Going Beyond the Binary
The body, Sexuality and Identity in Shelley Jackson’s
Half Life: a novel

Linjing Liu

Frank Baasner
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Abstract

The thesis focuses on Shelley Jackson’s *Half Life: a Novel* with efforts directed towards a literary interpretation considering relevant issues within the context of gender and feminist theory. The argument rests upon four basic units: the theoretical framework at the outset, the question of the body next, thirdly an investigation of sexuality, and finally a consideration of identity.

In Jackson’s *Half Life: a Novel* the non-dualist thinking underlies a deliberate play of dualism. To go beyond the binary, Jackson captures the tension and confusion revealed from the body, sexuality and identity; and therefore this thesis aims to conduct a dynamic discussion on these gender issues to encounter and reconsider the entrenched binary-defined social, cultural and gender norms.

Key words: the body, sexuality, identity, gender and feminist theory
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Introduction

Oh my America, My New-Found Land! Join us in heralding this coming world. It is no accident that it is only now, as we approach a new millennium, that a new people has stepped through the very split they are destined to heal: twofers. From among their ranks, a new Columbus will raise two heads, screen four eyes with two hands, and shout Land-Ho — pointing in the one direction we forgot to look: inward.

Shelley Jackson, *Half Life*

Examining the nature of the relationship between fiction and theory invariably lies at the center of any literary explication. Widely adopted yet seemingly contentious, any examination of this relationship promises to be worthwhile. This paper explores Shelley Jackson’s latest printed novel *Half Life: a novel* (2006) (*Half Life* for short) from the standpoint of gender and feminist theory, and seeks to demonstrate a dynamic relationship between them. Undoubtedly, Shelley Jackson is an interesting novelist to assay, and *Half Life* is a fascinating subject to analyze. I chose this subject for the following reasons.

As noted in the quoted excerpt above, it is evident that there exists an imaginary world populated with a new species of people, whom Jackson names (in the darkly humorous lingo) “twofers”. Shelley Jackson, American avant-garde writer and artist who came up with the novel idea of framing her characters in such a scenario and then goes on to tell readers a *Half-Life* story of this pair of conjoined twins. This story of Nora and Blanche, who as “a new Columbus”, “raising two heads, screening four eyes with two hands”, leads readers to a parallel America to visit and explore the vistas that Jackson’s narrative presents.

Jerome Bruner (1996) once stated that it is through the telling of narratives that humans construct a version of themselves. In *Half Life*, readers can appropriately identify our current world with that unfamiliar yet similar version of territory generated by Jackson’s narrative. As Tony Morrison (1992) notes in *Playing in the Dark*:

Writers are among the most sensitive, the most intellectually anarchic, most representative, most probing of artists. The ability of
writers to imagine what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar, is the test of their power. (15)

Obviously, literature has always been the primary manifestation of the narrative. The reading of literature, on one hand, inevitably provides readers with a chance to revisit our past and present experiences; while the interpretation of literature, on the other hand, motivates readers to reflect on the trajectories of our lives and gain new insights from the thoughts, embodied actions and works of others. If a certain literary text can be considered as an inter-zone where reality and fantasy world meet with imaginative empathy, where a recuperative reflection and re-inventing can take place, and where deep concerns and elusive issues regarding mankind can be investigated, the writer of the text, then, can be viewed as capable of wielding the massive capacity and power of his/her text to influence and transform the reader.

*Half Life* is such a novel with enriching potential of this kind; and Shelley Jackson is such a writer with the ability to “familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar” (Morrison, 1992, 15). Jackson starts as a reassuring realist but produces a defamiliarizingly innovative narrative. Most importantly, she points out one direction that we modern human beings often forget to look, which is “inward.”

In this paper, I focus on Shelley Jackson’s *Half Life: a Novel* with my efforts directed towards a literary interpretation considering relevant issues within the context of gender and feminist theory. To be more specific, there are three aspects that I will elaborate, namely, the body, sexuality, and identity.

To pursue the reading of *Half Life*, first and foremost, I would like to concentrate my attention on the author Shelly Jackson and provide a brief review of her oeuvre.

Born in 1963 in the Philippines, Jackson is currently a resident of Brooklyn, New York. She teaches in the graduate writing programme at The New School University and is a writer-in-residence at the European Graduate School in Switzerland. Both an avant-garde writer and multi-media artist, Jackson is a graduate of Stanford and Brown University, holding a BA in studio art from Stanford University and an MFA in creative writing from Brown University. It is at Brown that she was taught by Robert Coover and George Landow¹. Due to her unique educational background, especially instruction she received from the two of the leading e-lit advocates in the university system.

¹ George Landow, author of influential books like *Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* and *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization.*
mentioned earlier, Coover and Landow, Jackson was initially inspired to create her cyber fiction in 1993.


Jackson’s highly acclaimed exploratory hypertext novel *Patchwork Girl* originated from her sketch of “a naked woman with dotted-line scars” (Wend, 2010), when she was attending the lecture on hypertext and critical theory given by Landow. This fiction remains to be her best-known work, in which Jackson employs the map of a stitched-together female body to explore issues of gender and identity. Her next hypertext novel *My Body* was written for the World Wide Web. Adopting a similar way of presenting the reading experience, *My Body* offers a map of hyperlinked illustrations to lead readers to different strings of the text with clickable links on different body parts. As a consequence, the notion of a pieced-together female body is enhanced, and topics of memory, identity, and sexuality are pondered. Co-authored with her sister Pamla, Jackson’s *The Doll Games* is designed with hyperlinks and the addition of photos to display artifacts, such as dolls, doll accessories, and other toys from childhood to account for how dolls as well as their body parts affect little girls’ development.

In addition to hypertext fictions, Jackson has also published two children’s books, *The Old Woman and The Wave* (1998) and *Sophia, the Alchemist’s Dog* (2001). Moreover, her collection of short stories, *The Melancholy of Anatomy*, published in paper and print in 2002, provided readers with a blatant exposure of the most private body parts. Cases in point are the stories titled “Blood” and “Phlegm”, as well as “Sperm” and “Egg”. In what follows we find Jackson’s *Skin* project. She intended to gather 2,095 volunteers to record a short story through the very act of tattooing, with one word inked at a time on one volunteer. Subtitled “A Mortal Work of Art”, the *Skin* project was meant to unconventionally publish one of Jackson’s short stories on the human skin/bodies rather than in print, and preserve the story until the last person carrying the word passes away.

Not surprisingly, Jackson’s most prominent printed novel, *Half Life*, published in 2006, which is the focus of my paper, is also centered upon the topic of the female body. An alternative universe is imagined in the novel, where conjoined twins are prevalent due to genetic mutations caused by nuclear radiation. Portrayed as a two-
headed woman sharing one single torso and a set of limbs, the twin sisters Nora and Blanche are the main characters of the story. Deformed and odd-looking as they are, the twin sisters are created against social norms of every kind. The deformed body serves as a context in which a reconsidering of issues perplexing human beings is addressed and accomplished: Can one body hold two souls? Can one stay true to oneself in a world full of mirror images? Furthermore, can our entrenched notion of individuality still be stubbornly clung to, when more and more people are becoming plurally-personned in this postmodern era? In later chapters I will return to the plot of the story and present the book in more detail.

It is worth noting that the relevance and meaning assigned to our body and its condition have always been a recurrent motif throughout Jackson’s literary works and art creation in various platforms. As readers, we can discern immediately where Jackson’s sensitivity finds focus: the body/consciousness relation. As Jackson replied in one interview:\(^2\):

\[\text{I take a good look at some of the stuff the body sheds or oozes: hair, milk, blood. That unnerving stain on the carpet was once part of your body. Now it’s something you should probably clean up. What happened in between? (Interviewed by Bold Type)}\]

Media has portrayed Jackson as “Performing at the body’s edge.”\(^3\) William Patrick Wend (2010) has acknowledged Jackson’s creation platform as reality by commenting “Shelley Jackson: The Writer Whose Medium Is Reality”. In the interview\(^4\) called “Written on the Body” with Scott Rettberg, Jackson admitted that “There are some parts of me that are permanently unknowable, and one of those things is the very basis of knowing: the body” (Interviewed by Rettberg).

Jackson’s consistent fascination and obsession with the body and its constituent parts have never changed; nonetheless this obsession appears to give her endless inspiration. For Jackson, the body is a space, the body is reality and what’s more, the body is a medium to establish contact with both her inner mind and the outside world. Most of her works set notable examples on the relationship between the body and

\(^3\) http://www.csgsnyu.org/2011/10/performing-at-the-bodys-edge-mortal-works/
\(^4\) Written on the Body: An Interview with Shelley Jackson by Scott Rettberg. http://iowareview.uiowa.edu/TIRW/TIRW_Archive/july06/jackson.html
consciousness. As Jackson followed in the same interview, “The mind relies upon something it cannot think, and conversely, the body relies upon something it cannot touch. I’m fascinated with the sticky stretch between matter and sense, both in us and in language” (Interviewed by Rettberg).

The mind-boggling coupling of matter and sense permeates through her artistic creations. To gain some restorative relief, or in more concrete terms, to explain the “outside-inness” of her sense of self, Jackson resorted to language and took up writing to express her view on this “sticky stretch”. As she later described, she had the feeling of an itch for writing, particularly as related to writing on different types of writing spaces with distinct material properties, be they virtual or physical:

I feel language has a relationship to my body, and I want to make that relationship more literal. Spatializing text makes it more like a body, or an environment for my body, or both, which gives me something to scratch my itch on. Coming from the other direction, I think literal bodies and spaces can strain toward a wordless sort of syntax or story. I love that stretch, and the gap that never quite closes between thingly word and wordy thing. (Interviewed by Rettberg)

This is Shelley Jackson, a hypertext (electronic) writer, a print novelist, and generally a prestigious literary agent. But most important of all, with regard to her roles as a performance artist and an illustrator, she has been publicly acclaimed as a true multimedia author.

After this brief introduction about the author, in the second place, the structure of my paper will be outlined. The argument that I advance in the following chapters rests upon four basic units: the theoretical framework at the outset, the question of the body next, thirdly an investigation of sexuality, and finally a consideration of identity. Correspondingly, the paper is divided into four chapters.

The first chapter, Half Life: A Question of Gender, sets out to provide a general theoretical framework of the entire paper. A detailed account of how the novel Half Life can be said to relate to the theory of gender and feminism will be proffered in the first chapter. Though discussions on the relationship between one fiction and a particular theory are contentious, this chapter aims to present a convincing argument to show how gender issues are earnestly handled in Half Life, and how discussions on the body, sexuality and identity in gender and feminist theory succeed in finding their way into the story set forth in Half Life.
The second chapter examines the recurrent theme of the body running through Jackson’s works. Entitled *Rewriting the Body*, the second chapter analyses Jackson’s newly-established body model in her story, the two-headed female body. The deformed female body containing two souls which Jackson adopts can be argued to destabilize the time-honored notion of a physical ideal, while at the same time the refigured female body explores a potential avenue to deal with our postmodern plight by embracing the non-dualist thinking.

As the title *Sexuality: a Queer Investigation* hints, the third chapter acquires a new dimension in my approach to the novel. This chapter takes up the issue of sexuality through the lens of queer theory. Mainly drawing upon Donald E. Hall’s book *Queer Theories*, I attempt to prove how the story of *Half Life* queers itself through various vectors of sexuality to participate in a dynamic discussion of this topic.

