"In the Beginning Was the Word"

The Road towards a Speaking Subject

in

Jane Hamilton’s

The Book of Ruth
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Introduction

The first thing that strikes a reader of Jane Hamilton’s best-selling novel *The Book of Ruth* (1988) is the absolute sense of vulnerability. This novel deals with concepts like social determinism in a way that speaks directly to the reader. *The Book of Ruth* is about issues that affect the reader, such as victimisation and abuse. The story is realistic in the sense that it is the story of numerous women who will never have the ability or courage to write down the story of their lives. The narrator in the novel is the main character Ruth, who tells about her horrifying experiences with a sense of irony and humour, poetry and distance. Although she is seen as a person of limited intellect, she is a survivor. She is struggling from the bottom of the social scale to create a subject of her own.

The journey, however, is long and hard. This essay will show how Ruth’s development depends on several external factors, where the use of language plays a prominent part. Ruth’s use of language changes throughout the novel, which shows how she needs a language to develop and gain a meaningful existence. Although Ruth has not yet created her own speaking subject, she is externally subjected in different ways. Depending on what situation or phase in life she is in, there are different factors that determine who she is: society, physical environment and family, to mention a few examples. She is represented by others and is not allowed to take part in defining herself. In other words, she is a positioned subject, controlled by others. Naturally, this is not a very positive situation, so her fixed subject positions created by others need to be broken down. Not until then, her journey toward a speaking subject can begin. As a speaking subject, Ruth will have fully acquired language, which makes her able to take control over her life.

The first part of the analysis will examine Ruth’s existence as a positioned subject, followed by an examination of her journey from being a positioned subject towards her breaking point. Her misdirected search for a meaningful existence leads her inevitably towards
destruction. Not until she is as deep down as she can get can her building of a speaking subject begin, and she aims at taking control over her life. The way towards her speaking subject will be analysed in the final part of the essay.

In analysing Ruth’s journey, Jacques Lacan’s theory of the symbolic order and Julia Kristeva’s ideas of the semiotic will be used. The essay will draw out symbolic and semiotic aspects of Ruth’s environment and psychological development. Both the symbolic and the semiotic are important parts of Ruth’s choice of path. When analysing the construction of a subject, social aspects need to be taken into consideration. In our western, patriarchal society, language is a self-evident factor when determining who we are. Mastering the codes of official language is a necessary step in gaining acceptance in a western, patriarchal society.

Since language is a symbolic way to express oneself, the symbolic language needs to be decoded and fully understood in order to successfully take part in society. Equally important, though, is the acknowledgement of the semiotic, since it is connected to human beings’ most basic and instinctual functions. This essay claims that a healthy balance between the symbolic and the semiotic is crucial within the individual, since a lack of balance creates non-functioning individuals. Non-functioning individuals, on the other hand, will inevitably create a malfunctioning society. The main argument of the essay is that we can reach a better understanding of *The Book of Ruth* if we accept the fact that the symbolic cannot function satisfactorily without the semiotic, at the same time as the semiotic cannot be positive without being balanced by symbolic laws. The most important standpoint regarding this problem is that there is a need for balance between the symbolic and the semiotic in creating functioning subjects.

In order to examine and clarify the problems involved in Ruth’s creation of a speaking subject, several aspects will be taken into consideration: First of all, Ruth’s use of language will be examined in order to determine what role her language has in her search for her own
subject. This essay claims that she has not really entered the symbolic order, since the symbolic laws are out of reach for her. Instead, she seeks comfort and validation within the semiotic. In addition, the physical environment, such as the house, the dry-cleaners’, nature etc. can be seen as bearers of the symbolic and the semiotic, which will be dealt with in the analysis throughout the essay. In order to shed light on the different ways of regarding the subject, the model of the subject that will be used in this essay needs an explanation.

**Theories of the Subject**

The concept of the subject is defined differently in different literary theories. One way to see the subject is to consider it as “an actor or agent, a free subjectivity that does things” (Culler 112). In this case, the subject is active, while others stress the non-autonomy of the subject. Paul Smith defines the subject as “something that is sub-jected, thrown beneath; in short, the ‘subject’ is by and large a passivity, something at the behest of forces greater than it” (xxxiii).

There are many questions raised concerning the subject and what the subject really is. Is it equal to individuality, with inner qualities or is it something created by outer forces? Silvio Gaggi, for example, claims that language and representation play a crucial role in the creation of a subject. According to Gaggi, “the subject is socially constructed, a product of language and discourse rather than an essential psychological-spiritual centre that uses language for its own transcendental purposes” (xi). The “subject” is thus constructed by outer influences, such as education, social belonging and so on, and should be separated from the “individual” or the “self”. The self as such is seen as a more essentialist notion of subjectivity, that is, the inner self or what is unique in human individuals. So, according to both Smith and Gaggi, the subject is subordinated to forces greater than itself, while the individual is supposed to be that which cannot be divided. As a conclusion to this discussion, the subject is dominated by outer
forces which results in the subject never being fixed. To the contrary, the subject is constantly changing, while the self is the inner qualities in a person which are both essential and lasting. For this reason, I will consciously leave out the term “self” in this essay since it is the changing subject that is referred to.

