

The Postmodern Challenge of Historiography in Contemporary Canadian Fiction: Kate Pullinger's *Weird Sister* and the Silent Voices in History

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ABSTRACT

As defined by Georg G. Iggers and promoted by Hayden White, the postmodern challenge of historiography calls into question the objective enquiry and truth value of history writing. Many works of fiction have embodied this trend, embracing the challenge by exploring objectivity and the retrievability of the past. In contemporary Canadian literature, such cases are also to be found. The novel *Weird Sister* (1999) by Kate Pullinger thematizes history and history writing, utilizes Gothic elements, and employs the elements of historiographic metafiction, e.g. as characterized by Linda Hutcheon. The book features characters representing the so-called silent voices whose testimony had remained lost in the official historical record. This paper aims to show that the depiction of the impossibility of uncovering the truth about the past represents a significant contribution by contemporary fiction authors to the postmodern challenge of historiography, with Pullinger's novel emerging as a notable contribution to this discourse.

KEYWORDS

postmodern challenge of historiography, contemporary Canadian literature, silent voices in history, Kate Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, historiographic metafiction

In *Dějiny Kanady* (History of Canada, 2012), Lenka Rovná and Miroslav Jindra describe the lifestyle of the original inhabitants of Canada, characterizing the intimate cohabitation of the forest hunter tribes. The bonds between men and women are portrayed as loose, easily formed and just as easily undone. One of the typical features of interpersonal relationships among the men in the tribe is borrowing women among each other. However, an important piece of information is missing from this history: the perspective of the women themselves. How this custom was viewed by women has not been recorded or preserved in any way.¹ In this example, the tribal women represent the silent, unheard voices swallowed up by the past. They demonstrably existed, yet their testimony, perspective, and voice did not survive.

The existence of silent voices has inspired many authors fascinated by the process of how history is crafted and by the concept of exactly what makes a historical fact. For centuries, written history was generally considered a science that strives for objectivity and factual correctness. Nevertheless, at least since the 1950s the objectivity of history has repeatedly been called into question by numerous Anglo-American historians and philosophers of history such as Robin George Collingwood, Edward Hallet Carr, Arthur C. Danto and Hayden White.

One of the first modern projections of skepticism towards the objectivity of history was presented in Friedrich Nietzsche's *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (*The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, 1872), a work of dramatic theory which provides "the first

1 Lenka Rovná and Miroslav Jindra, *Dějiny Kanady* (Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2012), 14.

incisive attack on the conception of truth and with it of historical truth.”² As Georg G. Iggers claims, Nietzsche’s work asserted that “the entire philosophical tradition of the West, beginning with Socrates, has been false and rested on the myth that reality could be grasped by means of concepts.”³ Nietzsche questioned Western thinking, which harbors faith in the ability of people to capture and understand the reality of the world around them through descriptions, words, images and other representations of reality. However, the core of Nietzsche’s skepticism lies in the understanding that comprehension through words is not possible, as the representation of reality will never be the same as the reality itself. The same notion is valid for history. Historical events and personages captured in words can never be the same as the past itself, i.e. if reality cannot be understood through concepts, neither can history.

The term “postmodern challenge” in relation to historiography was defined in Georg G. Iggers’ *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (1997) as a frontal attack led by philosophers and literary critics who claim to be postmodernists on the possibility of objectivity in the writing of history.⁴ For the purposes of this paper, in the discussion about the subversive tendencies in Kate Pullinger’s *Weird Sister* to undermine the possibility of an objective representation of historical fact, I will be operating with Iggers’ term. According to Iggers, the postmodern challenge was the result of a development in historical thinking which in the course of the second half of the 20th century tended to abandon the traditional approach to the writing of history, i.e. pointing out political historical events and using them to depict a “greater story.” What became more frequently preferred after WWII was an analytical approach emphasizing social structures and processes,⁵ as well as depictions of microhistory, i.e. the retelling of small, seemingly unimportant events which often remained lost or forgotten in macrohistorical works. Thus, these historians came to accept the reality that there is not just one history, but many histories covering even those facets of human life which had been considered ahistorical.⁶ Such an approach to the writing of history acknowledges the existence of silent voices who had thus far remained ignored.

According to Iggers, a second facet of the postmodern challenge is the literary aspect of all historical works, a feature pointed out by Hayden White.⁷ This brings us to Jacques Derrida and his famous claim that “there is nothing outside of the text.”⁸ With this he puts forth the assumption that “language constructs reality rather than referring to it. The historian works with texts, but

2 Georg G. Iggers, “Rationality and History,” in *Developments in Modern Historiography*, ed. Henry Kozicki (London: Macmillan, 1993), 22.

