Fragmented Narrative in Ursula Hegi’s Intrusions
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In Dr. Moneysmith’s English Senior Seminar class, Kelley Hantzsché, in her essay “Fragmented Narrative in Ursula Hegi’s Intrusions,” chose the theory of fragmented narration and not only used it as a critic, but applied it in her own writing, to Ursula Hegi’s novel, Intrusions, which was read during the Fall 2005 semester.

This fragmented narrative is one in which the narrator does not simply move from one plot point to another consecutively. There are several plots moving and intruding on each other all at once. The first (and most obvious) plot appears as that of the character Megan and her life, which then places the novel in the romance genre. The second plot is that of the narrator and how her own writing fits into her life, which places those sections of the novel in more of a memoir genre. Finally, we have the plot that the characters themselves long to map out, which moves the novel into more of a metafictional genre. Even with these multiple plots, we must keep in mind that they are all serving a singular purpose for Hegi, which shows through her narrative form: the classic pull of feminism, women trying to have it all, and the consequences that follow when finally obtaining these goals. Experimental forms of prose writing such as a fragmented narrative can be used to expose a mother’s guilt over pursuing her own goals.

Some mothers have always longed for a voice outside of the home. In her novel Intrusions, Ursula Hegi uses fragmented narrative as a way to expose this underlying guilt she feels as a working mother.

In today’s literary atmosphere, female authors now have the chance to find and use a narrative voice that is able to show the ways in which women think, reflected in their writing. Hegi’s Intrusions would be less effective if she left out the fragmented thought patterns and turned towards a more linear pattern. For example, if Hegi moved from chapter 96, which deals with Megan Stone and her son, Timothy, straight into another chapter about Megan’s life, then the reader would miss the intrusion of chapter 97, which deals with writing about weather in the story. At first, this intrusion appears completely unrelated to the plight of Megan in the previous chapter, however, Hegi is using chapter 97 to illustrate how (just as the weather is unpredictable) so is the plot of her novel or the author’s life (Hegi 173-175). It is this unpredictability and the idea that mother’s cannot control the outcome of events that link Hegi’s fragmented thoughts and interruptions in her own life to emphasize the working mother’s conflicts against fulfilling herself and society’s expectations. She “immers[es] herself in her characters, living and breathing within them” (Engelson). By this I mean Hegi leaves her characters in limbo, just as her life and struggles with being a writer and a mother are constantly left in limbo. Her guilt is still there underneath her successes, just as her characters have an ending underneath the apparent drop in the plot. Without this parallel between the writer and the characters the fragmented narrative would seem out of place. Hegi —

Sorry about the intrusion, I just had to grab the laundry out of the dryer. The buzzer was going off and wouldn’t stop. I think it’s broken. I need to teach the kids how to do laundry, that way they can help me out more. There is always a never-ending pile of jeans, towels, and whatnot to be washed, dried and folded. But, I am getting away from my objective and need to return to the topic at hand. Now where was I headed? Oh yes.

Unfortunately, not much is written on the topic of women writers in respect to fragmented narration. There is very little written on Hegi’s work in particular, and even less on her novel Intrusions. Therefore, it is important that we sift through the resources to find information on the thought patterns of women, the social and psychological effects on working mothers, all while looking at it in the context of form and theme in fiction writers, especially the women writers. Gayle Greene’s Ambiguous Benefits: reading and Writing in Feminist Metafiction concurs, stating, “Since the available forms [of narration] do not accommodate something new, feminist novelists forge new forms that render the process of change” (Greene 323). Hegi’s novel shows some of the changing forms the female writers are pursuing.

Also discussing feminist narrative is Elizabeth A. Say’s book, Evidence on Her Own Behalf: Women’s Narrative as Theological Voice, feminist theory in regards to women’s narratives and the plight of the women novelist’s movement through history. Say uses analysis to delve into where women novelists are heading in the future concerning their narration practices. She states that women novelists have used their voices “as a vehicle for moral debate” and gaining a public voice where society is concerned (68).

