

THE FRAGMENTATION OF STYLE IN ANN BEATTIE'S *PICTURING WILL*

*Hilda Gairaud Ruiz**

ABSTRACT

The following article examines the application of the notions of fragmentation to the novel *Picturing Will* written by Ann Beattie. Fragmentation of style in this novel serves as strategy to support Beattie's thematic development. Its employment seems to suggest that totalitarian and hegemonic views to important social institutions such as marriage, parenthood, and family ought to be broken to open different possibilities of new forms of relating within them. At the same time, its employment also serves to disrupt the traditional literary conventions of crafting stories.

Key words: fragmentation, photography, frames, angles, close-ups, long-shot, lightening.

RESUMEN

El siguiente artículo examina la aplicación de las nociones de fragmentación a la novela *Picturing Will* escrita por Ann Beattie. La fragmentación de estilo en esta novela sirve como una estrategia para apoyar el desarrollo temático de la autora. Su empleo parece sugerir que las percepciones totalitarias y hegemónicas hacia instituciones como el matrimonio, paternidad/maternidad y familia deben ser fragmentadas para abrir posibilidades diferentes de nuevas formas de integrarlas y de relacionarse dentro de ellas. Al mismo tiempo, su empleo sirve para alterar las convenciones literarias tradicionales de plantear historias o cuentos.

Palabras clave: fragmentación, fotografía, marcos, ángulos, acercamientos, distanciamientos, iluminación.

The work of American novelist Ann Beattie has been characterized by a narrative style that reveals a resistance to the strictly conventional. Being a contemporary author, she has distanced herself from traditional ways of crafting stories. In fact, general criticism has seen Beattie's different stylistic application as innovation mainly but, at the same time, has categorized her writing in negative ways. Namely, *New York Times* critic Mervyn Rothstein (1985: 2) affirms that her style presents fragmented narratives which seem to be webbed only by a suggestive unity of the story. He

literally states that much of her writing has been compared to "a jigsaw puzzle put together with art" (Rothstein 1985: 2). Beattie (Rothstein 1985: 2) herself confirms that the realities in her writing are highly fragmented: "I think you go out here and see there are no clear pieces. And that you can do a lot with the pieces and have not necessarily just one puzzle". In addition, Hillel Italie (1998: 1) from the *Houston Chronicle* also connects Beattie's style to an avoidance of traditional stylistic models: "sparse in language, droll in humor, wary about love and skeptical of tradition. It's fiction for an audience unsure about

* Profesora de la Escuela de Lenguas Modernas, Universidad de Costa Rica.

everything". Subsequently, her broken (from the conventio- nal) stylistic forms have open doors to a rather adverse criticism. To illustrate, Ann Hulbert (1990: 1) from the New York Review of Books proclaims:

in Beattie's characteristically deadpan prose crowded with up-to-date details, she has kept up with her familiar cast of laid-back characters who came of age in the late Sixties and early Seventies. Just that talent for disjointed documentary has obscured Beattie's aspiration to do more than mirror the malaise of a generation of Americans distinguished by their inability to connect.

Following a similar view, critic Vladislava Gordic (1990: 1) reduces Beattie's style to minimalism-tendencies and strategies in American writing which attempt to represent reality the way it is: "[avoiding] to falsify experience for the sake of drama". Gordic affirms:

Ann Beattie has developed a style of short flat sentences, non- sequiturs, matter-of-factly focusing upon the banal details of contemporary popular culture, and the so-called "missing effect." Her story telling is fragmentary and economic, regularly eliminating description for the sake of exposition. Her stories lack a central theme, consistent modes of characterization and a clear time-scheme. Instead, she only registers trivial transgressions. (2)

Nonetheless, Beattie's style and development of theme and character have certainly served to bring into consciousness the realities of a generation of Americans who apparently can not find their own way in life. In short, Beattie's works describe the unstable emotional state of a generation of Americans urged to confront a rather difficult, changing reality and the sometimes tragic demands of the contemporary world.

But, what is meant by "fragmented narratives"? Current proposals have given consistent connotations to the term fragmentation since there is no theory of fragmentation whatsoever up to now. Philosophically, proposals of modern literary and cultural criticism have exposed the notion of fragmentation as follows:

The idea of fragmentation has often been invoked as a general description of life in the modern era,

encompassing all aspects of experience from social traditions to religious and philosophical systems to aesthetic forms. The concept itself is opposed to that of totality- whether as a description of the self or subject, the system of values we inhabit, or the material experiences of every day life [...] For many, especially those invested in particular forms of essentialism, or belief in transcendent forms of aesthetics, morals, or political action, fragmentation is much lamented. For others, especially those who espouse notions of decentering or indeterminacy [...] fragmentation is not necessarily in and of itself a deleterious state of affairs and can even be celebrated (Childers 1995: 117).

