WHO AM I?

QUESTIONING IDENTITY IN THREE

SHORT STORIES BY LILIANA HEKER

BY

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This thesis focuses on the question of identity in three short stories by the Argentine writer Liliana Heker (1943-); “La fiesta ajena” (The Stolen Party), “Berkeley o Mariana del universo” (Bishop Berkeley or Mariana of the Universe), and “Georgina Requeni o la elegida” (Georgina Requeni or The Chosen One). Heker’s texts are founded on the assumption that a sense of identity arises from the mediation of social objective discourses (who the world tells me I am) and the subjective concept of self (who I think I am). The author began publishing her works in 1966, the same year that Argentina came under the military rule of Juan Carlos Onganía. The synchronicity of Heker’s foray into literature and the beginning of a period of military governments whose repression and violence spanned three decades is symbolic of Heker’s function as literary historiographer. Through the examination of moments of epiphany that alter one’s identity, slightly or tremendously, Heker enunciates the protagonists’ identity against the backdrop of the collective social consciousness and lays bare cultural assumptions of class, power, and gender that are crucial for understanding Argentine society. Heker’s belief that “toda polémica es enriquecedora en la medida que permite la confrontación de dos sistemas de ideas” (all polemic is enriching in that it allows for the confrontation of two systems of ideas) is the reason she creates historically anchored texts that question the role of the dialectic of social discourses in the formation of identity.
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INTRODUCTION

identity n. (pl. -ies) 1 a the quality or condition of being a specified person or thing. b individuality, personality (felt he had lost his identity).

identity crisis n. a period during which an individual experiences a feeling of loss or breakdown of his or her identity.


How does one answer the question, "Who am I?" The Argentine writer Liliana Heker (1943-) explores the notion of identity in her works with the assumption that identity is a two-fold concept. This concept is voiced in Judith Butler's guiding, and perhaps rhetorical, question, "To what extent is "identity" a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience?"1 Butler asks us to consider how much of identity is assigned by social factors (who the world tells me I am) and how much arises from one's own concept of self (who I think I am). In Heker's literary works the balance between the objective and the subjective discourses forms the dynamic core of identity. The objective discourse, objective not in the sense of impartiality but in that it objectifies, is derivative of ideological discourses and acts upon the person without his/her consideration.2 The second aspect of identity consists of how the person sees him/herself and is, therefore, purely subjective.

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1 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity, New York, Routledge, 1990, p.16.
2 The scope of this thesis does not include the philosophical debate of the potential existence of true objectivity, nor does it include the discussion of the conundrum of subjectivity regarding identity based upon the mediation of "who I think I am," "who others think I am," and "who I think others think I am." This thesis is limited to the conflation of externally assigned classifications of the person with the person's subjective considerations of his/her capabilities and individuality.
This thesis focuses on different combinations of these facets of identity in three of Liliana Heker’s short stories; “La fiesta ajena” (The Stolen Party), “Berkeley o Mariana del universo” (Bishop Berkeley or Mariana of the Universe), and “Georgina Requeni o la elegida” (Georgina Requeni or The Chosen One). By enunciating the protagonists’ identity against the backdrop of the collective social consciousness in her examination of identity, Heker lays bare cultural assumptions of class, power, and gender that are crucial for understanding Argentine society.

Heker’s stories are rarely explicit in terms of political and historical data, however, in order to obviate the parallel of history and text she alludes to dates and figures which are seared into the collective Argentine psyche. The role of literature in the formation of the collective consciousness of society is central; literature, through its textual confrontation of social issues, becomes a public referent that creates and disseminates responses and/or resolutions to these issues. Heker builds her stories around the recognition of symbols and

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3 The English translations of the titles are from Alberto Manguel’s edition of Heker’s stories (The Stolen Party, transl. and ed., Alberto Manguel, Toronto, Coach House Press, 1994). All English quotes of the texts are from this edition. “La fiesta ajena” was originally published in 1982 in the compilation Las peras del mal. (Buenos Aires, Editorial de Belgrano). “Berkeley o Mariana del universo” and “Georgina Requeni o la elegida” were first published in Acuario (Buenos Aires, Centro Editor de América Latina, 1972). All Spanish citations of the three stories are from Los bordes de lo real.

4 Heker’s story “Vida de familia” (Los bordes de lo real) traces the repetitious loss of identity of Nicolás Broda who wakes up one morning in a strange house with strangers who say they are his, Alfredo Walter di Fiore’s, family. Just as Nicolás resolves to enter the family and continue his life under Alfredo’s assumed identity he wakes again the next morning to a third family who know him as, Federico, their son. This third family, like the second, sees nothing different about their son. For the person who was Nicolás, his address, his job, his relatives, his mental capabilities, etc., have changed completely. The reinstatement of different families in the protagonist’s reality evokes the successive imposition of military governments during various decades. The issue of loss of identity in relation to the previous allusion, comments on the plight of the desaparecidos (disappeared) who were abducted, as well as sometimes tortured and assassinated by the military governments. The primary trait of these disappearances is the government’s categorical denial of any records concerning the prisoners. Families found little, if any, proof that their loved ones had been held by authorities. As Mirta Corpa Vargas points out, Heker also weaves allusions to political events through the narrative through the use of dates, such as July 7, two days before Argentina’s Independence Day, and through use of such common Peronista vocabulary as in reference to a “leader on a balcony” (Los cuentos de Lilian Heker: testimonios de vida, New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 1996, p.115.). This image, part of the collective memory of Argentina, immediately invokes what is considered by Perón’s opponents to be a fascist characteristic of his first two terms. Perón, unlike other presidents (barring Menem who actively seeks to incur Perón’s charisma), addressed the masses by speaking to them from the balcony of the presidential house. It is through these allusional, yet potent, images that Heker comments on the alienation and confusion of the Argentine citizen under military regimes.
discourses that belong to the public imagination and is able to indicate the historical context without introducing politico-historical specificities. Her works challenge the manufactured objectifying discourses that reside within the concept of the “nation” as an imagined community, which is based on unrealistic ideas of a limited, sovereign community of brethren. While she depicts the reworking of identity on the discursive level of the texts, it is on the referential level that Heker’s political commentary is apparent.

In some of her works Heker builds the narrative on the *Bildungsroman* technique, defined by Jerome Hamilton Buckley as the “novel of youth, novel of education, of apprenticeship, of adolescence, of initiation, even the life novel.” This sub-genre accommodates the exploration of identity by allowing the reader to accompany the protagonist on a journey of self-discovery. The reader, while privy to the subjective beliefs of the protagonist, is also able to discern the social objectifying discourses of which the protagonist may initially be ignorant. Another way in which Heker relates the psychological state of the character is through use of the “fantastic”, meaning the emotional/psychological warping of textual reality as set out by Julio Cortázar in his reflections on the short story and the fantastic. Heker writes about identity in terms of the deep divide caused by social codes between members of different classes, between sisters, and also between fiction and reality. These conflicts, between external objectifying social discourses and their internalization through interpersonal polemics about identity, are what cause situations and characters to become nonsensical, meaningless, alienating. They

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evoke the self-conscious individual as being detached and isolated from his/her social surroundings. As she explains,

me importan aquellas zonas marginales de la realidad en que lo aparentemente cotidiano y lo aparente normal pueden devenir en disparate, en locura o en directamente lo fantástico.

I am interested in those marginal areas of reality where the seemingly quotidian and the apparently normal turn into something nonsensical, insignificant, crazy, mad, or fantastic.

In the three texts to be examined, these borderland situations of daily experiences are fraught with hostile barriers built upon premises of class, power, and gender that the protagonists are unable to traverse.

Liliana Heker has not been published outside of Argentina except for one small anthology of translated stories selected from each of her previous works, titled The Stolen Party (1994) published by the Argentine-Canadian literary critic Alberto Manguel. Consequently, Heker is all but unknown to most foreign readers, even those familiar with her colleagues such as Elvira Orphée, Alejandra Pizarnik, and Alicia Steimberg. Heker’s contributions to national literature, in the form of the essay, short story, and novel, are germane to the discussion of the “campo cultural” (cultural field), which is that community of artists and intellectuals as well as publishers, editors, theater companies, in sum, those people concerned with the production of culture. She is considered, by public and critical consensus, to be representative of contemporary Argentine literature — as evidenced her

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9 Pierre Bourdieu’s concept as it appears in Carlos Altamirano and Sarlo, B., Literatura/Sociedad, Buenos Aires, Hachette, 1983, p.78. The term “intellectual” is used throughout the thesis as defined by Silvia Sigal: “intelectual” is used to refer to, “aquellos letrados que combinan conocimiento con una responsabilidad social explícita o bien con una relación con valores colectivos de una sociedad, identificable sea a través de los textos producidos sea a través de la clasificación que otros actores hacen de ellos: no se trata, como se ve, de una definición taxativa sino del balizamiento de un conjunto que no puede nunca ser definitivamente cerrado.” (“those educated people who combine knowledge with an explicit social responsibility or with a link to the collective values of society, which is identifiable either through the texts produced or through the classification that others make: it does not have to do with a limited definition but with the distinction
contribution to the Encuesta a la literatura argentina contemporánea (Investigation into Contemporary Argentine Literature) published in 1982 by Centro Editor América Latina, one of the leading publishing houses of the seventies. Heker arrived on the intellectual scene of Buenos Aires at the age of seventeen in 1960 by way of what she calls her “training ground” – the literary magazines: “El Grillo de Papel”, “El Ornitorrinco”, and “El Escarabajo de Oro” which she co-founded with Abelardo Castillo. Here she learned the social responsibility of the politically involved writer and the consequent dangers of dissent. Her close association with Castillo, in conjunction with her Sartrean conviction, suggest that Heker shares the general beliefs put forth by the group that published the Contorno literary journal. The work of Contorno was deeply affected by the Cuban Revolution and developed a pre-eminent position during the 1950s and 1960s in critiquing Peronism. In Sigal’s Intelectuales y poder en la década del sesenta, the author puts forth the concept that the intellectual is an agent of circulation of common notions concerning the social order. This is Heker’s role as a writer, as the texts clearly demonstrate; seemingly
benign situations and characters challenge the reader to confront his/her social biases.

Cortázar’s comments on the characteristics of a well-executed short story are pertinent to the discussion of Heker’s stories, which fulfill his principles.

The story’s significant element seems to reside mainly in its subject, in the act of choosing a real or imaginary happening which has that mysterious property of illuminating something beyond itself, to the extent that a common domestic occurrence... is converted into an implacable summary of a certain human condition or the burning symbol of a social or historical order. A story is meaningful when it ruptures its own limits with that explosion of spiritual energy which suddenly illuminates something far beyond that small and sometimes sordid anecdote which is being told.15

Heker has published five books of short stories; Los que vieron la zarza (1966), Acuario (1972), Un resplandor que se apagó en el mundo (1977), Las peras del mal (1982), Los bordes de lo real (1991), and two novels; Zona de clivaje (1988) and Fin de la historia (1996). Although her stories are specifically situated in recognizable streets of the urban center of Buenos Aires, the unremarkable characters and their daily lives reach a universal sphere of understanding. Through the examination of the moments of epiphany that alter one’s identity, slightly or tremendously, the three short stories this thesis deals with decry society’s imbalances without alluding directly to partisan politics. Heker’s beliefs are, nevertheless, intelligible in the discretionary selection of which moments in life she chooses in order to convey an identity under development. Currently, she remains a significant writer who continues to engage the reader by means of her politically active position within the literary arena.

Heker began publishing her works in 1966, the same year that Argentina came under the military rule of Juan Carlos Onganía. The synchronicity of Heker’s foray into literature and the beginning of a period of military governments whose repression and violence spanned three decades is symbolic of Heker’s function as literary historiographer.

The blend of literature and socio-historical fact seen in Heker’s work is, as Saúl Sosnowski points out, part of the Argentine tradition:

_los argentinos ... nos hemos dedicado empeñosamente a politicizar la historia y leer en tiempo presente los hechos del pasado._

_we Argentines ... have resolutely dedicated ourselves to politicizing history and reading in the present tense the events of the past._

Heker relates Argentine history since the late 1960s and early 1970s by fictionalizing the issues embodied by the clash of the military’s ideals along with the advent of the North American and European women’s liberation movements within the reverberations from the Cuban Revolution. This involvement arises in the texts as a reflection of social concerns and is evident in her first works as much as in her latest novel _El fin de la historia_ (1996), which expresses a leftist aspect of the 1970s youth movement through gender.

While she does not restrict her writing to gender issues, Heker’s commitment to political activity is upheld by the choice of a feminine perspective in the majority of her works. This feminine gaze is fully engaged in questioning such masculinist presumptions as linearity, rationality, and the mistrust of the disenfranchised protagonist. Heker’s predilection for protagonists who are young girls, as in the three stories analyzed in this thesis, abets the expression of the socio-political status quo. For example, in “La fiesta ajena” the plot, which depicts the strict confines of class, evolves through repeated flashbacks and focuses on the immediate concerns of a child. Heker explains her affinity for texts built around child characters:

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17 Other stories by Heker with a child as the principal character include five from _Los bordes de lo real_; “Las monedas e Irene”, “Los primeros principios o arte poética”, “Retrato de un genio” which all have a girl as the protagonist, and “Las peras del mal”, and “Un resplandor que se apagó en el mundo” which narrate from a boy’s perspective. The stories “Los panes dorados” and “Las amigas” from _Los que vieron la zarza_ (Buenos Aires, Editorial Jorge Alvarez, 1966) are both told from the point of view of a girl. Her two novels, _Zona de clivaje_ (Buenos Aires, Legasa, 1988) and _El fin de la historia_ (Buenos Aires, Alfaguara, 1996) also have women as protagonists.
Looking through my literature I can see that children appear as central figures, or at least as momentary flashes that illuminate or reflect adult behavior, in almost all of my narratives [...]. I believe that in childhood all of the human passions exist in a pure state. During childhood, egoism, speculation, love, perversity, jealousy, and altruism are feelings that dominate and propel apparently inexplicable behavior [...]. I do not believe that childhood is a paradise or a carefree and happy time. I believe it is an intense and often unhappy stage since it is filled with incommunicable feelings [...]. Our future acts are rooted [... in these feelings.

By avoiding the romantic notion of childhood as an idyllic time, Heker's child protagonists distill the impact of adult themes. These themes, such as misconceptions of the self, shifting realities, and radical changes of consciousness, reach their expression in the three texts through the techniques that mimic the growing flexible awareness of children: the Bildungsroman and the fantastic. The repressive socio-political events of 1966-1983 demanded the creation of a dynamic literary space, and these two literary techniques allow the textual parameters within which the writer can challenge social laws. Texts concerning children and young adults coming of age present a correlative threat by the very fact that they are capable of the binary representation of text and sub-text, meaning their capacity to function as parable. This level of double-entendre is alarming to governments attempting to establish a singular nation-wide truth. Because of this, in Argentina,

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18 Corpa Vargas, Los cuentos de Liliana Heker: Testimonios de Vida, p.12.
La censura se ensañaba con la literatura para niños, dado que esta forma de expresión literaria se consideraba como una de las armas más efectivas en manos de los subversivos.

Censorship was particularly brutal with children's literature, given that this form of literary expression was considered one of the most effective weapons in the hands of subversives.  

Children's literature and the Bildungsroman text are troublesome to a repressive government because their structure permits the reader to experience, albeit vicariously, the protagonist's awakening to a consciousness of social discourses.

I place a particular emphasis in situating the military governments in a historical context because of their impact in shaping both contemporary modes of literary expression, and societal forces that contribute to the ideas of class, power, and gender that arise in Heker's texts. Recognition of this triad of objective discourses is vital to an understanding of Heker's works not only for their role in the formation of identity, but for access to the sub-diegetic level of the text. Because the bulk of Heker's literary production thus far is written against the backdrop of socio-political turmoil under various military regimes, the historical context provides insight to the author's situation. The relationship of class, power, and gender in Heker's texts is inscribed through allusion such that the texts become viable records of social discourses. Fernando Reati's belief in the literary relevance of the historical situation supports this perspective:

no podemos hablar de texto o escritor en un sentido ahistórico, sino que debemos tener en mente un escritor argentino concreto que produce textos históricamente identificables en respuesta a presiones, demandas, premios o peligros específicos de su época y geografía.

one cannot speak of a text or a writer in an ahistoric sense, rather, one must have in mind a concrete Argentine writer who produces historically identifiable texts in response to pressures, demands, specific rewards or dangers of his/her era and geography.  

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19 Ibid., p.22.
The predominant characteristic of modern and contemporary Argentine political history has been political authoritarianism. Totalitarian, non-constitutionalist leaders, such as Juan Manuel de Rosas (1829-52), date back to the foundation of the state.\(^{21}\) In the twentieth century, Juan Domingo Perón, who governed Argentina during three eras (1946-52, 1952-55, 1973-74), continued Rosas’ tradition of *caudillismo.* For the *descamisados* (shirtless masses), Perón’s patriarchal concern, labor reforms, and charismatic populist appeal signified his role as their hero. The elite sectors, primarily the military and the church, saw another visage of the figure: that of the man exploiting political office for personal gain. Perón alienated the armed forces by putting stock in “personal loyalty, rather than institutional obedience,” while he cultivated the working classes so as to gain access to further political control through the unions.\(^{22}\) While Perón cleverly made use of symbolic gestures to enhance his image, such as handing out fruit cake and cider at Christmastime, he also made concrete advances such as delivering the vote to women and putting restrictions on child labor.\(^{23}\) During this time Heker became aware of the surroundings of the political climate; her mother’s charitable efforts to house stray animals and sick children taught Heker her first lessons in social injustice, while her older sister instilled in her a love of books, an interest not shared by the Peronist government.\(^{24}\) In part due to Perón’s insistence on total governmental control of the mass media, his government came to be “*caracterizado por un antiintelectualismo más pronunciado aun que el de otros populismos*” (characterized by the most pronounced anti-intellectualism of all populisms.)\(^{25}\) It was these same abuses perpetrated by Perón’s government that propelled Julio Cortázar to leave Argentina in 1951 for Paris, where he remained until his death in

\(^{21}\) Rosas was the model for Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s 1845 historicized novel *Facundo: Civilización y barbarie, Vida de Juan Facundo Quiroga* (Mexico, Editorial Porrúa, 1991)  
\(^{23}\) Ibid., p.27.  
\(^{24}\) *Encuesta.* p.110.
1984. Perón’s first term as president ended when he was overthrown by the military in 1955 for crimes ranging from “sowing hatred in the Argentine family and inciting violence and crime,” to “a lack of loyalty to the [military] institution.”

The military government of General Pedro Eugenio Aramburu which ruled until 1958 was sage enough to fear the political strength of Perón’s broad popular base and consequently prohibited his participation in politics. More severely, Aramburu proscribed the mere publication in print of Perón’s name and purged the government of those who revealed any affinity for him through dismissal or, in the case of twenty-seven people, assassination. The absence of Peronist candidates in the 1958 elections pitted the Unión Cívica Radical (Radical Civic Union-UCR) against the Unión Cívica Radical Intransigente (Intransigent Radical Civic Union-UCRI) in a farce of constitutionalism. Dr. Arturo Frondizi of the UCRI won the presidency, which quickly became identified as an office of concessionary politics when he granted the military professional authority and autonomy. This was synchronous with Heker’s discovery, at the age of fifteen, of what writing meant and still means to her today: “la posibilidad de fijar y comunicar mi visión del mundo, y también una forma de militancia.” (the possibility of determining and communicating my vision of the world, as well as a form of militancy). Heker ordered her thoughts in a text for the first time to protest the repeal of Law 1420, which guaranteed free and obligatory lay education, and read the piece in school in an attempt to convince a religiously fervent and reactionary teacher to change her opinion of the Law’s abolition. As the power of the military grew, so did terrorism, widespread strikes, and the formation of protoguerilla organizations. Frondizi, who had many communist and left-wing supporters, walked the

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25 Sigal, p.45.
26 Norden, p.27.
27 Ibid., p.30, 31.
28 Encuesta, p.108.
29 This major event of 1958 motivated secondary-school children to enter a political movement for the first time. Heker credits the experience of trying to explain her thoughts to her teacher with giving her the idea of becoming a writer. Encuesta, p.108.
30 Norden, p.32.
tight-rope between two factions in the military: one which believed in continuinismo (continuism) i.e., a continued military role in government to protect the presidency from Peronism and to safeguard military interests, and its opposing faction which believed the military should withdraw from government once the political situation was stabilized and poised for democracy. Frondizi was unable to mediate between the two factions, thereby alienating military constitutionalists and opening his government to more than thirty planteos (uprisings) in two years.\textsuperscript{31}

In 1961, while the country was heavily reliant on foreign investment, long strikes interrupted the nation's business and Frondizi, against his military statesmen's advice, allowed Peronistas to enter provincial and congressional elections. The military remained divided into the azules (blues), who favored Peronism in so much as it would inhibit communism, and the colorados (reds), who considered Peronism "a sectarian and violent movement that would allow communism."\textsuperscript{32} The continued internal divisions helped Dr. Arturo Ilia of the Unión Cívica Radical del Pueblo (People's Radical Civic Union) score a slim victory in the limited democratic experiment which took Frondizi's predecessor, Guido, out of office a year later. The UCRP had been pro-colorado yet the government was now ruled by azules; Ilia engaged the help of General Juan Carlos Onganía in resolving this military factionalism. While the military considered Ilia ineffective because of his internal policies, economic difficulties, and slow decision making, it appeared to have faith in Onganía. They hoped Onganía could reverse the economic decline: petroleum production was down, inflation rising, and devaluation setting in as contracts with foreign petroleum companies were cancelled. The labor movement became chaotic as factory occupations, hostage situations, and demands from the unions escalated in protest of Ilia because of his party's history of anti-Peronism. By the end of 1965, the military and the government were embedded in an antagonistic relationship that degenerated further when Ilia repeated Frondizi's act of allowing Peronistas to enter elections. As a result of the coup

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., p.33.
that followed, Onganía assumed the presidency for one year and put in place, “a far reaching plan of state economic intervention,” which sought a heavy margin of export and capitalist accumulation at the price of a weighty foreign debt.\textsuperscript{33}

The historical and political events of the late 1960s affected the objective societal discourses that contributed to the formation of Heker’s own identity. During these years in which she entered the intellectual sphere as a young adult, Heker was experiencing her own \textit{Bildungsroman}, which partially explains the choice of the literary technique in her texts. Heker’s first selection of short stories, \textit{Los que vieron la zarza} (1966), published in the year of Onganía’s coup, won much critical acclaim and received the \textit{Mención Única del VII Concurso Casa de las Américas} and \textit{la Faja de Honor de la Sade}. Heker worked on material for her next collection of short stories while the already-polarized positions of the intellectual left and the armed forces increased. The 1969 Cordobazo uprising, a violent student-led uprising named for the province of Córdoba where it primarily occurred, epitomizes the ideological distance on the cultural field between intellectuals and the military. The Cordobazo alarmed Argentines because it pitted organized labor and university students against the armed forces. The violence of the clash and the repression with which the military responded led to external, as well as serious internal, questions about the military’s ability to rule. As public reports of disappearances, torture sessions, and kidnappings proliferated, the military attempted to legitimize the repression by passing a National Defense Law which outlined the government’s position on internal security and its zero tolerance for communist ideas. Initiated by Onganía, the two-decade period of the \textit{Proceso de Reorganización Nacional} culminated in what was known as the “Dirty War” due to the illegal and immoral tactics of the government.\textsuperscript{34} The turbulence of the political

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p.37.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p.40.
\textsuperscript{34} The “Process of National Reorganisation” takes its name, as Nuria Girona Fibla explains in her book, \textit{Escrituras de la historia: la novela argentina de los años 80} (Cuaderno de Filología, anejo xvii, Departamento de Filología Española, Universitat de València, Valencia, 1995), in response to the failed peronist “\textit{Reconstrucción Nacional}” (National Reconstruction). “\textit{La forma abreviada. El Proceso, fue
climate triggered the 1970 coup that finally deposed Onganía. Under the bureaucratic-authoritarianism of the last presidents, the economy improved slightly, although it did so at the expense of the working class, creating further disparity between the upper and lower classes. The discrepancy between classes is a recurrent theme in Heker’s corpus as a direct result of the economic situation. Argentina was in crisis; the economic successes of earlier years were all but forgotten as the nation battled soaring inflation and a plummeting GNP rate. The public’s doubts about military economic and political savvy grew in tandem with the repression exercised by these governments and fuelled guerrilla activities.