3 Iggers, “Rationality,” 22.

4 Georg G. Iggers, *Dějepisectví 20. století: Od vědecké objektivitě k postmoderní výzvě* [Historiography of the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge], trans. Pavel Kolář (Praha: Lidové noviny, 2002), 8. In my paper I refer to 2002 Czech edition of Iggers’ book, as it includes an introduction to the Czech edition written by Iggers that contains information vital for my paper that is missing from the English 2005 edition.

5 Iggers, *Dějepisectví*, 7.

6 Iggers, *Dějepisectví*, 9.

7 Iggers, *Dějepisectví*, 9.

8 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), 242.

these texts do not refer to an outside world.”⁹ Therefore, as Iggers understands it, theoreticians including Derrida recognized that every historical work is the historian’s subjective construct, i.e. no history exists outside of texts, and these texts have no relation to the actual past.¹⁰

At the beginning of his 1966 treatise on structuralist narratology, Roland Barthes claimed that “there are countless forms of narrative in the world [...]; narrative is present in myth, legend, fables [...] epics, history [...] narrative starts with the very history of mankind,”¹¹ meaning that “narratological imperialism” has transcended genre conventions and has blurred or erased altogether the boundary between fictional and historic narrative.¹² In *The Tropics of Discourse* (1986), Hayden White provides a chronological overview that shows that viewing the writing of history as an objective record of past events is a relatively new phenomenon which only came into wide practice in the 19th century. In the course of recording processes, personages and events, historians inevitably encounter gaps in the knowledge of a historical incident, yet these gaps rarely remain empty. According to White, a “historian must interpret his materials by filling in the gaps in his information on inferential or speculative grounds,”¹³ in other words, insert assumptions into his works. This process pushes the historic text further from what can be called an objective record towards narrative. As for narrative discourse, White claims that historians choose their own style of writing history: “There is no such thing as a single correct view of any object under study but there are many correct views, each requiring its own style of representation.”¹⁴ Any interpretation of an historical event forces the historian to choose a particular narrative style in which to report on it. To support this claim, White uses examples from French historians and the event of the French Revolution, which was interpreted as a romance by Jules Michelet and as a tragedy by Alexis de Tocqueville.¹⁵ White’s conclusion is that as far as narrative discourse goes, there is little that would differentiate the writing of history from fiction.

Literary theorist and narratologist Dorrit Cohn opposed White’s argument in her 1989 article “Fictional versus Historical Lives: Borderlines and Borderline Cases,” and more extensively in her book *The Distinction of Fiction* (1999). As Philippe Carrard states, Cohn built her defense not on the grounds of “what novelists can do and historians cannot (but rather) in terms of what historians can do and novelists cannot.”¹⁶ Cohn opposes White’s assumption that history and fiction are indistinguishable from one another simply because they may both be viewed merely as verbal artifacts,¹⁷ claiming that there is in fact a difference between the two in the traditional

9 Georg. G. Iggers, *Historiography of the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2005), 9.

10 Iggers, *Dějepisectví*, 9.

11 Roland Barthes, “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative,” trans. Lionel Duisit, *New Literary History* 6.2 (1975), 237.

12 Lubomír Doležel, *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History: Postmodern Stage* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2010), 15.

13 Hayden White, *The Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1986), 51.

14 White, *Tropics*, 47.

15 White, *Tropics*, 59.

16 Philippe Carrard, “The Distinction of Historiography: Dorrit Cohn and Referential Discourse,” *Narrative* 20, no.1 (January 2012): 125.

17 White, *Tropics*, 122.

distinction between “story” and “discourse.” Cohn asserts that White places structure merely at the level of story, never considering the level of discourse, where “narratology can come into play to define highly differentiated formal features that do [...] prevent histories from passing for novels and vice versa.”¹⁸

The second half of the 20th century witnessed the emergence of a new approach to historical fiction, one which embraced the possibility to “fictionalize history, but by doing so [postmodern authors] imply that history itself may be a form of fiction.”¹⁹ Czech-Canadian literary theorist Lubomír Doležel adds that as a part of this approach postmodernists “cultivate a radically nonessentialist semantics, which allows them to change even the most fundamental, individuating properties of historical persons, events, settings.”²⁰ Whereas in much historical fiction there is an effort to avoid contradictions between the particular story being told and the received versions of historical figures, postmodern historical fiction challenges these “facts” of history and often contradicts them.²¹ This postmodern approach of creating a contradictory and often ironic historical representation was famously defined by Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), where she operates with the term “historiographic metafiction” to denote postmodern fiction that deconstructs the myth of objectivity of history by implying that writing of history itself is a human construct, a discourse.²² Many works of postmodern as well as contemporary fiction have embraced the possibilities of historiographic metafiction to challenge the objectivity of the writing of history, raising the questions such as “what is the difference between history [...] and fantasy? What events of the past have become lost [...] why have they become lost?”²³ A few Canadian contributions to this discourse would include for example Rudy Wiebe’s *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973), Daphne Marlatt’s *Ana Historic* (1988), Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996) as well as Kate Pullinger’s *Weird Sister*.²⁴