In this definition, the traditional approach to fragmentation presents itself as the opposite of totality, and totality is regarded as a form of transcendental and essential truth, universally accepted, to the point of being formally acknowledged and transmitted by current cultu- ral institutions such as the church, family, and formal school systems. This "truth" must fun- ction in equally effective ways for all human beings worldwide. The term fragmentation, then, acquires a negative perception in fixed, hegemonic systems of thought. On the contrary, post-modern and more recent approaches provide a new, deconstructed view of fragmentation which is not only positive, but also gives the term the qualifications of a necessary practice which accounts for the appreciation of difference wi- thin systems, promotes the idea of plurality and expands the types of relationships among all forces that compose a social system or group.

Difference becomes a key term within this view of fragmentation. The appreciation and acknowledgement of difference becomes a must in all areas related to human experience- aesthe- tics, morality and values, politics among others-for it promotes possibilities for more specific and particular ways of representation. Therefore, representation is framed in discourse in many possible forms. To frame discourse within narratives using fragmentation means to articulate experience generating and processing texts distancing from traditional literary conventions. Ann Beattie seems to be

employing such framing to her narratives. More specifically, she is proposing a different fragmented style in her novel *Picturing Will*. In this novel, stylistic frames show a narrative complexity that deviates from traditional literary conventions. The new forms of style propose different means of presenting, shaping, and controlling the representations of realities. The employment of different techniques and devices used in the narrative support the thematic issues on decentering, deconstruction, and fragmentation.

Picturing Will is framed in several unconventional ways. Stylistically, the story postulates non-traditional narrative techniques which reinforce the development and proposals of theme. As if detaching from traditional ways of crafting narratives or of storying, Beattie includes photography, a diary, shifting voices, reserved and disrupted descriptions, and gaps among other narrative devices, to shape her proposal to deconstruct and decenter absolutist, hegemonic ideas about marriage, parenthood, and family. The stylistic complexity and its associations to theme illustrate her attitude and the attitude of many writers from her generation to "eagerly drop out the system" (Miller 1995: 565). The unconventional forms of her style are also proposals of deconstructing the idea of wholeness in the narrative and its theme.

Ann Beattie frames the narrative of *Picturing Will* by using a very complex and unconventional style. Instead of following a linear, logical sequence of interrelated events, where facts are explicitly arranged in progression towards a crisis, an epiphany, and a resolution, she employs innovating devices to cause an effect of fragmentation. Examples of these devices mainly include the use of photographic intra-textual frames and in the narrative, the use of the stream of consciousness, shifting voices, disruptions and gaps. Events appear loosened when they do. Certainly, this type of framing deconstructs the traditional, tightly controlled structure of plot in which an episode unfolds from the preceding one in a very logical way. In contrast,

Picturing Will offers a fragmented plot where events are often webbed through facts and represented by photographs. These pictures are in turn scattered throughout the novel, and constant shifts in voices and points of view narrate the story from different focuses. With the use of photography, the effect of storying in this way is disjointedness and fragmentation insinuating the deconstruction of stylistic literary forms and descriptions of realities.

The novel *Picturing Will* includes photography as part of its narrative development. The use of photography intrinsically frames certain realities in the novel through its presence and descriptions. Subsequently, photography becomes a narrative form which embodies several thematic issues. Besides, the role of the photographer, the use of angles, close-ups, long-shots, and lighting are crucial elements within photography as well as essential devices within Beattie's narrative. So the first element of photography to be discussed is the presence of the photographer, Jody, as a protagonist and a narrator.

Because photography is a visual art, Jody's gaze frames realities in specific ways, especially those related to matrimony and parenthood. She proposes different views of these realities, often distancing them from certain hegemonic practices that have traditionally framed them. By means of photographic acts, Jody deconstructs the supposed use of rationality and control in marrying and replaces it with the inevitable presence of intuition, chance, and desire. According to Ann Kaplan, depending on the ways of looking, through the look or the gaze, representation and perception are affected. Since the gaze frames Jody's way of perceiving objects and subjects, when she takes pictures, the description of her photographic images through the camera highly mirror her own consciousness. In this way, like a camera, Jody partly becomes a reflector. In a way, because Jodie is gazing, her appreciations reckon her own anxieties and her own desires, conditions which are reflected in the uncertain expression

of the protagonists of her pictures. They project her own emotional state. She also describes photographs framed by intuition rather than rationality on her part and on the part of the protagonists. Intuition replaces rationality, a fact that exhibits a lack of precision in future decisions. Finally, photographs are also framed by a strong desire that the happiness of the moment might last the rest of the protagonists' lives:

Jody inclined her head and looked into the camera. There they were: two happy, silly people who had no doubt given great thought as to how they would appear. They didn't seem that different from the engaged couples who put on their best clothes and sat side by side to smile for posterity (Beattie 1989: 45)¹.