Under the Lanusse government, which intended to demystify Perón, the military made another foray into constitutional politics that also backfired. The military remained sharply divided into nationalists, who sympathized with Perón, and professionals, but managed to unite in an effort to safeguard macro-military interests with “Los Cinco Puntos” (The Five Points), a document signed by all generals which demanded fidelity to the laws, constitution, and “republican institutions” while denying amnesty and impartiality to people tried for subversive or terrorist activities. Critical thought of this era is built upon the premise that “la literatura es una relación social en la que intervienen el lenguaje (como material) y los discursos ideológicos (como contenido).” (Literature is a social relationship in which language (as material) and ideological discourses (as content) intervene.)

Heker’s second book, Acuario (1972), which includes selections from Los que vieron la zarza, is evidence of this stream of thought. Acuario contains short stories that struggle...
with the theme of disenfranchisement of sectors of society, demonstrating Heker’s incorporation of historical events.\(^{37}\)

Political stability was not on the horizon as Lanusse left office through elections that opened a revolving door to four different presidents who ruled from 1973 to 1976 without any political continuity: Héctor Cámpora, Raúl Lastiri, Juan Domingo Perón, and María Estela (Isabel) Perón. The fractured state of the nation became clear when Perón and his third wife arrived from Spain at Ezeiza airport on June 20, 1973. The crowd, made up of supporters and anti-Peronistas, rushed to meet them and turned violent, injuring and/or killing up to 400 people.\(^{38}\) The new-style Perón, who held office for just one year, was more conservative than his two predecessors: he reinstated harsher sentences for “subversives” and evicted the Montonero guerrilleros from the Plaza de Mayo.\(^{39}\) He also visibly courted the military by donning his army uniform for public appearances and elevating respect for the armed forces by association with his popular image.

On July 1, 1974 Isabel Martínez de Perón, hardly as scintillating or politically knowledgeable as the late Evita, took the presidential reins from her dead husband. She relied heavily on her advisor José López Rega, the man responsible for forming the infamous Triple A (Alianza Argentina Anticomunista – Anticommunist Argentine Alliance) which joined “the wave of terror.”\(^{40}\) Economic inflationary escalation and severe clashes between the government and the public in the form of strikes, protests and conflicts grew. In this presidency it was López Rega who was the true power, and he used his influence to threaten leftist intellectuals and other “subversives” who jeopardized his extreme right-wing politics. As a result of Martínez de Perón’s weak hold on the presidency, the military

\(^{37}\) In “Un secreto para vos” Heker tells a fantastic story of classism; “Las peras del mal” deals with the double transgression of class divisions and the law; “La llave” like “Georgina Requeni o la elegida” comments on gender and the self.

\(^{38}\) Norden, p.47.

\(^{39}\) Please see Norden for a discussion of the Montonero rebels, the leftist armed branch of the Peronist youth whose goal was to end military rule, as the scope of this thesis does not permit me to go into detail.

finally gained the high level of autonomy it had been anticipating. At this point, the possibilities of intellectual exchange, although somewhat limited, were far greater than they would be after the coup of 1976. Beatriz Sarlo relates:

**Hasta 1975, por lo menos, los intelectuales habíamos tenido la sensación y la experiencia de que podíamos mirar y hablar más allá de los límites de nuestro propio campo, que podíamos salir de la universidad y cruzar las puertas de algunos sindicatos, que se podían escribir libros pero también periódicos populares, discursos, volantes, manifestos.**

Until at least 1975, as intellectuals we had had the feeling and the experience that we could see each other and talk beyond the confines of our own field of study, that we could walk out of the university and through the gates of unions, that we could write books, community newspapers, speeches, leaflets, and manifestos.41

This prolific time, during which ideas, speeches, and a modernizing praxis established a route of communication between the political and intellectual fields, had been all too fleeting.42 A new stage of the ideological censorship of artists, initiated in 1975 and carried out through threats, persecutions, and deaths, formed a stranglehold on the intellectual freedom acquired in the brief aperture in political thought of the previous years. Discussions of exile took hold in intellectual forums, while for Heker, as for other authors who felt fortunate to escape the seemingly random kidnappings and murders, it was imperative to find ways to use words to document and protest the deaths taking place both in the creative and physical spheres.43 In regards to the new era of repression, the human rights commission report Nunca más (Never Again) states:

> From the huge amount of documentation we have gathered, it can be seen that these human rights were violated at all levels by the Argentine state during the repression carried out by its armed forces. Nor were they violated in a haphazard fashion, but systematically, according to similar pattern,

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42 Reati, p.24.
43 Heker, “Los intelectuales ante la instancia del exilio: militancia y creación,” in Represión y reconstrucción de una cultura: el caso argentino, p.196.
with identical kidnapings taking place all over the country.\textsuperscript{44}

Military action in government increased when Martínez de Perón refused to leave office after running through thirty-two ministers in one and a half years. General Videla and his forces detained her, dissolved the Parliament, and began the era of internal strife of the "Dirty War". Generals Videla and Massera and Brigadier Agosti headed the junta that abolished Los Cinco Puntos and that founded the plan of the Proceso de Reorganización Nacional (Process of National Reorganization – PRN). Nuria Girona Fibla explains the institutionalization of the PRN,

\textit{Por reorganización de la nación se entendía desde la remodelación del ámbito económico hasta la reformulación de los valores ideológicos, pasando por el aplastamiento de la guerrilla, la institucionalización de los nuevos poderes y el control de los medios de comunicación. Ninguna esfera estatal, nacional, pública o privada, se libraría del control militar.}

Reorganization of the nation meant everything from the remodelling of the economic field and the reformulation of ideological values by squashing guerilla movements to the institutionalization of the new powers and the control of the media. Neither state nor national sphere, neither public nor private sphere, would be free from military control.\textsuperscript{45}

The tremendous repression that followed, sanctioned by the PRN, was primarily concerned with fighting guerrilla subversives. Girona Fibla states that, \textit{"En noviembre de 1975, Videla había advertido que si para matar a un guerrillero tenían que matar 500 inocentes, así lo iban a hacer."} (In November of 1975, Videla warned that if they needed to kill 500 innocent people in order to kill one guerrilla fighter, so be it.)\textsuperscript{46} The primary goals of the PRN stressed the institution of a morality, that relative term used to justify the enforcement of a right-wing agenda:

\textsuperscript{44} Argentina's National Commission on Disappeared People (CONADEP), \textit{Nunca Más (Never Again)}, London, Faber and Faber, 1986, p.2.

\textsuperscript{45} Girona Fibla, p.28.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., p.29.
Reinstitute the essential values that serve as the foundation of the integral leadership of the State, emphasizing the sense of morality, propriety and efficiency, indispensable to reconstruct the content and the image of the Nation, eradicate subversion and promote the economic development of national life based on the equilibrium and responsible participation of different sectors towards the end of assuring the latter installation of a republican, representative and federal democracy, suited to the reality and the demands for solution and progress of the Argentine people.\textsuperscript{47}

The seven-year government of the junta was economically unsuccessful, corrupt (to the point that certain officers were taking home multiple salaries), lacking in legitimacy, and obsessed with the eradication of guerrilla movements.\textsuperscript{48} The lower military ranks felt disillusioned and betrayed by their officers because of the questionable acts they committed on their behalf. The internal national persecution, characterized by illegal and immoral methods used in disappearances, torturing sessions, and assassinations, used tactics that are hardly innovative but it is their frequency and heartlessness that makes the era stand out. This internal war was embarassing to the junta’s image and was artlessly hidden from the public. Secrecy and denial fanned the flames of the public’s distrust for the government, whose image was already damaged, to the extent that the officers, in the public’s consideration, were a bunch of “power hungry, immoral ogres.”\textsuperscript{49} The lack of support did not prevent the military from clamping down on oppositional forces in society. In fact:

\begin{quote}
the greatest degree of authoritarian culture is witnessed between 1976 and 1983, governed by the Doctrine of National Security and its enforcement, a policy that maintains that, ultimately, the principal enemy is amongst us, the ideological opponent, the “subversive” in the etymological sense.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{47} Norden, p.54.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., p.62.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., p.61.
The coup of 1976 changed the way the military approached its enemies: instead of focusing on guerrilla groups or isolated spots of destructive dissension, the military, "broadened their scope to include ‘subversion’, the purported ideological or cultural sources of revolutionary activity. According to the military, any small core of ideological dissidence could represent a potential source for terrorist or revolutionary behaviour."\(^51\)

The regime worked to censor intellectuals and artists with culturally restrictive laws in fear of the language of resistance that cropped up in folk songs, novels, articles, and theatre. This backlash aimed at the intellectual and artistic community occurred because this "surge of artistic expressions of the terrors of the ‘Dirty War’ was interpreted by many military men as a deliberate attempt to tarnish their reputations."\(^52\) The perceived threat of critical thought and resistance was compounded by the very real threat of physical harm to dissenters. The café tertulias (literary gatherings) were too dangerous for intellectuals to continue because of the repressive measures which forbade meetings. Writers tried to continue their work by meeting clandestinely to discuss their texts or by holding debates in print in magazines when lags in censorship permitted. The magazines were united by a "structure of feeling", that is, a common lineage of diverse structures and a collective sense of priorities that cemented their commitment.\(^53\) In spite of the opportunity provided by the forum of literary magazines, in many cases it was enough that the military regime threatened reprisal in order to intimidate writers and prevent them from challenging the government in their texts. Girona Fibla explains:

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\text{fue la ambigüedad de los parámetros de prohibición, cuya indeterminación les otorgaba múltiples lecturas y aplicaciones ... Esta sibilina ambigüedad genera una fructífera autocensura entre los escritores, un exilio interno, asumido también por los medios de comunicación y la industria editorial.}
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\(^{51}\) Norden, p.59.  
\(^{52}\) Ibid., p.126.  
\(^{53}\) Altamirano and Sarlo, p.99.
it was the ambiguity of the parameters of the prohibition, whose indetermination granted them multiple readings and applications ... This sibylline ambiguity generated a fruitful self-censorship among writers, an internal exile, assumed as well by the media and the publishing industry.54

Military repression also affected the writers of this time by ingraining a deep feeling of what Carmen Perilli (following Deleuze and Guattari) calls "desterritorialización" (homelandlessness). The concepts of exterior and interior were confused as writers instinctively began to edit themselves and their works in anticipation of governmental censorship. In these cases writers became fearful of the risks associated with free speech and inserted censorship regulations in their own consciousnesses. The internal censorship instigated by the intellectuals themselves changed the face of Argentine literature immeasurably. Combined with the regime's threatening stance towards intellectuals, self-censorship contributes to what Santiago Kovadloff terms "the culture of the catacombs" because it forced literary production underground, not only to clandestine meetings but to the artistic subconscious.55 The economic crisis also contributed to the reformation of the literary ambience in Argentina because funds for publication dwindled. Sarlo maintains that censorship enforced by the combination of a lack of funds and government regulation caused the intellectual field to become "un espacio doblemente fracturado" (a doubly-fractured space).56 Again, literary magazines filled the gap by publishing excerpts and chapters that otherwise would not have been read and that challenged the "verticalism and monologism" of the regime.57 Altamirano and Sarlo note that because magazines are privy to a higher degree of autonomy, due to the fact that they are self-published, they are predominant in the campo cultural as, "[un]espacio articulador de discursos de y sobre la literatura, la revista tiende a organizar a su público" ([As] an articulating space for

54 Girona Fibla, p.31.
56 Sarlo, in Represión y reconstrucción, p.95.
57 Girona Fibla, p.35.
discourses of and about literature, the magazine tends to organize its public.) In this sense, Heker’s participation in the magazines of the 1970s, 1980s and today points to her interest in and dedication to politics.

Given that “el estado articuló una teoría unidimensional de la realidad ... un discurso unificado y a la eliminación de toda oposición,” (the state articulated a one-dimensional theory of reality ... a unified discourse and the elimination of all opposition), subtle alternatives of communicating resistance to the governmental authority were developed as a survival tactic. Heker, who views writing as a method of resistance, employs such tactics as using euphemism to convey a message, writing from a universal and/or nameless perspective, and writing a text from the base of a single metaphor, in order to register her dissent. In this era of the 1960s and 1970s the entire campo intelectual (intellectual field) was perceived as a threat by the regimes because of “el rol que juegan los intelectuales en la construcción de mitos unificadores y en la elaboración de la identidad colectiva” (the role which intellectuals play in the construction of unifying myths and in the elaboration of the collective identity.) The regimes responded with, as chronicled above, a methodology of indiscriminate terror designed to internalize the concept of punishment in the public psyche. As the government established an official version of state-sanctioned human rights abuses, the Argentine literary imagination responded by creating a parallel world of confusion. In Heker’s work the crisis in the nation’s conceptualization of issues dealing with class, power, and gender, is shown as a fragmenting world rent by psychological epiphanies and shocks in which transitions are traumatic. In 1977, the same year that Heker published a small edition of two short stories and one edited selection from

58 Altamirano and Sarlo, p.79.
61 Sigal, p.76. Further research on Liliana Heker will allow the study of how women narrate and portray the nation, and how women are allegorized within that concept of nation. Although Jean Franco has studied this in the case of Mexico, as of now, there has been no Argentine study. Please see Franco’s Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico (New York, Columbia University Press, 1989).
Acuario, entitled Un resplandor que se apagó en el mundo, the international community was apprised of the human rights violations through a U.S. report.

The government reacted to the intellectual’s indomitable capacity for the expression of dissension by instituting a strike on the intellectual’s own ground: the resemanticization of language to control discourse, meaning the manipulation of the connotation of words to reinforce the regime’s agenda. Using pejorative terms for the opponents of the government reinforced positive associations with the state, as the regimes themselves were based on an absolutist and binary scale.

Uno de los ejes estructurales de esta ideología es la oposición binaria que se establece en sus presupuestos: lo propio y lo ajeno, lo incorruptible y lo degradado, lo físico y lo mental, lo limpio y lo impuro, etc., en la que el término marcado positivamente es siempre el primero y el único legítimo.

One of the structural axes of this ideology is the binary opposition which is established in its preconceptions: the proper and the foreign, the incorruptible and the degraded, the physical and the mental, the clean and the impure, etc., in which the positively marked term is always the first and the only legitimate one.63

In this way victims became “terrorists”, mothers became “mad-women”, and disappeared persons became “subversives”. The regimes adopted the vocabulary of the revered medical scientific discourse in order to acquire by proxy this discourse’s legitimacy. Consequently, any opposition to the state was seen as corrupt and sick, and as an extremely dangerous plague to the public. This concept was exploited by the regimes to engage the discourse of infallible scientific fact.

Using the biological metaphor, the internal enemies of the organic state are envisioned as malignant cells that have gone bad and are attacking their host. The military attempts, first, to contain these cancerous cells through therapy and repressive means. If this should fail, then the ultimate draconian step of surgical removal (extirpation) may be necessary.64

62 Girona Fibla, p.31.
63 Ibid., p.30.
64 Norden, p.59.
Conversely, as Nuria Girona Fibla points out,

Libertad, progreso, orden social, seguridad nacional, etc. sirven paradójicamente a la política represiva del régimen y para aludir a ciertos procedimientos de recomposición sobre la base de la violencia.

Liberty, progress, social order, national security, etc., paradoxically serve the repressive politics of the regime and allude to a shift in significance based on violence.65

Writers responded to this with work that “aparece como una lucha contra el poder por poseer sus signos y símbolos más preciados” (appears as a fight against power for possession of its most precious signs and symbols.)66 As events such as riots, uprisings, and disappearances occurred, writers confronted the problem of adapting language to relate new concepts of dissension, European and/or revolutionary ideas of resistance, and most of all, the daily terrors that took place in the streets and homes of Argentina. Sometimes the shock did not directly stem from the violence but from the regime’s sweeping control of reality. For example, an enemy of the state was not allowed a funeral, even if, as rarely occurred, the family was permitted to reclaim the body. The absolute lack of funeral rites for victims of the state contributed to the psychological trauma of the living because they were denied the ritual of closure and communal grieving.67 Perilli writes:

el imaginario textual convoca las fantasmas del imaginario social. La incertidumbre tiene que ver con la pérdida en un trágico laberinto del que no advierte salida.

the textual imagination conjures the ghosts of social imagination. The uncertainty has to do with loss in a tragic labyrinth which appears to have no exit.68

Writers voiced their confusion and rage by turning the medium of the text into a locus of resistance. As society witnessed the official distortion of reality through such acts as the

66 Ibid., p.34.
67 Reati, p.27.
68 Perilli, p.51.
categorical denial of human rights abuses that occurred in public, writers questioned the structural and thematic realities of their texts. In this respect, as Perilli (following Ludmer) writes: “la literatura argentina del siglo veinte puede leerse ... como una reflexión sobre la falsificación en la que la ficción política y la ficción literaria se relacionan” (twentieth century Argentine literature can be read as a reflection on falsification in which the political fiction and the literary fiction are connected.)\(^{69}\) The texts are geared to question concepts of power and authority, and create space for a textual resistance that does not accept prejudice and betrayal as fact.\(^{70}\) The fantastic, the grotesque, and the parodic genres grew as writers searched to convey the terrors of the state.

Los hechos resultaban tan terribles que no alcanzaban para comprenderlos o representarlos los sistemas éticos y estéticos tradicionales, por lo cual, quienes quisieron articularlos literariamente se vieron en la necesidad de recurrir a estrategias de descentramiento apoyadas en la alusión, el eufemismo, la alegoría, el desplazamiento, la representación paródica; la metaforización en general.

The facts were so frightening that the traditional ethical and esthetic systems were incapable of representing or understanding them, which is to say that whoever wanted to convey them in literature had to resort to decentering strategies based on allusion, euphemism, allegory, displacement, parodic representation; in general, metaphorization.\(^{71}\)

As Cristina Piña points out, experiments with textual fragmentation and discontinuity gave way to the introduction of extralinguistic codes such as in the cinematic cases of Puig, Soriano, and Gallione. Authors gleaned textual imput from the discourses of history, journalistic representation, literary theory, propaganda, science fiction, police fiction, and adventure stories. Irony and parody, among other devices, were infused with a textual legitimacy as never before in this melting pot of literary techniques.\(^{72}\)

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\(^{69}\) Ibid., p.36

\(^{70}\) Girona Fibla, p.34.


\(^{72}\) Piña, p.123.
As the difficult decade of the seventies came to a close, opponents of the military regimes weighed the benefits of going into self-imposed exile. Literary magazines, where Heker had launched her career, were the forum of debate over political responsibility between exiles and non-exiles.73 The influence of existentialism and Sartre on Argentina’s intellectual community is significant because it prompts the textual political commitment seen in the 1960s that is inherent in Heker’s works.74 Warley explains

la aún vigente concepción sartreana del “compromiso del intelectual” adquiría (y exigía) definiciones cada vez más políticas y empujaba hacia la toma de posiciones frente a eventos históricos y luchas sociales concretas.

