

DREAM AND FANTASY IN THE WORK OF SINCLAIR ROSS

by

LYLE PERCY WEIS

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Department of

English

The University of British Columbia  
2075 Wesbrook Place  
Vancouver, Canada  
V6T 1W5

Date

April 25, 1977

This thesis studies the meaning and importance of fantasy and dream in the work of Sinclair Ross. By first reviewing existing criticism on Ross's work and then illustrating how this criticism may act as the basis for further investigation, I will show the manner in which fantasy and dream help order theme and figurative language in his fiction.

Criticism has concerned itself mainly with Ross as a realistic prairie writer; his short stories and novels have won recognition for their accurate portrayals of Canadian rural life during the Great Depression. The vivid descriptions of the environment, with its sun, dust and wind, are often the critical context for an evaluation of theme or characterization. While this approach correctly identifies an important aspect of Ross's work, it has not gone on to other equally important areas. The manner in which this critical emphasis grew to be, and still remains, the accepted approach to Ross's work will be the subject of discussion for the first part of this study.

After the critical background has been established, specific matters of technique and theme will be examined. Alienation, the process which acts as the catalyst for behavior for so many of Ross's characters, is dealt with in detail because of its importance to plot and theme. Three distinct kinds or levels of alienation are identified in so far as they represent Ross's portrayal of man's perception of himself.

Symbolism is studied as a unifying force in the writer's work. His symbols fall into two general groups which represent the basic conflicting forces within man in regard to an imaginative restructuring of the environment. Symbols of life, movement, and action are shown as being balanced by the author with symbols of enclosure and stagnation.

Symbolism is seen as a key to understanding how Ross uses dream and fantasy as major vehicles of meaning. The bitter disappointment and even despair which his characters often reveal, and which critics have often pointed to, is only one vision of reality. His characters, through experiencing this despair and reacting to it by looking imaginatively at the world around them, perceive means of endowing the environment with more meaning than it naturally offers. They lend to it qualities laden with their own hopes and visions for the future. These visions or dreams often become even stronger versions of reality than the physical realities of the landscape. This process is repeated often by Ross and represents a major thematic focus.

Without rejecting the work of earlier critics, this study recognizes certain inadequacies in previous criticism on Ross's work, and sets out to broaden the scope of inquiry and emphasize the need for further examination.

Chapter One:	Introduction	1
Chapter Two:	The Inner Collapse and the Need to Dream	12
Chapter Three:	Symbolism as the Language of Dream	39
Chapter Four:	Dreams and Fantasies and the Shaping of Personal Realities	62
Chapter Five:	Conclusion	84
	Bibliography	89

Sinclair Ross's first novel, As For Me and My House, published in 1941, and the criticism associated with it, pegged him as a "realist", a chronicler of prairie life during the Great Depression. Criticism based on his work has changed somewhat through the intervening years but its basic character has been greatly influenced by this early classification and as a result other aspects of the artist's work have suffered relative neglect. Symbolic representation and the use of fantasy and dream as a major thematic focus, two consistently used Ross techniques, have been overlooked while critics have undertaken thorough discussions of the conflict and survival themes first identified during the 1940's.

The earlier critics who viewed this writer's work for the first time saw him not only for his own immediate merit but also with an eye to his predecessors. The Confederation Poets, for instance, had tried to achieve a scope uniquely their own while turning out material that was still imitative of the English Romantics, and in a similar way, early prairie fiction writers like Nellie McClung and Arthur Stringer had shaped idealized visions of life in the West. Other motivations at this time provided Canadians with visions of life as it ought to be: Nellie McClung and Ralph Connor, for instance, often wrote with a religious and moral cause in mind. The only cause not widely represented was that of realism, the depiction of life as it ostensibly was, with an emphasis upon the trials of the middle and lower classes of society. Writers such as Stead and Ostenso, and certainly Frederick Philip Grove, might be termed prairie realists, but the influence of the French realists Balzac and Zola was stronger for writers like the American Dreiser.

Canadian readers, and perhaps writers too, could not accept as sensual a heroine as Zola's Nana, a Parisian courtesan, and even objected to Grove's study of sexual problems in Settlers of the Marsh. Even with these obstacles, Grove managed to give Canadians accurate views of prairie life in works like Fruits of the Earth.

After Grove however, writers seemed to lose interest in realistic portrayal and instead appeared content to "dream of Green Gables, northern adventures, rustic or suburban triangles, and the thrust and rut of historical romance."<sup>1</sup> In his study of Canadian fiction between 1940 and 1960, Hugo McPherson lamented the arrested artistic development of Canadian writers:

The prosaic facts are that the great majority of Canada's novelists have reached no sudden metaphysical maturity.... What 'maturity' there may be in recent Canadian fiction belongs to a very few writers who... have confronted their experience with critical independence and have recorded their insights with a new subtlety and technical power (LHC, p. 694).

McPherson wrote with the advantage of historical perspective, but he frames his remarks with a reference to J.R. MacGillvray, who had already seen the same supposed weakness of writing talent in 1940. MacGillvray bemoaned the fact that there was

no imaginative study of our Canadian life and society, no looking out upon the world, no interest in fiction as a fine art, no apparent awareness of ideas and events...(LHC, p. 696).

In the context of these remarks then, it is easier to understand MacGillvray's assessment, a year later, of Ross's first novel. He saw in the book a sign that, the "long-prevailing romantic idyllicism of our fiction may ... give way ... to the immediate and actual."<sup>2</sup> MacGillvray, along with MacPherson and others after him, tended to link and even equate romanticism with poor writing, while linking "mature" writing with the portrayal of the "immediate and actual." Canadian critics looked for

writers to carry on in the spirit of the Canadian Grove and the American Drieser; although the Ross portrayal of character was duly recognized and noted, it was his supposedly faithful rendering of the time and place which rivetted the attention of his reviewers. One of the earliest and most influential writers of this type was Desmond Pacey.

Pacey, in his search for great Canadian writing, saw in Ross a hope for the beginnings of a tradition, but this promise soon failed to meet his criteria. Pacey recognized that "Ross's special gift is for the creation of a psychological atmosphere in which the nerves are almost at a breaking-point....", <sup>3</sup> but saw this gift as being relative to the author's ability to create an "accurate, if sceptical, account of life in a small Saskatchewan town...(Creative, p. 224)". Pacey often refers to Ross's faithful descriptions of appearances and manners, to the "excellent atmospheric descriptions of the prairie landscape" (Creative, p. 224). Only occasionally does he suggest that the universality of the writing, if there is any, might lie in the revelation of the psychological workings of the characters; the fact that Ross's work is evidently able to provide a healthy contrast to Stringer's and shows the latter's "triviality, facetiousness and flippancy" (Creative, p. 103), seems to be the central and most important point Pacey wishes to make.

This initial stress on the immediate and actual in Ross's work, the focus on the struggle of the people with the land and elements, became the critical guideline that was to be repeated in subsequent years of evaluation. His fiction came to be judged by the tenets of what may be termed "landscape criticism", a line of thinking that grew from the kind of yearning for "realistic" writing seen in MacGillivray, to a vaguely envisioned but nevertheless influential trend that found its most



eloquent formulation in Northrup Frye's identification of the "garrison mentality" in Canadian consciousness.<sup>4</sup> Frye merely carried forward the individual instances of character recognition of landscape or environment in Canadian works, and concluded a general attitude of fear or even terror on the part of Canadians towards nature.

Landscape criticism concentrates on the outward manifestations of man's struggles for survival. Even his inner searches for sanity and meaning are consistently seen within the context of his battle with the forces of his environment. Hence, the various critical interpretations all too often amount to elaborated statements on the man versus nature theme. The widespread influence of this approach is hinted at in a rapid glance at critical titles that have appeared over the years; the range includes the subheading "The Literary Landscape" in A Choice of Critics to the full-length study, Survival, by Margaret Atwood, to a book entitled Vertical Man / Horizontal World, by Laurence Ricou. With regard to Ross, this critical approach must be credited with making basically accurate statements about his works. The environment and its effect upon man is, of course, important and the recognition of this fact is nowhere as adamantly stated as in The Introduction to As For Me and My House, written by Roy Daniells in 1957:

The inner and outer worlds of the Bentleys correspond perfectly, but there is no need to think of symbolism or of a mirror-image, for the truth is that in the simplest fashion their lives are the product of living in such an environment. Now and again some detail takes on symbolic force.... But, by and large, the rock-bottom strength of the plot, achieved at the cost of deliberate limitation, insures that almost the full weight and pressure of the narrative will be experienced by the reader who takes all in the most literal fashion.<sup>5</sup>

Later critics tended to disagree with this literal interpretation of the Ross landscape, but they accepted, and built upon, the idea that his characters' lives were a "product of living in such an environment".

Deterministic as this statement now seems at twenty years' distance, it merely reflected the nature of the critical thought that was developing in this country at the time. Intensive treatment of the inner lives of characters came infrequently, and even then as a subordinate observation to what were considered more important issues. This is true of the criticism written by Warren Tallman.

Appearing under the heading of "The Literary Landscape" in A Choice of Critics (originally appearing in Canadian Literature) the beautifully-written essay "Wolf in the Snow" by Tallman contains one of the earlier specific appreciations of the psychological truths concerning Philip in As For Me and My House. Tallman notes the agony Philip experiences in trying to be an artist, and sees this suffering to be the result of a "failure to summon self into presence".<sup>6</sup> He tries to draw conclusions about Philip's unfocussed adult life, sensing that the preacher's childhood had been largely "uncreated" due to painfully vague memories of his father. This glimpse into the inner being of a Ross character is definitely brief and limited however, as Tallman is busy trying to build a metaphorical house of literature and must deal with several works and not only one within the confines of an essay. In this all too brief excursion into the unmapped areas of character, Tallman opened a challenging vista which, unfortunately, successive critics too often did not explore.

In his search for Canadian writing of high quality, Desmond Pacey had set the tone for Canadian criticism that was to follow. The most significant Ross criticism of the 1960's and early 1970's came from a West Coast trio, Donald Stephens, W.H. New, and Sandra Djwa, writers who saw Ross's place in the developing Canadian literary tradition as

owing largely to his portrayal of man in a stark, finely rendered landscape. The kind of selfconscious measurement of literary merit that was becoming endemic in Canadian criticism is evident in these opening lines from Stephens' essay, "Wind, Sun and Dust":

Twenty-four years ago what is perhaps the best Canadian novel was written: Sinclair Ross's As For Me and My House. Up to that time the only writers who could be viewed with any assurance were Morley Callaghan, Frederick Philip Grove, and probably Laura Salverson; since then only Mordecai Richler and, of course, Hugh MacLennan have added to the store of better Canadian novels.

The duty of monitoring the nation's literary pulse is passed from MacGillvray and Pacey to Stephens, who proves equal to the task. To Stephens though, must go the credit of establishing the critical focus that may be termed landscape criticism: in other words he isolates the factors of the environment that affect Ross's characters and studies these in detail, while downplaying important aspects like characterization and symbolism. The apex of achievement then in As For Me and My House, is that

...Ross has caught an essential part of the Canadian scene: the small midwestern town. But it is more than just the place that Ross captures; it is the time of the thirties, a time which many Canadians remember and cannot forget. It is a time, too, that younger Canadians constantly hear about: the drought and wind and dryness of that decade. Ross has recorded that time, and adds a dimension to the memories and dreams of people who cannot, and will not, forget the thirties (Writers, p. 175).

The extent to which Stephens has committed himself to landscape criticism is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in his "Introduction" to the book of collected essays entitled Writers of the Prairies. In this piece, he envisions a landscape so powerful that it demands a loss of objectivity on the part of the critic; somehow the prairie landscape is greater than the wills of either author or critic:

The critic cannot help but be caught by the effect

of this environment on the writers that he is examining: in fact, it is imperative that he steep himself in the landscape so that he is always aware of it, forever pressing him into an attitude already dominant in the work of the writer he is examining. Rather than remaining objective, the critic must become part of a landscape that is both fictional and real. He co-creates, with the writer, the experience of life that is presented through the artist's pen, so as to enrich it, to extend the experience into something far greater than the ordinary critic achieves who remains outside the art he attempts to evaluate and criticize (Writers, p. 1).

While the critic who chooses to "steep" himself in the total landscape may gain immensely in getting a general feeling of a book, he may have to sacrifice something in acquiring this advantage, and this something in Stephens' case would appear to be the freedom to probe the intricacies of characterization. Of Ross's first novel, he notes at one point that "The people who inhabit this landscape are described to the reader too (Writers, p. 176)", a comment which suggests a mental post-script of sorts. Indeed, near the conclusion of the "Wind, Sun and Dust" essay, he identifies characters as being "subservient to the environment of the story (Writers, p. 181)", and ends by saying that any justification for a close study of character in As For Me and My House lies in their implied universality. People all over the world, he states, have the same struggle to assert a claim to individuality. Hence, the "shallowness" of Ross's characters may be excused, and the study of his landscape is necessitated because his people are of a type, anonymous figures straining for identity.

This relegation of character to the background of critical study is evident in varying degrees in at least two writers having professional association with Stephens: W.H. New and Sandra Djwa. New, in an essay entitled "Sinclair Ross's Ambivalent World", sees landscape as a touchstone

for interpretation:

The overall impression left by the book is certainly one of aridity: of dust and heat, the Depression on the prairies and the drought which went with it. And accompanying the unproductivity of the land is the dryness of the people...." <sup>8</sup>

There is a great similarity here in both interpretation and phrasing with Stephens' wind, sun and dust theme, and with the belief that characters are "subservient" to the landscape. New examines images from this landscape and goes on to make generalizations about the supposedly ambivalent nature of Ross's novel, but does not really go beyond Stephens's original observations regarding landscape and character. New seems unwilling to take Stephens's position to the kinds of conclusions that Sandra Djwa does.

Djwa, in "No Other Way: Sinclair Ross's Stories and Novels", sees the author's work in terms of the theme of man versus nature:

This is a nature against which man must struggle--- not just to become a man---but simply to exist and perhaps, if he is particularly fortunate and determined, to exist in some meaningful way. <sup>9</sup>

So that there may be no mistake in interpreting her message, Djwa refers to Frye's theory of the "garrison mentality", but goes that critic one better, saying that Ross writes not so much of naturalism as he does of determinism; his characters appear to be "swept along by the currents of destiny (Writers, p. 202)", and therefore they have "no other way" in life but to flow along. The landscape, once again, becomes the central critical issue, but not in an entirely deterministic sense. As Djwa notes, the characters seem to believe in an Old Testament version of God, a belief that somehow gives their existence more meaning than that suggested by their mundane activities.

The work of the group of Stephens, New and Djwa, while having superficial differences, has a basic unity in treatment of theme. The strength of this unity is not to be underestimated, for their voices are in harmony with their critical predecessors and therefore speak from precedent. Also, their own work has obviously encouraged subsequent writers to follow in the same vein. Doug Jones in Butterfly on Rock,<sup>10</sup> for instance, mentions the interplay between landscape and character and reiterates the importance of Frye's "terror in regard to nature" observation. John Moss, in Patterns of Isolation, rejects Djwa's notion of what he calls "a sombre deterministic lament",<sup>11</sup> but nevertheless sees the elements as being "cosmic pressures upon the lives of individuals which are met in a variety of ways" (Patterns, p. 164). The landscape, simply stated, is a catalyst for action.

While Moss and Jones show similarities to Stephens in interpretation, they also show an increasing concern for the study of the facets and development of character. Laurence Ricou, in Vertical Man / Horizontal World shows signs of recognizing that Ross's characters possess informing imaginative powers. He notes that Ross was:

the first writer in Canada to show a profound awareness of the metaphorical possibilities of the prairie landscape. More particularly, and hence the term "internalization" is appropriate, Ross introduces the landscape as a metaphor for man's mind, his emotions, his soul perhaps, in a more thorough and subtle way than any previous writer.<sup>12</sup>

At first this identification of metaphorical usage seems nothing more than the interplay of inner and outer worlds noted by previous critics; in fact, Ricou takes pains to show that man, in Ross's work, is a creator, a dreamer, and that the process of dreaming indeed shapes life. Ricou repeats the statements of Stephens and New, such as

Man and environment are totally integrated so that adjectives chosen to describe the natural environment could well apply to character, and vice-versa (Vertical, p. 87).