Jody frames her pictures influenced by the damage caused by her own broken marriage. With all her best wishes, she ambiguously prays for the endurance and preservation of marriage, but she thinks that, like in her case, chances for success are scarce. She acknowledges that success in marriage does not depend only on the performance of the groom and the bride. Instead, in Jody's view, it mostly depends on an object: the camera, reproducer of memories, an object capable of the prolongation of a happy marriage. This idea nullifies the role of the protagonists, who are supposed to be the subjects in control of such an act, which is a supposed rational commitment. But since these subjects only expect the best, they, the groom and the bride, project naiveté and desperation, far from a conscious awareness of what they are doing: "Even wedding photographs themselves had started to make (Jody) sad: documents that would allow people to look back and wonder about their naiveté or their self-righteousness that would allow one day turn to skepticism" (33). Thus, intuition, chance, and desire juxtapose the presupposed rationale that frames marriage. The bride and the groom incapable of rationalizing their acts in Jody's view; parallel, the photographer who also lacks control of the logical arrangement of the process of photographing weddings.

According to Jody, the best transcendent wedding pictures are those resulting from the intromission of chance in the image, and not those resulting from the artistic skills of the photographer. Hence, the presence or absence of control on the part of the photographer does not determine or guarantee the best pictures: uncontrollable forces, such as an unexpected element like the breeze (its effects seen later in a photo), provide a wedding picture with a transcendental quality:

In the best photographs, the photographer's presence was palpable. Though [Jodie] had revised her thoughts now and was inclined to think just the opposite, she was interested, then, in trying to understand what the photographers revealed about themselves. The risks they took were the ultimate fascination. She had tried to figure out when the photographers thought they were hiding, and to what extent this was true. Sometimes the photographer disappeared as unconvincingly as a child playing hide-and-seek who couldn't help peeking around the corner to see how the game was going. Other times you couldn't help thinking that the photographer had orchestrated the moment in order to make a personal statement, which did not express the subject's feeling at all. Looking at photographs was a little like sleuthing, but in so many cases the mystery transcended anything that could be explained. (13)

The first statement of the quotation stipulates a truth in the art of photography, but Jody questions this view and confirms her stance in the rest of the quotation: the role of the photographer is not determinant in order to achieve transcendental results. The photographer's presence or absence is mysterious. The transcendence of the photograph surpasses her/his expectations. Again, her/his rationality or her/his logical arrangement of a picture does not necessarily control the situation. The best results achieved in photographing weddings, that is in reproducing a lifetime commitment, are achieved if improvised elements get into the picture. As a narrator, Jody perceives the transcendence of getting married beyond expectations, rationality, and logic. By not giving importance to the photographer's control of the camera and of the situation, she

proposes a frame for marriage. Thus, she asks to the reader to acknowledge indeterminacy, improvisation, and chance which may also frame the act of marrying.

On the whole, it is not the photographer who is in control of this transcendental act, nor the subjects involved, nor the traditions surrounding the experiences of weddings. For the most part, in Jody's view, the camera is distinctively the object responsible for freezing and recording those happy moments for a lifetime. According to Jody, the camera is precisely the only means that can grant weddings and marriages the possibility of happiness and endurance. So, the commitment to preserve a marriage in the ways articulated in the vows becomes real only by the function of the camera, which captures the moments of commitment and happiness and documents them in pictures. In this respect, Jody affirms: "you went away with the memories of the day [a wedding] that would be larger than life because you had a machine that could do the enlarging" (84). Ambiguously, Jody acknowledges that pictures will always be there and that situations are likely to change for the worst: "camera raised, she would close her eyes for a few seconds and pray that the marriage taking place would last, however unlikely it might seem at the moment - that it wouldn't become a dreary statistic of failure down the road" (20). Furthermore, in Jody's view, the camera becomes a sort of protector because it freezes time and the moments in which there is an apparent happiness. The camera grants Jodie the possibility of possessing those moments and of saving them since "the good thing about having a camera between you and the rest of the world (is that) it afforded some protection, a way to stall for time" (45). Ironically, by freezing and possessing time in happy memories, she empowers herself and becomes in control of a situation she could not manage in her own reality.