The still valid Sartrean conviction of the ‘intellectual commitment’ acquired (and demanded) increasingly political definitions and pushed for the assumption of a position towards historical events and concrete social battles.75

The central question of the era for the major literary magazines (El Escarabajo de oro, Hoy en la cultura, La rosa blindada, Che, Cristianismo y revolución) was how to process, from a strictly cultural perspective, the social and political battle taking place between the esthetic and the revolutionary vanguards.76 The debate that raged among exiles and non-exiles is represented by the epistolary exchange between Julio Cortázar and Liliana Heker in the pages of the Ornitorrinco literary magazine in 1981.77 In the article/letter entitled “Polémica

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74 See information cited in footnotes 12 and 13 concerning the influence of Sartre and existentialism on the Contorno literary group. When asked who her major influences are Heker replies that she is made of everyone she reads, but that without a doubt Sartre organized her world. (Frouman-Smith, “Entrevista con Liliana Heker”, p.112.) Existentialist thought affected Latin America differently than it did Europe, due to distinct historical identities. Rose Hayden explains, “The Latin American variety is less attracted to themes of death, the neutral and hostile universe, and individual freedom ... Abstract metaphysical problems are also of secondary importance ... Situations are more personal, concrete. The philosophical dimensions of freedom, choice, action and responsibility are important, but not central.” (An Existential Focus on Some Novels of the River Plate, Monograph Series, no.10, Latin American Studies Center, East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1973) p.28.
75 Warley, p.196.
76 Ibid., p.197.
77 Warley writes that El Ornitorrinco was particularly involved in expressing political dissent: “La visión del compromiso intelectual de clara filiación sartreana llevó a la gente de El Ornitorrinco a combinar discutibles debates entre los exiliados y los que se quedaron con la publicación de solicitadas de las Madres
con Julio Cortázar: exilio y literatura” (Polemic with Julio Cortázar: exile and literature), Heker reaffirms her commitment to staying in Argentina while questioning his response that a writer should be removed from the danger in order to properly recount the events in full detail. Heker does not judge the writer who chooses exile, but her letters rebut Cortázar’s excuses that one can accurately document governmental repression from abroad. While Cortázar staunchly defends the intellectual’s recourse of exile, Heker’s reduction of his argument to protests of self-defense turned her into a voice for intellectuals who decided that protest is best launched from within the nation. One of the effects of exile on the national literature is that texts were published all over the world and allowed for the direct denunciation of the military regimes, albeit through the eyes of the exile.78

Another ramification, caused by the infrequent communication between exiles and writers who remained in Argentina, is the bifurcation of the trajectory of Argentine literature along the lines of expression. Heker recognizes that the writer who chooses to remain in the country faces the threats of the regime in his/her fellow writers’ stead. Her concerns for the non-exiled writer prompted her to write an article delineating the importance of literary workshops for reintroducing the writer to a creative ambience in the military and post-military regime period. She expresses the belief that the self-censorship and lack of creative communion damage the creative output. Currently, Heker continues to work to remedy this, because:

*En cuanto a los escritores que quedaron en el país, la imposibilidad o falta de deseo de reunirse o de publicar, los convirtió en islas, en condenados al exilio de su propia habitación.*

Regarding writers who stayed in the country, the impossibility or lack of desire to meet together or to publish...
turned them into islands, condemned them to exile in their own homes.\(^7^9\)

The junta embarked on the 1982 Falklands crisis in hopes of unifying the nation under one nationalistic display of military might after an internal coup that put General Galtieri in power. Argentina, preferring to leave its best soldiers at the Chilean border where age-old disputes still occurred, deployed barely-trained units of its army to the Islands to fight the British. A short six months later, Argentina surrendered. The nation was exhausted by years of insecure economics, internal divisions, deep distrusts of neighbors, strangers, even relatives feared to be potential police spies, and by the draining Falklands conflict. New civil elections were called for as “the military had failed at government, failed at external war, and [they had] failed at convincing the civilian population of the legitimacy of their methods in the internal war.”\(^8^0\) In 1982, as Heker released five stories in the volume *Las peras del mal*, which includes “La fiesta ajena”, President Galtieri stepped down after the loss of the Falklands War, making way for General Bignone and his ministers. Bignone reinforced censorship and “anti-terrorist” operations while his government dealt with a massive general work strike and mitigated public outcry spurred on by the highly-visible protest group, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. These protesters are a group of mothers who congregate weekly to bear witness to the disappearances of their sons and daughters under military governments. Deprecatingly termed “The Mad-Women” (*Las Locas*), these women are nonetheless, “as in the Middle Ages, the voice of the mad [which] was the voice of truth.”\(^8^1\) Because the official culture is so backward in terms of human rights abuses and denial of reality-based events, the Mothers, in their staunch opposition, are considered by the government to engender madness and irrationality. Close on the heels of Raúl Alfonsín’s swearing-in as

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\(^7^9\) Heker, "Los talleres literarios", p.189.
\(^8^0\) Norden, p.76.
constitutional president in 1983, the report Nunca más (Never More) was released by Ernesto Sábato to chronicle the desaparecidos (disappeared) and human rights violations.

At first perceived as an extreme Leftist, Raúl Alfonsín of the UCR took office in 1983 after narrowly defeating the Peronist candidate. He was more of a radical nationalist who believed in denying foreign intervention and promoted the theory of state-controlled economy.\textsuperscript{82} It was this nationalism that led him to denounce the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. While Alfonsín’s first years were refreshing and hopeful for the Argentine people, the next years were saddled with conflict because he refused to criticize the military for the “Dirty War”. Instead of holding the masterminds of the era accountable, Alfonsín blamed outsiders who supposedly used the military as pawns and theorized that Argentina was at the mercy of two demons, the guerrilla subversives and the military. The alienated military was stung by the concessionary instigation of human rights trials and budget cuts and tumbled further into paranoid factionalism. A series of Carapintada (Painted Face) Uprisings, so-called for the grease paint the military rebels wore to obscure their features, signals the internal military confusion. In 1988, as the country attempted to make sense of the “Dirty War” and bridge its divisions, Zona de clivaje (The Fracture Zone), Heker’s first novel, which deals with the reappropriation of the self, won the Municipal Prize. In this novel Heker relates the confusion of the “Dirty War” through a parallel with a woman freed from an emotionally unstable relationship with a man.

The 1989 election of Carlos Saúl Menem was the first election of a Peronist candidate since Perón’s death in 1974, a fact that Menem relied on to link himself to the mythical figure of General Perón for popularity. Menem, whose strategy was reliant on capitalism, liberalism, individualism, and the old oligarchy, espoused Perón’s rhetoric


\textsuperscript{82} Norden, p.80.
while disengaging his presidency from helping the poorer sectors of the nation. In fact, in 1990, approximately one third of the population was living on or below the poverty line. In 1989, Menem, in an attempt to close the chapter of disgrace in Argentine history, granted a sweeping pardon to the Carapintada rebels whose support he had relied on to win office. One thing Menem managed to do was unite the military and assign it a specific governmental role. The armed forces had floundered in previous eras because they had been unsure of the limits of their position, and by assigning them a particular scope of power, Menem allowed the forces to confidently take part in government within the confines of their role. The surreality of Menem’s pardon of the military rebels is reflected in the title of Heker’s 1991 compilation of seven new and fifteen previously-published stories: Los bordes de lo real (The Borders of Reality). Today, Heker continues to contribute works to publications and seminars and is active in the development of literary workshops for emerging writers. With the recent publication of El Fin de historia (The End of History) (1996), Heker shows that she remains politically involved both personally and professionally.

As the characters in Heker’s stories are confronted by shifts in the triad of class, power, and gender, their concepts of self and other, of reality and fiction, reach the “zona de clivaje” (the fracture zone). The Bildungsroman, as a coming-of-age story of a protagonist on the cusp of self-discovery, and the fantastic, through its destruction of linearity and rationality, are the structural approaches to Heker’s most forceful stories and reflect her curiosity in pivotal moments when identity is in flux. Her long-time friend and literary sparring partner, Julio Cortázar, wrote of her, “Liliana Heker is a magician ... She

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84 Lewis and Torrents, p.91.
turns little daily objects and trivial events into pieces of gold. She is wise, she is frightening. She must be read, she must be read."³⁸⁵

³⁸⁵ Back cover of The Stolen Party. Further studies should examine Cortázar's influence on Heker's work within the context of his position within the campo cultural.
Chapter One

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This thesis concentrates on the three short stories “La fiesta ajena”, “Berkeley o Mariana del universo”, and “Georgina Requeni o la elegida” because they represent primary concerns that reappear in the body of Liliana Heker’s work while engaging different techniques of questioning identity. I navigate the stories to substantiate the hypothesis that the construction of identity is a continual process which involves several variables. The apparition of these variables in the texts provides information on the conflictive discourses of Argentine society. Since Liliana Heker’s stories are set within the parameters of common experience, her protagonists grapple with the social constraints imposed by the discourses of class, power, and gender that are part of the collective identity of Argentina. Because of this, multi-disciplinary terms that grasp and conceptualize this quotidian reality are necessary to examine her works.

Briefly, “identity,” the crux of the thesis, is never a static or stable evolution sculpted by socio-political forces. External discourses that are inherently objectifying combine with the subjective sense of self to create identity. As social pressures wax and wane, aspects of one’s identity, one’s relation to social norms, readjusts. This is a lifelong process which can in fact continue posthumously, for example when lives are researched, rewritten, and re-evaluated by others according to new social ideals. Concurring with this, Judith Butler notes that the impact of social circumstances on a person’s identity is substantial:

Within the philosophical discourse itself, the notion of “the person” has received analytical elaboration on the
assumption that whatever social context the person is “in” remains somehow externally related to the definitional structure of personhood, be that consciousness, the capacity for language, or moral deliberation.¹

The understanding of identity as being partially externally-prescribed is salient in the examination of the construction of identity in Heker’s works because the extreme changes that occurred in Argentine society resulted in a variance of external forces. In a rapidly changing society, identity must adapt to reflect the positioning of the person in that social context.

While identity is partially built of external discourses, it is also informed by one’s concept of self, one’s subjective belief of who one is. At times the sense of self is infused with external discourses so that it reflects internalized discourses rather than the person’s own experiences, as Butler suggests. Where does the subjective aspect of identity begin? For Michel Foucault, the constitution of a sense of self is the first step in becoming a subject, which for him is passive. He suggests that a sense of self lies in the distinction of the “me” and the “not-me.”² This self or “me,” Foucault points out, “is not clothing, tools, or possessions. It is to be found in the principle which uses these tools, a principle not of the body but of the soul.”³ When the “not-me”, Foucault’s expression for all that is objective, “sub-jects” a person to a system of power, knowledge, and a regime of truth, the person becomes a ‘subject’. One’s awareness affects the extent to which one becomes the subject of social discourses because it informs one’s conception of the “not-me.”

As I am concerned with the adaptations of identity rather than its fixity, I rely on Paul Smith’s book Discerning the Subject for the concept of a subject which is rooted in a political and ethical reality. Smith defines the “subject” as an individual, an object of study,

¹ Butler, p.16.  
³ Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” Technologies of the Self: a Seminar with Michel Foucault, p.25.
a person sub-jected to domination, a complex of psychical formations constituted as the
human being positioned in relation to language, in sum, “a passivity, something at the
behest of forces greater than it.”⁴ According to Smith, the “subject” need not be completely
errant and adrift in a tide of ideological programming, but rather may become an agent who
makes sense of ideology and chooses whether to enter the “ideological scripts” or not.⁵
This introduces the concept of agency – which arises, according to Smith, from, “the place
from which resistance to the ideological is produced or played out, and thus not equivalent
to either the ‘subject’ or the ‘individual’.”⁶ He continues:

> current conceptions of the ‘subject’ have tended to produce a purely theoretical ‘subject’, removed almost entirely from the political and ethical realities in which human agents actually live and that a different concept of the ‘subject’ must be discerned or discovered.⁷

Smith prefers to use the term “subject-positions” to describe the active participant known
by Foucault as the “thinking subject.”⁸ Since Smith considers the “sovereign subject” an
anomaly for harboring illusions of choice, he prefers to emphasize the constant
repositioning people undergo in response to changing discourses. The term “subject-
positions” incorporates a sense of agency, a sense of resistance to ideology, that Foucault’s
“thinking subject” lacks.

Because discourses change in tandem with socio-political demands, the self is
involved in a continual determination of what is “me” and what is “not-me.” The
internalization of the objective so that it becomes the subjective explains the mobility of the
subjective self. Smith clarifies the idea of subjectivity and subject by stating that,
“subjectivity is partial: certainly, the ‘subject’ can always be conceived as being subject to
something, but that something is always different, always changing.”⁹ As the subjectifying
discourse is altered, it follows that the subject itself is restructured. Heker’s belief in the

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⁴ Smith, p.xxxiii.
⁵ Ibid., p.xxxiv.
⁶ Ibid., p.xxxv.
⁷ Ibid., p.xxiv.
⁸ Ibid., p.xxxv, Foucault, p.22.
mutability of identity stems from her conviction that “el factor articulatorio fundamental ... es la necesidad de dar cuenta de la construcción de la propia sujietividad” (the fundamental articulating factor ... is the need to achieve the construction of one’s own subjectivity.)

Heker situates her texts deeply within the subjective center of the characters to the extent that it is at times difficult to ascertain any objective discourse. In “Georgina Requeni o la elegida”, the narrative breaks down to become a stream of thoughts of one, or even two characters, that lacks the borders usually required to express polyphony. As we shall see in Chapter Four, Georgina’s absence of a sense of self is caused by the internalization of external criteria: she is the ultimate example of the passive subject until she develops a sense of self and the consequent agency.

In regard to “class”, I must specify my restriction to the Argentine situation bearing in mind the political treatment of the masses and the implication of the military hierarchies. Historically, the reorganization of ideologies and economic plans occurred simultaneously and affected a change in beliefs and class identities. In these three stories Heker deals with middle-class concerns, such as the structure of hierarchy that separates a domestic employee from her employer. Heker’s concerns are far more ideological than economic, as the texts demonstrate that it is the inculcation of class divisions rather than the concrete issues of a lack or surplus of money that interests the author. Heker uses the tone of the textual language to reveal the presumptions of the middle class through her choice of reference, vocabulary, and structure. Oblique references to class values root the characters in specific middle-class situations and relate the strength of class barriers.

Foucault holds that “power’s relation to knowledge is never separable, because within each society there is a ‘regime of truth’ with its own particular mechanisms for

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9 Smith, p.xxxiv.
10 Piña, p.136.
11 Another example is Heker’s story “Yokasta”, in Acuario, (Buenos Aires, Centro Editor de América Latina, 1972) which simultaneously relates a mother’s and child’s thoughts without distinguishing between the two. The reader is required to take an active part in making sense of the seamless first person narrative.
producing truth.” In the case of literature, the myth of truth propagated by the State is challenged textually by the survivors and opponents of the military regimes. Different techniques are used to establish an oppositional response to the regime, such as the fantastic, the testimonial, the autobiography, the polyphonic, etc. Foucault terms this sort of literary fight for expression a “reverse discourse,” which serves to decenter all encompassing structures of official truth. He enumerates five points of the “political economy of truth,” in that “truth is never outside or lacking in power.” These are, briefly, that “truth” is centered on scientific discourse, that it is subject to political and economic incitement, that it is diffused and consumed, that truth is produced and transmitted under the control of huge apparatuses (army, university, media, etc.), and finally, that it is an issue of ideological struggles. One of the most useful of Foucault’s comments on power is that “power and authority are no longer vested in a central point ... Nor does resistance arise from a single point.” The feminist appropriation of the Bildungsroman sub-genre can be understood as such a reverse discourse meant to challenge the accepted (and expected) traditional discourse. Heker recognizes power as a mutable entity that can have different effects according to how it is exercised. Power is a complex weaving of forces, pressures, ideals, and knowledge and pleasure. Carmen Perilli, in accordance with Foucault, believes that “representations and discourses are themselves acts of power, acts of division and exclusion, which give themselves as knowledge.” Heker uses the text to challenge the traditional depiction of history. In “Berkeley o Mariana del universo,” Heker suggests that the imbalance of power between

The blending of the two voices drives home the point of the story that Yokasta has lost her sense of self and identity through confusion about her role as mother.

12 Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby, Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance, Boston, Northeastern University Press, 1988, p.x.
13 Cynthia Duncan’s article “An Eye for an “I”: Women Writers and the Fantastic as a Challenge to Patriarchal Authority”, Inti, 39-40/41, 1994-94/94, 233-246, is helpful in understanding the fantastic as a reverse discourse in the analysis in Chapter Four.
14 Diamond and Quinby, p.x.
15 Ibid., p.x.
16 Ibid., p.9.
two sisters is similar to that of the relationship between the authoritarian state and the subjugated citizen. In Heker’s stories the identity crisis, meaning the intent focus on an identity in flux, is enacted to widen fissures in this power structure.

While identity is created through the subjective assumption of cultural norms, gender is a cultural inscription on the material or corporeal ground. Gender is a conceived notion of how men and women ought to behave that has nothing to do with secondary sex characteristics or any aspect of the physical. Francine Masiello corroborates the idea that the concept of “woman” has come to exist through literary texts and symbols that are at the mercy of socio-economic forces. “Gender,” as defined by Judith Butler, constitutes a process of identification, unrelated to the sexed body, that is more of a socially imposed necessity than a sign of personal experience. Ideas of gender are products of centuries-long discourses which cannot be disengaged instantaneously. Attention to questions of gender is vital for any works produced during this period in which culturally sanctioned members of the patriarchy voiced highly pejorative and restrictive opinions that served the function of upholding the status quo of the military and also the heterosexual matrix. The restricted psyche of the time is exemplified by the traditionalist right-wing opinions of Monseñor Vicente Zazpe concerning gender and sexual orientation:

[Entre 1960 y 1976 hubo] un periodo casi demencial...Surgieron movimientos de liberación de la mujer y hasta un llamado frente de alegre liberación de homosexuales.

[Between 1960 and 1976 there was] an almost demented period ... movements such as the women’s liberation movement and even a so-called movement for the joyful liberation of homosexuals emerged.

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17 Ibid., p.9.
19 Francine Masiello, Between Civilisation and Barbarism. Women, Nation, and Literary Culture in Modern Argentina, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, p.8.
Gender does not supersede any other social construct, yet it is a central criterion for the treatment one receives in the social sphere as well as a primary step in the recognition of self.\textsuperscript{21} I understand gender as a convention that serves structures of social control, and not as an inherently fixed trait.

In Heker’s works the protagonists are not able to transcend the boundaries built upon class, power, and gender in Argentine society. Social constructions are divisive in the texts and cannot be mediated as they are in Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of border writing. Her concept, which is used primarily in terms of gender issues, nonetheless enriches the commentary on the collision of discourses and realities by serving as a comparative notion of transgression. Anzaldúa explains her theory on borders as follows:

\begin{quote}
The Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

Anzaldúa depicts the schism between Mexico and the U.S., culturally and politically, and transforms the border into an area within which hybridity is possible. By border, or frontier writing, Anzaldúa refers to the geographic and psychological boundary between two territories which is sometimes a place of great pain, warranting her description of it as “una herida abierta” (an open wound).\textsuperscript{23} Indeed, the borders broached by Heker’s protagonists provoke physical reactions in spite of the fact that they are not crossed.\textsuperscript{24}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Butler agrees with bell hooks who does not believe that one can arrange the concepts of class, gender, and race in a hierarchical structure. (bell hooks, Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center, Boston, South End Press, 1984).}
\footnote{Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands, La Frontera: The New Mestiza, San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books, 1987, Preface.}
\footnote{Ibid., p.3.}
\footnote{Briefly, Rosaura becomes muted as she comprehends class borders in “La fiesta ajena”, Mariana becomes dizzy and disoriented due to her leap across boundaries of power in “Berkeley o Mariana del universo”, and Georgina vomits as she approaches the border between fantasy and reality in “Georgina Requeni o la elgida”. This will be discussed in Chapters Two, Three, and Four, respectively.}
\end{footnotes}
Since the three stories concentrate on the impact of an event on a person’s subjective self and therefore also on identity, the theory of border writing is helpful in defining the psychological borders that are built upon conditions of class, power, and gender. In Heker’s textual reality, free traffic across and between socially constructed borders is, if at all possible, a temporary charade. The applicable aspect of Anzaldúa’s theory to Heker’s texts is the notion of the painful divide between two entities, the objective and the subjective. Other aspects of border writing, such as the idea of the border as a place of liberating symbiosis, contrast with the confines of the margins between social discourses.

The *Bildungsroman* form, called *novela de aprendizaje* in Spanish, was traditionally a novel of apprenticeship that traced the coming-of-age of the young male hero of a novel. Andrés Avellaneda cites *Don Segundo Sombra* by Ricardo Güiraldes and *Aguas abajo* by Eduardo Wilde as prime examples of this tradition. He notes that the *Bildungsroman* is resurrected at times of crisis, such as those prompted by military coups, which threaten social formations. The *Bildungsroman* is the natural vehicle for Heker to express the growing pains of new social demands because she is able to textualize Argentina’s history of reinventing its government without specifically naming historical figures or situations. Avellaneda writes:

> La especificidad de la situación histórico-cultural argentina sugiere que mucho de lo que calla la serie literaria se expresa por bocas indirectas como la del texto de aprendizaje.

> The specificity of the Argentine cultural-historic situation suggests that much that is silenced by the literary series is expressed indirectly through mouths such as the text of apprenticeship.

Heker makes use of the *Bildungsroman* so that the reader experiences the issues in the text through the perspective of the protagonist. The traditional male *Bildungsroman* has four

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possible developments as outlined by Avellaneda. At the beginning a catalytic encounter with a person, animal, or thing takes place. In the first stage the hero returns to the social class of origin that he thought he had abandoned, and to a situation or state that he believed he had overcome. Second, he realizes that individual projects are fragile; third, he perceives the existence of limits, and last, he perceives a possible escape or salvation that consists of abandoning the individualist ego and rejecting petty bourgeois conduct.  

The *Bildungsroman* can be a feminine and feminist strategy as well and express those concerns through the appropriation of the sub-genre. As such it becomes a reverse discourse that challenges societal norms. Linda Peterson finds that the difference between the male and the female *Bildungsroman* resides in the fact that the male *Bildungsroman* focuses on the hero’s vocational crisis of finding his place in the world through accommodation, rebellion, or withdrawal. She conceives of the female model as being an introspective psychological journey which focuses on “awakening” rather than “apprenticeship”. This is the basis of the application of the *Bildungsroman* to Heker’s stories, bearing in mind that as gender roles change in Argentine society the male and female *Bildungsroman* may converge.