Judith Butler, too, speaks of the subject as a social construction. People become who they are through different subject positions, which are determined by family, friends, occupation, race, gender, social position etc. Similarly, in his theory of interpellation and hailing, Louis Althusser points out that we are always already subjects – an idea that corresponds well to Kristeva’s way of interpreting language as always already there. This idea means that a child, for example, is subjected in many ways long before it learns to speak, and according to Kristeva, a language does not necessarily mean the ability to speak. These theories above are strongly connected and are all of substance in this essay.

Martin Heidegger and Jacques Lacan, on the other hand, see the subject as something that is created when acquiring language, and quite to the contrary from Kristeva, Heidegger claims that a man who has lost his ability to speak is mute. Without speaking, there is no language. As Heidegger says: “Language is the tongue, the ‘lingo.’”(114) Thus, he connects all ways of communication to the ability to speak.

Obviously, there are different ways of regarding the subject. This essay, however, will address the necessity of fully acquiring language, although it is obvious that there are different ways of communicating aside from the language associated with patriarchal values. Needless to say, the necessity of language in shaping a subject cannot be ignored. When learning a language, according to Lacan, one enters the symbolic order. The symbolic order has its origin in Freud’s psychoanalysis, which Lacan has developed further in the light of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism. When a child acquires a language, it enters the abstract world of words, which is an endless row of signifiers. Thus, the child goes from full
imaginary possession of instinctual drives and connection to the mother’s body, to accepting the social laws connected to the social structure. Judith Feher describes the Lacanian subject essentially as

[a] linkage of the Oedipus complex and of primal repression with what determines the actual socialization of the individual, namely the acquisition of language, itself the bearer of culture. This process of socialization that is linked to primal repression occurs through the imposition of a law – the prohibition if incest – which we can view as what triggers the processes that inscribe the child in the structure of language. It is at this point that Lacan adds a radically original element to Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex: he describes the unconscious as an intersubjective structure belonging to a realm that transcends the individual. He calls this realm the symbolic. (14)

The basic idea of Lacan’s theory of the symbolic and the subject is that the subject is created through language, it is a construction based on prohibition of incest. Since both Lacan and Heidegger consider the subject as something fixed and directly connected to the acquisition of language, their way of regarding the subject is not emphasised in this essay. Lacan’s symbolic order, however, is strongly connected to western, patriarchal values, which are indeed valid in our contemporary society. There is no doubt that the symbolic order is necessary in order to adjust to the western society, but what happens when the symbolic order is not successfully gained? This question will be dealt with later in the analysis. In order to grasp this problem fully, the semiotic will also be explained.

Julia Kristeva’s concept of the semiotic is grounded in the pre-Oedipal stage of development, before the actual achieving of language. Kristeva focuses on the development of language, and states that everybody has some sort of language, no matter where they stand in the line of development. The mother’s body is the basis of semiotic language, involving rhythm, bodily functions, the flow of fluids like the mother’s milk, menstruation, amniotic
fluid and so on. A crucial part of the semiotic process is what Kristeva calls the semiotic *chora*, which she explains in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, as follows:

Discrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such and, in the course of his development, they are arranged according to the various constraints imposed on this body – always already involved in a semiotic process – by family and social structures. In this way the instinctual drives, which are “energy” charges as well as “physical” marks, articulate what we call a *chora*: a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated. (25)

Kristeva says that “[t]he mother’s body is therefore what mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations and becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*” (27). We all know that instincts are the most basic functions of living creatures. According to Freud, the death instinct is one of the strongest. Since the semiotic *chora* is directed by instinctual drives, it can be severely destructive if not controlled by laws. The *chora* can thus be both negative and positive, depending on the balance of symbolic laws and semiotic *chora*. In Ruth’s inner journey from being a positioned subject towards creating a speaking subject of her own, the balance – or lack of balance – between the symbolic and the semiotic will be analysed in order to find out what factors lead her to destruction and what Ruth needs in order to start building her own speaking subject.