The camera also offers protection because it grants subjects a sense of belonging. The camera verifies that subjects are part of cultural traditions. Getting married proves that brooms and brides follow culturally preserved practices, which is a way of receiving

acknowledgment and approval because they are doing what is expected for them. However, though couples behave as expected, for the most part, they do it without a conscious rationale. When explaining why a couple looked "soulfully" into the camera, Jody says that is due to the fact that:

(...) the camera had the power to stop time and to verify that [couples] were part of a tradition. That was why brides wore their grandmothers' wedding dress (...). It was a celebration that all generations were invited to witness, and sometimes the dog as well. (65-66)

However, in reality, time can never be frozen. Everything evolves in continual progression. The suggestion is that cameras may freeze time in momentary shots, but they cannot be compared to human beings. The tendency for human beings is evolution. Even imposed traditions are exposed to transformation. What the camera can project are only memories and memories only serve to construct new ways of perception. While cameras cannot replace a subject's rationality, responsibility, and performance in matrimony or in any other area of the human experience, subjects cannot foresee their future, or state a commitment sustained by their temporal emotions for the rest of their lives.

Jody's ambivalence concerning the realities of weddings and marriages supposes two opposing practices. On one side, as a photographer, she gazes at the subjects in her pictures and only perceives her own ways of sensing. She perceives doubt, naiveté, skepticism. She also frames the best transcendental photographs exposing the intromission of elements like intuition and chance, lacking any logical-rational arrangement. On the other side, she wishes and "prays" for the preservation and endurance of marriage. The polarity established by the unchangeable, fixed, and indisputable statements of the vows of matrimony and lifetime commitments on one hand, and Jody's perception of this reality framed by instability and change on the other, propose the consideration of those in-between spaces along the opposition. She deconstructs the realities of

matrimony proposing an acknowledgment of what she considers are important truths concerning marriage. In Jody's view, the truth is that the bride and the groom, by establishing compromises for posterity, lack the capacity to visualize their future life. In contrast, they need to acknowledge a sense of intuition, the intromission of chance, and the possibilities of change in order to have better expectations.

Framing realities by using photographic techniques also exhibits several perspectives of the realities of weddings and marriages in the novel. These basically depend on the controlled manipulation of factors such as angles, close-ups, lenses, and light among others. The examination of these factors in the narrative of *Picturing Will* presupposes distinctive ways of framing that affect meaning and interpretation, and that add strength to the deconstruction of themes. To begin with, photographic angles offer a perspective of the image in pictures where objects/subjects are positioned and captioned by the camera and by a specific type of lens. The photographer determines the position of the camera, and by looking through its lens, she/he frames the angle by providing a perspective of the object/subject. By offering her/his perspective, the photographer enhances positionality and, thus, determines points of view in representation. In this way, several perspectives achieved through different angles presuppose a cultural position and a cultural attitude. Objects/subjects are then physically or metaphorically positioned in high or low, centered or marginal, upper or lower locations, establishing connections with social status, political relations, and hegemonic practices.

In the novel, several angles are set, positioning the camera in various locations, with the intention of approaching the object/subject from different perspectives. Jody, for instance, plays with different angles to cover a wide range of possibilities offering a meaningful perspective of the subject - weddings and marriages- and to include details in the image of the picture. When she wants to capture the picture of the scenery after a

wedding, she looks for different possibilities. First she uses a tripod, a symbolic image that represents equilibrium and unity, like the Trinity: "She set up the tripod and screwed on the camera. (. . .) She moved the tripod to another location so that when she photographed the house the little ash trees would be in the picture" (17). But the tripod would not capture the best shot, according to Jodie, a condition suggesting that the presupposed equilibrium and unity of the scenario after marrying is not optimally framed by using the tripod. Then, she takes the camera, looks through its lens, and photographs the scene from different angles:

A rusty blue pickup started to bump its way into the driveway. [Jodie] photographed the approach, as documentation. She photographed the man opening the door on the driver's side and his companion, hopping out the other side (. . .) She waited until they got to the door, then began photographing in earnest. And luck was with her: the wind got in the photograph. A wind blew up, and in an almost palpable way it reinforced the empty space that surrounded the men. Then [Jodie] moved quickly to stand behind the tripod and photographed the men as the door opened, the lens compressing distance until their truck was no longer a respectable distance from the house but a huge presence, large and threatening. It existed in stark contrast to the branches blowing in the breeze, overwhelming the three small people who stood in the door-way. The housekeeper was squinting against the rush of air. Jody clicked and knew she had the right picture. The photo caption would read: After the Wedding. (18)

In Jody's opinion, a caption of this scene in this way turns out perfectly. The final photograph covers objects like a car, the wind, branches, and people pictured from different angles. The "right" final picture that represents realities after a wedding involves subjects threatened by the position of a magnified "rusty blue truck" (18), in the first place. The fact that the car in the picture is bigger than the people, and also, the fact that it is positioned in a first plane determines a series of relationships and answers several questions. When looking at the right picture "After the Wedding," observers will first see a huge car, which is "rusted;" in other words, old, damaged and worn. Besides,

the car is blue, a color mythically associated with truth, security and positive attitudes. In addition, the type of car is a pick-up, which is supposed to collect, recollect and transport the remnants of the celebration. Is this angle suggesting that the event that took place is represented by a huge old rusted vehicle? Is it suggesting that this significant event is recollected in an old, worn and damaged structure, which, at the same time, is ironically covered by the color of truth and security? Is the image suggesting that the remnants should be transferred?