As mentioned, my analysis of the use of the fantastic literary genre in Heker’s stories is based upon Julio Cortázar’s explanation and definition of the fantastic as a neurotic product, a nightmare, and an outside ambience transferred to the terrain of the neurotic. The fantastic enters into Heker’s text only in terms of psychological drama, not as in García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* whose characters levitate, grow tails like pigs, and so forth. I have chosen Cortázar’s perspective on this term, because it very much resembles Heker’s use of it. He explains that

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27 Ibid., p.221.
28 Avellaneda, “Construyendo el monstruo”, p.221.
30 Ibid., p.66.
Almost all of the stories I have written belong to the genre of the “fantastic” for lack of a better term, and they are opposed to that false realism which consists of believing that everything can be described and explained as it was accepted by the scientific and philosophical optimism of the eighteenth century; that is, within a world directed more or less harmoniously by a system of laws, principles, cause-and-effect relations, defined psychologies, and well-mapped geographies.\(^\text{32}\)

Elsa Dehenin has compiled a partial list of Cortázar’s primary fantastic elements which further clarifies the area of focus. They are, in Cortázar’s words:

1. a rarely peaceful coexistence of at least two openings to the world (that of the child and adult);
2. writing from the interstitial (interstitial zones, the living interstices) one of the instantaneous fractures of the continuum;
3. that abrupt and almost always unanticipated breakdown between a satisfactory and reasonable horizon and the irruption of the unusual;
4. \textit{ars combinatoria};
5. open order;
6. punto vélaco (place of convergence, point of mysterious intersection);
7. heterogeneities;
8. fortuitous encounter;
9. legislation of \textit{the arbitrary}.\(^\text{33}\)

This list of Cortázar’s basic aspects of the fantastic will serve as the guideline for the discussion of the genre. While they are not the definitive requirements for the fantastic, they are well-suited to Heker’s use of the genre.

The structure of the following chapters is as follows: Chapter Two examines the \textit{Bildungsroman} text “La fiesta ajena” that deftly portrays the precise instant in which a young girl becomes aware of the absolute class barriers that separate her from her playmate, the daughter of the upper-class family for whom the protagonist’s mother works as a maid. “La fiesta ajena” comments on class fixity and the function of class relations in

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\(^{31}\) Cortázar, “Del cuento breve y sus alrededores”, p.66.
\(^{32}\) Cortázar, “Some Aspects of the Short Story”, p.5.
the formation of a sense of identity. I chose to work with “Berkeley o Mariana del universo” in Chapter Three of the thesis, because of the psychological angst which pushes this story into the realm of the fantastic. In this story, while waiting for their mother to return home a young girl pesters her older sister until the frustrated older sister introduces Mariana to the philosophical idea of idealism, creating one’s entire reality. Mariana’s world and psyche are shattered by these concepts of subjectivity and nothingness and reflect the destruction of reality and sanity seen under the military regimes of 1966-1973.

The third story constitutes the fourth and penultimate chapter. “Georgina Requeni o la elegida” is a mixture of stream-of-consciousness narrative, dialogue, and third-person narrative about the disappointments of a child’s transition to womanhood because of her alienation from a subjective sense of self. The story chronicles the empty life of a middle-class woman who waits to be escorted to a life of fame and fortune by men before deriving agency from her situation in the eleventh hour of her life. Heker uses several narrative techniques to achieve a blur of temporalities in the story, making it a perfect candidate not only for the discussion of the role of gender in Heker’s conception of the construction of identity, but also as an example of the hybridization of the Bildungsroman with the fantastic genre.

While the absolute definition of the above concepts is impossible, these fundamental terms will be used to convey the discussion of the thesis. The terms may acquire alternative significations as the discussion unfolds, but any departure from the core concepts will be addressed in the text of the discussion. The structure of the thesis is meant to facilitate the flow of the argument by allowing the narrative techniques and literary strategies of the author to be seen as natural outgrowths of her thematic and the historical events that produced it.
Chapter Two

CLASS IDENTITY AND THE CHILD: A COMING OF AGE

IN “LA FIESTA AJENA”

“Afirmar la identidad implica destacar la diferencia. To affirm identity is to emphasize difference.

-Yurkievich

“La fiesta ajena” (The Stolen Party), first published in 1982, chronicles a young girl’s moment of recognition of class borders. Ideological issues of class barriers and economics are a constant concern for Heker personally as well as professionally and appear in her work with some frequency. In “La pólémica con Julio Cortázar” she writes,

Si se le preguntara a cualquier escritor “in situ” y con un mínimo de lucidez, qué es lo que más lo aplasta en la actualidad, probablemente citaría en primer lugar la situación económica.

If you were to ask any “in situ” writer, who is in any way lucid, what is currently most stifling to him/her, he/she would probably rank the economic situation in first place.

In “La fiesta ajena” Heker concentrates on the process of socialization of class barriers that result from economic discrepancies. In choosing a simple, concise event in which to situate the cataclysmic recognition of class divisions, Heker calls the full attention of the narrative to a crisis of identity brought on by the intersection of the personal consciousness and the impersonal class consciousness. The simple plot consists of Rosaura, the hugely

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2 Corpa Vargas, Los cuentos de Liliana Heker: testimonios de vida, p.7.
sympathetic heroine, attending a birthday party in the home of her mother’s employer. She believes she is a special guest at the party until the final scene in which her mother’s employer pays for her help, effectively inducting her into the working class. Héctor María Cavallari states that the structural basis for the story is:

la tematización “denunciante” de la problemática de la enajenación en la sociedad burguesa; tematización que se textualiza no como palabra proferida desde otro lugar, sino precisamente como discurso que enuncia el orden para interrumpirlo e invertirlo a partir de su propio dominio.

the “accusatory” thematization of the problematic of alienation in bourgeois society; a thematization which is textualized not as a commentary uttered from outside this place, but precisely as a speech that enunciates the order to interrupt it and invert it from the site of its own authority.³

The narrative ends as the parameters of class wend their way into Rosaura’s consciousness, emphasizing the process of identity construction more so than its ramifications. Heker depicts this loss of innocence through flashbacks and repetitions in the frame of a Bildungsroman text. This technique enables her to write about Argentina’s middle class by depicting the trappings of the lifestyle without using the explicit vocabulary of class relations.

The word “ajena” can be translated as meaning foreign, alien, inappropriate, and belonging to somebody else, so that the Spanish title of the story foreshadows the outcome of the party.⁴ Since the story centers on Rosaura, the reader of the Spanish text is immediately engaged in asking why she is a foreigner in the party atmosphere. The answer is found in Rosaura’s identity (the blend of the subjective self and objectifying discourse) which hinges on five points of collision that occur between her subjective conception of her role at the party and pragmatic reality-based admonishments about class. The party is ajena

³ Héctor María Cavallari, “Liliana Heker: (d)enuniar el orden,” The Latin American Short Story: Essays on the Twenty Fifth Anniversary of Seymour Menton’s El Cuento Hispanoamericano, Kemy Oyarzun, ed., Commemorative Series, Latin American Studies Program, University of California, Riverside, no. 9, May 1989, Cavallari’s emphasis, p.36.
because it is meant for the other children, not Rosaura, who is there to learn the attributes of the serving class through the mediation of the employment contract between the middle and lower classes. The story opens as Rosaura rushes into the kitchen of her mother’s employers to see if their daughter Luciana’s secret about the performing monkey is true. The class commentary is immediately engaged as Rosaura recalls her mother Herminia’s disapproving words mocking the idea of a monkey at a birthday party, “¡Por favor! Vos sí te creés todas las pavadas que te dicen” (Get away with you, believing any nonsense that you are told!) (117) Cavallari draws our attention to the very fact that the monkey is in the kitchen, the space for the non-invited to occupy when not working at the party, and consecrates the kitchen as a place for employees, not friends. Luciana and Rosaura’s “secret” is hidden in the kitchen. In this sense, the secret is the monkey just as much as it is Rosaura’s hidden identity as a servant. Her relief at finding the monkey there informs the reader of Rosaura’s ingenuousness, a contributing factor to the friction between mother and daughter, and reinforces Rosaura’s opinion that she is at the party as Luciana’s friend. Rosaura’s stubborness is a key factor in her forthcoming crisis, evidenced by the thought that, “no le hubiera gustado nada tener que darle razón a su madre.” (19) (she wouldn’t have liked to admit her mother was right.) (117), facilitates Luciana’s mother’s efforts to cajole her into working at the party.

The first of the five points of collision between Rosaura’s subjective conception of herself and the objective discourse of class occurs when Herminia characterizes the party as “una fiesta de ricos” (a rich people’s party) (117), inferring an otherness that Rosaura does not want to perceive. Heker uses the idea of a hired magician and performing monkey precisely to situate Luciana’s family in the upper middle class. The party is a status symbol that delineates the values of their class, just as having a maid speaks about the middle-class

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5 Cavallari, p.37.
6 All page numbers for citations of the text are given in brackets. The Spanish text of “La fiesta ajena” is accompanied by the page numbers from Los bordes de lo real and the English text of “The Stolen Party” is followed by the page numbers from The Stolen Party.
preoccupations of appearance. The girl mistakenly assumes that Herminia means to say that rich people are liars or sinners and that because they do not go to Heaven her mother does not want her to go to the party. Rosaura enters into the dynamic of defending Luciana, her upper-middle-class companion, to her mother, while tentatively probing the area of the class division. Rosaura, who studies religion at school, knows that “los ricos también van al cielo” (19) (rich people go to Heaven too) (117) and doesn’t understand why her mother categorically disapproves of the party. She does not confront her mother’s disapproval because she intuits the difficulties that would arise and so opts to circumscribe the issue by willfully misunderstanding it as a dislike of frivolity. When her mother says, “Lo que pasa a usted, mi'hijita, le gusta cagar más arriba del culo” (21) (The problem with you, young lady, is that you like to fart higher than your ass) (117), Rosaura’s reaction reveals the rift between mother and daughter. Herminia’s comment engenders everything the girl hates: simple mocking cynicism that denigrates what Rosaura feels to be her uniqueness. She disapproves of and is embarrassed by her mother’s remark because of the vulgarity of the sentiment. The subtlety of this short exchange lies in the versimilitude of the class innuendo. The realism of the remark helps this bitter exchange lay bare the differential in sensibilities between mother and daughter. Rosaura, being the best student in her class, looks down on her mother’s base expressions. Herminia’s highly class-referential metaphor rankles Rosaura because it attacks the subjective façade that allows Rosaura to hope that Luciana’s socio-economic world is within her reach.

7 Cavallari, p.38.
The second point of collision occurs when Herminia reveals aspects of her daughter's identity to her by voicing the external reality of class-based identity. The narrative constructs Herminia in the role of Cassandra, the mad seer, who warns her daughter of her coming misfortune. Rosaura cannot make sense of her mother's words and thinks she must be mistaken to misread the invitation to the party so drastically. She ignores Herminia's advice just as Agamemnon ignores Cassandra's vision of the destruction of Troy by fire. Herminia's terse words in the Argentine vernacular of a domestic employee inform Rosaura of society's view of her: "¿Sabés lo que sos vos para todos ellos? Sos la hija de la sirvienta, nada más" (You know what you are to them? The maid's daughter, that's what) (118). These words are impossible for Rosaura to absorb because for Rosaura, no statement is further from the truth. She does not understand why her mother would say such a thing, given Rosaura's many happy experiences of studying with Luciana free of any mention of class status. Because Rosaura believes her unique position in the household as Luciana's friend is based on an egalitarian basis, Herminia's harsh forecast can only be rebuffed by disputation and ignored. Rosaura retorts, "Calláte - gritó-. Qué vas a saber vos lo que es ser amiga" (Shut up! You know nothing about being friends) (118). She rejects the discourse that restricts her to being the daughter of the servant and concentrates on the identity her subjective sense of self constructs, which enables her to relate to Luciana as an equal. This discomforting exchange not only threatens to bring tears to Rosaura's eyes but instigates a careful re-examination of the situation of her friendship with Luciana. The reader understands that Rosaura is supporting a false pretense of friendship that extends to a belief of belonging to the sphere of the upper class. She is playing at the fantasy of fitting in with Luciana's family. The narrative recedes temporally into the history of afternoons spent in the insular world of the kitchen as if to reassure not only Rosaura but the reader, as well, that Herminia's cynicism is unwarranted. Rosaura's confusion, the reader learns, stems from the fact that she spends every afternoon with Luciana doing homework and playing while
Herminia cleans the house. She is perplexed by Herminia’s resistance to the party because such conflict has never arisen in the shared world of the kitchen. She knows that Herminia permits her to play with Luciana, and since her subjective ideas are ignorant of class divisions, she assumes Herminia does not want her to enjoy the party for some other reason. For Rosaura, the party is a magical opportunity to spend time in Luciana’s world and she will not miss it no matter what her mother thinks. When her mother starches her best Christmas dress and washes her dark hair with vinegar to make it shine, Rosaura is surprised that she has acquiesced and believes Herminia has been convinced.

Herminia’s refusal to believe that there will be a monkey at the party, told once in flashback at the start of the story and now repeated in the context of a past discussion, creates the third instance of crisis. Her words of condemnation, “Vos sí te creés todas las pavadas que te dicen” (21) (Get away with you, believing any nonsense you’re told) (119), are a criticism of Rosaura, not of Luciana and her family, as Rosaura believes (117). When Herminia accuses Luciana of lying, Rosaura, who knows Luciana is not lying about the monkey, leaves Herminia’s sphere and allies herself with the upper-class sphere, enunciating a binary dynamic of class politics. The narrator relates:

Rosaura se ofendió mucho. Además le parecía mal que su madre acusara a las personas de mentirosas simplemente porque eran ricas. (20)

Rosaura was deeply offended. She thought it unfair of her mother to accuse other people of being liars simply because they were rich. (119)
This interchange reveals that class fixity is a reality for Herminia while Rosaura believes that class spheres are mutable. The narrative admits that “Ella también quería ser rica” (20) (Rosaura wanted to be rich, too, of course) (119). Yet, in as much as she dreams of a middle-class future, Rosaura subconsciously recognizes that class is exclusionary, even of familial love. She reasons that, given her mother’s antipathy for rich people, Herminia would not come to visit if Rosaura became rich. The potential loss of her mother’s esteem and affection does not dissolve Rosaura’s determination to go to the party. In fact, “Deseaba ir a esa fiesta más que nada en el mundo” (20) (She wanted to go to that party more than anything else in the world) (119). Rosaura elects to identify with Luciana and the upper class because she believes that by virtue of her mother’s polemical class views she is already alienated from Herminia. When Herminia deprecates the party, Rosaura mutters to herself, “Si no voy me muero” (20) (I’ll die if I don’t go) (119). It is a life or death situation for her, and although her threat is obviously hyperbolic it serves to categorize Rosaura’s concerns. Heker founds the microcosm of the party on Rosaura’s perceptions in such a way that it mimics the macrocosm of reality. If going to the party constitutes living, then her externally derived identity will be determined at the party, that is, while she is alive and interacting. Remaining in the lower class with Herminia will kill Rosaura, she believes; it will destroy her dreams. Because Rosaura feels closer to Luciana and the big house with its wonderful people and possibilities than she does to her mother’s concept of the capricious upper-middle class her only alternative is to believe she belongs to the opposite class sphere. Herminia, who knows that Rosaura is ajena to that sphere, is merely protecting her daughter from rejection. Rosaura’s blind hopes of living in a mansion as a rich person prevent her from recognizing the social lines that condemn her hopes to childish fantasy. The identity based on the subjective self is contravened, but in no way altered yet, by Herminia’s warnings of the social conventions concerning class. Rosaura is in the stages that preface the awakening necessitated by the Bildungsroman, she is resisting the inevitable acknowledgement of the difference between her and Luciana.
Rosaura arrives early at the party and feels that she has the status of a special guest due, she reasons, to her daily friendship with Luciana. When Señora Inés compliments her, "Qué linda estás hoy, Rosaura" (20) (How lovely you look today, Rosaura) (120), this seal of approval, coming from the highest ranking authority, assures Rosaura that she is accepted. The symbolic value of clothing as a demarcator of class status is important in this instance because in Señora Inés' opinion, Rosaura is dressed appropriately to serve at the party. The special care that Herminia took to prepare her for the party indicates the differential between standards for appearance in the two classes. Señora Inés tells Rosaura that she is the only child allowed to peek in at the monkey in the kitchen and asks her to carry a jug of orange juice to the party guests because the others can't be trusted not to spill. Her secret intention to employ Rosaura without making it explicit to her or the other children at the party relies on the referential level of their communication. Cavallari cautions:

hay que enfatizar aquí que ese "secreto" está a la vez dicho y callado en los actos verbales de la dueña de casa, y que lo que interrumpe y revela esta duplicidad de la palabra del personaje es la actividad de la escritura mediante el agenciamiento de la función narrante en el discurso del relato.

it must be emphasized that here this "secret" is both pronounced and silent in the verbal actions of the housewife, and that what interrupts and reveals the duplicity of the words of this character is the activity of the writing through the agency of the narrative function in the discourse of the story.⁸

⁸ Ibid., p.38.
The narrative communicates Rosaura’s pride in being asked to help, making her feel like an intimate friend, and the reader is influenced by Rosaura’s innocent excitement. Consequently, the reader suspends his/her disbelief that Rosaura is genuinely appreciated as a friend and rides along Rosaura’s sentiments of privilege. Rosaura feels accepted by Señora Inés, which demonstrates the importance of Señora Inés’ opinion. When Señora Inés tells her she is the only one allowed in the kitchen because the others “son revoltosos, capaz que rompen algo” (are much too boisterous, they might break something) (120), Rosaura thinks she is receiving preferential treatment for being a daily visitor. This intentional misunderstanding is repeated when Señora Inés asks her to pass the hot-dogs: she tells Rosaura that since she knows the house so well she will better at it than anyone else. Rosaura’s familiarity with the house is a product of Herminia’s work hours there, but Rosaura concludes that this is another reflection of her special status, not recognizing that Señora Inés is coopting her desire to help.

The fourth revelation of external identity comes from Luciana’s blonde cousin who flatly demands of Rosaura, “¿Y vos quién sos?” (And who are you?) (121). This detail about hair color refers to class distinctions; although scarcely mentioned, it is by no means arbitrary. Heker uses every aspect of the text to embellish the portrait of class divisions in Argentina: this is an allusion to the social construct of the paradigm of civilization and barbarism symbolized by the confrontation of the fair (the cousin) and the dark (Rosaura). Rosaura’s dark hair defines her class position suggesting membership in a certain class. The family is the locus of inculcation of class positions. It is where the child receives his/her first social ideas and, as such, the family is metonymic for class position.

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9 Jorge Luis Borges uses physical attributes to symbolize the conflict between the European and the American in his story “El sur” (Ficciones, Buenos Aires, Alianza Emece, 1992). In the story the protagonist, Juan Dahlmann, mediates his mixed German and Hispanic ancestry with some difficulty. Borges shows how certain traits are associated with each lineage along the lines of the social construct of the civilization/barbarism opposition. The struggle between German and Hispanic becomes, by extension, the struggle between the intellect and the physical, the religious and the military, and logic and spontaneity. Also, see Victoria Cohen Imach’s chapter “La piel” in her book De utopías y desencantos: Campo
Rosaura’s mother symbolizes the lower class and its preoccupations, while Señora Inés and her family represent the values and systems of the upper class. The child-sized representation of the social voice of the upper class, Luciana’s cousin, mimics Herminia’s warnings and is, for this reason, one of the most successful interruptions of Rosaura’s blithe ignorance. The arrogant cousin is the catalyst for the awakening Rosaura dreads and because of this, the sour point of the party. The haughty obstinacy we read in the cousin’s feelings of superiority to Rosaura is explained in Tomás Eloy Martínez’s belief that Argentina is victim to “the general belief that the ruling class imparts the civilizing discourse – the rest is barbarism.”

When Rosaura explains she is Luciana’s friend, the girl shoots back: “Vos no sos amiga de Luciana porque yo soy la prima y conozco a todas sus amigas. Y a vos no te conozco” (You are not a friend of Luciana because I’m her cousin, and I know all her friends. And I don’t know you) (121). The cousin’s suspicions about why Rosaura is at the party are aroused because she has never seen her before. Rosaura is a stranger, she is ajena to the cousin, indicating that the family, which determines one’s circle of friends, is as closed a social position as class is. The cousin insists that Rosaura explain what her link is to Luciana. She replies, trying to be patient but indignant at the same time, “Yo vengo todas las tardes con mi mamá y hacemos los deberes juntas” (I come here every afternoon with my mother, and we do our homework together) (121). The cousin teases and laughs at her by saying, “¿Vos y tú mamá hacen los deberes juntas?” (You and your mother do your homework together?) (21). When Rosaura reiterates that she studies with Luciana the cousin disregards Rosaura’s explanation and states: “Eso no es ser amiga” (That’s not being friends) (121). The cousin’s derogatory stance forces Rosaura to reveal that she is the daughter of the maid, a fact that Rosaura hardly enunciates, proving that she internalizes the class division while outwardly denying its power. The fact that she doesn’t include the embarassing words her mother instructed her to add, “y a

intelectual y periferia en la Argentina de los sesenta (Tucumán, Universidad de Tucumán, 1994) for a discussion of physical traits in Argentine literary texts.
mucha honra" (21) (and proud of it) (121), shows that Rosaura is humiliated by her class position and the words that betray it. Rosaura has been schooled by Herminia in her class position but is unable to feel proud of her origins. She is annoyed by the exchange because the cousin has made Rosaura aware of her own discomfort about class position.