This paper focuses on Pullinger’s novel which can serve as a demonstration of strategies the author uses to challenge received history and to emphasize the presence of silent voices in history. Pullinger’s novel was inspired by a minor 16th century event associated with witch hunting in the English village of Warboys. The novel questions the objectivity of history writing and especially the retrievability of historical fact by employing elements of historiographic metafiction and by foregrounding two characters who represent the silent (and silenced) voices in history – Agnes Samuel, an elusive protagonist whose motivation and thoughts remain hidden, although the story is, for the most part, narrated by a narrator who appears to be omniscient in the case of all the other characters in the novel, and Martin Throckmorton, a supporting character who is mute and paralyzed, and therefore unable to communicate the truth about Agnes that only he knows. Pullinger’s

18 Dorrit Cohn, *Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2000), 114.

19 Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987), 96.

20 Doležel, *Possible Worlds*, 87.

21 McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 17.

22 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), 93.

23 Amy Elias, “Historiographic Metafiction,” *The Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature*, eds. Brian McHale and Len Platt (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 294.

24 Although presently residing in England, Pullinger is generally recognized as a Canadian author – Canadian by birth, having grown up and studied in Canada and having received the Governor General’s Award for fiction.

novel utilizes the elements of historiographic metafiction, by “revealing the discursive nature of all ‘reality’: history [...] is shown to be subject to political and personal bias,”²⁵ emphasizing the very limited objectivity of the only historical source on the Warboys witch trials. Just like Hutcheon’s historiographic metafiction “embeds intertextual references that locate the reader in a specific past historical moment, but then it uses metafictional techniques to defamiliarize that historical moment to expose its ideological character as a specific telling of history,”²⁶ Pullinger takes one period account of the Warboys events and presents a Gothic reimagining of them, challenging and parodying the objectivity of the received historical facts by the very looseness with which she treats them.

Pullinger’s *Weird Sister*: A Note on the Historical Account of Warboys Events

In November 1589, the common practice of a neighborly visit to a family with a sick child proved fatal for the poor Samuel family of Warboys in Huntingdonshire (nowadays part of Cambridgeshire). A daughter of the wealthy Throckmorton family fell suddenly ill, and when Alice Samuel paid Robert and Elizabeth Throckmorton a visit, the child pronounced the fateful words: “Grandmother, look where the old witch sits [...]. Did you ever see [...] one more like a witch than she is?”²⁷ What was likely an impulsive accusation consequently spun out of control and eventually caused the execution of Alice’s whole family—her husband John and their fifteen-year-old daughter Agnes. The Samuels were charged under the Elizabethan witchcraft statute of 1563 against Conjurations, Enchantments, and Witchcrafts. The customary penalty for damage caused to persons or their property by witchcraft was a one-year prison sentence along with six hours of being pilloried once every quarter of the year of sentencing. This was the punishment for a first offence, which became much more severe if a death had occurred, supposedly as a result of witchcraft.²⁸ At any rate, the events consequently led to the Samuels’ execution, when, besides the Throckmorton children falling ill, a friend of the Throckmortons, Lady Susan Cromwell, died from the same or a similar malady.²⁹

The only period account that summarizes the Warboys events related to the Throckmorton-Samuel witchcraft dispute between the years 1589–1593 is called *The Most Strange and Admirable Discoverie of the Three Witches Of Warboys, Arraigned, Convicted, and Executed at the Last Assises at Huntington, for the Bewitching of the Five Daughters of Robert Throckmorton Esquire, and Divers Other Persons, with Sundrie Divellish and Grievous Torments: And Also for the Bewitching to Death of the Lady Crumwell, the Like Hath Not Been Heard of in This Age*. The text was published by Thomas Man in 1593 under the patronage of Judge Edward Fenner, who presided over the trials

25 Amy Elias, “Historiographic Metafiction,” 301.

26 Amy Elias, “Historiographic Metafiction,” 302.

27 Anonymous author, *The Most Strange and Admirable Discoverie of the Three Witches of Warboys, Arraigned, Convicted, and Executed at the Last Assises at Huntington, for the Bewitching of the Five Daughters of Robert Throckmorton Esquire, and Divers Other Persons, with Sundrie Divellish and Grievous Torments: And Also for the Bewitching to Death of the Lady Crumwell, the Like Hath Not Been Heard of in This Age* (London: Printed by Widdowe Orwin for Thomas Mann, 1593), Sig A.3.r, quoted in Philip Almond, *The Witches of Warboys* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), 15–16.