The images and their symbolic arrangement do suggest it. The car is the object captioned on the first plane of the picture. It has a "huge presence, large and threatening" (18). If its positioning and description stand for conditions of matrimony, its symbolic representation contrasts with its traditional frames. The color and size that define the event stand for an imposing truth; however, though the experience is old and worn, proven to be ineffective sometimes, it is still practiced from one generation to another. Nonetheless, the subjects in the picture, representatives of rationality and control are threatened by other representations of the event. In fact, subjects are seen from a different angle. They appear on a third plane, minimized by the pickup and the effects of the wind. The wind in the picture represents another element of threat. It fills the spaces of the picture and is positioned in a second plane, reinforcing the composition of the scene. The dynamic effects of the wind contrast with the fixed, static and huge presence of the pick-up. The wind is completely submerging the subjects involved in the picture on a third plane, subjects who cannot see themselves clearly because of force and effects of the wind. Is the positioning of the wind in the branches, seen in a second perspective, contrasting with the static car suggesting the incorporation of instability into the scene? Is the breeze affecting the subjects' vision much more powerfully than the subjects themselves? Is the housekeeper's lack of vision a symbolic issue of ignorance

about the relevance of the event that just took place? If so, the threat posed by the wind supposes a direct incidence in the "after-the-wedding" picture. The wind suggests a lack of firmness and liability that gives way to instability and change. In addition, the representation of the wind in the picture is described as an element of "luck" for the achievement of the best shot. Hence, the image of the breeze in the picture and the angle in which it is portrayed suggest the acknowledgment and incorporation of chance, of elements from contingency and of change that should be acknowledged within certain realities of marriages and weddings.

This acknowledgment contrasts with the vows and hegemonic practices that frame marriage. In this social institution, everything is supposed to be controlled, immutable, firm, positive, and mainly successful. However, the awareness of other different realities within marriages, represented by unexpected agents, needs to be acknowledged. In this picture, subjects are relegated to a third plane. They are threatened by objects that they are not even aware of, but that appear effectively describing the scene after the wedding. One of these objects, the wind, inhibits the housekeeper to see well. Her lack of visibility presumes a type of ignorance, a lack of attention and, hence, a lack of knowledge to a reality that must be considered, since it is a lifetime commitment. Besides instability, the wind represents movement, and movement presumes a human tendency toward progression and evolution. A representation of movement enhanced by the pickup and the wind presupposes a need to transform the rusted color of the "truths" of marriage into a different or a more realistic perception. The angles of the picture entitled "After the Wedding" represent the deconstruction of fixed frames such as steadiness in marriages, and add elements like instability and ignorance. The contrast between elements represented in the picture challenge the established hegemonic thoughts of marriage positioned in modern, centered structures.

In photography, close-ups and long shots give definition to pictures. They represent “means that make the difference between ordinary photographs and distinctive ones” (Morgan 1963: 684). When photographing, a basic consideration for using one or the other is the choice of the lens. Longer focal length lenses are useful for close-ups and other angle lenses provide different views of the subject/object. Both techniques reveal attributes of images that the photographer wishes to emphasize. However, while the main function of the close-up is to particularize, the long shot serves to define or reveal the subject/object as a whole within the context in which it appears. The close-up reveals details that are important by magnifying them from the whole. The implied purpose of using close-ups is to call the attention on specific details, presumably because they are important. Thus, the close-up serves as an “attention getter” (Morgan 1963: 687). The long shot, on its part, reveals the whole. It focuses on an integrated image of the object/subject. It also emphasizes the complete integration of parts disregarding the particular. Furthermore, long shots offer an entire composition of an image creating a totalizing effect. The use of both close-ups and/or long-shots calls attention to the possibilities of expressing feelings and concerns through pictures.