The redoubling of the external assertions of identity, parental and now peer, increase the reader's perceptions of Rosaura's headstrong insistence on her own subjectively constructed identity. The text encourages the reader to align him/herself with Rosaura by portraying her as a doomed innocent facing the little cousin's blunt words. When Rosaura ignores this call to reality the reader ignores it as well, preferring to believe in an eventual vindication of Rosaura, which obviously never occurs. Clearly, this is an example of Umberto Eco's concept of the text asking for help from the reader. The reader aids the narrative by relaxing his/her analytical capabilities so that the text is experienced through the muddy emotions of the young girl. The reader is involved in the Bildungsroman text in tandem with Rosaura. The hazy zone of ignorance that Rosaura has built for herself is a youthful refuge to which the reader also escapes from the voices of reason (the cousin's, Herminia's) that elaborate the social codes for class. Thankfully, the cousin is interrupted by Luciana's mother who asks Rosaura to pass the hot-dogs since she "conocía la casa mejor que nadie" (22) (knew the house so much better than the others) (122). Because Rosaura is at this point still resisting the class barriers embodied by the little cousin, she struggles to assert her friendship with Luciana. When Señora Inés asks for her help, she feels flattered because it seems to prove her intimacy with Luciana and Señora Inés. The reader empathizes with Rosaura's optimistic naivety and cheers for her when she gives the rude little cousin a kick in the shins when no one is looking.

In spite of the insolent cousin, Rosaura is enchanted by Luciana, and also by the boys who clamor to have Rosaura on their team after she wins party games. The boys' attention testifies to her talent outside of the domestic sphere of the kitchen and reveals that

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10 Lewis and Torrents, p.15.
Rosaura is physically their equal. As the text ominously intones, “Pero faltaba lo mejor” (22) (But the best was still to come) (123). The “best” for Rosaura means handing out the cake. She feels superior to the other children when she is asked to pass out the birthday cake, because the cake, as any child knows, is the pinnacle of the party. The attention this power affords her is gratifying and reminds her of a fairy tale in which a queen holds the right of life or death over her subjects. The image of a life or death ultimatum is repeated here to indicate the zenith of Rosaura’s experience at the party. She has swung from fearing Herminia might not let her go to the party, a death sentence in Rosaura’s mind, to having a star role at the party – the thrilling consolidation of power. She exploits the power she is granted by unfairly handing out the slices of cake, believing she is in control while in fact Señora Inés, the power behind the throne, bought the cake and controls access to it by slicing it. The act of handing out the cake enables Rosaura to divide the party guests into enemies and friends, which shadows the theme of inequality at the base of the text.\footnote{Altamirano and Sarlo, p.111.}

Rosaura gives Luciana and the boys the biggest pieces of cake and doles out a miserly slice to Luciana’s cousin in retaliation for her questions. Señora Inés lets Rosaura believe she has control over the cake while she is actually just serving it; she is literally, a servant, and not on equal standing with the guests. The servant decidedly does not have control over the upper-class children, as Rosaura wants to believe.

She revels in this illusion of power and preens when the magician singles her out for help from the audience. “A ver, la de los ojos de moro” (23) (You, with the Spanish eyes) (125), he says to Rosaura when he asks her to hold the monkey during a trick. This second reference to complexion is more racially rooted than the first and does not imply value positioning the way the paradigm of civilization and barbarism does. It is a powerful innuendo, but coming from the magician it is an affectionate remark that makes Rosaura feel special. “Moro” (Moor) refers to the Arabic invaders of Spain and their descendants; in this instance the discursive level reminds the reader that Rosaura is a foreigner at the party.
This word in itself implies at least 780 years of tension between African muslims and Spanish christians. To the cousin, Rosaura is an invader who is inserting herself into an ambience where she is not wanted. In recounting the details of the party to her mother as they get ready to leave, Rosaura mentions her bravery and the magician’s special words to her after she helped him; “Muchas gracias, señorita condesa” (23) (Thank you very much, my little countess) (125). The magician feeds Rosaura’s fantasy of living in the upper class. Instead of impressing Herminia, these words reveal Rosaura’s pride which only fuels her scorn for her daughter’s unrealistic hopes of being accepted as a legitimate guest. She laughs before exclaiming “Mirenla a la condesa” (23) (So now we’re a countess!) (126). The reader can see that Herminia is torn by frustration with Rosaura’s obliviousness and by pride in her daughter’s good behaviour.

The fifth intersection between the self and the objective identity takes place at the end of the party when the class conflict reaches its apex. As they wait to say goodbye to Señora Inés, Rosaura, still pleased with her success at the party, gloats that she has been the most helpful at the party, unaware that her effort has been surreptitiously corrupted by her employer. Rosaura explains to her mother that Señora Inés has gone to get the party gifts for the departing guests, a yo-yo for the boys and a bracelet for the girls. This bourgeois tradition of handing out party gifts to departing guests consolidates the barrier between Rosaura and the other children. Rosaura does not dare confess to her mother that she would prefer the sparkling yo-yo because she feels sure her mother would push her to ask for the boys’ gift instead. This embarassing distinction would make Rosaura stand out from the rest of the little girls, a curse for a little girl her age who only wants to fit in with her peers. While Señora Inés compliments Herminia on Rosaura’s behavior at the party, the final remark on currency and class begins as shimmer of fantasy in which “Por un momento, Rosaura pensó que a ella le iba a hacer los dos regalos” (24) (For an instant, Rosaura thought that she’d give her two presents) (128). Señora Inés does not compensate

12 Cavallari, p.43.
her as a guest but firmly links Rosaura to the serving class, in spite of Rosaura’s delusions of superiority and at least, equality, by reaching into her wallet and pulling out two bills of money. The ironic repetition of the double gift, two bills and not two toys, adds weight to the fact that Rosaura is different than the others because she is considered an employee. The tentative hold Rosaura has on her purely subjective identity dissolves in the moment in which Señora Inés hands Rosaura her pay and says, “Esto te lo ganaste en buena ley” (You really and truly earned this) (128). Señora Inés’ satisfaction with her work makes Rosaura understand in a flash that she will always be different from Luciana and the guests because she pertains to a different class. This enunciation of the difference between the salary-based relationship of the employer/employee and the mutual, non-economic relationship of friends is the undeniable proof that Rosaura is truly her mother’s daughter. Señora Inés relegates Rosaura to being a servant, a fact so basic on Señora Inés’ part that she assumes Rosaura is informed as well. She has always regarded Rosaura as an employee and assigns Rosaura a class before the girl attains a consciousness of her own status. Now that Rosaura receives her salary from Señora Inés just as her mother does, as the hired help, she is marked by the class identity she has desperately tried to avoid. She learns in this instant that her class position is not based on behavior or worth but that it exists independent of her intentions. Rosaura is subject to class distinctions and cannot control them any more than she can choose her dark hair or change her ojos de moro, or the impersonal work relationship in which she is now entrenched. Rosaura understands that she misconstrued her role at the party and must reconstruct the afternoon in her memory so that it reflects the reality of class divisions. Rosaura’s world rearranges itself in the instant that Señora Inés reaches into the billfold and consolidates the class borders embodied by the gesture. Her mental transition from child to adult is completed by the shedding of these scales from her eyes. Every bit of praise from Señora Inés was coercion intended to solicit Rosaura’s help; the narrative that surrounds the textual events upholds the double levels of

13 Ibid., p.36.
understanding of action so that in spite of Rosaura’s confusion the reader can interpret the relationship of employer-employee. The hierarchical structure of class dynamics is evident in Herminia’s painstaking attention to Rosaura’s appearance in spite of ambivalence concerning sending her daughter to the party. The unspoken reason she is ambivalent is because she is sending Rosaura to her first job as a domestic employee and knows that Rosaura is oblivious to the situation. Herminia’s duplicity in this matter allies her with Señora Inés: they have made an arrangement concerning Rosaura but do not inform her. Herminia takes extra care in arranging Rosaura’s appearance in order to “earn” Señora Inés’ approval when she “pays” them a compliment. Herminia tacitly teaches her daughter the irrefutable power of the hierarchy of class by sublimating her own feelings and pleasing Señora Inés.

The *Bildungsroman* text requires that there is no possibility of regression to a previous position of knowledge. Because the facts have asserted themselves in Rosaura’s world on an emotional, rational, and physical level, she cannot deny them and return to her childish ignorance. Rosaura stiffens as she hears the cold confirmation of her mother’s warning and recoils from Señora Inés. The immense class barrier that separates Rosaura and Señora Inés is perceived by everyone but Rosaura until the instant the physical space is transversed by Señora Inés’ hand holding the money. Rosaura is, literally, speechless and regresses to corporeal intuition. Herminia becomes her refuge: “Instintivamente se apretó contra el cuerpo de su madre” (25) (Instinctively she pressed herself against her mother’s body) (129). She retreats to the maternal sphere for protection from Señora Inés who represents the upper middle class. As the magnitude of Rosaura’s deliberate misunderstanding sinks in, she returns her employer’s objectifying gaze of class divisions that is devoid of subjectivity: “Su mirada fría, fija en la cara de la señora Inés” (25) (Rosaura’s eyes had a cold, clear look that fixed itself on Señora Inés’ face) (129).

Rosaura sees now with clarity that Señora Inés is a representative of the upper class, not her friend’s mother, but an unfamiliar and impersonal figure. The concluding line of the
story refers to Señora Inés’ unwillingness to address the shock evident in the girl’s expression: “La señora Inés, inmóvil, seguía con la mano extendida. Como si no se animara retirarla. Como si la perturbación más leve pudiera desbaratar este delicado equilibrio” (25) (Señora Inés, motionless, stood there with her hand outstretched. As if she didn’t dare draw it back. As if the slightest change might shatter an infinitely delicate balance) (129). Cavallari suggests that:

A nivel subjetivo...su propia reacción de sorpresa ante el gesto de Rosaura sugiere que ella no ha sido ni cínica ni hipócrita, sino más bien “natural”, en el ejercicio de “su derecho”.

On the subjective level ... her own reaction of surprise to Rosaura’s gesture suggests that she has not been cynical or hypocritical, but rather she has been “natural” in the exercise of “her rights”.14

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14 Ibid., p.44.
This story exemplifies the *Bildungsroman* genre because it tracks the maturation of thought processes through the shift from childish innocence to adult consciousness. Rosaura is a different person at the end of the story than she was at the outset, due to the crushing experience of being “put in her place” by the class discourse. As the prescriptions for the female *Bildungsroman* suggest, the awakening occurs in the domestic sphere and has to do with personal issues rather than chance encounters or professional vocation. Rosaura puzzles through the issue of class in relation to her identity in such a way that no one else can accelerate or delay her discoveries. She combines the information gleaned from the sources available to her (fairy tales, past experience, advice from her mother, and personal desire) to create the collage of her subjective self. The emergent subjective identity is that of a confident and capricious girl who intends to fulfill her dreams of wealth and possibilities. She refutes the efforts of those who seek to impose their opinions on her until she is overwhelmed by the external discourses they represent. The complete disintegration of Rosaura’s primary identity is preceded by instants of erosion that she ignores, such as Herminia’s disapproval and the intrusive questions from the little cousin. Rosaura clearly registers these episodes but manipulates the ambiguity of the scenario to protect her perspective. When the irrefutable proof of class restrictions comes in the last scene, the identity she has constructed for herself, that of a capable, beautiful, intelligent girl who knows no barriers, falls away to reveal the social construct that she has been assigned, that of the daughter of the hired help. Her reaction, as the subject, is to become rigid in body and in mind mimicking the etched-in-stone quality of class relations.

As Franco Moretti proposes, “the *Bildungsroman* as the ‘symbolic form of modernity’ embodies cultural tensions between individuality and socialization, autonomy and normality, interiority and objectification.”¹⁵ In our case, although Rosaura tries to assert her individuality, she spends the party doing chores for Señora Inés and learning how to please her. The instruction on how to behave in front of an employer, or relative of

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¹⁵ Peterson, p.66.
the employer such as the cousin, is not specifically spelled out for Rosaura, but it is
intimated so that she treats the cousin with respect, albeit grudgingly. It is assumed that
Rosaura reads the objectifying sub-text of class, because her behaviour is exemplary, when
in fact she doesn’t recognize the connotations until after the party. The notion of class is
constantly present on the referential level in order to maintain the reader’s awareness of the
instability of Rosaura’s identity. The class vocabulary of the comments, such as the Queen
in the fairy tale and the pet name of “Countess” from the magician, conflates with the more
negative remarks from Herminia and the cousin to stoke the discourse of class-based
identity. Both camps are referring to Rosaura with their own polemic vocabularies. The
magician indulges Rosaura by referring to her as a monarch while the other realistic voices
deem her a servant. This contradictory view of Rosaura increases her struggle with
determining who she is and where she fits in at the party. The text does not help the reader
by pointing to a reliable textual voice concerning Rosaura’s role until the final resolution.
Luciana, the hub of the story, who endows Rosaura with feelings of aspiration, worth, and
affection, is conspicuously silent. Luciana never acquires a voice in the narrative and the
reader never knows if she and Rosaura are friends in her estimation. Luciana’s diegetic
absence adds to Rosaura’s and the reader’s insecurity about Rosaura’s identity because of
the lack of verification of their relationship from the one person that could settle the issue.
While in most female Bildungsroman gender is a primary concern, gender seems to
scarcely enter the story. Rosaura makes mention of the boys at the party only to relate her
own competence, not to express inferiority or an unattainable standard. Not once does she
mention the idea of class mobility through marriage as in a rescue fantasy of a prince on a
shining steed, as we shall see in “Georgina Requeni o la elegida”. It is evident that
Rosaura is concerned first and foremost with her own capabilities; as the fairy tale makes
clear, her Queen does not need a King to retain power over her subjects.

Knowledge of the social context of the writer and the text is important in reading
Heker’s short stories. While they are full of emotional impact and well-written, it is their
success in capturing the portrait of Argentina’s middle class that makes them unique. In 1982, the year La fiesta ajena was first published, Argentina was weathering the tremendous storms of the previous decades. The nation was faced with making sense of the violence, repression, and economic instability of the Dirty War. As Argentina searched for a new identity that reflected these experiences, writers responded by examining their own identities through their protagonists. Metaphorically, Argentina was in an adolescence and on the cusp of discovering the identity that would take the nation into the twenty-first century. Naturally, the Bildungsroman speaks to this national preoccupation and mirrors the growth and transformation of society, allowing the writer to project issues of change into the text so that the loss of innocence is enacted as a metaphor for the entire society.

The notion of a “before” and an “after” of Rosaura’s identity establishes the narrative not only in the Bildungsroman tradition, but also in that of border writing in the sense of trespassing. Rosaura seems to be the only person at the party unaware of her identity as the daughter of the maid. Whether or not she is conscious of this on some hidden level is an unimportant point because she is not ready to absorb its ramifications until the final episode. She is in the unique position of striving to fit in and, at the same time, of hoping to be singled out for her good behaviour and popularity. In short, she is consumed by the issues of a young girl and not cognizant of the weighty matters of adulthood until she is forced across the threshold into a new awareness. Jean Franco explains this phenomenon:

\[\text{Los márgenes, los bordes y los límites también han sido refuncionalizados no necesariamente como fronteras de territorios reales sino más bien como fronteras de neo-territorios que marcan el espacio no sólo geográfico sino también psicológico.}\]

Margins, borders, and limits have also been reworked not necessarily as frontiers of real spaces but as frontiers of neo-territories that mark not only geographic, but psychological space as well.\textsuperscript{16}

Rosaura stands at the cleft between the upper and lower classes both physically (she is familiar with Señora Inés's house but does not live there) and emotionally (she thinks she is Luciana’s friend and wants to be rich one day). She tries to bridge the gap to the upper class by doing her homework with Luciana, playing at the party, and winning the party games. She seems to fit in with the other guests until she must help with the chores of passing the food, and then her status is questioned. Rosaura mediates the two classes as well as she can until the end of the party, that zone of irreality where classes mingle and intentions are misunderstood, showing that metaphorical borderlands are a place of uncompromising hostility for Heker. Rosaura makes the leap from child to adult by comprehending Señora Inés’ consideration of her without a transition in class status. She crosses the border between her view of herself to the rest of the world’s opinion by entering the domain that she has attempted to ignore. This psychological border is a place of mental anguish, as evidenced by Rosaura’s almost catatonic state, and it is represented physically by the space between Herminia and Señora Inés. Señora Inés peers down at the little girl who expects to be presented with a party treat and ignores Rosaura’s expectant hand. This gesture is symbolic of the denial of equality and forces Rosaura to retreat to her mother’s space. When Señora Inés does extend her hand, now clutching Rosaura’s payment, to Herminia’s physical proximity, Rosaura stiffens and is incapable of traversing the space to collect her money. The lesson she is learning about her own identity in this moment is physically challenging and manifested in these one-sided gestures between representatives of opposite classes. The unbroachable class divide is a physical and psychological border that Rosaura confronts by beginning to internalize the proscribed identity of maid’s daughter. This step changes her from the innocent girl who considered class barriers to be temporary inconveniences to a young adult who feels the inescapable weight of her station and the impossible divide between classes.
The resolution of “La fiesta ajena” stops short of providing an elongated chronicle of Rosaura’s reactions to the imposition of the prescribed class-based identity through labor relations in the middle-class sphere of the capitalist socio-economic regime. The story need not continue further than the instant of the statement of Señora Inés’ intentions in order to demonstrate the relationship between social views of work-based and trans-class relationships, external discourses, and identity. By limiting the narrative to this short length, Heker concentrates the reader’s attention on the five crucial moments that preface the dramatic restructuring of Rosaura’s identity. Three of these impacting exchanges involve Herminia, one occurs with Luciana’s cousin, and one with Señora Inés. This continuum of interlocutors provides a broad base from which Rosaura’s subjective sense of self is dismantled. The referential level of the text rejoins the class consciousness of these interlocutors and provides a background for Rosaura’s discovery of not only economic but particularly economic spheres. A requirement for the Bildungsroman text is that the heroine find her place in the world. Once Rosaura has deduced the significance of class in her life, “La fiesta ajena” can be considered an authentic text of discovery. The abrupt transition she makes from deluded schoolgirl to aware young woman in her own intellect, as well as in the social realm, is due to the collision of her desiring subjective conception of self with the external objectifying discourse of class identity.
Chapter Three

LOSS OF DISCOURSE: DO I EXIST?

POWER AND PERCEPTIONS IN

“BERKELEY O MARIANA DEL UNIVERSO”

In “Berkeley o Mariana del universo” (Bishop Berkeley or Mariana of the Universe) published in 1972, Heker explores the relationship of power to one’s identity. At the time of its publication, Argentina was emerging from the weight of the years of Onganía’s government, and the democratic process appeared on the horizon as a realistic hope. This story takes its title from Bishop George Berkeley (1685-1753) who, in his Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous, in Opposition to Sceptics and Atheists, sets forth the tenets of idealism, which prove that while matter does not exist, the minds and ideas that imagine matter do. Heker uses the semi-autobiographical story of her experience as a child who loses her reference points of reality to explore the relation between the external world and the internal psychological processes by using the family context to express authoritarian abuses of power. The focus of Heker’s compact examination of one’s place in the universe is Mariana’s attempt to reconcile her reality with the discourse of philosophical idealism imposed on her by her adored older sister, Lucía,

2 Heker confesses, “En cuanto a la vinculación directa de mi infancia con mi literatura, hay [...] algunos cuentos que podrían considerarse autobiográficos: son los que tienen como personajes a Mariana y Lucía Barkán. Así, en efecto, fue la relación entre mi hermana (61/2 años mayor que yo, muy inteligente y muy autoritaria) y yo; a ella, en buena medida, le debo el ser escritora, aunque, como suele decirle, tambien hubiera podido deberle muchísimos años de psicoanalista.” (In respect to the direct link between my childhood and my literature, there are [...] some stories that could be considered autobiographical: those with the characters Mariana and Lucía Barkán. That was, in effect, the relationship between my sister (6 1/2 years older than I, very intelligent and very authoritative) and me; to her, I owe, in good measure, my
with the intent of silencing her. Lucía stuns Mariana by introducing her to the concept that everybody has his/her own configuration of reality and that each person dreams and creates his/her world. Lucía’s authoritarian exercise of power mirrors the external objective authoritarianism of the state which permeates all levels of society. It regulates the hierarchical structure of the family unit not only in terms of the dominant parent(s), but also enters the relationships of siblings, according to birth order. The isolation Mariana begins to feel due to the discourse stems from Heker’s existentialist belief that “en los momentos fundamentales de la vida, uno está solo” (in the fundamental moments of life, one is alone).

In the dysphoric moment when Mariana experiences an abrupt shift in her subjective identity, she changes from being unburdened by responsibility to controlling reality. Here, and in contrast with “La fiesta ajena”, the story remains in the subjective realm and does not intersect with an objective discourse to promote a change in the subjective of self. Rosaura alters her sense of self when class discourse forces her to do so. However, we can attempt to indicate the oblique presence of the objective discourse through recourse to Vidal’s “paradigm of trauma.”

The story concentrates on the young protagonist’s anxiety over facing the subjective self’s readjustments, thereby propelling the narrative into the psychological fantastic. This extreme emotional and intellectual upheaval can be said to mirror the objective repressive action under military regimes, limiting the citizens to live in a very constrictive public and private sphere dominated by a culture of silence and fear. Vidal’s idea provides a model of interpersonal interaction that parallels that of the state and the citizen. With this model in mind, the power dynamic between Lucía and Mariana presents an allegorization of the regime and the citizen. Heker’s subjective profession as a writer, although, as I like to tell her, I could have also been indebted to her for years of psychoanalysis.) Corpa Vargas, Los cuentos de Liliana Heker: testimonios de vida, p.66.


Corpa Vargas, Los cuentos de Liliana Heker: Testimonios de vida, p.20. For a more complete look at the paradigma de trauma, see Fascismo y experiencia literaria: reflexiones para una recononización, ed. Hernán Vidal, Minneapolis, Institute for the Study of Ideologies and Literature, University of Minnesota, 1985.)
description of the power relationship between the two sisters represents the objective conditions of social and personal interaction under repressive regimes. Thus, Mariana enters the culture of silence, fear, and submission because Lucía so mandates, just as Argentine citizens were forced into a realm of collective censorship.\textsuperscript{5} Mirta Corpa Vargas considers Heker’s narrative as

\textit{ susceptible a la tematización de la alienación del individuo, a la figuración literaria de aquél que se debate en soledad, en locura y obsesiones; y que, paradójicamente, lo llevan a querer conquistar la seguridad necesaria, para integrarse definitivamente al resto de la humanidad. }

susceptible to the thematization of the alienation of the individual, to the literary shaping of the person who struggles in solitude with him/herself with madness and obsessions; and that, paradoxically, brings him/her to want to attain the necessary security, in order to integrate him/herself definitively with the rest of humanity.\textsuperscript{6}

In other words, the theme of the alienation of the individual closely relates to the isolation of the citizen of the regime who is relegated to the culture of silence and fear.