Say’s concept leads me to feel Hegi is the leader in innovative narration by women authors. She has
breached the walls “between the world of masculine tradition and women’s experience” (Say 119). Hegi uses her experience as a mother and a novelist to break away from the masculine traditional forms of narration and creates a genre all her own, *Fictional Feminor*. It is so named because of the narration’s roots within feminine thought processes, fiction (in general), and the inclusion of an intrusive author who is providing commentary that reveals the processes of life such as working, motherhood, and all that comes with it. In this new genre, Hegi uses her voice, her thoughts, to “truthfully tell women’s story [to enable] us to see other women,” to understand narration from a feminine point of view (Say 138).

This distinction between masculine and feminine narration and thought relates to Rosalind S. Simson’s “Feminine Thinking.” It is here that the discussions between the different genders’ thought patterns are exposed more precisely than in the previous book by Elizabeth Say. Also, Simson clarifies that not all writers, male or female, can be placed neatly into one category of thinking. She believes that “the adjectives “feminine and masculine are best understood as applying directly to types of thinking and only indirectly to people” (Simson). In some cases men and women alike are more or less emotional, abstract, objective, and rational. Without this emotion or rational Hegi’s novel would lack the main idea that brings to light the conflict within working mothers. Her novel is “strong evidence that, contrary to the historically popular belief that feminine thinking is ill-suited to intellectual pursuits, feminine ways of thinking in fact expand the domain of rational thought” and provide positive reinforcement that women can overcome any stereotypical box that society puts them in (Simson).

In light of the stereotypical box, the desire to break free from domesticity into the working environment brings with it a deep-rooted feeling of guilt. “The meaning of guilt: A phenomenological description of employed mothers’ experiences of guilt” by Ylva Elvin-Nowak, discusses working mother’s and the “unconscious feelings of guilt that arise from” mother’s striving to better themselves and the lives of their families (73). Elvin-Nowak discusses the effects on women because of society’s moral standards that involve what women should or should not be (78). *Intrusions* is based in this guilt-ridden arena. Hegi uses narrative to show (not tell) the reader that the narrator feels guilt for working and not spending time with her children.

Children, what fun they can be. My daughter, the hypochondriac, just came in to my study to have me look at her ear and see if it was infected. Once I explained I couldn’t just look in there with a flashlight, she whined and firmly told me I had to call the doctor first thing in the morning for her. Telling her we’ll see I escorted her back up to her room, tucking her in and kissing her, the teddy bear, and two of her dolls, Sally and Betsy. Now I think it is time to find out if their dad can keep them for a weekend so I can just write. The trials of the single working mother never end. That is why I like to write fiction, there is always something to write about.

In “The Convergence of Postmodern Innovative Fiction and Science Fiction: An Encounter with Samuel R. Delany’s Technotopia” Teresa Ebert uses feminism to discuss thoughts and language pertaining to writers in general. Also, she discusses metascience fiction, self-reflexive language and characteristics of postmodern narratives such as “diary text.” This idea of “diary text” can pertain to Hegi’s *Intrusions*. Ebert goes on to explain that fragmented narrative leaves the product as “an unfinished published product.” In regards to *Intrusions*, Hegi uses this idea of an unfinished product to parallel life. Life itself is an on-going, unfinished product just as the characters in her novel are on going and unfinished. This leads us to discover that just because we cannot find a nice ending wrapped in a bow does not mean that an ending does not exist. Hegi alludes to this concept of the eternal circular movement of life when Megan decides she wants a child. Then, Hegi has the narrator intrude on Megan’s story to discuss the reality of writers, especially women writers, as creators of life. She even has a whole stack “of potential characters” on “index cards with groups: family, neighbors, friends, etc” (Hegi 51). This parallel of creator not only applies to writers and their characters, but as a mother, who brought children into the world, and then because she feels guilty for working and taking time away from her children, feels she has “stacked her children in “plastic recipe file” waiting to be introduced (Hegi 52).