In the narrative, Beattie combines the use of both techniques in order to approach the object/subject much more completely. But the narration shows her tendency to prefer the use of close-ups, to show and differentiate details in her photographs. Beattie prefers to emphasize the particular in order to acknowledge difference. Metaphorically, close-ups and long-shots are used to reveal Will to his father from a photographer’s and mother’s perspectives. For example, when Jodie sends Wayne an envelope containing several “things,” such as receipts and tickets, the narrator says:

She just wanted him to know things: the price of a quart of soup, the fact that medicine had been prescribed. She thought of some of the things she enclosed as wide-angle views of their lives and

other things as close-ups. Nothing much could be made of a parking ticket—a common enough occurrence— but there was something almost intimate about sending the pharmacy bag. (9)

The objects in the envelope are expected to reveal Will to his father Wayne, since the latter has always been distant from Will. The envelope in itself presumes to represent the whole: Will as a subject. The small details in it specify those tiny but significant fragments, seen through a close-up, which particularize Will. Presumably, the soup, the ticket (probably from the drugstore), and the pharmacy bag indicate that Will had been sick. These fragments serve to remind Wayne about the hegemonic thought that biological parents must always look after their children. Thus, through the details or close-ups in the envelope, Jodie reminds Wayne of his responsibilities as a biological father. If the child is sick, he should know, care, and show concern. But close-ups do not achieve their purpose in this occasion. Wayne is never concerned about his son and this crowded envelope did not change his irresponsible attitude.

The long-shot (wide-angle view) or its symbolic representation in an envelope, as well, serves to demand attention from Wayne. It serves to organize and assemble all the fragmented parts of Will’s life, thus, facilitating the chore for Wayne. Envelopes not only reveal Will as a subject, but they also reveal Jodie:

The envelope (she sent to Wayne) contained everything from flyers from the health food store detailing the advantages of various kinds of juicers to postcards she had received from friends on vacation. Between the lines, or because he began to recognize handwriting, or because some items were constant, he would eventually begin to piece things together: who was important, what was happening, even what Jodie might be thinking (132).

In this way, the metaphorical close-ups and long shots, though they somehow function in opposite ways, serve Jodie’s purpose. The distant parent approaches his biological family through the symbolic framing of a narration in the light of these photographic techniques. Ironically, Jodie and Will are represented with objects within an

envelope. Unfortunately, the envelope is replacing presupposed physical and emotional bonds between a father and his ex-wife and son. While, the narrative claims for a revision of parenthood confronting prevailing cultural practices and other contrasting ones, the fact is that that Wayne is not interested at all. Will's existence discomforts his father.

Besides calling Wayne's attention on Will's and Jody's life, the effects of the metaphorical close-ups also serve to particularize both of cha-racters. Using the details in the envelope, Jody is individualizing her son and also herself because her intention is to force Wayne to think of them. Inside the envelope, Wayne finds details that reveal both of them as subjects:

He found a thank-you note from Jody's father (he and her father had never gotten along); a 3-D postcard, mailed to her in New York City care of her lover, Mel Anthis, of King Kong with a screaming blonde in his big arms, and the message "You are safe with me," signed simply J.D.O; a letter from a fruit shipper saying that she had forgotten to enclose a check with her order for tangerines; notice of a bounced check from Midas Muffler; and one of Will's drawings (which must have been done awhile ago, because Will's recent drawings were more rea-listic: two crayoned lines intersecting in the center of the piece of paper with four ovals on one side and on the other a Christmas tree that looked as though it had been made with a shaky cookie cutter. Above that was lettered FOOTBALL, and then, in an adult's hand, FIELD. He had not known that Will was interested in football. (132-133)

The thank you note and the postcard tell Wayne that Jody is surrounded by people who care about her and that she is secure and safe. However, contradicting her supposed emotional security, the letter and the bounced check suggest that her finances are not well. Thus Jody seems to ultimately seek Wayne's attention and help which might be expected from an ex-husband. Curiously enough, the fact that she cannot pay for fruit and bread supposes an inability to cover her own basic expenses. Also, the consideration of a symbolic religious meaning within the bread image, representing a basic spiritual nourishment, presupposes a need for this type of

nurturing. The supposed security and care represented by a letter from Jody's father and Mel's postcard contrast with her incapability to pay her debts, though she might be just demanding Wayne to help her financially, emotionally and spiritually. In this case, Jody's attitude reveals ambiguity. Moreover, Will's new drawing reveals to Wayne that his son has grown and become a better drawer. The football field describes Will's visit to it at Christmas time as well as his interest in football. The four ovals probably account for Will's age and tell Wayne that he has been absent during the last four Christmases.