While basic similarities exist between “La fiesta ajena” and “Berkeley o Mariana del universo,” such as that of the young female protagonist who comes to a startling discovery, the two texts are predicated on separate issues expressed through different literary techniques. On the one hand, “Berkeley o Mariana del universo” is concerned with constructions of power and knowledge rather than class consciousness. Also, as will be examined later, the text does not reach a resolution with the establishment of the adult consciousness typical of the \textit{Bildungsroman} story. Mariana’s discovery is not an epiphany but rather an impermanent psychological scare constructed as a mimetic device for an overpowering socio-political referent. On the other hand, “Berkeley o Mariana del universo” shares with the previously examined story a concise and succinct nature that

\textsuperscript{5} I am grateful to Professor Rita De Grandis for her help with the above passage.
\textsuperscript{6} Corpa Vargas, Los cuentos de Liliana Heker: Testimonios de vida, p.14.
emphasizes the psychological state of the characters as opposed to their physical surroundings or plot developments.

“Berkeley o Mariana del universo” is structured around the question “¿Cuánto falta para que vuelva mamá?” (147) (How much longer til Mom comes home?) (87). The narrative depicts a brief period, roughly an hour of chronological time, largely told from the perspective of an omniscient narrator, but includes segments of Mariana’s consciousness. Mariana is waiting anxiously for her mother to return and cannot refrain from repeatedly interrupting her older sister’s reading to ask the same question. Despite Lucía’s evident annoyance, Mariana continues her questioning in an attempt to assuage her own boredom and uneasiness. Regardless of Mariana’s nervous self-assurances that “Las hermanas mayores protegen a las hermanas pequeñas” (147) (Big sisters look after little sisters) (87), she is aware that, “las cosas empezaban a marchar mal y ... lo mejor será no hacer más preguntas.” (147) (things weren’t going that well and ... the best thing to do was not ask any more questions) (87). This circular reasoning – for she does continue to ask her sister questions – refers to Mariana’s inability to transcend her preoccupation. In an exploration of the parallel between the state in relation to the citizen and Lucía in relation to Mariana, one can see that Lucía metes out information just as the government issues official policy. Lucía controls Mariana’s access to knowledge of all issues ranging from the mundane (the time) to the important (their mother’s arrival) to the vital (the meaning of words). Mariana is apprehensive of her older sister’s intentions yet wants to believe what she has been told, namely that big sisters look after little sisters, rather than her own experience of being ignored and teased by Lucía. The paradigmatic correlation to Mariana’s denial is the citizen of a repressive regime who prefers to believe the sanitized version of unconstitutional

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7 Corpa Vargas writes in her study of Heker’s work, “en algunos textos la referencia al personaje central, se confunde con la del narrador en la primera persona, mientras que en otras partes del texto esta relación se presenta en la tercera. Este procedimiento al que recurre el autor, Lejeune lo define como una forma de mantener a ‘cierta distancia,’ un determinado episodio de la vida del constructor de la obra.” (in some texts the reference to the central character is confused with that of the narration in first person while in other parts of the text this relationship presents itself in the third person. This method to which the author resorts, is
events because it is easier than contesting the powers that be. The potency of the external objective discourse of power is measured in its capability to reproduce itself within the family unit among relatives.

Lucía becomes the head of the house while their mother is away and this displacement causes Mariana anxiety. Because the family is the site of our first experiences with definitional identity, power struggles, and punishment and reward, it is the appropriate textual setting for a commentary on the pervasive power of Onganía and the military regimes. This conflict of control is reflected in the ideological struggle between the sisters. Mariana’s idle imagination, which is fearful of her sister, attempts to deny Lucía’s self-serving assumption of power. Her conscious effort to recast Lucía in the role of protective angel is not strong enough to prevent this image from inevitably twisting into a monstrous mad-woman, a transformation that happens, according to the narrative, every time their mother leaves them alone together. Mariana’s fear of Lucía’s total control echoes the citizen’s fear of indiscriminate repressive tactics of the military regimes that hold absolute power. The military was at times as arbitrary in its decisions to detain and interrogate alleged subversives as Lucía’s changing moods seem to Mariana. The authoritarianism of Lucía’s power, as perceived by Mariana, recreates that of the regime and its efforts to stifle independent discourse. Mariana’s instinct is to search for a recourse in logic. The narrative comments “Ya se sabe que los locos matan a la gente” (147) (It is a well known fact that mad people kill normal people) (88), which on the discursive level can be understood as a truism about killers, but can also be read on the referential level as an indictment of the dichotomies manipulated by the government to enhance its image.\(^8\) That is to say, Heker accuses the regime with the logic that if the killer is crazy, and the military

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\(^8\) As mentioned in the Introduction, military regimes in Argentina engaged in the resemanticization of language and associated themselves with the positive pairing in the socially-constructed paradigms of rational/irrational, systematic/disorganized, scientific/unhealthy, state/terrorist, etc., to acquire legitimacy. By labeling opponents with the negative (second) pairing of the paradigm, the regimes became necessarily joined to the positive (first) term by the mutually exclusive nature of the couples.
government is assassinating citizens, then the murderous government is crazy. By associating Lucía with the government, the author exposes the mechanisms of repression and terror of fear of reprisal from censors or government agents. This is the euphemistic sidewinding tactic to which Cristina Piña refers that enables writers to express their dissent during the difficult years of military rule. Piña comments on the difficulty of expressing events and feelings with a language that does not have a vocabulary for the expression of the unreal. She includes the experimental use of fragmentation, textual discontinuity, and the appropriation of multi-disciplinary discourses as tactics that allow pioneering authors to relate their themes. The reader’s role in deciphering the narrative is substantial, as the author relies on techniques that are not explicit and rational; the reader must determine for him/herself the relationship between apparently disparate elements in the text.

Mariana attempts to enter into a dialogue with her sister by drawing her out of the book with questions about the time and the book she is reading, but Lucía’s answers leave little room for response. Mariana vacillates between frustration with and adulation for Lucía and tries to drive her scary fantasies about Lucía out of her head. Mariana tells herself, “Es la persona más chistosa y simpática del mundo; y nunca se va a volver loca. ¿Por qué tendría que volverse loca justamente ella que es tan fantástica?” (148) (She’s the funniest, nicest person in the world, and she’ll never go mad. Why should she go mad, she, who is so absolutely terrific?) (89). The book Lucía is reading, she tells her inquisitive sister, is El hombre mediocre (Mediocre Man) and deals with “el que no tiene ideales en la vida” (148) (the man who has no ideals in life) (90). Carmen Perilli notes that the regime’s unidimensional reality, like Lucía’s, produces a “retracción del espacio público al espacio privado” (retraction of public space into private space), meaning that the requirements for behavior in larger society are internalized by the subject and used as the

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9 Piña, p.125.
10 This book, written by the Argentine writer, sociologist, and psychiatrist José Ingenieros (1877-1925), is considered to have introduced positivism to Argentina.
codes for conduct in the emotional and personal sphere.\textsuperscript{11} A textual example of this is that Mariana pretends she knows what “mediocre man” means until she thinks

\begin{quote}
\textit{Seguro que ahora me pregunta sí yo sé qué quiere decir hombre mediocre, y yo no voy a saber, y ella me va a decir para qué decis ah sí no sabés, pedazo de estúpida.} (148)
\end{quote}

I bet now she’ll ask me if I know what mediocre man means, and I won’t know, and she’ll say then, ‘Why do you say “Ah,” you idiot?’ (90)

This leads her to correct herself in anticipation of Lucía’s reproach: “\textit{Rápidamente pregunta: – Luci, ¿qué era lo que quería decir ‘hombre mediocre’?}” (148) (Quickly she asks, ‘Lu, I can’t remember, what does Mediocre Man mean?’) (90). Lucía’s succinct explanation “\textit{la tranquiliza porque ella si tiene ideales en la vida}” (148) (lays her mind at rest, because she certainly has ideals in life) (90), and leads to a daydream about egalitarian and mutual understanding. Her readiness to institute Lucía’s rules and values in her own psyche demonstrates the extent of Mariana’s deference to authority. Foucault’s notion of the Panopticon is a metaphor for the origin of self-policing behaviour. This self-censorship is adopted by artists living in repressive societies and is manifested in Mariana’s thoughts.\textsuperscript{12}

After another failed attempt to captivate Lucía’s attention, Mariana gets angry with her and revolts by picking a fight. Lucía, impervious to her attacks, tells her she wishes she would drop dead, and returns to her reading of \textit{El hombre mediocre}. This is where Mariana’s real terror begins, because Lucía tells Mariana that it is inconsequential if their mother comes home or not because ultimately she doesn’t exist. Lucía explains that nothing exists, that each person imagines the world. And, more importantly, that Mariana is imagining Lucía as well as the book that states this theory. She tells her adamant sister

\begin{quote}
\textit{Pero Mariana, ese libro no es nada comparado con las otras cosas que te imaginaste. Pensó en la historia, y en la ley de gravedad, y en las matemáticas, y en todos los libros que se escribieron en el mundo, y en las vacunas, y en la telegrafía sin hilos, y en aviones. ¿Te das cuenta?} (151)
\end{quote
But my poor Mariana, that book is nothing compared to the other things you’ve imagined. Think of History and the Law of Gravity and Maths and all the books ever written in the world and Aspirins and the telegraph and planes. Do you realize what you’ve done? (96)

As the magnitude of her creation sinks in, Mariana pleads with her sister to repeal this information: “No quiero, Luci. Tengo miedo. Tengo mucho miedo, Luci” (152) (I don’t want to imagine anymore, Lu. I’m afraid. I’m really frightened, Lu) (98). This is the last exchange before the narrative drifts in to a stream-of-consciousness third-person description of Mariana’s mental degeneration into a state of sense-data dependence, meaning a complete reliance on the senses as opposed to the intellect: “Cierra los ojos y el mundo desaparece, los abre y vuelve a aparecer” (152) (She shuts her eyes and the world disappears; she opens them, and it appears again) (98). This paragraph tracks Mariana’s process of linking her imagination to her reality and the eventual disappearance of her world due to her thoughts and fears:

puede acordarse de Lucía, pero de Lucía loca que viene con un revólver a matarla. Y ahora si que ella se da cuenta de lo peligroso que es eso. Porque si no puede dejar de pensarlo, Lucía será así, loca, y la matará. Y ya no existirá nadie para pensar en todas las cosas. (153)

she might remember Lucía, but a mad Lucía coming to kill her with a gun in her hand. And now she realizes how dangerous all this is. Because if she can’t stop herself thinking about it, then Lucía will really be like that, crazy, and kill her. And then there won’t be anyone left to imagine all those things. (98)

Mariana is experiencing the crux of Bishop Berkeley’s argument which is that an idea, defined as anything that can be “immediately known, as, for example, sense-data are known,” is only real because someone perceives it. Still, as Bertrand Russell explains, Berkeley believes that an object such as a tree,

must continue to exist even when we shut our eyes or when no human being is near it. But this continued existence, he

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13 Russell, p.20.
says, is due to the fact that God continues to perceive it; the ‘real’ tree, which corresponds to what we call the physical object, consists of ideas in the mind of God, ideas more or less like those we have when we see the tree, but differing in the fact that they are permanent in God’s mind so long as the tree continues to exist. All our perceptions, according to him, consist in a partial participation in God’s perceptions, and it is because of this participation that different people see more or less the same tree.14

The story closes with the narrative supposition that, if she died, nobody would know that Mariana had invented a place called the Universe, thereby consolidating Mariana’s new subjective identity as lone controller of the discourse of her reality. Berkeley’s theory is the ultimate exercise in the subjective construction of identity because it is based on personal perception. Mariana has not made the leap from subject (Mariana is “sub-jected” to Lucía’s dominant discourse) to individual, “that which is undivided and whole, and understood to be the source and agent of conscious action or meaning which is consistent with it.”15 Mariana is entrenched in the subjectivism that traps her in Vidal’s paradigm of trauma and prevents her from using her experience to extend the capabilities of her self. Because of this lack of awakening, “Berkeley o Mariana del universo” cannot be considered a Bildungsroman text. Mariana does not acquire the self-assuredness that combines with controlled intent to signify agency.

In 1972, the year “Berkeley o Mariana del universo” was published, the ban on Perón was lifted. Argentina was coming to grips with tremendous changes, not only in its government but in its society as well. The violence of the previous years was swept under the carpet by the military junta while increased repression targeted those people designated as “subversives.” The governmental assertion of power over its citizens brought questions of influence and control to the forefront of intellectual discussion. During these transitionary years, power was on everybody’s agenda: the government and the military debated the internal division of power, the government as a whole sought to disenfranchise

14 Ibid., p.20.
15 Smith, p.xxxxiv.
certain oppositional groups, women were beginning to establish agency, the unions fought to strengthen their power base, and Argentina prepared to enter the international theater as a consolidated nation. This national preoccupation is the source of the allusional relationship in which Mariana struggles against her sister. Foucault’s characterization of power as “a multiplicity of force relations, the interplay of various discursive fields with their imminent necessities and developments,” bears out the web-like search for power. The writer’s confrontation with this nebulous power system, in which the modes of control are faceless, bureaucratic, centralized, and pervasive, is an assault on many levels that necessitates expression and, in some cases, textual exorcism. Mariana experiences these feelings when confronting her sister, whose visage changes in an instant from angelic to murderous, who has total power in the home, who is able to redefine reality and reconstruct Mariana’s subjectivity. Reati explains the reason for this textual tactic of vacillation:

Plantear la ambigüedad y la duda, elaborar paradigmas del fracaso, enfatizar lo vacilante, negarse a las certezas, es en la literatura argentina el equivalente al cuestionamiento del maniqueísmo en todo el discurso político y cultural de la sociedad.

To suggest ambiguity and doubt, to elaborate paradigms of breakdown, to emphasize the unsteady and the indecisive, to deny certainties, is in Argentine literature the equivalent to questioning the Manichean tendency of seeing things in black and white in the entire political and cultural discourse of society.

Irony, parody, and literary hybrids of all sorts are sampled by authors in trying to relate the unspeakable; in this text Heker uses an indirect parallel to convey the ubiquity of authoritarian power. The theme, embodied by the sisters’ interaction, is the State’s stranglehold on creative expression: the artist’s confrontation with the power of the State is expressed through Mariana’s character, who becomes alienated and confused by Lucía’s

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17 Diamond and Quinby, p.79.
18 Reati, p.58.
imposition of a distorted reality. In the text this new system of thought – philosophical idealism – forces a most unwilling Mariana to rethink her ideas about her world and her position within it, just as the artist must discover a new method of expression. According to Reati,

*Cuestionar la identidad personal, fracturada por la violencia, es entonces una práctica que parece, aquí como en otras literaturas, un producto natural del conflicto.*

To question one’s personal identity, shattered by violence, is a practice that seems to be, here as in other literatures, a natural product of conflict.\(^{19}\)

Her polemic with Lucía provokes the identity crisis that leads her to feel responsible for the reality around her. Mariana feels bombarded by this responsibility and retreats deep within herself to escape from fear in the same way that victims of the regime silenced themselves and withdrew from society to avoid confrontation with government agents. Since the same types of issues occur in both atmospheres (social and textual), a critique of one is by extension applicable to the other, even though it remains on an indefinite referential level. The sisters’ private reality usurps the primacy of the referential level to reveal the pervasiveness of authoritarian power.

Heker uses a personal experience to represent a shared social reality by introducing a fictionalized historical exercise of totalitarian power through the character of Lucía. The blending of the internal (personal, emotional) experience with the external (public, socio-political) validates the representation of the paradigm of power by means of the paradigm of trauma at the interpersonal level of social relationships. It is also a typical response coming from writers who live under culturally oppressive conditions.\(^{20}\)

\(^{19}\) Ibid., p.71.
\(^{20}\) Corpa Vargas, *Los cuentos de Liliana Heker: Testimonios de vida*, p.81.
In spite of being identified as the primordial element that characterizes fictional autobiography (narration in first person according to Lejeune’s formulations), the narrative process deals with the autobiographic genre as a method of resistance to the oppression emanating from external chaos.\textsuperscript{21}

The autobiographical aspect disrupts the usual narrative assumptions and encourages the extension of a critical gaze to the rest of the text, particularly the social codes depicted. The identification of an “I”, no matter how tenuous or brief, grounds the narrative in the politics of an interaction based on debate. Heker is particularly adept at the tactic of inserting the “\textit{dinámica sujeto/mundo interior-exterior}” (dynamic of subject/interior-exterior world) in her works to reveal the socialization and psychic state of the subject.\textsuperscript{22}

Mariana is troubled by her feelings because although she thinks Lucía “\textit{siempre se las arregla para amargarle la vida a una}” (always manages to make things difficult), she is also “\textit{la persona más chistosa y simpática del mundo}” (the funniest, nicest person in the world) (148) (89). Mariana struggles to define herself in response to Lucía, a measure of subjectivity, and nonchalantly tries to assume Lucía’s position within the discourse. She challenges Lucía with the same patronizing tone with which she herself has been handled: “\textit{Luci, por la última vez te lo digo: no-me-gus-ta que inventes estas cosas}” (150) (Lu, I’m telling you for the last time: I-don’t-like-you-say-ing-stu-pid-things, okay?) (93). This fruitless tactic of discursive masquerade elicits nothing but the half-hearted response from Lucía that she did not invent the theory of idealism. Ironically, Mariana’s unsuccessful flirt with assuming Lucía’s voice/identity is the turning point in the relationship between the two sisters. When Mariana is finally able to engage her sister’s attention, Lucía perks up because she senses that she can exploit the situation to her benefit by scaring Mariana and thereby be left alone to finish her book. Consequently, Lucía continues to unravel the world before Mariana’s eyes as they talk:

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p.74.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p.99.
- Que a mí también me estás imaginando, Mariana.
- ¡Mentira! ¡Mentira! Sos la persona más mentirosa que vi en el mundo. Te odio, Lucía. Pero, ¿no te das cuenta? Si yo te estoy imaginando, ¿vos cómo lo sabés?
- Yo, ni lo sé ni lo deja de saber. Sos vos la que me inventa. Inventás a una persona que se llama Lucía y es tu hermana, y que sabe que vos la inventás. Eso es todo. (151)

- I’m saying that you are also imagining me, Mariana.
- You’re lying, you’re lying! You’re the biggest liar in the whole world! I hate you, Lucía. Don’t you see? If I’m imagining you, how come you know I’m imagining you?
- I don’t know, I don’t anything. You are just making me up, Mariana. You’ve made up a person called Lucía, who’s your sister, and who knows you’ve made her up. That’s all. (95)

Mariana retreats from the masquerade to her identity of desperate little sister by launching challenges to Lucía’s devastating statements. Mariana’s circular reasoning, touched upon earlier, is a weak threat to the verticalism of Lucía’s philosophical discourse. For example, Mariana knows she shouldn’t continue her questions, but she does; she invests all of her power in Lucía as an authority figure who can answer her questions, and then she attempts to revoke that investment by calling her a liar; she resists Lucía’s ideas on the superficial level, then internalizes them entirely. Linda Peterson, in her study of the female Bildungsroman, notes the importance of “modern theorists like Chodorow, who note that women define their identity ‘relationally’ (i.e., in relation to other people, especially family members), rather than ‘positionally’ as men do (i.e., according to the status they have achieved in the world.)”23 In this sense, Mariana’s process of self-identification is a normal development, since she compares herself to Lucía in order to define herself as the little sister. This conceptualization undergoes a transformation when the older sister stops acting like one and insists that Mariana has the total power of creation. This places Mariana in a void where she cannot define herself in relation to anyone. As the creator of the reality in which she is the central figure, she suffers because of a lack of reference.

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23 Peterson, p.86.
As previously mentioned, this text is not a clear example of a Bildungsroman work because, as a result of the future conditional tense, the ramifications of Mariana’s psychological journey remain hypothetical. The reader can safely foresee the arrival of Mariana’s mother as the antidote to Mariana’s existential anxiety. Unlike “La fiesta ajena”, this drama remains in the psyche of the character. While Señora Inés and Herminia can see that Rosaura is processing the class division, there is no textual witness to Mariana’s suppositions in “Berkeley o Mariana del universo” other than in the reader’s perception. Mariana does have a dramatic experience as a result of an intellectual breakthrough, but she does not reach a consciousness that will alter her life. Rosemary Jackson believes that women such as Heker who write fantastic fiction “are intimating a world, a consciousness, a reality, larger than the one that man has controlled.”\(^\text{24}\) The fact that the fantastic text can explore themes that are philosophical and psychological by transcending realistic scenarios means that it can be used to describe emotions that non-fantastic texts do not convey appropriately. “Berkeley o Mariana del universo,” as an example of the fantastic genre, develops the warping of the psychological realm instead of focusing on an epiphany that contributes to personal growth. The text does not need to be an action-packed thriller or a melodramatic ghost story to be considered part of the fantastic genre. In fact, at its most effective, the fantastic text is a glimpse into a psychological episode. As Tzvetan Todorov points out, “it is the perception of events rather than events themselves which brings the fantastic into being.”\(^\text{25}\) While Heker depicts Mariana’s mental anxiety instead of delineating a more complex plot, she is clearly in alignment with Cortázar’s requirements for the fantastic as outlined in Chapter Two of this thesis. The point of convergence between Lucía and Mariana is textualized by Mariana’s thwarted attempts to mimic Lucía and is ultimately defined by her internalization of philosophical idealism. The sisters’ tumultuous relationship provokes “ese brusco y casi siempre inesperado desajuste entre un satisfactorio horizonte razonable y la irrupción de lo insólito,” (that abrupt and almost always

\(^{24}\) Duncan, p.244.
unanticipated breakdown between a satisfactory and reasonable horizon and the irruption of the unusual). Indicative of the nightmarish qualities Cortázar assigns to the fantastic are the descriptions of Mariana’s world melting away:

Se irán los árboles, y el escritorio, y las tormentas. Se irá el color rojo y se irán los países. Y el cielo azul, y el cielo cuando es de noche, y los horneros, y los leones en África, y el globo terráqueo, y los cantos. (153)

The trees will disappear and the desk and thunderstorms. The colour red will disappear and all the countries in the world. And the blue sky and the sky at night and the sparrows and the lions in Africa and the earth itself and singing songs. (99)

Mariana is incapable of reining in the disappearance of her world and actively reinstating herself in the discourse. Heker uses an open order of circular thought to lay the path through the text to an unresolved conclusion. A text without resolution transmits an uneasiness to the reader, which mirrors the discomfort Mariana feels due to the psychological trauma. Because of this lack of closure, the reader withdraws from the text with lingering preoccupations about the subject and the emotional twists she endures.

