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GIRLS' SCHOOL AND COLLEGE FRIENDSHIPS IN  
TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITISH FICTION

Sheena Maria Wilkinson

Submitted for the degree of Ph.D.

University of Durham, School of English Studies, 1998

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## ABSTRACT

### GIRLS' SCHOOL AND COLLEGE FRIENDSHIPS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITISH FICTION

Sheena Maria Wilkinson, University of Durham, 1998

This study examines in detail a variety of adolescent female friendships in twentieth-century British novels, written for both the 'adult' and 'juvenile' reading public, a distinction which I argue is arbitrary, since the relationship between the two is an exceptionally close one.

Scholars discussing adolescence this century have tended to ignore the experience of girls, or to reinforce patriarchal stereotypes by presenting girls in marginal and reactionary roles. Until recently, even feminist discourse on friendship has been inclined to focus on adult relationships, or to examine girls in relation to boys. Identifying these tendencies, I explore fiction set in girls' schools and colleges to determine how novelists saw this significant relationship.

Girls' schools and colleges represented a significant cultural space for girls and young women to learn to value female companionship. Although most discourse on girls' school friendships has focused on the 'crush' relationship, I was interested in determining to what extent writers valued 'ordinary' friendships, as an area of life over which girls, earlier this century, were able to exert some autonomy.

The girls' school story is the obvious fictional space to celebrate adolescent female friendship in all its complexity. As a genre it has been consistently devalued by critics (perhaps partly because of the very accessibility of the schoolgirl as a cultural image) despite enjoying enduring popularity among readers of all ages, and inspiring several notable novelists to adopt its conventions for their own works, as demonstrated in this study.

My approach to the texts discussed here involves a close reading of the text against an awareness of the cultural conditions in which it was produced. As I show, failure to take into account these cultural conditions can lead to misunderstanding the novels and the relationships depicted therein.

This study, drawing on a wide variety of texts produced between 1909 and 1990, shows clearly that the novelists concerned were influenced to varying extents by the prevailing ideologies of their times. These ideologies often determine the importance they accord female friendship, the form it takes, and the language they use to discuss it.

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S.M.W., Belfast, 1998

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## I N T R O D U C T I O N

### 1. Why study fictional friendships?

'Whatever comes to us, nothing can alter our friendship....We'll always be friends, and we'll always remember our schooldays.'

So says Joey Bettany on her last day at the Chalet School in 1935<sup>1</sup>. And, indirectly, it was the Chalet School, with its seductively unproblematic view of friendship, schooldays and life after school, which led to the conception of this study.

Like many children I was given as presents books which my parents had enjoyed twenty years before. Thus, at eight or nine, I was introduced to Arthur Ransome by my father and to a variety of girls' school stories by my mother. I can still, on occasion, enjoy reading of the holiday adventures of the Swallows and Amazons, but the more mundane term-time exploits of the Chalet girls and their counterparts in many other fictional institutions, have captured my imagination more thoroughly, leading to a life-long interest in fiction about girls at school. From Joey of the Chalet School, Dimsie of 'Jane's' and Darrell of Malory Towers it was a natural progression to Jane Eyre at Lowood, Nanda at Lippington, and as many terrible, thrilling accounts as I could find of the Brontës' tragic sojourn at Cowan Bridge.

When I began research for this study of adolescent female friendship in twentieth century fiction, two things became clear at an early stage. Firstly, the novels which dealt most convincingly with friendship tended to be set, for obvious reasons which will be outlined later, wholly or partly in girls' schools, and secondly, these novels seemed to owe a considerable debt to the girls' school story as popularised by Angela Brazil, Elinor M. Brent-Dyer, Dorita Fairlie Bruce, Elsie J. Oxenham and scores of other, largely forgotten writers.

Bobbie Ann Mason in The Girl Sleuth asserts that women - even fictional women - share a common reading past:<sup>2</sup>

Lolita must have read Nancy Drew and the  
Bobbsey Twins. We all did.

For British girls in every decade this century, but especially between the wars, girls' school stories were read because 'we all did.' Certainly, the girls in Angela Lambert's No Talking After Lights read 'stupid Dimsie and Enid Blyton'<sup>3</sup>, and Clara Batchelor complains that a petty scene at her high school is 'very Angela Brazilish'<sup>4</sup>. Even when no such specific reference to girls' stories is made, however, it seems reasonable to apply Mason's argument generally to the female characters in modern British fiction (accepting of course that we are hypothesising about imaginary characters).

Their creators, however, were and are not imaginary, and I would suggest with confidence that the 'adult' writers studied here - Antonia White, Rosamond Lehmann, Janice Elliott, Andrea Newman and Angela Lambert - were fully conversant with the girls' school story. Even if their absorption of many of its familiar elements into their own writing did not imply this, the fact is that most of them were girls at a time when the school story was immensely popular. It is highly unlikely that they would never have read an Angela Brazil or Elinor M. Brent-Dyer novel. Their first readers, too, may very well have 'graduated' from Dimsie and the Chalet School. The title alone of Angela Lambert's 1990 novel No Talking After Lights is surely designed to strike a chord with readers who will immediately recognise the admonishment, and the world it conjures up, possibly from their own experience but much more probably from their reading of school stories.

It is this intertextual relationship between what Elizabeth Bowen defined as the 'school story proper' and the 'school novel'<sup>5</sup> which has fascinated me during the writing of this thesis, and it is, I think, the recognition and exploration of this relationship which distinguishes this study from other recent discourse on women's writing and on the school story.

On the whole, although not exclusively, critics are

wary of applying the same criteria to adults' as to children's literature, at least within a single study. While many children's literature critics<sup>6</sup> have argued, as I would, for children's novels to be taken more seriously, and there is a continuing and possibly unresolvable debate about what actually constitutes a 'children's' book<sup>7</sup>, these discussions do not seem to have led to a major trend towards discussing 'adults' and 'children's' novels together.

It is my aim in this study to approach every novel, regardless of its intended readership, in exactly the same way, as a work of imagination offering an important female space for the exploration of girls' friendships. At first glance, a novel like Rosamond Lehmann's Dusty Answer may seem to have little in common with an Angela Brazil or Elsie J. Oxenham novel, but, as I shall demonstrate, thematically and culturally, even aesthetically, they stand closer together than one might think. If, as Maria Nikolajeva asserts, summarising Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogics or intertextuality, 'literature and art are created in a continuous conversation ... between creators, in which each new piece of art or literature is a new line in the conversation'<sup>8</sup>, then all the writers in this study are engaged in a dialogue about girls at school and college in twentieth-century Britain and the friendships which form an integral part of their experience.

Naturally, this study draws on various areas of interest, bringing together ideas about adolescence, about female friendship and about the school story. Work in these areas has been largely theoretical or sociological in its approach, even when literary texts have been the focus. There has been, consequently, an absence of close reading - especially accurate close reading - and my intention in this study is to read each novel carefully, acknowledging the importance of its social and cultural background, the ideological conditions which directly or indirectly produced it, and its relationships to other novels in the study and to the school story genre in general.

In reviewing the available literature in these areas I have been struck by the general neglect of girls in studies of adolescence; of adolescents in studies of women's friendships; and of girls' schools in studies of schools and school stories. That is not to say, of course, that little has been written about adolescent girls, about their friendships and about their schooling in real and imagined institutions. In fact, a considerable body of such literature has existed since the 'problem' of the 'modern girl' was first expounded by commentators such as Eliza Lynn Linton whose The Girl of the Period<sup>9</sup> was a popular late-Victorian response to what was seen as the decline of 'true' femininity with all its implications for society. But girls are conspicuously absent from 'mainstream'

studies: much has been written about them, yes, but on the whole this has been value-laden and grudging; they are given a few paragraphs or a chapter in a study which claims to be about 'adolescence' but which is clearly interested primarily in male adolescence, or they are the focus of separate studies, written as a welcome response to the lack of helpful discourse on female adolescence, but accentuating their marginalisation.

Similarly, adolescent friendships receive little attention in the various studies of female friendships which have been published in the last decade or so. For example, Janice Raymond in A Passion for Friends<sup>10</sup> does not deal with adolescent relationships at all in her 275 page study of 'female affection'. Are adolescent girls not female? And in the wealth of commentary on the school story, it has, until very recently, been customary to neglect the girls' story in favour of the boys', a phenomenon which I shall consider in some depth in due course. As recently as 1994, The Oxford Book of Schooldays<sup>11</sup> edited by Patricia Craig and claiming in its introduction to 'include as wide a range of views and reviews as possible',<sup>12</sup> has an overwhelming male bias. In a total of 401 extracts, only 81 are written by women and deal with girls' schooldays. Granted that the history of education in Britain is such that boys have been educated for much longer than girls, it hardly seems reasonable to accord their experiences five times as much

space.

This tendency to ignore and to marginalise the experience of women and girls has of course been recognised and addressed in many recent reassessments of history and literature. Studies like Vivienne Griffiths' Adolescent Girls and their Friends: a Feminist Ethnology (1995)<sup>13</sup> foreground the experience of girls in relation to other girls, and there have been several recent studies of girls growing up at various stages of the twentieth century, such as Fashioning the Feminine: Girls, Popular Culture and Schooling<sup>14</sup> and Young, White and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties<sup>15</sup>, to give an Australian and an American example.

Since this study was first conceived in 1990, there has been a marked increase in interest in school stories and popular literature for girls generally. Significantly, the tone of this has changed since the critical climate of the 1970s when Cadogan and Craig's substantial You're a Brick, Angela!<sup>16</sup> 'rediscovered' a vast body of girls' fiction with a tongue-in-cheek, sophisticated air reminiscent of what Tania Modleski calls the 'flippant kind of mockery' which often characterises criticism of popular feminine narratives.<sup>17</sup> Rosemary Auchmuty's A World of Girls takes girls' school stories seriously on their own terms, arguing that they provided girls with an important imaginary space

which highlighted and endorsed women's concerns and relationships. Penny Tinkler's Constructing Girlhood: Popular Magazines for Girls Growing Up in England, 1920 - 1950<sup>18</sup> looks in detail at the ideological role girls' magazines played in constructing femininity, recognising that 'fictional boarding schools ... were an ideal vehicle for constructing positive and attractive schoolgirl identities.'<sup>19</sup> The Chalet School Revisited, published in 1994 to commemorate the centenary of the birth of Elinor M. Brent-Dyer, is a collection of essays entirely devoted to the Chalet School series.

It would seem, then, that it has become much more 'respectable' to declare an interest in girls' popular fiction, perhaps partly because of the general development of academic studies of popular reading and culture. Having said this, studies like A World of Girls are so remarkable partly because they dare to challenge powerful and accepted critical views that girls' stories are trash, formula fiction; for, as I shall demonstrate, no matter what trend criticism of children's literature has taken this century, the girls' school story has usually been a victim. Aesthetically and ideologically, it has attracted adverse, sometimes downright hostile criticism.

It must be remembered, therefore, that we are perhaps still quite near the beginning of a backlash against the

denigration of the school story on several counts. I hope that my study of novels for adults and children which share the setting of the girls' school or college, and the prioritising of friendship within that context, will contribute to the discourse.

Fiction about girls at school or college will tend to share a number of concerns and themes. To some extent, all such fiction is primarily focused on the socialisation and development of the individual. As Penny Brown acknowledges<sup>20</sup>, the traditional model of the Bildungsroman (novel of selfdevelopment) established by Goethe, is modified significantly by the hero's gender. Within patriarchy, Brown argues, self-development for women involves 'not the maturation but the growing down.'<sup>21</sup>

It is interesting to apply this theory to the titles of Louisa May Alcott's Little Women and Little Men<sup>22</sup>, both novels concerned with self-development, and two of the most popular novels for young people of the nineteenth century. Little Men suggests the embryonic 'man' within the child (and emphasis is placed throughout Little Men on what the 'little men' will 'become' when they grow up). Little Women, on the other hand, seems to imply the diminution or 'growing down' of the March sisters, especially Jo, as they modify their ideas and ambitions to fit society's expectations. For the boys, 'little' is a starting point for development: they

can only get bigger and better. The girls, however, study to become 'little'.

These lessons are learned, of course, largely in the home, and the domestic arena was seen as the proper sphere for the girls' development until the twentieth century was well established.<sup>23</sup> The 'little men', however, learn their lessons at school, albeit in the family atmosphere of Plumfield. Most of the girls in this study do indeed have to learn to 'grow down' to conform to society's demands (Brown focuses, in fact, as do I, on Antonia White's Frost in May quartet and Rosamond Lehmann's Dusty Answer), but at least they all, for a time, exchange the home for the wider world of school. Many of these institutions, it is true, are deeply conservative, reinforcing patriarchal structures. Paulina Palmer says of Frost in May that:<sup>24</sup>

Despite the fact that Lippington is peopled almost entirely by women, its organisations and codes of conduct reproduce and perpetuate patriarchal values.

Nevertheless, the fact that these are communities where to be female is normal, and where women can be seen in positions of authority and control, is a powerful one, as Auchmuty and others<sup>25</sup> have pointed out.

One of the most important differences between the socialising of girls in the home and at school was surely the increased opportunities for friendship offered by the

latter. Girls' home lives traditionally, and for a good part of the present century, remained heavily circumscribed by parental control. While schools were often strict they did provide girls with access to the companionship and stimulation of other girls. In 1911, Margaret E. Robertson, a headmistress, declared:<sup>26</sup>

Boarding schools have exceptional opportunities of widening the outlook and enlarging the sympathies.

The relative freedom to mix with other girls not directly chosen by parents must have constituted a significant aspect of these opportunities.

The friendship of adolescent girls in British schools and colleges is both a neglected and a much-discussed topic. That is to say, a great deal has been written on the subject in various quarters but, as I shall go on to outline in detail, this has been largely confined to one area - the crush: an intense emotional attachment to an admired older pupil or mistress. 'Ordinary' peer relationships (for want of a more scientific term) have attracted relatively little attention. In fiction, however, this is far from the case. Although, among the novels discussed in this study, there are a number of overtly romantic friendships which are consistent with the 'crush' phenomenon, there are still more portrayals of the support, fun, comradeship and sharing of ideas which characterise 'ordinary' friendship - often

within the same text.

A note must be included here on the selection of texts. When it became clear to me, as outlined above, that the novels set in girls' schools and colleges tended to focus most on friendship I read as many of these as possible and selected for closer study what I believe to be a fairly representative sample of novels published between 1927 and 1990. (Some of the girls' stories alluded to are slightly earlier.) I was keen to include novels which might be regarded as 'popular' (A Share of the World, No Talking After Lights) as well as acknowledged modern 'classics' like Dusty Answer and Frost in May. In fact, these latter were best-sellers when first published, highlighting the inadequacy of the term 'popular' to define what is considered non-canonical. Jean Radford, whose objective in The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction is to 'redefine the relationship between elite and popular forms as different social developments within the same field',<sup>27</sup> (rather as this study aims to investigate the relationship between the 'school story proper' and the 'school novel') acknowledges that 'the term popular is itself a notoriously unstable category.'<sup>28</sup>

Much of what has been written about popular fiction, in particular the romance, is very relevant to discussions of the girls' school story and the reasons for its continuing

appeal, especially to adult women, as I shall go on to illustrate. It must be pointed out, however, that in no sense should the 'girls'' stories here be seen as examples of 'popular' and the 'adult' novels of 'high/elite' culture: this is too simplistic an approach to allow for the variety of fiction presented here and the complex relationships these texts have to their readers and to each other.

Although, naturally, the novels chosen had to deal with friendship to some extent, I must emphasise that in each case the text was chosen primarily for its school/college setting and the fact of its, because of this setting, inevitably depicting relationships between adolescent girls or young women. Only then did I begin to analyse how friendship was presented, the social and emotional importance accorded it, and the relationship of these to the ideological climate in which the text was produced. As the study shows, some interesting patterns became apparent, with the result that only at an advanced stage did it become clear to me how the texts should be organised, and I resisted the impulse to do so chronologically.

It seemed appropriate to 'frame' the discussions with readings of the school story itself - Elinor M. Brent-Dyer's Chalet School<sup>29</sup>, the most popular, enduring and romantic school series ever written, and Antonia Forest's Kingscote<sup>30</sup> books, probably the most literary and least

typical of the genre. The Chalet School is discussed in relation to No Talking After Lights<sup>31</sup>, the most recently published of the novels studied. Frost in May<sup>32</sup>, The Lost Traveller<sup>33</sup> and Secret Places<sup>34</sup> are chronologically ordered, in terms of both their publication dates and the periods in which they are set, for each deals with a fictional time in the past; The Lost Traveller and Secret Places looking backwards at the first and second World Wars respectively.

The 'college' novels of Rosamond Lehmann (Dusty Answer<sup>35</sup>) and Andrea Newman (A Share of the World<sup>36</sup>), though published almost forty years apart, have more in common than their college setting. Each is a first novel written by a young woman not far removed from her own college days and each has an interesting relationship to the sexual ideologies of its time. They are the only novels in the study with strictly contemporary settings. Angela Lambert's No Talking After Lights looks back to the 1950s, when its author was a schoolgirl. The Chalet School, although its beginnings are contemporary, with references to trouble in Ireland<sup>37</sup> and 'the spirit of young Germany',<sup>28</sup> does not quite keep pace with the twentieth century - indeed, it would be impossible for it do so. In a way, the later books (published in the 1960s) must be regarded as being set 'in the past', partly because of the ages of the characters - the Maynard triplets, born in 1939 at the outbreak of the second World War, are eighteen in The Chalet School

Prefects, published posthumously in 1970, and partly because of their anachronisms. Elinor M. Brent-Dyer's entry in Twentieth Century Children's Writers suggests:<sup>39</sup>

She understood the tastes of girls growing up between the wars, although by the late 1950s her books had become anachronistic.

Anachronistic they may be, but, as I shall establish, none the less popular for all that and, twenty years after this was written, in print in a new edition!

As for the Kingscote series, they present a dating problem. The first book was published in 1948, the last school story in 1976, but only two fictional years have passed. However, each book is set more or less in the time it was written, with, as I shall show in the relevant chapter, interesting implications.

Of course, the books discussed here are by no means the only novels relevant to a study of girls' school and college friendships. What these novels have in common is that, central as the theme of friendship may be (it is not always), intense as the relationships described often are, their authors are concerned with more than simply depicting one particularly passionate or deep-felt relationship. They are, as we shall see, interested in the complexities of friendship, in the diverse roles which friendship can play in the lives of adolescent girls or young women. The extent

to which they concern themselves with female friendship and the language they use to do so can tell us a great deal about the society in which they were writing.

In most of these novels, friendship is given an important function in the development of the heroine and her ideas: it is more than merely an emotional relationship. For example, in The Lost Traveller, the quality of Clara's friendships with Patsy and Ruth is not remarkable: what makes their friendships so meaningful is the opportunity they afford for rebellion against her parents and, by extension, against the role which society has ordained for her. It should not be forgotten, however, that friendship is an emotional relationship and, being often the only arena where a girl could assert her autonomy, an extremely important one.

## 2. The Background

### I. Adolescence

In the early twentieth century a wealth of literature on the subject of adolescence appeared, and was fairly widely read, on both sides of the Atlantic. For a long time the most influential of these was G. Stanley Hall's Adolescence<sup>40</sup>. A huge work in two volumes, Hall's study writes of adolescence in celebratory, almost eulogistic terms. He saw adolescence as a time of growth, ambition and change - for boys. In over 1,000 pages of closely printed text girls receive scant attention. There is an unpleasant logic about Hall's disregard for female adolescence, for adolescence as defined by him could have little real meaning for girls in 1904 - or for some considerable time to come. Hall believed that women could never actually hope to attain the self-knowledge towards which boys were growing, for their lives were governed not by reason and intellect, but by 'deep unconscious instincts.'<sup>41</sup> For a girl, Hall asserted, adolescence was a time of profound emotional instability, during which she needed special protection from society. Of course it is true that in a patriarchal society adolescence does have different meanings for girls and boys, because girls are not allowed to develop, economically, intellectually and emotionally, into fully autonomous 'mature' adults. Hall, however, was not merely reflecting a

social climate in which women were inferior to men: he thoroughly endorsed and sought to perpetuate patriarchal values, which he saw as natural, divinely and biologically ordained.<sup>42</sup>

Woman at her best never outgrows adolescence as man does...This constitutes her freshness and charm, even in age.

The truth is not, of course, that women are biologically or psychologically incapable of attaining the same level of maturity as men, but that within a patriarchal society the means of achieving this maturity were denied them. Any problems suffered by adolescent girls, as far as Hall is concerned, stem not from the contradictions and constraints of the role into which she is being pushed, but from the fact that she is so 'unnatural' as to challenge this role.

Given his ideas, as well as his considerable influence on other social psychologists, it would be fair to call Hall the 'patriarch' of twentieth century writing on adolescence. There is not the space here for a detailed exploration of his theories, or to assess his influence, but as the century progressed commentators on adolescence continued to endorse Hall's views to a significant extent.<sup>43</sup> This included his marginalisation of the female. Patricia Meyer Spacks, The Adolescent Idea: Myths of Youth and the Adolescent Imagination<sup>44</sup>, although she does not consider Hall's neglect of girls, acknowledges his 'glorification' of adolescence,<sup>45</sup>

the fact that he 'writes ... as a celebrant.'<sup>46</sup> She accords him the status of having invented 'the myth of adolescence' which endures today<sup>47</sup>:

It [Adolescence] inaugurated a period, still continuing, in which the adolescent assumed a place of pivotal importance in sociological, psychological and literary thought and in the popular imagination as well.

This 'myth' necessarily excluded girls - some might argue that it continues to do so.

Female adolescence, then, to judge from early twentieth-century writing on the subject, was of interest mainly insofar as it contrasted with contemporary ideas about male adolescence, which were considered the norm. That girls 'fell short' of this norm was blamed on their femaleness or their refusal to accept their 'natural' destiny, not on society.

The 'Women Question' was much debated in the early twentieth century, but by and large, despite developments in education for middle class girls and greater access to the professions, the average girl continued to live as a dependant<sup>48</sup>, denied any real liberty and choice, concepts which were central to contemporary definitions of (male) adolescence. Adolescence when thus defined having relatively little meaning for a girl, the social psychologists could afford to pay scant attention to her. It is very important

to remember, when we consider what was written about adolescent girls this century, that it represents only a tiny proportion of the general interest in adolescence.

Furthermore, in my brief outline of this interest I shall naturally focus on theories and studies of adolescent female friendship, and this, apart from the 'crush' discourse, was widely ignored. Hall does not mention it. Laurence Augustus Averill, whose 1936 study Adolescence: A Study in the Teen Years<sup>49</sup> enthusiastically endorses Hall's convictions about femininity and eugenics, as well as his neglect of girls, discusses boys' 'gangs' at length, and refers to boy/girl relationships, but is silent on the subject of girls' friendships. Leta S. Hollingworth concentrates on the 'crush' relationship, but ignores 'ordinary' friendship.<sup>50</sup> Alicia C. Percival, in the quaintly titled The English Miss; Today and Yesterday<sup>51</sup>, also focuses on the crush.

What issues did early twentieth-century social psychologists consider central to their discussions, if any, of female adolescence? Clearly there is no space here to do more than acknowledge them, but they help place any discussion of friendship which did occur into a context.

Generally speaking, all researchers have focused on the physiological changes at puberty, particularly the onset of

menstruation which, in a climate of ignorance, was often experienced as profoundly traumatic. As Simone de Beauvoir suggests in The Second Sex<sup>52</sup>:

All the evidence agrees in showing that whether the child is forewarned or not, the event always seems to her repugnant and humiliating.

The girl as a unit within the family and in the wider social context of school is examined, receiving an especially thorough treatment in Mary Chadwick's substantial 1932 study Adolescent Girlhood<sup>53</sup>. This comprehensive, sensitive and largely common-sense approach to female adolescent experience stops short of a definite feminist position, but Chadwick's sympathies lie firmly with the girls. Her tone is generally balanced and unemotional, but she makes clear her anger at a male writer's theory about female adolescence, which can be evolved only out of 'what he thinks about what he sees'<sup>54</sup> rather than any real insight into the experience of being an adolescent girl.

Male writers have tended to say little of girls' relationships with their peers, as already outlined, although boys' gangs and peer group relations have attracted a fair amount of attention. The girl's desire to be a boy is mentioned by most researchers, with de Beauvoir analysing most deeply the reasons for this common fantasy. The awakening of sexual desire is, as we would expect, a frequent theme, often informed by developments in

psychoanalysis, and the adolescent's interest in religion and in spiritual matters generally is often discussed. Chadwick and de Beauvoir both explore female friendship in some depth, and join in the discourse about the adolescent 'crush' and lesbianism, which will be investigated presently.

When Hall published Adolescence in 1904, his blatant neglect of girls and the fact that this seems not to have been challenged spoke volumes about society's attitude to the adolescent girl. Interestingly, the neglect continued until very recently; some would argue that it persists today. The development of Women's Studies as an academic discipline is of course welcome, but the necessity for it underlines and may even perpetuate the marginalising of female experience.

Sara Delamont, in a chapter on adolescence in The Sociology of Women<sup>55</sup> complains that 'adolescent girls have been neglected by researchers and by social theorists. In 1986, Sue Lees, in her study Losing Out: Sexuality and Adolescent Girls points out:<sup>56</sup>

Research on adolescence is almost exclusively about boys...When girls do make an appearance.. they are usually seen in ways which are marginal or which uncritically reinforce a stereotyped image of women.

I would suggest that the reasons for this neglect are

manifold. Firstly, as already suggested, Hall and his followers (who dominated the field until at least the late thirties) tended to write of adolescence in almost eulogistic terms, an approach which, as we have seen, necessarily excludes girls. Later studies of youth, particularly in America, began to focus on crime, deviance and gang culture, an interest which for a long time was considered inapplicable to girls whose 'deviance' tends to be less visible than that of boys. In the 1990s, as indicated at the beginning of this chapter, there is wider and less value-laden interest in female adolescence, of which this study is a part. However, as ideological background to the novels studied, it is essentially to thinking earlier in the century that we must look.

## II. Friendship Within the Discourse on Adolescence

If adolescent girls in the first half of this century reacted with understandable envy towards boys, as most research (not to mention fiction) seems to suggest, how did they respond to other girls? Did ambivalence about the female role, which contributed to the lack of understanding between mother and daughter, undermine relations between adolescent girls? How did writers on adolescence see homosocial relations among girls? Female friendship, so common in novels from Jane Austen to Enid Blyton, has been sadly neglected, as I have already outlined, by the psychological and sociological analysts whose work reveals prevailing social attitudes towards women and girls.

It would be fair enough to claim that women in our century have been encouraged to prioritise relationships with men, representing as they do the epitome of what women are supposed to strive for - marriage and motherhood. Recent researchers, notably Lilian Faderman<sup>58</sup>, have celebrated female friendship in previous centuries, when the more rigorous implementation of separate spheres facilitated women's social intercourse. Separate spheres (public for men, private for women) continued in society and, more enduringly, in literature, for a good part of the present century, but now the 'public' world of work was being infiltrated by women, in a campaign for equal citizenship

which was popularly seen, by men and women, as threatening and deviant.

Rather ironically, perhaps, the breeding grounds for this assault on the status quo were institutions which were thoroughly homosocial, communities of women and girls. In order to break down the principle of separate spheres it was necessary for women to become educated, and this in a sense involved institutionalising women's separate sphere, by creating girls' schools and colleges. Many of these were actually fairly traditional in their espousal of marriage and family values, seeking to create cultured young women who could take an educated interest in the world but who did not desire or need to be economically independent. Headmistress Sara Burstall's comment in 1911 that 'we must never forget that they are to be women first and scholars afterwards',<sup>59</sup> is indicative of the desire of many early female educationalists to be seen not to destroy but to enhance their pupils' femininity and worth. Even so, girls' schools and the pioneering women who administered them, were the object of mistrust and even derision.

The history of girls' secondary and higher education has been the subject of many excellent accounts, some personal and localised, like Alison Jordan's biography of Margaret Byers, founder of my own Belfast grammar school<sup>60</sup>, others huge in scope like Gillian Avery's immensely readable

and informative The Best Type of Girl . Many writers have published memoirs of their own school or college days like Elizabeth Bowen<sup>61</sup>, or have drawn heavily on their own experience at school to produce fictionalised autobiography, like Antonia White, whose Frost in May and The Lost Traveller are the subject of chapters in this study. Still others have chosen to write about schools, basing some of their ideas, no doubt, on personal experience but creating what is essentially an imaginative work. Into the last category fall the majority of novelists in my study who create between them a fairly comprehensive catalogue of institutions. This study cannot include a factual history of the girls' school (although in a sense it offers a selective history of these fictional institutions) but it should be stated that much of the discussion on adolescent friendship this century focused for obvious reasons on the school and college. Interestingly, this is much less the case in American studies, where co-education became the norm much sooner than in Britain.<sup>62</sup>

Mary Chadwick and Simone de Beauvoir having provided a reasoned discussion of issues facing girls in the first half of this century, I was naturally interested in their response to the debate surrounding adolescent female friendship. This debate only really came into being in the 1920s, facilitated by the popularising of the theories of Freud and Havelock Ellis and by the successful prosecution

in 1928 of The Well of Loneliness on grounds of obscenity. In other words, only when the public became aware of the sexual potential of female relationships did these relationships receive much attention. This preoccupation with sex which is so telling a characteristic of the twentieth century can seriously undermine attempts to evaluate all kinds of friendships.