On the other side of the narration discussion, Bernard Paris feels that the narrator should not be up front, but they should remain behind the plot. In his article, “Form, Theme, and Imitation in Realistic Fiction” Paris discusses the disappearance of authors within their work. However, in Hegi’s case she chooses not to disappear, but remains very much an active participant in the story not just a lurching entity who is maneuvering the characters through the narrative.—

Just as I am discussing the disappearance of the narrator, the hypochondriac is back. This time it is a spot under her kneecap that hurts. I just point towards the door and send her sobbing back upstairs. This is my

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Paris also deals with the idea of using underlying themes to focus “on social or on psychological reality” within a narrative (142). He discusses the idea that the importance of theme has “been overestimated by many critics” and that pattern and form of the narrative are just as important (143).

Hegi’s novel touches not only on the surface ideas of writing and the ideas involved within it but the underlying struggles of working mothers. I suppose you are asking yourself, why another paper about the struggles of women, especially working mothers? The answer is clear; no one has bothered discussing the lengths Hegi has gone to portray a working mother/writer and her Intrusions that clearly cause her to suppress guilt over not spending enough time with her family. Another aspect of Hegi’s writing that differs from other female writers is that she not only shows the reader that she has guilt for her lack of family time, but she allows the reader to see that when she does indulge in domestic issues, she is left feeling guilty over ignoring her characters. The characters take on a life of their own and in turn become extended children for the prolific writer.

Intrusions is a novel for every working mother whether she works outside the home or stays at home with her children trying to become the writer of the next great novel. She could be trying to do all these things at once, just as Hegi was trying to do while writing her novel. Hegi was, at the time of writing Intrusions, the mother of two young boys, a wife, a graduate student, and teacher. Many times she wondered, “What kind of mother could keep on writing while her youngest is pressing his body against the other side of the closed door?” (Hegi 10) It is here writers, especially women writers, can see how guilt over pursuing our own desires invades our lives. Even when we find the solitude we yearn for we find that it “has been greatly overrated” (Hegi 266). Instead of accomplishing all we had hoped for we end up thinking about “the warmth and softness of the children’s skin when they’re asleep […] I can’t seem to separate thoughts about my self from thoughts about them” (Hegi 267).

That is true. When mothers get the time alone they asked for they find that they can’t accomplish anything because it is too quiet. Like the narrator, I have often wondered if my children feel neglected when I creep downstairs to my desk and spend the day studying or writing. Am I scaring them? “How much had my writing intruded on my children’s lives? How often had I asked them to play quietly and not interrupt me?” (Hegi 23) According to Ylva Elvin-Nowak’s, “The meaning of guilt: A phenomenological description of employed mothers’ experiences of guilt” there are “unconscious feelings of guilt that arise from” mothers’ striving to better themselves and the lives of their families (73). It can be assumed that Hegi is not only telling the reader, through the narrator, of her own guilt, but also shows that all mothers feel this guilt by giving the reader Megan’s narrative. Hegi also reinforces the idea that sometimes the guilt becomes overwhelming for some mother’s and they escape into solitude, even if it is a small escape such as “walking along the deserted beach” (Hegi 1).

As I sit and ponder this, my twelve-year-old son intrudes upon me. I know he just wants attention and wants someone to listen to his lengthy story of how his day at his friend’s house went. Next, hearing the semi-conversation, my eight year old wants to know with whom she can play and when her dad is coming to pick them up for a visit. I half listen and half tune them out. I am sure they sense this as they both turn and head upstairs. Leaving me to my own guilt.

Mothers are searching to fulfill the high expectations society has placed on them, until they become “aware of the painful clashes between” their expectations and reality (Hegi 9). The narrator, possibly Hegi herself, her character Megan, and myself (along with other women) are searching for solitude; we are surrounded by the needs of our children “even when [we] are not with them (which is very seldom), when ninety percent of [our] conversations” are pertaining to them, we can’t escape them (Hegi 9). If we even try to we feel guilty. The guilt can build to an unreasonable level, one that would “cripple the population of a medium size town, a force of guilt powerful enough to stop a mismatched army of Foreign Legionnaires” (Hegi 5).

