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# “I am a teacher cleaving a track through the undergrowth of method. I am a bird”: Teaching as a site of female subversion in Sylvia Ashton-Warner’s *Spinster*

**Abstract.** The aim of this paper is to scrutinise the influence of teaching on the female identity of Anna Vorontosov, the protagonist of Sylvia Ashton-Warner’s *Spinster*. Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic and the symbolic is referenced to argue that the work of a teacher enables the heroine to transcend the patriarchal model of experience, predicated on rationality, self-restraint and stability. Through teaching, Anna renews her bond with the semiotic, surpassing the bounds of a unitary and fixed self. After providing an overview of Ashton-Warner’s own career in education, the paper analyses the tensions inherent in the role of a female teacher as represented in the novel and explicates them in Kristevan terms. Subsequently, detailed attention is paid to how the peculiarities of Anna’s teaching method contribute to her enhanced experience of the semiotic and shape her female self.

**Keywords:** semiotic, symbolic, teaching, Ashton-Warner, female identity.

## 1. Introduction

With her idiosyncratic approach to teaching and vivid accounts of her own practice as a teacher, Sylvia Ashton-Warner exerted a lasting influence on educational theory. As quipped by Judith P. Robertson and Cathryn McConaghy, “[t]here are things that nobody would know about teaching unless Sylvia Ashton-Warner had written them” (2006: 1). Born in New Zealand in 1908, she

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joined the profession as early as in 1926, albeit without any strong sense of mission.<sup>2</sup> In 1938, Ashton-Warner and her husband moved to a far-flung part of the country to commence work in a local Māori school. As a result of maladaptation to the new environment, the writer-to-be suffered from a nervous breakdown, a harrowing experience, which in hindsight can yet be considered a blessing in disguise. It was during her treatment that she developed an interest in writing and became acquainted with the rudiments of Freudian psychoanalysis, which later came to underlie her original teaching method.

The turning point in her career came in the 1940s, when she was struggling with the inadequacy of the New Zealand's educational system to meet the needs of Māori children in a school in Pipiriki. Required to learn from textbooks that did not relate to the milieu in which they were raised, her pupils failed to make any noticeable learning progress. The teacher soon became convinced that what they lacked was a model of schooling that would be responsive to their individual experience and based on materials striking a chord with their emotions. While teaching her pupils to read and write, she "found that if a personal set of words was chosen collaboratively by teacher and child, one word at a time, these un-illustrated words that name the pictures in the child's heart would be learned easily and stay learned" (Gurewitz 2016: 780). The two words that proved to have a particularly powerful resonance for the children were 'kiss' and 'ghost'. These observations prompted Ashton-Warner to develop the Key Vocabulary method, whose core idea was that pupils should be stimulated to give vent to their experience of two Freudian drives: sex and fear. As explained by Nancy S. Thompson, "Key Vocabulary is a method of tapping into each child's personal, emotion-laden mental images, what she [Ashton-Warner] calls their 'native imagery', and using 'captions' of those images as the first words for teaching children to read" (2000: 92). Apart from its educational function, the learning scheme served also a significant psychological purpose; it was intended not only to facilitate the acquisition of literacy skills, but also to assist pupils in gaining mastery over their negative feelings, as clearly articulated in *Teacher*:

I see the mind of a five-year old as a volcano with two vents: destructiveness and creativeness. And I see that to the extent that we widen the creative channel we atrophy the destructive one. And it seems to me that since these words of the key vocabulary are no less than the captions of the dynamic life itself, they course out through the creative channel, making their contribution to the drying up of the destructive vent. (Ashton-Warner 1963: 29)

In her writings, Ashton-Warner dramatises the resistance of the male educational authorities to recognise her unconventional teaching method, let alone to incorporate it into the official policies.

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<sup>2</sup> Lynley Hood notes with amazement that, as a matter of fact, Ashton-Warner was strongly averse to her work: "... how could anyone who claimed she never wanted to be a teacher, that she hated teaching and was never any good at it, make any worthwhile contribution to education at all!" (2008: 11).