*A “Twofer” Identity* marks out the direction of the final chapter. This chapter engages in the discussion of identity, selfhood, and individuality. In view of the narrator’s perspective, one of the most eminent themes in *Half Life* rests with the claim to birthright, selfhood, and individuality. This chapter also leads to the conclusion of the entire paper. The awareness that Jackson strives to raise in this story will be revealed and generalized in the exploration of identity, which is to promote the notion of “togetherness” and achieve a harmonious relation of oneness by going beyond the traditional Western binary thinking.
Chapter One—*Half Life*: A Question of Gender

Gender has always been a central but taken-for-granted concept for modern people. We tend to focus solely on the grammatical function of “gender”, regarding it the euphemism for another interchangeably used term “sex”, to mark the differences between men and women based on their biological essentials. Currently, buzzwords like “gender roles” are repeatedly talked about; the “gender gap” has been given due concern; the “gender identity” has stirred up heated controversy. With the rising tide of gender debates a new academic branch called “gender studies” has emerged at its proper historic moment and has been expanding at a rapid pace. However, in contrast to our common belief, “gender”, one of the most restless terms in the English language, has been proved much more contested, slippery and problematic than expected.

Human beings have long been divided by gender into two categories: male and female. For the modern human however, gender poses another conundrum: which gender do you want to be today? This rephrased question comes from a misguided reading of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990). Although Butler has cautioned against its failure to gloss over the constraints that gender puts on us, it is somehow worthwhile to re-consider this much condemned misinterpretation from a postmodern perspective. In a manner of speaking, to live in today’s world entails living with a label of gender. The question “which gender do you want to be today” reminds us that gender is nothing but a masquerade. In the meantime, it implies that gender is “more of a matter of choice, of picking up or discarding identities” to some extent (Glover and Kaplan, 2000, XXVII). As the fragile and provisional gender continues to function on human beings, it will inevitably generate an unstable modern/postmodern self. Therefore, as a rough approximation, what may be the central concern in our postmodern times may rest with how gender affects the postmodern subject and how the gendered self establishes its identity. Time and again, one contemporary novel seeks to explore this not-so-surprising issue of identity, which may sound a tad cliché. Nonetheless, departed from the literary routine, the author explores a postmodern self and pushes it to an outermost limit. The novel is Shelley Jackson’s *Half Life: a Novel*.

In the first chapter of this paper, I am going to show how *Half Life* re-visits the dated literary issue of identity by giving it a postmodern spin, and how Jackson employs
a wide variety of strategies together with ideas absorbed from gender theories to create her fascinating narrative accordingly.

A Half-Life story

Let’s begin with a review of the novel’s storyline. Ostensibly, *Half Life* is a story about a pair of Siamese twins, or conjoined twins, Nora and Blanche Olney. The so-called “twofers” like Nora and Blanche have formed a substantial demographic minority group in their world. In a classic manner of science fiction, the parallel world is naturalistically portrayed as identical to our real world, and yet maintains its difference from ours by one feature — the existence of twofers in large numbers. The twofer phenomenon seems to be the result of radioactivity fallout caused by the American government. As described:

> In 1951, saddened by Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and recognizing the need for a national activity of penance, a despondent American government commenced organized hostilities against itself. For three years, they hammered a sparsely populated part of the Nevada desert with the most powerful bombs in existence. (Jackson, 2006, 225)

Under this major catastrophic presupposition, the American landscape has been fittingly altered to give birth to a group of genetically-mutated and oddly-looking twofers. The story pushes the Siamese sisters’ oddities to an extreme, upon which the whole plot develops and further thickens. As odd as conjoined twins may seem, Nora and Blanche do not even live up to the twofer standards: Blanche has been sleeping for fifteen years, leaving Nora in sole control of their conjoined body. However, in a video footage filmed by Nora’s friend Audrey, Blanche shows some signs of awakening, which causes Nora an immediate panic. Then Nora wants out. Being a loud lesbian, Nora decides to look for some surgical measures to maintain her absolute control over the body and become Nora only, which simply means to cut off Blanche’s head. Centering around the “head” issue, the novel starts with the “Unity Foundation Release and Waiver”, stating that Nora Gray Olney requests for surgical removal of her conjoined twin Blanche Grey Olney, based on “the special case of an insensible or ‘vegetable’ twin” (1), and due to “irreconcilable difference” (3).
Narrated by Nora, *Half Life* is told from a unique first-person perspective, but in a dual manner. From the opening chapter *Personal Statement*, the author provides readers with Nora’s monologue from the outset, rather than leading readers into the story directly. Nora says:

Blanche, white night of my dark day. My sister, my self. Blanche: a cry building behind sealed lips, then blowing through. First the pout, then the plosive; the meow of the vowel; then the fricative sound of silence. 

Shhhh. Blanche is sleeping. She has been sleeping for fifteen years. I can tell you the exact moment I knew she was waking up. But allow me a day’s grace. Let me remember that last afternoon, unimportant in itself, wonderfully unimportant, when I was still Nora, just Nora, Nora Olney, Nora alone. (5)

As the opening passage indicates, the articulation of the singular “I” is in earnest; on the other hand it suggests that the whole plot will be unfolded through a series of binary and contradictory concepts. The point can be illustrated with several clues. Firstly, it can be seen clearly that Nora’s narrative follows a dual track, alternating between chapters chronicling her quest for self and identity while recounting the twin sisters’ comparatively normal but repressed childhood. Secondly, Nora’s narrative is organized by the Venn diagram and structured by the Boolean operators: NOT, XOR, OR, AND.

The simplest form of the Venn diagram employed by Jackson features a mathematical plan of two overlapping circles to illustrate how the two circles (the mathematical sets generated by two circles) relate to each other; and simultaneously, the boundaries of the two circles create three surfaces. Put in its simplest terms, Jackson employs this model of two overlapping circles to represent the conjoined twin sisters respectively, one for Nora and one for Blanche. The relation between the twin sisters and the transformation of Nora’s self-identification develop with how the two circles and their three surfaces relate, which is to say, how the protagonist Nora perceives her sister Blanche and herself. If put in another way, as Jackson states distinctly in her story: “the literalization of this model is the conjoined twin or twofer” though, it can also be extended to account for normal individuals in general, for the fact that “every singleton also contains a phantom twin” (385).

On the basis of the three surfaces created by the Venn diagram: left, middle, and right, the Boolean operators: NOT, XOR, OR, AND are needed correspondingly. In
actuality, the relations between the self and other entailed in the Venn diagram are governed by the Boolean operators (385-6). \textit{NOT}, means I, not you; \textit{XOR} stands for “exclusive or”; either of us, but not both; \textit{OR} means either or both of us; \textit{AND} represents the intersection set. Following the four operators, Jackson wittingly divides the novel into four sections. Quite explicitly, \textit{Half Life} displays a “Boolean Search for Self” (97). Although the story ends with some degree of uncertainty, as the last line of the story reads: “‘Nora?’ I say” (427). The final section of \textit{AND} implies that the protagonist Nora has already realized that the overlapping zone between herself and Blanche is their common ground, which paves the way for her/their life to become complete instead of remaining a half one. The Venn diagram, the Boolean Operators and the diagram of the whole story are shown below:

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{venn_diagram}
\caption{Venn Diagram of \textit{Half Life} with Boolean Operators}
\end{figure}
The Question of Gender

Before moving on to discuss how the novel *Half Life* reflects ideas within the realm of gender, and how it explores the identity issue from the perspective of gender, I will offer a brief account of the concept of gender.

No one knows for sure when gender was initially coined and where it was first put into practice, whilst the late modern concept of gender has long been figured since the early 1960s. The early appearance of gender can be traced in Alex Comfort’s 1963 revised post-war overview *Sex in Society*, in which “gender roles” were added and discussed as a complement for its original *Sexual Behaviour in Society* (1950). Evidently, the concept of gender is intimately related with the long-exited term sex, and rooted in sexology. David Glover and Cora Kaplan’s *Genders* (2000) confirms that the development of sexology, along with that of psychoanalysis, witnessed the emergence of the concept of gender; and the years following the Second World War in particular accelerated its growth.

To have a comprehensive understanding of gender, sex/gender distinction needs to be clarified at first. Efforts to distinguish gender from sex have been undertaken repeatedly in gender studies and by feminist analysts. In 1968, Robert J. Stoller published his book *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and
Femininity, which for the first time placed the distinction between sex and gender high on the top of the agenda for scholars and researchers. After analyzing and summarizing all the key ideas in sex/gender distinction, Glover and Kaplan draw their own conclusion, noting that the “sex” is a language term through which “we speak and come to know our desires”; “gender” however, “denotes the cultural practices or cultural media that enable these desires to be played out” (Glover and Kaplan, 2000, XXVI). On the whole, gender, a vast and expansive concept, has been used to index and signal the complexities of social and cultural aspects related to sex and of sexual differences.

As far as feminists are concerned, gender is the most central category of inquiry, especially in terms of questioning and reconstructing the category of women. In 1990, Judith Butler developed the concept of gender and presented an embodiment understanding of gender in her influential work Gender Trouble. For Butler (1990):

> Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (140)

Butler’s interpretation further confirms that the concept of gender is fragile, unstable and incomplete. Gender is a masquerade, whose supposedly solid binary structure may be weakened, and in which the two halves of the division — masculinity and femininity may show up in transient guises.

In the next place, analysis will be devoted to an explanation of how Half Life reveals the question of gender. Attention will be pinpointed on two aspects, namely the genre and the premises of the novel.

Science fiction: A Gendering Practice

As the winner of the 2006 James Tiptree, Jr. Award for science fiction and fantasy, Half Life was highly acclaimed by The New York Times for “all this razzle-dazzle” and “all
the allusions.” At the same time, Jackson’s ambition was praised as “truly glorious, and passage by passage Jackson is capable of fantastic runs.”

Modern strategies, such as exploiting fantasy and science fiction have been taken up from the late 1960s by feminists and female writers alike. In general terms, in constructing narratives which aim at transforming and displacing gender norms, imaginative women writers resort to fictions of various genres to think beyond and even bypass the traditional binary division of gender. With a wide variety of genre options at hand, Jackson conceived a science fiction of Half Life, and chose to constitute a different gendered literary text out of fantasy.

Literary genre, the canopy term for various writing styles has been proved useful in recent literary criticism as a social, cultural construct. Tzevetan Todorov once argued in his book titled Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle (1984) that “genre is a sociohistorical as well as a formal entity” (80). Thus, from his statements it may be further deduced that any shift or change in genre even the least noticeable one denotes a corresponding change in society. Todorov (1984) made this point clear by saying that “Transformation in genre must be considered in relation to social changes” (80). For literary critics, the transformation in literary genre reflected by literary works can identify cultural and social assumptions at a specific time and place. In addition to the literary aspect, when dealing with science fiction novels such as Half Life, special attention needs to be paid to its change of genre from the perspective of gender, because the transformation in genre also enables the gendered assumptions embedded in the text to be characterized and analyzed.

