**Watson, Sheila (1909-1998)**

Canadian writer Sheila WATSON (1909-1998) is best known for her modernist novel *The Double Hook* (1959) about the redemptive struggles of a small, rural community as they deal with the murder of one of their members.

Born Sheila Martin Doherty in New Westminster, B.C., Watson received her B.A., Honours in English (1931) and M.A. (1933) from the University of British Columbia. She taught elementary students in a number of rural schools in British Columbia before marrying Wilfred Watson in 1941. She then continued to teach in Toronto, in Vancouver at the University of British Columbia, and in Powell River, B.C. While iving in Calgary during 1951-52, Watson completed *The Double Hook,* which was published to mixed reviews. After its publication, Watson began her PhD under he guidance of Marshall McLuhan at the University of Toronto and completed her dissertation *Wyndham Lewis: Post Expressionist* at the University of Alberta in 1961. While working as a professor at the University of Alberta, Watson continued to write and publish. She maintained correspondence with several Canadian scholars and writer,s including Michael Ondaatje, George Bowering and Daphne Marlatt. After her retirement in 1980, Sheila and her husband moved to Nanaimo B.C., where they died in 1998.

While *The Double Hook* was partly based on her experiences teaching in the Cariboo District of British Columbia (1934-1936), in the novel Watson creates a community disconnected from any obvious Canadian context or history. Indeed, the characters in *The Double Hook* seem ultimately to be defined by their relationship with each other, rather than by a history of national or racial origin. Watson's interest in writers like Samuel Beckett, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis has been well documented. Her vision of an alienated world; nostalgia for a primitive tradition; and use of symbolism, fragmentation, and imagery all connect the work to a eurocentric form of modernism. While the influence of these formal elements on her work is apparent, also striking are the ways Watson adapts these for a distinctly Canadian audience (e.g., her use of First Nations imagery).

Watson was instrumental in establishing the arts periodical *White Pelican* (1971-76) along with Douglas Barbour, Stephen Scobie, John Orrell, Dorothy Livesay and Norman Yates. She published her collection *Four Stories* in 1979, and another story ("And the Four Animals") was added for the publication of *Five Stories* in 1984. This was followed by the publication of *Deep Hollow Creek*, which had been written in the 1930s but left unpublished until 1992. While *The Double Hook* removes the self from Watson's portrayal of the Cariboo District, *Deep Hollow Creek* is noted for its realism and more faithful description of Watson's experiences in the region.

Scholarship on Watson has focused on diverse aspects of her work. Critics have discussed the ethical implications of her portrayals of First Nations characters and imagery. Likewise, the relationship of Watson's characters and the landscape is often considered with respect to national and historical land claim issues. In consideration of Watson's relationship with noted media critic Marshall McLuhan, critics have also focused on the impact of modernity and technology on the configuration of community in Watson's work. Watson's writing, especially in the short stories, also invites psychoanalytic approaches and gender critique.

**Paratextual Material**:

Audio Clip: This clip includes Cathy Brown's readings from *The Double Hook* and commentary by Professor Misao Dean.

<http://www.newestpress.com/authors/Podcasts/Watson\_discussion.mp3>

Image: Sheila Watson, 1976. Courtesy of Rowland McMaster

<http://www2.athabascau.ca/cll/writers/english/images/swatson.jpg>

**List of Works:**

**Books:**

*The Double Hook*. Toronto: New Canadian Library, 1959.

Watson's first published novel, which revolves around the redemptive struggles of a small, rural community as the members deal with the murder of one of their members.

*Four Stories*. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1979.

Watson's short stories recontextualize the Oedipus mythology as it might unfold in a contemporary social setting. They were heavily influenced by her father's work as the head of a mental institution.

*Five Stories*. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1984.

Watson's earlier volume was reissued with the addition of her previously unpublished story "And the Four Animals."

*Sous l’oeil de coyote*. trans. of *The Double Hook* by Arlette Francière. Montreal: Editions La Presse, 1976.

*Deep Hollow Creek*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992.

While dealing with the many of the same themes as *The Double Hook*, *Deep Hollow Creek* presents a community more seemingly embedded in a contemporary Canadian setting.

**Edited Books:**

*Habits and Hangups* (Study Guide for Modern Consciousness course). Edmonton: Athabasca University, 1979. Written and edited with Mary Hamilton.

Miriam Mandel. *The Collected Poems of Miriam Mandel*. Ed. by Sheila Watson. Edmonton: Longspoon Press, 1984.