It was the girls' school, naturally, which was the focus of much of this attention, some of it wildly hysterical; less because it accommodated hundreds of girls than because of the pernicious influence of the spinster teacher. After the carnage of the First World War many young women who might have expected to marry were obliged instead to support themselves. Teaching remained one of the few 'respectable' professions for middle class women, and of course there had been, since the move for greater access to education for girls in the late 1800s, a considerable increase in the positions available. The independent, unmarried teacher, one of the most accessible examples of the 'New Woman', had always attracted suspicion as an unnatural man-hater. By the late 1920s she had come, most unfairly, to embody all sorts of sinister, predatory characteristics in the public imagination. This 'caricature of the perverse and perverting spinster teacher'<sup>63</sup> was fuelled by popular novels such as Clemence Dane's Regiment of Women.<sup>64</sup>

Chadwick warns against such women in her chapter on 'Friendships and Identifications' in Adolescent Girlhood. Adolescent girls being often impressionable and highly emotional, it is natural for them to form strong attachments to older girls and women, often teachers, admits Chadwick, seeing these essentially unbalanced relationships as among the most important, but the most problematic, of adolescence. The admired woman may or may not be worthy of the girl's regard, and the relationship may be constructive or (more often, Chadwick seems to be saying) destructive, depending on the type of woman involved and on what gratification she seeks from the friendship. Any relationship involving excess emotion - something for which adolescent girls have been traditionally regarded as having a propensity - was disapproved of by most writers on adolescence, but the unequal balance of power in the friendship with an older woman rendered the girl particularly vulnerable. The danger was increased, of course, when the woman sought in the friendship unnatural gratification for her own suppressed desires:<sup>65</sup>

A great number of women...teachers and others, because of inhibitions of various kinds, have never been able to derive any normal gratification for their sexual impulses...only able to gain satisfaction from contacts...with other women... Such friendships usually have a disastrous result upon the object of their affections.

Chadwick's views unquestioningly reinforce prevalent

contemporary stereotypes of the predatory, man-hating lesbian teacher, emotionally depraved and frustrated, a threat to young girls:<sup>66</sup>

It is usual to find that these women... cherish a good deal of hostility towards men, either consciously or subconsciously.

She ends the chapter with a dire warning to parents to beware of the charismatic and popular teacher, for her influence may be 'injurious'.<sup>67</sup>

Although Chadwick does discuss what I, for lack of a more scientific term, describe as 'ordinary' friendships between adolescent girls, she seems most concerned with relationships involving an element of sex, romance or extravagant feeling as described above. This is typical of the discourse on girls' (but not boys') friendships for the reasons suggested earlier. She emphasises above all the emotional intensity of adolescent friendship, including in her examination such aspects as friendship between 'opposites' (a popular theme in the girls' school story), friendship between girls of different ages, friendships based on bullying and teasing - an outlet for the sadistic and masochistic impulses, as well as the 'crush, pash, or G.P. [grande passion]'.<sup>68</sup> Regarding the last, she says almost nothing about the unrequited or one-sided passion, which from all accounts was prevalent in many schools at the time, sometimes more or less institutionalised<sup>69</sup>, and which

one might imagine to be more psychologically interesting than the 'simple, effusive, direct-love' of the 'love idyll',<sup>70</sup> on which Chadwick concentrates.

She portrays these overtly sentimental friendships as passionate and mutually jealous, but not sexual, reserving this judgement for the pupil/teacher relationships already described. I wonder if this equation of the sexual force in a relationship with the more experienced, independent partner owes much to the traditional paradigm of marriage, which still in the 1930s involved an imbalance of power in favour of the man? It was traditional to see women as sexually passive, a contention much debated in recent re-evaluation of women's friendships and romances in earlier centuries<sup>71</sup>. In confining sexual gratification to the pupil/teacher 'identification' Chadwick is endorsing the view that women/girls are sexually passive, since the older woman in such a friendship was regarded as perverted, imitating the men she was not 'natural' enough to love. Thus, two girls, while they might indulge in sentimental, overtly romantic expression of their attachment, are doing no more than prepare for adult heterosexual love: their relationship cannot really be sexual, since they are both 'real' girls/women and no significant imbalance of power is involved. This has been a common way to see homoerotic experience in the twentieth century, regarding it as the immature expression of desire (rather than love), an

adolescent phase in 'normal' heterosexual development.

This view is flawed for several reasons. It presupposes that homosexual experience is emotionally 'immature'; it simplistically labels all intense feeling for members of one's own sex 'sexual' (even if unproblematically so as a 'phase') and it depends on a narrow definition of sexuality. These attitudes dominated twentieth century discourse on adolescent relationships, which may be one reason why a more complex and diffuse response to adolescent female friendship is confined very largely to fiction. Even commentators who made a conscious effort not to react with hysteria to intense adolescent friendship were so busy defending these friendships as 'normal' that they failed to pay enough attention to the actual emotional content of the relationship. Alicia Percival, whose history of the education, formal and otherwise, of girls was published in 1939, provides a typical example:<sup>72</sup>

Those who throw about such 'psychological' terms as 'Lesbianism' need to study both in theory and in practice the development of the growing girl, and to realise how naturally these friendships and enthusiasms pass into the next stage, and only serve to widen and deepen her character.

This attitude has the advantage of being pragmatic, and it acknowledges the positive influence such a 'devotion' could have, but in implying that the 'next stage' is heterosexual coupling Percival is clearly valuing the female

friendship primarily for what it can teach the girl about heterosexual love.

Chadwick's discussion of the dangers of the pupil/teacher relationship is, interestingly, the only point in her substantial book where she seems inclined to take other than a sensitive, informed and fairly enlightened approach to the issues surrounding female development. This suggests the potency of the image of the predatory lesbian, which survives in the popular imagination even today, with many people assuming that homosexuals of both sexes prey on the young, as witnessed by some rather hysterical reactions to the recent bill to lower the age of consent between men to sixteen.

The Well of Loneliness<sup>73</sup>, whose obscenity trial and consequent banning in 1928 focused distrust of lesbianism, may have contributed to the perpetuation of this extreme and negative image, but its author, Radclyffe Hall, in her turn, in the character of the doomed Stephen, drew on her own experience as well as on the theories of Havelock Ellis. Ellis, at the forefront of the new and popular 'science' known as sexology at the beginning of the present century, put forward the concept of 'sexual inversion'. 'Inverts', of whom Stephen Gordon was a textbook example, were members of 'the third sex'. Neither truly male nor female according to society's definition, they were individuals trapped in

the wrong body. Thus Stephen feels like a man, dresses like a man and even looks rather like a man, but is biologically female. Today we might call Stephen 'transsexual', according to the Oxford Dictionary definition ('having the physical characteristics of one sex and the supposed psychological characteristics of the other'<sup>74</sup>). In the 1920s she would have been considered a 'true' or 'congenital' invert, born that way and deserving Hall's constant plea - pity and understanding. Ellis believed that while some women were congenital inverts or 'real' lesbians, many others could be influenced by a 'real' lesbian, and form a passionate attachment to her, but were essentially 'normal'. These women he called 'pseudo-lesbians'.<sup>75</sup> This is the model suggested by Chadwick - the 'real' lesbian/invert is the active partner because she embodies characteristics which are essentially male. This popular view of the lesbian relationship (teacher/pupil; Stephen/Mary) is essentially a heterosexual model, containing 'male' (sexually active, even predatory, powerful) and 'female' (sexually passive, vulnerable) roles. It presupposes the need for a masculine figure in a relationship. The assumption is that two 'real' women cannot love. (Before the development of such 'advanced' views it was of course accepted without question that two women could love each other deeply, but by the 1920s 'love' had come to be equated with sex.) Thus, in Dusty Answer<sup>76</sup> Jennifer, recognisably a 'pseudo-lesbian' by her prettiness and long

hair, cannot love Judith, another conventionally feminine woman, but must attach herself to the 'real' lesbian, short-haired, broad-shouldered Geraldine. This was the model of women's love available in the 1920s. It was a limiting and a damaging one, but it endured.

Simone de Beauvoir, writing almost twenty years after Chadwick, and from a more self-consciously intellectual point of view, is much less influenced by this model. She is more explicit about the lesbian elements inherent in the 'special' friendships between girls and young women, maintaining that lesbian tendencies, hardly distinguishable from narcissistic enjoyment, exist in almost all young girls:<sup>77</sup>

Each one covets in the other the softness of her own skin, the modelling of her own curves; and, vice-versa, in her self-adoration is implied the worship of femininity in general.

For examples of this 'worship' in literature, de Beauvoir refers us to Colette's Claudine a l'ecole and Rosamond Lehmann's Dusty Answer. De Beauvoir also believes that these passionate friendships are soon outgrown, but her view of them is somewhat less restricted than Chadwick's. She is more open to the 'grossly carnal' nature of some of the relationships, without making any value judgements of these, while accepting that others 'are purely platonic'<sup>78</sup>. While Chadwick presents the older woman in such attachments as

predatory, actively seeking gratification in the love of an innocent young girl, de Beauvoir presents the girl herself in much less passive terms, describing her desire, at adolescence, for 'the lovemaking of a god'<sup>79</sup>, which, coupled with her fear of men, moves her to turn to an educated, respected and independent woman, 'who is less strange and frightening than the male but with something of male prestige.'<sup>80</sup>

So far, this review of the treatment of female friendship in the discourse about adolescent girls earlier this century has focused on models of friendship involving conscious or subconscious sexual desire. Surely I have myself argued against such an approach, maintaining that it only limits our understanding of girls' friendships? This is true. However, as I have suggested, girls' friendships until quite recently failed to attract much attention unless they could be seen to contain such an element. I should have thought that the very fact of girls being educated together, exchanging ideas, hopes and ambitions, forming their own groups and establishing their own values, would have led to some sociological or psychological interest. After all, the area of friendship was perhaps the only one where a girl could express her autonomy. Did not that, in itself, render friendship potentially subversive and therefore interesting? So far as I have been able to ascertain, this was not considered the case, at least until

very recently, and only in fiction was any value placed on girls' peer-group friendships for their own sake.

In the midst of this studied silence about 'ordinary' girls' friendships, many people entered the debate on the schoolgirl crush, which typically involved intense feeling for an older girl or teacher. This relationship had long been recognised, but until this century it was not generally regarded as potentially sexual. Ellis included a discussion of boarding school 'flame' relationships, which he identified as sexual according to the model already described, in Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Sexual Inversion (1897) He reassured his readers of the usually temporary nature of the attachment:<sup>81</sup>

The frequency of the phenomena, as well as the fact that, on leaving college to enter social life, the girl usually ceases to feel these emotions, are sufficient to show the absence of congenital abnormality.

As Rosemary Auchmuty, in her splendid study of the girls' school story, A World of Girls, recalls:<sup>82</sup>

[The crush]... provoked education ists to vigorous discussions and analysis through out most of the twentieth century. The terms of the debate changed over the decades as the distinctions between 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' friendships became framed in increasingly sexual terms.

As Auchmuty reminds us, until the 1920s, this distinction primarily concerned excess emotion. A friendship was

considered 'unhealthy' if it involved too much of the girl's energies. For much of this century, various interested parties saw it as their right to decide where a girl's energies should be directed. Teachers would wish her to devote herself to work and sport; other authorities to maintaining her health, preparing to be a wife and homemaker or to religious experience. To none of these parties would too absorbing a friendship with another girl be considered a legitimate focus for the girl's energies. Martha Vicinus' essay, 'Distance and Desire: English Boarding School Friendships, 1870 - 1920'<sup>83</sup> seeks to establish when the emphasis changed, and argues, as I do, that concern about 'labelling' these relationships detracts from any attempt to consider what they were actually like.

Certainly, by the 1920s, a new, but ultimately limiting, 'sophistication' was forcing those interested in adolescence to engage in the 'crush' discourse. Perhaps that is why they have next to nothing to say about other aspects of adolescent female friendship - jealousy, for example, or group identity, friendship as a forum for the sharing of ideas, rivalry, scapegoating, or loneliness...

Aldred's first week at The Grange was a very lonely one... She had come to school full of confidence that she would win immediate favour, and it was humiliating to find herself not appreciated as she had expected.

Being an Angela Brazil heroine<sup>84</sup>, Aldred would not remain

friendless for long, for Brazil was not afraid to present friendship in all its permutations. The fact that female friendship (and not just the crush, as is supposed by many) should be so widely celebrated, in all its complexity, in the school stories of the 1920s and beyond, is testament to writers' faith in their own judgement of what was important to girls. It would be a long time before sociologists and other commentators made any coherent attempt to catch up.

### III. Female Friendship Rediscovered

The neglect suffered by adolescent female friendship in studies where it might reasonably have been expected to deserve some attention extends, by and large, to the study of all female friendships. Only in the last couple of decades have women's relationships attracted sustained sociological and psychological interest. There have been studies of kin relationships in our own and other societies, and books have been devoted to women in the family, in public life and in sexual relationships, but the study of friendship for its own sake is fairly recent. Women are traditionally studied in relation to other people, but these are usually family members or men, not other women from outside the family. If adult women's friendships have been generally disregarded, on the grounds that they are culturally insignificant, then the study of friendship at adolescence is seen as inconsequential on two counts: firstly as the study of women's relationships with each other, and secondly, as the study of adolescent and therefore 'immature' relationships. Pat O'Connor, in her comprehensive study Friendships Between Women<sup>85</sup> admits that 'The study of friendship can, even today [1992], be viewed as a rather trivial exercise.' This dismissive attitude is intensified when one admits to an interest in adolescent friendships, as I know from typical reactions to the subject of this study.

The fact that adolescent girls are female seems to have more to do with this dismissal and neglect than the fact that they are young. Teenage boys' relationships are fairly well documented, not just in the studies by G. Stanley Hall, etc. mentioned above, but also in studies of youth culture throughout the century. Girls are not absent from the study of youth culture, but they tend to appear in marginal roles, in relation to boys. The study of crime and deviance has been another area of considerable interest in youth studies: again, girls are notably absent. 'Boys' 'deviance' from socially acceptable behaviour tends to be highly visible: girls' 'deviance' is still largely perceived as taking the form of sexually unacceptable behaviour - promiscuity, teenage pregnancy, etc. There is no such equivalent for boys. Again, this behaviour depends on relating to boys.

Recently feminist scholars have been revising every aspect of women's role in history, literature and society. Unsurprisingly, friendships have become the focus of considerable interest, a very welcome reversal of the earlier situation. Books like Lillian Federman's Surpassing the Love of Men<sup>86</sup> have done a great deal to acquaint the modern reader with 'forgotten' history of women's relationships with each other in the past. It seems to me counter-productive that recent feminist discussion of

Faderman's position (that, in our twentieth century equation of love with sex and our mania for categorising emotion, we have been in danger of losing the ability to accept and explore the romantic nature of past female friendship in a way which is appropriate to its cultural context) has focused on arguing about the likelihood of genital contact between loving women friends in the past.<sup>87</sup> Such narrow definitions of sexual/sensual/romantic love are unhelpful in evaluating the quality of women's friendships in the past. Again, the emphasis is on sex, and a limited view of sex at that. Again, the preoccupation with one particular aspect of the relationship could preclude open-minded investigation of the relationships themselves - I am reminded of the early twentieth century 'crush' discourse all over again.

Pat O'Connor's useful review of studies of female friendship contains a short section on the context of adolescent friendships, which identifies two views of adolescent female friendship<sup>88</sup>. The view drawn from psychoanalysis highlights identity and intimacy, and tends to see adolescent friendship as a preparation for establishing intimate heterosexual relationships. We have already seen how this view influenced much thinking about adolescent identifications and its impact on the 'crush' discourse. The opposing and more recent feminist view identifies these attitudes as examples of what Adrienne Rich describes as 'compulsory heterosexuality'<sup>89</sup>, devaluing

female adolescent experience because it will only accommodate love between women if this can be seen as representing a transient and immature phase. We might imagine that, from this feminist viewpoint, open-minded and empirical studies of female friendship might emerge to increase our knowledge.

However, a characteristic of recent discussion of female friendship is that, increasingly, it is couched in theoretical or political terms which, although they clearly have an important function in developing theories of women's relationships, appear to be inconsistent with an empirical examination of what female friendship is actually like. Janice Raymond in A passion for friends - towards a philosophy of female affection puts forth the concept of 'gyn/affection' to signify 'the passion women feel for women, that is, the experience of profound attraction for the original vital Self and the movement towards other vital women'<sup>90</sup>. It is interesting and revealing that Raymond does not deal at all, even on a philosophical level, with adolescent friendship. This seems strangely incompatible with her preoccupation with the 'true Self', as one could argue that children are closer to their 'true Selves' than the rest of us, and that adolescence involves a rejection of that 'true Self' in an endeavour to adopt an appropriate, socially constructed female role.

Raymond's lack of interest in adolescent friendship is symptomatic of its dismissal by many scholars, feminist and otherwise. Of course there have been significant recent studies of female adolescence, notably Angela McRobbie's work, mainly on female youth culture and popular reading<sup>91</sup>. Sue Lees' Losing Out (1986) and Sugar and Spice (1993) are major contributions to the field<sup>92</sup>. There is evidence that this is a growing area of interest, probably as a reaction to its comparative neglect in the past. None of these studies, however, although they do explore aspects of female friendship, places girls' relationships with other girls at the forefront of its investigation. Feminism and Youth Culture analyses relationships in girls' magazines and girls' responses to the messages contained in these magazines. Sugar and Spice, although it contains a substantial chapter on friendship, is primarily concerned with sexuality, and Lees' exploration of friendship, while illuminating and, unlike much recent study, empirical, highlights friendship mainly in relation to girls' sexual reputations.

A significant factor in contemporary work in this field is, of course, that most girls now operate within sexually mixed environments and of course it is important to examine how girls form relationships in such environments and what strategies, if any, they develop for resisting the sexual double standard which still obtains. It may be

assumed that greater freedom to pursue heterosexual relationships means that female friendship survives mainly as a forum for discussion of these relationships, or as an arena where women concentrate their rivalry for the attention of men.

A very interesting recent contribution to this debate is Vivienne Griffiths' 1995 Adolescent Girls and their Friends: A Feminist Ethnology<sup>92</sup>.--Griffiths' study of several groups of girls at a Yorkshire comprehensive school over some months considers the implication of their mixed environment and 'whether a strong female friendship group depends on, or thrives best in, a polarised situation.'<sup>93</sup> Griffiths concludes, as a result of her research, that 'these friendships are close and supportive, characterised by trust and loyalty.'<sup>94</sup>

This study is interesting in the light of my own research for several reasons. Firstly, rather like the novels I shall discuss, 'a strong positive picture of friendships between young women has emerged from the research'<sup>96</sup> which in no sense ignores or downplays the conflicts and problems inherent in complex relationships: Griffiths' book is no mere celebration of female friendship. Secondly, I was struck, despite the differences in context, by marked similarities between the structures of the friendship groups Griffiths describes and those found in

school stories of sixty years ago. For example, the girls Griffiths observed operated in small groups of friends rather than pairs; codes relating to gender, age, race, etc. were more rigidly applied to school than to home friendships; the girls were physically affectionate; they asserted their friendship through talking and giggling together, and their friendships were often intense. Griffiths herself admits:<sup>96</sup>

I have been surprised by the similarity between the young women's friendships in this study and my own experience as a Southern, middle-class girl in the 1960s.

Perhaps this is a sign that friendship between girls, although inevitably subject to changing societal pressures and ideologies, is in many respects stable, providing support for girls during the 'vulnerability of adolescence' and 'helping to form self-identity.'<sup>97</sup>

Griffiths maintains that this support can remain strong even in a mixed environment where 'the cultural and ideological pressures on girls to get a boyfriend are enormous.'<sup>98</sup> I would suggest, from my own experience of teaching in a large, co-educational grammar school, that one reason for this is that girls tend to perceive the boys in their own year group as immature and therefore inappropriate objects of desire. They tend to remain, both in and out of the classroom, in largely homosocial groups, although this tendency decreases with age, particularly in the sixth form.

Despite this, there can be no doubt that, with the decrease in single sex education and homosocial leisure pursuits, and the mounting pressure on young girls to prove themselves attractive to and interested in boys at an early age, separate 'female space' is being lost. This fact has been identified and lamented by various feminists. Griffiths says:<sup>99</sup>

Creating space for girls (and women) to be together in single sex situations is widely recognised as valuable by feminists.

Rosemary Auchmuty's most persuasive argument in A World Of Girls is that women read girls' school stories to escape into a female space<sup>100</sup>. My own study also concentrates on essentially female spaces, exploring as it does fictional representations of school and college friendships at a time when single sex education remained the norm.

It seems, then, that we are back where we started, acknowledging the importance of a separate female sphere as a natural environment where women's friendship can thrive. The woman's community, educational, familial or religious, has become once again a respectable focus of scholarly attention. Dystopian visions of such communities, such as Regiment of Women (whose title surely is enough to chill), as well as popular perceptions of women as bitchy and mutually antipathetic, have lingered in the cultural consciousness, with many people articulating a conviction

that women cannot and should not live together without men. Set against this view there is the equally erroneous and unhelpful tendency to idealise women's friendship and consider female communities utopian, or more 'natural' for women than a heterosocial environment. These views have their own problems. Radical lesbian separatist theories, for example, which demand that women choose not to relate sexually and emotionally to men, are logical within a radical feminist context, but can lead to ideological and personal difficulties when they conflict with social reality - when, for example, the woman has a male child.

Neither of these positions - and I emphasise that these are two extreme views - allows for the complex reality of women's relationships, at adolescence or any other time. Positions which are essentially dependent on theory can also fail to take the reality of friendship into account, and investigations of the adolescent girl in today's society are often too preoccupied with girls' reaction to the double standard of sexual morality to analyse the essence of their friendships with each other. Nina Auerbach reminds us that female communities are complex environments:<sup>101</sup>

The communities of women which have haunted our literary imagination ... are emblems of female self-sufficiency which create their own corporate reality, evoking both wishes and fears.

The writers of the novels I examine in Part Two are, on the whole, unconcerned with theory, although their novels are recognisably the products of particular cultural conditions. In the novel, the perfect forum for the exploration of human relationships, they have evoked the wishes and fears of various fictive communities and have written about friendship between adolescent girls in a way which celebrates not the ideal but their vision of the complex reality of female friendship.

### III. The Girls' School Story

Elizabeth Bowen, in her introduction to the Virago edition of Antonia White's Frost in May makes the arbitrary but useful distinction between what she calls the 'school story proper, written for school age children and the school novel, written for the grownup.'<sup>102</sup> Her attitude to the former is indicated in her claim that:<sup>103</sup>

those for boys are infinitely better than those for girls. The curl-tossing tomboys of the Fourth at St. Dithering's are manifestly and insultingly unreal to any girl child who has left the nursery.

Bowen's opinion of the girls' school story is a useful introduction to the widespread contempt in which the genre has traditionally been held. I shall be reviewing the various forms which this critical contempt has taken over the decades and suggesting reasons why the girls' school story has been the focus of such scorn.

The girls' school story was literature's inevitable response to the increase in girls' secondary and higher education, as well as to the boys' public school story which flourished after the success of Tom Brown's Schooldays<sup>104</sup> in 1857. The first examples of the genre were didactic in tone, in keeping with the majority of literature for girls at the end of the nineteenth century, which, on the whole, aimed to reinforce contemporary ideals of feminine

self-sacrifice and service to God and the family. When Angela Brazil's first school story, The Fortunes of Philippa, was published in 1906, the choice of a girls' school setting was not, in itself, radical. L.T. Meade among others had been writing of girls' schools and colleges for some time. What distinguished Brazil's work and that of the dozens, perhaps hundreds of writers who followed her, was the concern for character and environment and the desire to entertain rather than to moralise. Brazil's heroines exist on their own terms; they are not mere vehicles for delivering sermons.

Many critics whose knowledge of the twentieth-century girls' school story is superficial concentrate their discussions on Angela Brazil as the name which has become synonymous with the genre. Angela Brazil was probably the first exponent of the type of school story we recognise today as typical of the genre, but she was not the first, nor indeed the most prolific girls' school story writer, and certainly not 'the only well-known name among girls' school story writers.'<sup>105</sup> Her popularity among those who continue to read and collect girls' school stories in the 1990s is considerably less than that of Elinor M. Prent-Dyer, Elsie J. Oxenham and Dorita Fairlie Bruce.<sup>106</sup>

There can be no doubt that, judged objectively, many girls' school stories were lacking in literary merit,

especially when the genre became very popular between the wars. It is incorrect, however, to assume that because some were bad, they were all bad, an arrogant and erroneous presupposition on which too much criticism of the school story is based. Eleanor Graham, founder of Puffin Books, asserted in 1980 that 'many people assumed all children's books were on the Angela Brazil level'<sup>107</sup>, making it clear that for her Angela Brazil is synonymous with mediocrity. In fact, while there are aspects of her books which lend themselves easily to caricature, should one be so minded, Brazil created lively if at times improbable plots and some convincing characters. Elinor M. Brent-Dyer, whose 'Chalet School' series will be discussed in some detail in the next chapter, created a fictional institution which outlived many real-life ones and which is still in print today, HarperCollins having recently (1998) produced a new edition. Elsie Oxenham's leisurely and romantic 'Abbey' stories, which focus on country dancing and female friendship, are strangely seductive with their 'seriousness and depth of characterisation'<sup>108</sup>. Dorita Fairlie Bruce could be criticised for an over-reliance on the plot device of the laboured coincidence, but so, it can be argued, could Thomas Hardy, and it did not prevent her producing 'clearly defined, likeable heroines' and 'authentic backgrounds'<sup>109</sup>. Even Enid Blyton, wrote school stories which are amusing and memorable and, like the Chalet School, still in print today. Antonia Forest's 'Marlow' books, four of which are

girls' school stories, are subtly written novels and the subject of a further chapter in this thesis. Other writers, largely forgotten today, wrote stories which bear examination. Christabel Marlowe's Shirley at Charterton, for example, to take a random title from the dozens of shabby old books I was bequeathed as a child, could be considered a 'classic' girls' school story and is a well-structured and thoroughly readable example of the genre<sup>110</sup>.

Set against these doyennes of the genre, there were undoubtedly writers whose attempts to 'cash in' on the immense popularity of the school story betrayed their lack of real interest in girls and their concerns. These writers, quickly out of print and generally not collected today, in a climate where even reprints of Erent-Dyers, Oxenhams and Fairlie Bruces can fetch prohibitive prices, have faded into deserved obscurity. Their plots are full of secret passages, interminable hockey matches and shifty foreigners, and their fictional schools are as instantly forgettable as the cardboard cut-out schoolgirls who romp through their corridors.<sup>111</sup>

Why have critics of the school story found it acceptable to fail to distinguish between the good and the bad writers of the genre, categorising all as bad? In doing so, they betray their own prejudice, but because their

criticism, unlike its subject, has been taken seriously, they are guilty of misrepresenting the girls' school story and contributing to the contempt in which it has long been held. Recently there has been a resurgence of interest in the girls' school story, which is largely celebratory though by no means uncritical, and on the whole this is characterised by careful scholarship and attention to detail. Studies such as Rosemary Auchmuty's exemplary A World Of Girls<sup>112</sup>, David Bathurst's exuberant Six of the Best<sup>113</sup> and The Chalet School Revisited<sup>114</sup> have gone some way to re-evaluate the school story, but books like these will inevitably be read by those who value and enjoy school stories in any case, and it cannot be hoped that they will vindicate the school story in the mind of the critical reading public.

Literary/children's literary criticism of the girls' school story has expressed its distaste for the genre in several ways. There is, as we have already seen in the discourse on female adolescence and on adolescent friendship, a frequent tendency simply to ignore the girls' school story, usually in criticism which purports to discuss the school story as a genre, but which is actually concerned only, or primarily, with those written for boys. Where the girls' school story is discussed, critics seem to feel their foremost duty is to point out the weaknesses in the genre, even if this involves conveniently forgetting its

undoubted strengths. In the second half of the twentieth century there has been a fashion for burlesquing the girls' school story largely in the 'St. Trinian's-sexy-schoolgirls-on-the-rampage' mode. Allied to this, there is the 'rediscovery' of the girls' school story, which involves so-called 'sophisticated' rereadings of (usually) Angela Brazil, which seem to be obsessed with pointing out that all the characters are lesbians, and what a jape that silly old Angela never noticed. None of these responses involves a sustained reading of the text within its cultural and literary context.

Let us examine first of all the tendency simply to ignore the girls' school story. Elizabeth Bowen's assumption that boys' school stories were better than girls' is shared by many critics. Just as many books supposedly on adolescence were actually on male adolescence, a considerable proportion of school story criticism is really about the boys' school story. There is no objection to critics' choosing to focus on the boys' school story: after all, I make no apologies for focusing exclusively on the girls'. I do object, however, to critics or publishers who do not make it clear that their studies are devoted wholly or mainly to the boys' story. This reinforces the conviction that girls' experience is marginal, and undeserving of consideration in its own right.

For example, in Stories and Society: Children's literature in its social context<sup>115</sup>, a 1992 collection of essays, Jeffrey Richards' contribution entitled 'The School Story' mentions the girls' school story, which one might naively have supposed to be part of this genre, only in the notes, where he cites constraints of space as an excuse for ignoring this huge body of literature. Dismissing the girls' school story as mainly an imitation of the boys', as Richards does, is somewhat over-simplistic. Certainly, both genres shared the emphasis on 'playing the game' and 'honour' which, it has been argued, expressed the nineteenth and early twentieth-century ideology of Imperialism<sup>116</sup>; both stressed the role of friendship and the school community in the development of character, and both presented school as the world in microcosm. However, these constructs found different expression in the girls' and boys' books.<sup>117</sup> Ironically, Richards, referring to modern school stories such as those by William Mayne, and the long-running BBC television drama, 'Grange Hill', specifies 'the presence of girls'<sup>118</sup> as an important development in the school story. This assumes that girls have only recently been 'included' in the school story, emphasising that for him 'the school story' means 'the boys' school story'. Richards' essay discusses popular fiction as social control, selective in what it chooses to show: his own essay, in the way it treats girls' fiction, contributes to this injurious selectivity.

Isabel Quigly's The Heirs of Tom Brown: The English School Story contains a chapter on the girls' school story, but it is the boys' story which seems to be her real interest. One feels, reading this chapter, that Quigly includes some discussion of the girls' story because she feels she must. The chapter seems to lack the enthusiasm of the rest of the book, and betrays not only Quigly's disdainful opinion of the girls' school story (which is her prerogative), but a surprising lack of knowledge about the genre. This is surely curious in a book which claims to discuss 'the English school story', but is an illuminating example of what I see as a sort of widespread cultural blindness to the materiality of the girls' school story.