Conventionally, for the work of science fiction and fantasy, some alien terrains and bizarre vistas are always the indispensable part of the creation of science-fiction authors. However, for a work of science fiction in our postmodern times, Jackson’s Half Life nevertheless, unfolds its scenario through a series of naturalistically depicted city views:

The flags lining Market Street from Church to Castro flexed and snapped, showing sometimes one, sometimes two linked rings. The stop signs shuddered on their spines. The wind had picked up in the late afternoon, as usual, and now the whole sky seemed to be

toppling sideways over the Twin Peaks, carrying with it whorls of smoke from the incinerators and pure white spooks of fog. (5)

This is where the story happens. This is a city called San Francisco in that alternate world where twofer minority congregates, just like the gay subculture does in our real world. In stark contrast to the narrative and stylistic conventions of science fiction, *Half Life* seems too real and mild to conform to the stereotype of emblematical science fiction novels. In traditional science fictions, alien planets, extraterrestrial creatures or even nasty star wars are always involved; and thus the genre of science fiction allows for the images of some masculine heroes to be depicted and magnified in the hope of attaining the lofty goals to safeguard our planets against any form of alien intrusion. In other words, the traditional science fiction is heavily dependent on a magnified masculinity to fulfill the ambition of the author. By contrast, Jackson breaks the mode in the genre of science fiction and fantasy; therefore, the conventional logic of the science fiction creation is abandoned. Without any trace of the commonly-employed magnified masculinity, *Half Life* seems to be coated with a façade of dailiness and flavorlessness. However, in spite of its ordinary superfcies, *Half Life* narrates a dazzling story, which never falls short of imagination and intelligence.

Compared to other feminist science fictions, Jackson’s *Half Life* defines itself differently. Take Ursula K. LeGuin’s novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* for instance. *The Left Hand of Darkness* talks about a planet of androgynes, called Gethen. The Gethen world is a society without fixed gender: the Gethenians are men as well as women. There is “no myth of Oedipus”, “no unconsenting sex”, “no division of humanity into strong and weak halves”, and “the whole tendency to dualism that pervades human thinking may be found to be lessened or changed” (LeGuin, 1977, 69). The century-old belief of dualism on sexual differences collapses in LeGuin’s science fiction. A new but simplistic model of deformed genders is fashioned to challenge the very ground of gender norms and ethics. All her efforts reveal a utopian desire to evade sexual differences. With the best intentions to alleviate the restrictions of gender imposed on women, the feminist science fiction author usually has a tendency to fall back on an intentional erasure of sexual differences and make the most of a utopian world to actualize the equality of men and women.

On the contrary, Jackson’s *Half Life* is by no means utopian. Starting as a hard-headed realist, Jackson highlights no alien world but a parallel world as ours in *Half
Life. The parallel world is a society populated by a large group of twofers with two heads, two arms, and two legs: the twofers are “you” as well as “I”, but never “us”. The twofer phenomenon destabilizes our grammar currently in use, the kinship, and anything relevant to the intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. The concept of dualism is intensified and played out in the entire story. The deformed female body struggles to hold two souls, but can it hold two sexual differences and moreover, two gendered identities? Trapped in a fixed gender category of female, one identity shows strong association with masculinity, the other shows mere passive femininity. The already provisional and unstable gender loses its orientation in the intricacy of binary divisions. A strong message that overcasts the novel expresses that: to some extent we are all twofers, we are all multi-gendered, and we are all plurally-personned.

Jackson’s dystopian satire, as the gendering practice of science fiction, on the one part overthrows the expected genre conventions; on the other part, it breaks away from the cozy fantasy of sexual equality. In addition, the story exacerbates the already complicated binary gendering, raising profound questions for all postmodern people: how to live with multiple genders? How to make peace with our multiple selves?

Postmodern Elements and Feminism

How feminist theory can be utilized to assist the postmodern reading of Half Life is the major concern of the last section of Chapter One. With reference to the subheading, I intend to take a look at the postmodern premises of the novel and match them up with concepts and debates in feminist theory.

Primarily, if we view the entire story of Half Life from various angles, we can find it fit the profile of postmodernism. As a reviewer once argued, it is likely that Jackson wants to “cram every ounce of postmodern alienation that she can think of into her book.” Landmark themes of postmodernism, like blurred gender divisions, lesbians, and postmodern multiple identities are explored. Intertextuality elements as well as intermittent self allusions are foregrounded. To name a few of the intertextual references: “Reader, I fucked him” (309) to Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre; “My fish, I called them. I even gave them names: Molloy, Malone, and the Unnamable” (358) to

Samuel Beckett’s Trilogy: Molloy, Malone, and the Unnamable; and “Now you’re being deliberately obtuse. I just think this story about Blanche is a bit too Jekyll and Hyde. Or do I mean not Jekyll and Hyde enough?” (71) to Robert Louis Stevenson’s The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll Mr Hyde. Darkly humorous language together with playful irony takes over the telling of this postmodern fiction, not to mention the self-conscious narrative style mockingly labeled as narcissism. All these postmodern elements are wedged into the novel, showcasing the brilliant union of imagination and craftsmanship.

Considering the main character Nora, there are two aspects worth mentioning. The first premise Jackson thinks of is the idea of the conjoined twins. As set forth in the Introduction, Jackson’s abiding interest revolves around the question of the body. Jackson’s fascination with the body reflects a similar preoccupation of later gender studies, especially that of contemporary gender theorists such as Judith Butler. It is Jackson’s consistent fascination with the body as other that constitutes her criterion for existence: otherness. In the novel, the recurring theme takes on a new look and becomes a deformed body. If human norm is defined by physical ideal, then the deformed body undoubtedly represents absolute otherness. For Nora, her otherness is intensified by another irreversible factor set by biological determinism: the female gender. Bestowed with a deformed female body, Nora cannot resist the destructive awareness that this body does not belong to her self, and yet it is shared with the other self. Is it a blessing or a curse? We begin to ponder it over and over again as Nora tells us her story about a two-headed yet half body.

Based on this very basic premise, there comes the second premise — sexuality, which further thickens the plot and complicates the entire story. Sexuality is the most noticeable trademark for the individual’s constitution as a gendered subject. As a loud-and-proud lesbian, Nora is a well-rounded peripheral figure, marginalized by all kinds of social and cultural norms and standards. Given all her oddities and the plight she is suffering, there is no wonder that Nora is desperate and aching for selfhood, individuality and a singular identity.

What have been portrayed and investigated in Half Life can trace their echoes in the feminist theory. The second wave feminism produced a boom in discussions on a wide range of hot topics, most of which are still under heated debate today. The discussion and debate on the female body, sexuality, identity and individuality have a deep root in feminism.
Corporeal feminism establishes itself as an essential school of thought on the body issue. It takes the female body as a model to refigure both the female body and the male body. Similar to Jackson’s view on the body (see page 7 for complete information), which focuses on “the stuff the body sheds and oozes” and highlights the body as “the very basic of knowing”, corporeal feminism believes that the body emphasizes “the fluid boundaries, connection rather than separation, interdependence rather than autonomy” (Andermahr, Lovell and Wolkowitz, 1997, 26). According to A Glossary of Feminist Theory, this school of thought is founded on “the strategy of refusing the either/or in favor of neither/both” (Andermahr, Lovell and Wolkowitz, 1997, 26). Its basic perception on the body is that a body does not merely “provide the grounds on which human subjectivity is built, but whose lived sexually-specific flesh constitutes the subjectivity” (Andermahr, Lovell and Wolkowitz, 1997, 26). After a careful reading of the corporeal feminist theory, it gradually dawns on me that corporeal feminism’s belief concerning the female body is indeed useful in understanding Half Life, which I will elaborate more in later chapters.

Obviously, corporeal feminism is not the only feminist thought that will be employed in this thesis. There is a reservoir of feminist ideas readily available to turn to. The queer theory for instance, can be referred to during the examination of sexuality in Half Life. Jackson tailors her protagonist a lesbian, which serves as a prerequisite for the development of the story. With the help of the queer theory, how Jackson opposes the gender and cultural norms can be explained, while how she creates her unique gendered subject through sexuality will be made clear.

By and large, besides the insights from corporeal feminism and the queer studies, I will draw on more feminist theories to build up my argument. But to take corporeal feminism as a point of departure, I believe we will gain more renewed observations on questions like the female body, sexuality and female identity and subjectivity.

To sum up, the examination on both the novel and the contemporary gender and feminist theory approves my proposal that Half Life, to a large extent, can be taken as a discussion of gender. Gender issues like the body and sexuality are handled with intelligent tenacity in Half Life. In regard to how to decode the gender norms embedded in the novel and how to decipher the novel as a whole, theories in feminism and gender studies are truly of great benefit.
Chapter Two—Rewriting The Body

At first all I saw was a strange, bifurcated shape. Then I realized I was looking at myself. I was lying on my bed, half undressed, asleep, my arms flung out with palms turned up as if to say, “What?”

... For a minute I looked beautiful, basking in light. I even thought, Nice breasts, as the camera moved in, forgetting for a moment everything that was not onscreen: the top-heavy yaw of those quarterback’s shoulders, not to mention my crowning glory, my peculiar surplus. The camera slid up my white side, my bristly armpit, my raised arm.

Shelley Jackson, *Half Life*

Since her first piece of work, Jackson has been consistently enchanted by the space of the body and its constituent parts. In *Half Life*, the body has been taken to a culmination in a cure for the postmodern predicament that perplexes modern people. For centuries, the longstanding preoccupation with the body has remained at the heart of Western philosophical thought as well as contemporary gender and feminist theory. Always a locus of discussion though, the body is all the same a “conceptual blind spot” as Elizabeth Grosz (1994) comments in her seminal research monograph *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*.

Historically, human beings are determined by their bodies, especially in the case of being a woman. The female body is not only marked for femininity and womanhood, but also devalued by Western philosophical assumptions as falling prey to misogyny. Along with the body comes a series of dichotomously opposed concepts, such as mind and body, male and female, self and other. What characterizes the binary thinking is the dividing hierarchy which privileges the former over the latter. Misogynist thought has been spawned from this pernicious dichotomous reason, rendering women and female bodies its target of hostility. The human norm posited by Aristotle in terms of the body and bodily organization is based on a male model, whereas for women, their body is seen as an anomalous other. Unless a new paradigm of human norm is to be set up, there stands no chance for women to break free from their bodily entrapment. As Grosz suggests (1994), to rethink female corporeality and produce a different analysis
of the body begins with disrupting the dualism tradition and acquiring a non-dichotomous thinking. Corporeal feminism, therefore, takes the female body as a new model to refigure both the female body and the male body due to the volatility and flexibility of the female body.

However for Jackson, in contrast to mainstream Western philosophical thought, the existing male model as a singular norm is discarded, instead she adopts another model with plural possibilities to refigure the body. In rewriting the body, the non-dualist thinking underlies a deliberate play of dualism in *Half Life*. To all appearances, the entire story is inundated with dualism, while de facto the binary Yin/Yang symbol of Chinese philosophy, which is popping up repeatedly in the story is foregrounded to articulate a complementary oneness.

Sharing a common ground with contemporary feminist theory, Jackson’s new model is fixed on the female body. But more extremely, a malformed female body is established, i.e. the body of a pair of conjoined twin sisters, to represent the modern human. The two-headed female body may not seem rich and variable enough to define the norms and ideals. Nevertheless, to view it from a postmodern standpoint, it is immediately evident that only with the female body containing two souls can the Western reason of male bias and single-mindedness be overcome and new boundaries be negotiated.

The second chapter, titled *Rewriting the Body*, will investigate the prominent theme of the body running through Jackson’s art works. It can be argued through analysis that in *Half Life* Jackson’s new body model doesn’t purport to represent the totality of human reason, but rather it acts as a reminder for modern people that to deal with our postmodern plight, the time-honored Western philosophy of dualism is better be replaced with a more comprehensive and wholesome thinking. The bodily phenomenon will constitute the first part of my analysis in order to capture its very essence. Accordingly, argument will be laid out following the subheadings, namely *The Body Image*, *The Two-Headed Body Versus Agnosia*, and *The Body is a Situation*.