**Stories**

"Brother Oedipus." *Queen’s Quarterly* (Summer 1954).

"The Black Farm." *Queen’s Quarterly* (Summer 1956).

"Antigone." *The Tamarack Review* (Spring 1959).

"The Rumble Seat." *Open Letter* 3.1 (1975)

**Essays**

"A Question of Portraiture." *The Tamarack Review* (Autumn 1963).

"The Great War: Wyndham Lewis and the Underground Press." *arts/canada* (Winter 1965).

"Canada and Wyndham Lewis the Artist." *Canadian Literature* (Winter 1968).

"Artist Ape as Crowd-master." *Explorations* Ed. Marshall McLuhan, sup. *The Varsity Graduate* (May 1964).

"Myth and Counter-myth." *White Pelican* (Winter 1974).

"Swift and Ovid: The Development of Metasatire." *The Humanities Association Bulletin* (Spring 1967).

"Power: Nude or Naked." *Explorations* Ed. Marshall McLuhan, sup. *The Varsity Graduate* (December 1965).

"Michael Ondaatje: The Mechanization of Death." *White Pelican* (Fall 1972).

"Gertrude Stein: The Style is the Machine." *White Pelican* (Autumn 1973).

"What I'm Going to Do." *Open Letter* 3.1 (1975).

**Further Reading:**

Betts, Gregory. "Media, McLuhan, and the Dawn of the Electric Age in Sheila Watson's Deep Hollow Creek and The Double Hook." Essays on Canadian Writing 84 (2009): 254-82. *EBSCOhost*. 12 April 2012. Web.

*Betts writes on Watson’s relationship with Marshall McLuhan and how this relationship impacted the way media is portrayed in both* The Double Hook *and* Deep Hollow Creek*.*

Bowering, George. Ed. *Sheila Watson and the Double Hook*. Critical Views on Canadian Writers. Kempville, Ontario: Golden Dog Press, 1985. Print.

*Bowering’s important collection of essays on* The Double Hook *which includes Barbour’s essay on the bibliographic history of the text, as well as a lecture by Watson herself entitled “What I’m Going to Do.”*

Flahiff, F.T. Always Someone to Kill the Doves: A Life of Sheila Watson. Edmonton: NeWest, 2005. Print.

*Flahiff’s unconventional biography on Watson traces her life through her archival material as well as his own relationship with the writer.*

Goldman, Marlene. "Ethics, Spectres, and Formalism in Sheila Watson's The Double Hook." *ESC* 33.1-2 (2007): 189-208. *ESC*. 30 April 2012. Web.

<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/ESC/article/view/9090>

*In her paper on ethics in The Double Hook, Goldman looks at the ways Watson's narrative frustrates the belief that we can cross the boundary between self and other in order to speak for them. In particular, this crossing becomes impossible in the case of First Nations characters in the novel.*

Lovesey, Oliver. "The Place of the Journey in Randolph Stow’s To The Islands and Sheila Watson’s The Double Hook." *Ariel* 27.3 (1996). Print.

*Lovesey compares the landscape of the characters' journeys in* The Double Hook *and* To The Islands*. He argues that both journeys require the characters' ultimate 'neutralization of the realities of settler colonization.'*

Morriss, Margaret. "'No Short Cuts': The Evolution of The Double Hook." *Canadian Literature* 173 (2002): 54-72. *Literature Online*. 7 April 2012. Web.

*In her important paper on* The Double Hook*, Morriss examines the narrative and formal transformations Watson's manuscript underwent before its publication in 1959.*

---. "The Elements Transcended." *Canadian Literature* 42 (1969): 186-201. Print.

*Morriss’s essay provides a comprehensive overview of the themes and imagery in* The Double Hook *and looks at the process by which regeneration occurs in the isolated community.*

St. Onge, Anna. *The Sheila Watson Archives*. Toronto: John M. Kelly Library, 2009. *OpenLibrary*. 12 April 2012. Web.

*St. Onge's online scrapbook gives a comprehensive overview of the materials in the Sheila Watson archives, and contextualizes them within Watson's biographical narrative.*

Willmott, Glen. "Sheila Watson, Aboriginal Discourse, and Cosmopolitan Modernism." *The Canadian Modernists Meet*. Ed. Dean Irvine. Ottawa: University of Ottawa, 2005: 101-118. Print.

*In his challenging essay on Watson, Willmott explores the tension between cosmopolitan modernism and aboriginal discourses in* The Double Hook.