But, he goes on to add,

Such a technique is finely ironic, for the characters of the novel are influenced by the environment, and yet they themselves contribute to its oppressiveness (Vertical, p. 87).

Here then is a recognition of a landscape that owes at least part of its being to the imaginative shapings of the men and women who live upon it, and although Ricou's emphasis somewhat reverses man's role in the process by seeing him as playing only a contributory role, his is a significant departure from earlier criticism in this observation.

Sinclair Ross has developed and usually maintained a unified system of vocabulary and archetectonics. He has utilized a set of images, assigned them symbolic qualities, and has had his characters interact with these identities in a consistent fashion. He has recognized that one of the basic creative urges in man is unite his dreams with reality and that dreams and the promises they hold often shape destinies and create or destroy happiness. As such, he is not only an artist who observes and records the mundane activities of man, but one also who enters the realm of fantasy and imagination. While some have called him a realist, he must be seen also as one who shares the romantics' avid interest in the fanciful, the imaginative, the world of shadows and strange meanings.

<sup>1</sup> Hugo McPherson, "Fiction 1940 - 1960", Literary History of Canada, ed. Carl F. Klinck et al., (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 694. Hereafter cited as LHC. All quoted material hereafter cited in parenthesis, giving title and page number.

<sup>2</sup> J.R. MacGillivray, rev. of As For Me and My House, by Sinclair Ross, University of Toronto Quarterly, (11 April 1942), pp. 298-302.

<sup>3</sup> Desmond Pacey, Creative Writing in Canada, rev. ed. (1952; rev. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1961), p. 224. Hereafter cited as Creative.

<sup>4</sup> Northrup Frye, "Conclusion", LHC, p. 830.

<sup>5</sup> Roy Daniells, "Introduction", to As For Me and My House, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), p. vi.

<sup>6</sup> Warren Tallman, "Wolf in the Snow", A Choice of Critics, ed. George Woodcock, (Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> Donald Stephens, "Wind, Sun and Dust", Writers of the Prairies, ed. Donald Stephens, (Vancouver, University of B.C. Press, 1973), p. 175. Hereafter cited as Writers.

<sup>8</sup> W.H. New, "Sinclair Ross's Ambivalent World", Writers of the Prairies, p. 184.

<sup>9</sup> Sandra Djwa, "No Other Way: Sinclair Ross's Stories and Novels", Writers of the Prairies, p. 190.

<sup>10</sup> Doug Jones, Butterfly on Rock: A Study of Themes and Images in Canadian Literature (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), pp. 39-42.

<sup>11</sup> John Moss, Patterns of Isolation (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p. 164. Hereafter cited as Patterns.

<sup>12</sup> Laurence Ricou, Vertical Man / Horizontal World (Vancouver: University of B.C. Press, 1973), p. 82. Hereafter cited as Vertical.



Characters in the fiction of Sinclair Ross are often in the process of coming face to face with a great personal void: life as it is, as it unfolds in tangible realities, presents a mind-numbing gulf of defeat, frustration, and even death. The world of apparent reality, most often represented by the prairie landscape, seems to bend an assault upon man, and he in turn mounts a determined, but fruitless, defense. The defense may be a refusal to give up that is born out of stubbornness or may take the form of dreams which will be discussed in the following chapters.

In this vision of the world, apparent reality fails to satisfy man's expectations and it is this clash between the ideal and the real which forms the basis for conflict in Ross's work. Alienation, the estrangement from once-familiar and comfortable surroundings or conditions, occurs as Ross characters find themselves uncomfortable with their environment and even with themselves. They are left with a lack of direction and purpose and become hollow shells moving dumbly upon the landscape. A typical Ross character finds himself in a state of acute alienation from the land, his work, himself, and the ones he loves. Instead of acting as companions and helpmates, husbands and wives eye each other suspiciously across a gulf of anxiety and misunderstanding. One Ross narrator describes the process as being "an inner collapse, a relinquishment of everything by which a man lives --- purpose, expectancy, self-respect".<sup>1</sup> All too often, these words accurately reflect the feelings of the men and women Ross portrays.

The dimensions and various faces of this "inner collapse" may be seen as comprising three structural levels, all interrelated and marked by causality: man when he perceives the landscape as an adversary, a bitch-goddess that often gives birth to nothing more than stone and dust; man when he loses his spiritual vision and his belief in his personal

uniqueness and worth; and man when he loses the loving capacity to relate to his family and friends in a forthright, spontaneous fashion. Each of these levels of alienation leads to a realization of emptiness, which in turn sets into motion the mechanics for the discovery of the next level of alienation. An examination of these levels reveals how Ross sees the failure of the personal relationships as being the culminating and most crucial stage in man's journey into a void of despair. At this point, sexual contact becomes a frightened, perverted episode, and sexuality itself becomes a weapon.

Ross depicts the first level of alienation as taking place between man and the land. Snow, wind, dust, and heat: the elements join with the earth to present an inhospitable, if not hostile, environment. Ross writes mostly of farmers or of people who are dependent in some way on a form of harvest. Like the farmer who sows seeds and then waits hopefully for them to grow to maturity, the Ross character plants visions for the future within the imagination and daily waits for the visions to become reality.

Whether real or imaginative, the soil these farmers toil upon usually turns out to be niggardly and unproductive: the harvest fails. The land at times becomes the embodiment of an adversary, one which has a deadly demoralizing relentlessness that destroys both the body and the spirit. In the short story, "The Lamp at Noon" Paul and his wife Ellen attempt to make a meagre living on a farm, even though he could have a secure job in her father's store. Stubbornness and a sense of independence prevent him from making this move, and the refusal is the cause of many arguments with Ellen. Paul tries to ignore the fact that his struggles on the land are futile, but he is able to escape the stark reality of his situation for only a moment:

suddenly the fields before him struck his eyes to comprehension. They lay black, naked. Beaten and mounded smooth with dust as if a sea in gentle swell had turned to stone. And though he had tried to prepare himself for such a scene, though he had known since yesterday that not a blade would last the storm, still now, before the utter waste confronting him, he sickened and stood cold. Suddenly like the fields he was naked. Everything that had sheathed him a little from the realities of existence: vision and purpose, faith in the land, in the future, in himself---it was all rent now, stripped away.<sup>2</sup>

Ross, through the use of analogy by simile, is able to show how a character's existence is comparable to the barrenness of the landscape. Because a farmer must plot his existence so closely to the ways of nature, a failure to reap the harvest is also a failure at self-definition. Paul experiences an utterness of failure that grows to encompass all aspects of his life. Like a huge blanket of despair, the landscape acts to suffocate life, a situation that is symbolically represented by the smothering of Paul's child during a dust storm.

Where "The Lamp at Noon" concentrates on the last moment of despair in a farming couple's life, "A Field of Wheat" reveals the range and development of that hopelessness, as seen through the eyes of a farm wife who has experienced it all. John, a middleaged farmer, has worked with many crops that have ended in failure and finally, he seems to have one that will be a success. His wife reflects:

A crop like this was coming to him. He had had his share of failures and set-backs, if ever a man had, twenty times over.<sup>3</sup>

The wife too has much invested in this particular crop, for she is no longer young, the work has been hard on her, and she has lost a son. But the worst set-backs by far have been with the crops:

the quickest aches of life, travail, heartbrokenness, they had never wrung as the wheat wrung. For the

wheat allowed no respite. Wasting and unending it was struggle, struggle against wind and insects, drought and weeds. Not a heroic struggle to give a man courage and resolve, but a frantic, unavailing one ("Field", p. 74).

Sometimes the wheat had died quickly, sometimes it had lingered on, tantalizing hope, only to be destroyed later by insects or the weather. All this is seen in conjunction with the present crop, and somehow, instead of tempering hope with caution, the memories seem only to whet the wife's imagination with greater eagerness. She hopes, for instance, that with a good crop she might regain the man her husband once was:

She had loved John, for these sixteen years had stood close watching while he died --- slowly, tantalizingly, as the parched wheat died. He had grown unkempt, ugly, morose. His voice was gruff, contentious, never broke into the deep, strong laughter that used to make her feel she was living at the heart of things. John was gone, love was gone -- ("Field", p. 74).

And even if she cannot recover her husband, a good crop would at least give the family an economic stability that would benefit the children. Past experiences may reflect, in fact, the only reality that the family can expect from life, but this possibility is too demeaning to the human spirit and imagination for Martha to accept. The void of defeat and despair desperately needs to be filled with optimistic endeavor, and she looks to the future. In a manner that is indicative of his other work, Ross shows that hope is treacherous when the basis for its fruition lies in the cooperation of the forces of nature or in other external realities. In direct opposition to the wife's hopeful musings, Ross throws an approaching storm which comes in a hush, "like a raised finger, forbidding", ("Field", p. 77). In its awesome invincibility, the storm is seen in the west where:

there was no sky, only a gulf of blackness, so black

that the landscape seemed slipping down the neck of a funnel. Above, almost overhead, a heavy, hard-lined bank of cloud swept its way across the sun-white blue in August, impassive fury ("Field", p. 77).

Here, nature appears as man's physical adversary, attacking him, drawing blood. Ross employs words descriptive of battle and struggle as hail rushes upon the family house:

She reached the kitchen just as John burst in. With their eyes screwed up against the pommelling roar of the hail they stared at each other. They were deafened, pinioned, crushed. His face was a livid blank, one cheek smeared with blood where a jagged stone had struck him. Taut with fear, her throat aching, she turned away and looked through Joe's legs again. It was like a furious fountain, the stones bouncing high and clashing with those behind them. They had buried the earth, blotted out the horizon; there was nothing but their crazy spew of whiteness. She cowered away, put her hands to her ears ("Field", pp. 78-9).

While Ross never states that nature is a conscious, malevolent force making war upon man, he does show that man plots and entertains expectations that run counter to the external realities of the world. That these forces are both "impassive" and inexorable makes for the basis of conflict in Ross's ~~fiction~~ <sup>situation</sup>. In fact, man does not appear as the dominant force in these scenes, but rather as the defendant in danger of being overwhelmed. The ending of "A Field of Wheat" depicts a scene reminiscent of a military sacking: the house is ravaged, windows and pictures broken, floors under water, the family dog dead. The entire effect is "too annihilating, too much like a blow" ("Field", p. 79). The plotting structure of this and other Ross stories reveals the seemingly inevitable clash of man and environment; man chooses a path for himself that skirts ever nearer, like a moth around a flame, towards destruction.

Structure as a revelatory device is strongly evident in "Not By Rain Alone", a short story in two parts. When originally published, the two

parts appeared at different dates as separate stories in the Queen's Quarterly,<sup>4</sup> but later were joined as two parts of a single story in the New Canadian Library collection of short stories. By joining the two works, Ross is able to clearly divide the levels of human experience into a struggle which begins with a determined yearning for the future, and ends with an agonized realization of despair in the present. The fictional duet centers around the courtship and marriage of a young couple, Will and Eleanor, who decide to determine their own fate in spite of discouraging odds.

In Part One, subtitled "Summer Thunder", Will attempts to dissuade himself from building up false hope, knowing from experience that wishing for rain only increases the bitterness if rain doesn't save the crops:

Maybe there were clouds gathering in the west, the same as yesterday, the same as the day before, but this time he wouldn't believe in them. It hurt too much. It wasn't worth it. There was a kind of ease in utter hopelessness.<sup>5</sup>

Again, there is a sense that perhaps there is a conscious malevolent force aligned against man, making a mockery of his existence. But Will attempts to ignore this possibility, thinking "it couldn't be deliberate, a storm. It couldn't always pass him by" ("Rain", p. 57). With a youthful, almost foolhardy belief in a happier future, Will and his girl Eleanor decide to plot their future in defiance of the lessons of the past and get married to live on the farm. The decision to marry marks the end of Part One, and consequently offers the explanation of the title, "Not By Rain Alone": man attempts to prove that his surroundings do not comprise his total meaning, he seeks to define himself free from external limitations. The irony of this outlook is, of course, that Will's idealistic decision is actually grounded upon a gamble that nature indeed

will cooperate and reward his efforts in the future. The nobility and freedom of spirit expressed in the title are actually fraught with conditionals.

In Part Two, subtitled "September Snow", Ross takes a short story of the same name that appeared in Queen's Quarterly in 1935-36 and changes the original characters' names to Will and Eleanor to establish a continuity and summation for the "Summer Thunder" piece.<sup>6</sup> Here, Eleanor is pregnant and Will must leave her during a snow storm to search for lost cattle. The husband and wife are separated by the storm, and by the time her returns she is dying from the combined rigors of exposure and childbirth. The optimism seen at the close of Part One becomes tragically ironic as Will and Eleanor's dreams end in death in Part Two. The initial hopeful promise of idealism is undercut at the end of Part Two when it becomes apparent that indeed "rain alone", the reality of nature, has determined the course of this young couple's marriage. The two-part structuring helps to give the ironic potential more impact, as does the use of contrasting values or identities. Often though, what appears at first to be a contrasting element becomes a rather dramatic example of parallelism instead, as is the case with Will's wife, Eleanor and his mother, the two women seen in this short story duet. Will's mother, as he remembers her, is a woman who quite literally broke herself upon the land:

He remembered how his mother used to pump, how she would rise with the up-stroke of the handle to her toes, then buckle herself and wince to bring it down. Summer and winter, twice a day for years ---- cursing the cows that guzzled till their bellies rounded out like barrels, always patient to let them have their fill. He pitied her suddenly, thinking that her labour too had all been waste ..... A wiry, wizened little woman, with tight grim lips, and work-thin stubborn hands. He remembered this afternoon ---- thinking of Eleanor again, asking himself whether he would want to offer her the same ("Rain", pp. 53-4).

And Will does offer Eleanor the same, and she too, is destroyed in the struggle with the land. The human failure depicted in "Not By Rain Alone" and "A Field of Wheat" is not that of a single individual, of one isolated case of insufficient stamina --- but of man, a collective identity which, in his expectations, is out of harmony with the natural landscape. The universality of this observation is deemed so important, so crucial, that Ross is led to repeat the same portrait with slight variations of character and plot many times in his work. Like a many-faceted gem, this insight into human suffering is turned over and examined repeatedly.

The second level of alienation depicted by Ross is a twofold doubting of the self and of a morally and spiritually oriented universe. Man, finding inadequacies in his surrounding environment, turns his vision inward and wonders if the outer barrens bespeak an inner barrenness as well. The farmer in "Runaway" is not dogged by outright failure but by a feeling that his life has somehow lacked dimension and breadth. When the chance occurs to give himself this measure of worth through the purchase of a pair of beautiful horses, aptly called "Diamonds", his self-image and a belief in cosmic goodness are brought into focus. After the purchase of the horses, the farmer feels an affirmation of self-esteem, a rejuvenation of spirit that had been dulled by years of repetitious drudgery.

His son observes:

My father, driving up to the door with a reckless flourish of the whip, was so jaunty and important, and above the pebbly whirl of wheels as the Diamonds plunged away there was such a girlish peal of laughter from my mother! They were young again. My father had a team of Diamonds, and my mother had something that his envious passion for them had taken from her twenty years ago. <sup>7</sup>

Ross shows that man's visions of outer and inner realities are often symbiotic, and so it is that the farmer feels a renewal of faith in the spiritual order coincidental with his personal renewal:



They were such fine, mettled horses, such a credit to creation. Watching and working with them it was impossible to doubt that at the heart of things there was wisdom, goodness and a plan. They were an affirmation, a mighty Yea ("Runaway", p. 92).

Since the horses had been purchased from Old Luke Taylor, a man reputed for shady dealings, the farmer had taken the sale as a change of heart in the old man, a "repentance" of sorts. The discovery that the horses are "balky" and therefore virtually worthless is a double blow. Not only has the farmer lost a source of pride in the horses, and is revealed as a poor business man, but he begins to doubt the rightness of a higher intelligence which evidently condones Luke's wickedness. When retribution does strike in the form of the accidental death of Luke and most of his famed horses in a fire, justice still seems uneven. The farmer a true horse lover, cannot understand why innocent animal life had to be involved in Luke's punishment:

There was a troubled, old look in his eyes, ... it was not so simple as that to rule off a man's account and show it balanced. Leave Luke out of it now ---- say that so far as he was concerned the scores were settled ---- but what about the Diamonds? What kind of reckoning was it that exacted life and innocence for an old man's petty greed? Why, if it was retribution, had it struck so clumsily ("Runaway", pp. 97-8)?