The guilt and exceeding need for solitude prompted me to write this one afternoon:

Search for Silence

Arriving home after school, exhausted from final exams that didn’t go well, sounds of shouts can be heard.
I haven’t even gotten out of the Town and Country yet.
My head pounds like a seventh grade Marching band.
The fighting has already begun.

Entering the house,  
I find my eight-year-old daughter, Shelby  
Pinned under her twelve-year-old brother, Nick.  
He immediately looks up,  
“She’s driving me crazy.”  
Being the mom I am,  
I say, “Work it out and don’t bleed on my new Berber carpet.”

Walking down the basement steps,  
I’m almost run over by our four cats,  
in their “zoom mode;”  
this is follow the leader,  
where the first cat is attacked  
making the next cat in line the new chief.  
They drive me out of the basement.

Retreating to the backyard patio,  
I find a solitary wicker chair.  
But,  
The kids and cats  
have followed me.  
I wish I was back at school.

I know as sure as I returned to school, I would feel so overwhelmed with guilt over my family’s needs that I would turn around and push my other jobs aside to spend time with the kids. This would bring about guilt over not getting enough done for my classes or not writing enough on my novel “in-progress.”

It is the guilt that seeps to the surface of Hegi’s novel causing female readers to step back and understand they are not alone in their thinking. Feminine thinking is one aspect that psychologists study at length because it appears to be very different from the thought processes of men. I often wonder why women are placed in the role of mother, caregiver, wife, homemaker, and (at times) financial provider. Men do not seem to have to have this many hats. They feel their job is to go to work and come home. That is all. They do not worry if the children are yearning to play; that is their mother’s job. They do not worry if the laundry is clean or the house is clean; again, that is the mother’s job. It is my hope that no one sees my house for a few more weeks; I have been too involved in school and work (and occasionally, one of my children’s sporting meets) to contemplate any kind of straightening of the house.

Rosalind S. Simson’s “Feminine Thinking” details that women appear to be “more concerned with the particulars of concrete situations […] and tend to focus on dichotomies less than masculine thinking does.” This focus on the concrete is important because as women continue to try to uphold the societal standards of motherhood while working, we must try to focus on the most important aspects of our lives. Hegi uses the fragmented thinking patterns of women to show how multi-tasking is essential to all women. In one instance, the narrator tells the reader that while doing some grocery shopping, Nick, “His knees pulled up to his chin, is sitting in [her] shopping cart” (Hegi 129). Women must be thinking ahead at all times. So, while doing her shopping, the narrator is researching for her novel, thinking about dinner, and any number of other items that she needs to accomplish. Simson would interject here stating that, at times, “feminine thinking ought to supplant masculine thinking […] and Hegi’s] goal is to make people appreciate the feminine ‘voice’ and not to make comparative evaluations of the ‘voices’. Too long has the masculine voice been the dominant voice in literature and everyday life. Simson is stating that the feminine and masculine voices are separate and should each have their own places and times. Also, because of the immense differences between the voices neither one should be compared to the other. Each has a purpose and meaning, and more research should be done on feminine voice to create an understanding and appreciation for the
differences.

Voices. Now that is a thought. I wonder how many times I have lain in bed interrupted by the creative voice that longs to put words on paper, forcing me up at 2 in the morning. I don’t feel I control the output of these words. The voice in my head recites them and I simply type.

Hegi’s voice is loud and clear: women have been suppressed by society, not only as auditory voices, but how our thoughts should be evaluated. If one were to peer into my head and listen to my thoughts, they would find a jumble of appointment times, writing deadlines, and a chore list of things to do at home. Simons looks further into women’s thought processes and details that “Attending to feminine ways of thinking […] can be important for both understanding the nature and dimensions of women’s subordination and devising ways to end this subordination.” Women should not have to change the way they feel or think just to advance in the work place.