The use of real and metaphorical close-ups and long-shots might be taken as contrasting photographic techniques, because one seeks for details and the other for the whole. Their use draws a frame for several realities of parenthood in the narrative. These photographic frames deconstruct family relations in several ways. In the first place, instead of physical and emotional experiences, an envelope full of objects reveals a son to his biological father. Hegemonic practices presume that biological fathers must establish a tight bond with their children. But in the narrative, Jody forces Wayne to notice Will, and Wayne is happy to know his son only through an envelope, at a distance, without establishing real connections with him. Postcards, bounced checks, and drawings (details, close ups) replace direct communication and the presumed openness between family members, especially in financial issues (typically discussed by divorced couples). However, like the role of the photo-grapher, though close-ups and long-shots are sources of revelation according to Jody, the real transcendence of pictures, people's behavior and actions, goes far beyond any rational expectations or use of techniques. Jody says:

until you looked through the lens, you could never be sure. That was when things took on a prominence they didn't have in life, or when details disappeared. You could find that the picture you thought to take with a wide-angle lens was really better seen in close-up. You could know the routine, use the right exposure, compose perfectly,

but still-the photographs that really worked transcended what you expected, however certain the results may have seemed at the time. (17)

The use of the wide-angle length or the close-up, the approach of objects/subjects as a whole or in detail, and the application of knowledge about photography, do not guarantee the best result in Jody's opinion. In fact, as mentioned before, transcendence depends on elements completely out of the control of the photographic techniques or the photographer.

This idea totally contrasts with some traditional views about photography, for many techniques and instruments, as well as environments, are created in order to get better pictures and better representations of "reality". The presumption in deconstruction is that even if standards on parenthood and family are set, established, controlled, and transmitted, other different variables such as emotional and physical distance, disaffection, chance, and change also exist and are equally important. This implication entails acknowledgment to reframe prevailing ideas concerning family relations. In this way, the use of photographic or symbolic close-ups and long-shots or wide-angle views exposes opposing truths about parenthood.

Following the metaphor of photography as a frame that narrates key events in the novel, the reader perceives how lighting also deconstructs some realities. Lighting affects the way images look, creating different effects in pictures. In addition, lighting controls the environment through color and tones, for it produces the shades and shadows that characterize the image. The available light provokes "an effect of realism, an evocative power and freedom to the photographer, less disturbing to the subject" (Morgan 342). In the narrative, the effects of lighting contrast with the supposed power and freedom granted by light. Jody, the woman as well as the photographer, prefers the absence of light. First of all, Jody prefers dark places in her studio for meditation: "rhetorical questions were some help, but when Jody was awake [...] only the slight absurdity, and the awkwardness of having

created this life seemed pertinent. She could have turned on the lights, but then everything would have looked too stark - the room would be obliterated by such brightness" (7). For her, the perfect environment lacks light because light reveals everything. She prefers incomplete, shadowy spaces where the environment cannot be controlled because, ironically, it lacks a full visibility. So sitting in the darkness, Jodie meditates about her roles as a career woman and as a mother:

She sat alone in the big chair and listened to the sound of the trees blowing in the night wind. An irregular patch of light from the street lamp jutted across the wood floor. She studied it as if it were a slip of test paper: What would be the proper exposure to register every gradation of white to black? It was a luxury, she knew, to be able to speculate, to seriously put observation before action. To be neither the harried mother nor the beleaguered artist. (7-8)

The projection of light in the floor of the dark room makes Jody inquire about her role as a parent and as a photographer. Nonetheless, comparing her role of mother with her profession, she perceives them as opposites, as "black and white" (7-8). But she grants herself the possibility to speculate because she is unable to reach a resolution and to establish a standpoint position which resides somewhere in the middle of the opposition. Again, opposite terms and conditions are questioning roles within parenthood.

With the exposure of light, Jodie realizes that motherhood and professions are incompatible, but that both, however, are factual realities. The term "speculation" supposes deconstruction, since she grants herself the possibility to function as a mother and as an artist at the same time, despite the fact that in material matters, everything is allegedly established and known since hegemonic ideas position women as mothers in the first place. The essence of womanhood is to become a mother, and a good mother. In contrast, Jody grants herself the chance to question that paradigm. Symbolically, light exposes the paradigm. In the darkness, deconstructing the stereotype, Jodie

acknowledges a wide range of possibilities, tones and shades, between white and black, between motherhood and careers. She is able to speculate in the darkness because otherwise, in an illuminated room, everything would be visibly clear and realistic, in harmony with a hegemonic representation of the paradigm. Correspondingly, with the exposure to light and knowledge, she would feel compelled to choose to be the good mother before the egocentric artist, though she does not necessarily want to.