It is this puzzlement, this feeling of being somehow out of step with God's way, which helps make up the second level of alienation for this farmer, and for other characters as well. Unable to comprehend an ultimate logic or plan in the universe, man sometimes feels as if he is a stranger to the ways of his own God.

The twofold alienation seen at work in "Runaway" appears either wholly or in part in each of the three Ross novels. In As For Me and My House both man's alienation from himself and from a conception of a God-centered universe are central concerns. The story is told through the eyes of Mrs. Bentley, whose husband, Philip, is a prairie preacher who

once had the dream of escaping a cramped small town and becoming an artist. He is, in fact, trapped in an endless round of tiny, depressing towns and in the circular frustration of his own failure to become a creative person, an artist. The agony of having to face the emptiness of his own failures is seen in this existential observation, as told to his wife:

"How hard life is, you know, pretty well depends on yourself --- whether you want to keep keyed up for something beyond yourself all the time, or whether you're willing to accept things at their face value.... 8  
If a man's a victim of circumstances he deserves to be".

These words suggest a stoical independence that is perhaps best suited to Ross's world of constant defeat and failure, but the speaker's constant simmering rage shows that even he cannot accept a personally-fashioned world on its own terms. Man, seeing himself as a rather frail organism on the landscape, finds the loneliness unbearable, and looks to a greater power to help share the feeling of responsibility. Paul, a philosophizing school teacher and friend to the Bentley's, observes:

Man can't bear to admit his insignificance. If you've ever seen a hailstorm, or watched a crop dry up --- his helplessness, the way he's ignored ---- well, it was just such helplessness in the beginning that set him discovering gods who could control the storms and seasons. Powerful, friendly gods ---- on his side (House, p. 30).

If the times are good, a belief in "friendly" gods may hold strong, but after a lengthy drought, Mrs. Bentley begins to wonder if her God has gone out to lunch, perhaps permanently:

Surely it must be a very great faith that such indifference on the part of its deity cannot weaken ---- a very great faith, or a very foolish one (House, pp. 147-8).

To believe in a deity that is indifferent or even malevolent may be foolish, but Mrs. Bentley would have herself believe that to be a fool is better than to be alone:

We shrink from our insignificance. The stillness and solitude ---- we think a force or presence into it --- even a hostile presence, deliberate, aligned against us ---- for we dare not admit an indifferent wilderness where we may have no meaning at all (House, p. 177).

Superstition soon creeps into the void created by doubt and Mrs. Bentley is not above entertaining notions of pagan spirits flitting about the countryside:

The close black hills, the stealthy slipping sound the river made ---- it was as if I were entering dead, forbidden country, approaching the lair of the terror that destroyed the hills, that was lurking there still among the skulls (House, p. 169).

Skull-like hills, dark shadows, moaning winds ---- all are Gothic elements that serve to help Mrs. Bentley avoid that which she fears most: the possibility that man is truly alone on the land, and that the natural elements have sole dominion. In her moments of lowest spiritual ebb, she sees an absolute power embodied in the wind:

The wind and the sawing eaves and the rattle of windows have made the house a cell. Sometimes it's as if we had taken shelter here, sometimes as if we were at the bottom of a deep moaning lake. We are quiet and tense and wary. Our muscles and lungs seem pitted to keep the walls from caving in.

....In the last week I seem to have realized that wind is master (House, p. 129).

Man who was on the defensive in his struggle with the land was at least still a man. On the second level of alienation, man who has lost contact with his inner self and with his God ceases to be man. The simple equation "wind is master" excludes man from a meaningful, directed existence, and reduces him to a sub-human servitude.

For Ross, the second level of alienation comes to be identified almost solely with the loss of an understanding of the self, a concept borne out by the later novels, The Well and Whir of Gold. In the The Well, the emphasis is placed upon a personality split between a self ideally

perceived and a self grounded in apparent realities. Larson, the central character, is a man who attempts to straddle both the past and the present simultaneously. He is torn between pleasing memories which he inwardly realizes do not function in his present situation, and immediate circumstances that resolutely refuse to travel backwards in time. The present is painfully inadequate, and must be made to conform to the needs of the past, as is seen in the effort to preserve the old Larson homestead. In the middle of his large farm, he keeps his original site intact, almost like a museum except for the fact that the rotting buildings have a more important place in his mind than the farm he now works. He realizes that time has passed, his eyes can tell that much:

The house, little better than a shack, was unpainted and weather-greied, with boarded-up windows and a leaning chimney. Weeds grew in a wild tangle right to the old broken steps,

and yet, in order to keep it all inviolate, Larson has built a fence,

Enclosing it all, in bright trim contrast, .... of stout new cedar posts and freshly-strung barbed wire (Well, p. 99-100).

The extent to which Larson attempts to protect the past from the present is seen in the symbolic fence surrounding the homestead; a barrier that is both ludicrous and yet very effective, much like the barrier that Larson has constructed between himself and the outside world.

While the past is protected, held in limbo, the present is twisted to fit images of the past. Sylvia, Larson's young second wife, is compared to Cora, a wife long deceased, and is made to pay a demeaning homage to the latter's memory. Chris, a young criminal who seeks to hide at the Larson farm, becomes a kind of hoped-for reincarnation of the farmer's long-dead son. While he knows he cannot relive the past, Larson exiles himself from the present and becomes a temporal nonentity. His alienation of the self stems from a lack of definition, a loss of the kind of

perception that allows the self to be appreciated as part of an ongoing process.

Age, even senility is a contributing factor in Larson's loss of control over the passage of time, but the central message is that ghosts from the past have the power to dictate to the present, a lesson made clear in the third novel, Whir of Gold. While past and present are not confused as in The Well, the past does affect greatly the present in the life of the central character, Sonny McAlpine. An alienation of the self occurs when the actions of the present cannot keep pace with the essentially moralistic dictums of the man's upbringing. As a boy, Sonny had been told by his mother that his behavior was to be a family model, an atonement for the supposedly sinful lives of his father and brothers:

"Make something of yourself, Sonny. Don't go soft ---- don't come down to their level. All these years it's what I've lived and worked for .... Just the thought that you'd be different, wouldn't end up like the rest of them ---- it's what's kept me going...."

My father and my two elder brothers were "the rest of them". It was their waywardness that had shamed her, and their cloddish lives that mine, with its banner high for the things of mind and spirit, was to redeem. <sup>10</sup>

Sonny carries the exhortation with him as he grows up and travels to Montreal to find work as a musician. Soon, however, the memory of his mother's voice clashes with the poverty brought about by unemployment, and Sonny becomes a thief. After he has committed his first criminal offence, he is aware of how little his old self resembles his new, fallen, self:

No understanding yet of what I had done to him [the robbery victim], no inkling of the implications. If anything, he was less victim than I. I sickened at the memory of my hands going over him ---- it even seemed that the smell of his clothes, sweaty, slightly acrid, still clung to them ---- but there, at my own frontier, the shame was halted. Not what I had done to him; what I had done to Sonny McAlpine. The smirch; the finger. For Sonny's name now, even up in lights, would always be a dirty name (Whir, p. 157).

In these lines, "I" and "Sonny McAlpine" are separate beings; Ross shows the criminal self and the morally upright self estranged from one another. Sonny experiences an alienation of the self that combines the artistic failure found in As For Me and My House with the disjunction of past and present found in The Well. Having dealt with the two aspects separately before, Ross combines them in Whir of Gold to reveal a loss of identity which seems fated to lead to the creation of another Philip Bentley or Larson.

Although questions regarding man's moral or spiritual consciousness may seem of greater importance than those regarding personal relationships, Ross realizes that while all men may not be philosophers, most men are of necessity socially-conscious animals. Therefore, the third, and what is for Ross the most crucial, level of alienation is that which is found between people, usually men and women. A work like "Jug and Bottle", which treats social dimensions as being of pivotal importance, reveals regions of suffering that exist within human experience, and which are even more severe than those the land or failure of vocation can offer.

Structure in "Jug and Bottle" plays an important part in revealing Ross's message: three characters are related in a chain of guilt and desperation which, Ross implies, is a perpetual condition of human existence. Coultier, a young soldier, is burdened by his pledge of love to a dying woman, and later when she is dead, by the memory of his hypocrisy. He had given her false hope, and then, like so many men in the work of Ross, he tried to draw away when she began to depend upon him. For Coultier, the mechanics of guilt are very real and painful:

He had killed her, and he was on trial.... he was caught helpless in some primitive mechanism of conscience like a sheaf in the gear of a thresher, borne inexorably by a chain of guilt to the blade of punishment ("Jug", p. 519).

In turn, the narrator, because he is Coultier's friend, is burdened by a feeling of responsibility for the soldier's well-being. And when Coultier commits suicide, the narrator feels the same kind of guilt Coultier felt when he abandoned his girlfriend (wife):

For me though, disposing of him has never been so simple. Partly, I suppose, because I failed him when he had greatest need of me; partly because you can't live six months in barracks with a man and not discover something of his character and story. The one has left me with a feeling of involvement and responsibility; the other with a conviction that beneath the failure and confusion there was something that might have grown and developed. He meant well. He got things badly tangled, but only because he wanted to straighten them. And draw a line, as he once said, and add the columns; is it only in the cramped little total of achievement that life has meaning and importance ("Jug", p. 500)?

That life's significance should only be measured by one's "achievement" seems a callous enough method of evaluation. The ultimate tragedy is however, that the means to surpass such a mundane perspective are available but rarely used. The narrator, like Coultier, failed to reach out to another individual to help give meaning to a troubled life. Man is culpable not only for his own failures, but for the failures of others as well; yet somehow, man is pitiable and worthy of forgiveness in his frailty because he is like Coultier who "meant well".

The tragic separation of individuals found in "Jug and Bottle" is not only the most emphasized level of alienation in Ross's work, but the one towards which the other two levels tend to develop. Ross, in his first published work "No Other Way", shows the interrelatedness and culminating order of the three levels, a structural characteristic repeated often in his fiction. In this 1934 offering, Hattie Glenn has toiled painfully upon the land for some twenty-odd years; the struggle has left her the obvious loser:

The thin, hatchety face and the yellow neck; the tight little knot of iron-grey hair; the wrinkles and crows-feet. That was what the years and the slaving had done. 11

The struggle with the land, the primary level of alienation, never ends, never seems to develop positively, and has prompted bitter self-doubt and despair, the second level of alienation. Once, in her now tired, work-worn eyes,

there had been a gleam and lustre that had made a handsome country boy pledge lifelong, and rather foolishly ardent, devotion; but to-day it was the festered, smouldering fire of a struggle that burned them.

An old struggle, for years now an inseparable part of her life.... A useless, wearying struggle, making her harsh and sour and old, and always ending just where it had begun ("No", p. 16).

Once, exuberance and strength had shone in her eyes; as is so often the case with a Ross character, she had started married life with the optimism of youth. As an adult, she feels caught in a spiritual doldrum, watching her life decay as she ages.

The crucial aspect of alienation in the story, that between husband and wife, is shown as being both the cause and the result of the hopelessness of Hattie's toiling upon the land. She has become an unattractive, unpleasant woman and in the process she has driven her husband Dan away from her. It is Dan's lack of feeling and devotion for Hattie which contributes to the bleakness of her existence. Through her eyes, Dan is a "lazy, shiftless pig" who does not help her with the chores, and does not remember gratefully that it was her work which paid off the farm mortgage. Ross uses a centered consciousness, or the character who is not a narrator but through whom personal insights are revealed, to show the extent to which Hattie and Dan are divided from one another. In fact, some of Hattie's observations are necessarily suspect because of this method: if she and Dan had arrived at a division of labor early in their marriage, and if he has kept up his part of the work, then her bitterness would seem the result of selfpitying hindsight. Evidently, they did



divide the work:

For she had grubbed, and Dan had schemed. He had manoeuvred shrewdly with wheat and land, and she had raised chickens and pigs. Together they had made money. And now she was an ugly old crone, and he was the same as twenty years ago. Erect, lightfooted, not a wrinkle or grey hair. The tears began to blur her eyes. Somehow life had treated her a little raw ("No", p. 80).

What in fact seems to pain her the most is the difference between them: he is still young and she is becoming crabbed and old. Not all of the differences, as she herself knows, are due to her hard physical labor. When she realizes at a party in town that she compares poorly to the other women attending, she thinks that Dan is to blame for not having taken her out more often. But the gulf between her and Dan and his friends is more basic:

It was no use her trying to be high-toned. Dan was different. He was right at home in the big car, just as if he had been a gentleman all his life. He wasn't cut out to be a farmer, anyway. Being a lawyer or insurance-agent would have suited him ("No", p. 81).

This very honest self-appraisal is infrequent however, as Hattie usually avoids painful truths about the gulf between her and Dan by concentrating on barnyard economics. She worries about unmilked cows or the price of butter, rather than seeing that these issues only cloud the very real, unavoidable question of her incompatibility with Dan. Hence, there really is "No Other Way" for Hattie Glenn. Since she will not accept the failure of her marriage, and since she is unwilling to take steps including suicide to change her situation, she is doomed to continue on in the same rut. Unnecessary pain and wasted effort sum up Hattie's marriage. Together she and Dan could have faced the problems posed by the first two levels of alienation; instead, they let those problems act as a source of even greater unhappiness. Instead of posing a united front against hardship, they actually create additional suffering by battling one another:

Nine times out of ten the nagging and names were justified ---- but a little while and they had become a habit and then their whole lives were smothered in a tangle of harshness and misunderstanding. Today she could see the tangle, but it was too late to start unravelling ("No", p. 82).

The "tangle of harshness and misunderstanding" is Ross's way of identifying the final, culminated stage of the three levels of alienation. An examination of the development found in the novels reveals action that ends in a failure of personal relationships that is similar to that found in "Jug and Bottle".

Taken as a group the four Ross novels reveal a focus that increasingly concerns itself with the final level of alienation. From As For Me and My House to Sawbones Memorial, the message that is emphasized, and finally treated exclusively in the fourth novel, is that people stand desperately and tragically alone. This isolation, although certainly social in a broad sense, is almost always sexual in its specific interpretations. Whether heterosexual or homosexual, relationships never reveal any sort of consummation. The literary device of motif serves to act as a standard for the first level of alienation. Since not all Ross characters are farmers, he uses a "failed harvest" motif to unite the different stories, so that human endeavor resembles the sowing, and hoped for reaping, of a harvest. Philip Bentley's failed harvest in As For Me and My House is, of course, his frustrated career as preacher and his failure to become an artist. On the first level of alienation, he feels isolated from the very townspeople he serves, and this awareness quickly leads him to the next level, a doubting and estrangement of the self. This in turn leads to the final level, the division between man and woman. Usually the gulf between Philip and Mrs. Bentley is shown by his frequent retreats into a tiny study, but occasionally the tense silence breaks out into open warfare:

That was when I lost my temper. He tried to quiet me, seized my arms, said there were people going past, to control myself, and for answer I mocked him, jeered at the good, God-fearing man who was afraid the town might hear him quarreling with his wife. I told him about my old clothes, our ugly furniture, these dark, dingy-smelling little rooms. My voice was nearly a shout; the sound of it goaded me on. I said that when I married him I didn't know it was going to mean Horizons all my life. I had ambition too ---- and it was to be something more than the wife of a half-starved country preacher (House, pp. 43-4).

Of course, the continual tenseness and sniping is not a situation new to the Bentley marriage, but rather is an accumulated "tangle" of problems of the kind Hattie Glenn saw in her own life. Out of the many portraits of strife found in As For Me and My House though, comes a rather distinctive attitude towards relationships between men and women. Mrs. Bentley verbalizes the sentiment, while referring to Philip:

His own world was shattered and empty, but at that it was better than a woman's. He remained in it.... Partly because he was an artist, because he had to draw; partly because he was a man, and the solitude of his study was his last stronghold against me.... It's a woman's way I suppose, to keep on trying to subdue a man, to bind him to her, and it's a man's way to keep on just as determined to be free (House, p. 111).