It should be noted, however, that her account of a larger-than-life confrontation between the female pioneer and the representatives of ossified institutions does not tally with the all facts (Mercer 2016: 447). Sue Middleton challenges this version, demonstrating that, in point of fact, the writer's approach corresponded to the generally applicable recommendations for the schooling of Māori children (2012: 39-40). At the time when she was developing her scheme, the New Zealand educational authorities were "child-centred" and open to innovation (Middleton 2012: 37). Committed to adjusting the system to the situation of specific groups of pupils, they also supported teachers in fostering native Māori culture in their everyday practice. Their openness is best evidenced by the fact that the writer's insights into the Key Vocabulary were published by the New Zealand's Educational Institute in their official journal (Mercer 2016: 447).

Ashton-Warner achieved public esteem for her merits as an educational theorist in 1963, upon the publication of *Teacher*, a non-fictional account of her method and professional experience. With its vision of "a more creative and humane schooling" (Hood 2008: 176), it won her the applause of both fellow teachers and parents. By that time, she had already established a reputation for herself as the author of *Spinster*, her debut novel, which became an international bestseller in 1958. This semi-autobiography follows the story of Anna Vorontosov, an unmarried immigrant from Kazakhstan, who works as a teacher of Māori children and strives to apply her original literacy instruction method, one that mirrors Ashton-Warner's Key Vocabulary, against the reluctance of her male supervisors. Despite its international success, the novel did not receive either praise or adequate critical attention at home (Mercer 2016: 449). Mercer claims that the writer fell prey to the patriarchal prejudices of New Zealand critics, who held "extravagance of style and focus on female emotion" (2016: 449), which are the distinguishing features of her prose, in low regard. He also rejects the biased and reductionist interpretation of *Spinster* presented by H. Winston Rhodes. Whereas the latter places an exclusive emphasis on the realist representation of teaching, Mercer shifts focus to the "depiction of intense female emotion associated with the conflicting desires of being a spinster or a wife" (2016: 454).

The scholar is undoubtedly right in taking issue with Rhodes for his disregard of Anna's heightened sensitivity and craving for love. What his analysis overlooks, however, is the close link between the heroine's work and her identity as a woman. The present paper thus attempts to take middle ground between the two aforementioned approaches by reading the teaching plot from the perspective of the extensive glimpses into the intricacies of Anna's psyche that the novel provides. In what follows, Kristeva's theory of the semiotic and symbolic will be referenced to argue that teaching serves the heroine as a vehicle of resistance to the patriarchal paradigms of experience. It will be demonstrated that it enables Anna to reconnect with the semiotic and transcend the ideal of a unitary and fixed self. The next section probes the tensions built into the role of a female teacher, examines their representation in *Spinster* and explicates them in Kristevan terms. Subsequently, detailed attention is paid to how the peculiarities of Anna's teaching method contribute to her enhanced experience of the semiotic and shape her female self and identity.

## 2. The double bind of teaching

Historically the only or one of few professions accessible to women, teaching appears to be imbued with ambiguities when considered from the standpoint of the female struggle for self-determination. While it used to present women with the rare opportunity to gain a modicum of autonomy and self-fulfilment beyond the role of a mother and wife, it still restricted them to patriarchal conventions. Maria Tamboukou contends that teaching forms “a nexus of created paradoxical spaces” (2000: 463), which challenges women to assert their identity against the conflicting demands of their obligations at work and at home. It requires “oscillating between public and private, two spheres that remain separated at the same time that they interact and impinge upon each other, creating crises, conflicts and dilemmas in women’s lives” (Tamboukou 2000: 470). Tamboukou also signals the uneasy place of female teachers within “a wider network of power relations within schools” (2000: 470). Entrusted with authority over their pupils or students, they are still vulnerable in terms of power by dint of their gender. The scholar thus conceives of the identity of a female teacher as balancing between “unstable, ambivalent and contradictory subject positions” (Tamboukou 2000: 476).

In “The Politics of Tutoring: Feminism within Patriarchy,” Meg Woolbright discusses the inescapable clash between feminist values, such as “mutual respect, trust, and community; shared leadership; and action” (1992: 17), and the male-constructed norms of the academy, celebrating authority, objectivism and duty. Any female tutor dedicated to cherishing the feminist model of teaching, whereby students are offered an inspirational stimulation to intellectual work instead of being forced to accept ready-made ideas, is likely to face conflicting loyalties between her heart-felt vocation and the duty to comply with official requirements. The conflict is more often than not resolved in favour of the latter under the pressure of “the power that the patriarchy asserts over both her [the female teacher] and the student” (Woolbright 1992: 26). According to Woolbright, teaching is thus both empowering and restrictive for women; it locks them in a double bind between the urge to conform to the all-encompassing patriarchal system and the desire to undermine it.