That is, the girls' school story is an area of literature/popular culture about which most people seem to feel some confidence. It is accessible and unthreatening: it holds no mystique. Memories of reading Malory Towers or watching Christmas repeats of St. Trinian's have perhaps contributed to a shared cultural conviction that we 'know' the girls' school story. To the general British public, the girls' school story is synonymous with 'The Four Marys', 'jolly hockey sticks', midnight feasts and romping, pig-tailed girls in gymslips.

I am aware, of course, that I am hypothesising here

about something which is very difficult to substantiate. I can offer only some hypotheses, ideas and observations, based on my own reading and on eight years of interpreting people's attitudes to the subject of this study.

Firstly, the alarming tendency for very respected critics to make factual errors or sweeping, distorting assumptions in their readings of girls' school stories<sup>119</sup> alerted me to the fact that the girls' school story seemed to inspire a sort of critical or cultural myopia in critics. What could explain this? Certainly, it has traditionally been acceptable to denigrate the genre as trivial, culturally marginal, elitist and 'lesbian'<sup>120</sup>, but this alone could hardly explain a fairly common - and apparently unchallenged - critical failure to see what is actually in the books rather than what one imagines to be there. I must stress here that I am not referring to subjective opinions with which I happen not to agree, but to tangible textual misrepresentations, distortions or simply inaccuracies.<sup>121</sup>

Nicholas Tucker, who has written widely on children's literature and psychology, refers in general terms to the tendency for generalisation and subjectivity in some children's literary criticism, suggesting that adults' flawed memories of the books they read as children could be partly responsible.<sup>122</sup>

Generalisations based on such memories may arise from narrow experience and confused recollection.

In the case of the girls' school story this is certainly compounded by the fact that one need not even have read a girls' school story to have access to a cultural memory of it, 'confused' as this may be. Tucker admits that 'some subjective feeling for the particular charm of certain children's books' is inevitable as 'there can never be a completely objective, depersonalised account of a subject such as this.'<sup>123</sup> (Ironically, as if to prove his own thesis, Tucker's essay on 'School stories, 1970 - 1980' contains an illuminating reference to 'the munching of tuck' in Antonia Forest's End of Term which actually has no foundation in the text!<sup>124</sup> Clearly, Tucker's own 'confused recollection' of school stories is at play here!) The issue of whether one can ever be objective in literary criticism is a huge one, of course, and outside the scope of this thesis, but I would suggest here that critics have found it especially difficult to be objective and open-minded about the girls' school story partly because of this shared cultural 'half-knowledge' or 'confused recollection'.

There is also, perhaps, allied to this and to the low status accorded to the girls' school story in the popular imagination and in literary history, a certain reluctance to be seen to take the genre seriously. If we, as critics,

write seriously about this 'trivial' literature, what does that say about us? How can we justify our interest? Nowadays, as I have suggested, the work of scholars like Auchmuty and Tinkler has made it much more acceptable and respectable to be interested in girls' stories and to read them on their own terms, but this was certainly not the case in the 1970s and 1980s, let alone earlier this century.

C.S. Lewis is widely recorded as protesting at 'the playfully apologetic tone' he felt obliged to adopt when discussing his interest in children's literature with fellow scholars.<sup>125</sup> Much more recently, in 1992, Peter Hunt, in the Introduction to Literature for Children: Contemporary Criticism stated that:<sup>126</sup>

Children's literature, although widely accepted institutionally, has tended to remain uncanonical and culturally marginalised.

And, of course, some children's literature has been more marginalised than others. Hunt suggests that British culture's 'patronising' attitude to children's literature (which he likens to colonising countries' attitudes to their colonised peoples and their writings) has established a hierarchy:<sup>127</sup>

adult male literature

women's literature

children's literature

As the girls' school story is written by, for and about

women/girls, one can imagine where it might fit into this model.

As will become evident throughout this study, much of the theory about women's popular literature, in particular the romance, is very relevant to discussions of the school story. Tania Modleski writes of the 'pervasive scorn for all things feminine' in criticism of popular culture<sup>128</sup>, and it would seem that this scorn is exacerbated when the 'feminine' is also 'adolescent'. As a result, Modleski argues, critics can be defensive about their interest in such an area, adopting an attitude of dismissiveness, hostility or a 'flippant kind of mockery' to vindicate themselves.<sup>129</sup> All these strategies have been widely practised in criticism of the girls' school story, even by critics who have shown considerable interest in the field.<sup>130</sup>

There is nothing new about this recognition. C. S. Tatnam, in an article on 'Yesterday's Schoolgirls' written shortly after the death in 1969 of Elinor M. Brent-Dyer notes that:<sup>131</sup>

It is fashionable to deride all the girls' books of this period and they are seldom criticised even with accuracy.

Almost thirty years later, however, we can begin, as I have tried to do, to consider the reasons for what Peter Hunt

calls this 'soft research'<sup>132</sup>, and hopefully this is within a more open critical climate which will reinstate the text of the school story within its own cultural, aesthetic and ideological context as the legitimate starting point for any discussions.

Central to much criticism and reviewing of school stories, especially since the end of the Second World War, have been the arguments that they are anachronistic and elitist, out of touch with social reality and perpetuating middle class and Imperialist values. Of course the 'school story was not alone in attracting this sort of attention. The children's 'realistic' novel had generally come to be seen as at best the 'harmless, hygienic story of comfortable bourgeois life, written, it seemed, by comfortable bourgeois adults for comfortable bourgeois children.'<sup>133</sup> By the 1970s critics and social commentators were acutely aware of the fact that Britain had become a pluralist society and there was an understandable demand for children's literature to reflect this. It cannot be disputed that, as one Junior Bookshelf reviewer states in a review of Antonia Forest's 1974 The Cricket Term<sup>134</sup>:

Life at an expensive boarding school for girls is outside the experience of the majority of young readers today.

However, much of what we read is outside our own experience, and there is a considerable weight of critical opinion which

sees the desire to escape into an unrealistic or inaccessible fictional reality as a central motivation for reading. Nicholas Tucker, rejecting the idea (central to much left-wing children's literary criticism in the 1970s) that children preferred fiction to reflect their own backgrounds, suggested that:<sup>135</sup>

The chance to identify with those who are leading more luxurious...existences has always been one of the main appeals in reading novels.

The wholesale rejection of the school story on social grounds<sup>136</sup> not only - within a criticism which purports to prioritise the child - ignores the fact that children seem to like school stories; it presents a very limited view of social reality and 'relevance.' As early as 1976, C.J. Driver's essay 'The relevance of relevance' challenged this narrow view, arguing for 'a version of the actualities of living which allows a proper place to the imagination.'<sup>137</sup> Any critical analysis which highlights one aspect of a text, seeing this in isolation from others, will inevitably distort and limit the possibilities of the text. For example, a focus on what might be construed as negative messages about social class in the 'elitist' girls' school story could obscure a text's potentially positive messages about gender roles and opportunities for women.

Robert Leeson asserts that today "people" must mean all people; "children" must mean all children, not one

section deemed to represent the rest.'<sup>138</sup> However, there is a danger that, as a backlash against the domination of the middle-class child in literature, 'all children' could be modified to mean all children who are not white and middle-class. Surely, such attitudes can only limit our understanding of what literature can offer readers?

Implicit in all this, of course, is the conviction that the writer for children has a duty primarily to reflect contemporary social reality, that the children's novelist has not the same artistic freedom as the adults', and that children's literature should be judged by other than aesthetic standards. As Philippa Pearce puts it, 'Children's writers so often have their responsibilities pointed out to them.'<sup>139</sup> There has been a long-running argument in children's literary criticism between 'child people' and 'book people', a tussle between the prioritising of the perceived needs of the child reader and the literary merits of the text.<sup>140</sup> This places the girls' school story in a double bind. As we have seen, it is rejected by 'child people' on the grounds of elitism and social irrelevance, while it is often assumed by 'book people' that all school stories are of a mediocre literary standard. The difference between fiction for adults and fiction for children seems to have less to do with the content of the work than with the criteria by which it is judged; while adults are allowed to make up their own minds about what they read, children's

literature is much more vulnerable to shifting social trends.

The demand for more socially relevant/'politically correct' children's literature is a commendable one, and today the protagonists of British children's novels reflect much more accurately the multiplicity of experiences of growing up in contemporary society. This is no mere obedience to critical demands, however, but a consequence of the fact that, where children's writers were once almost exclusively white and middle-class, with little knowledge of the reality of other ways of life, this is no longer the case.<sup>141</sup>

In the 1970s, however, critics and librarians ('child people') seemed to be rather narrow in their assessment of what was reactionary and elitist, reluctant to look beyond what is superficially apparent, and less concerned with the literary merit of the work under review than with its perceived social implications. It is assumed, for example, that girls' school stories, because of their 'elitist' setting, cannot be socially relevant, even though, as I go on to discuss in Part Two, Antonia Forest's novels about the Marlow family, four of which are school stories, treat with depth and originality such complex and 'relevant' issues as death, divorce, anti-semitism, teenage boy/girl relationships, sexual morality and religion. She is rarely

given credit for these qualities because critics can be too busy reminding us that school stories should not still exist to look at what she actually writes about and how she does it, or to consider why, against the odds, the school story did still exist, albeit in Forest's modified form.

Those critics who are more concerned with the literary qualities of texts are united in praising Antonia Forest for the 'sound literary style',<sup>142</sup> of her novels, particularly her sophisticated characterisation. John Rowe Townsend, himself a writer for children, is prepared to adopt the unfashionable position of praising the school stories of Forest and others. He is less concerned with narrow definitions of social realism than with the indisputable fact that the school society is in many ways the ideal focus for a writer, because 'the school story has many advantages. School is a self-contained world in which boys - or girls - are full citizens.'<sup>143</sup> Fred Inglis, in 1981, although acknowledging, not without justification, the 'stunning snobberies' of school stories, recognises that for the readers, these are secondary to the 'celebrations of friendship' which he sees - as do I - as absolutely central to the books' enduring appeal:<sup>144</sup>

The school story, in all its extraordinary variety and vitality, is one of the biggest monuments in popular culture to the institution of friendship.

As this very brief overview of 'serious' literary

criticism of the girls' school story has shown, although a few critics have been prepared to acknowledge the strengths of the school story, more often than not, for various reasons, critics have been reluctant to do so. In their endeavours, deliberate or not, to devalue the school story, some critics have tended to adopt a facetious tone, exploiting school story clichés (which often, as we have seen, do not even have their origins in the books themselves) as if, perhaps, to prove their own superior sophistication and social awareness. In the critical climate of the 1970s and 1980s this was perhaps inevitable. In the 1990s, it need not be.

What of responses to the school story which do not pretend to be serious? As early as 1935, when the girls' school story was still flourishing, Arthur Marshall was parodying it<sup>145</sup>, and most people today are familiar with St. Trinian's, which began as a Ronald Searle cartoon and was later developed into a series of films by Ealing Studios.<sup>146</sup> Daisy Pulls It Off is a clever and affectionate parody, much more closely related to its original source, which ran as a successful West End production for some years in the 1980s<sup>147</sup>. These caricatures of the school story are largely responsible for the perpetuating of the 'joke' image of the schoolgirl, and possibly, as I have suggested, have made a major contribution to the collective cultural 'knowledge' about the girls' school story, which seems to be so powerful

that, as we have seen, it has influenced even 'serious' literary criticism of the genre.

Often, the desire to distinguish between the 'sophisticated' modern outlook of the critic and the ingenuous 'naivety' of the school story writer, inspires a reinvention of the stories based on awareness of sexuality, a tendency which reaches its apotheosis in the nymphomaniacs of St. Trinian's. It is quite right to point out that school story writers were perhaps unique in their concentration on friendships between girls, and it is certainly the case that they often wrote with a lack of self-consciousness which would be unthinkable today. To assume, however, as some critics have a tendency to do, that in fact, Brazil & co were writing about lesbianism - and didn't realise it! - is to impose an unhelpful and inappropriate awareness onto the text. Have we become so narrow-minded in our definition of human relations that we can only define intense feeling as 'sexual'? Gillian Avery refers to the depiction of 'female for female' love in the girls' school story, asserting that:<sup>148</sup>

One must assume that these authors...  
had not the faintest idea in this instance  
what they were writing about.

Surely the writers knew exactly what they were writing about: love and friendship between girls and women, often containing an intensity and a physical affection which

were, at least until the late 1920s, considered valid aspects of female friendship. It is unhelpful to impose the values and 'awareness' of a different culture onto these texts and to say that, according to our values, the writers did not know what they were writing about. C. S. Tatham, in the article mentioned above, remarked that the school story 'is usually looked at out of context and judged by the standards of an age other than its own'<sup>149</sup>. This is perhaps most striking in the area of sexuality, and it may be helpful here to consider the terms in which this was discussed in the 1970s and 1980s and the possibility, in the 1990s, of moving beyond these 'sophisticated' readings to a **more open-minded** approach. The comment, for example, made in 1978, that 'Angela Brazil was totally innocent of any underlying forces guiding her subconscious'<sup>150</sup> seems to ignore the fact that Brazil, born in 1869, grew up as a Victorian and in many ways simply reflected Victorian 'romantic' ideas about female friendship. Assuming that she was guided subconsciously by 'underlying forces', and that these were libidinous, could be argued as saying more about the 1970s than about Brazil's novels.

Peter Hollindale, in his insightful essay 'Ideology and the Children's Book' points out:<sup>151</sup>

We often ignore the huge commonalities of an age, and the captivity of mind we undergo by living in our own time and place and no other.

I believe this describes very accurately that problem of objectivity and open-mindedness in considering the literature of another time, a tendency to which, as we have seen, the girls' school story is peculiarly vulnerable.

Recently, as I have pointed out, there has been a renaissance of interest in the school story. Although critics have been pronouncing the death of the school story since the 1940s, the genre has refused to die. Antonia Forest, 'splendidly...[going] her chosen way, ignoring the changing fashions in writing for children which litter her path',<sup>152</sup> produced two school stories in the 1970s, which is partly why her work was the object of such intense criticism in that decade. Enid Blyton's school stories remain in print today, as do many of the Chalet School titles. In fact, only in the mid 1990s did HarperCollins finish the mammoth task, begun in the late 1960s, of publishing the whole Chalet Series in paperback, and in 1998 they began to print a new edition. Anne Digby's 'Trebizon' books, which are set in a contemporary West Country boarding school, are fairly slight tales compared to the Kingscote or Chalet books, but they are interesting for their continuing celebration of female friendship in a more relaxed social climate which allows quite a bit of mixing with boys.<sup>153</sup> Like Vivienne Griffiths, who concluded that 'Friendships between girls are deep, intense and long-lasting and often continue alongside relationships with boys',<sup>154</sup> Anne Digby recognises that even

in a 'non-polarised' female community, the support of female friendship is precious.

Many societies exist to promote understanding, scholarship and enjoyment of writers such as Elinor M. Brent-Dyer, Elsie Oxenham and Dorita Fairlie Bruce and these include members of both sexes, all ages and from all over the world. Many members recall reading the books in their childhood and refer to the joy of rediscovering them in adulthood and of being in touch with other readers who share their enthusiasm. The Bettany Press was set up in 1994 to publish books with a Brent-Dyer interest, and increases its list regularly. Second hand hardback copies of Chalet and Abbey titles in particular have become extremely collectable and consequently expensive. A Day School on girls' stories has been running at Loughborough for the past five years, with the 1998 programme devoted to the 'Big Three' girls' school story writers, Dorita Fairlie Bruce, Elinor M. Brent-Dyer and Elsie J. Oxenham.

Of the recent critical studies which focus on the girls' school story, the most notable is Rosemary Auchmuty's A World of Girls. Published by the Women's Press in 1992, Auchmuty's book, a close study of the novels of the 'Big Three' and Enid Blyton, takes up a fairly radical theoretical position, arguing that the girls' school story, with its depiction of girls and women in self-sufficient

communities, represented a threat to patriarchal values and was systematically destroyed by the critics, librarians and publishers on the grounds that it was 'not heterosexual enough',<sup>155</sup>.

Mainstream children's literature criticism, having gone through first of all a very historically based approach, dedicated mainly to establishing a tradition of writing for children<sup>156</sup>, and then a very sociologically based approach, concerned primarily, as we have seen, with 'social reality', the redefinition of that tradition and the 'battle' between 'book people' and 'child people', is now largely preoccupied with theories of language, ideology and the reader. How children read is now regarded as of more concern than what they read. Analysing what happens when children read and how they construct meaning out of texts has interesting implications for a consideration of the enduring appeal of the school story (both throughout history and beyond childhood). It also helps to explain the tendency to devalue these texts and their readers.

For a long time it was accepted that the child's reading was characterised by 'involvement', a reading approach regarded by the modernist aesthetic as essentially 'immature'. Henry James, for example, felt that detachment was 'the characteristic of the good reader',<sup>157</sup> the implication being that involvement with the text was 'bad' reading. Other critics agreed:<sup>158</sup>

Only immature readers can ever really identify with any character, losing all sense of distance and hence all chance of an artistic experience.

Although more recently 'it is acknowledged that even the most judicious readers do become involved in the books they read',<sup>159</sup> the privileging of metafictional and experimental texts which 'den[y] that language is invisible and prevent total absorption in or identification with a book',<sup>160</sup> could be seen to downgrade the experience of reading the domestic realist text, which, broadly, the school story is.

Absorption and identification are closely allied to escapism. As Gillian Avery says:<sup>161</sup>

Adults have always been distrustful of children's escape reading. They accept the need for escape, but they like to dictate the form it takes.

Fred Inglis, as early as 1971, argued against seeing 'escape' as a simple construct, pointing out that the motivations for escape are complex: 'escape may be narcotic or reassuring.'<sup>162</sup> We must ask ourselves, what does a child (or an adult) project onto or derive from an escapist text? There is perhaps a tendency to see escapist reading as particularly passive: it may actually be intensely creative, particularly as the meanings and values the reader brings to the text change over time. Today's children, reading the early Chalet School novels, will have a somewhat different cultural semiotics from the children of the 1920s who were

the original intended readership. As Tony Watkins reminds us:<sup>163</sup>

The meanings which children or adults take from a text will be different for different groups at different points in history... The meanings of a text depend upon the history of its reception and the way meanings are mobilised in human experiences and history.

The response of the 'original' readers of the girls' school story is largely lost to us today, but I wonder if, like the women in Janice Radway's study of romantic fiction, they valued the 'privacy of the act',<sup>164</sup> feeling that here was a literature especially for them, allowing an essentially private experience because adults did not read them, had not read them as children and, very often, did not approve of them. Sheila Egoff, considering why some 'old-fashioned' children's books retain their power with generation after generation, suggests that:<sup>165</sup>

Perhaps there are certain needs that are part of the unchanging heart and every age cannot supply them all... Children still go to books of the past in search of security, morality, extravagant imagination, sentiment, or, for downright fun.

Adult readers, asked to explain their continuing interest in school stories, often cite the pleasures of 'escaping' into a more stable, secure society:<sup>166</sup>

They make me feel safe and secure with their familiarity...it's a place I escape to completely - away from the demands of life and work.

It may be that the texts provide for adult readers something of the 'compensatory function'<sup>167</sup> that reading romantic fiction does for thousands of other women. Janice Radway suggests also that 'through romance reading ... women are providing themselves with another kind of female community capable of rendering...affective support.'<sup>168</sup> This is very reminiscent of Auchmuty's assertion that women read school stories to escape into a 'a world of girls'<sup>169</sup>. It is also consistent with the success of organisations like Friends of the Chalet School and The New Chalet Club, which give readers the strong sense of belonging to a reading community, and, in some way, to the fictive community of the Chalet School itself:<sup>170</sup>

It [ie. the Chalet School] is such a happy, comforting place and you really do feel 'one of the family' - a feeling that is duplicated in FCCS.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Chambers ran a Chalet Club, with regular newsletters written by Brent-Dyer. The tone of the letters from some of the thousands of girls internationally who were members, also suggests something of this desire for community.<sup>171</sup>

A very important concern of children's literary criticism, which has significant implications for a study such as this, which aims to consider a variety of texts against a changing cultural background, is the impact on the

text and the reader of ideology. Peter Hollindale's essay, referred to above, points out that ideology is not a separate entity which can be detached from a text or a reading experience and examined out of context: 'inseparable from language'<sup>172</sup>, it is an inextricable part of the text, and of our response to it, and pervades the text on several levels.

Most conspicuously, there are the 'explicit social, political or moral beliefs of the writer and his wish to recommend them to children through the story.'<sup>173</sup> These are more likely to be expressed 'covertly' in a modern children's novel, but in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, when children's writers tended to moralise, overt didacticism was common. Early school stories like Tom Brown's Schooldays and Eric<sup>174</sup> were intended to improve and instruct. One reason, I would suggest, for the popularity of Angela Brazil early this century, is that she did not attempt this. Although her novels contain an implicit moral sense, she aimed to entertain rather than improve.

Secondly, at an unconscious level, there are 'the individual writer's unexamined assumptions'<sup>175</sup> It is these, perhaps, which have traditionally attracted most attention in the critical debates about the moral implications of children's literature. When the apparently innocent adventures of the Famous Five are analysed, for example,

they reveal implicit racism, sexism and elitism, as is now well known. (They also, of course, reveal a belief in the power and resourcefulness of children, which could be seen as a resistance to a culture which devalued and discounted the young. This could help explain their enduring popularity: rather as the Chalet School 'empowers' girls, the Famous Five empowers children.) 'Writers for children,' says Hollindale, 'like writers for adults, cannot hide what their values are',<sup>176</sup> and when these values are unfashionable, as we have seen, it is very easy to use them as evidence against a particular text.

An interesting tension can arise when 'the conscious surface ideology and the passive ideology of a novel are at odds with each other and 'official' ideas contradicted by unconscious assumptions.'<sup>177</sup> Thus, a writer may insist, on an explicit level, that women and men are equal, but might present women in marginal and inferior roles, thus implying the opposite.

The most important level at which ideology operates, according to Hollindale, is the all-pervasive one which permeates every aspect of language and experience, so that 'the idea of individual authorship' becomes secondary to 'the huge commonalities of an age.'<sup>178</sup>

A large part of any book is written not by its author but by the world its author lives in.

We have already seen the implications this has for criticism, and how it can actually limit our critical understanding. 'As a rule,' Hollindale says, 'writers for children are transmitters not of themselves uniquely, but of the worlds they share.'<sup>179</sup> This does not mean that writers merely reflect prevailing ideologies. For a start, an age can embrace many divergent ideologies, particularly as society becomes increasingly pluralist and complex. Secondly, writers do not stand in an unproblematic relation to prevailing ideologies, destined to act as ciphers or filters. The texts in this study have, we shall see, various relationships to the changing ideological conditions which produced them. Sometimes they reflect them; sometimes they seek to resist them; often, a more complex process is at work.

A further complicating factor in any academic study which concerns itself with children's literature is that, as critics, **we** are necessarily responding to these texts as adults. We may feel that we remember the impact they had on us as children, but naturally we cannot totally recapture that first reading experience. As Michael Benton, in a lecture on 'Children's Responses to the Text' puts it, 'Each 'reading' is a unique experience: this includes rereadings of the same text by the same person...the nature of the reader's participation has changed.'<sup>180</sup> Further, as critics we must read with some measure of detachment and an

awareness of the text within a particular culture: with children, this is less likely to be the case.

Allied to this, and of central importance to my study, is the complicated debate about what actually constitutes a children's book. This discussion has involved critics for generations and it seems probable that there will never be consensus. In the Introduction to Children's Literature: the development of criticism Peter Hunt states:<sup>181</sup>

This is a species of literature whose boundaries are very hazy; it cannot be defined by textual characteristics either of style or content, and its primary audience, the 'child-reader' is equally elusive.

A great deal has been written to try to define more clearly these 'hazy boundaries'. Marcus Crouch, for example, declared that 'There are no children's books.'<sup>182</sup> Several children's authors have agreed with the view that 'the honest writer' simply 'writes first and finds the appropriate market, if it exists.'<sup>183</sup> John Rowe Townsend contended in 1971 that the distinction between children's and adult literature was arbitrary, created by publishers, arguing that:<sup>184</sup>

The only practical definition of a children's book today ... is 'a book which appears on the children's list of a publisher.

However, this dismisses the question of why publishers make such decisions and ignores the presence of texts which are available on both adults' and juvenile lists with identical

text, for example, Jane Gardam's A Long Way From Verona and Bilgewater<sup>185</sup>, Watership Down<sup>186</sup> and Little Women<sup>187</sup>, to mention only a few.

Most discussions of the defining of children's literature assert the anomalous situation of a literature which is defined in terms of its audience, yet often criticised without reference to that audience. The debate between 'child' and 'book' people was motivated partly by this problem, and has made it impossible to criticise children's literature on purely aesthetic grounds. The concept of childhood being a shifting social construction further complicates the situation.

More text-based discussions about the child/adult divide include Aidan Chambers' powerful essay on the implied reader, which analyses the reader's response and the role of writer and reader in constructing meaning. Chambers argues persuasively that a textual reading based on this theory can help us determine what kind of reader a book demands and, by implication, whether it is for children or not.<sup>188</sup> In his own reading of Lucy Boston's writing for adults and children he reminds us that different 'experiential demands [will be] made on the reader.'<sup>189</sup> Again, this is made more complex by the fact that, when a book is read out of its own social and historical context, these demands cannot be taken for

granted.

Victor Watson suggested that 'The most significant choice a reader...can make is, surely, to read a book again...Perhaps children's literature means 'the books children reread'?'<sup>190</sup> This has interesting implications for the school story, which seems to be reread constantly. Not only do school story readers read school stories constantly, their choice of mainstream/adult novels which repeat the school setting is another kind of rereading of the same text. Taking into account the many aesthetic, moral and theoretical issues involved, and the fact that childhood itself is an unstable construct, it seems likely that there will never be agreed workable criteria for determining whether a book is 'for' adults or children.

One common assumption is that an adult novel will deal with its themes in a more complex manner than a children's novel. Certainly, a writer who is consciously writing for a juvenile market may be more constrained by taboos, usually sexual, but it does not follow that s/he will also have to deal with issues in a simplistic way. Children's literature is often seen as part of popular literature, but this fails to take into <sup>account the</sup> vast range of texts involved. Remaining within the bounds of the school story, for example, Antonia Forest offers a more complex analysis of friendship in her Kingscote books (published by Puffin) than Angela Lambert

attempts in No Talking After Lights (published by Penguin).  
K. M. Peyton, a celebrated author for children and adults,  
says:<sup>191</sup>

I feel that the only possible limitation  
in writing in this sphere is the necessity  
to write within the framework of the reader's  
understanding, but as this is as wide or  
as narrow as the writer cares to make it...  
it is hardly to be thought of as limiting.

Clearly, there will be novels published for children which  
stretch this understanding, and novels published for adults  
which will operate within a very narrow framework.

All the novels in this study have as their focus the  
concerns of adolescent girls, and this makes a very strong  
bond between them. They will almost certainly have been  
enjoyed by both children and adults. I read Frost in May as  
a child, attracted by its affinities to the school stories I  
loved, but did not read Oxenham's 'Abbey' books until I was  
in my late twenties. I would argue that the contextual and  
thematic bonds between such texts make a connection which  
transcends divisions along adult/children's literature lines  
and allows - indeed demands - that each text be read so far  
as possible in the same way.

Isabel Quigly, introducing her chapter on the girls'  
school story in The Heirs of Tom Brown, admits that 'There  
have been brilliant adult novels set in girls' schools...but  
these do not really belong to the genre.'<sup>192</sup> This

distinction need only be made if one defines the genre in the narrow, value-laden and flawed way in which many critics, as we have seen, have. As far as they are concerned, girls' school stories are poor literature and it would be insulting to regard 'brilliant' adult novels as part of the same genre.

I would argue that we must move away from such limited approaches to texts. In the second half of this study, where I look in detail at a number of novels which consider the theme of girls' friendships, I shall try to do so.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Exploding the myths of the school story: Angela Lambert's No Talking After Lights in relation to Elinor M. Brent-Dyer's 'Chalet School' series

As recently as the present decade, writers on female adolescence continue to set their novels in girls' schools. The most recently published novel discussed in this study is Angela Lambert's No Talking After Lights, first published in 1990. The novel describes one summer term at a girls' boarding school in the 1950s, and in particular the experiences of Constance King, a shy, bespectacled new girl who hates her new school on sight. Raeburn, 'a beautiful school in the heart of the country'<sup>1</sup>, is based on the school which Lambert herself attended, 'for after spending seven years there I would find it hard to imagine any other.'<sup>2</sup>

No Talking After Lights is a school novel in the tradition of Frost in May, Secret Places, etc. and like most novels set in girls' schools, it shares with the 'juvenile' girls' school story not only the school setting but many of its themes and concerns. But there are major differences, mainly in the introduction of the sexuality of pupil and teacher, and in the emphasis on cruelty. No Talking After Lights is a sad book: Isabel Quigly, reviewing it for the Financial Times, comments that:<sup>3</sup>

Its 1950s talk rings true - the dated slang, the offhand cruelties; so, more than anything, does its sadness.

This alone would set the novel apart from the general run of girls' school stories, which were, by and large, a celebration, a romanticisation, of boarding school life. Gillian Avery, in The Best Type of Girl suggests that the 'jolly times' evoked by Angela Brazil in the 1920s and '30s 'must have done a lot...to make boarding school desirable to eleven and twelve year olds.'<sup>4</sup> The reality however, was often very different, as Avery's study, with its wide use of often painful personal reminiscences as well as more academic sources, shows.