Rather than placing under scrutiny Mrs. Bentley's opinion of men and women as almost natural rivals, Ross lets the comment stand as a social observation, a fact which may be valuable in understanding the rather tormented personal, and especially sexual, relationships found in his writing. By implication, part of the assumed antipathy between man and woman must be sexual, but the novel does not explore this aspect beyond a few references to Philip's cool distance in bed or his adulterous episode with Judith. Intensive exploration of sexual estrangement is reserved for the second novel, The Well, which although a conventional and less successful work than As For Me and My House, is interesting in its portrayal of a range of sexual motivations.

The failed harvest motif is present in The Well in the form of Larson's futile attempt to join the ideal past with the unyielding present. He tries to hold and freeze the past, only to find that it fails him by rotting or drifting away. The second level of alienation experienced by Larson is a splitting of the self into conflicting identities, each of which attempts to function in two mutually exclusive time experiences. As he attempts to reshape his environment, he antagonizes those around him to the point of hostility. In this caldron of emotion, the deterioration of the relationship is based on the sexual dimensions of the characters. Sylvia, Larson's wife, hates him and makes him pay a set sum every year for sexual favors. Chris Rowe, the young drifter who becomes a surrogate son to Larson, is suspicious of the old farmer and his affection. This suspicion manifests itself as an expression of subconscious homosexual anxieties during a dream in which Chris sees himself being felt and examined by Larson. The implied aura of secretiveness and unnaturalness that surrounds Larson and sexuality spills over to taint the affair between Chris and Sylvia also. Since Sylvia is wife to Larson, she becomes a substitute mother to Chris. The implied incest, coupled with a strong undercurrent of hostility between men and women, finds subconscious expression in another dream where Chris is being threatened by a giant version of Sylvia who is forcing him to drink a huge glass of milk. The spectre of woman as a domineering, scheming creature plotting for the control of a man who in turn only wishes to be free of her grasp becomes clearer towards the conclusion of the novel as Sylvia blackmails Chris into planning Larson's murder. Two issues that were indirectly dealt with in the first novel, agonized sexual relationships and antipathy between the sexes, become pivotal concerns in The Well. With each successive novel, Ross concentrates more exclusively with these themes, moving away from conflicts of man versus the landscape to man in conflict with his expressed or understood sexual roles. The

third novel, Whir of Gold, shows a heightened emphasis of this theme, with the two main characters, Sonny and Mad, involved in a relationship that punishes as much as it rewards the participants.

Sonny McAlpine's descent into despair is initiated by an awareness, like that of other characters, of a failed harvest. His is an inability to break into, or reap, the Montreal music scene. The frustration of unemployment ushers in the familiar doubting of the self, which in turn is completed by an inability to relate to those around oneself; in this case, the ignored companion is Mad, a well-meaning but luckless bargirl. Sonny and Mad fit nicely into the pattern of hostility between men and women as seen in As For Me and My House and The Well; Sonny endeavors to avoid being tied down by a woman, while Mad slowly ingratiates herself into his life. Sonny has a tough-guy attitude which condones the use of a woman for physical pleasure while shunning emotional involvement. After their initial meeting in a bar he makes his position clear to her, thinking:

Right. She couldn't put a rope on me, but no harm making sure she didn't get a chance to try. For there was something in the eyes that might insist, refuse to understand ---- something childlike, unanswerable. A threat of devotion: better straight speaking now than rough handling later on (Whir, p. 18).

The history of their affair is nearly pathetic in the repeated, clumsily set little snares Mad lays for Sonny's conscience and dependence, and in his just as studious efforts at remaining aloof. Sadly, it is his continuing effort to protect the virginal purity of his male independence that effectively prevents him from escaping the loneliness and isolation he feels in Montreal.

But the most dramatic proof of the isolated spheres that Mad and Sonny occupy is surely in their sexual lives. Unlike the tormented, and by social standards, unnatural sexuality depicted in The Well, the sex Ross shows as occurring between Sonny and Mad is of a "normal" hetero-

sexual sort. But their lovemaking is based on an abstract conceptualization of love, not upon spontaneity. Sonny, for instance, makes love according to a vaguely defined standard, one which has never been achieved by himself. Even as an adolescent, he was not able to have sex with Millie, a neighbor girl, without experiencing deep disappointment:

The last of Millie. We were neighbors and there was no lack of opportunity, but I never so much as danced with her or held her hand again. For I had taken her wanting a revelation and had got instead a scratchy half hour in the hay. And I never quite forgave her for it, always bore her a secret grudge (Whir, p. 22).

The driving search for a kind of transcendent sexual experience lends an ironic tone to his thoughts following sex with Mad:

No revelations with Mad, either; just experience and expertise; just uninhibited enthusiasm, uncomplicated delight (Whir, p. 22).

Sonny's objections appear to lack seriousness until they are seen in the light of an exaggerated view of ideal maleness. His code of behaviour demands that he look upon involvement as being beneath him, since, after all, all females fall short of an ideal and therefore should be regarded with suspicion as grasping creatures. The only real joy allowed by this attitude is a recognition of evidence of a he-man male characterization, such as occurs when Mad notices Sonny's erect penis during foreplay: "Oh Sonny ---- you mean that's all you!" (Whir, p. 21)". Size, in reference to one's penis, becomes a requisite of masculinity, one which Sonny can view with pleasure and manly detachment. His view of sexuality is self-centered, and heavily laden with obscure bitterness.

The tone of Whir of Gold, while consistent in its portrayal of the estrangement of the sexes, is oddly different from the other novels in that its characters seem to lead an existence that is worse than hopeless: it is pointless. For human contact to degenerate to the level that Sonny

and Mad know, is to experience ultimate pain and sorrow. Although Whir of Gold is considerably weaker than As For Me and My House in areas such as characterization, it certainly achieves its goal: a disturbing portrait of human suffering and loneliness that surpasses the emotional impact of previous novels. From the intensity of this low ebb of experience, Ross moves back again to a broader view in Sawbones Memorial, and in so doing, maintains the best part of social criticism while losing the more bitter, sometimes limiting, voice found in Whir of Gold.

The themes in Sawbones Memorial are still those of extreme personal alienation, but the observer here seems more sympathetic, more humane in his recording of them. Doc Hunter, having served the community of Upward for forty-five years, is attending a retirement banquet in his honor, and during the evening, he and others reminisce over years gone by. More than the tone and mood of this fourth novel have changed, as Ross himself states, "technically, at least, it's very different from anything else I've done".<sup>12</sup> The novel proceeds without the benefit of narrative description, and, for the most part, this method allows the author to achieve the kind of personal touch found in Mrs. Bentley's thoughts in As For Me and My House. Some of Upward's impressions regarding Doc are revealed through town gossip which is sometimes petty, sometimes malicious, but much of the information comes from Doc himself, either spoken aloud to others, or via the man's inner musings.

In the fourth novel, Sawbones Memorial, Ross continues to explore the theme of alienation. As Doc recalls his years of practice, he reveals certain episodes that hitherto have been known only imperfectly by the town gossips: advances made by a neighboring farmer on a young girl end in a pitchfork murder; shame over an illicit pregnancy causes a young man's suicide; and an incestuous relationship between a widower and his teenage

daughter ends in an abortion. There is also Benny who is a "closet" homosexual, desirous of giving his preferences expression, but fearing the self-righteous outrage of the town of Upward. Once, he tried to find homosexual friendship in a large town, where anonymity would allow him freedom, but because he was inexperienced the adventure ended in his being beaten and robbed. Benny returned to Upward to live and suffer amongst the whispers of neighbors.

Doc, the central character of the novel, sees and sympathizes with Benny's unhappiness, perhaps because he too has experienced the agony of conflict between desire and repression. When still a young man, Doc married a beautiful, well-bred woman. The warmth of their courtship suggested a blissful marriage, but the wedding proved instead that his bride was hopelessly frigid. The hindsight of experience tells Doc that perhaps his wife's aversion to sex was really just another "case" for which a cure could be effected, but the initial discovery was for both parties a shock that neither could grasp, much less discuss rationally:

Queen was the word [for her] - in the country of the lover there is no excess - and when at last the night of nights and she withdrawn, wincing as if assaulted by a horror, snout and fangs, how know it was not rejection but a case?..... how know that not disdain was snuffing it, nor disillusionment, but the gutter from some tainted memory, some childhood dread? <sup>13</sup>

Because of the wedge of misunderstanding driven between them, the affronted husband seeks to hurt his bride, using the most obvious weapon at hand, sex:

stalking off it that's how it is then there are other rooms, yes, other bodies too, you'll see (Sawbones, p. 111).

From those early nights of disappointment, Doc and his wife spin out a life together which consists only of discussions on "the weather and the roast", and he begins to spend more time at work and socializing than at home.

When Doc does find other female support, the relationships are, as in other



novels, strained by social convention or restrictive morality. One brief affair of this type eventually does lead to unforeseen involvement, but once again it is held back, hidden. Doc has sex with an Hungarian cleaning lady, Big Anna, who comes in a few times a week. Anna shortly becomes pregnant, and although Doc doesn't know for sure whether the child is his or Anna's husband's, he assumes he has fathered it. When the son Nick is born, Doc cares for him as if he were his own son, secretly buying shoes and clothing that the "Hunkie" family cannot afford. Following the examples of Philip and Larson in two previous novels, Doc takes in a son who is not his legitimately.

Again, the intimacy and naturalness of a normal, forthright father-son relationship is difficult, if not impossible to achieve. The repetition of this theme in so many of the works suggests that perhaps there may be a more universal applicability of its message, to cover the traditional family unit. Doc, in his actions towards Nick, may only exemplify the complex relationships found in any family. Doc befriends and guides Nick to adulthood without revealing the reason for his actions.

Every major action in the fourth novel emphasizes the theme of isolation found in Ross's previous work: that those who will themselves the warmth and beauty of a personal relationship are doomed not to find such felicity. Instead, they will be forever tantalized by being able to see their dream, seemingly within reach, but actually just beyond possession. At the close of Sawbones Memorial, Doc is retiring, and watches as Nick, his real or imagined son, comes to Upward to assume the vacant post. While speaking well of the incoming doctor, Doc cannot reveal the two men's true relationship, not even to Nick.

The conditions that recur time and again in Ross's fiction ---- man's seemingly unavoidable slide into total and abject alienation from

all levels of experience ---- act as a catalyst for dreams. Into the void of doubt and despair must go a cry of self-assertion no matter how weak or tenuous. The author's characters are dreamers, men, women and children, who create worlds and images to give themselves an alternative to their own bleak existences.

<sup>1</sup> Sinclair Ross, "Jug and Bottle", Queen's Quarterly, 56 (1949-50), p. 505. Hereafter cited as "Jug".

<sup>2</sup> Sinclair Ross, "The Lamp at Noon", in The Lamp at Noon and other stories, ed. by Malcolm Ross, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), pp. 21-2. Hereafter this story will be cited as "Lamp", and this short story collection will be referred to as NCL. Original editions of primary material have been used except in the case of stories appearing in the NCL collection. These incorporated changes in phrasing and therefore are taken as the version preferred by the author.

<sup>3</sup> Ross, "A Field of Wheat", in NCL, p. 73. Hereafter cited as "Field".

<sup>4</sup> Part One appeared as "Not By Rain Alone", in Volume 48 of the Spring 1941 issue, and Part Two appeared as "September Snow", in Volume 42 of the Winter 1935-6 issue.

<sup>5</sup> Ross, "Not By Rain Alone", in NCL, p. 55. Hereafter cited as "Rain".

<sup>6</sup> Ross provides the explanation for this combination in a letter addressed to myself, December 1, 1974.

<sup>7</sup> Ross, "The Runaway", in NCL, p. 86. Hereafter cited as "Runaway".

<sup>8</sup> Ross, As For Me and My House (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1941), p. 212. Hereafter cited as House.

<sup>9</sup> Ross, The Well, (Toronto: MacMillan, 1958), p. 99. Hereafter cited as Well.

<sup>10</sup> Ross, Whir of Gold (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), pp. 1-2. Hereafter cited as Whir.

<sup>11</sup> Ross, "No Other Way", Nash's Pall Mall Magazine, 94 (1934), p. 80. Hereafter cited as "No".

<sup>12</sup> A letter from Ross to myself, January 25, 1975.

<sup>13</sup> Ross, Sawbones Memorial (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), pp. 110-11. Hereafter cited as Sawbones.

Three alternatives face the character who experiences the several manifestations of alienation in Ross's fiction: he may chose to fight, flee, or dream. The first two choices appear unacceptable to most characters because confrontation with the reality of the landscape invariably seems hopeless, and actual flight poses special dangers and risks of its own. Dreaming is the choice made by most characters, as they entertain either momentary hopes or elaborate fantasies of realities alternative to the ones they live with. In this way the universe becomes ordered with personal meaning, and a special language is created to deal with the assigned values that everyday objects assume. This language and system of values is a body of symbolism that Ross uses with recurrence and consistency. If he may be said to have a theory of art, an aesthetic, it surely must include a notion of the interplay between man's worlds of daylight experience and imaginary drift.

The major symbols Ross uses fall into two large groupings: those which suggest vitality, dynamicism, and a high standard of human endeavor or experience, and those which point to an artificially induced preservation or stagnation of the qualities of the first group. In the first grouping, the most important images are horses, with music (and musical instruments), and trains performing a correlative function. The second grouping may be broadly described as being typified by various kinds of physical enclosures, or closed spaces. Elements from the two groups are often seen in juxtaposition, and sometimes in roles that actually conflict with one another. A character may wish to sustain the beauty of a given moment beyond its natural duration and Ross reveals this action through, for example, the depiction of reflections trapped in a well. Throughout his writing, the author shows that a symbol, like the quality it represents, is a living thing, and to trap or encase it is to deprive it of life.

The simplest way of avoiding the suffering imposed by reality is to attempt an escape, and while few characters actually follow through with this alternative, several make it the basis for their fantasies. Trains become the symbolic entities for this fantasy and two beliefs seem prompted by the sound of a train whistle: one, that the immediate world can be forsaken, and two, that a better world, however vaguely conceived, waits at the end of the tracks.

In its simplest, most innocent usage, the train appears as part of a youthful, ideal conceptualization of love. In "Saturday Night", a young man boards a train to journey towards an affair that has been greatly enhanced in his imagination. When he arrives at his destination, he finds that the girl he thought was fond of him has gone to a dance with another fellow. The story is a lesson in bitter disappointment, but the opening journey is a study in the use of beautiful images of hope and youthful vigor. The train ride is described in terms of idyllic beauty; the world seems bathed in a "golden stillness". The spirit of young love, undaunted and pure, seems perfectly reflected by the passage of the train which cuffs aside static objects on the countryside, and with a "whisk and flourish" asserts its freedom and self-determination.

In more adult perceptions of the symbol, a character may relate to trains because he is running from his past, like Chris Rowe in The Well, or trying to shake free from the oppressiveness of the present, like Judith in As For Me and My House. Or, he may be trying to avoid all aspects of his existence, including the future, as Philip Bentley did during his youth. Bentley, burdened with an uncertain, perhaps shameful past, a stifling present, and a future that seems only too bleak, saw in the train a glimpse of a far different existence:

He grew up in one of these little Main Streets, rebelling

against its cramp and pettiness, looking farther. Somewhere, potential unknown, there was another world, his world; and every day the train sped into it, and every day he watched it, hungered, went on dreaming (House, p. 48).

The symbol itself has a vitality, a dynamicism that appeals to, and sometimes hypnotizes, the senses. While Philip and Mrs. Bentley sit under a trestle, a train approaches:

Then the bridge over us picked up the coming of a train. It was there even while the silence was still intact. At last we heard a distant whistle-blade, then a single point of sound, like one drop of water in a whole sky. It dilated, spread. The sky and silence began imperceptibly to fill with it. We steeled ourselves a little, feeling the pounding onrush in the trestle of the bridge. It quickened, gathered, shook the earth, then swept in an iron roar above us, thundering and dark (House, pp. 47-8).