**Ruth as a Positioned Subject**

As a little girl, Ruth’s inner journey has already been completed; hence, the novel is one long look in the rear-view mirror and a first-person narrative – a re-presentation of Ruth’s life. The importance of language as a part of her journey becomes evident in her words: “I tell myself that it should be simple to see through to the past […] now that I can invent my own words,
but nothing has come my way without a price” (7). Ruth takes nothing for granted and she is used to fighting for the right to a meaningful existence. It is also clear that the ability to create her own words, to find her own voice, is crucial in gaining power over her life and standing up for herself.

At the beginning of *The Book of Ruth*, Ruth’s life is very limited, as well as her language. She lives in Honey Creek, a lifeless and dull community. There are “rusty farm machines” left like corpses in the garages around the town (10). Machines are typical symbolic features, since they represent the male world of power, but here, they are dead and silent, which indicates that the symbolic is not functioning satisfactorily. The reason for this statement is that there is no ‘feminine’ flow from dead material, indicating that nothing can live and grow here, neither language nor spirituality. The symbolic is not functioning without semiotic features that would give life to the environment. Another sign of the non-functioning symbolic world is that there is a complete lack of male role models in Ruth’s life. Her father, Elmer, has left Honey Creek to build a new life in Texas; her brother Matt has left for university studies; and her future husband Ruby’s father is hardly ever mentioned. In addition to this, Ruby is a quite feminine name, which indicates that Lacan’s “law of the father” is not valid here. The feminine clinging “Ruby” could be seen as a symbol of the semiotic he represents.

Ruth’s longing for the semiotic, away from the non-functioning symbolic, is evident in her interest in beauty and poetry, a longing that is not fulfilled in Honey Creek. Her frustration with the limitations and lack of language is clear at the very beginning of the novel: “We were the products of our limited vocabulary: we had no words for savory odors or the colors of the winter sky or the unexpected compulsion to sing. The language I had to speak to be understood is not the language of poetry or clear thinking” (8). Here, poetry symbolises the semiotic and “the language of clear thinking” is the *functioning* symbolic,
where the semiotic and the symbolic complement each other. In Ruth’s world, there is no such balance. On the contrary, the language spoken around her does not allow any form of positive development. Thus, Ruth’s one and only attempt to develop her language is abruptly interrupted by her mother, May. When Ruth, trying to sound like the characters in a book by Charles Dickens, lets out: “This room is excessively bare and disorderly, wouldn’t you say?” (69), May reacts violently with the words: “Then don’t talk like there’s a pile of crap in your head” (69). Her utterance is completely out of place. The language is copied from a novel, a fantasy world, which makes the comment very awkward when Ruth tries to adapt it to the real world. Ruth attempts to find a voice of her own within literature, the only area where she has found an alternative to the limited language of her family. Her attempt fails, since the language of literature is not adaptable to the real world. There is no encouragement from May either. She is constantly impeding Ruth’s development since Ruth’s independency would lead to Ruth moving away. In full selfishness, May attempts to keep Ruth so out of self-esteem that she would never even find the thought of leaving her.

The limited use of language does not allow Ruth to fully enter the symbolic order. She is not capable of taking that important step, much due to the inadequate way she is hailed as a subject by her teachers, family etc. Ruth is seen as a person of limited intellect. All the way through school, she is compared to her brilliant brother Matt. Matt is hailed in a radically different way. He is regarded as the brain of the family. Matt is in charge of language from the start. He learns to speak earlier than Ruth even though he is a year younger. Thus, May thinks of Matt as a genius and Ruth as “delayed” (18). Even though Matt succeeds in school, he must leave Honey Creek in order to be able to completely enter the symbolic world. The barren environment in Honey Creek does not encourage any form of development, so Matt needs to move away from the town to actually become what he aims for. The reason why Matt succeeds in leaving and Ruth does not is much due to their connection to language.
Ruth, as a child, cannot say words while Matt makes whole sentences from the beginning. Still, she approaches language by writing down words on the walls (18). Ruth’s father Elmer, however, washes the words away, himself only in possession of a limited language. Already here, Ruth is denied her own entrance into language – and – society. Thus, as a child, Ruth is subjected as an awkward, dumb daughter, as well as a mean sister to Matt. She is seen as a girl of limited intellect and even though she makes a few attempts to show that she is meaningful, she is not very successful. One example of her attempts to show her abilities is the spelling bee (competition) she attends in grade school. This contest shows that Ruth has the skills, but she has absolutely no self-confidence. The pin May gives to Ruth becomes the symbol of success, since success is the only thing May values. So, when Ruth loses the pin, she can no longer spell the simplest word. Even though she has shown she can do it, the words fail her. The significance of words is apparent when Aunt Sid comes to comfort her with the words: ‘You were wonderful’ (78). Ruth’s reaction to this is that “[i]f I had had the words I would have told her that lie stank worse than a pig fart” (78). It is quite obvious that she is not yet ready to fully enter the symbolic world since she needs the assurance from the pin and lets the words fail her so easily. She has no belief in herself.