By the 1950s the heyday of the girls' school story was long past. However, the genre was far from dead. Antonia Forest, whose novels I will be examining in detail, had begun to write her 'remarkable'<sup>5</sup> series of novels about the Marlow family, four of which were school stories, and Elinor Brent-Dyer, 'the outstanding romantic among modern story tellers'<sup>6</sup>, although she had written her best work, was extraordinarily productive in the 1950s, publishing no fewer than twenty four of her famous Chalet School books, in addition to other titles. The final two books in Enid Blyton's 'Malory Towers' series were also published in the early fifties, and whatever we think of Blyton's literary merit there is no doubt that Malory Towers remains probably

the most widely known fictional girls' school. Cheap reprints of the 'Dimsie' novels, the 'Abbey' series and other schools stories ensured that a new generation of girls, whose mothers had read these books as they were originally published, developed an interest in school stories. The characters in No Talking After Lights read Blyton and Dorita Fairlie Bruce, much to the disdain of bookish Constance, who already at twelve finds poetry 'a friend'<sup>7</sup> and reads the classics: 'they're all stupid, with their stupid records and babyish books: stupid Dimsie and Enid Blyton.'<sup>8</sup>

It is my contention throughout this study that novels like No Talking After Lights and girls' school stories can usefully be looked at together and most of the novels I have investigated owe a debt to the school story genre. No Talking After Lights, however, does rather more than echo themes and situations: it borrows the conventions of the genre and fits into the school story tradition even more easily than Frost in May because all the action (with the exception of some flashbacks) is compressed into one term, as was usual in most girls' school stories, the holidays providing a natural framework; and because the setting, a Sussex boarding school, quintessentially English, middle class and Anglican, will be more familiar to readers than the rarified atmosphere of an Edwardian convent. The rural situation of Raeburn, the school rituals - Parents' Weekend,

half term, the themes of friendship, loneliness, the games of 'kick the can' up by the pets' shed, even the mysterious thefts which perplex the whole school, are so very familiar to readers of school stories that they throw into sharp relief the differences between this novel and the stories it 'imitates'. What Lambert does in No Talking After Lights is to adopt the structure of the girls' school story and use it to explode certain myths (about girlhood, sexuality, friendship, etc.) which most school stories, deliberately or not, sought to perpetuate.

These myths had already been exploded, or at least challenged, by an earlier writer, Antonia Forest. But Forest's subversion of the girls' school story is much less radical than Lambert's. Although it has been pointed out that her 'themes and interests are not always accessible to the child reader'<sup>9</sup> and that 'Antonia Forest is distinctive as a children's writer, as her books do not fit easily into the category marked Books For Children'<sup>10</sup>, her novels are published for the juvenile market so she does not have the same licence as an 'adult' writer. My interest in Forest's work is chiefly because of the 'complex psychology'<sup>11</sup> of the novels and her subtle and persuasive treatment of relationships between young people and their friends and the school and family community. Forest's 'characters are flesh and blood'<sup>12</sup> whereas Lambert's are more or less skilfully drawn caricatures - the unhappy, homesick child; the

frustrated lesbian teacher; the feather-brained beauty; the disturbed child from a broken home - convincing constructions but not to the same extent as the Marlow twins, Tim or Lois, who are vital enough to sustain our interest over several novels. This is partly because No Talking After Lights is a single novel, rather than part of a series, so Lambert does not have the same opportunity to develop her characters, but it is also because her principal concern is not with character as such but with the dynamics of adolescence and sexuality: she is exploring a situation rather than developing personalities. Her characters have a functional role rather than being of intrinsic individual psychological interest: in this, her characterisation resembles that of Enid Blyton who in her Malory Towers and St. Clare's series created what Rosemary Auchmuty calls 'perfect stereotypes',<sup>13</sup>.

What are the myths I talk about, which pervaded the school story? In seeking to determine this I shall focus mainly on the Chalet School series by Elinor M. Brent-Dyer. This is the second longest juvenile series ever written, spanning a considerable period of history, 1925 - 1969, and still in print in 1998, almost thirty years after the author's death. The quality of the books is very variable: at their best, they are among the most respectable and original examples of the genre, and at their worst (mainly, to be fair, written in the 1960s when Brent-Dyer was old and

infirm) they embody all the weaknesses of the school story at its most caricaturable, with improbable plots and insipid characters. A good number of the titles were written in the 1950s, the decade when No Talking After Lights is set and where appropriate I shall focus on the 1950s titles, as No Talking After Lights is so self-consciously a glance backwards at the 1950s. The Chalet School, as we shall see, is a very fine example of the 'utopian' community of women, which sets it firmly at the opposite end of the spectrum from Raeburn, which is essentially a 'dystopian' vision.

The myths perpetuated by writers like Brent-Dyer and Blyton, successfully and subtly challenged by Antonia Forest, and demolished by Lambert, were little white lies - or thumping black ones: about school communities, about adolescence and sexuality, and about the adult world beyond the school gates. Even at its best and most serious (probably the wartime books) the Chalet School world lacks realism to some extent. Chalet School heroines do not suffer the usual adolescent traumas. They have, for example, no need for privacy: when a new girl approves of the sleeping arrangements, on the grounds that the individual cubicles allow privacy, the old Chalet School girls are amazed: 'Whoever heard of a girl of fourteen demanding privacy!' <sup>14</sup> The irony is that Prunella is deliberately pretending to be outrageous! Chalet girls never think of boys except as

'chums' (one girl who does talk about boys, much to the embarrassment of her classmates, is Joan Baker, but Joan is quite definitely 'common' and Brent-Dyer never allows her to be properly assimilated), never get spots or greasy hair and, naturally, never menstruate. Of course, these are children's books, and belong, moreover, to another era, but Antonia Forest was able to write rather more honestly of adolescence:<sup>15</sup>

Tactfully, no one enquired the exact nature of her indisposition: in Upper V.A.'s experience, the shorter the illness, the more embarrassing it was likely to have been.

This reference to periods may be oblique, but at least Forest does not join in the usual conspiracy of silence. As Cadogan and Craig put it:<sup>16</sup>

Of all biological phases, adolescence surely is the one in which bodily experiences are of paramount importance; yet ... children's authors until recently have been prohibited from mentioning many of its most fundamental aspects.

The school community, according to Brent-Dyer and her contemporaries, is benign and supportive, one big happy family. Discipline is never oppressive, but Authority is always right, and any girl who finds herself 'agin the government' (apart from out of permissible youthful high spirits) will be made to see the error of her ways. Most Chalet School pupils are happy: failure to settle down and conform indicates deviance on the part of the girl herself:

possibly she has been spoilt by a foolish upbringing or an inadequate preparatory education at a school inferior to the Chalet. At any rate, she will soon be compelled to admit that the Chalet School way of doing things is the right one. Theodora, for example, has been expelled from three schools before the Chalet School takes over: she proves herself to be misunderstood rather than bad, and reforms magically, showing little sign of rebellion. Juliet Carrick, Lavender Leigh, Eustacia Benson, Elizabeth Arnett, Cornelia Flower - the list of naughty, spoilt or resentful girls who 'make good' is a long one. But the characterisation is not simplistic. Elizabeth Janeway, in an essay on Little Women, attributes some of that novel's enduring success to the fact that the characters were not perfect:<sup>17</sup>

Her girls were jealous, mean, silly and lazy;  
and for hundreds of years jealous, mean, silly  
and lazy girls have been ardently grateful for  
the chance to read about themselves.

The appeal of characters who are essentially flawed but still attractive was clearly understood by Brent-Dyer<sup>18</sup>.

Teachers at the Chalet School are understanding and fun-loving: any member of staff who does not agree with the Chalet School ethos will be disposed of, often by resourceful schoolgirls, before she is allowed to do any real harm. Chalet School pupils will never have to fear the wrath of someone like 'Batey' Sylvia Parry, whose internalised, barely controlled anger makes her a danger to

herself and her pupils. Rosemary Auchmuty suggests that 'Elinor Brent-Dyer was uniquely skilled in depicting schoolmistresses',<sup>19</sup> It is certainly true that the Chalet School staff, although somewhat idealised, are much more fully developed than those in most other school stories: they are not merely stereotypes, as in Blyton's school stories where 'Mamzelle' is fat and humorous, the headmistress 'grave' and dignified, and Matron kind and cosy. Brent-Dyer is at pains to show that the staff have their point of view, and she develops this most fully in The New Mistress at the Chalet School, which shows the Chalet School from the perspective of a young, inexperienced teacher, who makes mistakes in her first term but soon settles down to a lifetime of producing school plays and escorting girls around Switzerland, reminded constantly of how lucky she is compared to colleagues who do not teach in the Chalet School:<sup>20</sup>

'When I think what I've heard from some of the people I was at Oxford with and contrast the sort of school life they have with mine here, I can scarcely believe my luck.'

One advantage of teaching at the Chalet School is the likelihood of meeting an attractive and available young doctor, often encountered, most propitiously, when a girl in one's charge falls into a lake or river. Thus Hilary Burn meets Dr. Graves in Carola Storms the Chalet School, and Biddy O'Ryan meets Doktor Courvoisier in The Chalet School

Does It Again. But those who are not 'rescued' in this way and never marry seem to be perfectly happy in teaching, and the Chalet School becomes the focus of their lives. It is praiseworthy, particularly in the earlier part of the twentieth century, to depict women wholly satisfied by their careers (albeit in looking after other people's children) and emotionally fulfilled by their contact with other women - as Auchmuty suggests those bosom friends Kathy Ferrars and Nancy Wilmot are. As a child, I read enviously and credulously about these wonderfully enthusiastic, energetic and understanding women. As an adult and a grammar school teacher myself, I find myself suspending disbelief, an example of the different experiential codes which readers bring to texts at different stages.

Brent-Dyer was herself unmarried, a teacher and eventually a headmistress, and clearly wanted to show teachers in a positive light. I believe that her attempts to show the staff's point of view stemmed from a sincere effort to present a 'realistic', rounded portrayal of school life. However, she cannot resist the temptation to romanticise. It is easy to say that a little more ambivalence towards staff and girls would have resulted in a more 'authentic' portrayal of school life. The fact is that the Chalet School manages to be the most romantic, and romanticised, school story series without being the least credible. This is perhaps because Brent-Dyer roots the series so firmly in

domestic - some would say trivial - detail. Despite the school's mostly exotic locations, Brent-Dyer and her readers delight in 'the massive accumulation of minute detail.'<sup>21</sup>

In focusing in the 'idealised' nature of the Chalet School world, the Chalet School's utopian fantasy, I must stress that this constitutes a significant part of the series' phenomenal success and enduring appeal. In rereading the books for this chapter I have at times been aware of a tension between my critical analysis of them and my wholehearted enjoyment: the tension between an 'objective' and an 'involved' reading. This enjoyment could certainly be regarded as escapist, as discussed in the previous chapter, and the challenge of maintaining a balanced approach between analysis and enthusiasm, without lapsing into the 'self-indulgence' of which some children's literary critics have been accused<sup>22</sup>, has been a real concern throughout the production of this thesis.

Most of the adults in Brent-Dyer's world are almost unflinchingly kind, nurturing and understanding. This idealisation reaches an apotheosis in the adult Joey Maynard, who embodies the spirit of the Chalet School. Joey, a sort of idealised girl/mother, in addition to being 'the eternal schoolgirl' in her outlook - although with a well-developed gift of understanding, is a successful author (of, among other things, girls' school stories),

mother of eleven and adopted mother of countless waifs and strays:<sup>23</sup>

Jack Maynard took the baby from Joey and kissed her in fatherly fashion. 'Room for any baby left alone,' he said.

Joey's willingness to take in 'any baby left alone' continues a tradition begun in the very first Chalet School book of all, when Juliet Carrick is literally dumped on the school by parents who are as astonishing in their callousness as the Chalet School adults are in their boundless altruism. Twenty four year old Madge Bettany, Joey's sister and the foundress of the school, adopts Juliet as her ward with scarcely a second thought and the Carrick parents are subsequently killed off in a car crash. Abandoned and orphaned, Juliet suffers remarkably little psychological damage, changing almost overnight from an insubordinate pupil to a model Chalet girl, grateful for the love and understanding of the Chalet and 'our dear Madame.' Wicked people are allowed to exist in the Brent-Dyer schema, but they are not allowed to prosper, and although individuals are shown to be selfish and unloving, the Chalet School represents such a force for good that a generally favourable view of the world is presented.

When events in the outside world suggest a more far-reaching breakdown in order - for example, the Second World War - the Chalet School is not completely powerless

to withstand evil. Its Chalet School Peace League (which Cadogan and Craig dismiss as 'sentimental',<sup>24</sup> but whose desire for international understanding and recognition of the distinction between Nazis and Germans at a time when many children's writers were cashing in on wartime xenophobia is commendable, and - unusually for Brent-Dyer - ahead of its time) becomes an important focus for former pupils caught up in the nightmare of Nazi Germany<sup>25</sup>. This nightmare is acknowledged horrifically throughout the wartime books, as we hear of the fate of popular (but never central) characters like 'Onkel' Florian Marani. It is not the world itself which Brent-Dyer presents as a utopia, but the world of the Chalet School.

For the Chalet School is more than a school - it is a family, an ideal, and a powerful force for good. It aims to educate its girls to be strong women - not, as it points out frequently, 'spineless jellyfish':<sup>22</sup>

'The girls must know,' decreed Matron.  
..'I don't believe in trying to shield  
girls from all sorrow and trouble. We  
want to make strong, helpful women of  
them - not spineless jellyfish.'

This strength and the ideals of the Chalet School will be passed on to the next generation, and former Chalet School pupils and teachers are unusually prolific in their production of future pupils. Clearly, this conception of the Chalet School as a beacon is a fantasy: an engaging

idea, and, although no more than a myth, the power of the fantasy for writer and readers cannot underestimated. No school could embody such dauntless virtue, and Brent-Dyer herself must have realised this in the ten years that she ran her own school in Hereford. At some level, too, the reader is aware of participating in a fantasy. Northrop Frye argued that the popular appeal of the romance was that it dissolved the boundaries between the actual and the potential, offering a vision of 'the possible or future or ideal.'<sup>27</sup> The Chalet School is certainly a vision of the ideal and the willingness of generations of readers to share the vision indicates its power and fascination.

Auchmuty and others<sup>28</sup> have for a few years now been demanding a reappraisal of the girls' school story, contending that its presentation of self-sufficient all-female communities, governed by and for women, was a powerful feminist paradigm, and a source of strength for generations of women. This theory, in particular the suggestion that it was helpful for girls to see their relationships with other women prioritised and celebrated in a culture which, this century at any rate, has devalued and mistrusted female friendship, is persuasive. Penny Tinkler also highlights, in her 1995 Constructing Girlhood, the 'freedom from the constraints of femininity' which the lively schoolgirl characters in fictional boarding schools offered readers, contending that the books offered 'a space

untouched by girls' prospects in the labour and marriage markets.'<sup>29</sup>

What of the Chalet School pupils? There is no need - or indeed space - to analyse character here. What I am concerned about is the myth of adolescent girlhood perpetuated by Brent-Dyer (and other writers of her generation). Brent-Dyer, of course, produced a cast of thousands. The characters in the early books, particularly the adolescent Joey Bettany and the group of 'middles' led by Margia Stevens, are engaging and vital. The old-fashioned charm of the lost world of pre-war Austria combines with the girls' enduring adolescent tensions about growing up, friendship, responsibility and change to constitute, I would argue, a significant aspect of the series' appeal.

By the 1950s, the Chalet School is a more prosaic affair. Even relocation to Switzerland cannot restore its pre-war charm. The characters are less finely drawn and seem to owe more to Brent-Dyer's observations of 1920s/30s schoolgirls than to the new generation of 1950s teenagers which they purported to represent. However, I would not be inclined to endorse Elizabeth Bowen's allegation that: 'The curl-tossing tomboys of the Fourth at St. Dithering's are manifestly and insultingly unreal to any girl child who has left the nursery.'<sup>30</sup> As I have shown, this unwillingness to allow the girls' school story any real validity is based

an a superficial and prejudiced attitude to the genre. The counter argument, that 'a very real understanding of girls...was one of [the school story's] greatest strengths',<sup>31</sup> does need, however, to be interpreted with care. Within the context of juvenile fiction, certainly the girls' school story was the natural environment for writers to explore 'girls' characters, and many did so with considerable success, but these girls are only convincing to a certain extent: they are, on the whole, unconvincing as adolescents to a modern reader and possibly also to readers in the 1950s and 1960s when the series was still going strong, because of the writers' denial of the physical and emotional manifestations of puberty and its consequences. Of course, as an analysis of the books written about adolescence earlier this century demonstrates, society did not like to think of its middle-class adolescent girls in terms of their sexuality. Writers who portrayed girls who maintained a certain childishness were thus endorsing the ideal of the unsophisticated child who became an adult on marriage without the intervening vulgarity of adolescence. If it is true, as Peter Hunt suggest, that 'More than any other texts, [children's books] reflect society as it wishes to be',<sup>31</sup> then writers like Brent-Dyer presented a view of adolescent girlhood which owed a lot to how society would wish these girls to be and which became increasingly outdated.

The girls of the Chalet School and their counterparts

at Malory Towers, St. Clare's, etc. are nearly all in their teens, but rarely, if ever, do they give any indication of being at a 'difficult' age. Individual girls are difficult, but this is seen as more to do with their upbringing and personality than with their age. In fact, in most cases, these girls graduate with minimum conflict from childish, cheeky junior to naughty middle, to serious, dependable senior, ready to go out and take her place in the world. They are little girls, and then they are young women: in between, they are not spotty adolescents, or moody teenagers. "'The early teens are a fussy age,'" as the staff of the Chalet School know well<sup>32</sup> but this 'fussiness' expresses itself in nothing much more than middle school naughtiness. In the 1950s and 1960s editions of the Chalet School series declared rather coyly on the flyleaf that 'Nowhere is the transition from rollicking girlhood to joyous womanhood more naturally portrayed', but it would be truer to say that the transition is merely rendered unproblematic.

Pubescent Chalet School girls are lithe and graceful, rarely fat, spotty, greasy-haired or clumsy. The occasional fat girl is firmly in the Bessy Bunter tradition - like clumsy, good-natured Hilda Jukes. But in general, there is little mention of the physical, and no sense that their developing bodies are embarrassing or burdensome to these girls. If a girl goes through an awkward stage, this is

shown by her sprouting up vertically: she becomes 'leggy' or 'like a young colt': the language reinforces the androgyny of the presentation. When a Chalet School girl is said to be growing up, this normally means that she is becoming more thoughtful and/or more beautiful: it does not refer to her physical sexual development.

Since these are children's books, and old-fashioned ones at that, we should not expect this, but the fact is that the usual adolescent problems are so systematically ignored as to restrict seriously identification with the characters. As far as the earlier books in the series are concerned, this neglect was only part of a wider silence: menstruation, for example, for a good part of this century, was a subject so unmentionable that it was the norm for girls to remain in total ignorance until their first, traumatic period, and it would be naive and unrealistic to expect the writers of schoolgirl fiction to have broken the silence. Certainly, describing developing young women as 'leggy colts'<sup>33</sup> denies their sexuality, renders them androgynous and perhaps limits readers' identification with them, but we should not be surprised at it. Adolescent girls today have access to magazines which deal frankly with most teenage issues, but for most of the century this was not the case. The first readers of the Chalet School must have had period pains and acne, and worried about their breasts, and perhaps they longed to read occasionally of

other girls who had experienced the same traumas, but they hardly expected to. Even in the 1950s, Chalet School readers would not have expected to see sanitary towels in the Splasheries! The 'realist'/'problem' novel was gaining popularity in the United States, in the wake of J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye<sup>34</sup>, and a genre of 'teenage' fiction was developing. However, girls' school stories, despite the age of their characters and their appeal to girls at adolescence and well beyond, belonged to children's fiction where, in 1950s Britain, such polite silence was the norm. It could also be argued that their very silence on these matters constituted some of the books' appeal: the Chalet School world offered a fictional space in which girls did not have to take on board the physical facts about femininity.

So androgynous are the girls of the Chalet School (and I use the word to express their emotional outlook only, for it is not true, as some critics have suggested, that these girls are 'boyish hoydens'<sup>35</sup>) that they have no interest in the opposite sex - except as 'chums'. Again, as far as the earlier books are concerned, this is not to be wondered at. And, as Auchmuty and Hennegan<sup>36</sup> have rightly pointed out, the school story was a rare opportunity for the girl to see female friendship explored and celebrated, in a society which already prioritised heterosexual relationships. Only one Chalet School girl, in the forty five years of the



series' existence, thinks of boys in a way which Brent-Dyer sees as deviant (and many readers consider refreshingly 'normal' in a fifteen year old girl in the mid 1950s.) Joan Baker is a working class, brash and vulgar, conforming very neatly to the stereotype of the working-class girl as sexually precocious. She is continually referred to as 'big' Joan Baker, denied the thin, long-legged 'coltishness' of her nice, middle-class contemporaries, and is never properly accepted in the school. The fact that Joan's talk "well, about - boys",<sup>37</sup> renders confident senior girl Mary-Lou red and speechless with embarrassment (in 1956?) does seem to add fuel to the oft-cited accusation that the series is 'anachronistic' by the fifties.

Despite this total uninvolvedness in teenage sexuality, even in the later books, Chalet School girls tend to marry young - absurdly so, in a few cases - and happily. Just as they pass from carefree child to responsible prefect with the pubescent stage in between passed over lightly, so they progress from sexless girl, who thinks of boys as nothing more than 'chums', to bride and wife. The myths perpetuated by this convention are twofold: in the first place, it reinforces the idea of 'good' women as innocent and sexually inexperienced, marrying the first object of their affection. Secondly, in presenting men as first chums and then loving fathers, male sexuality is also, if not denied, at least rendered unthreatening. Chalet School girls are not

vulnerable, either as children or as women. Of course, one would hardly expect the pages of girls' school stories to be peopled by ravening sex beasts, but neither should it be necessary, at least by the 1950s, to present such a very narrow and romanticised view of adult human relations. Even Elsie Oxenham, who has been criticised for the unrealistic way in which she deals with heterosexual relationships, allows her young adult characters to experience some complex feelings regarding marriage (although never to the extent that they agonise over their friendships with other women). Jen Robins' courtship with Kenneth Marchwood is rudimentary, but in the context of the 1920s not totally unconvincing. There is even an alternative suitor! On the other hand, sixth-former Len Maynard's sudden engagement in 1969, to a man ten years her senior, is laughably anachronistic and unbearably coy:<sup>38</sup>

'I take it we're engaged. Like it darling?'  
Len chuckled. 'So much I can't think why I  
didn't know it before.'

Brent-Dyer presents the whole area of sexual relations as thoroughly unproblematic: chums become husbands, and bouncing or interestingly delicate babies follow in due course. Both Oxenham and Brent-Dyer were unmarried, and wrote about marriage because it was the expected and accepted destination of the girls they wrote about. When Oxenham writes of friendship between girls and women, the Abbey girls' intense relationships are presented with much

more conviction, as Rosemary Auchmuty discusses in A World Of Girls.

If there has been a tendency, throughout the twentieth century, to devalue female friendship and to regard it with the worldly-wise suspicion of post-Freudian sophistication, we must also guard against the dangers of idealising women's friendships, as I argued in Part One. Suzanna Rose points out in her Foreword to Pat O'Connor's Friendships Between Women: A Critical Review that the 'rose-coloured' view of female friendship actually denies the 'rich, complex reality of friendship.'<sup>38</sup> Friendship, as seen by O'Connor and Rose, and as experienced by real girls and women, can be the source of conflict, anxiety and pain, as well as rewards. Oxenham's view of female friendship certainly allows for this reality, even if her settings are romantic. Antonia Forest, perhaps uniquely in the girls' school story, (and it must be stressed that most of the 'Abbey' books are not school stories although they are often discussed in that context) explored this potential for pain in a characteristically understated and unemotional fashion, and in so doing presented a much richer and more complex understanding of adolescent relationships than writers like Brent-Dyer, who tended towards the rose-coloured approach.

Conflict, frequently in the form of jealousy, does enter into Chalet School friendships, but it is usually

resolved fairly easily. More often than not, one girl is being unreasonable and she can usually be made to see sense. Sometimes Chalet girls experience jealousy more to help the plot than anything else. When we are told in Ruey Richardson, Chaletian that Francie Wilford is jealous of new girl Ruey, who is the latest addition to the Maynard family, because 'years ago she had taken a deeply hidden fancy to Margot Maynard',<sup>40</sup> we can only marvel at Francie's powers of dissembling, for we have known her for years and been quite unaware that she harboured such an affection. Francie, by the end of the book, realises how silly she has been, and she and Ruey develop 'a real friendship ... which had far more in it than the one-sided adoration she had felt for Margot Maynard',<sup>41</sup> but neither relationship is presented in much depth.

Exclusive friendships are frowned on: Brent-Dyer would have wholeheartedly endorsed the Lippington dictum that: 'the school rule does not approve of particular friendships. They ... lead ... to dangerous and unhealthy indulgence of feeling.'<sup>42</sup> Sentimentality, as I have already suggested, was Brent-Dyer's pet bugbear, and her second novel, A Head Girl's Difficulties<sup>43</sup>, focused in detail on the dangers and silliness of the 'crush'. Most of the friendships at the Chalet School are 'healthy', ie. not intense or exclusive. In the very first book, Joey Bettany tells jealous Simone Lecoutier, who adores her and is rather understandably hurt

and insecure when new friends appears in the scene, that it is selfish to demand such undivided attention from a friend, and this sets the scene for the whole series. Friends, in the Chalet School, are, as Auchmuty points out, for sharing<sup>44</sup>, and those who 'hunt in couples' are few and far between. Girls form groups: the Quartette, the Triumvirate, the Gang.

Brent-Dyer must have been aware of the 'crush' discourse discussed in Part One. The Chalet School girls, on the whole, do not experience crushes: when a girl does cherish a particularly strong affection or admiration for another girl, the fact is always qualified by a good deal of authorial comment:<sup>45</sup>

Rosamund had lately taken to regarding [Katharine] with awe and admiration - from afar off. Sentimental grande passions were severely sat on at the Chalet School.

Tennis star Katharine has, of course, already been established as someone worthy of Rosamund's admiration. Even such 'healthy' hero-worship features very little in the Chalet School, however. Boyish Tom Gay is horrified to find herself attracted to prefect Daisy Venables, but understanding Matron reassures her that admiring an older girl is 'healthy' so long as it conforms to the model offered by boys - ie. unsentimental and essentially private:<sup>46</sup>

'Boys have their heroes...just as girls have their heroines. They don't express what they feel in quite the same way ...but then, in a decent school, neither do girls...You won't find any of that nonsense here, for instance... The outlook has always been too healthy and sane for such rubbish.'

Brent-Dyer is quite unable to mention hero-worship, or any kind of strong emotion between girls, without a lecture about the healthy outlook of the Chalet School which precludes sentimentality and self-indulgence. When she writes of the adult Jo Maynard, however, she describes Jo's friendly nature in excessively sentimental terms which do a good deal to limit the appeal of a character who, as a more ambivalently presented adolescent, was thoroughly likeable: 'the whole-hearted tenderness that radiated from Jo Maynard'<sup>47</sup>.

Loneliness is rare at the Chalet School: most girls have little difficulty in finding friends, and if they are friendless, it is usually their own fault. Joan Baker finds it difficult to make friends, but Joan, as we have seen, is never properly integrated into the Chalet School world ('[Richenda] was a fastidious young person and so far she had no liking for this girl with her assured, rather sophisticated air and her cheaply pretty face.'<sup>48</sup>) Even after several terms at the Chalet, Joan 'seemed to belong nowhere'<sup>49</sup>: the implication is surely that, being working class and holding on to her working class values, she does not 'belong' at the Chalet School. Her classmates, aware

that she is not 'one of them', do not bully or patronise her but are pleasant.

As, indeed, they are, almost unfailingly, to everyone. Of course there are a few nasty girls, like Thekla and Betty (who are expelled, because even the Chalet School can do nothing for them), but the average Chalet School pupil is courteous and kind. New girls are looked after with care and consideration: '"They're so friendly!"' says new girl Samaris to herself. 'Later she was to learn that one of the strictest unwritten laws of the school was that new girls were to be made to feel welcome and one with the others as soon as possible.'<sup>50</sup> Not only do the girls look out for one another but the series abounds with incredible staffroom discussions, where the teachers reveal their encyclopaedic knowledge of every girl and her needs. This is believable in the first few books, when the school is still tiny, but when there are several hundred girls it is, however commendable, less convincing. If, by any chance, the Chalet School support system of sympathetic girls and staff should break down, or if some situation should call for preternatural powers of understanding, there is always good old Joey in the background to hand out wise advice and motherly affection.<sup>51</sup>

'Is she alone?'

'No. Joey Maynard has gone to be with her.'  
Lesley Bethune gave a sigh of relief. 'Oh, I'm so glad! Mrs Maynard can be just like one of us, but - '

Prunella took the words out of her mouth. 'I know. When she likes she can be nothing but a mother...Naomi will have all the mothering anyone could want.'

Even when her own family numbers eleven, not to mention the various 'adoptees', Jo is never too busy to offer comfort to Chalet girls.

Not only are friends for sharing at the Chalet School, they are for life. Early in the series the 'quartet' of Joey and her three special friends, Frieda and Marie (from Austria) and French Simone, is set up as a model. As the years pass, distance and family commitments (producing the next generation of Chalet School pupils) limit the time and energy that the four women can expend on their friendship, but it is apparently always felt, in the background, as a source of joy to all of them. Actually, after the first few years of married life, Frieda, Simone and especially Marie become shadowy figures. We are told of their enduring friendship, but there is little evidence of it, apart from a few set pieces, such as The Coming Of Age Of The Chalet School and The Chalet School Reunion.

Is it a source of strength to young women readers, to see female friendship thus presented? Possibly, but the almost unmitigated perfection of Chalet School friendships cannot have rung very true in the minds of young women struggling to cope with real relationships in the real

world. A welcome temporary escape from that harsher reality, certainly, but hardly a real source of strength. Surely the more balanced approach of, say, Forest, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Seven, or even the torments of the Abbey girls, whose misunderstandings and hurt feelings take up hundreds of tortured pages, must have been a more genuine source of strength, as girls actually saw mirrored the complexities and angst of their own relationships and problems? By perpetuating a myth that female friendship is basically unproblematic, the Chalet School books - and others like them - refuse to engage in any serious attempt to explore them. Thus, in romanticising, they devalue, even if the intention has been to celebrate.