Hegi places subtle hints in her novel of the importance of women’s voice and thoughts coming to the surface and no longer being overshadowed by the male voice that literary circles have always looked on as superior. One such hint appears during a conversation between the narrator and her character, Megan, have concerning Megan’s lack of control over the story and her fear that the males are dominating the outcome of the novel. Megan asks, “Why didn’t you listen to me…” and the narrator responds by stating, “I tried […], but I couldn’t hear your voice.” Megan then replies, “Because you’re too busy listening to the voices of the men” (Hegi 103-104). The heart of this conversation is in the last line. The voices of women writers have been overshadowed by the male voice in literature for centuries. Hegi points out that readers couldn’t hear the feminine voice because the masculine voice was overpowering and no one thought to look for an alternative. She is giving us the alternative and waiting to find out if any one is not only listening, but also hearing the messages she is relaying.

I think that is called selective hearing. The overpowering male voice is constant in literature and life. Why is it that children listen to their parents and not their mothers? I know first hand my teenage son could care less what I say, which is evident by the mumbling I heard when I informed him it was time to go to bed, and the fact that he did not move. I had to tell him three times. If his dad had said go to bed, he would have jumped, no mumbling.

This is another important reason that Hegi’s narration technique is helpful and it works. If she wrote a book saying women are under appreciated and need to find a voice equal to that of a male’s voice, it would possibly be written off as a feminist rant and remain unheard. To further support her understanding of the oppression of the feminine voice Hegi offers the reader a glimpse into the life of Hillary, a non-traditional student, who is “in her early fifties” (Hegi 171). When discussing what Hegi’s novel, Intrusions, is about the narrator states that Hillary should understand the concept, because “It must have been like that for you when your children were small […] Constant interruptions, regardless of what you were doing” (171). It is Hillary’s reply (“Yes. […] There always were interruptions. But I didn’t mind. Nothing I did was important enough”) that sends home the message that women have been programmed to expect little and even shut out the voice that should be the most important, their own. By weaving the topics into the story, Hegi removes the obstacles and is, in fact, heard.

Just as the narrator thinks, “Hillary would have never kept a door closed between herself and her children”(171), I think about my little hypochondriac and maybe I should go check on her. Hillary would have taken care of her. She would not have just pointed back towards the stairs. Again guilt seeps into my mind and the narrator’s. I would really like it if my children’s father would experience some of the multi-tasking I do everyday.

Hegi allows her character Nick to experience some of motherhood’s complications when she writes that his wife, Megan, has left him and the children. Nick then intrudes on the narrator once more stating, “I don’t think there is enough happening in this manuscript” (Hegi 237). This leaves me with the thought that Hegi is asking herself if the novel has enough happening or if it is going the way it should. Also, Nick then intrudes with the statement, “It would speed up the pace if there were no interruption” (Hegi 237). This statement solidifies Hegi’s own insecurities with the format of the novel.

Nick even gets to witness the interruptions that motherhood brings when he is trying to have an adult conversation with the narrator about the plot and where it should or should not go. The narrator asks Nick, “What’s that upstairs? Listen. Did you hear that? [Nick responses with] Quiet. That sounds like Nicole” (Hegi 239). His own daughter interrupts Nick’s conversation when she gets hurt. The reader is never told whether or not Hegi heard the noise at her own home and wrote it in or if she was simply trying to get back to writing the story.

It would be interesting to look at Nick’s intrusions from a masculine criticism; however, at this point we are only dealing with the feminine thought process and how it affects—
Crying upstairs again signals WW... 14, I think. Now footsteps are heading this way. "What you fell. Please be careful. No, we don't need to go to the hospital. Your will be fine. Go lie down and rest. You arm will feel better soon."

"But, you have been working a long time."
"I will be finished soon. I just want to get a few more pages done."
"You always say that and it takes you forever."