28 Almond, *The Witches of Warboys*, 3.

29 Almond, *The Witches of Warboys*, 64–66.

of the Samuel family. All other retellings are derivatives from this one.³⁰ The problem with this source is its historical unreliability, or bias. It was published under the patronage of the judge who sentenced the Samuels to death, thus it is only natural to presume that the account was written in order to reify the Samuels' guilt in the eyes of the public.

Alice Samuel confessed to bewitching the Throckmorton children (over time, all the Throckmorton daughters fell ill with the same symptoms as had their eldest, Jane, and all of them accused Alice Samuel of bewitching them), but according to historian Philip C. Almond, soon after the execution there were rumors that an injustice had been done to the Samuels. Some people from the county later claimed "that this Mother Samuel [...] was an old simple woman, and that one might make her by (fair) words confess what they would."³¹ However, the doubts came too late for the Samuel family to save their life and reputation.

The first notion that Alice's daughter Agnes was the source of the torment of the Throckmorton daughters appeared in early 1593.³² Agnes was then forced to stay in the Throckmorton's house, as the children at some point claimed that the presence of the witch relieved their suffering.³³ In the house, she was forced to undergo a particularly violent scratching, as it was believed that physical torment of the witch neutralizes their powers and relieves the victim.³⁴ Eventually, the younger daughter, Elizabeth, accused Agnes of being the worst of the whole family and that she was the reason her mother Alice did them so much harm.³⁵ Agnes underwent several other scratchings with forbearance, which was later interpreted as yet more proof of her witchcraft.³⁶ The Samuels were not allowed to present a defense at the trial³⁷ and they were all executed on April 5, 1593.³⁸

Iggers' Postmodern Challenge in Kate Pullinger's *Weird Sister*

Set in the present, Pullinger's *Weird Sister* revolves around a fictional counterpart of the historical Agnes Samuel—a young American of the same name who arrives in the little Cambridgeshire village of Warboys one winter evening. There she seduces and marries a handsome local bachelor, Robert Throckmorton, a descendant of the ancient Throckmorton family. Shortly thereafter, Robert's family is struck with a series of tragedies. Agnes initiates a love affair with Robert's brother Graeme, whose marriage consequently disintegrates, followed by his wife's tragic death. Robert's youngest sibling Jenny commits suicide, and Graeme is killed by Robert in an attempt to defend Agnes from an attack by Graeme.

30 Almond, *The Witches of Warboys*, 5–6.

31 Anonymous author, *The Most Strange and Admirable Discoverie*, sig. H.1.v, quoted in Almond, *The Witches of Warboys*, 7.

32 Almond, *The Witches of Warboys*, 32.

33 Almond, *The Witches of Warboys*, 131.

34 Almond, *The Witches of Warboys*, 38.

35 Almond, *The Witches of Warboys*, 153.

36 Almond, *The Witches of Warboys*, 167.

37 Almond, *The Witches of Warboys*, 187.

38 Almond, *The Witches of Warboys*, 194.

The central theme of the novel is Agnes's identity and the impossibility of truly knowing who she is. This device serves as one of the instruments with which the author thematizes the (un)reliability of history and points to the existence of silent voices. In *Die Logik der Dichtung* (1957, *The Logic of Literature*, 1973), Käte Hamburger claims that one of the most important markers of fictionality is demonstrating an insight into the inner world of the character.³⁹ Therefore, in fiction it is possible to access thoughts and thus become a witness to the presentation of the feelings of the characters, even those inspired by historical personages. Dorrit Cohn argues that "in a factual, historical text, presenting the inner life of a statesman [...] would be unthinkable and would not be accepted [...]. The omniscience of the author is a privilege and a mark of fiction."⁴⁰ Therefore, thanks to the freedom to speculate, fiction can create a more complex representation of characters. This is not the case, however, with *Weird Sister*, as the author purposely maintains the unbreakable mystery around her protagonist. A large portion of the novel is narrated by an omniscient narrator who continually avoids giving insights into Agnes's mind that would disclose her secrets and give her the voice that was denied to her historical counterpart. Veiling the protagonist's motives and thoughts in mystery, i.e. denying her a voice, can be interpreted as one of the strategies the author uses to emphasize the presence of silent voices in history and thus pointing to the ultimate loss and irretrievability of their testimony, an absence which inevitably leads to an incomplete picture of a historical event. Although the framework of fiction provides the opportunity to use an omniscient narrator with access to every possible thought of each character in the novel, in this case Agnes Pullinger opts for leaving the gaps remain. The theme of mystery, strongly connected with history, dominates the novel and emphasizes the elusiveness and irretrievability of the past, thus the impossibility of unveiling unequivocal historical facts.