Death and illness play their part in the Chalet School, but again, Brent-Dyer's tendency to romanticise prevents her from attempting a serious analysis of these facts of life (as Forest does in The Cricket Term). In the Chalet School world, death is 'just falling asleep to wake with God'<sup>52</sup> and should not be cause for grief. People tend to die after a long and painful illness (usually T.B.) so that their deaths can be rejoiced in as a merciful release. Schoolgirls do not die; they may be dangerously ill and hover between life and death for days, giving all concerned a terrible fright (Joey in Rivals of the Chalet School; Julie in Bride Leads the Chalet School; Mary-Lou in Mary-Lou of the Chalet

School) or they may be left crippled for years (Eustacia in Eustacia Goes to the Chalet School) or live under the shadow of 'delicacy' (Joey, Robin, Margot) : but they never actually die.

An exception is Rosamund Sefton, teenage stepsister of Chaletian Jessica Wayne, but Rosamund has been an invalid all her life. Mary-Lou, another of Brent-Dyer' universally empathic characters, admonishes Jessica for her sadness about Rosamund's approaching death:<sup>53</sup>

'If what you fear is coming to pass, won't it be best for Rosamund? She has only half a life as it is, and she's just a girl... Whatever else you feel, don't be afraid. Try to make yourself feel glad for her if it really is - that. Don't grudge her her happiness.'

The presentation of Rosamund's death is coy: the word 'death' is studiously avoided as the girl 'kissed Jessica and drowsed off into a quiet sleep from which she awoke only in heaven.'<sup>54</sup>

Brent-Dyer could not bear to suggest that death can be random, unfair, and tragic: it can be assimilated in her schema, but only when it is part of a benign and comprehensible order. On the rare occasions when a death seems genuinely tragic (the death of Nina Rutherford's father, or Daisy and Primula Venables' mother) a positive aspect is always emphasised: Rutherford dies saving a life,

Margot Venables has gone to join the little sons from whose death she has never recovered. The Robin's father is killed in a climbing accident, between books, but this is surely a plot device to allow Robin to become more properly part of Madge and Joey's family. And of course, should anyone be orphaned, there is always Joey and the school: no-one is ever left alone in the Chalet School. When Jacynth Hardy's aunt, another invalid, dies, leaving behind a letter to Jacynth which is genuinely poignant, Joey reassures Jacynth that she is not alone:<sup>55</sup>

'She has trusted you to us... You are ours now....And never forget that we are yours as much as you are ours.'

The myths perpetuated by Brent-Dyer and writers like her are not unique to the school story genre: they pervaded, to an extent, the whole social structure, and together they contribute to fairly widespread myths about childhood, femininity, and sexuality. I have already shown in Part One that female adolescence was largely ignored - or at least prevaricated about - in social/psychological debate in the earlier part of this century. This reluctance to engage in reasoned discussion of the real nature of female adolescence, the insistence on hiding truths about sexual development under a cloak of prescriptive and often contradictory patriarchal fictions (secondary education was inimical to the establishment of a regular menstrual cycle and therefore damaging to the girl's health; menstrual pain

was all in the mind and should not be pandered to; adolescent girls were sexually rapacious; they were sexless; they were silly and trivial-minded; they were too serious...) was part of a widespread mistrust of young women on two levels. Firstly, as women per se - women as sexual creatures have traditionally been feared, and secondly, as the emerging class of new, liberated women. The schoolgirl may have been popularly seen as something of a joke, but this may well have been to hide the fact that she actually represented a threat to the status quo. There are two common responses to what is feared: to over-react hysterically (one is reminded of the sinister depiction of the spinster teacher in the 1920s) or to ignore - to pretend something is not happening, or is of little consequence by devaluing it, paralysing it, turning it into a joke.

There are various strategies for this. One response to the 'problem' of female adolescence was to pretend that there was no problem, that growing up was fairly easy. This strategy depends on faith in the world as a benign place, and especially on a belief that, as Lambert herself puts it: 'Childhood...is an innocent, unclouded time. Children are like tumbling puppies or singing birds.'<sup>56</sup> It is this view, more or less, that Brent-Dyer puts across in her Chalet School books, even though other children's writers were, by the 1950s, acknowledging that childhood could be difficult<sup>57</sup>. Chalet School girls, in the main, do have

happy childhoods, and why should they not? They grow up surrounded by caring, understanding adults, educated in a supportive, encouraging environment, safe in the conviction that their friendships will continue to provide love and support well into adult life, even after they have married a strong, loving man and had lots of beautiful children who will in turn 'go out into the world and make it just that much happier and better because of the Chalet School way of thinking and doing.'<sup>58</sup>

Brent-Dyer, who seems herself to have had rather a difficult life<sup>59</sup>, may not really have believed in the world she created, but it was a powerful fantasy. Clearly her readers too, for several generations now, have found the illusion seductive, a welcome escape from harsh reality; an attractive creation, perpetuating charming myths about the world and about being an adolescent girl within it. A world without period pains or unrequited love, without confusion or depression, a world where everything is more or less as it seems, a world you can trust. Not, ultimately, a world you can believe in, although it can be found - with variations but in a recognisable form - in many popular girls' school stories. Antonia Forest, as I have demonstrated, is an exception, and Mary K. Harris's novels are also noteworthy for their honest and unsentimental presentation of adolescent girls at school. Forest and Harris promote no myths.

Angela Lambert goes a step further. As a novelist for adults she is at liberty to write more frankly than a children's author about sexuality, and the treatment of sexuality will always be a crucial distinction between 'adult' and 'junior' fiction. It would be tedious and pointless to attempt a comparison of adult and junior school stories on this basis alone, and this has never been my intention. Lambert, at school in the 1950s and (I would guess from her use of its conventions) conversant with the school story genre, not only seeks to write an 'honest' novel about a girls' school, but sets out actively to deconstruct the myths which have surrounded the popular girls' school story for years.

In a sense, she and Brent-Dyer represent opposite ends of the spectrum: just as the Chalet School world is almost unrelieved sweetness, as the girls prepare for an adult life which might have its hardships but will be, on the whole, full of love and joy, so the world as revealed to Constance and her classmates is almost unrelieved bitterness. In the Chalet School world, there is hardly a man that is not kind, loving and strong; in the Raeburn world, there is hardly one who is not a rapist. Chalet School girls never, ever go to the toilet; Raeburn girls are excessively vulgar:<sup>60</sup>

The girls were preoccupied with smells.  
Farting was sure to prompt an outcry  
of disgust...and unpopular girls would be

accused of 'having let off and made a foul pong.'.. Jennifer..would confide, breathily, the details of what happened 'on the lavvy' and once invited Constance to inspect the result for worms.

Chalet School girls are almost unfailingly kind and courteous, especially to new girls; at Raeburn, Constance's 'godmother' tells the new girl's dormitory mates: "'Don't anyone be foul to Constance'" and considers that she has done her duty admirably.<sup>61</sup> Lambert is not content to do what Harris and Forest have done, or even what Antonia White does in Frost in May: while in some ways sticking even closer to the 'school story formula' than White, she pushes the conventions of the genre to their utmost limits. In doing so, interestingly, she produces a novel which is, in its way, as unconvincing as the most highly romanticised examples of the genre she seeks to subvert. I do not know if it was Lambert's intention to write an 'honest' school novel, but certainly, if the Chalet School is an unlikely utopia, Raeburn and the world in which it exists is an equally unlikely dystopia, as sterile and predictable in its gloom as the Chalet School is in its gaiety.

All the familiar conventions of the school story genre are used, and subverted, in the novel. If we compare Lambert's treatment of certain themes with those of Brent-Dyer, we can see exactly how she tries to explode the myths of the conventional girls' school story. Of course, the primary concern of this study is the fictional

exploration of friendship. However, it is important to consider the context of these friendships, and to see their depiction against the background of the writer's vision of society.

I have shown that Brent-Dyer's presentation of adults, and adult relationships, is highly idealised. Lambert goes to the other extreme. The adults in No Talking After Lights are, by and large, selfish, vain, insensitive and hypocritical, and even, in the case of Sylvia Parry, pathologically vicious. The teachers at Raeburn are in the main bored and frustrated, trapped in a career which does not fulfil them. They tolerate their charges or, in Sylvia's case, do not. They do not care for them in the way that Brent-Dyer's devoted teachers do. Only Ginny Valentine, cheerful and pretty, retains much enthusiasm for her job. Mrs. Birmingham, the headmistress, is kind but troubled, preoccupied with the dying husband she has never really loved, and by traumatic memories of her own adolescence. The teachers into whom we gain most insight are Diana Monk and Sylvia Parry, unhappy, sexually frustrated spinsters, conforming to the stereotypical image of the predatory lesbian teacher discussed above.

Chalet School parents make sacrifices to send their (grateful) daughters to the best school in the world; parents in No Talking After Lights send their daughters away

to get rid of them, and to uphold a certain social status. And they do not send them to the best school available, but to Raeburn, second rate and struggling. Even the twins' mother, regarded by Constance as 'a darling',<sup>62</sup> is something of a stranger to her children, and seems unsure how to treat them when they are at home for half term: "Lovely to have you here..." [her voice] drifted on the wind' [towards them].<sup>63</sup> These girls, away from home for much of the year, are little more than visitors in their parents' homes, unlike Chalet girls who have no difficulty in reconciling home and school, or Blyton's Darrell Rivers who is simply delighted in her good fortune at having 'two such lovely worlds, home and Malory Towers',<sup>64</sup>. Angela Holdsworth suggests that the different demands of home and school, with their often conflicting messages and role models, could have been confusing for girls:<sup>65</sup>

It could be a confusing upbringing for girls; encouraged in termtime to bury their heads in books and, flattening their chests in gymslips, thrash the neighbouring school at hockey, then in the holidays to appear willing and winsome.

Interestingly, this is an aspect of girls' lives little considered in fiction, perhaps because most books dealt with the girl either at home or at school. Antonia Forest's Nicola Marlow, happy enough in both her worlds, yet experiences some convincing disorientation at the transition between Trennels and Kingscote:<sup>66</sup>

She felt uncomfortably like a pin between

two magnets labelled 'Home' and 'School', the tug of one defeating the pull of the other.

Most of the Raeburn parents are shallow, self-centred and stupid, seeming to care little for their daughters' welfare. The worst offender is Charmian Reynold's mother ('Now that the divorce was agreed, the time had come to come to drop a few hints.'<sup>67</sup>) but as Deputy Head Peggy Roberts points out:<sup>68</sup>

'That goes for quite a few of the parents. There's several I wouldn't mind having a word with. Paying off guilty consciences or just plain indifference by sending their daughters here. And then they tell them they aren't really homesick and furthermore how lucky they are.'

Of course, there are selfish parents of Chalet girls too, but it is very rarely the conventional nuclear family which provides a dysfunctional background. Stepfamilies and guardians are much more likely to be indifferent - the Cochranes, Ted's family, Carola's cousin, Annis's aunt, etc. The notable exceptions are Juliet Carrick's parents, but everyone recognises that their callousness is aberrant ('Villainy pure and simple'<sup>69</sup>) and they are soon killed off, leaving Juliet to start the fine tradition of the school's taking in any girl left alone.

Most of the children in No Talking After Lights, in direct contrast to the Chalet girls, are nasty little beasts. This is hardly surprising, because they themselves

have been so badly treated by their families. Vulnerable and insecure, prey to the selfish whims of adults, they take out their instability and fear on each other. Charmian, devious and artful, stealing from the other girls, deriving pleasure from her blackmailing of best friend Sheila and her sadistic treatment of Flopsy the rabbit, is the archetypal deprived/depraved child. But all the girls are victims to some extent. Constance's parents do not listen to her, refusing to accept that she is genuinely unhappy; Hermione's father, when his daughter is sexually assaulted by the under-gardener, regards her as 'damaged goods' and worries about the effects of the attack, not on her emotional and physical well-being but on her marriage prospects. And, of course, this generation have themselves been victims: Sylvia Parry, the teacher who terrorises little girls, has been abused by her father, and Mrs. Birmingham has been raped by her brother's best friend, a youth her parents liked and trusted.

The children in No Talking After Lights have some awareness of their own vulnerability and their lack of any choice in their own fate. Being a child, as Constance discovers, means being helpless, denied any personal autonomy. Constance hates the idea of going to boarding school, but her parents refuse to consider her wishes:<sup>70</sup>

[Constance] felt utterly helpless. She had no say in the adult decisions that governed her life.

In the Chalet School world, adults who treat children badly are in a tiny minority; in Lambert's world, they are the norm. She shatters the myths with which children grow up - that adults are basically infallible, and that the only ones to be feared are 'strange'. Children are taught not to speak to 'strange men' but they do not always know that the adult they are brought up to trust - parents and teachers - are sometimes the one from whom they are most at risk. Lambert's characters all have to learn this lesson. When Constance encounters a pervert who 'talks dirty' to her, it is not an old man in an overcoat in the park, but one of her teachers ("Nasty, dirty, over-sexed little girl... you little slut."<sup>71</sup>) In the Chalet School world, evil is relegated to the outside world. In Lambert's novel it permeates every fibre of the school community and there is no escape.

One myth which children have about adults is that they can do exactly as they wish. Certainly, compared to children, adults have a degree of autonomy, but Lambert makes very clear in No Talking After Lights the extent to which adults are also constrained and victimised, often because of their own traumatic childhood. In the happy world of the Chalet School most adults are indeed as 'free' as they appear, but in the bleak world of Lambert's novel it is only the children who believe this particular myth:<sup>72</sup>

Oh, how I wish I were grown up! she thought. Grown-ups can do whatever they like. They don't have to ask permission, nobody criticises them or orders them about. They're free. I feel like poor old Flopsy, stuck in a cage; and I want to get out. But they make it impossible.

Of course, an older girl than Constance would realise - as Patience does in Secret Places - that adults are 'in cages' too, and that cages of one's own making can be harder to escape from than the more obvious trammels of childhood. When Constance, in the best school story tradition, runs away from Raeburn, which is the focus of her unhappiness, she realises that with escape comes danger; that, in fact, there can be no escape. She has seen her loneliness and unhappiness, her lack of freedom, as part of the condition of being a child, when in fact they are part of the more general human condition.

If children cherish myths about adults, adults seem to accept myths about children and childhood, which their own experience of growing up should have warned them about. Or perhaps it would be more correct to infer, given the nature of the childhoods described in No Talking After Lights, that the pain of growing up can be so intense that as soon as it is over we choose, as on waking from a nightmare, to forget all about it. Thus, adults do not really believe that childhood is an 'unclouded' time - the wealth of literature about unhappy childhoods bears this out - but they pretend to, because that is less painful than acknowledging the

truth and confronting the pain which their own children may be going through. They want to rewrite and embellish an unsatisfactory history, just as people who talk about the 'good old days' are selective in what they choose to remember. There exist powerful myths as to what childhood ought to be ('Children are like tumbling puppies or singing birds...'), but, as Philip Larkin, for example, reminds us in 'I Remember, I Remember',<sup>73</sup> real experience rarely adheres to the ideal. Lambert states that:<sup>74</sup>

Adults have forgotten the agony of growing up, when feelings are vast and incomprehensible, primitive and turbulent.

but in some cases this may be less a question of simply forgetting than of being unwilling to remember. As Margaret Meek, in her essay 'What Counts as Evidence in Theories of Children's Literature?' puts it:<sup>75</sup>

Because [children] are small in stature and immature in thought..., we ignore the immensity of their emotions which are never less than adult-sized and sometimes ungovernable.

Of course, as we develop an adult perspective, it is inevitable that we trivialise childish concerns to a certain extent: adult problems can be so weighty that, in comparison, the troubles of childhood seem inconsequential. We forget that problems which appear petty to an adult can overwhelm a child, and perhaps we are loath to remember that sense of being helpless which besets Constance.

If writers like Brent-Dyer present a view of life dependent on these myths, so that everything is rendered innocent and safe, then Lambert, in seeking to destroy these myths, goes to the other extreme. It would be a gross oversimplification to say that the world she creates in No Talking After Lights is more 'realistic' than the Chalet School world, and that what we are dealing with is a straightforward case of: children's fiction = rosy fantasy; adult fiction = harsh reality, for this is very far from being the case. In Lambert's case, the unrelieved virtue of the Chalet School is replaced by (almost) unrelieved vice: she does not merely acknowledge the darker aspects of human experience; she exaggerates them.

To illustrate what I mean, I shall take several examples from the text: the treatment of death and of sexuality. I have already shown that in the Chalet School world, death is incorporated into a rational order, so that it loses most of its sting. Death in No Talking After Lights, however, is evidence that there exists no rational order: apart from Lionel Birmingham, who is an old man, people die as the result of war, freak accident and suicide - deaths not merely tragic, but monstrous and gratuitous.

The girls of the Chalet School, as we have seen, are unaware of their own sexuality and unlikely to be victims of anyone else's. Lambert's girls, however, are the object of a

lesbian teacher's frustrated desire (Hermione); the victims of assault and rape (Henrietta, Sylvia, Hermione) and verbal abuse (Constance). They experiment sexually in the dormitory after 'lights out' and this is no question of mere 'tickling' as Baba and Cait do in Edna O'Brien's The Country Girls ('Once we took off our knickers in there and tickled one another. The greatest secret of all.'<sup>76</sup>) but of vigorous 'horseplay'. Brent-Dyer and writers of her ilk do not admit - we would not expect them to admit - that there can be any sexual element at all in relationships between girls or women, even though later criticism of their work - especially that of Angela Brazil - insists on its 'underlying homosexuality'<sup>77</sup> We have seen how the 'crush discourse' and the general development of a more sexual perspective on relationships cast suspicion on affectionate relations between girls and women, so that often the emotional content of friendship is dismissed. Lambert, when she acknowledges a sexual aspect, reduces it to the absolutely base and physical. Anne and Fiona's game of 'horses' is the most crude expression of female adolescent desire/frustration ('a pair of horses mating'<sup>78</sup>) of which I am aware in the modern school novel. There is no suggestion of intense emotional involvement (as in the relationship between Laura and Patience in Secret Places): only of mutual gratification: although a more diffuse pleasure is hinted at when she discusses the 'pashes' which junior girls might have on pretty seniors, it is still quite definitely

physical rather than emotional. Most evidence suggests that such attachments between schoolgirls were primarily emotional, as indeed they are in the school story. Lambert focuses on the physical and the emotional is largely disregarded.

Neither is there room for much sentiment where friendship is concerned. 'School friendships were conducted according to a strict code'<sup>79</sup>, as in any book about schoolgirls. Ritual and adherence to an unofficial code of conduct characterise life in most institutions to some extent. Vivienne Griffiths notes that while home friendships are likely to be based on proximity, etc., school friendships are 'more rigidly demarcated' according to gender, age, ethnicity, etc.<sup>80</sup> At Raeburn, this code often gets in the way of the girls' real feelings: Sheila and Constance, for example, are attracted to each other, and, both being rather sensitive and intelligent characters, would suit each other rather well, but Sheila is officially Charmian's friend and so, even when Charmian is making her unhappy by avoiding her, she is not at liberty to make friendly advances to Constance:<sup>81</sup>

She was still Charmie's best friend. Walking with anyone else would have been disloyal.

Friendship does not have quite the central role in No Talking After Lights that it has in many of the other books I have studied, although its importance is never

underestimated, and it is mainly her isolation and unpopularity that makes Constance so desperately unhappy: having friends is essential to happiness.<sup>82</sup>

I'm not happy here...I never could be. I haven't got any friends.

The protagonists of the novel are pubescent, thirteen or fourteen years old, and their relationships tend to be insecure and fragmented. These friendships are not the solid, dependable comradeships enjoyed by the Chalet School girls. The one thing that seems to motivate Raeburn girls in their friendships is fear: fear of being the odd one out, fear of being seen to consort with outsiders (like Constance, who is shunned not for any sinister reasons, like Laura in Secret Places, or because she really is a loathsome character like Marie Dobson in the Kingscote novels, but more mundanely because she is bookish and homely and has adopted a defensive attitude which repels).

Invited to the twins' home for half term, conscious that Mick and Flick have never been particularly kind to her, Constance is surprised to find that: 'The twins, away from school, were actually being quite nice to her.'<sup>82</sup> Away from school, of course, the twins do not have to worry about their own popularity; they do not have to be scared of identifying themselves with a social pariah. The pecking order in the Lower Fourth is sacrosanct, and Constance, new, plain and shy, not immediately attractive, is relegated

to the bottom along with fat, sweaty, stupid girls, Jennifer and Rachel.

Most school stories emphasise the need for friends, the importance to a new girl of being assimilated into a group but this is not always easy. The casting out of undesirable individuals helps the group to assert its identity as a group, to wield its power. The characters in No Talking After Lights are, as we have seen, essentially powerless. In their insecurity, the need to assert themselves in whatever way possible comes to the fore, and Constance is the victim of her classmates' frantic need to keep some individuals below them in their own pecking order.

Even established friendships are pervaded by alienation and mistrust. Charmian and Sheila are 'best friends' according to the school code, but there is no sense of real liking between the girls. Clearly Sheila, a plain girl, is attracted by Charmian's prettiness; Charmian, although she is a sly and sadistic character, is high up in the Lower Fourth's pecking order ('Even Charmie was popular, though everyone knew she was horrid to poor, dogged, patient Sheila'<sup>83</sup>) and as her friend Sheila enjoys a certain status. Charmian blackmails Sheila into being her accomplice in theft, copies her homework, and generally abuses her. Poor Sheila is too young to see what we, as readers, see - that Charmian is taking out her own wretchedness at her parents'

divorce on her friend. Having been hurt, she needs to strike out in defence; having 'lost' her parents, she threatens Sheila with the loss of hers, making her swear on her mother's life to keep Charmian's secret - and, of course, Sheila's mother actually does die, in a freak accident, a tragedy which attention-seeking Charmian uses to her own advantage: 'Charmian had given them all a dramatic account of Mrs. Dunsford-Smith's fatal accident, complete with dark purple bruises on her long white throat.'<sup>84</sup>

The schoolgirl crush, as we have seen, is allowed to exist in the Chalet School world only in a very sanitised form: 'sentimentality' is not permitted, only 'healthy' hero-worship. The girls at Raeburn have 'pashes', of course, and these are seen by Lambert as 'in most cases...a safe outlet for adolescent emotion and practice for sexual encounters to come.'<sup>85</sup> This is, of course, a standard response, based largely on psychoanalytic theories which identify an immature homosexual phase which gives way to the adoption of a mature heterosexual position. Hermione, a beautiful but shallow sixteen year old, is the focus of much desire and longing, and the pashes that many of the younger girls have on her are contrasted with the more overtly sexual desire of Sylvia Parry. Sylvia is presented as the classic 'perverse and perverting spinster teacher'<sup>86</sup> and her feelings, which cannot be dismissed as adolescent, are presented as sinister: there is a threatening note in

Lambert's economical: 'What Sylvia Parry felt for Hermione was not an adolescent 'pash',<sup>87</sup>.

Contrasting the girls' relationships with those of their teachers in this way (as Elliott does in Secret Places) identifies them as potentially sexual, and places them in a wider sexual context. This is the reverse of what happens in books like the Chalet School, where not only the girls but the teachers are denied any sexual existence whatsoever. Adults in the Chalet School world, while embodying all the appropriate adult characteristics (nurturing, responsibility, wisdom, etc.) retain a childish sexlessness, as Brent-Dyer promotes the myth that people (especially women and children) have no sexual being whatsoever.

Girls in the 1950s, although less innocent than their mothers' generation about sexuality and maturation, were still largely fairly ignorant about the changes in their own bodies. Most of the younger girls at Raeburn are very ignorant about sexuality and their bodies:<sup>88</sup>

Although they sometimes shocked and excited one another with smutty conversations after lights, most girls were entirely ignorant about their own sexuality.

However, their fate as objects of sexual desire is made very plainly known throughout the novel. Unlike the Chalet School girls, who have no awareness of sexuality, scorn the

idea of girls wanting privacy, and face none of the pubertal problems of real-life schoolgirls, the girls at Raeburn are acutely self-conscious and embarrassed at their development:<sup>89</sup>

Getting changed in front of other people was even more of an ordeal now that small folds of flesh had begun to point her nipples outwards.

Constance also suffers the experience of her first period, staying with the twins for half-term ('The curse. This must be the curse. This was what the whispers and giggles were all about.'<sup>90</sup>) The girls exchange smutty stories and giggle speculatively about sex, which may titivate them but which the more sensitive - like Constance - find both disgusting and terrifying to contemplate. Brent-Dyer's characters are allowed to exist in a never-never land of eternal innocence, but for Lambert's innocence is lost at a very early age, and sex haunts the novel, not a potential source of delight, but as something which makes women, and even children, the victims of male (and, in one case, female) lust and rapacity and the patriarchal double standard: 'When will men stop demanding virginity - and taking it, wherever they find it?'<sup>91</sup>

The events which make up Constance's term at the school - the mysterious thefts, the polio epidemic, Constance's loneliness and the suspicion that she might be the thief - can all be found in many traditional girls' school stories.

Brent-Dyer, indeed, specialised in epidemics of every sort, although never is there any suspicion that the Chalet School might have been negligent, as is hinted at in No Talking After Lights.

Charmian's thieving, indeed, has an almost exact parallel in Enid Blyton's Second Form at Malory Towers, even to the detail of the parcel. Daphne, the thief, is like Charmian a selfish and disturbed character, but her reasons for stealing are different: she is, despite being pretty and spoilt, not in the same social class as the other girls, and steals the pretty things which her family are too poor to supply her with. Happily, under the reforming influence of Malory Towers and with the support of its decent upper-middle-class pupils ("I'll stick by you, Daphne. I don't want you to go. You won't ever take things again...There's more good in you than bad."<sup>92</sup>) Daphne makes good.

Lambert uses the stealing episode to demonstrate various points: the deviousness and real spite of Charmian but also the extent to which she is distressed and pitiful, and the readiness with which Constance, as a new girl, is made a scapegoat and a suspect by staff as well as girls, a situation which is paralleled in many school stories. In a much more subtle and dangerous way, Laura Meister is scapegoated in Secret Places, but even in the conventional

girls' school story it is a popular plot device. Thus Stella, in Stella Wins The School, is generally suspected of foul play because she is new and boisterous:<sup>93</sup>

Stella was aware that other mistresses besides Miss Pelham thought her responsible for the ruined exercise.

She began to find school-life difficult.

Shirley is suspected of disgracing her school, Charterton, by cheating in an important scholarship exam:<sup>95</sup>

Somehow or other, whether she was really guilty or not, the school decided to accept her as the cause of the tragedy which had overtaken Charterton.

Usually, when this happens in the school story, a clever and unscrupulous girl, the equivalent of Charmian (Daphne in Stella Wins the School; Rhoda in Shirley at Charterton) has been responsible for framing the heroine. Order is restored at the end and the wronged heroine is more than willing to forgive the school for having doubted her in the face of what seems conclusive evidence of her guilt. There is no such conclusive evidence in No Talking After Lights. Constance is blamed because she is an easy target.

The staff at Raeburn are practically helpless when confronted by a clever and determined criminal. Chalet School girls do not, as a rule, steal, but it would be unheard of for omnipotent authority to be as perplexed and powerless as Charmian renders her teachers:<sup>95</sup>

The staff could threaten or hint that they knew the identity of the culprit...But if a girl had the wit to keep her mouth shut, they were powerless.

The power balance at the Chalet School is such that authority may be challenged by deviant pupils but it always triumphs and there is never any real threat. This is not the case at Raeburn, where authority is in real danger of being undermined and, unlike the Chalet School authorities, is not always in the right.

The title No Talking After Lights acknowledges firmly the novel's debt to and relationship with the school story, while setting it apart: 'talking after lights' may suggest mischief, but 'no talking after lights' implies repression, especially when compared to the conventional school story titles, which tend to conjure up fun and frolics: Exploits of the Chalet Girls; A Thrilling Term at Janeways; The Chalet School Does It Again; The Naughtiest Girl in the School, etc. Traditionally 'after lights' in the school story was an opportunity for horseplay - midnight feasts and theatrics - which Lambert, of course, takes literally.

Of course the recognition of adolescent sexuality, the disclosure that children are not only vulnerable but, as a result of this, capable of incredible duplicity and cruelty (Katherine Whitehorn, writing about her own schooldays, describes the cruelty of adolescent girls as 'as bad as a

boy's or indeed a ferret's'<sup>96</sup>), are not new insights. What is innovative about No Talking After Lights is the way in which Lambert systematically uses the conventions of the traditional school story genre to overturn the myths and fallacies which some school story writers, reflecting a wider ideological belief about what was 'suitable' for young people, perpetuated. She is not, of course, the first writer to write about girls at school in a way which upsets orthodox ideas: as this study itself demonstrates a good number of novelists have explored the school situation, and their novels are in some cases even less 'comfortable' than Lambert's - Martina Evans' Midnight Feast, for example, which explores anorexia in an Irish convent school.<sup>97</sup> But in No Talking After Lights all the ingredients of the absolutely traditional girls' school story are utilised and exploited. It subverts by imitation, but it is no mere parody. The sort of parody to which the girls' school story has lent itself has been caricature and burlesque - the saucy romps of St. Trinian's, or the gentler Daisy Pulls It Off. No Talking After Lights, although it has its moments of dark humour, does not adopt school story conventions for humorous effect. Rather the opposite: it shows, by stressing and exaggerating the malevolent aspects of a community of girls and women, the sadness both of that community - which seems to bring out the worst in people - and of the world outside. Neither is it, however, merely an indictment of the girls' school or the girls' school story,

what Elizabeth Bowen calls 'the anti-school [novel]',<sup>98</sup>; there is some kindness and the possibility of happiness at Raeburn, as Constance finally realises. She has concentrated, as Lambert has done, on the negative aspects of school life, but, once she seems to be attaining her desire to leave, she can see that there have been positive aspects, too:<sup>99</sup>

It had all been strung together in a familiar routine, and one she had learned to take pleasure in....I don't want to leave, thought Constance in despair.

However, by now it may be too late: ironically, Constance's parents have at last decided to take her unhappiness at school seriously and are determined to remove her, even though she no longer wishes to leave. But as we, and Constance, know, 'They never listen to me!'<sup>100</sup>: Constance now knows that, difficult as life at school may be, the world outside, even the family bosom, is every bit as fraught. Just as Chalet School girls learn through their schooldays the myth that life is fair and just, and maturity - since it never really has to be faced - to be welcomed, Constance and her classmates at Raeburn have any such myths violently destroyed.