The Body Image

The subheading *The Body Image* is a special terminology taken from psychoanalysis. As widely acknowledged, psychoanalytic theory has made remarkable contributions to
the understanding of the body and its working principles. It contends that the way the body functions is not only a simple biological process but also a psychical projection of the body’s image. Interpretations on how the body’s psychical interior correlates with its physical form lay the vital groundwork for psychoanalysis and psychical topographies. In other words, the relation between the body and its psyche equates with the stereotyped binary division of the body and mind. Undeniably, the feminist theory on the body issue has absorbed many ideas from previous works of psychoanalysis and other relevant theories in biology and psychology. The body image for instance, is one of the frequently figured psychoanalytical concepts, which has been borrowed and utilized by feminists to question the social and cultural imprisonment on women’s modifications of body images in modern times.

As a matter of fact, the concept of the body image has a long history in Western medicine. Regardless of what has been discovered from Egyptian and Greek antiquity, probably the earliest medical reference to the body image can be dated back in the 16th century. The sixteenth-century physician Ambroise Paré produced a great amount of writings on teratology to deal with amputations caused by war injuries. He categorized various teratological disorders and introduced several surgical interventions, such as ligature (used to separate Siamese twins), artificial limbs, artificial eyes and the phantom limb. His research on the body image, more strikingly on the grotesque bodies and the phantom limb sensation has far-reaching influences on later psychoanalytical studies.

In *Half Life*, the body image that Jackson chooses is a two-headed female body. On the basis of psychoanalysis and relevant feminist theories, argument will be presented as follows.

To define the concept of the body image, Paul Schilder informs us that that the image of the human body means “the picture of our own body which we form in our mind, that is to say, the way in which the body appears to ourselves” (Schilder, 1978, II).

Following Paré’s research on the body image, it is noted that a classificatory scheme for teratological disorders has been designed. According to Paré, there are three major types of teratology: anomalies of excess, anomalies of default, and anomalies of duplicity. Based on this standard, conjoined twins can be classified to the first category, anomalies of excess. Interestingly, possibly due to the limitation of the age when Paré
was alive, he regarded the bodily anomalies as *monstrosity*, and certain surgeries were devised to rectify these anomalies. Despite Paré’s technical idea of monstrosity in the bodily phenomenon, the monstrosity judgment, conceptually and culturally, has its deep root in misogyny. The misogynist thought views the female body as a monstrous ovum. Rosi Braidotti once also noted that “woman as a sign of difference is monstrous” (Conboy, Medina, and Stanbury, 1997, 65). For a moment, I reckoned that whether the idea of monstrosity had ever occurred to Jackson during her writing process, even if it was only a fleeting flash of inspiration; then it is undoubted that her deformed protagonist Nora would be such a well-rounded and multi-dimensional “monster”.

Certainly, the idea of the “monster” is not the point on which Jackson lays emphasis; and the gothic flavor that comes along with the “monster” never haunts Jackson’s *Half Life* story. However, the monstrosity of the bodily malformation is indeed confirmed later in the story. Evidence can be found through Nora’s narrative:

Well, almost every fate. In “backward” parts of the world they still considered us monsters, and corrected us at birth if they could, and prayed over the body if they couldn’t. There were mercy killings and exorcisms, but also surgical interventions, to suit the baby for a normal life. I’d have a 50/50 chance of making the cut. Sometimes as I lay in bed I saw a pair of hands, disciplined and culinary, feeling for the spot with the knife. Rocking the blade on the bones, finding a niche. Crunch. Hands in streaked latex.

“Mama,” I said. My mother was chopping carrots.

“What is it. What.” Crunch.

“Can we cut Blanche’s head off?”

Crunch. (114)

This scene takes place during Nora and Blanche’s childhood. It is the first time that Nora has the idea to correct her abnormally formed body. Nora compares the “backward” world where monstrous conjoined twins can be fixed at birth with her comparatively modern world where her abnormal body is kept intact and her liberty to lead a “normal” life is deprived of.

Seeing from the viewpoint of psychoanalytical theory, I suggest linking the body image with another psychoanalytical term “ego.” The story confirms that the “monstrous” body image that traps Nora fails to conform to her “ego”, which is supposed to develop from childhood. Freud presents his understanding of the ego in corporeal terms in *The Ego and the Id*. Freud (1923) asserts that:
The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego: it is not merely a surface entity, but it itself the projection of a surface.... The ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as mental projection of the surface of the body, besides, ... representing the superficies of the mental apparatus. (26)

By all appearances, a discrepancy is generated by Nora’s bifurcated body, which to a large extent, amplifies the mind/ body opposition. Unable to reflect the various body parts or acquire the notion of the body as a whole, Nora’s ego is beset by ambivalence at its core. Besides, with the absence of the recognition of the totality and autonomy of the body, Nora’s ego is built on an unstable body image rather than a supposedly stabilized counterpart. As a result, the incoordination between the ego and the body image propels Nora to look for a consistent sense of self and clear-cut bodily boundaries. This explains why from a young age Nora would hold a knife and say to Blanche: “Do you think I can take your head off with one stroke, … or do you think I have to saw?” (115).

What’s more, Nora’s longing for the clear-cut bodily boundaries can be seen from her unfulfilled attempt to lay a blade against Blanche’s neck. Nora admits:

I held the knife so that the blade rested on the saddle between our heads. I had held it there so long that it was our body temperature and I could hardly feel it. The edge was just touching the skin of her neck, right where tan gave way to pallor under her hair. A fine muscle in her neck was standing out. I could sever it easily. … I pressed the knife a little harder against her neck and looked at the way her flesh dented. It went white near the blade. I kept looking back and forth between her eyes and the knife. (115)

Just at that moment, Max sees the blade and stops Nora. A false alarm as Nora claims it; however, Max still takes this incident seriously. Nora continues:

After that I often saw Max watching me. But I can state that I did not at this time have any real wish to be rid of Blanche. I wanted only to know the precise extent of my considerable power over her. How much of me was mine. For keeps. (116)

Extra attention will be paid to the last two words of the passage cited above. “For keeps” directly signal Nora’s possessive ego to take full and sole control of their conjoined body. Nora’s ego grows more and more possessive day by day. “Aside from these tiny reminders” of Blanche’s presence, Nora declares that:
Our body was mine. It grew up. It grew up, and Blanche was left behind, like a vacation puppy too dumb to bark after the shrinking license plate and the desperate faces tinged with aquamarine behind the glass. (9)

The Two-Headed Body Versus Agnosia

In light of Nora and Blanche’s physical condition, Jackson presumes a metaphorical indication. The two heads represent a bodily incarnation of the individual’s varied and manifold psyche. Performed by Nora and Blanche simultaneously, the body is occupied by two souls, while afflicted by two contrasting stretches.

Let’s go back to review Paré’s research on the body image once more. Owing to his fruitful research and extensive knowledge gained from his work, he was able to produce the first description of the phantom limb. As a typical instance of the phantom sensation, the phantom limb is to describe an illusionary pain felt on the same spot where the limb used to exist before its amputation. To take this example as a lead, or more precisely, enlightened by this test case of phantom phenomenon, I believe that Nora’s two-head syndrome and her insanity to rid Blanche’s surplus head on her body can be interpreted from the opposite disorder of the phantom limb, which is, agnosia.

In diametric contradiction to the phantom limb, agnosia refers to the failure to recognize a body part as one’s own due to brain damages in most cases. It is crucial for the individual to perceive a balanced picture of the body and construct the body image as a whole. On the other hand, agnosia bespeaks a disavowal of a part of the body which deserves its rightful position on the body within the total body image. Grosz summarizes the polarity between the two disorders, claiming that in traditional psychological and physiological terms, the phantom limb is seen as a “memory”, a “past experience reactivated in the present” but in essence is a “hallucination”; and agnosia is treated as a “forgetfulness”, a “refusal” or “negative judgment” (Grosz, 1994, 89).

In the disorder of agnosia, a fundamental ambivalence can be detected. The non-recognition of a rightful body part characterizes the sufferer’s incapability of forming a correct link between the psychical interior and the bodily situation. In Half Life, Nora denies Blanche’s life-long coexistence and purposefully refuses to recognize Blanche’s head as one of the intrinsic body parts. As if suffering from the agnosia disorder without
neurological damages, Nora devalues Blanche as an “energetic parsnip” (140); similarly, Blanche’s head is nothing humanly biological but a vegetated bulk. Consequently, there is nothing wrong to cut off the head of the “parsnip”. For Nora, the agnosia logic of thinking legitimizes her sinful attempt to deprive of Blanche’s right to breathe and live.

Lamenting her cursed birth with two heads, Nora prefers a murder to make real her fictional construction of the body. The fantasmatic one-headed normal body fancied by the agnosia disorder seems to be an easy way out and direct a short-cut to correct every mistake. However sadly, what may cause Nora’s plan to fall flat is another non-recognition that she overlooks: the murder may turn out to be a suicide in the end. As the poem *The Song of The Two-headed Lady* reads:

Alas for the two-headed lady
and alas for the lady with one
Broken hearts, they have two parts
but the two-headed lady has none

With two heads I was born accursed
and by my mother never nursed
The midwife snatched me from the coals
and in one body saved two souls

God set this gossip next to me
to vex my ear continuously
She carped and wheedled all day long
an angel’s face, a harpie’s song

Then I simplified my life
with an unpremeditated knife
The parrot on my shoulder cried
“Murder!” and then “Suicide!” (328)

The Body Is a Situation

“The body is not a thing; it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and a sketch of our projects”, Simone de Beauvoir writes in her 1949 thought-provoking work *The Second Sex*. Repeatedly quoted and widely discussed by later gender theorists and feminist scholars, Simone de Beauvoir’s intellectual contribution cannot be merely redeemed as an innovative devotion to the feminist theory; but more importantly, it is
extensively acknowledged as a “powerful and sophisticated alternative to contemporary sex and gender theories” (Moi, 1999, 59), says Toril Moi in her text *What Is a Woman*.

What Beauvoir articulates in her statement is that the body itself is a situation, not as an object in a situation. A direct parallel can be found in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s negative claim in his work *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945): the body is not a physical object. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological reflection on the body reveals that the body is a condition through which the subject can establish connections with other objects and the outside world as well. In Merleau-Ponty’s opinion, the phenomenon of the body and the experience gained by living the body constitute the fundamental understanding of the relations between nature and consciousness. Similarly, Shelley Jackson holds a parallel view. As she expressed in the interview *Written on the Body* (already discussed in *Introduction*, see page 5 for complete information), the body provides her with the “very basis of knowing” and justifies her being-to–the-world. Jackson’s unique corporeal perception elucidates that the body acts as a medium to connect interiority and exteriority; and moreover, the body is a necessary situation to articulate the interrelatedness of the mind/body dualism. To generalize all the understandings of the body, I would conclude with Merleau-Ponty’s words, which claim that “the body is our general medium for having a world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, 146).

Taking into account all the ideas listed in the preceding paragraphs, I propose to include the term “lived experience” coined by Toril Moi (1999) in *What Is a Woman*, to guarantee a thorough reading of the body as a situation in Jackson’s *Half Life*. Given all the richness that the body is attributed to, the term “lived experience” denotes a “central existentialist concept”. Moi (1999) emphasizes that the term describes “the way an individual makes sense of her situation and actions” (63). She goes on to explain that to claim the body is a situation means the body “both is a situation and is placed within other situations” (63). She agrees with Sartre on that the bodily situation is a structural relationship between our projects (freedom) and the world (the body is included).