The irresistible force of the sound, and by implication, of the power of the symbol itself, is obsessive for the character. While this can be a power for creativeness, for constructing dreams, it can also be destructive, as will be shown in Chapter Four.

Music and musical instruments, while symbolic of creativeness, and the shaping of dreams, differ from train images in that the restructuring of present realities takes a far more dominant interpretation rather than any hint of the possibility of using the medium or its instruments as a means of flight. Ross either uses music to denote a higher order of social status and sensibility, or more abstractly, the striving of the human spirit to attain an aesthetic height. While music has these symbolic qualities for the various characters, Ross shows that the strived-for goal is not always that which proves most expedient, and the quality symbolized may be sacrificed for a need of somewhat lesser, but more immediately demanding nature.

For farm families who have known only dirt and grinding physical labor, the presence of a piano in a home seems to suggest elements of another, more cultured and refined world. A farm wife, for instance, can

hope that if for nothing else, her toil will enable her children to have certain advantages she has not had:

It was the children now, Joe and Annabelle: this winter perhaps they could send them to school in town and let them take music lessons ("Field", p. 75).

This emphasis on music as a means towards improving the total person, and in general the commitment of parents to the betterment of their childrens' future, becomes the focus which gives an otherwise demoralizing existence some meaning and direction.

In "A Cornet at Night", a story which concentrates on the intense feelings that music can generate, the mother depicted is only one of several Ross women who want better than the farm for their sons and daughters, and hers is a desire which she must defend against her more practical husband, who objects:

"A dollar for lessons and the wheat shelling! When I was his age I didn't even get to school".  
 "Exactly", [the] mother scored, "and look at you today.  
 Is it any wonder I want him to be different?"<sup>1</sup>

Tommy, the son, discovers that there is more to music than even his mother appreciates when a young musician arrives at the farm looking for seasonal work. The newcomer reveals an uplifting, exciting dimension of music, one which has the power to transform reality. In describing the cornet itself, the author employs language complete with traditional images of life and richness. Tommy recalls:

Even though it was safely away in its case again I could still feel the cornet's presence as if it were a living thing. Somehow its gold and shapeliness persisted, transfiguring day, quickening the dusty harvest fields to a gleam and lustre like its own. And I felt assured, involved. Suddenly there was a force in life, a current, an inevitability, carrying me along too ("Cornet", p. 47).

The use of the word "golden" is important in that Ross often uses it in situations where the imagination is in the process of being freed, taking

wing. The following passage uses the word as part of a description of an experience that is parallel to the imaginary flight sequence found in "A Day With Pegasus", which will be discussed later. The narrator describes the cornet as it is lifted from its case:

In the dim, soft darkness I could see it glow and quicken.  
And I remember still what a long and fearful moment it  
was, crouched and steeling myself, waiting for him to  
begin.

And I was right: when they came the notes were  
piercing, golden as the cornet itself, and they gave life  
expanse that it had never known before. They floated up  
against the night, and each for a moment hung there clear  
and visible. Sometimes they mounted poignant and sheer.  
Sometimes they soared and then, like a bird alighting,  
fell and brushed earth again ("Cornet", p. 49).

Gradually, Tommy is captivated by the sound of the music and he becomes aware of ethereal realms of pure artistic enjoyment. The music is "like slow suspended lightening, chilled sometimes with a glimpse of the unknown.... It marched us miles. It made the feet eager and the heart brave. It said that life was worth the living and bright as morning shone ahead to show the way" ("Cornet", p. 49). Music becomes the light that shines through boredom, drudgery and insensibility. To hear inspiring music is like experiencing a moment of unique inspiration----the time is rare, and should be cherished. In the words of the narrator, "A harvest, however lean, is certain every year; but a cornet at night is golden only once" ("Cornet", p. 51).

The heightened sensitivity and insight commonly associated with artists of all fields does not prevent the musician, say, from knowing the acute social and psychic estrangement felt by others, and for him, music sometimes becomes a refuge, or haven from feelings of alienation and despair. Mrs. Bentley, in As For Me and My House, seeks a restorative for her low spirits after dealing with hypocritical townsfolk. In desperation, she resolves:



Tomorrow I must play the piano again, play it and hammer it and charge it to the town's complete annihilation. Even though Philip slams a door or two and starts his pacing. For both our sakes I must (House, p. 19).

Another alienated figure from Horizon, Judith, dreams of escaping her bleak surroundings, and does so in limited fashion by surrendering herself to song. Mrs. Bentley watches as Judith sings in the choir:

The rest of us, I think, were vaguely and secretly a little afraid [of a wind storm]. The strum and whimper were wearing on our nerves. But Judith seemed to respond to it, ride up with it, feel it the way a singer feels an orchestra. There was something feral in her voice, that even the pace and staidness of her hymn could not restrain.

"She stood there all the time so white and small", Philip said afterwards. "Unaware of herself" (House, pp. 64-5).

Ultimately then, the purely artistic side of music can be manipulated for baser, more mundane needs, such as a quick release from reality. Mrs. Bentley, for instance, not only takes pleasure in music for its own sake but uses it to give vent to her continually cramped defiance. Judith, while described as being a natural singer, seems more intent to use her talent to bring on an autohypnotic state of sorts. Sonny McAlpine, in Whir of Gold, loves music but loves money and success equally well and when he finds himself threatened with poverty and rejection, he creates for himself a temporary euphoria by playing a particularly unfettered kind of music, jazz. The swing of jazz seems to deny the evidence of his limitations and failures. When he decides to resort to thievery, he attempts to rationalize his actions by comparing the drastic move to the improvisations of jazz:

Now, though----today of all days----I felt release, exhilaration. I was good. Half a dozen notes came out and hung together----made something. I worked them over a time or two, shaped them----took pencil and paper and wrote them down.... Good. Just let myself go, be what I was, do what I could. The farm and the sonatas... were all a thousand miles away. Improvise----let go, yield to what you feel, project it----wasn't that the way to make good jazz (Whir, p. 126)?

The informing power of music, like the allure of trains, is never static, but always presents a dynamic face that is inspiring to the potential dreamer. With either of these two inspirations close at hand, the character is able to look beyond the confines of his own personal Horizon. The third symbol in this group, the horse, has the same powers as the other two, plus an added special dimension that the others never quite achieve. While the temptation of trains and the beauty of music are powerful, they are somehow always external to those who perceive their value, whereas part of a horse's symbolic impact definitely resides in its ability to merge with and sometimes subordinate the consciousness of the character who owns or rides the animal.

During the Depression years, the horse was still a visible, important part of farm life. While mechanization had introduced the tractor and combine, hand implements and the horse were still the economic standbys of many farmers. Historically, the horse has accrued mythic and symbolic dimensions so widespread in use and recognition that not only those who, like writers, consciously manipulate symbols are familiar with the values of the image, but laymen too have a general "feel" for the image. Ross capitalizes on this common recognition, making the horse central to many characters perception of themselves and their world. In all, the horse becomes a barometer of thought and behaviour, one which varies according to the subjective perceptions of characters while maintaining a central unified statement of belief. Ross, besides being aware of the potential of symbol as meaning, is quite conscious of its value as a function of form, ordering the plot and characters around the dimensions of an image. The horse image is used in three ways which are related and yet distinct in the manner in which they affect the unfolding structure of a story. These are the horse as: an external object which remains distinct from

the self but which has the power to prompt contemplation or action by its presence; a catalyst for the attainment or enactment of transcendent thought or experience, including a sense of "pure" sexuality; and as a confidant, closely identified with consciousness or other identifications of inner awareness.

The horse as external object is often perceived as being an image that measures an owner's self-worth or social status. Possession of a good horse reflects well upon the owner and hints at, among other things, his higher level of business sense and intelligence. Therefore, if a newly-purchased horse or team of horses turns out to be worthless, as occurs in "The Runaway", the owner may experience a personal crisis:

His pride as he spanked up Main Street, the same pride I had witnessed earlier that day, the same youth and showmanship; and then the sudden collapse of it all, the unbearable moment of humiliation when the Diamonds, instead of springing away with flying manes and foaming mouths, striking sparks of envy and wonder from the heart of every beholder, simply stood there, chewed their bits and trembled ("Runaway", p. 87).

The emphasis placed on intelligent horse-buying in this short story is perhaps exaggerated for humorous effect, but nevertheless reveals the importance of the image as a symbol of self-worth. In a world of gruelling hard labor the majesty of a flowing mane and sleek, muscular lines acts as a reassurance to people whose lives seem to lack beauty of any kind.

Ownership of a horse may likewise signal the attainment of manhood, where a father makes a gift of the animal during what is only a slightly refined version of an initiation ceremony. The responsibility of caring for, and raising the gift is impressed upon a boy, as is seen in "A Day With Pegasus". Such a gift implies trust and acceptance of a son, one of the few moments when individuals successfully reach out to each other in Ross's work. Fathers and sons in fact are often estranged, even unrelated

by blood, and a horse is the bond that unites them. In As For Me and My House, Philip attempts to make an orphaned boy, Steven, take the place of the son he never had. He gives the boy a horse to gain his trust and affection, an act that Paul, the teacher, feels is highly significant:

..."The horse is good for him. Good for his self-respect. You can't ride a horse and feel altogether worthless, or be altogether convinced that society's little world is the word. If I had a boy of my own that's what he'd do. There's no better way to grow a mind" (House, p. 61).

The male figure in search of a son appears again in The Well, with Larson attempting to establish a bond with Chris, by assigning the care of a favorite stallion, North, to the young man. Both men are suspicious of others, and of each other at first, but the signal of trust given through the horse is effective in bringing the two together. For Chris who has tried, often futilely, to gain the approval of others, the care of North is a clear sign of another's acceptance, and of an elevated importance. As he leads the stallion from a stall, he feels like "a small boy unexpectedly in charge of an elephant. If only there was someone to see him!" (Well, p. 45). While the importance of the image in establishing status or bonds of understanding is not to be denied, it nevertheless clearly remains outside a character's imaginative perception of himself. That is, in the case of Chris, he sees the horse and its qualities lending importance to himself, not actually becoming merged with his self. The image and the perceiver of the image remain distinct from one another.

A more intense, and personal, relationship to the symbol results from seeing the horse as an indication of transcendent qualities or experience, which is the second major employment of the image. The act of transcendence itself may cover the range of human experience from spiritual, through mental, to sexual aspects. Since the majority of Ross characters are caught in a reality that binds, the desire to break free

is often expressed symbolically through the horse, an image of mobility and freedom. Transcendence, shown in terms of a flying above earthly limitations, point to a freeing of the human spirit. Ross unites rural ingredients with a mythical foundation when depicting the release in "A Day With Pegasus". The mythical Pegasus story tells of a winged horse capable of soaring with its rider high above the earth, bringing glory to those who could control it.<sup>2</sup> In the Ross story, a boy waits eagerly to take possession of a colt promised him months earlier by his parents. When the colt is born, it becomes the focus for daydreams about rodeos and fantastic rides that somehow become airborne. Adults do not always fully appreciate the beauty of these imagined excursions though, and the boy is subject to the chiding of his elders. Their reaction however, prompts him to indulge in even greater exercises of fantasy. Daydreams about his new colt cause him to be late for school and to be scolded for talking in class, but his teacher's stern rebukes cannot tear him away from his preoccupation:

He couldn't help himself. The rhythm persisted, was stronger than his will, than his embarrassment, stronger even than the implacability of Miss Kenley's tapping ruler. "We're waiting, Peter", she repeated sternly, but this time he didn't hear at all. Gradually the class-room fell away from him. The light flashed golden in his eyes again. The fields sped reeling young and green.<sup>3</sup>

The transition from everyday dull reality to uplifting experience is paralleled by a similar transcendence seen in terms of an ideal sexual experience. The typical Ross character, finding intimate, and especially sexual, encounters inadequate or threatening, cherishes an idealized version of intimacy. The ideal is formulated in the character's mind and projected upon the outside world where he often finds the desired qualities suggested by the image of a horse.

When the horse is used to suggest a male sexual identity, characters see in the animal qualities of solid strength and tremendous virility: the sexual organs themselves denote a prodigious capacity for intercourse. The male ideal, as intimated by Philip Bentley's actions, and as verbalized by Sonny McAlpine, becomes linked with a selective view of animal potency. Old Larson in The Well attempts to mold himself to the ideal by comparing himself to a stud horse he owns:

"Sylvia's always after me to get rid of him. Doesn't like him on account of the mares. After there's been one she says she can hardly look the men in the face when they come in for a meal, because they've been watching and making jokes and she knows what's on their mind. Says it makes me worse too." He winked and gave a hitch to his overalls. "Says the day there's been a mare she knows what she's in for" (Well, p. 96).

When the image suggests female sexuality, the portrait is one of a sensuous seductress who yields to the male an exotic, uplifting experience without demanding a commitment in return. The male dream of the female who gives wholly of herself, who doesn't demand involvement and yet turns herself over for the satisfaction of the male, takes form in the image. All that sex should be, according to this fantasy, is offered symbolically through the qualities of the animal. The appeal of adventure and excitement in "The Outlaw" takes on a particularly sensuous tone as it seems to come from the horse itself. The outlaw is a mare noted for her wild behavior who seems to tempt the young boy to ride her by the very virtue of her notoriety. The act of riding, with its suggestive overtones, becomes quite explicit in meaning as the boy describes the temptation to mount her:

To approach her was to be enlarged, transported. She was coal-black, gleaming, queenly. Her mane had a ripple and her neck an arch. And somehow, softly and mysteriously, she was always burning. The reflection on her flossy hide, whether of winter sunshine or yellow lantern light, seemed the glow of some fierce,

secret passion. There were moments when I felt the whole stable charged with her, as if she were the priestess of her kind, in communion with her deity. <sup>4</sup>

All these things Isabel promises and like a "temptress", she appeals to the narrator's male pride, "she bore me off to the mountain top of my vanity" ("Outlaw", p. 26). For the image to be complete in ideal conceptualization, the actual experience must be as exhilarating as promised, which is what the boy discovers when he finally does ride Isabel. The entire episode is very much like the teaching of a sexual novice by an older accomplished practitioner.

The story of Isabel and the aura that she has stays with Ross and emerges in his third novel, Whir of Gold. Here, the symbolic qualities of the image are used to provide contrast to the disappointing sexuality of the main character's female companion. Ross establishes a continuity between "The Outlaw" and Whir of Gold by having Sonny recall Isabel as if he were the unnamed boy in the short story. Mad in comparison to Isabel's ideal nature is as disappointing as Millie, a neighbor girl mentioned in the short story, had been. Millie, as Ross reveals in the novel, was a disappointing episode in Sonny's sexual education, very much like Mad is in his adult life. The memory of Isabel, by contrast, is fondly recalled, with hints of her sensuality included. Not only does she represent an ideal of female beauty, but a traditional standard of woman as subordinate to man. She assumes an advisory role, exhorting him to ever greater heights, tempting him with the assurance that he can, indeed, succeed.

The personal appeal and identification with the image found in "The Outlaw" and Whir of Gold suggest the third usage of the symbol, that of the horse as confidant, or as some reflection of a character's consciousness. In this image of the innermost self, reside childlike notions of

trust and intuition. The self is able to take its most personal and private fears and dreams and make them appear objectified, external. Looking at the personal dimension from some removed vantage point, a character has a reassurance of external proof, which in fact actually has been created by himself. A boy, for instance, asks his horse whether a certain dream is in fact reality; the horse, acting as an alter ego to the boy, answers in the affirmative, and the dream, now tested by a second opinion, is accepted as tangible reality. As simplistic and nonsensical as this process may seem to an outside observer, it is the kind of rationalization which makes absolute sense to the person using it.

The blurring of distinction between the world of the imagination and the external world is especially evident in stories like "One's A Heifer" where a boy maintains a running conversation with his horse, Tim, that greatly affects both his waking and dreaming thoughts. The horse is used as a sounding board by the youth to help build an otherwise mundane search for two missing calves into an excursion into danger and intrigue. A similar but more intense and structurally interesting relationship spans the action of two works, the short story "The Outlaw" and the novel Whir of Gold, by using the horse Isabel as a linking device.