It is tempting to see novels like No Talking After Lights as fundamentally more 'honest' than romantic stories like the Chalet School. It is my contention, however, that both Lambert and Brent-Dyer present their characters and

situations in the same way: without ambivalence. In Brent-Dyer's case the resulting fictional world has an attractive fairy-tale quality; in Lambert's case, a horrific portrait of school, society and human nature is painted. Together, these books represent the two extremes of writing about adolescent girls at school - the utopian community and the dystopian; the denial of sexuality and the gratuitous dwelling on it; the reinforcement of comfortable myths about life, and the destruction of those myths. The rest of the novels in this study fall somewhere in between these two extremes, and, being less concerned with the presentation of a particular view of the world, are freer to concentrate on the particular relationships of individuals within their fictional worlds.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The school novel: Antonia White's Frost in May

Like two of the other novelists in this study (Janice Elliott and Angela Lambert) Antonia White is looking back at the period when she herself was an adolescent. Unlike Elliott and Lambert, however, she has produced a more or less autobiographical novel.

We might expect any novel which 'looks back' to reflect aspects of the culture in which it was produced as well as those of the time it depicts. Certainly, No Talking After Lights, while a deliberate attempt to expose boarding school life in the 1950s does so in the context of 1990 Britain, where child abuse, for example, has become an acceptable subject for discussion.

In the case of Frost in May this is complicated not only by the fact that White is writing a fictionalised account of her own school life, but also by the fact that the world she thus immortalises, that of a pre-World War One English convent, is so enclosed. The time is 1910 or thereabouts, the place, Roehampton in South London, but Frost in May could be set almost anywhere and at any time. Like the Chalet School world, the Lippington world continues alongside the real world, but is little affected by it. It

is a world in itself, a world of nuns and girls.

Friendship plays a central role in the 'girls' school story'<sup>1</sup> Frost in May, the first novel in the sequence which describes Antonia White's childhood, adolescence and young womanhood. First published in 1933, Frost in May was an immediate success, attracting great critical acclaim, but it was almost twenty years before White, whose life was tormented by writer's block and the mental illness she called 'the Beast', was able to write a sequel, in which, as we shall see in the next chapter, female friendship continues to play a vital - and often overlooked - role.

When, a few days into her school career at the Convent of the Five Wounds, Lippington, nine year old Nanda Grey is reproved by her class teacher, Mother Frances, for intending to give a birthday present to a classmate, Marjorie Appleyard, she is told that:<sup>2</sup>

'At Lippington we do not give presents, even birthday presents, except to relatives. We do not encourage particular friendships among little girls.'

The offending story book is confiscated and the incident apparently forgotten, but it is a useful introduction to Antonia White's treatment of friendship in Frost in May, and a significant episode for a number of reasons.

Firstly, Mother Frances' comment strikes the reader as

deeply ironic, for Nanda, far from wishing to cultivate Marjorie's friendship, considers her 'an intolerable bore'. Indeed, later in the novel, the nuns actually encourage rebellious Nanda to make friends with dull, virtuous Marjorie whom they consider a potentially good influence.

Secondly, this situation has arisen not through Nanda's own will, but because of her father's. Mr. Grey has instructed her to give the present to Marjorie, an acquaintance from home. In her first week at school Nanda has already suffered two humiliations because of her father: she is the only Junior to have to study Latin (Mr. Grey is an eminent classicist) and she is to have a cold bath every morning. ('Nanda felt she had been branded for life. Never, never would she live down this shame.'<sup>3</sup>) Mr. Grey (or Claude Batchelor as he is renamed in the second and subsequent novels) is a stern, domineering figure whom Nanda fears and adores. He plays a fairly peripheral role in the narrative of Frost in May because, with the exception of one chapter describing a Christmas holiday, all the action occurs in the enclosed world of the convent, but his influence is felt keenly throughout the novel, in this incident and others like it.

Thirdly, one of Mother Frances' objections to Nanda's proposed present lies in the nature of the gift itself, Kenneth Grahame's Dream Days, a popular contemporary

storybook and one of the few things to 'date' the novel. The book delights Nanda, but its 'tone...is not at all the kind of thing we like at Lippington. Apart from its being by a non-Catholic writer, it is morbid, rather unwholesome, and just a little vulgar.'<sup>4</sup> This is not the only time Nanda will get into trouble because of an 'unwholesome' book: some years later Mother Percival is disgusted and horrified to find her reading Francis Thompson's poetry ("If I had my way it should be burnt."<sup>5</sup>) and of course her final, catastrophic downfall, expulsion from Lippington, is the result of a book she has written herself. But all this is to come. In this early incident, implied criticism is directed at Nanda's parents, rather than the child herself, for their vulgarity in buying such a book: throughout her school-days at Lippington, the nuns will continue to make Nanda feel uncomfortable, in a thousand subtle little ways, because, unlike most Lippington children, she does not come from an upper-class, solidly Catholic family.

But the most significant aspect of the little episode - as far as this study is concerned - is that it gives Mother Frances an opportunity to voice the convent's policy on friendship among its pupils. The nuns' belief in the undesirability, indeed the danger of 'unhealthy indulgence' in 'particular friendships' is stressed throughout Frost in May. Gabriele Griffin, in What Lesbians Do In Books, suggests that the 'inter-female friendship in the convent is

subject to deliberate destruction'<sup>6</sup>. This is a slight exaggeration: only certain friendships are systematically dismantled, but it is certainly against a background of discouragement and suspicion that all Nanda's school friendships will be formed. Friendship, then, as this apparently trivial episode demonstrates, is both an important theme in its own right and also a device through which other themes of the novel are conveyed.

Despite Mother Frances' concern about Nanda, friendship features very little in the early part of the novel, which covers Nanda's first two years at Lippington. Nanda is in the Junior class, under Mother Frances, and White concentrates on her initiation into convent life, the daily routine, the many little ceremonies which colour the monotony, and the individual personalities of the nuns. Supervision and discipline are strict, and we see Nanda usually in the company of several other girls with a nun in charge, with little opportunity to make special or 'particular' friends. At the beginning of Chapter IV, when Nanda is eleven and has just been promoted to the Senior School, 'where life was a sterner, more responsible affair'<sup>7</sup>, we are told that 'Joan and Monica and Louise and Mildred...had been the chief figures in her life'<sup>8</sup> until now, but we are not made aware of any particular attachment to them, either individually or as a group. Joan, indeed, is mentioned only once, beyond this reference. Mildred is

characterised as a spiteful child, known to pinch others. Monica, 'the Junior School dunce'<sup>9</sup>, humiliated and victimised by the nuns because she is poor and rather dull-witted, is to become, later in the novel, a focus for the reader's and Nanda's sympathy, and an important catalyst in Nanda's growing dissatisfaction with the Lippington regime, but for the moment she remains rather a pathetic, background figure. Louise too is a shadowy figure, 'a small, self-possessed foreigner'<sup>10</sup> to whom Nanda is attracted on their first evening at Lippington. After Nanda's promotion to the Senior School, where she is placed in a higher class than her contemporaries, Louise drops out of the action, but she foreshadows Nanda's subsequent friendships with Rosario and especially Leonie, both of whom are also self-possessed and - to Nanda - glamorously foreign.

The only girl to whom Nanda is seen to form any real emotional attachment in these first few chapters is a senior girl whom, in the classic schoolgirl tradition, she fervently admires. Hilary O'Byrne, a pretty Irish tomboy, is kind to Nanda at her first, fraught Lippington mealtime, begging Madeleine, the stately, 'irreproachable' girl in charge of their table to allow Nanda to leave her cabbage. Hilary's plea for leniency is unsuccessful, as Madeleine tells Nanda that '"You've got to learn to do things you don't like"<sup>11</sup>, but it earns Nanda's respect and admiration. Listening to Hilary's chatter about her holidays is Nanda's

first glimpse of the 'dazzling world',<sup>12</sup> to which the average Lippington child seems to belong. Country houses and cub-hunting are as exotic and romantic to the middle-class Londoner as Catholicism itself. At nine, she is a very raw convert who, despite having 'taken to her new religion with a rather precocious fervour',<sup>13</sup> is always sadly aware that she is not 'a proper Catholic like the others',<sup>14</sup>. Hilary, from an old Catholic family with long associations with the Order of the Five Wounds, represents a world of which Nanda can never be part, and remains an admired and romantic figure to Nanda until she leaves school (to return, much to Nanda's astonishment, as a postulant nun in Nanda's final term). 'Boyish and handsome',<sup>15</sup> the 'admired Hilary',<sup>16</sup> has something in common with Leonie de Wesseldorf, who becomes Nanda's closest friend.

Friendship becomes an important part of Nanda's experience once she becomes a member of the Senior School and no longer merely a little girl. It is a new experience which coincides with the beginning of adolescence. This is implied in the text by the fact that Leonie de Wesseldorf is introduced at exactly the time when Nanda and her friends are preparing for their First Communion, a religious 'rite of passage' which has traditionally been the closest Western society comes to a formal recognition of the onset of adolescence. (A present day Catholic child would make her first communion at the age of seven, but Confirmation, in

both the Catholic and Anglican churches, continues to mark the transition from childhood to young adulthood.) When Leonie is introduced, Nanda has just confessed and been released from 'a rash vow'<sup>17</sup> of perpetual virginity made when she was eight: she has symbolically discarded such childish behaviour and is ready, with the help of her relationship with Leonie, to develop into a young woman.

Before looking in detail at the complex and fascinating relationship between Nanda and Leonie, it will be helpful to examine the nuns' attitude to such friendships. That the nuns greatly fear close emotional ties between their pupils is made clear throughout Frost in May and is reflected in the school rules. For example, the girls are forbidden to walk in pairs at recreation since 'When two are together, the devil loves to make a third.'<sup>18</sup> Instead, the nuns organise the girls into trios, chosen always on the principle that two girls who are known to like each other will be kept apart. The third member of the trio will always be a senior girl of known good character, a chaperon in fact. So fearful are the nuns of the consequences of two girls being left alone together that one pupil, the pious Theresa Leighton, is sent away from the school infirmary before she has fully recovered from a feverish cold which has struck the school. Her room is needed for Nanda and although the infirmary bedrooms are easily large enough to hold two beds, 'in no circumstances were children allowed to

share a bedroom'<sup>19</sup>. Theresa has a relapse and dies - but at least the school rules are upheld. Clearly such an extreme attitude on the nuns' part demands the question: What is the 'devil' they are so afraid of? Mother Radcliffe, the Mistress of Discipline, warns Nanda that:<sup>20</sup>

'You know quite well that the school rule does not approve of particular friendships. They are against charity, to begin with, and they lead, moreover, to dangerous and unhealthy indulgence of feeling.'

The argument that 'particular friendships' are 'against charity' is based presumably on Christian teaching, which demands more general goodwill to one's neighbours: close friendships can be seen as selfish and 'unchristian' because they necessarily exclude others. The same point was often made in the girls' school stories which were at the height of their popularity when Frost in May was first published. Jo Bettany of the Chalet School tells Simone Lecoutier, a jealous child who wants her exclusive friendship, that it is selfish of her to make such unreasonable demands: "'It's you who are selfish. I've told you over and over again that I'm going to have all the friends I want, and it doesn't make one scrap of difference to my being pally with you!'",<sup>21</sup> I think that Mother Radcliffe, however, is more concerned with her latter argument: intense feeling, if not directed towards God, the Virgin Mary or the saints, is potentially dangerous in the eyes of the Church. Mother Radcliffe may not be talking explicitly about the possibility of the

girls' developing a conscious or subconscious sexual attraction for each other, but the implication is certainly there, and the existence of extreme sensual tension in Frost in May cannot be denied. Paulina Palmer, in her lesbian reading of the novel, suggests that ' Nanda, Leonie, Clare and Rosario are portrayed...in the emotionally turbulent manner associated with lovers.'<sup>22</sup> In the rarefied, oppressive atmosphere of the convent, religious fervour is the only permissible outlet for emotion, but it is natural that many of the girls find this unfulfilling, and turn, as Nanda does, to human and aesthetic objects as well. In the Catholic church, absolute obedience and unquestioning abnegation of one's own desires and wills are required, and the nuns in Frost in May expect from their pupils the same degree of submission and self-sacrifice which their own vocations demand of them. The free choice of friends, and the forum for open discussion and the development of human, rather than divine, emotional ties, which unsupervised friendship offers, is anathema to the nuns and the authority they represent.

Of course, despite - or because of - the nuns' desperate efforts to suppress them, close friendships do develop among the girls, and Nanda's three years in the Senior School at Lippington are dominated by her relationships with Clare Rockingham, Rosario de Palencia, and especially Leonie de Wesseldorf. Leonie is a

remarkable, unforgettable character, of whom Elizabeth Bowen, in her introduction to the Virago edition of Frost in May says:<sup>23</sup>

Frost in May could...go down to time on the strength, alone, of Leonie de Wesseldorf... [who is] living from the first phrase.

The 'androgynously attractive'<sup>24</sup> Leonie, clever, lazy, insouciant and eccentric, 'belonged to a very old and wealthy family whose name, to Catholic ears, had something of the glamour of Medici or Gonzaga.'<sup>25</sup> Leonie is little more than a year older than Nanda, but it is impossible, even when we first meet her as a twelve year old, to think of her as a little girl: both her mind and her face are curiously adult. 'Unfeminine' and 'unchildish', Leonie is fascinatingly androgynous, as the admiring Nanda instantly recognises:<sup>26</sup>

Nanda's private image of Leonie de Wesseldorf was of a young prince, pale and weary from a day's ride, with his lovelocks carelessly tied back in a frayed ribbon.

[Nanda's] feeling for Leonie was one of pure admiration, the feeling of page for prince, too cold and absolute to be called love. It would not have mattered if Leonie had never spoken or even looked at her - provided Nanda could bind herself to her by a private allegiance.

Leonie, however, despite her haughty, aloof demeanour, is far from indifferent to Nanda, actively seeking her out and becoming her best friend.

Intellectually precocious, Leonie forces Nanda to consider her religion philosophically rather than simply dogmatically, a radically new and subversive approach for Nanda who, as a convert, lacks Leonie's careless security in her Catholic identity, a fact which Leonie is perceptive enough to realise:<sup>27</sup>

'Being a convert, you have to make an effort... more effort than I, for example. And so you come to believe them better than I.'

She wears her intellectual maturity and her sharp intelligence as carelessly as she does her expensive, shabby clothes. She finds it 'rather amusing',<sup>28</sup> to ponder upon such philosophical questions as the nature of existence and is quite happy to fail her exams deliberately 'in order that Nanda should catch her up in the Lower Third',<sup>29</sup>.

As their friendship develops, Nanda, enjoying what Penny Brown calls 'her first experience of hero-worship',<sup>30</sup>, continues to see Leonie in a romantic light, as a prince, a knight, or a soldier, responding to both the androgynous and aristocratic qualities of her friend. Unlike her earlier, milder feelings for Hilary O'Byrne, this is no unrequited 'crush', for Leonie returns Nanda's appreciation enthusiastically, and the two girls enjoy a rich and mutually sustaining relationship. Leonie is unemotional and undemonstrative, as were the heroines of many school stories in the 1930s, but her regard for Nanda is evidently strong.

She considers her with 'brotherly affection'<sup>31</sup> and is fiercely loyal to her, so that Nanda's adoration ('a little bubble of pleasure burst in her throat every time Leonie grinned at her'<sup>31</sup>) seems entirely justified. The language of kin ('brotherly') is interesting: mother/daughter or sister language was often used to describe female affection, but 'brotherly' reinforces the androgynous presentation of Leonie.

Leonie's intellectual and moral superiority to the majority of the other girls is as undeniable as the force of her personality, and these qualities combined make her a difficult character for the nuns to deal with. Unlike Nanda, her Catholic pedigree is impeccable ('"My dear sir, you can't seriously send a Wesseldorf to hell."<sup>33</sup>) and she is allowed to get away with misdemeanours for which Nanda would be punished.<sup>34</sup> But the nuns are wary of her androgyny and her free thinking, discouraging Nanda from becoming too friendly. Leonie's attitude to religion: "I like the Catholic way of looking at things...Any way of looking at life is a fairy story, and I prefer mine with lots of improbable embellishments"<sup>35</sup> is profoundly at variance to the blind, unquestioning faith demanded by the nuns and by the church itself, and so disturbingly embodied in the ill fated Theresa Leighton. Leonie, cool, rational and intelligent ('"There's no rational proof of the existence of God...not one that would really hold water for a

philosopher."'<sup>36</sup>) acts as a foil to Theresa who is 'preternaturally stupid and preternaturally good-natured'.<sup>37</sup> The ecstatic intensity of Theresa's devotion frightens impressionable Nanda, even while she recognises the girl's 'sweetness', and she is not only bored, but actually repelled, by Theresa. Leonie predicts that Theresa is 'too holy to last'<sup>38</sup>, and she is quite right, in a sense that she has not anticipated, for Theresa dies at school, the victim of the nuns' unbending discipline. She is too holy to last, in that hers is the kind of faith which often takes its toll, mentally and emotionally: even at fifteen her devotion makes her 'strained'<sup>39</sup>, 'dazed'<sup>40</sup>, 'rapt'<sup>41</sup>. She personifies Nanda's misgivings about the church, whereas Leonie represents everything that is attractive and noble about it:<sup>42</sup>

She felt a pang of conscience that she did not seek Theresa's society more often, but, as she... saw Leonie de Wesseldorf in her smart, shabby coat, clutching her candle as if she were presenting arms, Nanda forgot the very existence of Theresa Leighton.

Apart from the attraction of Leonie's personality, her pragmatic attitude to her religion helps Nanda to forget, or put into perspective, its more disturbing aspects.

Leonie and Nanda's friendship is not exclusive:<sup>43</sup>

They were both attached, Nanda passionately and Leonie with her usual cool carelessness, to two divinities in the Lower First. The two divinities were also inseparables.

The use of the words 'divinities' and 'inseparables' suggest the traditional schoolgirl crush, but although the relationship between the four girls does have an element of the conventional 'grande passion' of the popular school story, it is a much more complex and involved relationship than those described by Mary Chadwick in Adolescent Girlhood (first published in 1932, one year before Frost in May). Chadwick maintains that the 'crush, pash or G.P. ('grande passion') is 'usually of the simple, effusive, direct-love type' and offers a model in which 'The two are devoted to each other. They go about together as much as possible, put their arms round each other's waists, kiss each other, do everything together and feel that this friendship will endure to the end of time. These girls will generally be quite simple souls, whose psychological quality will be that of the hysteric.'<sup>44</sup> In fact, what Chadwick is describing seems more akin to the institution of 'bosom friends', as described over and over again by Angela Brazil, to the amusement, as we have seen, of many critics. The 'crush', was more usually characterised by some difference in age between the girls, and, often, by unrequited passion, where the younger girl would worship her goddess from a safe distance as described by Martha Vicinus in 'Distance and Desire', an essay on boarding school friendships.<sup>45</sup> Leonie and Nanda do not behave in the overtly sentimental way which Chadwick describes (indeed, there is no opportunity for them

to do so), either with each other or with the 'divinities', nor do they worship Clare and Rosario from afar. Certainly, they experience intense feeling for their friends, but the relationship is fairly reciprocal, the girls forming a close quartet which is viewed with some suspicion by what Palmer calls the 'heterosexual patriarchal establishment',<sup>46</sup> as embodied in the nuns.

Rosario and Clare are as different temperamentally as Nanda and Leonie. Rosario is the less developed of the two characters, because everything in Frost in May is seen through Nanda's eyes and Nanda, although she 'devotedly admires' Rosario is too 'dazzled' by the glamour of the beautiful Spanish girl 'to envy Leonie her intimacy',<sup>47</sup>. Like Leonie, Rosario comes from an ancient and noble Catholic family, and she and Leonie have been friends outside Lippington, since 'there were Wesseldorfs and Palencias at every embassy in Europe.'<sup>48</sup> Passionate, graceful, fierce and charming, Rosario 'seemed to despise her own beauty',<sup>49</sup>. The tradition of the beautiful but unselfconscious schoolgirl was well established by the 1930s. Marie von Eschenau of the Chalet School, in a novel published the same year as Frost in May, 'was the school beauty, though a less vain girl rarely lived.'<sup>50</sup>

With her customary reserve, Leonie allows her admiration for Rosario only the most formal and artistic

expression. There is, indeed, something of the courtly lover in her approach to her friend, which is entirely consistent with Nanda's own view of Leonie as soldier/prince/knight:<sup>51</sup>

Occasionally she wrote poems to her; frosty, elegant little eighteenth-century verses...

It was customary, in real and in fictional girls' schools for the 'crush' or 'pash' relationship to be characterised by ritual and convention, and often really intense feeling was dissimulated by formality. Martha Vicinus' essay, mentioned above, describes this phenomenon on detail. It is interesting to read much more recently (1995) that, not only does the crush still exist, but that it continues to be characterised by strict conventions:<sup>52</sup>

In some recent research at a girls' boarding school in Sussex ... girls are allowed to have 'gone-ons' and the rituals and rules are almost identical to those from my own school experience. (1960s)

Leonie, in keeping with her 'brotherly' feelings, is fiercely protective of Rosario - as indeed, she is of Nanda. When the smug Marjorie Appleyard makes a racist remark about Spanish people, 'Leonie, without a word...shot out her fist and sent her sprawling.'<sup>53</sup> Again, this fits in with the image of Leonie as a soldier or knight, defending his lady's honour. But this is a more reciprocal relationship, and Rosario, in her turn, is swift to stand up for Leonie: 'Rosario flew to Leonie's defence.'<sup>54</sup>

Leonie and Rosario's mutual regard is thus seen in actions rather than words, neither girl being outwardly emotional. This pattern is fairly common in the 'school story proper': there is often an implicit understanding that the most staunch and genuine friendships are those characterised by a certain reserve. When Nanda declares to Leonie that 'Rosario's the loveliest person I've ever seen' Rosario agrees but 'judicially' rather than passionately, and she swiftly changes the subject<sup>55</sup>. If the nuns are suspicious of the implications of excess emotion, then Leonie is scarcely less fearful. In her channelling of emotion into art she is reminiscent of the schoolgirl heroines who, unable to express their affection in words, show their love in actions. Thus, Gertrud offers practical help to a worried Grizel (1928), 'that being the only sort of sympathy Grizel would permit.'<sup>55</sup> Dimsie (1925) shows her enduring friendship for the girl she has replaced as head girl by rescuing her poetry - the cause of friction between them - from a fire.<sup>56</sup>

Nanda's special attachment is to Rosario's best friend, Clare Rockingham. Clare is a Protestant, which makes her even more of an outsider than Nanda and lends her a certain romance: 'Her family...had...threatened to cut her off completely if she became a Catholic. This gave Clare the glamour of a secret sorrow.'<sup>58</sup> Clare uses this 'glamour' to attract attention to herself. She is self-dramatising,

sentimental and histrionic, given to hysterical weeping in chapel and to such declarations as "'Perhaps I won't live long. But I'd like to die a Catholic.'"<sup>59</sup> Nanda is disturbed by an attention-seeking incident and tries to make sense of it with Leonie:<sup>60</sup>

On the terrace Nanda said breathlessly:  
'I don't understand Clare, do you?'  
'She's just hysterical,' panted Leonie. 'One of these days she'll go off her head.'

Leonie's assessment of Clare seems reasonable: certainly, she is emotionally unstable. We never find out if Clare does indeed 'go off her head', but it seems possible, and this is reinforced in the text by the fact that Leonie makes several 'prophecies' which are fulfilled: she declares that Theresa Leighton is "'too holy to last'"<sup>61</sup> (Theresa dies young) and that: "'It's the unlikely ones like Hilary...who end up in the community.'"<sup>62</sup> (Hilary enters the convent as a postulant nun).

Rosario's exotic appeal is obvious, and Leonie captivates the reader as easily as she does Nanda, but Clare is not an altogether attractive character, and despite Nanda's admiration Clare makes her - and us - rather uneasy. Often this is deliberate on Clare's part. The very first time we meet her she is asking Nanda to explain the Catholic concepts of venial and mortal sin. Nanda - for once in a position of superiority where Catholicism is concerned - is eager to explain, and her earnest attempts are

unintentionally comic ("Take stealing. It's rather difficult to know how much would constitute grave matter. But it's generally supposed to be about half a crown."<sup>62</sup>) but it is plain to the reader that the older girl is teasing her. Clare demands that Nanda explain the commandment 'Thou shalt not commit adultery', and Nanda's reply:<sup>63</sup>

'I haven't the faintest idea...We don't do the sixth and ninth commandments. Mother Percival says they're not necessary for children. They're about some very disgusting sins, I believe, that only grown-up people commit.'

is undeniably comic, but its humour is undercut by the fact that Clare is exploiting Nanda's innocence for her own amusement. Palmer also focuses on this passage, highlighting the flirtatiousness of Clare's attitude: 'The erotic impact of this passage is remarkable...White humorously and provocatively juxtaposes references to sacred and profane love.'<sup>64</sup>

Even when Nanda is a little older and therefore more self-conscious, Clare cannot resist the temptation to tease and embarrass her about sexuality. After one summer vacation when Clare has attended life-drawing classes, she mortifies Nanda by asking the others, jokingly, "'Wouldn't Nanda make the sweetest little nude?'"', a remark which makes thirteen year old Nanda blush 'so much that her skin felt as if it would crack.'<sup>65</sup>

In contrast to Leonie who is always described as pale, cold, stern, rather statuesque in fact, everything about Clare is warm and restless. She has a 'hot, quivering hand'<sup>66</sup>, 'feverishly bright... restless' eyes<sup>67</sup> and a 'wild, dreaming face'<sup>68</sup>. Nanda is always uncomfortably aware of the physicality of Clare. Although she has always been attracted by Leonie's handsome and impressive appearance, and Rosario's Spanish beauty, she responds to Clare on a more sensual level:<sup>69</sup>

Clare's touch embarrassed and delighted her; it gave her the queerest shivering sensation in the roof of her mouth. Why was it that when everyone seemed just face and hands, Clare always reminded one that there was a warm body under her uniform?

The convent uniform - and we can take this not only literally but as a metaphor for convent discipline - is designed to eliminate vanity and individuality and to disguise the developing bodies of the girls. ('The comforting impersonality of uniform,' as Nanda thinks of it.<sup>70</sup>) In Clare's case, her sexuality cannot be denied by the school uniform/Catholic authority.

It is not only her awareness of Clare's body that disturbs Nanda: she is also troubled by the emotional intensity of her friend's nature. While Leonie can dismiss this with customary nonchalance and reluctance to become involved ('"She's just hysterical"<sup>71</sup>; "What a one you are for the dramatic"<sup>72</sup>; "Clare's so frightfully

sentimental."',<sup>73</sup>) it distresses Nanda, particularly in the latter part of the novel, by which time Clare's determination to enter the Catholic church, despite her parents' opposition, has become a fixation. Clare's is the sort of self-dramatising nature which thrives on emotion, a predilection which the 'rarified' atmosphere of the convent serves to feed. In an ordinary girls' high or public school (the latter famous in their early days for their 'hearty' ethos) Clare would have been teased out of her fervour:<sup>74</sup>

'I've got to be a Catholic or nothing..' [Nanda] stole a glance at Clare's face. Something about its bright ecstatic eyes and half open mouth reminded her of Theresa Leighton and touched her with a faint discomfort.

On this occasion, Nanda is already unsettled, having received a letter from Mother Percival admonishing her for various faults, including her attitude to her friendships. ('"I notice that you choose your friends rather for such superficial attributes as cleverness and humour and even for the still more unworthy and frivolous reasons of mere 'good looks' and a social position above your own."',<sup>75</sup>) In her unease, Clare's fervour and her physical touch combine to upset Nanda so much that she can no longer bear to remain alone in Clare's company:<sup>76</sup>

Clare...bent her wild, dreaming face towards Nanda. She was so pale with emotion that her freckles showed almost black.

'Darling, darling,' she whispered quickly, and gave Nanda's hand a sudden squeeze.

Nanda jumped up...

Compared to the self-possessed Leonie and Rosario, and quiet Nanda herself, Clare is loud, lacking in self-control, slightly vulgar. Her laugh is always described as wild and harsh ('her crows of laughter'<sup>77</sup>). She shrieks when she talks, is often sarcastic and sneering to Leonie and Nanda, and is much given to fits of hysterical weeping, usually in public. At prayers one evening Nanda watches her friends and notes the difference between Clare and the others:<sup>78</sup>

In front of her knelt Leonie and Rosario with stern, peaceful faces; across the aisle she could see Clare ... From the shaking of her shoulders, she knew that she was giving in to one of her fits of weeping.

The ease with which Clare can abandon herself to her emotions suggests that her feelings do not run very deep. Leonie, on the other hand, shies away from any expression of personal feeling, but clearly does feel very deeply: despite Clare's trembling hands and declarations of affection, it is Leonie who offers Nanda the more loving friendship. As we have seen, this is consistent with a tradition in the school story, where writers often approve of characters who display a certain reserve.

The letter which has so upset Nanda is only the latest in a series of systematic attempts to destroy her friendships with Clare, Leonie and Rosario in favour of younger girls. On an earlier occasion, after she has lectured Nanda on the 'silliness' of her "rather morbid

interest in Clare Rockingham's appearance" Mother Radcliffe suggests that: "There are girls such as Marjorie Appleyard and Monica Owen who are about your equals in years and station of life. I think you would do well to cultivate their society."<sup>79</sup> Nanda is sufficiently shaken by this interview to try to obey the nun but the experiment is a failure: Marjorie and Monica can have little appeal to someone accustomed to a friend like Leonie:<sup>80</sup>

The experiment was not a great success for Marjorie and Nanda bored each other even more disastrously than they had three years ago, while the unexpected attention warmed Monica's dim friendliness into an embarrassing devotion.