Similarly, throughout *Spinster*, teaching assumes antithetical associations, being treated by the heroine interchangeably as a source of power or a severe limitation. On the one hand, Anna is wont to juxtapose her role as a teacher against her precarious position as a woman. The former offers her the sense of personal dignity and autonomy that she lacks as the spinster of the title, whose life revolves around a quest for a husband: “I am not thinking of men at all. I am thoroughly and severely teacher. Such a proud teacher too, in spite of my weariness” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 68). Most importantly, it frees her from dependence on romantic relationships as the essence of her identity. Wholeheartedly engaged in the performance of her professional duties, Anna proves that marriage does not constitute the ultimate end of her life, an awareness that boosts her self-confidence. Whereas as a woman she faces the unrelenting threat of being reduced to a mere object of romance and plaything of her own desires, as a teacher she retains control both over herself and over the man whom she loves: “I still mourn the kisses I have rejected, but it is the last stand of the woman against the teacher ... he [Paul] is no more than one of my Little Ones after all and

once more I am proudly teacher” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 69-71). On the other hand, the teacher is portrayed as a prisoner to a set of norms that form a yardstick of her value: “He [inspector] is satisfied that I am not a good teacher; if indeed he considers me a teacher at all. I don’t. I’m satisfied that I am no more than a vague incompetent artist” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 238). In this context, the profession is contrasted with motherhood, which allows the woman to give vent to her spontaneity and emotionality instead of urging her to uncreatively repeat calcified schemas: “I am for a while no longer the imperfect teacher but the perfect mother and all these children, brown, white and yellow, are my own” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 42).

In addition to the aforementioned tensions, the novel draws yet another conspicuous line of divide. Carole Durix observes that Ashton-Warner shows a thematic interest in “[putting] matriarchal and patriarchal law into conflict” (2008: 106). Indeed, *Spinster* portrays a collision between teaching as an institution developed by patriarchal society and regulated by its rigid conventions, and teaching as the personal, often non-normative, experience of the female teacher<sup>3</sup>. The two dimensions of teaching, in turn, appear to fit neatly into the Kristevan distinction between the semiotic and symbolic, which should be briefly outlined at this point. According to Kristeva, the semiotic takes its roots in pre-Oedipal processes prior to the acquisition of language and the development of distinct selfhood borders, a phase when the split between object and subject has not yet emerged and a child experiences a pleasurable state of undisturbed plenitude and fusion with their mother’s body. As clarified by Keltner, “[t]he semiotic refers to the affective, material dimension of language that contributes to, but is not exhausted in or by, the social-symbolic meaning of signs” (2011: 12). It is formed by pre-verbal impulses, echolalia, rhythms, tones and biological drives to which a child succumbs before their socialisation into a world of prohibitions and limitations. Once a child commences to differentiate between self and other, thereby separating from their mother and forming a discrete identity, they enter the realm of the symbolic. Unlike the chaotic and fluid semiotic, permeated by “energies” with no “fixed aim, object or form” (Grosz 1989: 43), the symbolic is an organised and orderly “system of meaning agreed upon by a community of speakers” (Keltner 2011: 12). It is predominantly a realm of rules, be it linguistic, social or cultural.

As envisaged by Kristeva, both the semiotic and the symbolic are unmistakably gender-coded. The former has an “explicitly maternal and feminine” character (Grosz 1989: 49), as opposed to the latter, which is “paternal, bound up with the concepts of the symbolic father and the castrated mother” (Grosz 1989: 49). Although the notion of distinction could suggest that the two realms have no points of convergence, they are by no means isolated by a clear and impassable boundary. Quite the contrary: “The two trends ... designate two modalities of what is, for us, the same signifying process ... These two modalities are inseparable within the signifying process that constitutes

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<sup>3</sup> This is a reference to the distinction drawn by Adrienne Rich between motherhood as “institution” and “experience,” understood respectively as “the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children” and “the institution, which aims at ensuring that the potential - and all women - remain under male control” (1995: 13).

language” (Kristeva 1984: 23-24). But for the symbolic language would be a mere incomprehensible babble, unfit to convey any meaning, thus preventing effective communication. It is yet the semiotic that serves as a repository of energy that enlivens language. “Without semiotic force”, as put metaphorically by McAfee, “we would be like bad actors when we spoke, as if we were merely reading words off a page” (2004: 41). While the hold of the symbolic on a mature speaking subject is significantly more potent, the semiotic continues to resurge at various points, undermining the stability of the former. Consequently, Kristeva conceives of female identity as an inherently fluid and changeable construct, balancing between the two realms: “The speaking being is a subject in process because her identity is never fixed in place; her identity is continuously disrupted by semiotic language’s heterogeneity, polyphony, and polysemy” (McAfee 2004: 105).