Since Ruth is denied complete entrance into the symbolic world of words, she seeks comfort in nature and the fantasy of another life. She speaks with animals and vegetables, fascinated by what they say. Here, Ruth finds a language that speaks to her – the semiotic language. There are no words, but still nature has a language that is meaningful to her. The semiotic in nature appeals to Ruth. She finds comfort in her special place on the hill and in the sun and warmth of the warm seasons. Spring and summer are typical representatives of the semiotic, since nature is re-born. It is motherly and caring, life giving and soothing for Ruth’s battered self. There are no signs of Ruth accepting nature in wintertime, however, which indicates that Ruth herself is not in complete balance with nature. If Ruth had had a
balanced relationship with nature, she would see the semiotic in winter as well, for example
the soft snow that is silent and protecting. This is not the case, as we see. Ruth has the
strongest opinion that “cold suggests a ferocious, merciless nature” (283). The reason why
Ruth cannot accept the cold season is that it is lifeless and cold. There is no nurturing life,
only ruthless, destructive coldness.

As a result of being denied full entrance to the symbolic world, Ruth cannot find
meaning in the symbolic language. Instead, she seeks meaning in the semiotic forms of
existence. She does not think much of her own existence, but likes the idea of being a foetus
in her mother’s belly: “I liked the idea of floating around and then changing into a baby, in
the dark, in secret” (16). In the womb, there are no demands, no social rules and striving for
acceptance. There she would only exist in complete safety, protected from the world outside.

However, the dream of being a foetus is a form of denial. Ruth denies that the symbolic
world is necessary in her search for her own voice. After all, the symbolic world is quite
equal to the reality of a patriarchal, western society. A good example of a person who has
found a healthy balance between the symbolic and the semiotic is Aunt Sid. Contrary to the
feminine ringing “Ruby”, as earlier mentioned, “Sid” is a rather masculine name, which
suggests her mastery of the symbolic order. She has both education, a stable situation in a
functioning social environment as well as a sense of poetry and empathy. Hence, Aunt Sid is
a good role model for Ruth. She is someone to look up to and admire. Aunt Sid becomes a
very important person in Ruth’s life. For the first time, she actually becomes motivated to
study. She has something to strive for – the acceptance and liking from her aunt, hence, when
the two of them start exchanging letters, a new world opens up. For the first time, Ruth wants
to improve her writing, just to please her aunt:
Once, she told me that I shouldn’t use ‘gonna’ in my letters, that the words were actually ‘going to.’ I instantly wanted to shape up. My teachers had spent plenty of red ink and cross words correcting me, but I didn’t see any use trying to please people such as Mrs Ida Homer. Aunt Sid was different. I longed to understand what was correct, for her eyes alone. (29)

Still, Ruth cannot tell the truth about her situation, so she dictates another world, where everybody is happy. She is not able to really make any progress in “becoming somebody,” but she finds a way of expressing herself through writing. She learns that words are powerful. In this stage in life, the written word becomes a way of escaping, not a way towards the symbolic order. The reason why she is not capable of finding her own speaking subject is likely to be the strong negative influences from her closest surroundings. Her denial of the real world is a way for her to survive in the short term– but the short term is all Ruth is capable of seeing. In the long run, denial and escape will inevitably bring her down.

Another way of escaping is through literature. In this early stage, there is no room for literature in Ruth’s life, except at Miss Finch’s house. This blind lady becomes significant in guiding Ruth towards a connection to literature. Miss Finch more or less forces Ruth to listen to *Oliver Twist* on tape. Ruth is indeed reluctant at first, but eventually, “the book magic occurred” (63). Here, Ruth discovers that books offer an escape to a world that is much more exciting than the existing one. Since reading is a way for Ruth to escape reality, it is not very helpful in her creation of a speaking subject; she uses books for the wrong reason. In this stage, literature gives her yet another subject position which is not her own. Still, Ruth’s interest in books and literature is genuine and Miss Finch here creates a foundation, something to build on in the future.

Both Miss Finch and Sid are significant persons in Ruth’s life. Through Ruth and Sid’s letters, Sid and Miss Finch become acquainted. Ruth even creates a family, consisting of herself, Aunt Sid and Miss Finch. This ‘family’ is a form of a social construction and for Ruth
it is a fully functioning family. However, it is not for real, it is just another of Ruth’s fantasies.