To illustrate this point, Moi makes an analogy of climbing a crag. She says that, in climbing a crag, the crag alone is not a situation because the individual’s situation is also her project “as it exists in the encounter with the brute facticity of the crag” (65). The panoramic view of the situation consists of both the situation as exteriority and interiority; in this sense, the situation is a “synthesis of facticity and freedom” (65).
the projects of climbing the crag vary from one individual to another, say, one to climb, the other to enjoy the mountain view, then the presence of the same crag to them will seem different. For the one whose project is to climb, the crag may present itself as being easy or difficult to scale; however for the other to enjoy the scenery, the crag may present itself as unremarkable or impressive. This analogy intends to show that although faced with the same crag, individuals’ situations would be different due to their different projects. Moi concludes her illustration with a stress on the interrelatedness and irreducibility of the body, the mind and the surroundings. She writes: “We are always in a situation, but the situation is always part of us” (65).

Perceived as a situation, the body provides the very horizon to make sense of the world. Fashioned as a lived experience, the body encompasses all the aspects of being-to-the-world and living-in-the-world. To quote Moi (1999) again:

The body is our perspective on the world, and at the same time the body is engaged in a dialectical interaction with its surroundings, that is to say with all the other situations in which the body is placed. (68)

Frantz Fanon points out in Black Skin, White Masks (1952) that race is a bodily situation. If bodies with specific physical properties can account for an independent category of the bodily situation, why not bodies imprinted with social and cultural markings? Then my misgivings are cleared out by Merleau-Ponty. In Phenomenology of Perception, he (1945) analyses class as another bodily situation. In this view, the body truly matters. To Fanon, the body is never “pure nature”; while to Merleau-Ponty, the body is not “pure meaning” either. Admittedly, the body is “fundamentally ambiguous” (Moi, 1999, 69).

In consideration of the bodily situation and the lived experience, the ambiguous body can be more complex and ambivalent when it is marked. If the generic human body defines the norm and is considered to be unmarked, the physically challenged body would be marked, let alone the monstrously deformed body, such as the body of the conjoined twins. For Nora in Half Life, her bodily situation is incredibly demanding. She is compelled to negotiate the world with a two-headed body. Apparently, her lived experience of the world would not be the same if she was given an unmarked generic body. Conversely, the world will not respond to her the same as it reacts to the able-bodied.
During their childhood years, the twin sisters are “home-schooled by committee” until they are eight years old: Mama teaches them to read, Papa instructs them in geology and natural history, Max in carpentry and politics, and Granny in music and moonshine (193). In those good old days before school, the twins are well protected by the entire family. They have “had little experience of children but had noticed several occasions that they did not follow adult custom and avert their eyes from [them]” (193). But soon after the incident with the kitchen knife, they are enrolled in the “Hohokam Elementary School in Grady” (193), which is a daunting task for the twins and especially a painful experience for Nora. From that moment onwards, they “felt the general truth of this observation” (193). School, in Nora’s eyes, is “a refrigerated Hades where demons offered fraudulent temptations, each with its giveaway flaw (round-tipped scissors that did not cut, fat pencils with no erasers, chairs soldered to their desks)” (194). At recess, they are called “‘mutant’ and ‘freak’ and ‘radioactive’ and slapped with a black skin” (194). Kids at school can act extremely mean sometimes, especially when the victim is an odd-looking twofer. Nora’s bodily experience at school frightens her and urges her to have a desperate wish for home and for their peaceful days before school. Nora cries later on the day at school: “Please, take us back to before….Back to before, back to before, back to before” (194).

After Blanche falls asleep, Nora’s bodily situation becomes even worse. She has to endure more, such as “Mama’s bewildered looks, [her] classmates’ whispers (but they’d never liked [her]), the half-baked suggestions of a sweaty school psychologist who slurped cold Sanka from a ‘Freudian Sips’ mug and plucked at his shirt” (41). Because of her being too special, not even up to the twofer standards, she has no choice but “graduated high school early and left home” (41). In college, she is “one of only three twofers at [her] college, well under the national average, but then it was a small school, in a barren state, in the middle of a no-man’s-land” (41). There seems to be some advantages of being a twofer: they “got the only singlerooms” (41). However, this “did not endear [them] to the others, but the university had decided after some debate that [they] could be considered our own roommates” (41). In Nora’s daily life, though she is “not ostracized”, but “part of the fastest growing voting minority,” inasmuch as she is a twofer, there will always be “the dirty allure of the midway”, which “still hung about [them]” (41).

Born in an imaginary terrain peopled with all kinds of marked bodies, Nora, nonetheless is unable to realize that no one or no body is pure in her world. The so-
called notion of the physical ideal/norm cannot find a safe haven to set its standards because all the bodies are impure, marginal as well as ambiguous.

To appreciate Jackson’s innovative move on rewriting the body, it is unveiled that the body of conjoined twins is deployed on one hand to set up a grotesque body image; on the other hand, to display another type of the bodily situation. Indeed, Jackson captures the tension and confusion revealed from the lived experience of the grotesque body, and ramps them up by narrating her postmodernist dystopian story of the two-headed body. By means of this new type of the bodily situation inscribed on the bodily malformation, the refigured female body is capable of providing a crucial site where the individual is endowed with the freedom and agency to encounter, internalize, reconsider, and finally challenge the dominant social, cultural or even gender norms.
Chapter Three—Sexuality: A Queer Investigation

To some, sexuality may seem to be an unimportant topic, a frivolous diversion from the more critical problems of poverty, war, disease, racism, famine, or nuclear annihilation. But it is precisely at times such as these, when we live with the possibility of unthinkable destruction, that people are likely to become dangerously crazy about sexuality.
Gayle Rubin, 1984

Continuing with the previous discussion on the body, what will be under examination in the third chapter is another body-centered concept, sexuality. Forasmuch as what I have mentioned in the Introduction, given one of the major premises of the story — the protagonist being a lesbian, an analysis of sexuality is more relevant than ever concerning the postmodern reading of Jackson’s Half Life. The title Sexuality: a queer investigation, on one hand manifests my intention to explore the topic of sexuality. On the other hand, the word “queer” in the second part of the title suggests that rather than sticking to the gender-specific lesbian theory, I prefer opting to the more comprehensive and flexible queer theory to undertake a “queer” investigation of sexuality in this chapter.

Theoretical Framework

To begin with, the notion of sexuality needs to be clarified before moving on to the main body of discussion. It is difficult to give a precise definition of what sexuality is, however, from its varied manifestations we can find it intimately tied up with different forms of erotic desire (Hall, 2003). Carried on in relative privacy, sexuality encompasses all the overt or subtle sexual desire as well as sexual expressions, be they “proper” or “improper.” Gayle Rubin declared in 1984: “The time has come to think about sex.” The inevitable discussions and discourses of sex have been both a boon and burden in conducting studies on sexuality. However, any facile understanding of seeing sexuality as a simple derivation from sex should be avoided. Returning to the quotation at the outset of the chapter, we can find that as for Rubin, the thinking and talking about
sex and sexuality demand a serious and urgent interrogation, especially in our era “with the possibility of unthinkable destruction.” By connecting “the unthinkable destruction” with the talking about sexuality, Rubin (1984) contends that:

Contemporary conflicts over sexual values and erotic conduct have much in common with the religious disputes of earlier centuries. They acquire immense symbolic weight. Disputes over sexual behavior often become the vehicles for displacing social anxieties, and discharging their attendant emotional intensity. Consequently, sexuality should be treated with special respect in times of great social stress. (4)

Thus, the category of sexuality is by no means “an unimportant topic”, yet always based on social existence while interconnected with gender, class, race, religion and other cultural norms and social valuations.

In attempts to explain where desire comes from, how sexuality is constructed, and moreover how sexuality functions, theorists, for example Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, have made tremendous advances in the theorization of sexuality. Contemporary theories on sexuality range from sexual desire to sexual activity, from sexual practices to sexual identity. It is Michel Foucault’s revolutionary work *The History of Sexuality* (1981) that provides theorists with a groundbreaking vantage point to re-perceive sexuality. One of his notable contributions in this work is to bring “homosexuality” to the limelight. Foucault (1981) notes:

The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. (43)

Foucault uses a double negation to address that sexuality, particularly aberrant sexuality should come to define and delimit a person, for the arcane fetishes and sexual desires accompanied with a certain type of sexuality can reflect profoundly the individual’s

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7 Rubin argues that in the West, the 1880s, the 1950s, and the contemporary ear have been periods of sex panic, periods in which the state, the institutions of medicine, the popular media have mobilized to attack and oppress all whose sexual tastes differ from those allowed by the currently dominative model of sexual correctness. (Abelove, Barale and Halperin, 1993, 3)
“total composition” (Foucault, 1981, 43), and in other words, the individual’s deepest self.

As indicated in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, four years later than the coinage of “homosexuality”, in the year 1901 “heterosexuality” was devised to function as an obverse of “homosexuality”. Given the common belief, whereas homosexuality is regarded as aberrant sexuality, heterosexuality is rendered as positive while compulsory sexuality. Therefore, we can see that a dualist division between heterosexuality and homosexuality has been framed, with heterosexuality as a socially and historically constructed category to standardize male/female sexuality. And furthermore, this hetero-/homosexual dualism is set up to maintain a defining and regulatory mechanism for all the individuals in human society.

Conterminous with studies in sexuality and the heterosexual/homosexual opposition, queer theory is actively and crucially engaged. In the next part, I will give a brief account of queer theory, and then explain why I employ a queer analysis of sexuality when dealing with Jackson’s Half Life.

As noted earlier in this chapter, Foucault has revolutionized the way that theorists perceive sexuality by his book The History of Sexuality. Through the work of Foucault, a “homosexual” dimension evoked a new trend of theoretical interests in sexuality in the mid-1980s. Accompanying this trend, a new branch of study called queer studies in the humanities developed.

Initially, the term “queer” was used to deride and castigate homosexual people for their unnatural same-sex desire. But after a dramatic overturn, this term was reclaimed by gay and lesbian activist groups in the USA and Europe, with their catchy slogan goes like, “we are queer; we are here; Get used to it.” At that time, “queer” was embraced by those self-styled queers to celebrate their difference from the heterosexual norm and moreover, to facilitate their rebellious assertion of gay and lesbian visibility and agency. From the early 1990s, “queer” was widely adopted and eagerly reframed throughout academics. Michael Warner (1993) devises a renewed understanding of the term “queer” in his introduction to the collection Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory:

Queer represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal…. For both academics and
activists, ‘queer’ gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual, and normal includes normal business in the academy. (XXVI)

Warner’s “regimes of the normal” indicates a vast array of norms and conventions, not only the heterosexual normalcy. With the purpose of questioning the widest range of “regimes of the normal”, “queer” is devised to call forth “a more thorough resistance.” Thus, based on this notion, queer theory in academia, actively conflates the lesbian theory, gay male theory and other postmodern theories especially the poststructuralist thought to challenge and unseat the “regimes of the normal.” It is evident that this academic practice reveals a re-appropriation and expansion on the connotation of “queer.” Caroline Gonda further makes a more direct and manifest remark to show how the term “queer” has been reconstituted and reformulated. She notes: “Anyone who feels at odds with social or sexual convention can claim the label “queer”, including, presumably, heterosexual men” (Jackson and Jones, 1998, 124).

In summary, with evolving understanding of the term “queer”, queer theory in academia draws on theories from post-structuralism, post-modernism, psychoanalysis, and other philosophical insights. Essentially, queer theory works to question the heterosexual nature of contemporary sexual relations, to challenge the viability of gendered binary divisions, and ultimately to reject any notions of normality revealed from “regimes of the normal.”