From the very beginning of the novel Agnes Samuel is carefully portrayed as someone odd, impenetrable and contradictory. She seems to have a strange power over people, "bewitching" everyone she meets, from the taxi driver who drives her to Warboys, to her future husband, Robert. The innkeeper in whose inn Agnes stays the first few nights "can hardly breathe"⁴¹ when he spots her for the first time, and her taxi driver "has fallen in love with his passenger."⁴² Yet, something dark and ominous accompanies Agnes; although the taxi driver "feels full of regret at leaving her in this small, damp village [...]" at the same time he can't wait to get away,⁴³ sensing her dangerousness.

When Agnes meets Robert, she is very much interested in everything about him⁴⁴ and yet, Robert does not get to know anything about her in return. The story is narrated retrospectively, after all the Warboys tragedies have happened, and still Robert asks himself "what can I say about her?"⁴⁵ After having been married to Agnes and having spent more time with her than anyone

39 Käte Hamburger, *The Logic of Literature*, trans. Marilyn J. Rose (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1973), 83.

40 Dorrit Cohn, "Narratologische Kennzeichen der Fiktionalität," *Sprachkunst. Beiträge zur Literaturwissenschaft* 26 (1995), quoted in Wolf Schmid, *Narratology: An Introduction*, trans. Alexander Starritt (New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 28.

41 Kate Pullinger, *Weird Sister* (London: Phoenix House, 1999), 2.

42 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 1.

43 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 2.

44 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 17.

45 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 23.

else in the village, he is still unsure about what to say when people ask him what she is really like in private.⁴⁶ Agnes remains an impenetrable mystery.

Agnes's peculiar and enigmatic nature is envisioned through the perspective of several characters. Upon their first encounters, Jenny Throckmorton harbors deep admiration for Agnes. She "can't believe her sister-in-law-to-be is real. She's like a creature from another planet."⁴⁷ We can read this passage in two ways—one is that Jenny, living in the isolated world of a sleepy English village, is left awestruck from the appearance of such an uncommon woman. On the other hand, one might assume that Agnes does not really belong to the world of contemporary England, that she truly is from a different culture and time as a historical figure who finds herself transplanted in the 20th century. Agnes's behavior is indeed strange at times, emphasizing her possibly sinister nature, as she is continuously portrayed as someone with a chillingly pragmatic approach to human tragedies. When she and Jenny run to catch the subway, they "hear a terrible sound, an enormous crippling thud, and people already on the platform begin to shriek and scream."⁴⁸ Jenny stops, horrified, because she knows that someone must have fallen or jumped under the oncoming train.⁴⁹ Yet Agnes walks on and when Jenny stops her, she "turns around, smiling, (and asking) 'What's wrong?'"⁵⁰ While Jenny guesses correctly at the nature of the incident, Agnes seemingly remains oblivious even to the screaming of others on the platform. Her reasoning for not being upset when Jenny explains what happened is even more chilling: "We're travelling in the other direction."⁵¹

Agnes's odd absence of empathy is also mentioned in connection with the deaths of the members of Throckmorton family. Graeme accidentally kills his wife Karen, and when Robert finds out, there is understandable turmoil—calling the police, giving statements, helping in the investigation. Agnes, however, goes upstairs to take a nap instead.⁵² Robert reflects that at that time he considered this perfectly normal,⁵³ indicating that once he was no longer in Agnes's company, he did reassess her behavior. He justifies his not noticing the oddness of her earlier actions by claiming that "it was as though Agnes was occupying my emotions so fully that there wasn't room for anything else."⁵⁴ A similar reaction comes from Agnes when Jenny commits suicide. Moments away from Robert's younger sisters' funeral, Agnes keeps dragging him to bed to indulge in sex, while Robert asks himself "how can it be right to take pleasure when Jenny is not yet buried?"⁵⁵ Agnes's strange behavior intensifies during the funeral ceremony itself when Graeme makes a scene, claiming that he had an affair with Agnes. In the middle of this episode, the smiling Agnes tries again to lure Robert upstairs to bed.⁵⁶ She is portrayed as a woman of enormous sexual appetite, which is not

46 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 23.

47 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 37.

48 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 55.

49 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 55.

50 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 55.

51 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 56.

52 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 221.

53 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 221.

54 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 221.

55 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 286.

56 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 291.

satiated even as she is facing the direst of circumstances. However, Agnes also uses sex as a means of manipulation: she seduces Robert in order to become a member of the Throckmorton family, she lay with Graeme to escalate the disintegration of his marriage with Karen, and finally, she lures Robert to the bedroom when her affair with Graeme is about to become public knowledge. Her real motives, though, remain obscure.