Jackson proposes that women write in the fantastic to provide serious explorations and dramatizations of issues at the heart of human existence. They raise profound questions about the nature of identity, about limitations surrounding earthly experience, the restrictions of body, mind, space and time, the distinction between life and death - profound philosophical, metaphysical, psychological and spiritual questioning.²⁷

Heker challenges the reader with the juxtaposition of these weighty issues and the unassuming narrative voice of Mariana, with the goal of provoking, not comforting, the reader.

Mariana does not establish a rapport with Lucía that leads to a unified discourse of communication. Instead they communicate over an abyss of differences widened by gaps.

²⁵ Ibid., p.235.
²⁶ Dehenin, p.22.
in power, age, interests, moods, and dispositions. This difficult political relationship is
built on Mariana’s subjection to Lucía’s power and, because this is the context of her
consciousness, this relationship defines Mariana’s subjective identity. Teresa de Lauretis
argues that

> the identity of a woman is the product of her own interpretation and reconstruction of her history, as mediated through the cultural discursive context to which she has access ... The concept of woman as positionality shows how women use their positional perspective as a place from which values are interpreted and constructed rather than as a locus of an already determined set of values.²⁸

Mariana’s identity embodies attempts at bridging the gap between her self and her sister.
The power differential between them is the primary cause of this troublesome chasm
because it is “tanto existencial como geográfica, un lugar de abyección y exceso pero también lugar para la evolución humana” (as existential as it is geographic, it is a place of misery and excess but also a place of human evolution).²⁹ Mariana’s identity stretches and shrinks in response to Lucía as she attempts to establish a plane where she can understand her sister. In the process, Mariana stumbles into the borderland of philosophical thought that overwhelms her. She is not prepared for idealism and is incapable of protecting herself from the annihilative stream of ideas that surge from her imagination. Because of this, “Berkeley o Mariana del universo” is a text which reveals the subjective reaction to a crisis promoted by changes in identity.

The examination of the distribution of power between the two sisters mirrors the
socio-political reality of Argentine citizen and state in the years 1966-1972. The existential
questions implicit in the narrative: (Do I exist? Does my reality exist? Am I ultimately
responsible for my reality?) lead to the re-evaluation of Mariana’s subjective conception of her identity. These questions pertain to the Argentine collective consciousness in terms of

²⁷ Duncan, p.234.
reconciling with the events perpetrated by the military regimes in power. Mariana's character assumes the connotative role of the powerless sister lost in her subjective self in order to textualize the author's concerns about the societal imbalance of power. Heker uses the fantastic narrative structure to place the reader in Mariana's reality as it melts away and to convey Mariana's terror as she loses her frame of reference. Mariana does not have a role in the discourse of power, and in this psycho-emotional interstitial space she is, to use the words of Sartre, “free, condemned to be free,” and alone in the universe of her own thought.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{30} Hayden, p.25.
Chapter Four

"I NEED A GOOD MAN; THEN AGAIN, MAYBE I DON'T ... "
OR
GENDER AND THE CONCEPT OF SELF
IN “Georgina Requeni o la elegida”

This chapter deals with a text about a woman who frees herself from a web of “Prince Charming” fantasies. Georgina Requeni hopes a father, boyfriend, director, or any man at all, will pick her out of the crowd and infuse her lackluster life with value. Heker depicts the tension between the subjective and objective discourses through the lens of gender, showing how Georgina’s identity pivots around male reaction. Through Georgina’s character, Heker reveals the difficulty of defining one’s feminine identity while living in the patriarchal state of the Fatherland. Georgina lacks a sense of self and relies on external sources for an identity; her constructed subjectivity mirrors masculinist views of women until, at the close of the narrative, the establishment of a true sense of subjectivity, rooted in a concept of self, enables her to be understood as Smith’s term “subject-positions.” The text confirms Foucault’s belief that “our subjectivity, our identity, and our sexuality are intimately linked,” while showing how the discourse of gender contributes to identity formation.¹

I believe that “Georgina Requeni o la elegida” must be understood as a hybrid of the two genres addressed in previous chapters, the Bildungsroman and the fantastic: the Bildungsroman provides the premise and the fantastic garnishes it with structural and emotional qualities. The resolution Georgina arrives at is an optimistic reclamation of her subjective sense of self, exemplar of the Bildungsroman. The title of the story (Georgina

¹ Biddy Martin, p.9.
Requeni or the chosen one) refers to the aspirations of the protagonist’s unremarkable life as an object of the male gaze, meaning the masculine biases with which one interprets the world. Cynthia Duncan writes:

women writers have experimented with narrative strategies through which they might appropriate the male gaze and the male voice, transform them into something more authentically feminine in character, and employ them as tools in the creation of a female body of literature. One way in which women have attempted to accomplish this goal is to use the subversive capacity of the fantastic to undermine patriarchal authority and disempower male discourse.²

Heker’s use of the fantastic depicts the installation of the masculine gaze within Georgina’s concept of herself so that she interprets herself and others according to patriarchal standards of fixed gender roles. The strain of living according to unattainable standards is unbearable; eventually, after experiencing an epiphany about how to exist without this gender discourse, she nurtures a subjective sense of self that can balance itself against other external discourses in the future. Instead of levying an obvious critique on the external discourse that subjects Georgina, Heker allows Georgina to represent the difficulty of living as an instrument of that gaze. By blending discontinuous time zones so that Georgina’s lifetime passes by like a stream of memories, Heker highlights the emotional stages of Georgina’s life and her arrival at a more egalitarian social perspective. There are eleven separate temporal sections of the story, which are stitched together like a patchwork quilt, which give a fantastic air of the abolition of time and space. Chronological life events are used as indicators of Georgina’s psychological state rather than appearing as the focus of the plot. The transition from discounting inherent perceptions of herself to believing in the subjective self is developed by the fantastic technique of rooting the text in Georgina’s psychological state, while this journey itself pertains to the Bildungsroman.

Carmen Perilli notes that the Argentine literary tradition is one in which

el discurso novelesco intenta destruir el mito de la verdad como saber de un solo discurso todopoderoso.

² Duncan, p.233.
the discourse of the novel attempts to destroy the myth of the truth of one all powerful discourse.³

One such manufactured discourse of “truth” is born out of the government’s collusion with the church. Integral to this “truth” is the concept of Argentina’s affiliation with the Christian and Western world, specifically the ideology and semantics of both.⁴ Georgina’s character, predicated on the sublimation of woman’s self-knowing, is an example of the situation of women living in the Fatherland, that is, under the patriarchal hierarchy of the president and his officers who protect the image of the Founding Fathers of the nation. The Founding Fathers are part of the myth of fraternity, or common lineage, that helps create the imagined “nation” and perpetuate strong feelings of nationalism.⁵ Government structure is allied with church structure, also headed by a male representative of the ultimate power, the Heavenly Father. Argentine military governments were based on the same tenets of suppression of the polysemous and the multifaceted that sought to protect this church and state relationship:

The ideology of the Proceso demanded defining the norms of Argentine society within very narrow parameters: a society that rested upon the Christian and Western values of the Sacred Institutions of the Fatherland.⁶

How can the discourse of the novel affect the monolith of church and state? Heker subverts the male gaze, which largely directs the church and state and therefore plays a greater role in the consolidation of discourses, by using it against itself as a critical eye. This critical eye spies cracks and weak points in the monologic discourse. By centering the text on a character who parrots and then rejects the male bias, Heker draws attention to the

³ Perilli, p.32.
⁴ The Generals themselves explain this: “Today, the West is an attitude of the south that is no longer bound to geographical area.” (Massera); “For us, the West is a historic evolution more than a geographic location.” (Agosti); “More than a geographic dimension, the West is a spiritual site.” (Graffigna) The Redemocratization of Argentine Culture, 1983 and Beyond, p.33.
⁵ Anderson, p.7.
⁶ Foster, Violence in Argentine History: Cultural Responses to Tyranny, p.70.
assailable areas of the discourse, and through Georgina’s life-affirming vindication conveys her hopes for society. The reader’s gaze is directed and manipulated by the gaze inside the text, both the narrator’s and Georgina’s, which focus the reader’s eye on certain images and away from others so that the reader is unaware that he/she is looking through someone else’s eyes. Eventually, the chinks in the structure of the discourse of gender allow dissenting opinions entry into the political economy of truth. Then the reader is able to recognize the origin of the textual gaze and apply her/his own interpretation to the text.

When examining notions of gender it is important to remember that changing social factors affect the representation of the ideological and fictional construct that is the concept of “woman.” Conflicts between the campo intelectual and the governments that ruled Argentina before and during the time in which Heker wrote and published Un resplandor que se apagó en el mundo (1977) contributed to a sense of instability in the already volatile societies of the late sixties and early seventies that affected social representations in literary texts. The intellectual community attempted to express these pressures in their works; “Georgina Requeni o la la elegida” is Heker’s portrait of the stifling gender roles promoted by a society based upon the union of church and state. In 1978 Videla stated his view of an ideological threat to the military regime: “A terrorist is not just someone with a gun or with a bomb, but also someone who spreads ideas that are contrary to Western and Christian civilization.” As Heker wrote in 1988, this open definition enabled the regime to categorize as “subversive” almost anyone who challenged governmental actions:

Como lo estaba todo obrero con conciencia gremial, todo estudiante con alguna participación política, todo investigador, o abogado, o actor, o profesor universitario sospechoso de decencia.

As it was, the conscience of every worker with a union-based consciousness, every student with some political participation, every researcher, lawyer, actor, and university professor was suspected of lacking decency.

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7 Duncan, p.235.
8 Masiello, p.8.
9 CONADEP, p.xiii.
10 Heker, “Los intelectuales ante la insistencia del exilio; Militancia y creación”, p.197.
The fractured decade of the seventies, at first exhilarating and then suppressive, had deep consequences on the artistic field and psyche, as Reati explains using Avellaneda's phrase:

A los breves años de comienzos de la década en que se observa optimismo ideológico, experimentación artística, crecimiento editorial y apoyo oficial a todas las formas de la cultura, sigue, especialmente a partir de 1975, una etapa de frustraciones intelectuales, pesimismo, limitaciones del mercado consumidor de cultura y persecuciones, quedando la década "dividida en dos mitades diferentes, cada una dueña de su propia dinámica."

The brief years at the start of the decade in which one can note an optimistic ideology, artistic experimentation, growth in publishing, and official support for all forms of culture, are followed, especially beginning in 1975, by a period of intellectual frustrations, pessimism, limitations on the consumer market of culture, and persecutions, leaving the
This became an era of experimentation with the fractured subject as writers grappled with themes of identity. As the military achieved government office, the Catholic Church regained power, allowing the two groups to reinforce their idea of femininity and appropriate feminine behaviour. Consequently, changes in woman’s position within the codependent ideologies of church and state provoked a re-examination of woman’s identity in relation to gender.

“Georgina Requeni o la elegida” begins in six-year-old Georgina’s fantasy: the third-person narrator tells the reader how Georgina is singled out by the President of the Republic as his carriage passes her in the street. He has never seen such a beautiful, assured little girl and he whisks her away to live in the presidential palace where she plays with ponies and French dolls. Because of the President (Georgina’s ideal hero because he embodies prototypical male attributes: he is virile, a powerful authority in the hierarchy, paternalistic, wealthy), Georgina is on the cover of all the newspapers and travels in a glass carriage waving to the citizens. Note the emphasis on being seen, selected, set on display for the enjoyment of the public sightseers; this early fantasy is founded on the imagined status derived from being an object of visual consumption. It is the head of state whose gaze is most powerful in Georgina’s fantasy – he transports her from playing in the streets to being the spectacle that occupies the public theatre. For Georgina, to be selected by the ultimate representation of masculinity means that she herself is especially remarkable in her femininity.

Once, a woman would not have been falted for relying on masculine power for success in her own life. Nowadays, feminism has made this dependence all but obsolete by encouraging women to establish their own careers and provide for their own needs. Heker highlights this social change by interrupting Georgina’s daydream of rising

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11 Reati, p.24.
passively to fame and wealth by no action of her own other than standing in the street, with
the words “Parece un oso del zoológico” (She looks like a bear in the zoo) (12). These words appear without any distinction from the narrative of the daydream and are the first of many abrupt discontinuities in the text that maintain the reader at a distance and make it difficult to discern the reality of Georgina’s memories. The narrative is reestablished in a situation where Georgina’s mother and grandmother are making fun of her singular parades along the porch lined by imaginary subjects. The derisive comment suggesting she looks like a caged animal establishes the recurring theme of being on display for viewing. In this instance, Heker uses the image to suggest that Georgina is caged by the confines of gender roles. The model of the woman as an object to be visually consumed by the male gaze necessitates the equally restrictive role of the man as the possessor of this gaze that delineates and defines social standards. Through critique of the feminine half of this gendered dichotomy, Heker makes it clear that the entire model, feminine and masculine alike, is based on exclusive and faulty premises. Georgina’s internalization of this model is underlined by her continued fantasy that the President of the Republic will avenge the embarrassment caused by her family’s ridicule by putting them all in prison. The daydream of male rescue in the form of fascistic revenge signals Georgina’s reliance on the social structure upheld by the institutionalization of the military.

Immediately, the narrative fastforwards the text to a present tense in which Georgina is now thirteen years old. She muses to herself, “¡Qué maravillosa era!” (258) (‘How wonderful I was!’) Georgina feels her eyes glisten) (13), and the focus on Georgina’s eyes is a reminder to question Georgina’s gaze and a reminder of the significance Georgina places on image and being observed. She is playing in her room remembering herself at six (again, the idea of looking at herself) and imagining how “wonderful” she will be when she is older. She is sure that one day a handsome young stranger will watch her through the window and be charmed by the beautiful things she does while she is alone. The idea that she is being fondly watched
makes Georgina feel as if she is worthy of male attention. She relishes the objectifying gaze of the anonymous man, signaling that not only is she subject to the discourse of feminine objectification but that it constitutes her subjectivity. Like the prisoner in Foucault's Panopticon who assumes the gaze of the guard, Georgina views herself according to external criteria of normative gender roles. She exchanges her own voice for the highly vocal assumptions, suggestions, and requirements of society. She speaks, even to herself, with a phallocentric voice, which is based upon the primacy of male authority.

Now she plans to write in the diary she has bought so that when someone sets out to write "un libro como Vida Maravillosa de Niños Célebres" (258) (a book such as the Wonderful Lives of Famous Boys and Girls) (12), there will be a record of her youth. Georgina is convinced of her future "success," although she has no idea what she'll be famous for. This lack of direction oppresses her when she remembers Mozart was considered a genius at seven years old. Georgina, obsessed with attaining success, tells herself not to worry about a late start because she will be beautiful as well as talented, and this beauty will ensure a fabulous life. The equation of the virtues of talent and beauty, indeed, her reliance on beauty alone, demonstrates Georgina's alienation from herself. Since she believes success is not the result of being fulfilled but is an external judgement, it makes no difference to her if she is famous for her looks or for her talent. While she is alone in her room her disconnected thoughts drift from how she will placate tortured lovers to abstract musings, such as "Dios está azul" (258) (God is blue) (12), which stem from self-conscious boredom. Her attention inevitably returns to dreams of some anonymous perfect lover who will know her every wish and fear without being told. Granted, Georgina never daydreams about what she can offer that perfect man in exchange. She is the subject of the man's attention and does not take an active part in these imagined love affairs.

The next of many abrupt temporal transitions occurs when she declares "Hoy es el día para empezar" (258) (today is the day to begin) (12), and the reader is left wondering what it is she will begin. The next sentence clarifies that a year has passed since she
bought her diary. Georgina is fourteen and writes a few brief lines in her diary that she believes would startle and impress any other fourteen-year-old who would read them. She pretends that she has died and imagines the entire world weeping for her. Moved to tears herself, she writes in the diary the imprecise goal that she will chase for the rest of her life: "Quiero llegar muy alto, muy alto" (261) (I wish to soar very, very high) (17). After rereading these, in her opinion, impressive remarks, the narrative jumps again. The reader is expecting a maturation on Georgina’s part that would have her recognize her childish dreams. As the text starts and stops, changes eras and scenes, the only constant is that Georgina is exactly the same person she was as a six year old. In the next passage she comes across the diary, empty except for a few pages of notes and doodles, while sorting through her old papers. She is eighteen and, impressed by the sentiments in the few sentences she wrote, imagines the diary on exhibition at a museum.

Here again, the concept of Georgina’s life being an open book on display for people to view urges the reader to question the reason for the ideological objectification of women and why women come to desire this objectification themselves. Georgina rifles through the contents of her childhood room, throws out the remnants of her adolescence, and pins a poster of Sarah Bernhardt to the wall, presumably in assertion of the acting career that she assumes will provide fame and fortune. The introduction of the idea of acting ensconces the reader in a position of voyeurism as he/she watches Georgina’s life unfold like a theatrical production. Her idolization of Bernhardt also points to Georgina’s assumption that worth and success are externally assigned by audiences and critics. Heker points to aspects of society by allowing the patriarchal appropriation of Georgina’s perspective and then using her as an actor, even metatextually, for those social traits.12 By actually assigning Georgina the career of actor, Heker is hinting at her narrative strategy of funnelling socially scripted lines through Georgina to prove their fallacy.

12 Concerning the topic of Argentine politics in theater, see the M.A. thesis of Shirin Shenassa entitled, “The Dialogue between Theatre and Politics: Gambaro, Pavlovsky, and Contemporary Argentine Politics” (University of British Columbia, April 1997).
Of the events textualized, most have to do with the opinions of men, because Georgina has geared her life around capturing male attention. This is explained by Linda Alcoff:

> When the concept of "woman" is defined not by a particular set of attributes but by a particular position, the internal characteristics of the person thus identified are not denoted so much as the external context within which that person is situated. The external situation determines the person's relative position, just as the position of a pawn on a chessboard is considered safe or dangerous, powerful or weak, according to its relation to the other chess pieces.\(^{13}\)

By installing the male gaze in her sense of subjectivity, Georgina becomes fixated on external positioning. Her unique attributes are not recognized by her boyfriend Manuel, nor by anyone else, yet she waits to be chosen from the crowd, assuming that someone will see in her what she herself does not see. When the third person narrator states "Georgina ya sabe lo que quiere" (261) (Now Georgina knows what she wants) (19), it is, of course, a fallacy. Two years later, Manuel, her current lover, answers the implicit question of 'What does she want?' He tells twenty-year-old Georgina, "Me querés a mí - dice él. Y listo" (261) ('You want me,' he says. 'It's as simple as that') (19). Heker uses Manuel as the patriarchal voice to tell Georgina what her desires should be. Georgina cannot refute the discourse voiced through Manuel because she has no sense of who she is aside from what originates from the external discourses.

As Georgina and Manuel sit on the bank of the river waiting for sunrise, a metaphor for Georgina's potential emotional awakening, she tries to enlighten Manuel to her "extraordinary" beginnings as a child but cannot tell if he is laughing at her, with her, or completely missing the point. She rewrites her childhood because she has been nourished on romantic dreams that are absent of practicality and impossible to reproduce. She talks about her belief that one can control destiny with sheer will-power and believes this assures her future success. Georgina would kill herself rather than become an old actress with

\(^{13}\) Alcoff, p.433.
nothing to live for, enunciating an extremist “all or nothing” belief that parallels her unbalanced dependence on one male-derived source of identity. When Manuel jokingly suggests she commit suicide by drowning, which horrifies Georgina, it is not his mocking that upsets her, but his suggested *modus operandi*; because her death must be much more aesthetically pleasing than that which produces a bloated drowned corpse. Drowning is fine for Alfonsina Storni, or for her literary English counterpart Virginia Woolf, as the respective text and translation reveal, but Georgina’s death must reflect her beauty and image. Georgina must be an object of beauty even in death because, she tells him, “*ellos tienen que recordarme hermosa*” (263) (they must remember me beautiful) (23). The reference to women writers who found the burden of the patriarchy stifling is an important index of Georgina’s priorities. Image is everything to her because she has no substance, no sense of identity that comes from knowing herself.

Georgina invents her past and present while talking to Manuel about her destiny, which she feels is foretold in the incisive daily entries she made in her teenage diary; the reader knows the true facts about the diary, among others that it was discarded practically unused when she was eighteen. She meanders around the topic of her charmed life as if it were a fairy tale, rewriting it to include an early dedication to the craft of acting. This alienation from her childhood and adolescence suggests she has no more attachment to those years than to a former role she played; immersed in so much fiction she cannot discern reality. She dramatically tells the story of an intricate private ceremony she held to destroy the diary in which she supposedly confided every day, assuming it is proof of her deep character. When Manuel balks at the pretentious idea of a ceremony, Georgina insists, “*todo debe terminar como vivió. ¿Qué querías que hiciera? ¿Qué lo tirara a la*

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14Manguel chose to replace the mention of Alfonsina Storni with Virginia Woolf in his translation, ostensibly because Woolf is better known to Anglophones as a writer who stood for women’s rights. Alfonsina Storni (1892 - 1938) was an Argentine writer who challenged the accepted social conventions of her time: not only did she write poetry that was critical of gender roles and male authority, but she had a child out of wedlock. She committed suicide by walking into the ocean in 1938. Her well-known poems
basura?” (265) (Everything must end in the same way it lived. What else could I have done? Thrown it in the garbage?) (27). The hypocrisy of this last remark, for she did throw the empty diary in the garbage, recapitulates Georgina’s lack of connection with her subjective sense of self. Instead of reconciling image with reality, she is a revisionist of her own history, replacing it with what she supposes her past ought to contain according to the external objective discourse of gender.