In "The Outlaw", the narrator and Isabel, his horse, relate in a manner that is full of juvenile charm and the allure of conspiratorial secrecy. Boy and horse plot against an adult world of restrictions and misunderstanding. The boy is warned by his parents against riding what is evidently a dangerous horse. But, using the kind of subjective interplay described previously, the boy convinces himself he must do the forbidden. Even a friend of the same age, Millie, does not share in the forbidden ride which proves to be a moment of exciting revelation. The horse, symbolic of the perfect lover, also stands for the perfect friend



in a child's uncomplicated view of the world.

Later, with an older character, in Whir of Gold, Ross depicts this ideal in an evolved, highly internalized form: Isabel in the novel is a psychological presence which is only discernable to the main character, Sonny, who is supposedly a continuation of the boy's character in "The Outlaw". For him, she is the "outlaw" side of his subconscious, the side which strains against the strictly moral upbringing given him by his mother. As a grown man, he allows the memory of his mother to hover on the perimeter of his conscience, disapproving of shady friends:

Twice he had dragged me along - literally dragged, for my mother had also sized him up for what he was and thought I shouldn't - and we had had T-bone steaks and double scotches. (Oh yes, like a good Westerner she too had faith in basic human goodness; still, where her Sonny was concerned, there were certain types at which she thought it wise to draw the line) (Whir, p. 55).

In contrast to the motherly advice, the private bond of companionship offered by the memory of Isabel is a call to the excitement of a dangerous gamble. Sonny considers joining another man in staging a hold-up and is rebuked by the ghost of his mother's moralizing voice. But, just as the conservative side of his conscience seems to gain an upperhand, he is reminded of his exhilarating childhood ride:

But I had forgotten Isabel.... Two or three times around - touching waxy faces, making sure they were all in place, spitting on myself for what I had done to them - and suddenly there she was, hell-bent for leather, tossing years and corpses as she had many times tossed me. For she, too, had been in on the beginnings and, whatever or whomever else I was laying out, I wasn't laying out for her. A witch of a horse: from the rock her hoof had struck there would always flow a clear bright stream, never the bitter waters of remorse and failure. They had been good, brave beginnings, and that was what they would always be. The wind through her mane would always have a sting of sky and wonder (Whir, p. 95).

The horse image in Whir of Gold is summoned to meet the need for a companionship of the spirit and also stands for that transcendent sweep that seeks to overthrow human limitations. Isabel, while guaranteeing nothing, holds forth the most tantalizing vision known to man: to become, to know more than is. Of all the horse images, indeed of all the symbols of vitality in Ross's work, Isabel exemplifies best the breadth and power of the human imagination in its struggle to conceive a more ideal, more human state. The condition to remember, of course, is that Isabel promises nothing, and for some characters this knowledge of possible failure prompts a desire to hold forever the moment when the foot is on the stirrup and the ride not yet taken. The passage of time prevents the dream from being held perfectly in abeyance. While some characters hope to hold the reins forever, keeping one foot raised to the stirrup, the horse dies or simply gallops away. This desire to hold the golden expectant moment in limbo is so common with Ross's people that a second set of symbols, in contrast to the images of life and vitality, may be identified.

The desire to hold static the excitement and expectancy of dreams is represented by images of physical enclosure. The appearance of an enclosure signals an attempt by the imagination to maintain stasis where none in fact exists; the imagination attempts to protect itself from encroaching realities, but in so doing, exiles itself to realms of stagnation. The most obvious form for the enclosure is as a symbolic refuge into which a character retreats and closes himself off from the outside world. A child's withdrawal from reality is explored in stories such as "Pegasus", "Circus in Town", "The Lamp at Noon", and "One's a Heifer", and is symbolized by a loft or a stable. Children retreat to lofts to protect fantasies from the perhaps unsympathetic eyes and ears of adults. In

"A Day With Pegasus" and "Circus in Town" the child is shown in a sheltered environment, held safely away from realities that could interrupt and destroy imaginative worlds. Symbolically, this state is depicted by having the child summon forth dreams in the isolated, hidden space of a loft. In "The Lamp at Noon", a stable again reflects an immature defense on the part of an adult against ostensible realities. The main character retreats to a stable to shield himself from the bitterness of a summer storm and the increasing storminess of his marriage:

There was a deep hollow calm within, a vast darkness engulfed beneath the tides of moaning wind. He stood breathless a moment, hushed almost to a stupor by the sudden extinction of the storm and the stillness that enfolded him. It was a long, far-reaching stillness. The first dim stalls and rafters led the way into cavern-like obscurity, into vaults and recesses that extended far beyond the stable walls. Nor in these first quiet moments did he forbid the illusion, the sense of release from a harsh, familiar world into one of peace and darkness ("Lamp", p. 19).

The protective, womblike aspects of the enclosure found in these stories are simple enough, and quickly recognized, but in "One's A Heifer" the enclosure becomes the ultimate expression of an ambiguity that lies at the heart of this desire to protect the self, and especially the imaginative self.

In what is perhaps one of his best short stories, "One's A Heifer", Ross achieves a sense of tense balance and ambiguity through the juxtaposition of the two major types of symbol. A youthful narrator searching for a pair of lost calves is the central character of the story, and as he begins his journey a typically close relationship between the boy and horse, already discussed, is revealed. When the boy arrives at a small farm he becomes suspicious that the owner, Vickers, may be hiding the missing calves. Largely through the magnifications of his imagination, the suspicions grow until the boy falls asleep while at the farm. During

an eerie dream sequence, the horse appears to add credence to the growing fantastical suspicions, and when the boy becomes convinced, without any kind of concrete evidence, that Vickers is guilty of something, almost anything (including the hint that Vickers may be hiding a woman's corpse), his interest becomes focused upon a locked stable. The climax of the story occurs when a confrontation between reality and fantasy seems imminent, as the boy attempts to open the stable. If the stable were to open, the fantasies conjured about the stable by the boy would stand face to face with the evidence of outward reality. As it is, he is prevented from opening the stable and this comparison is never completed. The test which would have revealed calves, corpse, or nothing, would also have meant the end of fantasy. For this reason the boy fears the stable itself, he is "Terrified of the stall", not of Vickers or of its possible contents. The subconscious conflict between a desire to see and a desire not to see stems not from Vickers, but from what the revelation may imply to the boy's perception of himself, and his imaginative world. Vickers would have stood before the boy as a real human being, not merely as a stage prop to the boy's drama of the mind. Instead, the boy gallops away with his dreams, and his childish perceptions, intact. Even when he finds that Vickers could not possibly have had the calves, he is not ashamed of his first overenthusiastic conclusions, rather he chooses to grasp an alternative that allows a continuation of the atmosphere of mystery:

"But the stall, then - just because I wanted to look inside he knocked me down - and if it wasn't the calves in there -" <sup>5</sup>

The obvious answer, that the farmer didn't like a nosey kid snooping around his property, doesn't occur to the boy.

Ross shows that, during the years of childhood, the desire to protect dreams from the onslaughts of adult versions of truth may sometimes be

necessary to the formation of a strong healthy imagination. However, as the dreamer becomes older and his surroundings demand a more adult, albeit a more realistic vision, the imagination which once provided happy security, may become sinister and suffocating. In "One's A Heifer", the narrator is prevented from experiencing greater self and social knowledge because of the insular nature of his perceptions. In other Ross works, enclosures other than a stall or loft symbolize this stunted growth, and the most famous is Philip Bentley's cramped study. Whenever the pressures of his job, marriage, or the memories of his failures become too much for him to cope with, Philip retreats to his study where he can create an alternative, however transient, reality. Behind his closed door, he paints and gives voice to the scorn that he feels for the town of Horizon, but dares not voice it aloud to the townsfolk themselves. His hypocrisy is like an ever-shrinking room which excludes all evidence of reality counter to that provided by his imagination. Finally, when his wife is pushed out of the little room, Philip is left alone with his memories and dreams inside a locked, safe study.

For the people of Horizon, the privateness of Philip's study is something they rarely glimpse, let alone understand. And yet they too often retreat to little areas of relative solace and supposed peace. Their religious faith and the church where they practice it, are symbolic representations of futile attempts to create and live within counter realities. During hymnals, their voices raise up in song, even though the scream of a raging storm outside all but drowns out their attempts at a spiritual self-affirmation. As Mrs. Bentley plays the organ, she watches the congregation react to the wind:

Service was difficult this morning. They were  
listening to the wind, not Philip, the whimpering

and strumming through the eaves, and the dry hard cackle of sand against the windows. From the organ I could see their faces pinched and stiffened with anxiety. They sat in tense, bolt upright rows, most of the time their eyes on the ceiling, as if it were the sky and they were trying to read the weather (House, p. 63).

In last analysis though, theirs is seen as a futile attempt at ignoring the awesome truths of their individual and collective failures in a struggle with the land. The walls of the church remain standing, just as Philip's study remains a sanctuary of sorts, but both enclosures seem weak, almost fragile when compared to the evidences of reality that surround them. The utter feeling of futility is revealed in an episode following the death of a young boy, son to a farming couple. For the wife, this is the climax to years of heartbreaking toil on the farm, she feels as if the land is finally winning, that the elements have claimed a victory. For her, the death of her son then, is more than a single death, it is symbolic of the death of her own existence, her own meaning. In desperation, she hopes to deny the truth of this symbolic death, by attempting to enclose and protect a remnant of her dreams, the body of her son, from the ravages of the reality of the landscape. Like those who hope to keep inviolate the bodies of their loved ones by burying them in lead-lined coffins, she demands that her husband build an enclosure for their boy's grave:

There are dry, stalky weeds on the graves, and you can see where gophers and badgers have been burrowing. When the service was over and the others had gone Mrs. Lawson started crying again that she didn't want anyone belonging to her left in such a place. Lawson told her he would go to town tomorrow for chicken wire, and sink a fence of it all round the grave to the depth of the coffin (House, p. 193).

The attempt of course is feeble and doomed from the start, just as the attempts to wring a life out of the land seem doomed. As Lawson, the

father of the dead boy, leaves the cemetery, he observes that perhaps his son has been lucky in one way:

He stood staring across the hot burned fields,  
his lips pinched tight and the veins on his  
forehead standing out as he tried to steady  
himself. At last, almost bitterly, he said,  
"We aren't going to get even our seed this  
year. Maybe he's not missing such a lot"  
(House, p. 193).

Dreams that die along with loved ones, and yet do not lie peacefully, appear again in The Well, and the main character, Larson, seems to a continuation of the As For Me and My House character of Lawson. Larson, or Lawson, now appears as a farmer who has somehow managed to make a good living from the land, but in the process has lost a beloved wife and son. Like his counterpart in As For Me and My House who sought to deny the ravages of time and the elements with a small fence, Larson tries to preserve his first homestead where idealized memories of an earlier life linger. Within the fenced-in enclosure of the farmyard exists another portrayal of the enclosure image, a covered and locked well. Not only does the well serve as a catalyst to bring forth memories of another time, but it serves as a concrete representation of Larson's subconscious. Impressions, like stones, are dropped into it, and except for the momentary disturbance of widening rings, appear to disappear forever. Only Larson has a knowledge of what really lies beneath the surface of the dark waters in the shaft, and even his knowing is imperfect. He drops a stone into the well and notes,

"Now it's steady again - I can see it shining."  
He glanced round after a moment and gave a  
pleased little nod. "Drop something in and you  
lose it for a while. Always comes back all right,  
but you've got to give it time. One day last  
spring when I was putting up the fence something  
went wrong - thought I'd lost it sure. You can  
see it shining and you can see yourself. You  
don't know it's you till you move, and then it  
moves too" (Well, p. 104).

As when he looks into the well to see his own face, Larson uses his imaginative vision to look in upon his inner self. But, his perception like the well is covered, locked down, enclosed in such a way that new impressions, those that would allow the old man to interact with his surroundings, cannot contribute to his growth as a total person. Ross depicts a closed system which, although based on the informing powers of the imagination, represents nothing more than a destructive force which places its creator in bondage.

The symbolic precedence of the locked study of Philip Bentley and the well belonging to Larson in Ross's first two novels is continued in Whir of Gold, but referred to in less direct and less concrete form. The most obvious enclosure is Sonny's room, and it is certainly a shell wherein the young musician isolates himself from others and from unpleasant realities. The city of Montreal, while being closed off from Sonny, is also a vast room of humanity where he is able to find anonymity. While these enclosures perform the same symbolic function as those in previous works, the symbol no longer possesses a central importance. Unlike Philip's study, which becomes laden with interpretative value, which he is aware of and maintains, the room in Montreal is really no more than a backdrop to the emotions portrayed.

With Whir of Gold there occurs a significant weakening in importance of the symbol in Ross's technique. The artist has relied upon some familiar symbols throughout his works, and before The Well, these were strong as well as immediate. Horses and trains appeared vividly and at center stage. In Whir of Gold music appears as a significant symbolic entity but the central symbol, the horse, cannot appear logically in a story that has an urban setting. Ross nevertheless attempts to validate its inclusion through the use of flashbacks, harkening back



to an earlier short story, "The Outlaw". The horse image in Whir of Gold, though important, differs from earlier usage in that its presence is distanced not only from Sonny's perception, but from the reader's as well. The horse image never really rises above being a literary device, it loses verve and vitality as the reader is always aware that the memory is a flashback sandwiched between parts of the main narrative. This change in technique must be taken as a serious change in Ross's utilization of images, for in Sawbones Memorial, the change is even more pronounced.

The main characters in Sawbones Memorial are an interesting exception in Ross's canon because they are not closely associated with any one of the main established symbols. True, Doc does see Big Anna sexually as having the force and drive of a horse, and Benny, the town homosexual, gains acceptance through his music, but these identifications are made briefly and cannot be said to be central to the story in the way that similar imagery in earlier works is. If Ross has seemingly ceased to use the language of the dream, then it would appear possible that his attitude towards the dream itself has altered. The significance of this transformation and its importance to dream and fantasy will be discussed in Chapter Four.

- <sup>1</sup> "Cornet at Night", in NCL, p. 36. Hereafter cited as "Cornet".
- <sup>2</sup> Bulfinch's Mythology (1964; rpt. London: Hemlyn Publishing, 1969), pp. 91-2.
- <sup>3</sup> Ross, "A Day With Pegasus", Queen's Quarterly, 45 (1938), p. 146. Hereafter cited as "Pegasus".
- <sup>4</sup> Ross, "The Outlaw", in NCL, p. 25. Hereafter cited as "Outlaw".
- <sup>5</sup> Ross, "One's a Heifer", in Canadian Accent: A Collection of Stories and Poems by Contemporary Writers from Canada, ed. by Ralph Gustafson (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1944), p. 128. Hereafter cited as "Heifer".

Throughout his fiction, Ross endeavors to show that the dividing line between dream and reality is indistinct, and often the two worlds overlap one another. His characters are the victims of this blurring, as they act out their lives according to the dictates of one world only to find one day that they actually live in the other. This revelation, though evident in many works, is particularly impressive in "The Painted Door". In this short story, John is a "slow, unambitious" man, content with his farm and cattle" and "naively proud" of his wife, Ann. His wife is not nearly as happy with their life as he is, and she despairs that she may never have the comforts and fine clothes that other women have. One day, when John must visit his father's farm several miles away, and Ann is left alone to paint in the house, a neighbour, Steve, visits her. Young, hungry for excitement and change, she feels drawn to the young man and during their supper together, she feels renewed, caught up in a special experience:

The texture of the moment was satisfyingly dreamlike:  
an incredibility perceived as such, yet acquiesced in. <sup>1</sup>

As the evening grows older, and the two become more attracted to each other, the dreamlike texture of the scene becomes more evident:

The lamp was burning dry, and through the dimming light, isolated in the fastness of silence and storm, they watched each other. Her face was white and struggling still. His was handsome, clean-shaven, young. Her eyes were fanatic, believing desperately, fixed upon him as if to exclude all else, as if to find justification. His were cool, bland, drooped a little with expectancy. The light kept dimming, gathering the shadows round them, hushed, conspiratorial ("Door", p. 114).