The portrait of Agnes as a sociopathic woman with a chilling lack of empathy, however, clashes with another side of her. There are numerous occasions when her behavior, at best, can be said to generate confusion about what she is really like. She is adored by Karen's and Graeme's young sons,⁵⁷ and when their mother dies, Agnes steps in and "is there for them, always, morning, noon and night."⁵⁸ In Robert she sparks a love so "palpable (that) everyone present feels it,"⁵⁹ making him "stupid with happiness."⁶⁰ This infatuation with Agnes remains even when she is not present. Robert is still in love with her even when she is gone and he is married to his childhood friend Elizabeth. Despite all that happens, at the end of the novel he states that Agnes remains his "best. His beloved. His girl."⁶¹ He rationalizes his feelings for her, and he knows exactly why he loved her so deeply: "when she married me, she married my family. I loved her for that as much as anything."⁶² In this respect, Agnes was a diligent wife, spending time with Jenny, with Karen's little boys, even with Robert's father, the wheelchair-bound, mute and incontinent Martin. This seemingly contradictory portrayal of Agnes contributes to the general confusion about her true nature, emphasizing the novel's theme of mystery that constantly intertwines with the theme of history, as Agnes Samuel remains a powerful reminder of her historical counterpart.

The impossibility of discovering who Agnes truly is persists throughout the whole storyline. She shares neither her thoughts, nor her personal information, and she never answers questions about her past, always retorting justifications such as: "I'm here for you now and that's all that matters."⁶³ Robert's childhood friend Elizabeth speaks with Agnes on several occasions, even involving herself in intimate conversations with her, but as Elizabeth states, the mysterious woman "had somehow deflected all conversation away from herself onto Robert and me. During the course of the evening I learned nothing about her."⁶⁴ Jenny has a similar experience when she inquires about Agnes's motivation to come to England, and Agnes looks at Jenny sharply and diverts all questions away from herself.⁶⁵ Elizabeth describes Agnes's impenetrability, claiming that "it was as though she was in our midst but none of us could really see her. Or what we saw differed so dramatically from one person to the next that you wouldn't think we were describing one person, but many."⁶⁶ Agnes is like a perfectly polished surface, so shiny that it is almost a mirror—when

57 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 237.

58 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 235.

59 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 231.

60 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 34.

61 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 307.

62 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 305.

63 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 88.

64 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 100.

65 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 124.

66 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 115.

people look at her, they don't see her but rather the reflection of their own feelings towards her. This is stated explicitly by Elizabeth when she ponders about how Robert viewed Agnes: "When Robert looked at Agnes Samuel I don't know what he saw. Love, I guess, love itself, his own love reflected back at him."⁶⁷ No one can see through the impenetrable veil around Agnes's character, not even people closest to her, as their look inevitably rests on the reflective surface and fails to penetrate.

Agnes's mysteriousness also works on a symbolic level. When she starts her love affair with Graeme, "they keep on their clothes and bare only the necessary flesh,"⁶⁸ which symbolizes that their true selves remain hidden from one another. However, as the affair progresses, Graeme begins baring not only his flesh, but also his soul, and confesses to Agnes even his deepest secrets. During sex he is completely naked, but Agnes keeps most of her clothes on.⁶⁹ Agnes "opens something up in (Graeme), something that is usually closed, locked up tight,"⁷⁰ but it does not work both ways. Graeme also cannot penetrate the reflective surface of Agnes.

All that is known about Agnes in the novel are others' interpretations and projections about her. Lolly, Jenny's best friend with a naïve interest in witchcraft, is heavily influenced by a book about the Warboys witch trials concerning the Samuels which she finds in a library—the only existing historical source on the real Warboys events. Lolly is convinced that Agnes is a revengeful incarnation of the historical Agnes Samuel. She believes Agnes "is evil."⁷¹ Nevertheless, Lolly's opinion is that of a child who herself likes to play at being a witch with a bit of chanting, candles and reading up on spells.⁷² When Lolly finds the book about the Samuel trial, she is convinced that the events described there are "exactly what happened,"⁷³ because "to her the book's age gives it authority."⁷⁴ Lolly is a child incapable of taking a critical perspective on historical sources. She takes the accuracy of such a venerated source for granted, and it would not occur to her to question its reliability. She bases her interpretation of Agnes's identity on this one source, which in her view is infallible. Here Pullinger utilizes the intertextual reference to a historical source ironically, as in the context of the novel, the Gothic elements of the old book are emphasized, thus Lolly is convinced that Agnes is in fact an evil reincarnation of a 16th century witch.

A similar interpretation of Agnes's character comes from a much more rational and reasonable Warboys citizen—Marlene Henderson, local lawyer, pregnant with her first child after years of intense therapy.⁷⁵ Marlene is presented as "bright and articulate and well-informed about politics and history,"⁷⁶ yet she is convinced that Agnes is a witch, and when Marlene suffers a miscarriage, she believes Agnes is responsible.⁷⁷ However, Marlene's husband thinks differently

67 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 116.