As to why my analysis of sexuality will be a queer investigation, my reasons are as follows. Generally put, the development of queer theory and its usefulness in discussing sexuality in particular, construe the inadequacy of the hetero-/homosexual binary division to take into full account all the manifestations of sexual desire. To illustrate, when talking about sexuality, sexual desire would be recognized and analyzed firstly. However, as amorphous as desire seems to be, it is hard to pin down or get to know the full range of erotic desire. Admittedly, in the exploration of sexuality through erotica, the simplistic binary distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality is barely sufficient to cover this broad spectrum. Accordingly, on the basis of conventional categorization, to identify an individual as either heterosexual or homosexual is problematic since it is highly possible that there exists some desire which operates outside of the hetero-/homosexual binary. Donald E. Hall (2003) points out in *Queer Theories* that the hetero-/homosexual division
would conveniently ignore the complications posed by individuals who nervously deny the full range of their sexual desires, who even work futilely to ‘change’ desires that are powerful or deeply ingrained, and who may or may not over time come to accept desires that society or family deems criminal or illegitimate. (3-4)

 Granted, individuals are complex; desire is amorphous; and gender is masquerade, and yet a simplistic hetero-/homosexual dualism is not capable of accounting for the diversity and complexity of sexuality.

 In light of all the inconsistencies and controversies in analysing sexuality, Hall (2003) continues to suggest that many of the insights from queer theory can help us understand the sexuality of diverse individuals nowadays, as well as their lived realities and day-to-day activities (5). He further informs us that with an emphasis on “the disruptive, the constructed, the tactical, and performative” (5), queer theory and queer analysis will reveal some of the ways in which “late-modern individuals experience the fractured and contingent nature of human existence in the twenty-first century” (5).

 Indeed, the study of sexuality in its highly varied forms and manifestations demands a relatively comprehensive but more significantly, even-handed theory. In academics, there have been a wide variety of theories which attempt to “homogenize, normalize, categorize and hierarchize” (Hall, 2003, 15). Inevitably, those autocratic theories have palpable limitations, and a refinement of these skewed conceptions is in urgent need to be carried out. As a counterforce to this academic epidemic, queer theory, to cite Warner (1993) once more, is equipped with “a critical edge by defining itself against the normal” (XXVI). To engage in the discussion of sexuality, queer theory endeavors to abrasively undermine the simple-minded dichotomy between the dominant sexual valuation of compulsory heterosexuality and sexually nonconforming marginal queer culture. Centering on the topic of sexuality while viewing it from the standpoint of queer theory, the upcoming passages will be devoted to a queer investigation of Half Life correspondingly.

 A Queer Investigation

 To begin a project of queer investigation, Hall encourages readers and critics to discern whether or not the target text is appropriate for a queer reading. The most explicit parameter that he suggests is the exploration of sexual desire in the text (Hall, 2003,
As a rich and complex text, *Half Life* contains manifold avenues for inquiry and interpretation. Among all its thematically noteworthy aspects, the story proves to be an obvious choice and readily lends itself to a queer analysis. To reiterate what queer is, we are reminded that “Anyone who feels at odds with social or sexual convention can claim the label ‘queer’” (Gonda in Jackson and Jones, 1998, 124). Furthermore, it can be argued anything that defies the norm is queer. Therefore, we can say that the story of *Half Life* takes place in a queer world whose queerness is reinforced by a queer type of people with a queerly misshapen two-headed body. Below the surface of the queer body, there lurks a vast array of sexual desire in its highly varied expressions. Built upon the story’s ample textual material, a sustained act of queer investigation will be generated from the following three aspects.

To begin with, I will concentrate on the protagonist Nora to see how the author queers her character and also her readers. I will turn to *Personal Statement* at the beginning of the story in the first place.

I am a twofer — what they used to call a Siamese twin, though I prefer “conjoined,”… I’m the one on the left, your right. Blanche is on my right, your left. I — oh, say it: We — have strong cheekbones, long earlobes, hazel eyes, and dirty-blond hair, which is also usually dirty blond hair. Glamour is not very important to me, and it seems goofy to groom Blanche, like trimming my pubes into a heart. But I’m not really a hag. I am stern, though, and wear the marks of habitual sternness, while Blanche is smooth as soap. (6)

From the first sight, it seems that nothing is revealed about the narrator’s sexuality, not to mention her queer sexuality that we expect to tease out. But we can sense a tension between the twin sisters from Nora’s personal statement. The tension is caused by difference not only between “we” and “I”, but more importantly between “You” and “I”. The disruption of grammar reflects a conflict between the proper linguistic usage and the improper tongue-twister-like compromise. The two-headed body of the conjoined twins, for one thing, queers the normal genetic formation of human beings; for the other, it queers the current speech performance determined by our standardized grammar system. Later, the speaking “I” Nora goes on to describe their/her queerness in terms of physical or facial appearance. “Glamour is not very important to me,” Nora says. This explains how their dirty-blond hair turns dirty, and gives herself a reasonable ground not to “groom” Blanche, the “Sleeping Beauty” (6). Nora’s perception on
glamour and the “goofy” act to groom Blanche indicates a not-so-normal conceptual link between beauty and stupidity. Nora enhances her opinion by drawing an analogy with “trimming my pubes into a heart”, which certainly deserves careful attention.

Generally speaking, Nora’s analogy between glamour and trimming the pubes vaguely hints at a queer sexuality. The tactile contact of “trimming the pubes into a heart” serves as a thinly veiled exploration of Nora’s sexual desire; or more precisely, it can be seen as an indication of sexual desire in its broadest sense. Though the trimming behaviour does not seem newfangled nowadays, it indeed to a large extent reflects the narrator’s sexual ideology, which means either to please the sexual partner or to fulfill a self-directed sexual pleasure. But at this point, it is all the more worthwhile to note that even if there is no explicit declaration of Nora’s homosexual desire from Nora’s personal statement, this vague reference to sexuality opens up a whole world of sexual possibilities and supports all sorts of speculations of the sexual ideologies in our era. Whilst the act of trimming pubes of women becomes a normal and daily practice, the seem-to-be-viable analogy, linking the outward business of skin beauty with the personal behavior conducted on private genitalia sheds some light on how modern people perceive sex and in which direction our sexual ideologies are headed.

Therefore, it can be seen that at the very beginning of the story, Jackson devises an implicit but multifaceted sexual schema through her character’s outspokenness in talking about the common practice of a sex-related private affair. In the meantime, Jackson leaves readers a subtle clue, setting the scene for her main character Nora’s homosexual preference and moreover, foreshadowing the upcoming random play of free and uncurbed sex scattered all over the story.

Shortly after the opening statement, Nora is confirmed to be a loud-and-proud lesbian; however, her mounting tension with Blanche stands in the way of her sexual gratification and thus, a severe sexual frustration is generated. Nora expresses her doubt: “Like any girl with a beautiful sister, I had never been sure my boyfriends were all mine” (42), because “the girls I had by then begun dating would freely propose strange formations involving Blanche” (42). Nora dissatisfies with the fact that the girls would bed her “to see if they could catch a glimmer of complicity from under [Blanche’s] lowered lids” (42). She recalls how her sexual partners venture Blanche while having sex with her: “They hovered over signs: a bead of spittle in the corner of her (Blanche) mouth, a haze of sweat. They moaned moist words into her hair” (42). To be a witness of such erotic scenes, Nora feels “throbbed with a sickening sweetness”
(42), but running out tolerance she rises up and “purged [her] bed of the bewildered betrayer” (42).

Judging from Nora’s accounts quoted above, it is apparent that being a lesbian and having homosexual sex are no longer discussed in an undertone or considered a social taboo in the story. Nora’s identifying statement “I was the lesbian” (43) and her straightforward demand to have sex with the girls she dates certainly carry with them no embarrassment, or any slight possibility of public scorn, or even any potential hostile reaction. But in point of fact, homosexuality has been regarded as aberrant and cast outlawed from the heterosexual norm for long. In this regard however, Jacksons reverses the tide and endows her loud-and-proud lesbian Nora with utmost frankness to voice her abnormal homosexuality. To put it another way, homosexuality, once abnormal and degenerate sexuality, is reconstructed as a legitimate sexual expression, juxtaposed with other core beliefs regarding sexual norms and gender roles in the story. This very drastic change of attitude towards homosexuality marks a significant step forward for the same-sex desiring people to extricate themselves from the entrenched heterosexual convention. Simultaneously, the norm which narrows sexuality to heterosexuality is undermined, and the convention which confines sexual activity to heterosexual coupleings is severely abraded.

After the discussion of Nora’s sexual preference, I will move on to discuss Nora’s sexual frustration and follow her narrative to perceive how the author queers the sexual norm by deploying her characters in a special kind of occupation. When Nora recounts her unpleasant sexual experience, she gives a telling example to show how much she is hurt and how detrimental that incidence remains for her future sexual life. Nora says:

“One, just one, before she closed the door, charged me with entrapment. “You wanted it. You’re a third wheel,” she shrugged. I had never heard the term used that way, but I understood the foul implication well enough. “Here’s a little something for later.” Taking hold of Blanche’s chin, she slid her tongue between the speechless lips, then sauntered out, leisurely buttoning her shirt.

(42)

In this incident, the protester is named Louche, who always gives Nora “a slightly unpleasant thrill” (42), as Nora admits later. Unlike other “bewildered betrayers” with their curious appetite and insidious intension to bed Blanche by taking detours of unwanted sex with Nora, Louche overtly denies Nora’s birthright of sex by excluding
Nora from the twins’ shared body: she charges Nora with “entrapment”; and more severely, she defines Nora as “a third wheel.” Louche’s accusation has a lasting but damaging influence on Nora. As Nora recollects, “If I was a third wheel, Louche was the boot. I curbed my appetite, discovered an appetite for curbing itself, and curbed that too. This went on not going?” (42).

Thus, Nora’s “appetite” for sex is curbed, however queerly, she discovers something virtual to get excited in order to fill the void of the factual and physical sexual activity. From then on, Nora begins to revel in a newly discovered “appetite” for suffocating her sexual desire, while channeling her suffocated desire into doing phone sex by which she earns a living. Nora claims that:

It was a relief when strawberry blond, jiffy-lubed Tiffany Bells frisked into my life, along with her pseudonymous partners in pubescence (Ginger, Cherry, Consolata), and her docile suitors mooing down the phone lines. After that, my sex life became almost entirely fictional. Well, I had always liked telling stories. (42)

Besides Nora’s homosexual desire and her thwarted sexual fulfillment, phone sex, as a special kind of occupation that the author arranges for her characters Nora, and Nora’s friends Audrey and Trey will be investigated.

To Nora, doing phone sex does not utterly signify a way of making a living, however more profoundly, it bespeaks an entirely fictional resort to rejuvenate her frustrated sex life. The word “frisked” is conjured up to show how desperately Nora embraces her new fictitious identity. She does not hesitate to let this “strawberry blond, jiffy-lubed Tiffany Bells” take over the actual Nora, and deliberately turns Nora into “Miss Tiffany” to explore a new landscape of telephone-based sexual encounters. In one instance, Nora has a regular client to cater for. She first finds a file, puts the client through, and then starts with “Hi, sugar! How’s my pony” (44)? Then, she continues:

Those files were recipes for worlds. “Likes to be called ‘stupid boy,’ piano teacher, lingerie, rose violently pinned to lapel, lemon smell of furniture wax, The Well-Tempered Clavier.” I was at home in these worlds; nothing surprising ever happened there. My dream girls fluttered up like shapes scissored out of old magazines, smelling of ink and oxidized paper. They were biddable and a little old-hat. Like maps, they cracked in the used places. The hand-puppet hobgoblins flapped: the outraged husband, the anguished wife, the appalled keyhole-peeker in pigtails, the coach, policeman,
maiden aunt. The consequences unfolded like the simplification of a mathematical equation, with solemn logic, and then $x$ and $y$ slipped out of their clothes and took their familiar poses by the equals sign. “Say ‘Thank you, Miss Tiffany.’ Now be a good pony and call again soon!” (44)

Nora’s narrative tells readers that her sex life is completely built on her own telling, rather than the acted-out sex. It is Nora who makes up these virtual worlds to delineate her fictional and never acted-out sex.