As a teacher, Anna is firmly entrenched in the symbolic realm, where logic, law and male authority are supposed to prevail over feminine affectivity. Just as the symbolic, the educational system within which she operates is distinctly male constructed and male regulated, with women relegated to the position of obliging servants. The heroine is subject to the unrelenting pressure of expectations placed upon her by the male school authorities, who understand teaching primarily as a matter of discipline, drills and fixed rules, which leave hardly any space for creative freedom, irrespective of their practical viability: “A good teacher does not break out from the curriculum, even when it is deficient. A worthy teacher does not defy an order of a Director” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 187). The inspectors hold the heroine accountable for compliance with inflexible patriarchal norms, requiring that she should act as an unapproachable voice of authority and indiscriminately apply traditional methods and materials, which take little account of the background, personality or individual needs of her pupils, as symbolised by a workbook with schematic exercises that Anna uses on a daily basis. The underlying goal of teaching is thus to perpetuate the patriarchal order and uphold the principles upon which it is built: rationality, order and restraint.

The heroine is not a typical feminist heroine in the sense that she does not intend to declare an open and premeditated revolt against the obsolescent system despite her frustration with its cold inhumanity. Quite the contrary, she regrets failing to meet its standards, aware that conformity would secure her recognition: “If only I had been a good teacher, an obedient teacher and submissive!” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 4). She feels genuinely guilty for not fulfilling her dreary bureaucratic obligations (Ashton-Warner 1986: 21) and accepts unfavourable opinions about her professional performance: “There can be no doubt about it: I’m a very low-ability teacher. For the whole of my teaching life inspectors have agreed on that. It’s true that I have tried with everything. ... Plainly, I am mistaken in all I do. The inspectors are right” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 81).

Nevertheless, Anna’s self-reproach and timidity are accompanied by the acute awareness of the system’s ineffectiveness and the resulting need to reorient it on the preferences of her pupils: “Why must we? Why don’t I teach them something that does interest them? Then they might develop like the flowers that are interested in the rain and the sun; in their own time and way” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 176-177). Despite her propensity for obedience, the heroine is not able to follow a model of teaching that stifles her creativity and hinders the learning success of the children. After

having burnt the hated workbook, she delivers a passionate speech that casts an important light on the differences between the patriarchal approach to teaching and her personal experience as a teacher: “I can’t do what I say I’m going to do! And that’s what a workbook is. Saying what I’m going to do! I can’t stand the planning of it. The clockwork detail. I can’t bear the domination of it. I hate the interference of it between myself and the children, and I resent the compulsion. Sack me if you like!” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 101). The former promotes order, duty, and emotional distance between the teacher and her pupils; the latter, by contrast, celebrates lack of control, creativity, intuition, and a degree of intimacy between both parties. What Anna thus decides to do while operating within the patriarchal framework of education is to disrupt it, in the same way as the semiotic reasserts its presence in the symbolic, by challenging the traditional methods and making her work a site of enjoyment for all those involved, as will be demonstrated in the following section.

### 3. Encounter with the semiotic

If the acquisition of spoken language marks the entrance of a child into the symbolic, the mastery of literacy skills only reinforces their position within this order. As a result, while teaching to read and write, Anna must, perforce, act as an intermediary between her pupils and the world of patriarchal structures. Her strategy of subverting this role consists in releasing and exploiting the semiotic underside of language, as if in response to Kristeva’s appeal voiced in *About Chinese Women*: “summon this timeless ‘truth’ formless, neither true nor false, echo of our jouissance, of our madness, of our pregnancies into the order of speech and social symbolism” (1977: 38). Instead of imparting crude semantic or syntactical rules, the heroine destabilises the symbolic by inviting her pupils to distil the emotive potential of individual words, one that is ignored or even suppressed in the course of traditional teaching. She shows them that language may be used not only as a means of producing meaning, but also as an outlet of their desires and fears: “‘Miss Vorontosov’, complaints brown Matawhero, ‘I’m sicka writing.’ A little Maori boy of six can say my name. I kneel to his level. ‘Well, write, I’m sick of writing’” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 23). In contrast to the conventional male-constructed learning scheme, which is static and oriented on individual work, her method involves motion, spontaneity, discharge of sounds, and togetherness, all of which are associated with the semiotic: “And it’s a gay performance this finding of their own words, taking time and involving noise and personal relations and actual reading, and above all communication with each other” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 181).