68 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 127.

69 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 173.

70 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 172.

71 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 285.

72 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 285.

73 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 255.

74 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 255.

75 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 239.

76 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 240.

77 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 240.

about Agnes. He is well aware of the medical problems connected with Marlene's pregnancy and his view is that "Marlene can say whatever she wants [...] she can blame Agnes, she can blame the Prime Minister and the Pope if she likes; he is glad to have her in one piece."⁷⁸ The differing perspectives of Marlene and her husband show that the view of Agnes as a witch is questionable. In the case of Lolly, it is the accusation of a troubled child who has just lost her best friend under dramatic circumstances and who has always romanticized witchcraft. Therefore, when she is confronted with a source about the Samuel family, it is only natural that she sees a witch in Agnes. In the case of Marlene, it is the accusation of a woman who desperately needs to blame someone for her miscarriage and who willingly ignores a rational explanation for the event, even after a logical justification is offered by her husband.

There are two more characters who attempt to understand Agnes and find out who she is—Robert Throckmorton and his second wife Elizabeth, the counterparts of the historical Throckmorton parents. The contemporary Throckmortons reflect the reluctance of their historical counterparts to believe in witchcraft. In *Weird Sister*, both Robert and Elizabeth refute the accusation that Agnes is a witch. Robert adores his first wife no matter what she does, maintaining his positive interpretation of her character. He is always on Agnes's side, even when it means opposing the members of his own family. He is angry with Jenny for telling him about Agnes's affair with Graeme,⁷⁹ and doesn't believe her.⁸⁰ On the one hand Robert claims he does not really know Agnes,⁸¹ while on the other he believes the best about her and claims that "she was not capable of harbouring a grudge."⁸² This clashes with Lolly's interpretation that Agnes came to Warboys to avenge the execution of the historical fifteen-year-old Agnes and her family, as such calculated vengeance would inevitably be fueled by ill-feeling. All in all, from Robert's perspective Agnes comes across as a pragmatic, at times weird, yet wonderful woman who gave him everything he had ever dreamt of.

Robert's enthusiasm is not shared by his second wife Elizabeth, who suffers from jealousy upon hearing of and seeing Agnes. Her interpretation of Agnes is therefore biased from the beginning, as Elizabeth herself admits.⁸³ When she first observes Agnes in interaction with the Throckmorton family, Elizabeth admits that "that evening the Throckmortons were a picture of happiness,"⁸⁴ yet she adds that "it seemed [...] with hindsight, that the whole set up was one enormous, loud, false chord [...] Agnes was biding her time. She was getting everyone where she wanted them. And everyone included me."⁸⁵ Elizabeth openly shows her view of Agnes, which is in concordance with Lolly's opinion that Agnes is evil. She also claims that the reason she told Agnes so much about her intimate life was because of "some spell that Agnes had cast [...] I looked at her and, before I knew what was happening, my tongue was loosened,"⁸⁶ blaming Agnes for the

78 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 250.

79 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 205.

80 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 304.

81 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 30.

82 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 232.

83 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 74.

84 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 98.

85 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 98.

86 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 141.

fact that she herself had divulged too much. Elizabeth's view of Agnes is, however, tinted heavily with Elizabeth's own flaws and her personal problems. She is in love with Agnes's husband, she has made some poor life choices, and as a result she is facing financial problems and other issues stemming from her failed career as a psychotherapist. She admits to being jealous—she “couldn't stand the fact that she (Agnes) had money, that she had beautiful clothes, lovely things, that it wasn't an issue for her.”⁸⁷ Together with Elizabeth's sour feeling that it should have been her to marry Robert,⁸⁸ her confession confirms her bias. Therefore, we are presented with a subjective perspective on Agnes by a woman who feels that Agnes stole the man who was rightfully hers and who believes that Agnes is hurting the family to which Elizabeth desperately wants to belong. Yet as for the accusation of witchcraft, Elizabeth demonstrates rationality. Here we can see the parallel with the historical Elizabeth Throckmorton, who was also reluctant to believe the accusation: “there was a problem with Agnes [but] it had nothing to do with witchcraft, nothing to do with the supernatural.”⁸⁹ Over time, Elizabeth comes to believe that “Agnes came to Warboys to destroy the Throckmortons,”⁹⁰ yet she does not believe that Agnes is a witch. After having read the only existing historical source on the Warboys events, she states:

I think about that little book from time to time. The story it tells is grim, but if you read between the lines, it's much worse. The Samuels were beholden to their neighbours the Throckmortons, the power the wealthy family had over their lives was absolute [...]. Agnes's father, John Samuel, was a brutal man and he fought hard against the allegations of witchcraft, but he could not stop the Throckmortons from making their case.⁹¹