Marjorie, a virtuous, uninspiring child, is one of the most lamb-like of the 'sheep' Leonie so despises. Even Mother Frances tells her, "You really are rather like a little sheep."<sup>81</sup> We can see why the nuns would prefer to have Nanda - whom they have identified as a potential subversive from the very beginning - under Marjorie's influence rather than Leonie's or Clare's. In the school play Marjorie physically replaces Leonie as Dante's Beatrice, but she can never be a real substitute for her. Neither can Monica who, if she is a sheep, is definitely a black one, but Nanda's championing of Monica's cause helps to harden the 'small core of rebelliousness which had been growing secretly for four years'<sup>82</sup> and increases Nanda's reputation among the nuns as a trouble-maker.

The only time when Nanda and her friends are left alone to enjoy their friendship in peace is during an epidemic of measles. Convalescing in the infirmary they are comparatively free from discipline and supervision: 'They formed a compact and almost inseparable group, and their number freed them from the grave reproach of "going about in twos."' <sup>83</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, in her introduction to the Virago edition of Frost in May, describes this episode as 'the measles idyll' <sup>84</sup>; it is not the only respite from daily routine described in the novel - convent life is full of feast days and holidays - but it is the only such break not connected with a religious celebration and therefore a unique freedom from the superstitious and spiritual atmosphere which pervades the rest of convent life and the novel.

Of all the episodes in the novel, it is perhaps this one which stands out as White 'captures exquisitely that mixture of romanticism, companionship and nascent sexuality which binds [the girls] together as they embark on their adolescent years.' <sup>85</sup> Antonia White describes one evening of the 'idyll' in detail, and the golden colour and music which suffuse the scene lend it the intensity of a painting. (Elsie Oxenham specialised in just this sort of romantic, golden description in her Abbey books: 'Joy [wore] ..the pretty brown handwoven frock ... with its patterns woven in bronze, that matched her flaming hair, and dull old

gold.'<sup>86</sup>) The girls are sitting by the fireside and Rosario is persuaded to sing for them. The Pre-Raphaelite splendour of Rosario's 'thick fleecy gold' hair which 'hung in showers round her shoulders' and Clare's 'great, coppery mane that nearly reached her waist'<sup>87</sup> make them beautiful, romantic figures in the firelight, as Nanda recognises. Leonie (with only a 'brief untidy plait'<sup>88</sup> to reinforce her androgyny) is more reluctant to abandon herself to the mood of the evening, although it is she who asks Rosario to sing, and she who has written the music for the most beautiful of Rosario's songs. Nanda is moved by the song and by the fact of Leonie's having written it, as she is by all beautiful things, but Leonie soon breaks the spell by turning on the lights. Clare calls her 'a heartless brute'<sup>89</sup> but in fact Leonie is probably the most sensitive of them all, to the extent that she has to hide her emotions behind a gruff voice and a show of 'masculine indifference'<sup>90</sup>, or, as already noted, behind the formality of art. Even physically she withdraws, protecting herself with folded arms and downcast head:<sup>91</sup>

Rosario bent over her guitar. In the glow its belly had a ruddy shine. Her hair...seemed to give off flakes of light, while Clare's red-brown head was frayed with gold at the edges. Nanda and Leonie drew back into the shadows; the latter huddled in her chair with her arms folded and her chin sunk on her chest.

In the subsequent chatter about 'where we shall all be in ten years' time' Leonie and Nanda remain in the shadows,

Leonie giving a flippant reply and Nanda declining to speak at all. 'Nanda's a dark horse,' says Leonie affectionately<sup>92</sup>, and by this stage in the novel the reader, realising that in fact Nanda has a fairly good idea of what her future is to be, can appreciate, perhaps more than Leonie, the truth of this.

Nanda's need to earn her own living when she leaves school- as a teacher, one of the few respectable careers for a middle class girl at the time - is one more thing which sets her apart from her more privileged friends: no wonder she does not want to dwell on it on this idyllic evening. Of course, another reason why Leonie and Nanda do not join in their friends' discussion is that they are some years younger; adulthood is that bit further off and therefore more difficult to imagine. Nanda is already aware that the future available to her is limited in scope, and Leonie, with the prospect of being presented at court and making a suitable marriage, may have similar misgivings. Schoolgirls in the early twentieth century and, indeed, until fairly recently, often had to face the harsh fact that despite an expensive education, the avenues open to them in adult life were limited. University education was not available to all, and even those girls whose parents could afford the fees or who won scholarships often had to face strong opposition to such an 'unladylike' ambition. Vera Brittain, whose Testament of Youth was published in the same year as Frost

in May, recalls her father's objections to her desire to go to Oxford:<sup>93</sup>

I never ceased...to pester my parents to send me to college. These importunities were invariably received by my father with the statement that he had already spent quite as much on my education as was necessary, and that 'little girls' must allow their elders to know what was best for them.

A fictional schoolgirl, Elinor Brent-Dyer's Jo Bettany, who has no ambitions to go to university, but cannot, at the age of seventeen, imagine herself married (although she does in fact marry young and have eleven children) is accustomed, like Leonie, to 'shy away' from talk about the future. Like many girls of her class, the first generation in their families to benefit from good secondary education, Joey, in a novel published only two years after Frost in May, considers her future options rather stifling:<sup>94</sup>

'I shall just stay at home and help... It does not appeal to me after the full life we lead here - it seems so - so little, somehow. It's just doing little bits of things that aren't important.'

For the daughters of the Catholic aristocracy, like Leonie, life may have been superficially rather more glamorous than this, but it was also even narrower.

The nuns complain that Nanda chooses her friends because they are physically attractive and of superior social standing. This is unfair, but if we consider Nanda's subconscious reasons for choosing Leonie and Clare we may

decide that the accusation has some truth, on one level. Leonie is chosen partly for the strength and originality of her personality, but there is no denying the force of her physical attraction. Nanda sees Leonie in fundamentally romantic and androgynous terms - as a princely, noble, boyish figure. These qualities are emphasised again and again in the novel, to the extent that Paulina Palmer points out how easily Adrienne Rich's theory of the lesbian continuum can be applied to 'Nanda's erotic involvements with her schoolmates.'<sup>95</sup> Quite apart from the sensuality which enriches her feelings for Leonie, to Nanda, well aware of her lowly status as a middle class convert, to have earned the affection and respect of someone of Leonie's calibre clearly means a great deal: perhaps it is difficult to separate Leonie's personality from the aristocratic Catholicism which is so attractive to Nanda, for Catholicism is absolutely central to Leonie's identity. Leonie seems to be desired, however, for who she is as much as for what she represents; more so than Clare, who fulfils a very important need in Nanda: as a Protestant she is the ultimate outsider. Even poor humiliated Monica at least has the grace to come from a Catholic family with a tradition of sending its daughters to Lippington. In answering Clare's questions about Catholic dogma, Nanda is for once able to display how much she does know, to what extent she does belong to that coveted Catholic world. As she grows older and less emotional about her religion, Nanda's attitude to Clare's

hoped-for conversion becomes more ambivalent. She realises that Clare's motivation is less religious conviction than a desire to gratify her desire for the dramatic and histrionic.

If Clare and Leonie fulfil certain needs in Nanda, what does she, as a friend, provide? As a character, she is overshadowed by the more dramatic personalities of her friends, but she is, as Penny Brown points out<sup>97</sup> 'attractive and sympathetic.' Clare, as we have seen, enjoys the attention that Nanda focuses on her, and derives pleasure from taking advantage of Nanda's comparative naivety. She is bewildered and hurt when the younger girl begins to respond rather more judiciously to her fervour and enthusiasms. Leonie also recognises that Nanda is naive:<sup>97</sup>

'Anyone with half an eye could see it [Nanda's novel] was written by a perfect sucking-dove of innocence.'

but she never exploits or ridicules this. Clare is incapable of any relationship based on equality and mutual respect and liking; she needs to adore (Rosario) or be adored (by Nanda). She has little to offer a friend. By the end of the novel it is clear that Clare, unlike Leonie or Nanda herself, is not very intelligent; now that Nanda has grown out of being an adoring Junior and can see her more objectively, Clare has lost much of her appeal. Nanda's changing attitude to Clare is one device by which White

suggests her developing intellectual and emotional maturity. When Nanda is so worried about the discovery of her clandestine novel, it is Leonie who tries to reassure and look after her, and, for once, in archetypally feminine ways - bringing her milk and entertaining her guests. Clare's support is neither sought nor offered.

In a novel like Frost in May where everything is filtered through the perception of one character, it can be difficult for the reader to respond objectively to that character. In Frost in May our attitude to Nanda will be partly determined by the light in which her friends seem to see her. Thus, certain remarks of Clare's, and Nanda's reaction to them, highlight the younger girl's naivety and self-consciousness, while Leonie's loyal, affectionate friendship and obvious enjoyment of Nanda's company and conversation reflect well on Nanda's intelligence and strength of character.

As Frost in May charts Nanda's progress from the age of nine to fourteen, we naturally see her develop and mature from a small girl to a young woman. To a large extent this development - her growing rebelliousness, her increasing aesthetic sensibility and her intellectual progress - is shown through her changing relationships with the other girls. For example, her altered response to Clare towards the end of the novel demonstrates not only that she can

better appreciate the flaws in Clare's character, but also a more mature attitude to her own religion. Although she still prays for Clare's conversion she can no longer join in Clare's exaggerated fervour, and for the first time tries to make Clare consider why she wants to be a Catholic:<sup>98</sup>

Nanda frowned and bit her lip. 'I wonder why you want to be a Catholic so very much?'

By the time Nanda hears that Clare's parents have finally consented to her conversion she is so upset at the injustice of her own expulsion from Lippington that the news hardly registers at all, and she is unable to react.

We have already seen how the expulsion of Monica, whom Nanda befriends at Mother Radcliffe's suggestion, contributes to Nanda's growing rebelliousness, not against the church itself but against 'the Lippington methods'<sup>99</sup>: the snobbery of the nuns, their refusal to countenance any but religious feeling, which blinds them and seeks to blind their pupils to what Nanda is beginning to experience as the wonder of art and beauty, their hypocritic and suspicious attitude to relationships. Her friendship with Leonie, which increases her sense of her personal autonomy and exposes her to new, radical ways of thinking ('"But Leonie, that's sheer blasphemy ... Good heavens, it's quite true..."<sup>100</sup>) can only add to this. If some of Leonie's nonchalance is, as I have suggested, assumed as a defence against the demands of emotion, Nanda too has had to learn, early in her school

life, to build up her defences, in this case against authority:<sup>101</sup>

A few weeks ago Nanda would have wept at such criticism, but to her own surprise she found she was growing a hard little protective shell.

Nanda is frequently shaken by the nuns' censure, often directed at her pride, her stubbornness and her choice of friends, but her 'hard little protective shell' makes her fairly resilient until her final debacle: expulsion, following the discovery of the novel which seems to the nuns and her father sordid and blasphemous (she is not given the chance to explain her plan of having all the characters repent and turn to the Catholic church at the end of the novel.) Mother Radcliffe has finally succeeded in breaking through that hard shell, which she insists is for the girl's own benefit:<sup>102</sup>

'I am only acting as God's instrument in this. I had to break your will before your whole nature was deformed.'

The nuns would probably never have succeeded in breaking Leonie's will in such a way, but with Leonie, independent of spirit as Nanda but with an irrefutable Catholic pedigree, they would never have dared try. Nanda herself, in her distress at being humiliated and having to leave Lippington and her friends, thinks of herself as weak - Mother Radcliffe has already suggested that she is corrupt, a spiritual 'germ carrier',<sup>103</sup>:

'It's too much. [ie. giving up her friends] I'm not a...not a very strong sort of person.'

but this is not actually true. Nanda is not an ineffectual character; if she were merely weak the nuns would not have been so determined to make an example of her. She is, however, and always has been, profoundly insecure, caught between the secular world of home and her father's academic ambitions for her and the religious, secluded world of Lippington:<sup>104</sup>

But she felt blindly that she could only live in that rare, intense element [ie. Lippington]; the bluff, breezy air of that 'really good High School' would kill her.

She is repelled and frightened by the latter, and uncomfortably aware that she does not really belong in the former. Although Leonie helps Nanda by helping to develop her sense of her own worth, whatever her background (she is very angry when Nanda draws attention to the difference in their stations), she also serves as a constant reminder of that desired world from which Nanda will always be excluded and which she herself inhabits so carelessly. Observations such as:<sup>105</sup>

'I'd never advise anyone to become a Catholic... If you're one, you've got to be one. But you can't change people. Catholicism isn't a religion, it's a nationality.'

are extremely pertinent and show Leonie wise beyond her years, but they must be comfortless to poor Nanda, desperate

to be a 'real Catholic'. When Leonie tells Nanda that she doesn't understand 'that specific Catholic something',<sup>106</sup> she is not, unlike the nuns, trying to hurt Nanda, but her candour brings home to Nanda the knowledge that "I suppose I'll never be a proper Catholic",<sup>107</sup> more directly than do all the rather snide remarks made by the nuns.

As Nanda grows into adolescence the arts begin to assume an important role in her life. To some extent, having identified herself with the 'literary romantics',<sup>108</sup> of the school, she is going through a self-conscious, pretentious phase, flirting with writing, music, painting and drama in turn. But gradually she develops a genuine love of art and beauty, receiving a pleasure from it which she guiltily realises has nothing to do with religious feeling. Nanda's love of the arts is as much a rebellion against the nuns' teachings as is her insistence on being friends with Leonie and Clare. She knows very well indeed that the church frowns heavily upon emotion which is inspired by any other than a spiritual source and indeed, is deeply suspicious of any art which threatens its teachings or highlights sensuality and worldly pleasure in any way. When Nanda is found with a copy of Francis Thompson's poetry, a gift from Leonie, Mother Percival is disgusted by its sensuality, and the reader intrigued by the ambivalence towards passion. ('I shall never feel a girl's soft arms/Without horror of the skin',<sup>109</sup>). But Nanda, once she

has discovered the unusual delight which art can give her, will not give it up even though she knows it is occupying a place in her life which should - according to everything she has been taught be occupied by religious feeling:<sup>110</sup>

She tried to persuade herself that her love of beauty was connected with God...but some small, clear, irritating voice assured her that it was an independent growth... Yet when she read the lives of the saints it seemed clear to her that their feeling at the thought of God was of the same kind as her own extreme delight when Leonie read Blake aloud, or Rosario sang Wolf.

Thus she identifies with the ecstasy felt by saints, but for her such rapture is not religiously, but artistically, inspired. More than that, it has an important human element, for it is not the arts in themselves that move her to 'extreme delight', but the arts as interpreted/performed by her own friends.

Her friendships, particularly with Leonie, expose her to art in a way which her formal education never could. Leonie is musically gifted, a lover of poetry, and a moving and inspiring 'Beatrice' in the school play (until the 'wilful and sensuous pleasure'<sup>111</sup> which she took in the performance leads the nuns to give the part away to Marjorie Appleyard instead.) For Leonie, art is often the only means through which she will allow herself to express emotion. I have already shown how she writes poems and music for Rosario but will not speak more directly about her friendship. When Nanda is moved to hysterical, blissful

tears at the beauty of 'The Vision of Dante' with Rosario as Dante and Leonie 'impressive and beautiful',<sup>112</sup> as Beatrice, she insists to Leonie:<sup>113</sup>

'When I got so excited about the play the other night it hadn't anything to do with you or Rosario or God or anything. It was just the thing itself.'

This, however, is not quite true: it is the quality of Rosario and Leonie's interpretation of Dante's poetry which makes Nanda respond so keenly to its beauty. And, indeed, the close, undemonstrative relationship between Rosario and Leonie helps to produce the 'strange electricity',<sup>114</sup> which makes their portrayal of Dante and his adored, unattainable Beatrice so moving. When Leonie is replaced by Marjorie, the play loses the magic quality which had so disturbed the nuns. Leonie is so upset at having the part so unjustly taken from her that she is, for the only time in the novel, seen in tears: 'Never before had anyone seen Leonie cry.'<sup>115</sup> Again, there is a school story tradition of schoolgirls who scorn tears, reflecting perhaps a reaction against the sentimental presentation of Victorian heroines:<sup>116</sup>

Corney would feel everlastingly disgraced if anyone saw her cry.

She scorned tears...

This incident so infuriates Nanda that she is suddenly able to articulate her anger at the extremely limited view of art and religion taught by the Lippington nuns, inspiring her to

an unprecedented outburst against their 'beastly cant':<sup>117</sup>

'Why can't we for once do something for its own sake, instead of tacking everything on to our eternal salvation... It's impossible to think about God and Religion every minute of one's day...I don't want poetry and pictures and things to be messages from God. I don't mind them being that as well if you like, but not only that...I want them to be complete in themselves.'

This outburst is interrupted by the approach of Mother Percival who admonishes her for 'talking in twos', thus textually reinforcing the impossibility of such 'blasphemous' views being able to be explored.

During Nanda's five years at Lippington, the Catholic church and the convent's ethos are absolutely central to her development. But despite her resolutions to 'think less of human friendships and more of Our Lady and the saints whom she had so neglected of late',<sup>118</sup> she channels a huge amount of her energy and emotion into her human relationships with Clare and Leonie. The intensity of the feelings she experiences are not unusual, but they are enhanced and deepened by the rarefied atmosphere of the convent and by the knowledge that, in 'indulging' in such intense human relationships she is somehow offending God and certainly annoying the nuns. The nuns' constant strictures against 'particular friendships' serve to give every conversation, every meeting, the romance of forbidden fruit, in the same way that strong opposition to a love affair may drive the lovers into each other's arms more readily than anything. In

effect, the nuns create a hothouse atmosphere and then refuse to accept the inevitable consequences of one hundred girls growing up in such a climate. As Nanda says, no-one can think of religion all the time, and it is absolutely natural that she and her friends will focus some of the emotional energy which their daily involvement in the Catholic religion cannot help but stir up - Catholicism is after all an emotive religion - on human rather than divine relationships. The fact that Nanda does not give in either to guilt about neglecting God or to pressure from the nuns indicates Nanda's determination and her conviction that human friendships are important in their own right.

The nuns clearly fear 'particular friendships' on a number of counts. The argument that they contravene the church's teaching by being 'against charity' is a tenuous one: in the Bible, devoted friendship (David/Jonathan; Ruth/Naomi) is extolled. The nuns seem much more concerned about the dangers of non-religious feeling, unrestrained conversation and the possibility, perhaps, of sexual indulgence - although this particular fear may not be conscious and is certainly never made explicit. In Frost in May there is no physical sexual experimentation (unlike Edna O'Brien's The Country Girls, where two convent schoolgirls engage in mutual masturbation: 'Baba and I sat there and shared secrets and once we took off our knickers in there and tickled one another. The greatest secret of all.'<sup>119</sup>)

However, the trembling physicality of Clare and the effect of her touch on Nanda ('the queerest shivering sensation in the roof of her mouth'<sup>120</sup>), as well as Leonie's androgynous beauty and suppressed emotions point to very strong sensual tensions. A good deal of the power of Rosario and Leonie's performance in 'The Vision of Dante' derives from their portrayal of a love that was not consummated. This heightened sense of emotion and desire is consistent with much adolescent experience: it is reminiscent of some of Angela Brazil's more overtly emotional relationships, as well as the often suppressed love and desire which the Abbey girls feel for each other but it is intensified by the Lippington atmosphere.

Judging by all that has been written on the subject it seems reasonable to assert that girls at school have always had intense feelings for each other to a greater or lesser extent. It is really only in the twentieth century, as I have shown, that we have become so obsessed with categorising the phenomenon as sexual, and therefore 'lesbian'. Vivienne Griffiths has observed the still-continuing phenomenon of the 'crush' in the 1990s, with rituals approximating to those which characterised her own schooldays in the 1960s.<sup>121</sup> Much twentieth-century interest in women's friendships in previous eras is obscured by a preoccupation with whether or not they had what we would consider sexual relations. It seems very probable that in

many cases they did not: freedom to express love - whether heterosexual or homosexual - with our bodies has not always been acceptable for women, and nineteenth and early twentieth century women were brought up to fear and distrust their bodies and taught that sexual pleasure was sinful - hardly the climate to encourage sexual experimentation. As Lillian Faderman has pointed out in Surpassing the Love of Men:<sup>122</sup>

Our century has a passion for categorising love ...which stems from the supposedly liberalised twentieth century view of sex that, ironically, has created its own rigidity.

Faderman's view has, of course, been challenged recently<sup>123</sup> but the preoccupation with genital sex which characterises some recent lesbian and feminist criticism could be seen as restrictive. My contention throughout this study is that, in examining the school and college friendships in the novels on which I focus, we should guard against just such a categorising, labelling approach, for it cannot add anything to our understanding of them, only limit it. Of course we cannot rediscover Victorian 'innocence' or ignorance of sexuality, but it should be possible to recognise and celebrate the often intense and sensual natures of many of these friendships - not all - without simply concentrating on and speculating about their sexual potential.

In the case of Nanda and her friends, there is certainly a potentially erotic dimension to their

relationships, as there is in many emotional relationships and, indeed, in much religious fervour. It is interesting to speculate on the sexuality of Leonie, whose androgyny is utterly central to her identity. Leonie is constantly seen not just as a boyish figure, but as handsome and desirable. (The boyish characters in the traditional girls' school story - Tom of the Chalet School; Bill of Malory Towers - tended to be plain.) The delight she inspires in Nanda is sensual, but not disturbingly physical in the way that Clare's febrile attention is: 'a little bubble of pleasure burst in her throat every time Leonie grinned at her.'<sup>124</sup> The sexual potential between the girls may well be the focus of much of the nuns' disapproval and suspicion, but we must not dwell on it to the extent that we miss other important elements. Nanda's friendships in Frost in May are significant not only because of the quality of the emotions they invoke in her, but because the experience of relating to other girls help her to develop, intellectually and emotionally. As I have shown, Antonia White, like many writers of novels about girls at school, tends to use her heroine's friendships as a vehicle for her treatment of other important themes - art, religion, snobbery, etc. This emphasises the fact that Nanda's friendships are all-consuming; they colour and influence every aspect of her life at Lippington.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Friendship as rebellion: Antonia White's The Lost Traveller

As I have already suggested, for schoolgirls in the early part of this century, school offered significant opportunities for establishing friendships outside the family. Of course, as schools were chosen by parents, they were still exerting some control over what sort of girl their daughters associated with, but even so, the choice of friends remained, to a large extent, an area where a girl could assert herself. Naturally, the extent of parents' influence depended largely on whether the school was day or boarding, and this is very neatly reflected in the contrast between authority's attitudes to friendship in Frost in May and its 'sequel' The Lost Traveller.

For Clara Batchelor, the 'continuation' of Frost in May's heroine Nanda Grey<sup>1</sup>, friendship has always represented rebellion, one of her only possible means of asserting her will against the strictures of authority. In Frost in May that authority was embodied in the nuns who ran her strict convent school and by extension the Catholic church itself. In The Lost Traveller the church continues to make demands on Clara but the real authority against which she must rebel is that of her parents, and in particular her tyrannical father, Claude.

At Lippington (renamed Mount Hilary in The Lost Traveller and its two sequels) Nanda formed close friendships with girls of her own choosing, despite the active discouragement and suspicion on the part of the nuns. At St. Mark's Girls' School, to which she is sent at the age of fifteen, discipline is much less rigid and the girls' friendships are not subject to official surveillance:<sup>2</sup>

In the enclosed world of Mount Hilary...It was only by subterfuge that she and Nicole [ie. Leonie] had managed to snatch any private conversation ... Much of the charm of her endless tete-a-tetes with Ruth and Patsy came from the old ban on 'being in twos'...

Because of the rarified 'hothouse' atmosphere of the convent, the friendships which Nanda experienced there tended to be intense and emotional, as shown in the previous chapter. This intensity was reinforced by White's narrative technique: a single point of view - Nanda's - was maintained throughout, and the episodic structure of the novel made certain events - exchanges with Leonie and Clare, the school play, some unpleasant interviews with the nuns on the subject of 'particular friendships', the Pre-Raphaelite idyll of the measles episode, etc. - stand out as particularly significant and memorable.

In The Lost Traveller, the quality of Clara's friendships is much less intense but the function they perform is similar: again they are a vehicle for

self-expression and rebellion. The Lost Traveller cannot be seen as a school story in the tradition of Frost in May but the sequences concerning St. Mark's owe a conscious debt to the genre, which White sometimes exploits for comic effect. At St. Mark's, Clara is more or less free to make friends with anyone she chooses. The girls tend to form cliques, but Clara, christened 'The Cat That Walked By Itself', seeks full membership of none of them. In contrast to her almost painful desire to be accepted at the convent, she approaches life at St. Mark's with 'an attitude of amused tolerance borrowed from Nicole de Savigny'<sup>3</sup> [Leonie in Frost in May]. The comparative freedom of her secular school goes to Clara's head; her 'mildly outrageous'<sup>4</sup> behaviour in class ('she threw herself wholeheartedly into the part of the privileged eccentric'<sup>5</sup>) appeases the schoolboyish, sporty 'Hearties', and helps to compensate for her non-involvement in school games, while her obvious intelligence gains the respect of the 'Brainies', one of whom, Ruth, is to become a close friend.

Cliques are a powerful force in a school community and Clara soon realises that at St. Mark's the Hearties and the Brainies are 'the two most important sets'<sup>6</sup>, united in their scorning of the lowly, studious 'Swats'. They exert an influence which Clara has not encountered before - that of peer pressure. Her desire to conform at least in the early days at Lippington/Mount Hilary was motivated by her own

uncomfortable awareness that she was an outsider in the upper-class, Catholic milieu. The nuns play on this anxiety in their attempt to break and reset Nanda's will according to theirs/God's, but no pressure, or criticism of her chosen friendships, is exerted on her by any collective body of fellow pupils. The convent girls are so rigorously policed, so closely monitored, that unofficial organisation on any scale would be unthinkable. The rules are unbendable but they are recognisable: there is only one accepted norm for Nanda to deviate from. At St. Mark's the girls are freer in every way from official discipline but this freedom enables the various cliques to set up their own, unwritten codes of practice, of what is and is not 'done' at the school. In any community, fictional or otherwise, such rules and conventions are always harder for the newcomer to grasp than official regulations. It is not long before Clara, through the choice of Patsy Cohen as a close friend, offends against this code.

In Frost in May the nuns' censure of Nanda's friendships was motivated by complex impulses and fears, and strikes the reader as rather sinister. In The Lost Traveller, the Hearties' stern disapproval of Patsy Cohen is presented as comic. Compared to Leonie/Nicole and Clara/Nanda's other convent friends, these girls appear immature and rather petty, made ridiculous by their schoolboy slang ("I gather the general feeling is that you

chaps want it to be Pax then?"<sup>7</sup>) and their almost total lack of any individual identities. Like Leonie they resist and despise the conventional demands of femininity, but whereas Leonie is bewitchingly androgynous, with a noble charm, these girls are merely caricatures of the boy-aping, hockey-stick-wielding 'chaps' popularly supposed to haunt the pages of schoolgirl fiction, priggish and herd-like. (We should remember that although The Lost Traveller is set during World War One, it was published in 1950, by which time the schoolgirl had become an easy target for mockery.) But however ridiculous they are, however amusing the 'very Angela Brazilish' incident in which they try to persuade Clara to 'drop' Patsy<sup>8</sup>, whom they despise for being frivolous, flirtatious, uninterested in games and vain, their status in the school lends them an authority of which Clara is only too aware:<sup>9</sup>

They were established school powers; they were in the same form and would move up with her every year. To have the four of them permanently allied against her would make the rest of her life at St. Mark's extremely unpleasant.

Clara refuses to give in to the Hearties, however, using gestures borrowed from Nicole to help her retain her composure in what is, for all its humour as an 'Angela Brazilish' set piece, a trying experience for her. Eventually, respecting her loyalty to her friend, her adversaries leave her in peace, rather to Clara's surprise:<sup>10</sup>

It was Clara's first victory over public opinion. It was also the first of many fights she was to have with various people, herself included, on the subject of Patsy Cohen.

On one level Patsy seems to be a strange choice of friend for a girl who has had a friend like Leonie/Nicole. Intellectually, Clara and Patsy have nothing in common, Patsy being content to muddle through school with the minimum of effort. Isabel, Clara's mother whom she despises, dislikes Patsy and constantly complains: "I can't see what a girl as clever as you sees in that brainless little thing."<sup>11</sup> If Isabel cannot see it, however, the reader is very well aware of Patsy's attraction. Unlike Clara, who has for some years now been deeply affected by art and beauty, agonising over the problem of reconciling them to her Catholic faith, Patsy's approach to life is uncomplicated:<sup>12</sup>

Life presented no abstract problems to her...  
General ideas had not the faintest interest  
for Patsy; her mind was concrete and empirical.  
Art was simply a talent...Religion, like music,  
was a natural taste. Either it appealed to you  
or it didn't.

Naturally such an outlook is refreshing for Clara, troubled by the intensity of her own response to abstract questions and fresh from the demanding world of the convent where she was constantly forced to examine her soul. Besides, if Patsy is unable to satisfy Clara's 'clever' side, she has, as we shall see later, another friend who does so admirably.

When Clara meets Patsy (or rather, renews her acquaintance, for Patsy and her sisters, strangely enough, have spent a few terms at Mount Hilary, where they were even more outsiders than Clara) she is at that painful, awkward stage of adolescence where she catches odd glimpses of herself as a grown woman, but at the same time yearns to escape into the security of childhood. Until she is befriended by Patsy, Clara still clings to the trappings of an uncomplicated, androgynous 'tomboy' identity, enjoying boys' games and comics, but under Patsy's influence she abandons such childishness. If Patsy's simplicity appeals to that part of Clara which wants to resist the approach of 'serious' adulthood with its attendant problems, her frivolity and sophistication appeal to her natural adolescent yearning to look grown up and physically attractive, a tendency which has of course been strictly repressed in the convent:<sup>13</sup>

At Mount Hilary, frivolity had been sternly suppressed. Clara was at just at that stage to respond ardently to Patsy's interest in everything the nuns had taught her to depise.