Most importantly, apart from exerting a tremendously beneficial influence on the learning capacities of her Little Ones, such a model of teaching also empowers Anna to overcome the sense of inadequacy instilled in her by the patriarchal machine and rediscover her attachment to the semiotic as a source of joy and release of inner tension. The heroine treats her work as an art that marks her uniqueness and, as such, must be shielded against the tyranny of the male authorities: “What power has an inspector against the gift that God has put in my hands?” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 56-57). This fact should be accorded particular attention in the context of Kristeva’s theory, considering

that art is one of the most fertile grounds for the resurgence of the semiotic within the symbolic. Anne-Marie Smith claims that “[all] imaginative practice, such as art, poetry, love and psychoanalysis, represents the individual subject’s encounter with the law of the father, of the symbolic and society, with imposed form and structure, as well as representing the imaginative attempts to battle with this frame of reference in the name of desire, subjectivity and the energy and drives the bring into play” (1998: 17-18). In a similar vein, Anna’s gradual development of her method is portrayed as a creative fever, during which she goes through the ebbs and flows of inspiration, transforming from an overtly rational and self-restrained teacher into an artist surrendering to a stream of uncontrollable and oft-conflicting emotions and drives. The process proves to be demanding and painful, yet also liberating and empowering: “But a nervousness, a vague discomfort, accompanies the recognition of it. It makes me think that the solution to infant teaching is nearby; ... It both frightens and exhilarates me. It’s like, like ... the fear-and-joy of birth” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 154).

The birth metaphor used to conceptualise this experience has a special resonance. It should be reminded that the maternal body, from which a child must separate in order to enter the symbolic realm and acquire an independent subjectivity, constitutes the primary site of the semiotic. According to Kristeva, while giving birth, a woman reunites with her lost mother (1997: 303). Despite the excruciating pain, childbirth thus occasions the breakdown of the symbolic and gives rise to sensual pleasure. Being childless, Anna appears to use her teaching art as a substitute of maternity, so as to be able to gain a renewed access to its concomitant jouissance. When she finally overcomes all internal and external obstacles and devises the Key Vocabulary in its full-fledged version, or, to be consistent with the metaphor, gives birth, her invention is described in terms of a disruptive force that penetrates into the everyday world of routines, giving the heroine a surge of energy: “The whole system of infant room vocabulary flashes before the inner eye as though floodlit. As I walk alongside the Senior, engaged in conversation on the surface of my mind about the regimentation in many schools, I am realizing what this captioning of the inner world is. It’s the vocabulary I’ve been after. ... Such a tremendous impetus! I all but burst with inspiration” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 170).

The very process of teaching may be similarly viewed as a “semiotic [intervention] into the ordering of the symbolic” (Grosz 1989: 98). Determined to eradicate any sense of unease and guilt that would spoil the spontaneity of her art, the heroine is accustomed to drinking alcohol before work:

Yet I teach well enough on brandy. ... It supplies me with top layer to my mind so that I meet fifty Maori infants as people rather than as the origin of the Inspector’s displeasure; ... never is better creative work done. As the legs release my throat some magnificent freedom comes to us all and the day leads off like a party ... The encloistered soul may sally without risk. ... It can endure more of the feeling in the exhausting art. It is sheltered: it is buffered. ... Intoxicating ... (Ashton-Warner 1986: 7).

What merits particular attention in the quoted passage is the emphasis that the heroine places on her enhanced sensuality, lack of self-control and, most importantly, a feeling of liberation. Just as the semiotic is associated with the shelter of the mother's body, a space of hospitability and plenitude, the process evokes the predominant impression of protection, juxtaposed throughout the novel against the sense of vulnerability and loss triggered by the interference of the authorities with her work: "I am reminded, at the melancholy sight of an Inspector within my doorway, once and for all, that I am indeed without covering, either of the mind or in the profession. Without epidermis" (Ashton-Warner 1986: 99). The demands, prohibitions and obligations specific to the symbolic realm shade into insignificance, as the heroine plunges into a state of unrestrained elation and exhilaration. She becomes attuned to her body, its rhythms and movements.