Georgina’s lies about her past introduce the next few segments which take place in rapid succession. In the first of these, she is acting in a minor role in a stage production of Hedda Gabler. Georgina takes a curtain call with other supporting actors as the enthusiastic applause for the stars wanes, prompting her venomous critique of the actress who plays Hedda Gabler. Georgina bitterly blames the restrictions of her own role for the lack of audience support and as she takes her bow prays, “Dios mío, pienias, dales un minuto de grandeza para que puedan comprender esta sonrisa” (266) (Dear Lord, she thinks, grant them a minute of greatness to allow them to understand this smile) (29). She does not consider the audience capable of appreciating her talents, and because she is so firmly ensconced in the fantasy of being a star, she is blind to anything that deviates from it. She transcends the commonplace moment by imagining herself as a great star who explains to her admirers how she managed to survive the days of hardship before she was successful. As she understands this dreary moment to be an important part of what will become her mythological past, the text leaps into the seventh temporal zone. She is sharing a dressing room with two other actresses who tease her for her superior attitude. Their comments cause a moment of insecurity that breaks through the fantasy of her imaginary life because they speak about Georgina’s identity, on which she herself has no perspective. “Dejála- oye.- Ella es así.’ ‘¿Cómo? - dice Georgina. ¿Cómo soy?’” (267) (‘Let her be,’ - she hears. ‘That’s how she is.’ ‘How?’ Georgina cries. ‘How am I?’) (31) Her plea

include “Tú me quieres blanca”, “Hombre pequeño”, and “Cuadrados y ángulos” (Antología poética, prologue by Susana Zanetti, Buenos Aires, Editorial Losada, 1994).
for someone to tell her who she is, and how she is, is the portal to a scene seven years later in bed with her lover Santiago. He responds to her question, “How am I?”, which she asks him after having received no clarification from the actresses, by telling her she is simply Georgina. This is a shadowy echo of the scene in which Georgina has just asked Manuel the question “What do I want?” Although both men offer inadequate answers to Georgina’s identity crisis, she grasps at the responses. She never ventures to answer her own questions, demonstrating anxiety about her own voice. At this point in the narrative it is easier for her to let the male voice do the talking for her.

In 1987 the U.S. artist Barbara Kruger created an untitled black and white photograph that shows an enormous dictionary opened at the page headed by the word “synthesize.” A woman’s manicured hands search with a sharpened pencil for the meaning next to the entry “synthesize,” pointing out a line of text the artist has printed over the legitimate definition. The overlayed definition reads simply “Why you are who you are.” The eerie feel of the photograph is hard to pinpoint. Is it provoked by the sharpened nails on the hand of the unidentified subject? Or the fantastic aberration of the overlayed dictionary entry? Or the meaning of the concise definition that points to woman’s place in society? Georgina Requeni is not satisfied by the answer she receives when she asks who, and how, she is. If she were able to transcend the male gaze with which she sees herself, perhaps she would be satisfied by Kruger’s dictionary entry. Georgina’s superficial life consists of halfheartedly chasing unrealistic goals that prevent her from examining her ungendered self, that is, that part of her which is free from the socially manufactured discourse of gender. The social construct of gender is so deeply ingrained that it has been synthesized with Georgina’s identity and left no aspect of her unknown to the male gaze which determines gender roles. A quote by Jacques Lacan, which appears in the text of the book about Kruger’s art, reveals the origin of the impact of the photographic work and Heker’s narrative text:

Images and symbols for the woman cannot be isolated from images and symbols of the woman ... It is representation,
the representation of feminine sexuality ... which conditions how it comes into play.\textsuperscript{15}

In this sense, the role Georgina is supposed to play according to social codes surpasses in validity Georgina’s actual conduct. Because there is no way that the symbol can coincide with the real woman, Georgina rewrites her history.

From a young age Georgina incorporates the social ideals of the feminine into her identity by internalizing the positioning of women within patriarchal rhetoric. The values of Western European thought and Christianity are distilled in Georgina’s understanding of what she should be – she becomes the image of a woman without being a woman. She misrepresents her past and fantasizes about the future without taking part in the present, which is far too painful. Her life is not on the trajectory of greatness she assumed it would reach by the time she was thirty-one. Georgina begins to come to grips with the fact that her love affair, which is a reflection of her life in miniature, is not on an endless upswing of increasing intensity and intimacy. When she broaches this with her lover, Santiago, he withdraws from her and tells her to be quiet. As she realizes that all things, even love affairs and beauty, pass through change, stasis, and decline, she sees that this moment of clarity may threaten Santiago. She tells him words she wants to believe herself because they correspond with the patriarchal idea that a woman is a thing of beauty and not intellect; “\textit{Soy una pava... Nunca me creas nada de lo que digo}” (269) (I’m a fool ... Never believe anything I say) (34). It is too late, though, to take back her revelation. Santiago leaves her rather than put up with these fruitless examinations, and Georgina proceeds in her sublimation of subjectivity by pretending that she has kicked him out. Installing this fictional yet official version of the truth is Georgina’s recourse to power; a lack of control over her life forces her to compensate by rewriting her personal history. This tactic, used by Argentine military regimes which refused to admit to incriminating historical events in

\textsuperscript{15} Barbara Kruger, \textit{Love for Sale: the Words and Pictures of Barbara Kruger}, text by Kate Linker, p.59.
order to protect the government’s legitimacy, points to the lack of power rather than its abundance.

The ninth temporal shift brings the narrative to Georgina at thirty-four years old while she is being directed in a cheap commercial. One of the actors criticizes Georgina’s theatrical gesture of closing a door, which prompts her to make the unnecessary explanation that she once threw a man out (Santiago) with the same action. Again, her rewriting of the past bridges the distance between a reality discernible by a subjective sense of self and the image Georgina wants to present. The actor is not interested in the ensuing conversation about Georgina’s devotion to acting which she instigates to impress him. In fact, he is sidetracked by the passing of a leotard-clad woman and scarcely listens to her: Georgina is usurped as the subject of male attention. This is a turning point for Georgina because it is the first instance in the narrative in which Georgina is not able to derive status from being the object of the male gaze. This loss threatens her because it is the first step in the dismantling of the frame of her conceptualization of the world. Because Georgina has attributed meaning and worth only to the male gaze, now that she cannot hold that gaze, she is invisible. The establishment of a subjective self is still premature and so she responds to the actor’s insulting apathy with convoluted attempts to rise above her sordid reality and again garnish male validation. The fury produced when he tells her that she is, at least, “still young” drives Georgina out of the studio and into the cold night air.

The narrative slips into a new time in which Georgina passes a man on the street a few years after the commercial rehearsal. The man makes a surreptitious comment to her that sends her preening. She proudly tells herself “Todavía soy joven” (I’m still young) (38). She suppresses the vague memory of the man who used this back-handed compliment years ago at the rehearsal before she can get depressed that now those conditional words are all she can anticipate in terms of male attention.

The last segment of the text begins with Georgina laughing at a party filled with young adults drinking and joking. There is no reference to how much time has passed, but
the reader senses she must be in her fifties. She drunkenly studies her hand for the lines of destiny that she has always believed one modulates by sheer will power. Georgina reaffirms that destiny is written by determination, not in the stars, but wonders nevertheless

\[dónde, me quieren decir, está señalado que Georgina Requeni será una gran actriz, y será hermosa? (271)\]

and where, where does it say that Georgina Requeni will be a great actress, will be beautiful? (39)

Her disillusionment is mingled with the first shades of realism in reference to herself. Georgina sees that she has not changed the lines in her palm because her life, at least this far, has been average. She is comprehending her life-long role in rewriting her history and performing her present, denying who she is. During this crucial moment, as she sits surrounded by happy, joking voices, she overhears someone say, “¿te fijaste que nunca falta una vieja borracha en estas fiestas?” (271) (have you noticed there’s always an old bag getting pissed at these parties?) (39). The brutality of this comment lies in the truthful tone of the remark and the fact that Georgina said similar things about older women when she was younger. She told Manuel that “una mujer que envejece siempre es un monstruo” (272) (a woman grown old is a monster) (39). Her own deepest fears reside in aging and losing her beauty: now her words have turned on her. The patriarchal promotion of restrictive myths and unattainable images, which are powerful only because Georgina has allowed the incorporation of them in her psyche, prevent her from focusing on her own goals. The most seductive (and destructive) of these myths is based on beauty. Georgina spends her time perfecting her image for others and ultimately is betrayed by the natural process of aging. When her beauty disappears and her feminine flirtations no longer entice male attention, she loses a reason for living, and with the loss of this discourse she has no referential structure in place to guide her thoughts. What makes this story an optimistic challenge to the patriarchal vision of women is that Georgina realizes that this loss can be freedom too, and that being alone means that “Santiago no está ni hay nadie para decirle que se calle, que todo está bien, que está equivocando las palabras y tambaleándose” (271)
(There's no Santiago, there's no one to tell her to shut up, to tell her everything's fine, to tell her she's fumbling over the words and is about to fall down) (39). This epiphany teaches Georgina that the male voice inside her head is not a monologous necessity and that she can listen to and speak with a voice of her own. Although most Bildungsroman protagonists learn their life's lesson at a younger age than Georgina, it is not too late for her to change her ways. As she stumbles out of the party alone to the river bank where she once sat years ago with her boyfriend, she remembers the party-goers laughing at her and imagines their surprise as they read in the morning papers about the suicidal plunge she contemplates. Georgina leans over the bank and vomits into the river, purging herself of the negative comments, external criticisms, lofty ideals, and denial that inhabit the past. This symbolic cleansing affects her positively, as the narrative reports; "Se siente bien ahora. La cuestión es vivir" (272) (Now she feels better. The important thing is to live) (41). As the sky reddens with dawn, Georgina stolidly anticipates the arrival of the sun, signalling the birth of her subjective sense of self and agency. The narrator comments: "Va a ser una hermosa mañana" (272) (It's going to be a beautiful morning) (41). This optimistic tone, from which the reader infers the active establishment of a new discourse that provides for the subjective sense of self, closes the narrative.

Throughout the text Georgina assesses value and success according to male attention, proving that her self-worth is at once relational and positional. As Teresa de Lauretis points out,

the concept of positionality includes two points: first, ... that the concept of woman is a relational term identifiable only within a (constantly moving) context; but, second, that the position women find themselves in can be actively utilized (rather than transcended) as a location for the construction of meaning, a place from where meaning is constructed, rather than simply the place where a meaning can be discovered (the meaning of femaleness).\(^6\)

\(^6\) Alcoff, p.434.
Georgina’s position has not changed at all, but her attitude towards it has been altered. Instead of viewing herself disparagingly in terms of all that she has not attained, Georgina realizes that she can make peace with who she is and proceed. By accepting herself, Georgina relinquishes her role in rewriting the past and scripting the future. She abandons her passive tactics of literally waiting to be discovered by a man, of waiting to be infused with meaning, when she changes her mind about her situation after the party. She decides that being alone is no longer evidence of her failure as a woman, but that it is an opportunity to be free of the adjunct of a masculine voice. Following the requirements of the Bildungsroman, she perceives a possible salvation, whereas, before the revelation, she assumes death is the only remedy for fears about aging.

Georgina is an apt portrait of the imbalance of gender roles, even though Heker leaves the male roles primarily unexpressed. This is because Georgina “reflects masculine identity precisely through being the site of its absence.” Male activity in the external sphere of government, policy, and church is related by Georgina’s complete absorption in frivolous thought. Activity in the public sphere never enters Georgina’s thoughts; this lack is a conspicuous silence. Textual silences are deceptive, though, for in them one can determine the weight of things not mentioned. In this blank space information can be read about the divisive gender roles that polarize men and women. Georgina cannot describe this division because she reads the world through the male gaze which views women as less than they are, as subjects instead of participants, without the opportunity of expression.

The fantastic genre demands a committed reader who can examine the interstices of the text for meanings which are not superficially apparent. A complacent reader who

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17 Butler, p.39.
18 See Susan Gubar’s article on the subject of silence, absence and creativity entitled, “‘The Blank Page’ and the Issues of Female Creativity,” (The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory, Elaine Showalter, ed., New York, Pantheon Books, 1985) in which she uses Isak Dinesen’s story “The Blank Page” to discuss the the power of silence that women exercise textually and personally. She finds that more information is often revealed by what is omitted than by what is made explicit.
accepts the surface level of Georgina’s reliance on masculinist presumptions reads the text as a story of denial and does not glean any value from it. As Cortázar emphasizes, the fantastic forces the reader to confront the tension between the polarities of the conscious/unconscious, chronological time/psychological time, and interior space/exterior space. In the case of “Georgina Requeni o la elegida,” the intertwining of fantastic elements with characteristics of the Bildungsroman creates a plot which, in terms of action, is secondary to the mental processes of the protagonist. The reader must discern the level of consciousness in Georgina’s words and actions. For example, on what level is she operating when she is in her room and idly says to herself, “God is blue?” If she is acting on the unconscious level the phrase is an inner thought that reflects a vacuous mental state. If Georgina is consciously or intentionally pronouncing those words the entire meaning changes from a pseudo-philosophical musing to a coquettish gamble at mystery. Heker deliberately leaves the reader alone to make these decisions by not providing any clues to Georgina’s intent in the text.

Another way in which Heker engages the reader is by manipulating time irregularly to shake the reader from a dependency on a continuous time line. As the chronological clock of the text starts and stops with interims ranging from one year to twenty years, Georgina’s psychological clock stands still until the last paragraph of text in which she rejects the external objectifying discourse. This enhances the reader’s recognition of Georgina’s lack of growth. The rapid and irregular jumps in time, contrasted with Georgina’s lackadaisical consciousness also endow the text with a feeling of angularity or edginess. The reader does not feel secure in the text because another shift to the future is always imminent and there is no indication of how far in the future the text will jump. The entire text is precariously balanced between Georgina’s erratic psychological state and the narrator’s lack of control of the even flow of the story, forcing the reader to pay close

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attention. Since Georgina is not a reliable representative of reality, as evidenced by her lies to Manuel about the diary, the reader cannot trust her, either. Therefore, the reader must construct his/her own version of the narrative, in order not to fall into the textual traps set by the author. By forcing the reader to maintain her/his awareness that is independent of the narrator and protagonist in order to comprehend the text, Heker makes sure that the thematic of gender and identity is never sidelined. The reader must read against the grain of the text by disassociating her/himself from the protagonist in order to sustain an idea of her psychological state that is based in Argentina’s social reality.

Heker’s problematization of the socially manufactured gendered positions that, at first, inhibit Georgina point to the author’s conviction of the significance of the discourse of gender in questioning identity. As a synthetic woman, in the sense that she incorporates the masculine gaze that defines women into her identity, Georgina allows restricting codes of gender to dominate her. She is a projection of the values of the Fatherland that are represented in the valued pairings of opposites, such as the familiar and the foreign, the incorruptible and the degraded, the physical and the mental, the clean and the impure, and masculine and feminine. Until she replaces dichotomous thinking with a continuum of possibilities, she sees life in terms of “success” and “failure,” with no neutral territory between the two. The text allows the reader to interpret the affiliation of church and state, as well as the impact of historical events on the formation of gender roles, through the development of Georgina’s subjective sense of self. Preceding this, Georgina’s lack of self is a textual space in which the reader finds layers of social commentary concerning the discourse of gender. When Georgina comes to terms with herself, what she eventually finds in that previous site of masculine absence is, finally, herself.

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20 Girona Fibla, p.30.
 Conclusion

Heker’s stories show that personal identity, like cultural identity, is “un ‘devenir’, un proceso en vía de desarrollo, una gestación vital y dolorosa” (a “process in the throes of development,” a process of growth, a vital and painful gestation). Recalling Judith Butler’s question about the balance between normative ideals and personal experience, what makes the questioning of identity in the texts such a challenge is the foundational work of constant assessment of external objective discourses in relation to the subjective sense of self. These three texts prove that each individual must walk his/her own path in the mediation of identity. The author’s political commitment, while apparent in the textual emphasis on personal responsibility in the formation of identity, is manifested as well in the use of the allusional historical level.

The three stories examined show that identity crises occur when external and internal discourses are sharply out of balance. Heker’s characters face the polemic of the “me” and the “not-me” in terms of the respective discourses (class, power, and gender) that penetrate their notions of their placement within society. This polemic between the “me” and the “not-me” produces the psychological margin in which the protagonist’s confusion, frustration, and terror concerning a changing identity are manifested. This is Heker’s area of interest because these feelings, while extreme, are sometimes grotesque, sometimes innocent; they reflect the possibilities of human expression. Reati holds that the discomfort the protagonists experience is a necessary part of the problematization of identity:

El preguntarse sobre el significado del yo en relación al Otro conduce a cuestionar la identidad, la unidad de la personalidad, y el sentido de lo real, todo ello marcado por el eje recurrente de la fractura.

Asking oneself the meaning of the I in relation to the Other leads to the questioning of identity, the unity of the

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1 Yurkievich, p.23.
personality, and the meaning of what is real, all of which is marked by the recurring theme of fracture.²

The painful schism Reati refers to can be seen in each of the three short stories when the protagonists become aware of their subject-hood. In “La fiesta ajena,” Rosaura’s identity is based upon subjective conceptions of class positioning that cause her to misconstrue the intentions of the other characters. When her subjectivity does ultimately collide with the objective discourse of class, causing a redistribution of the weight of the two discourses, the impact shocks her both physically and emotionally. The effects of the imposition of the external discourse, which signal that Rosaura is a subject of the previously unrecognized discourse, are drastic because they force her to reconstitute the entirety of her conceptualization not only of personal identity, but of the structure of society. Mariana, in “Berkeley o Mariana del universo,” experiences the change in balance between the subjective and objective within the context of her sibling relationship. Her subjective self suffers the changes imposed by Lucía’s authoritarianism through the assertion of the philosophy of idealism. The oblique application of the external discourse of power through the paradigm of trauma exerts pressure on Mariana which leads to confusion of identity. Finally, in the last story, Georgina Requeni expresses another permutation of the balance between the subjective and the objective when she discards the male gaze that views gender as a strict confine in favor of a burgeoning subjective sense of self. In contrast with Rosaura, who relied exclusively on her subjectivity until the imposition of class divisions made this impossible, Georgina spends the majority of her life depending on an external social discourse as a referent. The rearrangements in her identity de-emphasize the considerations of public opinion and allow Georgina to become comfortable with her “self,” thereby growing out of being a passive subject and attaining a sense of agency.

Questioning identity is a manner of examining one’s surroundings, for one cannot interpret oneself without becoming aware of a context. Through the examination of

² Reati, p.78.
personal identity, the three stories studied chronicle the impact of historical events on the Argentine concepts of class, power, and gender. Although Heker’s texts concentrate on the situation of the protagonists, they reveal facets of Argentine society which are hidden in the social sub-text. Her explorations of identity help make sense of the difficult years of military rule and unstable governments and allow the reader to reach a better understanding of the effects of these regimes in the social sphere. It is this ability to represent the specific situation of Argentina through the universal concerns of class, power, and gender that makes Heker’s work, based on her “fascinación por la problemática social” (fascination with social issues) accessible to her readers.³ Cavallari writes that this concentration on the immediate issues is a factor in all of Heker’s works.

Esta desconstrucción de lo aparentemente trivial – de los poderes de la cotidianeidad, que frecuentemente instrumentan y disfrazan los “poderes de horror” (Kristeva 1980) en la sociedad argentina actual – constituye uno de los valores fundamentales de toda la producción literaria de Liliana Heker.

This deconstruction of the apparently trivial – of the powers of everyday-ness, that frequently orchestrate and disguise the “powers of horror” (Kristeva 1980) in current Argentine society – constitutes one of the fundamental values of Liliana Heker’s entire literary production.⁴

Heker’s expression of class ideology is unquestionably rooted in the concerns of the Argentine middle class, just as the conflict of power reflects the repercussions of military repression, and the social construct of gender reveals the collusion of the church and state in forming social discourses. Heker alludes to the historical events that shape these three discourses but never makes them explicit; she prefers instead to focus on the results of historical events. Reati agrees with Sarlo who believes that the hidden level of the Argentine text, which Heker makes use of, is full of significant commentary.

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³ Corpa Vargas, Los cuentos de Liliana Heker: Testimonios de vida. p.38.
⁴ Cavallari, p.45.
This tactic of allusion increases the forcefulness of the stories, rather than diminishing their incisive value, because it engages the reader in the referential level of the texts; the reader is impelled to examine the allusive, suggestive, symbolic text residing beneath the diegetic level.

Liliana Heker’s work is a product of Argentine society which reflects the concerns, suppositions, and thematic of the campo cultural. In the chaotic era of repressive military regimes, discovering identity becomes a life-affirming pursuit that adds perspective to the contradictory events taking place in the public sphere. Turning to alternative techniques of expression such as the Bildungsroman and the fantastic enables Heker to subtly explore ideas that are impossible to relate through traditional narrative means due to censorship; we must not forget that Videla classified as subversive anyone who challenged the tenets of Western European Christian thought. This resistance to dialogue fosters abuses and imbalances of power, which Heker, as a politically active writer, condemns. Her belief that “toda polémica es enriquecedora en la medida que permite la confrontación de dos sistemas de ideas” (all polemic is enriching in that it allows for the confrontation of two systems of ideas) is the reason she creates historically anchored texts that question the role of the dialectic of social discourses in the formation of identity.6

5 Reati, p.20.
6 Heker, “Los intelectuales ante la insistencia del exilio; Militancia y creación”, p.196.
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