After graduating from high school, Ruth continues to live with May and starts to work at Trim ‘N Tidy, the dry-cleaners. The very idea of cleaning without water is a sign of the barren environment of Honey Creek. The clothes are washed with chemicals, far from the natural, semiotic flow of water. Her work is one area where she performs well and she advances to be a spotter. Here, Ruth is subject positioned as a diligent worker. She is good at what she does, but it leads her nowhere. Ruth is also positioned as a super-bowler. When bowling, she feels like she is somebody. But her success in that field only cements her position in Honey Creek, around May and Trim ‘N Tidy. Ruth needs to find symbolic language as a connection to the symbolic world, in order to find balance between her semiotic needs and being a functional member of society. Her locked position and the urge to break free from May leads her to search for meaning in the wrong places, which inevitably leads her towards destruction.

**On the Way to Destruction**

The way down for Ruth begins when she realises that it is impossible for her to find herself in the life she has. A world built on fantasies is bound to collapse. Ruth begins to understand that her fantasy world will not get her anywhere. She needs a change and she needs to get away from May. May is a typical representative of the imbalance between symbolic and semiotic. She has no connection to nature at all, her language is narrow and limited and she gulps liquor and pills, she swears and picks on everybody around her. This is the semiotic chora speaking. Without sufficient balance between the symbolic and the semiotic, the semiotic chora easily takes over, leading the way for destructive drives to dominate her
existence. Ruth sees the need to break free from May’s suffocating presence, but in her attempt to do so, she chooses a fatal road, and yet other subject positions.

As a grown woman, there are rules for how a woman should be. Ruth is subjected as a woman, which is a very complex form of identity. According to Judith Butler, women are “the subject of feminism” (2). She claims that “the term women denotes a common identity [...]. [W]omen, even in the plural, has become a troublesome term, a site of contest, a cause for anxiety” (3). Butler believes that there are given, unwritten rules of women’s positions in the political context which makes the term “women” complicated. These positions are equal to the subject positions in which Ruth lives her life. Ruth’s position is indeed troublesome. In her limited environment, there are not many positions for her to choose from. For her, the only way within reach is to go from being a daughter to being a wife. Basically, she goes from one subject position to another, which is not constructive for the building of her own speaking subject. Society as a whole is constituted by a norm of patriarchal and symbolic values, hence, Ruth needs the connection with society and language in order to adjust to that form of living.

Meeting Ruby, though, leads her in the opposite direction, away from the symbolic world she has just begun to approach through Aunt Sid and Miss Finch. When Ruth first meets Ruby, he is floating around in a tube in the middle of the lake. According to Ruth, he is a water creature: “[H]e looked as if he lived in the water. The inner tube was home. He needed nothing to be happy except water, a few beers, some damp cigarettes, and the moon shining down filling him with the pure light” (113). From Ruth’s point of view, he impersonates everything she is longing for. He is a semiotic creature, absolutely distant from the symbolic world. After meeting Ruby for the first time, Ruth keeps dreaming about him. He appears to be careless and free – without responsibility – which seems very appealing to Ruth:
He had a silver boat glistening even without moonshine, and we went sailing away. We had delicious fish to eat, boneless, plus we didn’t ever get seasick, not once. Finally we turned into swimming creatures [...] and we communicated only by loving gestures. (116)

Apparently, Ruth has changed Ruby’s inner tube to a “silver boat,” which indicates that she has no connection to reality. Her fantasy completely governs her. She creates her own realities, where she can pretend that everything is perfect. In Ruth’s fantasy world, the semiotic image of Ruby seems to be her way to happiness. They would not have a care in the world and would not even use common language. The language she describes here is purely semiotic – “communicating only by loving gestures” – which is clearly pre-lingual. When Ruth hears Ruby talk she thinks that “[i]t was crazy to hear him utter words” (120). Spoken language does not fit into her fantasy of the water creature that lives in the sea. Even though Ruby “show[ed] all his rotten teeth” (116) the very next time they meet, Ruth’s imaginary image of Ruby does not change. She squeezes him into her fantasy world, where his pre-Oedipal behaviour becomes attractive and exciting because it does not belong in the world of demands and duties. The semiotic forms of existence seems to be the easy way out, hence, she abandons her attempts to enter the symbolic world. After Ruby has taken Ruth’s virginity, she gets even more confused about life. Her first experience with sex is not at all pleasant. He forces himself on her and hurts her – not as wonderful and romantic as in TV-shows or novels.

Television plays a significant part of Ruth and Ruby’s life. Ruth escapes to TV-shows and movies where people are either good or bad. These TV-shows bring Ruth even further into her fantasy world, since she tends to adapt television-behaviour to real life, which naturally make her even more confused and disappointed. Television is a typical representative of the imbalanced symbolic order, since it is mechanical and limiting – like a frame wall from
real life that blocks all subjective thinking. When watching TV, Ruby is completely shut off from the world. As a true semiotic being, Ruby’s absolute lack of connection to the symbolic order shows that he has no balance between symbolic and semiotic. Instead, he is caught in the semiotic chora, where destructive behaviour has taken over his existence. For Ruth, this is devastating. Her search for a speaking subject is disrupted and she is swept away by Ruby’s destructive behaviour.