Importantly, the clash between the traditional model of teaching and Anna's approach corresponds also to the dichotomy of stasis and activity inherent in the distinction between the symbolic and the semiotic. While the former assumes that pupils should be seated at their tables, completing repetitive exercises, even if they prove educationally ineffective and thus fail to produce any sense of progress, the latter makes room for joyful movement and dance, with the participation of the teacher, stimulating the creativity of all: "Up rises the other Twinnie and their movements merge... And here, all at once, we have a rending in the creative vent, widening it. Here we have another escape for the wild spirit within" (Ashton-Warner 1986: 54). Furthermore, as experienced by Anna, the teaching process appears to abolish linear time, which characterises the symbolic order in opposition to the semiotic realm, which exists "outside of time" (Oliver 1993: 106). The pace of Anna's work is determined not by clock time or any schedules, but by the subjective "rhythm on the blackboard" (Ashton-Warner 1986: 204). While outside the classroom Anna repeatedly complains about her morbid urge to cling to the past and yearns for "an obliteration of memory" (Ashton-Warner 1986: 18), teaching alleviates the sense of being torn between the present and the past, as the heroine immerses herself in the present moment: "I forget about the conflict within me and about how many worlds there are. I'm utterly lost in the present" (Ashton-Warner 1986: 10-11).

The quoted passages reveal yet another peculiarity of Anna's teaching style that restores her severed ties with the semiotic. It is the heroine's personal, even intimate, rapport with the pupils, which provides a positive counterbalance to her troubled relations with the inspectors and Paul, a young teacher in whom she falls in love. Once again, the two types of liaisons replay the oppositions ingrained in the symbolic/semiotic distinction. The symbolic is built upon the process of separation and differentiation and sustained by a hierarchical power system that supports male power and female submission. In a similar vein, Anna's relationships with men are characterised by distance and to a large extent operate within the logic of domination and subordination. Her flirt with Paul lacks any meaningful communication, for the heroine and her beloved alike are enclosed in their own worlds. Anna, in addition, appears to be restrained by the awareness of the social scripts to which she is expected to conform as a woman. Her professional dealings with the male educational

authorities, in turn, relegate her in a very distinct way to a position of inferiority. The inspectors strive to reduce the heroine to patriarchal stereotypes, thereby diminishing her self-esteem and inhibiting her self-development as a creative artist. More than that, their presence is experienced by the heroine as a violent intrusion and a major threat to her safety and well-being, as best illustrated by her comparison of one of the inspectors to a monster: “Here is the Inspector – ogre of the past again with its cloudy height, its red eyes and its black mouth” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 198).

Her relationship with pupils, by contrast, is based on closeness and togetherness, a nod to the semiotic, which “precedes all ... binary oppositional structures and hierarchical forms of organisation” (Grosz 1989: 43). It is of utmost significance that Anna displays consistent aversion to approaching the children from the position of power, being apparently unwilling to endorse the patriarchal patterns of interaction. When the pupils insist that she should act as an omniscient voice of authority, she is embarrassed and loath to meet their expectations: “So much asking! Who am I, the law of God?” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 9). In fact, she prefers to assume the role of a substitute mother, who protects her children and offers them guidance without asserting her domination, rather than that of an aloof supervisor who gives orders and instructions. Not only is this attitude supposed to help her pupils in the learning process but it also alleviates Anna’s own anxiety: “Ah, this secret that mothers have never told! Gradually the horror, expelled from the crater of me, smokes away to nothing, while with this boy in my arms, I forget I am a spinster and a teacher and am only woman” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 101). Her relationship with the pupils in many respects resembles the early fusion between mother and child, characterised by the blurring of the self-other boundaries and the accompanying pleasurable sense of plenitude: “All these differing personalities and faces and colours make me think that if ever I had borne children, I would have wanted it this way: offspring of many sires. I would be like the rain, uniting them all in my motherhood” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 58).