To a girl who has sent five years of her life in an unbecoming 'high-necked, long skirted uniform dress of navy serge'<sup>14</sup>, with her hair plaited tightly back, and forbidden to look in a mirror, there is an understandable attraction in the new-found freedom to indulge in 'worldly vanity'. At the beginning of the novel Clara is painfully shy about removing her dress in front of her mother: in Patsy's

bedroom she seems quite happy to display her underclothes as the girls try on each other's clothes. With Leonie/Nicole Clara had always felt herself 'the follower who trailed behind the pioneer'<sup>15</sup>: Patsy is no pioneer but in a way she does become something of a mentor for Clara who is happy to accept her lead in matters of dress and appearance:<sup>16</sup>

When Clara, on her sixteenth birthday, was promoted to a small dress allowance, she spent it entirely under Patsy's direction, often acquiring things she dare not wear at home.

It is Patsy, surprisingly sophisticated for a schoolgirl in 1914, who tells Clara the 'facts of life', which until now she has resisted hearing, pretending to Isabel that she already knows, because, despite her curiosity, she cannot bear to be enlightened by the mother she despises. Here we see the importance of the adolescent's peer group in passing on the knowledge essential for maturity: this is in direct contrast to the traditional society, where only an adult could perform this role.

Patsy offers Clara a warm, undemanding, easy companionship which she has never experienced before, either at home or at school. This warmth is extended to Clara not only by Patsy herself but by her whole family, particularly her mother Lilian. The very house they live in emanates friendliness and welcome:<sup>17</sup>

As soon as she stepped into the...hall...she seemed to be enfolded in warm brightness even

on the dullest day.

The Cohens become a substitute family for lonely Clara, just as Lady Cresset and Charles do later in the novel. They offer her a happier, less exacting model of family life and love than she has ever received from Claude and Isabel:<sup>18</sup>

...all the Cohens openly and demonstratively adored each other; there were no undercurrents of jealousy and dislike.

They were gay and affectionate rather than passionate. The girls quarrelled and made up again as spontaneously as a family of kittens; no smothered resentments thickened the air as they did in her own home.

Because the Cohen home is always full of friends and visitors, including young soldiers on leave, it is through Patsy that Clara makes her first real social acquaintance with young men. As a child 'she had despised other small girls and her friends had all been boys'<sup>19</sup> but now that she is growing up she learns to flirt ('"It's fun trying to intrigue someone new",<sup>20</sup>) although the young men do not treat her as anything other than the naive schoolgirl she is (which hurts her vanity but is actually rather a relief).

Clara's insistence on spending so much time at the Cohens' home in Garthwaite Crescent, and the easy way in which she fritters away her time there, is, for her, an important statement of rebellion. As we have seen, she is reacting against the convent and the asceticism it demanded, but she is also rebelling against her parents - against

Isabel, whom she despises and who detests Patsy, and against Claude and the future he has mapped out for her. Claude wants Clara to go to Cambridge, which part of her yearns for, and then to become a schoolteacher like him, the very thought of which fills her with dread. At Garthwaite Crescent Patsy accepts the fact that Clara is intelligent but regards it merely as a handicap in attracting men (which it possibly was: Patsy is voicing a standard early twentieth century response to the 'educated woman' who was widely believed to have unsexed herself), rather than as an attribute which should be developed:<sup>21</sup>

She had a touching affection for Clara's 'braininess' but regarded her as slightly demented.

If the cheerful confusion of Garthwaite Crescent is for Clara a physical escape from the dreariness of Valetta Road, Patsy also represents an emotional escape, into a charmed realm where Clara does not have to think about serious matters but can be frivolous, gossipy and relaxed.

In a boarding school situation, the influence of home attitudes can be ignored to a certain extent but for day school pupils, parental influence can hardly be disregarded, particularly in the early part of the twentieth century, when teenage daughters had much less freedom than they enjoy today, and when they were still expected to be essentially dutiful. In the convent, parental approval or disapproval

of friends was irrelevant; it was the nuns, not her parents, who objected to Nanda's attachment to Leonie and Clare. In The Lost Traveller, however, the school Hearties are not the only people who disapprove of Patsy: Clara's friendship with her arouses criticism at home in Valetta Road. Clearly some of this criticism is inspired, particularly on Isabel's part, by simple jealousy: Clara so obviously prefers to spend time at Patsy's home rather than her own. Interestingly, it is Isabel, herself vain and worldly, who is the more disapproving of Patsy. Claude would have preferred a more serious-minded friend for his 'clever' daughter, and he laments the fact that she now has no Catholic friends, but he cannot help responding to Patsy's 'easy good nature',<sup>22</sup>. Isabel refuses to allow Patsy any good points: she considers her vulgar and stupid. Perhaps she is, on some level, jealous of Patsy's youthful bloom, to which Claude is certainly sexually attracted. She may also be upset by the fact that Clara not only tolerates but welcomes in Patsy traits for which she despises her mother - Patsy and Isabel share a preoccupation with clothes and looks. Because of the multiple points of view employed in The Lost Traveller we receive enough of Isabel's own awareness to realise that she is genuinely hurt by Clara's contemptuous rejection of her. Criticism of Patsy is an implied criticism of Clara herself, one of the few ways in which Isabel can express her resentment.

Clara's battles over Patsy are not confined, however, to the home and school fronts. The most important fight she has is with herself. Throughout her life Clara's primary driving force has been the desire to please her father, with whom she has an uncomfortable, cloying relationship. Since becoming an adolescent Clara's own will has begun to assert itself more insistently and she begins to resent his tyranny, his frequent injustices and impossible demands, while continuing to adore him with an intensity that hints of incestuous desire on both their parts:<sup>23</sup>

...he kissed her goodnight, more lingeringly than he had done for many months, stroking her hair while she tried to tell him what a wonderful evening it had been.

Claude wishes Clara to be a scholar like himself, an idea which both delights and terrifies her. At the same time he is beginning to realise that she is growing into an attractive young woman, and having seen her kissed - very innocently - by a distant cousin on the day of her grandfather's funeral, has a tendency to think of her as 'fallen'. He certainly responds to her on a sexual level, while wanting her to remain undefiled ("I wanted one thing in my life to be perfect."<sup>24</sup>) This double standard echoes and reinforces Clara's own double-edged attitude to her sexuality: on the one hand, she fears it, vowing - as do many adolescent heroines - that she will never marry; on the other, she tries to grow up as quickly as possible and dreams of 'he' who will sweep her off her feet. ('On her

seventeenth birthday she was seized with...panic in case he never appeared at all.'<sup>25</sup>) Patsy represents a welcome distraction from these disturbing feelings and conflicting impulses. Dressing up and gossiping about sex with Patsy gives her the opportunity to gratify her desires in a safe and unthreatening setting. No demands are made on her to be grown up and deal with real adult problems. When Patsy stuffs a cushion up her petticoat to see how she might look when she is pregnant, it is an easy matter for her to remove the cushion and become a carefree young girl again. In the clutter of flimsy, pretty underclothes and cheap cosmetics in Patsy's untidy bedroom, Clara is free to indulge her enjoyment in the trappings of womanhood while remaining enough of a child to eat 'unlimited caramels'.<sup>26</sup>

The privacy of the bedroom as a space for girls to share confidences, described by Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber as 'the culture of the bedroom'<sup>27</sup>, remains very important for adolescent girls. In most school stories, 'visiting' another girl's cubicle or dormitory is strictly forbidden, as it often was in actual schools<sup>28</sup>. For convent girl Clara, Patsy's bedroom clearly has an almost magical charm.

Patsy is open and, for a girl in 1914, knowledgeable about sex, and curious about it in a way which scandalises the more strictly brought up Clara:<sup>29</sup>

'Don't you think it would be awfully exciting to let oneself go and see what happened?...I'd like to go to the limit with someone then p'raps I'd find out...I definitely would if it weren't for Parpee and Marmee.'

The rigid moral codes which Clara learned so thoroughly at the convent are not easily discarded, however. "Well, I am a Catholic, after all," she reminds Patsy sternly.<sup>30</sup> Although she enjoys the evenings frittered away at Garthwaite Crescent her pleasure is 'enhanced if anything by a faint sense of guilt.'<sup>31</sup> There are many reasons for Clara to feel guilty about the time she spends with Patsy: she has been taught to despise worldliness and part of her still does ('She continued...to be coldly critical of Isabel on the score of worldly vanity.'<sup>32</sup>); she is aware of her parents' disapproval, and most importantly she knows that although she is genuinely fond of Patsy, she represents merely a distraction and an escape. Clara knows quite well that she herself could be much more usefully employed, especially if she means to try for a Cambridge scholarship, but 'all the same, she continued to spend most of her spare time at Garthwaite Crescent.'<sup>33</sup> She may feel pangs of guilt but these are over-ridden by her need to rebel against parental and church authority and to flee from the uneasy demands of her own developing consciousness: Patsy's appeal is too strong to resist.

But for all Clara's need to indulge the more frivolous

side of her nature, her aesthetic and intellectual sensibilities are as strong as they were when she cried at the school play 'because Dante was so beautiful'.<sup>34</sup> When she stands on the downs above Paget's Fold, with a well-read copy of Francis Thompson's poems, thinking about religion and art until her brain hurts, Clara's mind is engaged in a way in which it never is in Patsy's bedroom: 'At last her mind was so weary that she could not think any more.'<sup>35</sup> Deep feeling and complex thought are intoxicating to Clara who has been taught above all to accept and never to question, but they are also potentially dangerous. She fears being led, in the course of her questing thoughts, into 'sins against faith'; fears even more that she might discover, deep inside, a vocation to be nun - her worst terror. Often she is left confused and worried by the implications of her thinking, and, until she meets Ruth Philips at St. Mark's, she has nobody with whom to share her ideas, Nicole/Leonie having been left behind at the convent. Luckily, she meets Ruth early in her career at St. Mark's:<sup>36</sup>

As the only Jewess and the only Catholic in the Sixth Form they had a quarter of an hour alone every morning during School Prayers. Almost at once they discovered so many things to discuss that they made it a habit to walk home together.

Plain, dowdy and very clever, Ruth is a total contrast to Patsy ('No two girls could have been more unlike than Patsy and Ruth.'<sup>37</sup>). Ruth aspires to be a 'New Woman', dreaming of Cambridge, independence and success with a

commitment and single-mindedness which Clara lacks. She is not, however, one of the school 'Swats', who, like Mabel Fuller and those like her in Dusty Answer, are studious but uninspiring: 'They had minds like filling cabinets and they worked with the nervous intensity of sheep feeding before a thunderstorm.'<sup>38</sup> Ruth, witty and creative, is a Brainy, dedicated to her vision of a dazzling future. When Patsy talks of the future she sees it in terms of marriage and a family, which Clara professes to reject. Ruth has very different ideas, which Clara affects to share:<sup>39</sup>

'If you and I are really going to do something about the independence of women,' Ruth would say, 'her spectacles flashing, 'we've jolly well got to begin at home. What's the use of our setting up as a pair of Atlantas if we're going to stoop to pick up wedding rings?'

Claude and Isabel approve of Ruth, as a foil to Patsy, because she is clever and hard-working. Claude, of course, has always cherished academic ambitions for Clara, but in a typically tyrannical, demanding way, not really considering that she might have her own ideas. He does not force her to go to Cambridge (and in fact she never does) but he has always assumed that she would, so that: 'Till she knew Ruth, Clara had thought of Cambridge as a dull prolonging of school.'<sup>40</sup> A prelude, in fact, to a dull career as a schoolmistress. Ruth does not dream of a teaching career, the obvious ambition for a clever girl in the early twentieth century, but one limited in appeal. She means, like all the Brainses, to do something remarkable, and she

infects Clara with her own enthusiasm:<sup>41</sup>

Soon they had both decided that their lives would not begin till they went to Cambridge.

To some extent, in that she appeals to Clara's intellect and creativity, Ruth is a natural successor to Nicole/Leonie, although, as we shall see, neither she nor anyone else ever comes close to taking her place. Clara and Ruth talk for hours about art, religion, literature and philosophy, each girl stimulated and enriched by her contact with the other. Clara admires and respects Ruth but she is not in awe of her as she was of Nicole/Leonie:<sup>42</sup>

They had reached the same stage of mental intoxication; the fact that there was so much to read and see and to find out gave them a feeling of delicious vertigo. With Nicole, Clara had always been the follower who trailed some way behind the pioneer but with Ruth she marched side by side.

Despite the fact that Ruth is approved of in Clara's home, the friendship represents an important rebellion for Clara, and on a much more significant scale than does the more outwardly rebellious friendship with Patsy. The future Ruth makes her envisage is not the one conventionally offered to a girl in 1914, especially a Catholic girl. Any woman who intended to devote herself entirely to a career at that time was likely to be considered at best daring and at worst unnatural. There is a world of difference between Claude's expectation that Clara earn her living as 'a very passable schoolmistress'<sup>43</sup> for a few years before marrying a

rage.

The fact that their friendship is based largely on their love of art and literature also amounts to something of a rebellion for a strictly brought up Catholic girl like Clara, who has a 'sense that the two [ie. poetry and religion] were mysteriously opposed.'<sup>46</sup> Creativity has always meant rebellion to Clara/Nanda; an important and potentially subversive outlet for her own emotions and ideas, representing freedom from parental and religious authority and immersion in a new and exciting and disturbing element. In Frost in May this bid for freedom was punished by expulsion from the convent and her father's disgust and

Ruth was so naturally good, so incapable of meanness or spite or dishonesty, that Clara sometimes wondered whether orthodoxy were so important after all. Though she brushed the idea aside as a 'temptation against faith' it had an uncomfortable way of recurring.

suitable young man ("and I most sincerely hope a Catholic"<sup>44</sup>) and settling down to Catholic motherhood, and Ruth's vision of them as free spirits and thinkers, dedicated to the improvement of women's place in society. Their discussions about religion, indeed the very fact that Ruth is Jewish (as is Patsy) certainly constitute rebellion for Clara against her Catholic upbringing and education. Just as friendship with Catholic Patrick and Jewish Miranda broaden Nicola Marlow's ideas about religion in Antonia Forest's 'Kingscote' novels, Ruth makes Clara question the doctrines in which she has been brought up:<sup>45</sup>

Clara's friendship with Ruth does potentially offer her a route to the freedom of an independent future. The fact that their intimacy develops, not in either girl's home, but in the streets as they walk home from school together suggests freedom from constraint. At the same time it underlines the radicalism of what Ruth stands for: if Clara follows Ruth's example she may free herself from her parents' authority and from economic dependence, but she will remain forever outside the conventional, safe world for which her upbringing has prepared her. This, in the end, she cannot face, and ultimately she disappoints Ruth, leaving her to fulfil (or fail in) her ambitions alone, while Clara leaves school to become governess to a rich Catholic family ("Goodbye, free spirit." "Goodbye, Jane Eyre."<sup>47</sup>). That Clara runs from what Ruth represents does not surprise the reader, since even in the days of their excited intimacy:<sup>48</sup>

There was no doubt that Clara delighted in Ruth's company nor that she admired and even liked her more than Patsy. All the same, she continued to spend most of her spare time at Garthwaite Crescent.

Clara likes Ruth for herself: unlike the Cohens, Ruth's family and home hold no attraction for her. Ruth's friendship is stimulating and loyal, but, unlike Patsy's, it is demanding: she forces Clara to think and make difficult decisions. For all Clara's thirst for knowledge, her attitude towards study is ambivalent: guilt and fear

inspired by her convent training, and a certain intellectual laziness ensure that she will never be a true scholar. Patsy's friendship, like the atmosphere in her house, is 'as restful as a warm bath'<sup>49</sup> to Clara, and in this undemanding companionship Clara finds her most welcome relief from the tensions of her own life. The gratification offered by Ruth has to be deferred ('Soon they had decided that their lives would not begin till they went to Cambridge'<sup>50</sup>) but Patsy's can be turned on as effortlessly as a bath tap. Patsy may be rather too 'fast' to be approved of by Claude and Isabel, but ultimately what she represents falls well within the confines of socially acceptable femininity. Hence, their friendship, unlike the peripatetic relationship with Ruth, can be comfortably confined in a family home: it represents no threat to the traditional social order, whatever Clara's parents might think of it. Ruth offers rebellion on a much more radical scale. As an aspiring 'New Woman' her determination not to marry clearly goes more than skin deep: in her djibbahs and sandals, she dresses for comfort rather than to attract men, a revolutionary departure from accepted ideas about women who were supposed, then as now, to be decorative. The 'New Woman' was, as we have seen, the object of intense popular suspicion in the early twentieth century: deemed unnatural and morally degenerate, she constituted in the public imagination a threat to the very fabric of society. Ruth is a determined pioneer, but Clara lacks the confidence to follow her.

At the convent, as we have seen, Nanda's friendships were characterised by heightened emotion; they had the romance of forbidden fruit. There is no 'hot-house' atmosphere at St. Mark's to engender such intensity and Clara's friendships are conducted outside the tense atmosphere of her home. Despite the fact that these friendships do constitute a meaningful rebellion for Clara, and cannot be reconciled with or integrated into her own home life, the quality of the relationship between the girls is in no way remarkable. Patsy and Ruth in their very different ways fulfil a useful and important purpose for Clara but it is no surprise to the reader when, on her return from Maryhall, Clara fails to contact them, and the insipid word 'fond' reinforces the lack of emotional intensity:<sup>51</sup>

Fond as she was of Ruth and Patsy, she had not tried to recapture their old intimacy since she had returned to West Kensington. At best they had been poor substitutes for Nicole.

The character of Leonie de Wesseldorf dominated Frost in May. As Nicole de Savigny she plays a significant if largely offstage role in The Lost Traveller. The peculiar quality of Leonie's relationship with Nanda was analysed in the first part of this chapter. In The Lost Traveller she is more than simply the yardstick against which other friendships are (unfavourably) measured. She is, for Clara, an authority on all matters of taste and art. Clara's pride

in Ruth's success in a literary competition is heightened by 'the fact that Nicole thought the entry epatant'<sup>52</sup> and her delight in the opera Tannhauser (her father's 'one musical passion'<sup>53</sup>) is spoiled by Nicole's attitude of blase boredom.

At the covent Clara/Nanda was always painfully aware that she was an outsider in the privileged, devoutly Catholic world of most of the girls ("This place isn't meant for people like me."<sup>54</sup>). When she has to leave she realises even more acutely that she and Nicole belong to different and irreconcilable worlds:<sup>55</sup>

Though Nicole was in London and only a mile or two away, she might, as far as Clara was concerned, have been on the other side of the world.

Friendship with Nicole has developed in a hothouse and it cannot withstand the harsher climes outside. If Clara is unable to integrate her friendships with Patsy and Ruth into her home life at Valetta Road, her friendship with Nicole is so firmly rooted in the convent that, despite Nicole's determination that they meet up in London, Clara finds herself unable to agree:<sup>56</sup>

Clara, struck with panic, had made the excuse that she could not leave her mother. In all their three years' friendship she had never met Nicole outside Mount Hilary. Though in one way she longed to see her again, it was not only shyness that made her refuse.

During her short-lived engagement to Archie Hughes-Follett, it is the thought that at least she will be able to see Nicole socially - in that exclusive, Catholic society from which she has always hitherto been excluded, that gives Clara a degree of comfort.

It is often characteristic of school story friendships that they can only flourish within a particular context. Sometimes, as with Nicole and Clara, the school setting is necessary for the friendship's survival, if the girls are from mutually exclusive social backgrounds. Patty, 'the nicest girl in the school', spending the vacation with her snobbish cousins, finds that they do not wish to 'know' a schoolfriend from a humbler background:<sup>57</sup>

'Jean Bannerman's all very well at school, but I really don't want to know her during the holidays,' said Muriel...  
'Well, darling...,' said Mrs Pearson. 'I have never been introduced to Mrs Bannerman, and I don't usually let you go to houses where I don't visit myself.'

Sometimes the reverse is true - a relationship facilitated by home circumstances cannot be assimilated into the demands of school conventions. Thus, Nick and Flick are free to be kind to Constance at home, but not at Raeburn. Mary-Lou Trelawney, in her first term at the Chalet School, is dismayed to find that her home friendship with the three years older Clem Barrass will be limited when the two become Chalet girls, because of their different statuses within the

school, Clem being a 'middle' while Mary-Lou is still a 'junior'. ("We shan't be together much after all!" And Mary-Lou looked ready to cry.<sup>58</sup>) Vivienne Griffiths' recent study points out this continuing phenomenon<sup>59</sup>, and I have observed it in my own school (where it takes on interesting implications of religious/cultural background) but it was probably exacerbated when schools were residential and home conditions much stricter.

Nicole's dashing decision to go and drive an ambulance in France enhances the romantic, rather androgynous aura which has always surrounded her. Clara continues to write to her but never, either in The Lost Traveller or its sequels, does she see her again, reinforcing Clara's belief that their relationship was specific to one context - the convent. Nicole remains for Clara what Claude's Cambridge friend Larry O'Sullivan has always been for him:<sup>60</sup>

'He was a romantic figure to me,' her father mused. 'It was not only his charm. Everyone felt the spell of that. He stood for everything I never had and he had the gift of turning life into a fine art.'

Claude recognises and comments on some similarity between them ("As soon as I saw your friend...my mind flashed back to Larry.") as he does between Larry and Reynaud Callaghan, Isabel's 'romantic figure', in whom the Irish of Larry and the French of Nicole are dangerously combined. It is exactly this quality of romance which is missing from Clara's

friendships with Patsy and Ruth (and, conspicuously, from her liaison with Archie), and no female friend in her future ever inspires her in the same way as Nicole.

In fact, Clara's most intense relationship in The Lost Traveller, apart from with her father, is not with another girl at all, but with the spoilt, tyrannical, charming little boy, Charles Cressett. As Charles' governess, Clara is adopting an ostensibly adult role, but ironically, as she becomes increasingly involved with the boy and his fantasy world, she regresses further into childhood. Clara adopts Charles' family as she did the Cohens, and plays out the fantasy of being his sister, living out the sort of upper-class Catholic lifestyle of her convent friends. As heir to Maryhall, Charles has a definite place to fill, a security which Clara has always lacked. She has always felt an outsider at the convent, and at St. Mark's her friendships with Patsy and Ruth, outsiders both, have not helped to integrate with the other girls. Absorption in Charles' childish world, helped by boyish, simple, clumsy Archie, allows Clara to forget the demands of growing up, with its attendant conflicts. That this denial of adulthood ('"What is there to grow up for?"') is ultimately untenable is symbolised in the text by Charles' sudden and violent death and the shattering of Clara's own fantasy childhood. Her decision to marry Archie (marriage often being seen in the novel as the heroine's adoption of maturity, as in Pride and

Prejudice, Emma, etc.) is a vain attempt to assuage the guilt she feels.

Archie is never a 'romantic figure' to Clara: all her sexual and romantic feelings are focused subconsciously on Claude and Charles, and more consciously on the dimly imagined perfect lover of her dreams. Accepting Archie means giving up this dream: at once a sacrifice and a relief, for the dream both excites and frightens her, and marrying Archie, ironically, would allow her to postpone the necessity to face adult sexuality. For Clara never sees Archie as a man, as such: unlike Blaze Hoadley, in whom she perceives sexual maturity and need ('He was at that moment a man, all that he would ever be. And she was nothing but a half-baked, pretentious little girl.'<sup>61</sup>) Clara believes that with Archie she will be allowed to remain that little girl, protected and loved, and not required to respond - sexually or intellectually - as a woman. She does not, until Isabel forces her to, consider the serious implications of marriage, and Catholic marriage at that. She thinks only of atoning for her guilt by making Archie and her father happy. Archie, despite his obvious weaknesses of character, delights Claude because of his impeccable Catholic pedigree. It is Isabel, regarded by Clara as the selfish one of her parents, who actually considers Clara's happiness with a man who is weak, and whom she does not love.

At this stage in the novel, Clara is profoundly disturbed and terribly isolated: the shock of Charles' death has left her in 'utter desolation'<sup>62</sup>. The one bright spark in her contemplation of the future is the thought that she will be able to mix with Nicole socially, but for the moment she is alone, Patsy and Ruth ignored. Emotionally paralysed, she drifts along in a miserable stupor until the meeting with her mother in the church. Had Clara contacted her old friends, they would surely have forced her to realise how foolish and self-deluding she is being even to think of marrying Archie. Patsy's sexual awareness and belief in romance, and Ruth's genuine determination to achieve independence, would render both girls shocked and horrified at Clara's decision, and would undoubtedly make her justify to them and to herself her reasons for that decision. This she cannot face doing and it is for this reason, more so probably than the fact that 'At best they had been only poor substitutes for Nicole'<sup>63</sup> which prevents her from rekindling the old friendships on her return from Maryhall.

This is unfortunate for, despite her obvious weaknesses, and her mother's belief that she is stony-hearted and selfish, Clara has always inspired great loyalty and affection in her friends. Ruth's disappointment and tears at Clara's decision to abandon the academic, independent future they had dreamed of to go to Maryhall, and Patsy's brave and passionate appeal to Claude not to be

angry at Clara about Charles' death are proof of the regard in which they hold her. Does Clara realise this? She certainly, having been trained to be humble and obedient, has little sense of her own worth. She is touched by Ruth's unhappiness at her leaving St. Mark's, and even more so by Nicole's cool admission that she minds 'considerably' that Clara has to leave the convent<sup>64</sup>, but in a time of crisis she does not seek the love and support of her friends, retreating instead into herself. Perhaps, regardless of the feelings which Clara may have for her friends, her strict upbringing in a religious and social tradition which prioritises the relationship with God and the church, and that within the Catholic family, but which mistrusts and denigrates the friendship tie, especially between women, has helped Clara to internalise the belief that she ought not to turn to her friends at this time.

Adolescence can be a difficult time for girls and Clara finds it particularly troubling. As we have seen, her desire to 'grow up as fast as possible'<sup>65</sup> is actually very superficial: in reality, she is afraid of growing up. She is introspective and sensitive and her sense of identity is fragile and shifting. Clara has always been aware of 'not belonging' - at the convent, in the Catholic church, within her own family - and she envies Charles Cressett and Nicole their backgrounds: they have definite places to fill, places which, to Clara, seem attractive and glamorous. Her

sense of not belonging is heightened during adolescence when she begins to become a stranger even to herself, as 'the girl in the glass'<sup>66</sup> is born: the mysterious, grownup creature which is recognisably Clara, but a new, adult Clara as yet unformed, raw and vulnerable:<sup>67</sup>

There seemed to be a new creature growing up inside her, something unformed and skinless that could not bear to be exposed to the light. The thoughts that nourished this inner self were too sacred or too silly to be told to her father or mother and the mysterious creature was insistent, resenting interruptions and demanding constant attention.

When Clara thinks of growing up she has little sense of herself developing as a person, instead: 'She felt she was not so much growing up as expanding shapelessly in all directions.'<sup>68</sup> This notion of being out of control, of developing apparently without form or pattern is understandable in adolescent girls, especially when, as was not unusual in the early twentieth century, they were deeply ambivalent about what they were growing up for, but it disturbs Clara profoundly: not only is she insecure in her background, but she does not know who or what she is growing up into. Ruth and Patsy offer her some stability in this crisis, for Ruth seems to know exactly where she is going and how to get there, while Patsy, youngest daughter of a loving family, knows exactly where she belongs. At the end of the novel, her academic career abandoned, a disastrous engagement behind her and the friends who might have offered solace neglected, there is no suggestion that Clara is any

more resigned to herself, her future or her sexuality. The sequels to The Lost Traveller, describing the disastrous marriage to Archie, and the acute mental breakdown which follows, bear this out, as does the rest of Antonia White's unhappy and chaotic life.

In the all-female environment of the convent, all Nanda's sexual and romantic feelings had been focused on her friends, Leonie and Clare. An important theme in The Lost Traveller is Clara's inability to transfer that feeling to an appropriate heterosexual object. She harbours strong, barely suppressed sexual feelings for her father Claude, and there is an element of sexual tension in her relationship with Charles:<sup>69</sup>

Now and then she glanced down ... at the dark head resting against her knee. Once she ran her finger down the pencilled groove at the nape of his neck.

'I like it when you do that, Spin. It gives me a nice shiver.'

Blaze Hoadley's kiss heightens her awareness that she is growing into a woman, as does the encounter with 'the odious man',<sup>70</sup> on the Sussex Downs. Both incidents also suggest future disappointment: Blaze, though kind and sincere, is red-faced and bucolic, and the man on the Downs, who from afar has the promise of 'that unimaginable lover',<sup>71</sup> turns out, on closer inspection, to be middle-aged, with 'a cheerful red common face.'<sup>72</sup> These disappointments, coupled with Isabel's ominous hint that 'men were cruel to the women

they loved'<sup>73</sup>, make her fear sexual maturity, while at the same time long for an ideal lover.

In the midst of her turmoil and ambivalence Patsy and Ruth offer Clara a degree of comfort: Patsy because of her own matter of fact approach to sexuality, and Ruth because of her determination never to marry at all. But with neither girl can Clara reveal ever reveal the extent of her anxieties: she always has to assume a role:<sup>74</sup>

These hopes and fears were not confided to anyone. With Patsy she continued to pose as a cynical coquette and with Ruth as a free spirit.

Clara's development throughout The Lost Traveller is marked by her adoption of various roles but as the disastrous outcome of her time at Maryhall, where she tries to re-enact her own girlhood, not as it was but as she wished it to be, suggests, happiness cannot be achieved in this way. Clara cannot achieve the self-knowledge necessary for the successful adoption of an adult position, because she is frightened to know herself. The adult roles available to her are narrow and unappealing, and she has not yet resolved the conflicts of her Catholic childhood.

In Frost in May, as I have demonstrated, friendship is a central theme, inextricably linked to the art and religion which were such crucial factors in Nanda's developing awareness of herself and the world around her, Nanda's

relationships with other girls being a necessary outlet for emotional energy. It is an equally important theme, for different reasons, in The Lost Traveller, as Clara uses her friendships with Patsy and Ruth to express her need to rebel against the authority of her parents and against society's prescribed role for her. But these friendships are not merely conscious or subconscious acts of defiance. Although lacking in the emotional depth of her friendship with Leonie/Nicole, they fulfil a critical function in Clara's development, providing some escape not only from the pressures of her family life, but also from the conflicts being waged within herself. Ultimately, however, Clara fails to resolve these conflicts, with or without the help of her friends.