However, Ruth’s short trip to her Aunt Sid opens up new horizons for her. Sid takes Ruth to visit the University, where she also hears a crowd of Chinese people talking in their own language. Ruth sees that the world is larger than Honey Creek with its limited area and limited language. At the University words flow, language is multi-coloured and living which makes her realise that her limited world is not the only one. In addition to the visit to the University, Ruth is confronted with the letters she has written to Aunt Sid. She realises that there is no truth in her letters: “I couldn’t believe I had written the letters; I was actually a little bit impressed, and very horrified, by my imagination” (258). Here, she is given a glimpse of her own fantasy world from the outside. Her realisation, however, does not help her much when she returns to Honey Creek. The outer influences are too strong.

After her visit at her Aunt’s, Ruth’s situation in Honey Creek becomes even more frustrating. As if Ruby’s destructive behaviour is not enough, the fact that Ruth, Ruby and their baby, Justin, live in May’s house is devastating for them all. There is constant fighting and drinking and both May and Ruby use drugs frequently. The semiotic chora affects the entire family, hence, the constant fighting and the negative spiral of their behaviour have lead Ruth to her limits. After years of misery she has had enough. The negative aspects of language are self-evident here. May and Ruby are equally caught in the semiotic chora and are inevitably destroying each other, verbally and mentally. Even though Ruth is well aware of the need for building a home for herself, Ruby and Justin, May just will not let that
happen, saying “[y]ou ain’t going nowhere” (287). Even though Ruth has had enough, May’s words are final. Moving is not an option. May’s fear of loneliness and destructive pill-consuming has enough power over Ruth that she never mentions it again. The hope Aunt Sid brought back to life is efficiently suffocated once again, but in spite of this, she is still able to find some hope in church.

Ruth cannot believe in God, but the messages from the Bible are soothing even though she claims that the Reverend only utters empty words that mean nothing to her. She does not believe in the symbolic language, where it is so easy to utter lies – just like she did herself in her letters to Aunt Sid. Her inability to embrace the Reverend’s words is strongly connected to her inability to accept the symbolic world of words. Words as such mean nothing to her, but still, she cannot forget words like “the meek shall inherit the earth” (221). Ruth still finds consolation in the Bible:

> Still, there were the times when I loved hearing the words from the Bible, for instance, the phrase about light: ‘For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord. Walk as children of light.’ I thought to myself, I’m going to walk as a child of light, as if I don’t have bones and night doesn’t ever come. The words always soothed me, even if I knew there was no truth to them. (280)

Obviously, Ruth is attracted to the idea of being “a child of light,” which corresponds well to her escaping reality. In her interpretation of the words, she floats around in the light, which is clearly semiotic. Ruth’s mind tends to bring her further and further away from reality, but she is rooted to the ground on one hand by the church routines and on the other hand by taking care of Justin. In spite of these concrete duties, Ruth has very little connection to the real world: “Still, it was lucky our heads didn’t float away. Mine was so full of thoughts, trying to be a child of light, and Ruby’s and May’s were not exactly at sea level, with the
pills they consumed” (281). In this later stage of the novel, the destructiveness of the semiotic chora takes up more and more of the entire family’s existence.

During the years the novel covers, the situation successively goes from bad to catastrophic. It is interesting to note that the cyclic changing of the atmosphere in May’s house always gets worse in the winter. This can be linked to Ruth’s negative feelings about the cold season. The people in the house become affected by the coldness and the tensions between them increase. Thus, the fact that Ruth does not like nature in the winter has really nothing to do with nature itself, but merely the fact that people get physically closer together, which certainly not is positive in this family.

The negative spiral culminates one November Sunday when the verbal and mental abuse between May and Ruby finally comes to a climax and Ruby starts beating both May and Ruth with a poker. The physical violence is fierce and merciless. Ruby finally kills May and nearly kills Ruth as well. Before the tragedy, the same day, they all had a wonderful time, going to church and having Sunday dinner, like the calm before a storm. Surely, Ruby’s flip could easily be compared to a force of nature, which corresponds well to Ruby’s connection to the semiotic chora. Ruth also looks into his eyes and states: “I swear when I looked into Ruby’s eyes they were the yellow of a sky right before a fierce summer storm” (298).