I watch as she heads up the steps. Why is it that I can never find the time to spend with them? I feel as though I have fallen into a pit of liquid guilt and swallowed ten tons. Maybe, I will try and stop writing long enough to read them a short story. If I do that though I will be taking time away from finishing this and I only have three days before the final draft is due. The dilemma is which form of guilt will win this war.

I find it rather ironic that Hegi does not have Megan on the receiving end of any interruptions until after she has children. An example of this occurs when Megan is in the obstetrician's office, "Nodding occasionally without interrupting, he made her feel as though she were his only patient..." (Hegi 61). Hegi is portraying the female voice as yearning for a time when there was no interruptions. This also exhibits the yearning for solitude discussed previously. After Megan has children it seems that even her husband now feels it is okay to interrupt. An example of this occurs when Megan is trying to talk to Nick about dinner and the canning she has done. Megan is upset and states, "...Get a good look. See how chapped they still are from canning and—"

"I didn't ask you to go to all that trouble."
"Excuse me for letting myself be interrupted by you." She hoped he noticed the sarcasm.

"I didn't know you were still talking." (Hegi 98-99)

This exchange leads to the idea that masculine voices and thought processes are smothering the feminine voices. Hegi even concludes the chapter that follows through the narrator's intrusion on the reader and the characters saying, "I'm getting out of this chapter. This is over my head" (103). Hegi is aware that the problems between the different voices and stifling of the feminine voice are also silencing female writers.

He knew she was still talking he just didn't care. Or maybe we are back to the whole selective listening trend. On top of that, he was reading the paper. Nick is that it? Were you just too involved in your paper to hear her? Nick? Nick...

Television and newspapers always cause the men in my family to be deaf and blind to everyone and everything around them. I wouldn't be surprised if I caught the couch on fire, while my son was watching a football game, and he never moved until he felt pain. Maybe not even then; my feminine thought process is obviously too dense to understand the masculine thought process. I hope you noticed the sarcasm.

In the early portions of the novel, the narrator explains that:

...be a woman is to be a victim, that all men are villains. Why? It doesn't have to be that way. [...] I won't let you be victimized by your husband, your children, your house, Megan, and I won't let you keep a card file of rooms to be cleaned and silver to be polished. [...] You'll be bright, assertive...Say something assertive, Megan (Hegi 45).

The narrator is striving to create a world where men and women are equals in all aspects; however, as the novel continues the reader and the narrator find that in one way or another Megan is shown as weak, not assertive, and not even positive (Hegi 61). The narrator is trying to force confidence on Megan and the reader is made aware during an intrusion that Megan would "rather be polishing silver. Just because you want solitude doesn't mean that you have to send me across ten miles of sand until my feet bleed" (Hegi 61). This exchange signals that even though some women strive for solitude and independence, other women may be content to be the stereotypical housewife that is not strong, assertive, or anything other than herself. This section also enables the reader to see that at times people, including the narrator, try to live life through others. Megan realizes this and tells the narrator, "Do your own walking the next time you get a craving for solitude" (Hegi 61) and, "Just because it was important to you once it doesn't mean it has to be important to me. I don't want to fight the battles you never resolved for yourself. I am not a rebel" (Hegi 75). In other words, live your life as you want, pursue your own dreams, be the strong, assertive, independent women, and don't try to hang on the coattails of female friends, relatives, characters, or anyone else just because you are afraid to go against the norm.

That sounds good to me. Megan has the right idea. I am not one for conflict. I just like to go with the flow even if I end up miserable. No raised voices, no crying, just peace or at least my imaginary vision of it that is get-
ting shattered by the soapbox standing woman on the television right now. It must be a movie. I don’t think I have seen anyone giving a speech out in the open about women’s rights lately; although, there is a women’s group on campus. I just never thought to join them because I don’t want to find out if they are men bashers. Life is too short. I should go home and play with my kids.

Works Cited