Granted, the emergence of the new types of sexual activities such as phone sex and web sex has far exceeded the already established forms of sexual behaviors captured in the simplistic binary distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality. With reference to the material condition today, late-modern people are given more choices and possibilities to explore sex and express sexual desire. Hall reminds us the fact that in most people’s lives there exits certain desire that lies outside of the hetero-/homosexual binary (2003, 102). To re-explore and satisfy such desire, people will always look for new patterns of expression. As a consequence, our conceptualization of sexuality will be tweaked with those sexual explorations inevitably. Nora’s rediscovered relief in doing phone sex is a case in point. As can be seen, Nora’s desires are situated rightly outside of this simplistically encoded duality; but rather, they are roaming freely in her multi-dimensioned fictional worlds under multi-faced guises.

By deploying phone sex to her characters, Jackson raises queerly the possibility that regardless of people’s sexual preferences, their erotic desire is not totally determined by biological sex or any tactile or visual stimuli; on the contrary, desire can be reassigned and fulfilled by taking a solitary but highly fantasy-involved trajectory. Jackson suggests that it is through this trajectory of fleeting mental constructs that people no longer need to react erotically to the superficial forms of gender presentation or bodily sensations. Additionally, Jackson alludes that the way that people experience and explore sexuality has been altered by all the queer patterns of sex, for instance the sexual fantasies entailed by phone sex; and thereby, the established binary conceptualization on sexuality will cease to be the only viable parameter with its supreme generative quality to offer a final and definite judgment.

The third and final section of the queer investigation will center upon Nora and Blanche’s mother. As we are told, the twin sisters are raised in a queer family pattern,
not by one pair of parents consisting of one father and one mother, but by three “parents”: Papa, Mama, and Max. Hall (2003) in his book *Queer Theories* makes it clear that queer readings don’t hinge necessarily on the “location of a specific homosexual content” (130), and he encourages us to “expand our definition of queer relevance to discuss the variability and instability of sexual selfhood beyond such content” (130). Thus in this final section, I propose to examine Mama’s bisexuality, trying to tease out Jackson’s intension of making such an arrangement for her character.

Nora’s narrative tells us that Mama comes from Brooklyn, New York, and does “a theatrical number that combined song and dance with dramatic monologue” (10) in a bohemian nightclub. Nora explains Mama’s motive to give birth to a baby, which in Nora’s words amounts to a mistake or a reckless act. Thus, the chapter recounting Mama’s encounter with Papa and her conception of Nora and Blanche is titled *Misconceptions*. Nora narrates that “she should have thought twice. Mama wanted to give a baby to her girlfriend, Max, as a tribute to Max’s almost perfect masculinity. A surprise. It is possible that this explanation was conceived after the fact” (10).

We can speculate from Nora’s narrative that before Mama’s encounter with Papa, Mama and Max are a lesbian couple. Max, as Mama’s girlfriend displays perfect masculine qualities. Out of that concern, Mama makes the decision to have a baby. Certainly, Max’s masculinity which makes her a queer subject also deserves some queer analysis as Max sets a typical example of “female masculinity.” According to Judith Halberstam (1998), “female masculinity” serves as an aggressive violation against the hegemonic models of gender conforming. But Mama, compared to Max whose female masculinity is merely one-dimensional, has been established as a much fuller and more slippery character due to her unique relationships with both Max and Papa.

After Mama’s conception on the bus with the stranger, Papa, Mama begins “playing the expectant mother to the hilt” (25), and thereby Nora asks: “Would motherhood wreck everything” (25)? What would be wrecked? As readers, we could not help wondering. Jackson drops a clue at this point for the coming events that will change the relation between Mama and Max, and further result in a triangular relationship among Papa, Mama and Max.

At first Mama keeps her pregnancy from Max, and later she decides to present this surprise to Max. Mama prepares a candle light evening, puts on her beauty and docility, sits on Max’s lap, and “lets her hair fall around Max’s face.”
“I have a surprise for you,” she murmured into the warm space between them. With many shy pauses and little looks, she told her secret, then sat back with her eyes cast down and her hands folded in her lap. (25)

However there awaits a sharp turn of surprise. To Mama’s great dismay,

Max jumped up, and Mama’s feet banged to the floor. Mama dropped her Madonna attitudes, ran to the bathroom, and shut herself in. Behind her, she heard the front door slam. (25)

The relationship between Mama and Max wrecks with Mama’s elaborate surprise. Max is away for two days, and comes back as “stranger” (26), saying “I’m taking you to the doctor. And that’s going to be our last date” (26). What happens next aggravates their already broken relationship and finally leads to Mama’s parting. The moment Max and Mama see the two-headed baby at the doctor’s, Max faints and is later gone. The same night, Mama decides to go to Papa, as Mama explains with a brittle laugh: “A baby needs a father, even if it’s only a man” (26).

With a failing love life with Max, Mama falls back on a man, Papa. Obviously, a male Papa is never the best candidate as a life partner for lesbian Mama. However, left with nothing better, Mama would rather choose to develop a traditional domestic relationship with a man to give her baby a father, and to give her own life a meaning of fixity. Depicted as a self-trained convert from homosexual to bisexual, Mama eventually “would lead him (Papa) into their bedroom” (63) and “eventually managed to love him” (63).

Mama’s conversion or transition concerning her sexuality exemplifies what Hall terms “the tension between fixity and fluidity in sexuality” (Hall, 2003, 156). The representation of Mama’s bisexuality reveals a lack of fixity in sexuality, which allows for a queer mutability in both the sexual relationship and the sexual desire. In this revelation, we can conclude that bisexuality, cast beyond the narrow dualist category of sexuality, evokes the complex nature of sexuality: capable of being mutable, contingent and multiple. Overall, Jackson adopts a queer recasting of sexual relations for her characters Papa, Mama, and Max. Mama’s sexual pluralism reminds us that for one thing, sexual selfhood is diachronically variable and for another, sexual desire can be manipulated and re-directed to manifest itself in nonexclusive terms and in the most unexpected ways. In Jackson’s story, the exemplary instance of bisexuality gives full
expression to the “constructedness of binarily defined sexual identity” (Hall, 2003, 150), while exposing the limitation of the socially sanctioned binary structure of hetero-/homosexuality.

Taking into consideration all the three aspects that have been discussed, we can sum up that Half Life participates in a dynamic discussion of sexuality and forcefully proves itself to be a very queer text, allowing numerous vectors of sexuality to unfold. Meanwhile, through Jackson’s thorough exploration and detailed description, we can tease out the fact that Jackson’s arrangement is devised not only to demonstrate the complexity and multiplicity of human sexuality, but all the more important, to enact a sexual destabilisation against the binary-defined sexual classification system.
Conclusion—A “Twofer” Identity

But hate, like love, is very hard to squash. It’s knocking in the coffin and embarrassing the mourners. It’s sprouting hair, hawking loogies, chewing with its mouth open, farting, grinning. It’s life: untoward, unseemly. But way cooler than easeful death, that sap. Who decorously taps his toe behind “Nora, you have self-esteem issues,” and “Nora, so much rage,” and “Nora, affirm to Blanche that you love yourselves.” “Yourselfs!” Language itself refutes certain propositions.

Shelley Jackson *Half Life*

Throughout the entire story of *Half Life* are the themes of duality and coupling. The density of iconography in Jackson’s text is powerfully indicative of a mixture of banter and seriousness in defying the taken-for-granted blindness for normalcy. Appositions of the opposite pairs, such as hate and love, death and life, twofers and singletons, myself and “yourselfs” (Jackson, 2006, 22), Nora and Blanche and others are set in proper places to bring to the fore the contradiction and inconsistency imbedded in the conventional dualist thinking. Just like the citation shows, “Language itself refutes certain propositions” (22).

In postmodern fiction, the self keeps throwing itself into trouble while having difficulty locating and identifying itself among many textual worlds constructed in the fiction. Nora, being this kind of self, embarks on an adventure to claim her individuality, whereas this journey to obtain a definite exclusive identity on her own terms troubles her with uncertainty and doubt. She starts with a disavowal of her current identity as a twofer, and lives her life with a pursuit of a single identity by setting herself against her significant other, Blanche. However inevitably, due to the connection between the twin sisters, Nora finds herself confounded by Blanche’s intensions and thoughts, and ultimately ends with her apprehension to replace her desired individuality with an identity of twoferness and twinfulness, and by extension a relation of complementary wholeness. Obviously, the story of *Half Life* progresses as Nora’s self-identification transforms. Stuart Hall’s theory of identity argues that one’s identity is “never complete”, yet always “in process” (Hall, 1990, 392). Thus, after the discussions
on the body and sexuality, I would like to conclude my thesis by exploring the most prominent theme in the story— a quest for identity.

Rejecting the Identity of “Twoferness”

Jackson devices an innovative tool for her twofers in the story—“the Siamese Twin Reference Manual” or “the Manual” for short. Nora refers to the Manual frequently and her copy of the Manual contains her “clippings and reading notes on matters twofer” (20). The Manual serves as a comprehensive life guide for the twofers, which features every nook and corner of their lives and daily happenings, such as festive events, political issues, life tips, talk shows and radio programmes and so forth. Under the instruction of the Manual, twofers in San Francisco the “desperately self-affirming city” (22), gather together, embrace their twoferness and feel lucky to be “twice-blessed” (22). By contrast, Nora does not agree on every detail mentioned in the Manual and refuses to be a “togetherist twofer” (31), or a “togetherist” (31) promoted by the Manual. Nora finds herself a “twofer at odds with [herself]” (22) out of the irreversible differences she possesses, whilst to other twofers, “whatever differences [they] had seemed to be washed away by a double shot of whiskey, or eagerly processed in interminable tête-à-têtes” (22). The idea of being normal with a twofer identity seems alien and ridiculous to Nora, which explains why she makes the following comments to other twofers that are not at odds with themselves.

The others thought they were normal; at the very least, they aspired to normalcy; when all else failed, they made a pretense of normalcy. They believed it was their obligation to represent in the best possible light the entirety of twoferdom in their individual or rather dual twoferness, presenting to the world the happy face(s) of (what was the latest sick-making phrase?) “twinfulness.” (22)

It is self-evident that the identity of “twoferness” or “twinfulness” is what Nora desperately denies for her self-identification. Instead, she yearns for a sense of sheer individuality and a complete self on her own. By extension, Nora loathes the notion of being a couple at the cost of giving up the single status and individual freedom. Nora expresses such doubts when recounting the relationship of her parents.
Of course, couples are always monstrous. Everyone senses this, and grows uneasy in their company. Nobody likes to watch the blending of things that should be separate: a sea urchin making up to a buffalo, a mosquito fondling a worm. (Audrey, of course, would disagree.) Why would two people who are free to walk away stand side by side and even hold hands? If I were single, I would always walk away. I would specialize in it. (63)

Nora’s longing for selfhood and her self-loathing to being twinful lead to an ardent wish of the singular “I” getting separated from the shared “we.” As we are told however, in the very beginning of the twin sisters’ life, Nora did not act the same as she does now. Nora tells the readers: “We were in perfect agreement. We went halves on everything: one cell for me, one for you, fair and square” (24).