Contrary to the reference of light as revelation, realism, control and knowledge, the narrative reaffirms a photographer's preference to darkness in the act of photographing. When Jody intends to caption the scene after a wedding, she starts photographing the environment: "it was a nice shot, but Jody didn't trust the dimming light, so she bracketed when she took the shot again. Then she let the tripod stand where it was and loaded the Leica. *Its* (my emphasis) lightness was reassuring" (17). Though the photograph is "nice," the intromission of a dim light makes Jody bracket and take the picture again. The term "lightness" has several connotative meanings and, consequently, offers several possibilities for interpretation. In the context of Beattie's statement, it may refer to brightness, paleness or weightlessness. Taking into account the context, the most assertive meaning refers to paleness, since the quotation indicates that Jody does not "trust" a dimming light and that she has to shoot the scene again because of its intromission. In addition, as has been noted in other quotations, Jody prefers dark environments to meditate. However, when she takes the Leica in her hands, the contact with such a light (weightless) object could also have made her feel sure. The problem is the reference to the pronoun "its," within the previously mentioned quotation, since it may refer to either the picture or the camera. If the reassuring of lightness refers to the paleness or whitishness of the picture, then the preference to indistinctively photograph the environment, is proven once again. Nonetheless, in her studio, Jody prefers to use candles for illumination instead of a reflector, and she is very happy with

the results: "Then she tried a twenty-second exposure, using only candles for illumination. When she studied the contact sheet later, she saw her inclination had been right" (28). Jody, the human being, prefers dark environments, and similarly, Jodie, the photographer, favors little exposure to light.

The preference for darkness is certainly contradictory in the hegemonic practice of photography, for this art depends on good light. However, Jody is not interested in controlling the environment, in creating multiplicity of effects, or evoking power or freedom, nor is she interested in creating an effect of realism with the use of lighting. She does not trust light because it exposes things as they are, and this reality exhibits paradigms and hegemonic behavior that she prefers to ignore and to un-acknowledge. She prefers dark, somber places, and pictures, because through them subjects/objects can be approached in many possible ways. With this assertion, the narrative not only deconstructs the privileges granted to the term "light," especially in photography, but grants importance to its opposite term, "darkness." It also adds a somber tone to the narrative, that exposes the obscurity enclosing visible paradigms. When applied to the realities of matrimony and family relations, any suggestion questions of the lack of clarity of certain hegemonic attitudes which exist hidden in the shadows. The preference for careers over motherhood and the changing conditions of a female subject in financial and personal standards must be considered within these realities. Instead of darkening marriage and motherhood, women's new positionality brings new perspectives and accommodations which call for revision in cultural behavior. To illustrate, a redefinition of roles within marriage becomes necessary: the roles previously attached to motherhood should be shared with the father. Thus, shared responsibilities leave spaces and time for mothers to devote to their professional careers, to study, or to freely enjoy themselves.

In sum, Ann Beattie uses photography to innovate traditional ways of crafting stories. In an overall view, photography in the narrative

serves to propose difference in stylistic forms. The presence of photographic frames suggests that what pictures reveal is a faithful projection of realities, providing the narrative with a realistic tone. In addition, these realities are framed by difference and affected by uncontrollable elements like intuition, chance, contingency, and instability, conditions that contradict the absolutist, rigid ideas which frame matrimony. Hence, since form often embodies content, Beattie's narrative offers a high potential for a deconstructive analysis, for her prose is characterized by the representations of the obscure conditions of logocentric thought. Likewise, narrative frames can be interpreted following the same deconstructive approach.

Note

- 1 All quotations from the novel *Picturing Will* will be appointed by page number only.

Bibliography

- Beattie, Ann. *Picturing Will*. New York: Irony and Pity, Inc. 1989.
- Childers, Joseph and Gary Hentzi, (eds.). 1995. *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*. New York: Columbia UP.
- Gordic, Vladislava. 1990. *Swallowing Pearls: The Narrative Strategies of Ann Beattie*. Women's / Gender Studies Association of Countries in Transition. Electronic Library.
- Hulbert, Ann. 1990. "Only Disconnect." *The New York Review of Books*. In <<http://www.doc.web@nybooks.com>>.
- Italie, Hillel. 1998. "Style-defining author Ann Beattie comes in from the rain." *Houston Chronicle.com* <<http://A:/Style-defining author Ann Beattie comes in from the rain.htm>>.
- Kaplan, Ann. 1997. *Looking for the Other, Feminism, Film and The Imperial Gaze*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Miller, James *et al.* (Eds.). 1995. *The United States in Literature*. Illinois: Scott Foresman,
- Morgan, Willard D. (Ed.). 1963. *The Encyclopedia of Photography*. New York: Greystone Press.
- Rothstein, Mervyn. 1985 "Ann Beattie's Life after Real State." *New York Times on the Web* 30 Dec. <<http://www.doc-mbi.ucla.edu/parag/nytimes/editors-choice82html>>.