

Calvino, endings, and
women: a look at if on
a winter's night a
traveller



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In Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, we see how Calvino attempts to compare the reading of a novel to a man pursuing a woman. In this text, the reader takes on the role of a male protagonist attempting to read a book. Along the way, the protagonist meets a female reader, whom he begins to pursue throughout the rest of the novel. This pursuit mirrors the interactions between us, as the reader, and the text. As we read, we are drawn in by narrative beginnings. While this interpretation may at first seem sexist or misrepresentative of female readers, further analysis will reveal the validity of this claim. In this novel, Calvino's main goal is to examine the reader's experience. By portraying this as a romantic encounter, we can draw important conclusions about the reader's experience. While it may appear that Calvino only values the masculine experience of the reader, this comparison will prove to enrich the understanding of the relationship between the text and the reader as we discover how Calvino's novel is more in line with female pleasure.

In Earl G. Ingersoll's book *Waiting for the End: Gender and Ending in the Contemporary Novel*, Ingersoll himself examines the lack of endings in Calvino's novel and how this affects the reader. Traditional narrative has taught readers to read for the plot, or to find pleasure in the climax and satisfying ending of a story. Calvino challenges this notion in *If on a winter's night a traveller* by eliminating endings from the stories. Calvino repeatedly hooks the readers attention with tantalizing beginnings of stories, only to stop them abruptly at the most compelling part of the story. Calvino's intent is to cause the reader to question their experience with the text. He wants the reader to value the text for the reading experience itself rather than

expecting a certain ending. For many years, the value of narrative has been in the plot—in a good ending. If the story doesn't have a good rising action, climax, and ending, then it isn't a good story. Sigmund Freud was a proponent of this line of thinking. He postulated that every human being has a pleasure and death drive. These drives push humans to desire pleasure and to desire their own end. Peter Brooks wrote in his essay "Freud's Masterplot" about this theory; even in narrative, the characters desire a good ending—an honorable death. Calvino and others within postmodern literature have begun to question this notion. Instead of pursuing the end, these postmodern thinkers claim to find pleasure within the process. According to Ingersoll, "Calvino is positing a 'pleasure of the text' itself, transcending the traditional notion of a plot whose ending offers a transformation of meaning" (235). This concept will make more sense as we continue examining *If on a winter's night a traveller*. In the text, Calvino explores how different readers interact with the text in their reading experience. He wants the reader to be conscious of what they are experiencing while reading; he wants the reader to value the text for more than just the ending.

Ingersoll further describes Calvino's writing style as "a fascination with the reading process and the ways in which that process impacts the author's consciousness in writing narrative" (235). Calvino is aware that the author has the power to manipulate his or her reader by what the author chooses to write, and he writes with the intention of making the reader aware of this. By doing so, Calvino is able to challenge the traditional narrative tendencies. For example, in *Traveller* there are no real endings. Certain aspects of the

storyline may stop, but they don't end. None of the ten books that Reader and Other Reader read are ever finished. Even the entire novel itself is stripped of an ending. The final line of the book tells us that we/Reader are "almost finished [reading] *If on a winter's night a traveller* by Italo Calvino" (Calvino 260). Therefore, we can never really get to the ending because the last line says we are "almost" done. By questioning the traditional notion of an ending within narrative, Calvino is pushing his postmodern ideology that the pleasure of narrative is in the text itself. By comparing this experience to a romantic relationship, we can see Calvino's point more clearly. There are two types of romantic pursuits: those which are only interested in one thing and those who desire a genuine relationship with another human being.

In regards to literature, it can be argued that those who read for plot are merely interested in that one thing—a good ending; then it's on to the next book. In contrast, those who read for the pleasure of the text truly value the narrative for what it is, even if the plot does not produce a satisfying ending. Susan Winnett explores this idea further in her essay titled "Coming Unstrung: Women, Men, Narrative, and Principles of Pleasure." In this essay, Winnett argues that for centuries authors have been writing narrative with male pleasure in mind. This is why the narrative structure of rising conflict, climax, and resolution or ending has been so strongly emphasized. She presents the idea that writing with female pleasure in mind would create an entirely different style of narrative. She does not intend to create a style which replaces the traditional style of literature, but she is presenting a compelling case for a new aspect of literature. She directly compares the pleasure of reading to the romantic pleasure experienced between a man

and woman. This comparison is stunningly revealing in examining what Calvino has done in his narrative. Winnett begins her essay with this statement: “ Considering the last decade’s preoccupations with sexual difference and the pleasure of the text, it is surprising that theories concerned with the relation of narrative and pleasure have largely neglected to raise the issue of the difference between women’s and men’s reading pleasures” (505). This is something that most people, women included, probably have never even thought of in regards to reading. Winnett continues by explaining how male pleasure is more closely related to the traditional plot narrative, while female pleasure is not. Male pleasure tends to finish in conquering or ending, while female pleasure continues into forward movement, new life, or sharing pleasure with the other.