Till this point, language confuses readers once again when Nora uses “we.” At the same time, language also fails Nora, for she barely noticed that “there was a we at this stage, or even I” (24). “Maybe that was the trouble,” says Nora (24). “If only I hadn’t been so lax about the I, letting it go until I’d taken care of other things that seemed more important at the time” (24). It is language that for the first time sets the trouble for Nora, which she cannot stop getting herself into. Gradually, Nora was “burgeoning in all directions, like a very gradual explosion” (24) and things were going out of control until Nora noticed that she had company, but unfortunately “it was too late to do anything about it” (24), because the discovery of Blanche’s existence baffles and alarms her to a large degree.

With Blanche’s dependence having become “a considerable burden” (129), Nora embarks on her trip to England after she reads an advertisement on the Internet:

- Seeing double? Beside yourself? Don’t know which way to turn?
- We can take a weight off your shoulders.
- *The Unity Foundation. Helping You Go It Alone.* (128)

The catchy advertisement grabs Nora’s attention instantly and prompts Nora to email The Unity Foundation. To Nora’s disappointment, she only receives an immediate reply, stating that “we will shortly be getting in touch with you” (129). Without any news from The Unity Foundation, Nora starts to believe that the separation thing does not turn out the way she hopes. While waiting for the reply, she begins to rethink her original intension of being a singleton. Nora narrates:
Sometimes I looked at singletons and asked myself, Were they so much happier than me? No, they did not sail their singleton boats on solo voyages and sing songs about being happy alone; they huddled together and went on short trips to familiar places and often asked one another, Do you want to come too?

Some people cling to what holds them back: they would rather live a bad life believing a perfect life exists than live a better life with no hopes and no excuses. Sometimes we are shored up by what we oppose. A constitutive dodge. A body of shirk. But I wasn’t like that. Was I? (129)

The longing for self becomes Nora’s misery as she grows older. The identity of twoferness pulls her from two opposite directions. On the one hand, she feels keenly that she is one, and yet on the other hand, her own senses inform her that she is two. The label of a twofer identity, the defect of language and the deficiency of language use deepen Nora’s marginalization as an “other”, different from the majority of the singletons. We learn it from the story later on that Nora’s surgical attempt is stopped by her mother’s phone call, warning Nora not to kill her sister Blanche; however, there could have been a potential mistake for the doctor to cut off Nora’s head instead of Blanche’s. After this incident Nora suddenly bursts into tears and says to herself that “Blanche had wanted to kill me. She had tried to kill me. She had nearly succeeded” (325). Nora continues to explain:

The scalpel I had meant for Blanche was lying across an operating table, pinked with my blood instead—not that even a doctor could have told the difference between her corpuscles and mine, mine, mine! (325)

Readers are likely to feel confused as to how Nora could come to such a conclusion, how the murder that Nora plans for Blanche could turn all the way around, and how the twin sisters relate with each other mentally or spiritually. These questions mark the stage in which Nora finds herself confounded by Blanche’s intensions and thoughts. As the story unfolds, Nora is becoming more and more aware of her trouble in being able to discern clearly herself from Blanche. Therefore, I will put forward a mathematical concept which may possibly account for the seemingly inter-relation between Nora and Blanche. The next section, *The Möbius Strip* will centre on the relation between the twin sisters to pinpoint a more favoured plurally-personned identity.
The Möbius Strip

Discovered by the German mathematicians August Ferdinand Möbius and Johann Benedict Listing, the Möbius Strip is created by joining the ends of two twisted strips in order to form a loop, in which its two sides can turn to each other without any point leaving the surface. Being a symbol of infinity, the advantage of the Möbius Strip lies in that it can show distinctly the inflection of two sides through a simple twisting or inversion. In Jackson’s *Half Life*, Nora and Blanche are created like the two sides of the Möbius Strip. The twofer image, quite similarly to the Möbius Strip, creates both one side and the other side simultaneously. Tracing the thoughts in one head of the conjoined body can directly lead to those of the other head. Nora’s confusion on Blanche’s intention strongly suggests Nora’s epistemological uncertainties and the inevitable reflection of Blanche’s sleeping mind. Narrated by Nora’s univocal voice, the story grows suspicious of the absence of Blanche’s point of view. Jackson drops many threads of textual detail from Nora’s strikingly singular viewpoint to reveal Nora’s trouble of knowing and meanwhile to trace another Blanche, who remains fully awake elsewhere outside of this seemingly sleeping Blanche.

The incorporation of the Möbius metaphor is devised to blur the clear-cut boundaries between the self and the other. As the story shows, the singular “I” is replaced with “I²” to challenge not only the traditional dualist thinking pattern, but also the long-held Western notion of individuality. As a consequence, the non-dualist thinking and a plurally-personned identity finally prevail over their conventional counterparts in the end of the story.

Initially, Nora’s perspective appears singular and her narrative seems authoritative, however, she is not able to provide an omniscient account based on her self experience. Readers become more and more suspicious as Nora’s narrative progresses, especially in epistemological terms. To name one of the many instances from the twin sister’s childhood, Nora turns unreliable when she reviews her own poem after a terrible fall, from which she gets a sudden awakening from her “daydreaming” (77). Nora states, “As with sleepwalkers, a too-sudden awakening had its perils” (77).

*Mama called from the bed*

*Papa called from the shed.*

*Blanche and Nora* could not choose either/ora.
They fell down and hit their head,  
And soon the poor girl was dead.

It should be “heads,” and there is a puzzling ambiguity in the last line (who is the “poor girl”? One of the two? Both? A third little girl, hitherto unmentioned?) but otherwise I think it describes the situation quite well. (78)

This accident gives rise to an increase in Nora’s speculations about Blanche’s doings and conditions. Subsequently, Nora’s ability to account for her own doings is affected and her authority on storytelling is destabilised. From that moment onwards, Nora develops a habit of making a note of Blanche’s doings to distinguish them from each other. However, as things have turned out, Nora puts herself into some new trouble.

Gradually, I learned to keep track of Blanche’s doings as if they were mine, and a new problem arose. I started thinking they were mine. An instant after I registered that strangely disinterested tug in the motor part of my mind, I found myself waving the pink slip. I trumped up reasons in retrospect for doing things that were her idea all along. I took the credit and the blame, imagining that I wanted what she tried for, or feared what she ran away from. I caught myself becoming Blanche.

I couldn’t let that happen, could I?

My revenge was private and paradoxical: I pinched myself to pinch her. I acted up so she would get a spanking. “Play nice, Nora!” said Mama.

“I am!” said Blanche.

“She is,” I corrected.

“Who?” Blanche, bewildered. (78)

Take another example to show this Möbius metaphor. Also in their early years, Blanche is told by Nora to be able to understand the language of the animals. This points out directly how Blanche’s influence starts to find a way into Nora’s memories and how this very influence starts to come into focus in Nora’s retrospection as the story goes on.

From then on she was their interpreter. When she told me what the vultures had said, I looked at her with irritated amazement. I could not tell her she was lying, as she was only lying my lie. I would never have admitted it, but I envied Blanche her passkey to my imagined worlds. Although I had made them up, she was the one to whom they revealed their rich vegetable life, their profusion of curious
Nora’s epistemological problems reach a climax when she believes it is her sister Blanche who tries to rid her head. Nora’s increasing inability to understand herself and Blanche is vividly revealed when she returns from England. Earlier in the story, Jackson mentions a looking-glass world where the story takes place. To Nora, Blanche is her “mirror”, from which she can read herself. However, the mirror goes broken with Blanche’s sudden sleep. Nora asks herself:

How could I tell her what was really wrong, that I had discovered a feeling I didn’t know I had or could have: when Blanche tried to kill me, my feelings were hurt. I couldn’t believe she would do that to me, her sister! And for an awful moment — you know how I hate mirrors — I saw the world reversed, and thought: I can’t believe I would do that to her, my sister. (363)

Unable to gain substantial knowledge of things happened and the world around her, Nora wonders if Blanche managed to “intervene” and “take advantage of a moment’s distraction to slip into [Nora’s] skin, possess [Nora’s] pen, dip her words in [Nora’s] ink, and tell [Nora’s] story for [Nora]” (364). Furthermore, she poses the possibility that “Blanche is writing [her] experiences into existence” (372). Moreover, she considers the possible scenario that: “I am Blanche,” and “[I] project myself into Nora’s experience so strongly that I experience myself as another. In which case I am being haunted by my own rejected experience” (373). She draws a conclusion: “The current situation could be described as Blanche thinking she is Nora thinking she is Blanche thinking she is Nora” (373). This kind of loop thinking fully vindicates the property of the Möbius Strip, i.e. either side enters the other side imperceptibly and even without the slightest warning. Later, Nora questions her own authority in narrating the story. She ponders: “‘Who’s writing this book, anyway.’ I am. Not good enough. Nora, Nora, Nora, Nora, Nora” (373).

Audrey points it out clearly that it is not the existence of Blanche to take the fall for the root cause of Nora predicament. But rather, Nora should hold responsibility for her own issues. Audrey explains to Nora that:

Look, Nora Either-or-a, if people were consistent they wouldn’t be people. You happen to have a fall guy for your inconsistencies. But
if Blanche magically disappeared I bet you’d find out that a lot of what you were calling Blanche was you all along. … I’m saying this is a good thing. It’s probably on the strength of what we don’t know about ourselves that we get by. We’re blurry, … Our grey area…is our window. (368)

Undeniably, Audrey’s words “Our grey area…is our window” (368) are key to resolve all the doubts of the self and stop the self from getting into trouble time and time again. As the protagonists’ names imply, Nora, the French noir, means black; Blanche stands for the French feminine form of blanc, white; and their respective middle names Grey and Gray are designed to combine black and white. Most importantly, their last name Olney is indicative of being the only one in a complementary wholeness.

Jackson intends to manifest that through this window of the grey zone we are blessed to go beyond the binary oppositions and make peace with our multiple selves, for some of which we might have not yet noticed. In this regard, we are all like twofers; nevertheless more like Nora unfortunately, most of the time we feel troubled, baffled and sometimes desperate and agitated. Personally speaking, I would agree with Audrey’s stiff remarks: “Being plurally-personned is not a defect, it’s a privilege” (367), and “only a twofer would think there was such a thing as being singular” (367). Audrey’s reply speaks volumes for the awareness that Jackson strives to raise, not for the sake of individuality, but in favor of a twofer identity, the notion of “togetherness” and a harmonious relation of complementary wholeness. I will once more refer to the Manual in the end to provide some final remarks for my thesis.

Twofers, yours is a sacred wound: you have been deprived of the picayune, atomic integrity of the singleton, in order to achieve a new, higher integrity. The truly Together will undergo a convulsive change or Focus and reemerge as a new One, who is to an ordinary singleton as condensed soup to a clear broth. These will become the Husbandmen of our divided world, guiding the factious singleton gently but firmly toward union.

To get Together, the superficial boundaries of the self must be broken down. Twofers, you have the glorious privilege of hosting, in one body, two souls, yet all too often these souls parcel up their joint experience, impoverishing both. Our Western notion of self, and the language it has given rise to, is to blame; every time you open one mouth to say I, you thrust a lance in the heart of your twin. Understand that your “identity” is only the scar tissue left by the ancient wound of being severed from the Whole. From I, we get to we, from we to that plenary in which self and world are united in bliss: I^2.
Only then may you truthfully say you are Together. (46-7)
Bibliography