Consequently, teaching offers the heroine an avenue out of the pressure of maintaining a clearly-demarcated and discrete self in accordance with patriarchal ideals of “singularity, sameness and homogeneity” (Tallon Russel 2009: 2). She loses it in the personality of her pupils. This loss, however, does not elicit any disquietude, but rather joy and inebriation, a jouissance-like experience evoking clear associations with pre-Oedipal pleasure: “I’ve mislaid who I am. Sensuously and accurately I vibrate and respond to the multifold touch of my Little Ones ... I am made of their thoughts and their feelings. I am composed of sixty-odd different pieces of personality. ... It is a potent drunkenness, an exhilaration, and it is one that does not leave depression in its wake” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 22). Throughout the novel, Anna suffers from a sense of inner division, being unable to develop a unitary identity out of the multifarious roles that she performs: “I’m tired of being a cheap flirt to Paul, an eccentric to the Head, a refusal to Eugene, a failure to the inspector and an artist unto God. I long for one vast rain to encompass my all” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 59). She has the tendency to see the world in binary oppositions and feels an externally-induced compulsion to always situate herself firmly on one side of the divide: “What exactly am I? To what world do I really belong?” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 9). At the same time, however, Anna actually

refrains from defining herself as a subject with fixed identity, especially towards the inspectors: “I don’t want them to know what I really am” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 27). In teaching, she manages to “[embrace] a more fluid sense of identity, becoming a more kaleidoscopic personality,” as underlined by Ian Richards (n.d. online). Her work obliterates her stable and closed-off self along with all inner conflicts, giving her pleasure that arises from the experience of fluidity and multiplicity. Importantly, this “fusion” involving “a symbiotic merging” (Robertson & McConaghy 2006: 132) poses a stark contrast to her relationships with men, described ominously as devouring (Ashton-Warner 1986: 1946).

In this sense, the novel juxtaposes the role of a teacher against the role of a woman and spinster. Much as the former is limited by the demands of the patriarchal educational system and its agents, it is still open for the subversion of the existing norms. As a woman and spinster, Anna is subjected to male power with no possibility of transgressing the patriarchal gender scripts. A woman is destined to be a wife and mother obedient to the will of her husband. A spinster, in turn, is relegated to the fringes of society, lacking the power that a woman derives from the position of her husband. Without one, Anna is regarded as infertile and thus unable to make any significant contribution to society. The heroine bemoans this entrapment in the patriarchal schemas, which do not correspond to her personal experience:

If only he could learn that for me anyway there can be interests other than men; that there can be romance outside desire; that with me, in spite of the reputations of the unmarried, relations with the male come second to my relations with my work; that the need for the physical engagement, the ‘trivial ritual of love’, so featured in the talk of New Zealand men as being the driving factor in the life of a spinster, can at my age, in some women, and to a workable extent anyway, lift to the realm of the mind to be partially consummated there” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 47).

Through teaching, she manages to unlock and exploit her own intellectual and creative potential, thereby challenging, if only for a moment, the stereotypical definitions of female identity. She becomes an intrepid explorer, free to follow the path of self-determination outside the reach of patriarchal power: “I am a teacher cleaving a track through the undergrowth of method. I am a bird” (Ashton-Warner 1986: 171).

## 4. Conclusion

As already mentioned, Anna Vorontosov can hardly be considered a paragon of feminist ideals, considering her lack of perseverance in defying the patriarchal schemas. This is confirmed at the close of the novel, when she resolves to abandon her aspirations and ambitions. Dispirited by the crushing opinion of the Board of Education, she buries her Key Vocabulary scheme and decides to depart for Kazakhstan to reunite with her former fiancé, bound to follow the traditional path of wifehood and motherhood prescribed for women in patriarchal society. Nevertheless, the paper has demonstrated that Ashton-Warner privileges teaching as a site of subversion of the patriarchal model of female experience and identity. The role of a female teacher may be regulated by male-established rules, which promote rationality, stability and restraint, but Anna finds a way

to transform it to her advantage and render it the “bedrock of her personality” (Richards n.d. online). Her close rapport with the pupils, based on mutual communication rather than the bonds of domination and subordination, which invariably structure male-female relationships, and her innovative method, which opens space for untrammelled creativity, emotionality and spontaneity, allow her to re-establish her lost connection with the semiotic. Thanks to teaching, Anna finds empowerment in experiencing herself as a fluid and porous self, not constrained by any patriarchal conventions.

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