Ann goes to bed with Steven, and later, lying beside him with the covers pulled up around her, the edges of dream and reality finally begin to slide into one another. While she watches, shadows on the wall move

"fantastically" and one in particular seems to take on meaningful shape:

There was one great shadow that struggled towards her threateningly, massive and black and engulfing all the room. Again and again it advanced, about to spring, but each time a little whip of light subdued it to its place among the others on the wall. Yet though it never reached her still she cowered, feeling that gathered there was all the frozen wilderness, its heart of terror and invincibility.

Then she dozed a while, and the shadow was John ("Door", pp. 114-5).

Her devotion to her husband is strong and works within her guilt-ridden subconscious to produce the accusing form which she simultaneously sees but does not accept. When the shadow image becomes too threatening, she attempts to deny the dream "reality" that she has created with Steven, and pleads with the shadow, "It isn't true - not really true - listen, John - ". The words are mouthed silently, but with them the shadow disappears.

The next day, when John is missing and his body is found frozen by a search party, Ann sees on his hand a tell-tale smear of paint from the door she had painted the previous afternoon. John had been in the house, and supposedly, had seen Ann in bed with Steven. The "dream" that Ann had eagerly lived, and then just as desperately tried to deny, had become an undeniable, horrifying part of her reality. Ross uses the nocturnal dream in this and other stories (most notably in "One's A Heifer") to illustrate this potential, but the process and effects are similar and none the less devastating in the form of daydream or fantasy.

Like the nocturnal dream, the waking fantasy is an alternative to waking or external realities. Fantasy, however, is more selective, allowing visions of beauty, strength and self-actualization, but not those of fear and ugliness, to enter the consciousness. Ross pictures fantasy as a phenomena that undergoes change as a character ages. He shows that if an attempt is made to carry childhood fantasies forward

unchanged into adulthood, the result is self-reproach, despair, and a disabling of the perception. What begins as essentially a creative, revealing experience becomes, in the adult years, static and destructive to the self.

The childhood imagination creates fantasies which are basically innocent and pleasurable. In "Circus in Town" eleven-year-old Jenny sees a circus poster and embarks on a fantasy unhindered by a slightly sceptical adult narrative observation:

The bit of poster has spin a new world before her, excited her, given wild, soaring impetus to her imagination; and now, without in the least understanding herself, she wanted the excitement and the soaring, even though it might stab and rack her, rather than the barren satisfaction of believing that in life there was nothing better, nothing more vivid or dramatic, than her own stableyard.

Jenny is still much too young to know, as presumably the narrator knows, that her yearning might "stab and wrack" someday, and therefore the story concludes with her happily visualizing herself as part of a magnificent circus, riding the symbol of freedom and ennoblement: the horse. Ross gives another hint as to the true nature of the fantasy: Jenny must escape to a hayloft to find the peace necessary for her dreams:

It was a big, solemn loft, with gloom and fragrance.... And there, in its dim, high stillness, she had her circus. Not the kind that would stop off at a little town. Not just a tent and an elephant or two. No - for this was her own circus; the splendid, matchless circus of a little girl who had never seen one ("Circus", p. 71).

The symbolic import of the loft is, of course, that it is an enclosure, suggesting that the fantasy is isolated from and therefore untested by reality.

The level of character awareness in "A Day With Pegasus" is almost, but not quite, as innocent as Jenny's. The symbolic qualities of a

horse carry the burden of meaning here, as young Peter, after months of waiting, finally gets his own colt:

It was a strange, almost unbearable moment. The horse that for five months had served the extravagances of his imagination, that he had lived with, gloried in, and, underneath it all, never quite expected to come true -- it was a reality now -- ("Pegasus", p. 143).

But the colt of reality is in itself merely a catalyst for a larger reality of the imagination, as Peter fantasizes on his way to school.

His daydreams are exciting in their transcendent imports:

Then suddenly as if by magic he was mounted, and the still May morning sprang in whistling wind around his ears. Field after field reeled up and fell away. The earth resounded thundering, then dimmed and dropped until it seemed they cleaved their way through flashing light....Until at last he stood quite still, impaled with a kind of wonder-fear that life should yield him such divinity ("Pegasus", p. 145).

The experience is like the discovery of a new-found power, one which is handy in dealing with any reality which fails to interest or enliven life. When, for instance, Peter is asked to write a school essay on how he spent his last Saturday, he finds that the day was too much of a

long-drawn, dull reality. So he transformed it -- redeemed it with an inner, potential reality -- rose suddenly like a master above the limitations of mere time and distance ("Pegasus", p. 152).

The boy discovers that he can summon forth the experience at will, and does so in a hay loft, but Ross's use of the loft as an enclosure symbolizing the stagnant imagination undercuts the beauty of the experience. The lines:

There was a state of mind, a mood, a restfulness, in which one could skim along this curve of prairie floor, and gathering momentum from the downward swing, glide up again and soar away from earth. He succeeded now ("Pegasus", p. 155).

have a humorous contrast to the call for "Supper!" that comes from

beneath the loft. An overall irony of the concluding lines of the work is seen in Peter thinking the adult world is preferable to his own, a world of supposed insights and freedoms. The irony is that, while Ross shows a boy's daydreams to have their own limitations, the adult world has these and more.

In "Circus in Town" and "A Day With Pegasus" the central character is largely unaware of the possible "stab and wrack" that fantasies can bring, while the reader is given a privileged, but subtle insight into the truth of the warning. In "The Outlaw", the imagination is still active in the mind of a child, who nevertheless glimpses the relationship between fantasy and reality before the tale ends. Like Jenny and Peter, the boy narrator of "The Outlaw" lives with a fantasy -- to ride a "dangerous" horse his father has purchased. While the fantasy is tempting, the boy sees the reality as being worthy of supplementing the fantasy. The conquering of the horse in this offering is symbolic of attaining recognition and acceptance:

With nuzzling, velvet lips she coaxed and pleaded,  
whispered that the delights of fantasy and dream were  
but as shadows beside the exhilarations of reality.  
Only try reality - slip her bridle on. Only be reasonable  
- ask myself what she would gain by throwing me. After  
all, I was turned thirteen. It wasn't as if I were a  
small boy.

And then, temptress, she bore me off to the mountain  
top of my vanity, and with all the world spread out  
before my gaze, talked guilefully of prestige and  
acclaim ("Outlaw", pp. 25-6).

When the narrator leaves the safe domain of fantasy, he finds that the real ride on Isabel is everything and more than he had dreamed:

And it was true: the wind cut sharp and bitter like  
a knife, the snow slipped past like water. Only in  
her motion there was a difference. She was like a  
rocket, not a rocking chair ("Outlaw", p. 29).

But the reality that exists outside the imagination tempers elation with

pain, and the horse throws the boy. In case the reader misses the point of this episode, Ross reveals it during a conversation between boy and horse after the fall:

From the bottom of her heart she hoped I wouldn't be so unfortunate another time. So far as she was concerned, however, she could make no promises. There had been one fall, she explained..., and there might easily be another. The future was entirely up to me. She couldn't be responsible for my horsemanship ("Outlaw", p. 31).

The "future" and the "horsemanship" that Ross is talking about here are the venturing by the imagination into the adult world; the balance, control, and enjoyment that signify a successful ride bring dreams and reality together. For most Ross characters, the ride into adulthood is neither smooth, nor successful, but filled with many tumbles.

In "One's A Heifer", previously discussed at length, fantasy is seen as having a totalitarian hold on a young imagination. Even after the boy narrator discovers that Vickers could not possibly have held the missing calves, new, more exotic suspicions crowd the imagination: perhaps the stall contains a captive or murdered woman! Having taken one tumble, the boy hopefully mounts another fantasy spinning out the imaginative adventures of youth as long as possible.

As Ross's characters develop in age and maturity, they become more aware of the imperfect nature of dreams, as is the case in "Saturday Night", a short story about misdirected love. A train journey is used in place of the horse symbolism to denote the building of fantasy, as a young man goes to meet a girl who is presumably eagerly expecting his visit. The aura of dreams is present, as Tom is aware of a "golden stillness" that is somehow "appropriate, a setting, as if he had been prepared for."<sup>3</sup> The passage is reminiscent of incidents such as the loft scene in "A Day With Pegasus" where the central character senses a uniqueness of being



and an elated experience. The use of golden images is repeated when he washes himself in the train, a direct indication of the idealized vision at work. Tom feels:

a kind of peace, aglow and solemm, as if the evening light outside had drifted in and filled his spirit with a shining golden ball...("Saturday", p. 389).

That a girl has promised her love to the main character, is a fantasy that is built and maintained through most of the story. The moment when fantasy and reality clash comes when Tom finds that Helen, the girl, is dating another young man, Ronnie Lawson. At this point, Tom considers punching Helen's date or getting drunk, acts which are equivalent to the avoidance tactics taken by the narrator in "One's A Heifer", who in spite of facts to the contrary, continued to raise "evidence" pointing to Vicker's guilt.

Even though Tom enjoys the bitterness of self-pity, he learns that his injury is not a swift, final thing, but a drawn-out process of anger, envy and regret. Ross has his character reject the romantic image of the pining rejected lover as Tom resists the temptation to "put her picture to his lips a moment, and in the re-dedication of his love, however hopeless, find peace and courage" ("Saturday", p. 400). Through the ending paragraphs of the story, a determination to become mature, to "grow up", is voiced, and the final words, as Tom is lying on his bed, listening to a steady rain, points to the possibility of a transition, of treating the incident as a learning experience:

It was a patient, healing sound. He yielded to it at last, and towards morning fell asleep ("Saturday", p. 400).

"Saturday Night" is significant in that it marks, with the age of its central character, a middle space between the unrestrained, and nearly indomitable fantasies of youth and the later, adult stages of bitter disappointment and despair at the aftermath of clashes between fantasy

and reality. "Saturday Night" shows a process by which fantasy, and the ensuing awakening, can be the foundation for a creative living process, not for a defeat in life. However, the works dealing with the adult experience often show an inability or unwillingness to deal in this manner with the present; rather, characters endeavor to return to the constructs of fantasy used during childhood. Either that, or the childhood fantasy remains to rebuke the character in his present endeavors. An example of this suffering adult is seen in each of the three novels. As For Me and My House chronicles adult lives spent in perpetual frustration due to a continuous, rebuking comparison between youthful fantasy and the apparent realities of maturity. The Well shows the corruption of adult perception carried to an extreme in old age, culminating in a psychic state bordering on insanity. The third novel, Whir of Gold, accomplishes a comparison of adult and youthful visions of fantasy by viewing the simultaneous perceptions of past and present within a character's consciousness. As such, Whir of Gold represents a comprehensive culminating statement of the thematic concerns of previous works.

The central portrait of frustration in As For Me and My House is, of course, Philip Bentley, and the roots of his unhappiness are in a dream which was once inspirational, but in adulthood, proves a persecution. The dream has actually two aspects: to be like his father and to be a creative person, possibly an artist or writer. Of the first aspect, Ross gives considerable background, albeit through the eyes of Mrs. Bentley. Born the illegitimate son of a waitress and a preacher, Philip grows to idolize the father he never knew, while despising a mother whose existence reminds him of his deprivation.

Because the father had died, leaving behind mysterious but impressive books, Philip:

made a hero of his father, and in lonely, childish defiance of his surroundings, resolved to be another like him (House, p. 49).

His childhood adulation steers Philip into the clergy, and later, allows him to relish a comparison between his own frustrated self and an image of his father as a similarly persecuted man. In fact, Philip's memories of his father and mother do much to explain his own growing character, and his behavior towards women as well. His opinion of his father made necessary the rejection of his mother:

He was the son of this hero: that was some compensation, at least, for being the son also of a common waitress. In his taking sides it never seems to have occurred to him that if these two were really as he thought, then the moral responsibility for his existence could hardly have been where he placed it. But he was just a boy then, and even now he feels a situation better than he can think his way through it. And his father all this time belonged to the escape world of his imagination, and his mother to the drab, sometimes sordid reality of the restaurant. (House, p. 50).

Philip's fantasies incorporate a hostility towards his mother, a feeling which becomes transferred to his wife, the narrator. Because the fantasized self-image is still very much alive, he withdraws from the woman in his life, retreating from her to a study which resembles a little room his father had. His attitude also explains his sexual interlude with Judith. By making Judith party to an adulterous coupling, he is reinforcing a generalization of woman as fallen and debased, just as his mother supposedly was. Philip, who had been born while his mother was still unmarried, helped wait on customers in the restaurant where she worked:

They were drunken customers sometimes, who laughed suggestively about his mother and his birth. Gradually he came to feel that for all the ridicule and shame he was exposed to it was his mother to blame. Too young to understand emotionally what had happened, he recoiled from her with a sense of grievance and contempt (House, p. 49).

Philip Bentley grew to manhood associating the most important woman in his

life with a great personal shame. His most vivid childhood impression regarding human sexuality, that of his mother's indiscretion, was linked with his being born a bastard. It is little wonder that, later in his own adult relationship with the opposite sex, he has difficulty in communicating openly with his wife. When he makes love to Judith, he is fulfilling the role of his father, while casting Judith in the part of his mother.

The image of the frustrated artist is also linked to the hero-worship of the father, as Philip discovers at an early age that not only did his father have an "ambition to paint" but that he had had a collection of books, "difficult and bewildering, more of them on art and literature than theology; but only half-understood, beyond his reach, they added to the stature of the man who had owned and read them" (House, p. 49). Here then, may be the key to appreciating how Philip's youthful fantasies were ostensibly an inspiration, but were perhaps unconsciously a deadly barrier to his drive for self-actualization. Because Philip holds his father up as an ideal, a goal to attain, the implication is also that the ideal is not to be surpassed. Therefore, the dreams and strivings are important to emulate, but even if he had the potential or talent to become, say, a painter, he cannot actually surpass the achievement of his father. Such an accomplishment would destroy the ideal, and along with it the security of the fantasy. Ross summarizes the importance and the continuing function of Philip's youth-formulated dreams through the introduction of an otherwise flat character, Steven, and the symbol, the train.

Steven, the boy the Bentleys take under their wing, momentarily sustains Philip's dreams, and Ross uses the symbol of unfettered strength, the horse, to show the revitalization: "Philip has taken him for Pegasus,

and gone off to the clouds again" (House, p. 91). Proof that Philip is still devoted to the image of his father is seen when he attempts to mold Steven "in his own image, even though it's an image in which he himself must find little satisfaction; and stubborn still he keeps on trying to make an artist of the boy...(House, p. 200). The description of the relationship between Philip and Steven is certainly colored by Mrs. Bentley's jealousy, but the solicitude Philip shows is certainly in keeping with a man used to molding himself and others after ideals.

While Steven provides an isolated example of the living fantasy, the train is a constant measure of Philip's level of attainment. Trains, to Philip, are not the same as they were when he was a youth caught in a small, prairie town and they looked like vehicles of escape from shame and tedium. In the present, the train is part of the rebuke, part of the failure, that is at once failure and not failure, since Philip has at least succeeded in not surpassing the ideal image of father:

A train still makes him wince sometimes. At night,  
when the whistle's loneliest, he'll toss a moment,  
then lie still and tense. And in the daytime I've  
seen his eyes take on a quick, half-eager look, just  
for a second or two, and then sink flat and cold  
again (House, p. 48).

The complex balancing act required when fantasies are being held, frozen in time, makes for similarities between two superficially diverse characters, Philip and old Larson in The Well. Through Larson, Ross explores the third age of man and the third stage of the perception of fantasy, old age: the conclusion drawn is that the perpetual push-pull on fantasy that Philip developed, if held throughout adulthood, causes the perception to become flawed, even tinged with insanity.

A striking similarity exists between the fantasies of both Philip and Larson. For them, the train is a symbol carrying visions of freedom

and excitement, moreover both have memories of dead people and dead times that serve as ideals, ideals that effectively cripple the perceiver's ability to take part in the life of his immediate surroundings.

Trains called to Larson in his youth and the allure is still powerful enough in old age to draw him, childlike, outside to listen to the distant whistle. While still a boy, Larson had conjured dreams of faraway lands and freedom that lay at the end of the tracks, and a friend had fanned the fires of enthusiasm:

"There was Fred Lamb -- he went. Couldn't have been more than fifteen. Caught a freight one day, stayed a year. Came back and told me all about it. Stuck around home a couple of months or so, then did it again. Last anybody ever heard of him" (Well, p. 73).