The destructive use of language in the family is likely to be the trigger to Ruby’s sudden act of violence. Ruby’s main purpose in beating May is to silence her permanently, which he also does. As Ruth comments: “She tried to say words but her tongue hang out of her mouth. It must have gotten disconnected” (302). Another sign of language being the reason for Ruby’s outburst is that also Ruth, while being beaten by Ruby, thinks that “Ruby probably had it in mind to undo my tongue too, stop my language permanently” (303). Language is power, and Ruby would thus gain control when silencing Ruth and May. However,
Ruth survives Ruby’s attack, but she is completely destroyed, both physically and mentally. She has reached the absolute bottom, from where the difficult project of re-constructing her subject begins.

**Re-Constructing a Subject**

It is remarkable that the only way for Ruth to start all over is to start from the absolute bottom. In that way, things can only get better. Not only does she need to re-construct her subject, she also needs to learn how to use language all over again, in order to give her a clean start. Since the use of language prior to the catastrophe was destructive and limited, it gives Ruth a chance to become what she wants. The road to fulfilling her dreams is long and difficult, however. When Aunt Sid reads to her in the hospital, she has no connection to language whatsoever:

> She read books to me. For the longest time I couldn’t understand any words, but I loved hearing her voice. I couldn’t concentrate on the story she was telling since her words gushed out in streams and then stopped dead at punctuation marks.[-] I used to wake in the night, and when I saw she wasn’t with me I whined for the touch of her hand. (306)

Ruth is like a newborn baby. Aunt Sid’s voice and touch are soothing and comforting, but the words mean nothing. Through her trauma, Ruth has regressed to a pre-lingual, semiotic stage, where she is given the possibility of re-creating her own being. In this process, Aunt Sid is the mother-figure, caring and demanding, which Ruth always needed but never had. More importantly, Sid represents the balance between symbolic and semiotic Ruth has always longed for but never reached. Sid’s connection to literature, and thus language, is an important external factor in Ruth’s way towards a re-construction of her speaking subject.
During the Reverend’s visit to the hospital, Ruth cannot stand to hear his words, so she
tells him to “[b]eat it” (307). Here, Ruth finds the power of words; two simple words would
make the Reverend leave. It also works on the nurses. Her destructive use of language at this
stage shows that although she has discovered the meaning of those words, she stands at the
low point of her life. The life she lived prior to the tragedy has been erased since neither May
nor Ruby is part of her life any longer. Her subject positions of being daughter, wife, mother
and dry-cleaner no longer exist. She is a blank page, deprived of her previous life. Still, her
discovery that words after all are meaningful is important for her re-connection to language.

At the bottom, Ruth is filled with foul language. She is suicidal and completely caught
in the semiotic chora of destructiveness. Her first step on the way up is when she realises that
cursing is bad, “that cuss words are unbearably boring after a while, that they wear you out
for good” (312). Foul language is not constructive; it will not help her get anywhere. This
must be seen as the breaking point in Ruth’s situation. Here, she begins the slow and painful
struggle towards building her own subject. At the same time, filled with hate towards herself,
Matt and the rest of the world, she states that “the word hurts your mouth if you say it ten
times in a row” (313). Here, the significance of the power of language becomes evident. The
mere word “hate” hurts her mouth. Hate is destructive, but Ruth is not capable of getting past
that feeling yet.

An important part of Ruth’s recovery is Matt’s visits to the hospital. Even though Ruth
hates Matt for leaving her, he is forced to take part in her recovery. Matt is a well-function-
ing person, living and working in the symbolic world. The difference between Matt’s sym-

dolic and Ruth’s semiotic world is exemplified by a situation in the hospital. Matt brings daf-

fodils to his sister, and her response is to state that it is the wrong season for that kind of
flower: “It ain’t the season for daffodils, Matt. But then you wouldn’t notice that. You’ve
never seen flowers in the spring” (311). Ruth has a strong connection to nature, which becomes even more evident when the reverend visits her.

The Reverend tries to soothe Ruth by saying “My dear, our kingdom on earth is not complete” (314). This statement is a real trigger to Ruth’s anger. According to her, nature is complete, “[i]t’s ideal, if you don’t count the humans” (314). She tells the Reverend about the frogs coming to life in springtime, which clearly suggests the idea that nature is reborn every spring. Ruth’s statement is a symbol of the imbalance between the semiotic nature and the symbolic human ideals. Nature is concrete, considering its changing seasons, the animals with their instincts as well as Ruth’s own healing. As she tells the Reverend: “My hands are going to be cured in no time and don’t tell me Jesus could do it. For your information, Jesus is a crackpot” (314). On the other hand, human ideals are more abstract. The Reverend tells Ruth to rely on God and she will get her reward in heaven. These are empty words. For Ruth, God is in nature and in the Bible, not in the abstract words from the Reverend. Here, the negative spiral from Ruth’s way down is indeed beginning to turn around. In her life with Ruby and May, everything kept becoming worse in the winter (see page 17). Now, nature, along with her, is reborn.