She understands what she perceives as the social background of the Warboys witch trials and with this explanation she rejects the idea that Agnes is the incarnation of the historical Agnes Samuel. Elizabeth understands Agnes differently from Lolly or Marlene, as is obvious from the scene in which she confronts her:

“I don't know if Agnes Samuel is your real name. You think you are a witch, but you are not, you can't be. You have internalized the story [. . .]. Witches don't exist. The Throckmortons were rich, the Samuels poor. They had no way of mounting a defence. The children were hysterical. No one understood about these things.”⁹²

Elizabeth proves to be a rational woman, and above all, a psychotherapist. Although she blames Agnes for the misfortunes that the Throckmortons have encountered, she does not believe this has anything to do with witchcraft; rather, she claims that Agnes simply identified with the executed Agnes Samuel, borrowed her name and decided to take revenge on her behalf.

Even with the perspective of various characters in the novel, we are nowhere near answering the question who Agnes Samuel really is or why she came to Warboys. She remains a mysterious,

87 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 176.

88 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 110.

89 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 240.

90 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 303.

91 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 302–03.

92 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 287.

undecipherable entity, never revealing anything about herself. She represents a silent voice as a symbol for the silenced historical Agnes Samuel, whose existence is documented in a historical source, but not her perspective. When Elizabeth shouts at Agnes “I want to know why you are here,”⁹³ Agnes only smiles and says “does anyone know the answer to that question.”⁹⁴ Pullinger openly mocks her characters’ efforts to uncover Agnes’s identity, but paradoxically has created a character that is different from all the others, one who sees and knows all. Robert’s father Martin Throckmorton intimates that he “knows who Agnes is.”⁹⁵ However, he is mute and wheelchair-bound; due to his medical condition he cannot change facial expression or move, therefore he is stripped of any means of conveying any kind of message. Yet in the context of the novel Martin’s knowledge of Agnes’ true identity makes him the ultimate silent witness, one who will never be able to pass on his knowledge. Pullinger’s choice of Martin as the only true seer is of great significance. Similarly to Agnes, he symbolically stands for all the lost sources and lost voices that lie buried in history and whose accounts are irretrievable. Therefore, the author’s choice of the mute Martin as the only one who knows the truth is another way of emphasizing the impossibility of truly knowing the past. Just like Agnes’s identity, thoughts and motives, the truth about the Throckmorton-Samuel case will remain hidden, with no one able to disclose what actually happened to the Throckmorton children, nor what was the nature and source of their affliction.

In *Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon argues that: “historiographic metafiction [...] problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge, because there is no reconciliation, no dialectic [...] just unresolved contradiction.”⁹⁶ In *Weird Sister* Pullinger presents Hutcheon’s “unresolved contradiction” in the form of Agnes Samuel—a fictional re-imagining of the fifteen-year-old Agnes Samuel hanged for witchcraft in 1593. Pullinger’s Agnes is a character portrayed simultaneously as utterly modern and deeply rooted in the local history of Warboys, cold and sociopathic, while at the same time loving and endearing, with nothing and no one able to unveil her true identity, not even the otherwise omniscient narrator having access to her thoughts and motives. Pullinger’s Agnes is not only a contradictory character who remains shrouded in mystery, she is also a silent voice whose story is irretrievably lost, a representative for the lost voices in history whose unheard testimonies have been swallowed up by the abyss of time—as was the case of her historical counterpart. In addition to Agnes, Martin Throckmorton, the only character who knows the truth about her and is unable to communicate it due to his physical limitations, represents the ultimate muted witness.

By employing elements of historiographic metafiction and presenting lost voices, Pullinger embraces Iggers’ concept of the postmodern challenge of historiography and the attempts to discredit the reliability of history through which the notion of the retrievability of the past is rejected as well as any possibility of representing events precisely as they happened. By utilizing the Gothic elements—the possibility of Agnes being a reincarnation of a 16th century Warboys witch and the series of chilling tragic incidents that are directly and indirectly connected with her—in addition to the ironic usage of intertextual references to the only existing source on Warboys witch trials,

93 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 295.

94 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 295.

95 Pullinger, *Weird Sister*, 223.

96 Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, 106.

Pullinger further challenges the objectivity of history writing. The novel represents a prime example of the postmodern distrust of what was once taken as historical fact, showing that with regard to truly knowing the past, our efforts to “master the unfamiliar is a vain illusion.”⁹⁷

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97 Bernd Engler, “The Dismemberment of Clio,” *The Historiographic Metafiction in Modern American and Canadian Literature*, eds. Bernd Engler and Kurt Müller (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1994), 33.

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