Winnett explores the phenomenon of male and female orgasm as a comparison to the pleasure experienced in reading a good story. Winnett quotes Peter Brooks from his essay “ Freud’s Masterplot” (mentioned earlier) in describing this experience: “ the trajectory of the male arousal [follows this pattern]: ‘ awakening, an arousal, the birth of appentency, ambition, desire or intention’ on the one hand and ‘ significant discharge’...and satisfaction...on the other” (506). This pattern of arousal is mimicked in the traditional narrative plot structure: beginning, rising action, middle, climax, falling action, and resolution. The desire for the end is here matched with the pleasure drive. Winnett presents that this concept is inherently masculine and therefore misrepresentative of a large range of the reading audience. She states, “ Brook’s articulation of what are ultimately the oedipal dynamics that structure and determine traditional fictional narratives and

psychoanalytic paradigms is brilliant, and it reminds us, in case we have forgotten, what men want, how they go about trying to get it, and the stories they tell about this pursuit" (506). Calvino explores these ideas in *Traveller as Reader/We* read the ten different novels within the text. Each of these stories involves the main character pursuing a woman, in one way or another. In each of these stories, some more graphic than others, the male protagonist is trying to pursue the woman in the story romantically. A few of these stories involve actual physical intimacy, while others show the male protagonist pursuing the woman until the story shifts right at the most exciting moment. These stories could be shown as proof that the novel is sexist since Calvino seems to portray women only as objects of male affection, but looking at this literary choice from this new angle can show a completely different analysis.

Perhaps Calvino is contrasting his own narrative to the narratives found within each of the inner stories. Each of the inner stories are structured like the beginning of a traditional plot, leaving off only the satisfying ending. In contrast, the subplot of Reader's pursuit of Other Reader (Ludmilla), which seems to be the only unifying storyline of the entire novel, is not objectifying in the least. Ludmilla is mysterious and respectable, if anything, and Reader's pursuit of her company is characterized by a desire to actually get to know her. Their story doesn't end with consummation of arousal or conquering of the female by the male. As the seventh reader in the library stated, their story continues in life rather than in death. The seventh reader says, "The ultimate meaning to which all stories refer has two faces: the continuity of life, the inevitability of death" (259). Calvino's story continues

in life as Reader and Reader marry and continue in their normalcy of reading in bed. Unlike the traditional novel, which desires to end, Calvino's narrative desires to continue. In light of the male versus female dichotomy, the notion of continuity into life aligns with the female as she is the one who continues human life, literally through giving birth to new human life. Winnett continues her analysis by examining the experiences of birth and breast feeding for a woman. A mother giving birth or breast feeding may seem to follow similar dynamic patterns as the male experience, but it is inherently different. While the male experience ends in death or release, the female experience of birth and breast feeding ends in continuing life.

In addition, the female experience is reliant on the other. A woman's pregnancy is reliant on an other; the birthing itself is reliant on the other; and the pleasure of breast feeding is reliant on the dependency of an other. Winnett's argument runs thus: " Most important for our narratological purposes, however, both childbirth and breast feeding force us to think forward rather than backward; whatever finality birth possesses as a physical experience pales in comparison with the exciting, frightening sense of the beginning of a new life" (509). Even though this process is painful, the new life is worth it. It seems there is pleasure in sharing the experience with the other. This is evident in Traveller as Reader finds pleasure in reading the books with Other Reader in mind: " Your mind is occupied by two simultaneous concerns: the interior one, with your reading, and the other, with Ludmilla, who is late for your appointment. You concentrate your on your reading, trying to shift your concern for her to the book, as if hoping to see her come toward you from the pages. But you're no longer able to read,

the novel has stalled on the page before your eyes, as if only Ludmilla's arrival could set the chain of events in motion again" (140). Reader's world has been multiplied by Other Reader's presence. Life has been increased by the presence of the Other.

Winnett's conclusion is that it is time to reevaluate the traditional narrative structure which has "told us in advance where it is that we should take our pleasures and what must inevitably come of them" (516). Calvino's Traveller is one step closer to accomplishing this as Calvino creates beginnings upon beginnings; his novel has exponential possibilities rather than one inevitable conclusion. Calvino leaves room for the reader (us) to choose how we interpret the text; he provides the beginnings to the stories and to the story between Reader and Reader, but the end of the story is left unanswered. As the story with the mirrors represents, the possibilities are endless. It isn't that Calvino wants to leave us without answers, but he wants us to exist in the continual realm of life. As Winnett postulated, Calvino's novel is representative of "the continuity of life" which aligns itself more with the female pleasure of new life and the other, rather than the inevitable and certain end or conquering nature of the male pleasure (Calvino 259). Rather than viewing Calvino's novel as sexist by preferring a male protagonist or by objectifying women, we now know that Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* is more in line with feminine pleasure than male pleasure. Whether Calvino intentionally did this or not, merely by challenging the traditional narrative structure, he succeeded in creating a novel which questions the inherently masculine goal of 'a happy ending'.

It is now clear that Calvino does not willingly give his readers the satisfaction of closure. Instead, he creates an infinitely complex narrative which explores and comments on the reader's experience and their relationship to the text and author. He creates exponential beginnings, with no end in sight. By doing so, Calvino has created a new way to look at literature. Anyone who reads *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* will have the literary experience changed forever, therefore creating a new space (or new life) within the literary mind. By comparing the reading experience to a romantic relationship, Italo Calvino has successfully unravelled the way we view narrative, which is a really good thing for both male and female readers.

Works Cited

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