Another connection to nature and rebirth is Ruth’s new baby. This baby is a reason for her to start all over again, and in order to do so, she has to start with herself: “I had to learn about myself before my baby boy was born so I could start fresh [---] Somehow, I knew, I was going to have to come up with strength and kindness in myself” (315). Ruth knows that this is her opportunity to be a functioning mother to her child. This part in her re-constructing a subject is very important. Kristeva says, as earlier mentioned, that “the mother’s body is therefore what mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations and becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic chora” (27). Ruth has realised that she can be this mediating mother, instead of living in the destructive semiotic chora, like her own mother, May. Hence,
Aunt Sid is also here a very important external factor in Ruth’s recovery since she represents the mother Ruth always wanted.

The next step in Ruth’s journey towards building her own subject is when she is discharged from the hospital and stays at Aunt Sid’s place. Since Aunt Sid is a representative of the balance between symbolic and semiotic Ruth is striving for, there could not be a better place for her recovery. Aunt Sid’s living room is described as follows:

She has the green carpet that looks, with poor vision, like a field of spring wheat, incandescent and fluid. [---] And she has stocked the room with blind tapes and books and records. She has to be at school all day so she can’t perform the great operas for my benefit. I’m by myself in a sea of green grass and spoken words. (318)

Here, Ruth is surrounded by symbolic/semiotic balance for the first time since her last visit to Aunt Sid. Here both nature and words surround her completely. This is a clear suggestion that the balance between the semiotic and the symbolic is essential in creating well-functioning human beings.

In her previous life, Ruth had no language to call her own. In her first meeting with Justin after the trauma, Ruth finally realises that she has to rely on herself:

I had dreamed that at our first meeting we spoke in television language, caressing each other, saying simple sentences, and healing each other within five minutes. But when I woke I knew I was going to have to rely on my own invention. This one time I wasn’t going to borrow from daytime TV, or May, or Sid. I wasn’t even going to try to steal from Charles Dickens. (320)

Previously she used television language to avoid constructing her own sentences, to avoid using her own voice. Now, she has begun the re-building of her speaking subject, and in that process, she creates a distance to her fantasy world – she finally starts relying on herself.
Finding the correspondence between Matt and Sid turns Ruth’s world around. Here, she learns the truth about Matt and Sid’s opinions of her marriage. Even though it is difficult for Ruth, finding Sid and Matt’s correspondence is a part of the process. She needs to know the reality and stop escaping from her own life. The letters are also symbols of the power of language. Written words are forever and here they are used to bring the truth into the light.

When the novel ends, Ruth still has a long way to go, but she has finally found her own voice, her own speaking subject. Surrounded by both the semiotic and symbolic laws, she has the possibilities of living a balanced life. She is free to do what she wants with her life – the power is in her own hands. There is a new world opening.

**Conclusion**

This essay has examined the main character Ruth in Jane Hamilton’s *The Book of Ruth* in her search for a speaking subject. Ruth’s journey from being a positioned subject to finding her own voice leads her to destruction, which is analysed in the light of Jacques Lacan’s theories of the symbolic laws and Julia Kristeva’s theories of the semiotic and the semiotic *chora*. The main thesis of this essay is to state that there is a need for balance between the symbolic and the semiotic in order to create functioning individuals in a functioning society. Here, the lack of balance is evident in the first part of the essay. Ruby and May are typical representatives of the semiotic chora, where drugs, poor language and television play significant parts. Since language in Ruth’s surroundings is so limited, Ruth uses quotations from literature and television in her attempts to enrich her language – without success, however. Thus, the lack of balance in May’s house makes it impossible for Ruth to develop at all.

May and Ruby’s physical and mental abuse deprive Ruth of her power. In addition to this, Ruth’s entire person is represented by others. She is not allowed to take part in defining
herself. This is shown in her subject positions as daughter, super-bowler, dry-cleaner, wife and mother. These roles are cemented and are not possible for Ruth to break without help. Not until she is released from her negative environment, can she start her building of her own speaking subject. 

External factors are extremely important in Ruth’s re-building a subject and in changing her subject positions: First of all, the interference from Aunt Sid along with the correspondence between Ruth and Sid, give Ruth the foundation of a language of her own. Also Matt’s letters to Aunt Sid help Ruth see her life from another perspective. Ruth’s new baby gives her yet another reason to live and be a functioning person. She has the opportunity to make things right and take control over her life. Here, the semiotic aspects of motherhood and pre-lingual communication are combined with structure and control as well as the symbolic language of books and letters. Ruth’s longing towards semiotic nature is finally balanced by the symbolic world of words, which also gives her the power to take control over her life. Thus, she is given the possibility of a meaningful existence.
Bibliography


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