But Larson never grasps his dream; it is as if the fantasy is more enjoyable when held at arm's length. Chores, the responsibility of being an only son in a farming family --- all are excuses for the real reason which is, as Larson himself reveals, a lack of courage, "Left me wondering how I'd do if I ever tried it -- if I'd have the nerve" (Well, p. 73).

Later in life, the reason for not hopping a freight is a wife, a child, a farm, mortgage -- Larson may not fully understand the foundation of his lack of courage, but a glance at other characters drawn by Ross shows that Larson's train may look like the concrete means to realize a dream, but in actuality, taking that train could destroy the beauty of an old man's fantasies. A boy in "The Outlaw" followed, actually "rode" his fantasy...and was promptly thrown. A young man in "Saturday Night" glimpsed ideal love, reached out to possess it and found he grasped illusion. In effect, Larson allows himself the luxury of yearning, while being spared the painful confrontation between fantasy and reality. Such a confrontation does, in fact, cause Larson's death, as he attempts to force the fantasies of his "ideal" marriage and an "adopted" son to become

reality. The attempted merger of past and present traps the wife and the surrogate son in the middle in awkward, binding roles; in their rebellion, they murder Larson.

If the dreamer attempts to prevent forever the meeting of the worlds of reality and fantasy, he will be caught in the middle when they eventually collide. Larson's method of denying reality has been to marry a younger woman and then to enter into a program of subsidized sex: "Sylvia was supposed to help get me over wanting trips...." (Well, p. 74). Evidently, Larson's first wife was able to keep his mind from the trains and it is this fact which makes the past so hard to relinquish. Simply stated, Larson lives too wholly in the past. Because he cannot face the facts of his own approaching old age, and the changing scene of faces and times, he attempts to people a personal emptiness with fantasies from the past. He has pledged an undying devotion to a dead wife and son who now order and dictate his daily thoughts.

The tyranny of fond memories becomes clear as Larson is effectively barricaded from his surroundings by his visions. The old farmer uses the memory of Cora, his first wife, to protect him from the knowledge that he is too old for his present wife, Sylvia, and that the latter only stays with him for his money. He selfconsciously scoffs at the homage he pays Cora, and yet keeps their first home as a shrine, fenced off from the animals and elements. The same morbid faithfulness preserves a virtually unused, beautifully decorated bathroom in the house the same as it was when his wife was alive. The room, besides being a goad to Sylvia, is an indication of the waste of a valuable resource, whether it be a room, a relationship, or a true talent, that results from a tyranny of the past over the present.

In As For Me and My House, Ross established the father-son relationship as being one which had special powers to perpetuate its own brand of

fantasy. Philip, in the role of son, shaped himself in the image of his father and also strove to see Steven, a surrogate son, shaped in his own image. Ross again shows the particular importance of this process in The Well. The fantasies surrounding Cora are at least recognized as being a part of the past, but the fantasy regarding the son is much stronger, so much so that Larson often speaks of him in the present tense:

Chris turned to the door again, but still Larson detained him. "You ought to hear the boy, the way he carries on. Like the new barn; he remembers the lanterns and the coal-oil lamps. Don't suppose he's ever going to get over it..." (Well, p. 26).

Larson's dead son is not the only one who is not "going to get over it"; the old farmer seems doomed to never "get over" the memory of the boy. This particular fantasy is so strong that it is not relinquished even when Larson has the chance to substitute it with a flesh and blood son in the form of Chris.

Examining the evidence together, the preserved homestead and bathroom, the succession of dogs meant to replace the son's original, the attempt to find a reincarnated image of the son in passing strangers, references in present tense to a dead son --- all seem to point to a breakdown of an ability of the perception to differentiate between immediate, tangible reality and the world of the imagination. The tragedy of Larson lies in that which simultaneously gives him comfort and yet alienates him from his friends, his environment and himself. Ross seems to say that man is held helpless between the opposing forces of fantasy and reality; and that the struggle inevitably leads to insanity, a breakdown of perceptive powers.

In As For Me and My House and The Well, Ross presents the foundations and present manifestations of fantasy in what is initially a mutually exclusive isolation. Incidents are referred to, but have the definite



characteristics of recall. In Whir of Gold, Ross offers a more comprehensive view, showing the past and present in juxtaposition through the use of flashbacks. Because the flashbacks not only delve backwards within a character's consciousness, but backwards into an earlier Ross work, "The Outlaw", the novel is revelatory of the development of Ross's work. This third novel must be seen as a culminating statement by the author, a selfconscious attempt at appraising and emphasizing issues that he has dealt with since the beginnings of his craft.

The title, Whir of Gold, refers to an incident that is crucial not only to an understanding of Sonny, the novel's main character, but to other Ross characters, and perhaps even to an insight into Ross, the artist. Once, when Sonny was a boy living in the Prairies, he set out to trap a beautiful bird. The trapping of the prairie flicker, a golden-colored bird, is indicative of the desire to grasp and possess a dream. The flicker becomes the personification of purest beauty, a tempting goal:

It was May, and for a week or more I had been catching glimpses of it flashing like a whir of gold, a gust of feathered light; and gradually wonder had become a need to see and verify.

Not cruelty -- just need. Desire that was at once innocent and unspeakable. To run the miracle to earth, lay hands on it, for all time make it mine (Whir, p. 162).

Ross shows that a maiming and killing of beauty results from the pursuit of, to the possession of, dreams. With the knowledge of the destruction he has caused, the dreamer in this case becomes apologetic:

So it was to catch, not kill -- to possess and delight in, not to maim. The words are always there, always on the alert. At the drop of a feather they spring to their defence positions, like soldiers at the sound of a bugle. To catch, not to kill. I didn't know what it would be like. I didn't think -- I just wanted (Whir, p. 162).

Ross goes beyond a mere statement of man's struggles ending in failure, a picture of futility -- he asserts that man is unworthy of his dreams,

that dreams are corrupted by possession. The dream ceases to be beautiful and becomes a rebuke, like Philip Bentley's train whistle, like the trapped, accusing flicker hanging by its feet:

But half an hour later there it was. Head down, suspended by the chain, its leg mangled, its wings flapping feebly, ruffled and bruised. And the eye, just about level with mine, an unsparing, snake-hard little drill of hate (Whir, p. 163).

Through the use of flashbacks, Ross shows how Sonny's dreams, like a trapped and dying flicker, hang in front of the young man's imaginative vision. A quest for ideal sexual prowess and satisfaction, for instance, is one such recalled fantasy, framed before a youthful encounter with Millie, a neighbor girl:

For I had taken her wanting a revelation and had got instead a scratchy half hour in the hay. And I never quite forgave her for it, always bore her a secret grudge (Whir, p. 22).

The flashback to the episode with Millie is structurally united with Sonny's situation in bed with Mad. Memories of Millie enter his consciousness while with Mad, and the earlier expectation leading to disappointment affects his present attitude: "No revelations with Mad either" (Whir, p. 22). The flashback sequence hints that Sonny feels he has "killed" an ideally perceived beauty of sex by possession, and therefore Mad becomes the object of a vision of corrupted, mutilated beauty. But, like other Ross characters, Sonny finds the immediate vision too painful, and seeks to reassure himself that the vision of Mad as aging and undesirable is in fact not the accurate one:

She lay with her eyes closed, passive, receptive, and at intervals, teasing, I stroked her with my fingertips, .... so that she would not predict the touch and each time would respond with a little contraction, a flicker of skin. Important: only young skin would flicker. Old would be toneless, slack (Whir, p. 31).

The repeated use of the word, "flicker", in this passage is a return to the ideal vision, an avoidance of the accusing eyes of the dying fantasy. As was the case with the bird, Sonny cannot accept Mad for what she is, but must "trap" her within the confines of his sexual fantasy.

As is common with Ross, the lesson of the flicker is repeated, in other forms, throughout the novel. But unlike the repetition of scenes and action found in As For Me and My House, repetition in Whir of Gold is found in the flashback technique, which begins as a slightly distinct sequence in the dream of the flicker, strengthens in a scene depicting Sonny's early musical training, and becomes an independent blurring of past with present in recalled images of Isabel, the "outlaw" horse.

The flashback to his musical training takes place as Sonny compares Mad's naivety to a fish trying to get up to land. The metaphor twigs a memory, and Sonny's consciousness dips into the past to another place and another scene, with his childhood music teacher, Dorothy. The scene comes back, not as an inspiration, but as a reminder of what Sonny might have been, how he had reached out to grasp a dream only to find it had turned to dust. The music teacher had said:

"A gift like yours -- it doesn't just happen -- there's a purpose somewhere -- a will far stronger than yours or mine --" (Whir, p. 76).

Sonny had tried to reach out and grasp, or trap, the dream the music teacher had described. Coming as it does in the midst of Mad's hopeless drive towards the "right one", the pure love, the flashback shows a comparable hopelessness in the quest for musical success. As he looks back, it seems to Sonny that he has killed the beauty of his dream by trying to grasp it, much as he killed the flicker by trying to possess its beauty. If he had stayed on the Prairies, he might have contented himself with the idea that he could have made the big time in Montreal. Instead, he travelled

to that town and destroyed the dream. This encapsulated sequence is important to the structure of the novel, and helps to make a conclusive statement about Sonny and the significance of the flicker.

In the third major flashback sequence, the past and the present are overlapped, as Ross draws a strong parallel between the maiming of the flicker and the similar gunshot maiming of Sonny. The sequence is actually in two parts, at separate points of the novel. The first part presents Isabel, the "outlaw" horse, as a personification of the vitality and drive of a dream:

A witch of a horse: from the rock her hoof and struck there would always flow a clear bright stream, never the bitter waters of remorse and failure. They had been good, brave beginnings, and that was what they would always be. The wind through her mane would always have a sting of sky and wonder (Whir, pp. 94-5).

As one of his earliest appreciations of beauty was linked to the flicker, so are Sonny's recollections of his youth and potential associated with Isabel. Ross offers a constant reminder of Sonny's youthful promise by intertwining scenes involving Isabel with the main narrative flow.

Later, Isabel returns to Sonny's thoughts, but with greater immediacy. The low point for Sonny is definitely his foray into crime. He is disgusted with himself. At this point, Ross identifies the robbery with an abject failure of dreams. After Sonny has been shot in the leg, and is lying bleeding in the snow, a number of images from his past become identified or confused with his present circumstances. As he loses consciousness, the snow around him becomes blurred with a recollected boy-hood scene of being thrown from Isabel.

Ample clues are given that the incident is not only central to Sonny's experience, but to the body of Ross work as well. The scene in Whir of Gold, Chapter 25, is a re-telling of the earlier short story, "The Outlaw",

with many phrases remaining unchanged. The consciousness of the reader, as well as that of the character, is being impressed with the repetition of life and circumstance. Sonny, the representative Ross character, has ridden his dream poorly, and he is in danger of killing it. The truth of this observation is in the similarity of Sonny to the flicker at the end of the flashback sequence: Sonny, like the flicker, is wounded and bleeding, hobbling in the jaws of a trap. The trap is, for Sonny and other Ross characters, the relentless pursuit of and grappling with dreams. The fantasy has returned to haunt, and torture the perceiver's own imagination.

Whir of Gold ends on a note of desperate realization of helplessness and anomie. Answers, if there are any, are quite ambiguous; dreams, if any still exist, seem faded and forlorn. Weakened images, a lack of focus -- these things contribute to make a novel of unpalatable substance. In his fourth novel, Sawbones Memorial, Ross regains some of the old intensity and appeal. Besides the lack of narrative voice, and the lessened emphasis on use of symbol, he carries the dream forward to be viewed for the first time through the eyes of an old man, Doc.

Through Doc, the reader is given some, by now, familiar social criticism: "if people slept with their neighbors more and talked about each other less, things would be a lot better all round" (Sawbones, p. 96). These observations become biting and cynical as Doc briefly wonders whether man's relation to a superior being in the universe is like that of a mythical sow,

"I remember once long ago reading about a tribe somewhere that believed in a Great Sow that eats her own farrow. Nearly made me throw up, and yet maybe they were on to it. The Great Mother and Evil Mother, maybe one and the same, creating life only to turn and destroy it" (Sawbones, p. 126).

But this is only one possibility and one which Doc emphasizes to taunt the town preacher. To accept the "Great Sow" as a universal explanation would push one's thoughts to suicide, and Doc plainly is not of the despairing kind. Instead, he is looking forward to his own retirement, accepting the fact of his aging, but with the knowledge that his years have been mainly good ones.

The dream, so prevalent in other Ross novels, seems to have died or faded when viewed through the eyes of an old man. But it is the point of view that is important here, since age colors the view the reader is left with. The overall outlook of the novel shows the dream, notwithstanding the proof that it often disappoints, to be quite alive and viable. There is, on a small scale, Joey, whose parents wish him to have a piano. The scene is a familiar one, recalling the determination of parents, in other stories like "A Field of Wheat", to give their children the advantages they themselves missed. There is Dunc, who:

"... didn't make it; he had the store and his mother and brother; and like all good fathers he now has plans and dreams for Robbie. To do what he couldn't do -- and so I understand my role" (Sawbones, p. 25).

Dunc's wife speaks here, and she allies her dreams with those of her husband. More importantly, there is Doc, who for all his evidenced crustiness, holds excitement and hope for the future of medicine, and especially, for his "adopted" son, Nick. Much of his energy during his retirement night banquet is spent, as it had been while Nick was growing up, in paving a smooth way for the returning boy.

While Sawbones Memorial might appear to end on an upbeat of optimism, with the golden aura of retirement, the excitement of the new hospital, and the promise of a new beginning, the ingredients for the fall into despair are still present. It is the very atmosphere of anticipation,

heralded by hope, which alerts the reader to expect this development from Ross. A scrutiny of his work to date would suggest it, even if his own words on a planned sequel to Sawbones Memorial, entitled Price Above Rubies, did not:

"...the principals will be Nick, Caroline, and Robbie; twenty years later; the occasion, Sarah's death;... the relationship which develops between Nick and Caroline is anything but a fortunate one." <sup>4</sup>

With this future project, Ross shows that while his technique and use of language may undergo transformation, his basic themes remain unchanged. His characters continue to be dreamers led by their dreams along exciting and perilous paths.

<sup>1</sup> Ross, "The Painted Door", in NCL, p. 110. Hereafter cited as "Door".

<sup>2</sup> Ross, "Circus in Town", in NCL, p. 68. Hereafter cited as "Circus".

<sup>3</sup> Ross, "Saturday Night", Queen's Quarterly, 58 (1951), p. 387.  
Hereafter cited as "Saturday".

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Ross to myself, dated January 25, 1975.



Man, in Sinclair Ross's world, is faced with challenges that exceed in severity even the rigorous conditions posed by the landscape. The land merely acts as a mirror to reveal certain inner images of emptiness that are universal and linked to the very definition of humanity. The "inner collapse", or void of personal meaning identified in Chapter Two, is commonly so all-encompassing, that the reader is not surprised to see some characters lapse into existential despair. On the other hand, other characters react with optimism and faith in response to the onslaught upon their sense of well-being. Theirs is an attempt to order and define life according to complex, subjective dream structures.

The approach which I have called landscape criticism and which was described in some detail in the "Introduction" to this study, has dealt in a limited way with themes of alienation while generally ignoring the importance of fantasy and dream in the work of Sinclair Ross. Of the three levels of alienation identified, landscape criticism has dealt mainly with the first: the sense of estrangement characters feel in their interaction with the physical environment. The reason for this emphasis undoubtedly lies in Canada's continuing development as an agricultural and industrial nation and in the corresponding treatment of this phenomenon in literature. The varied ways in which Canadians have been aware of their relationship to the physical environment are in evidence in works by authors from Susanna Moodie through to Howard O'Hagan and Margaret Atwood. It is not surprising then to find an author like Sinclair Ross drawing characters who are farmers and ranchers. Nor is it surprising to find critics who recognize and appreciate the themes of struggle Ross has used. What is surprising however, is the way in which Canadian criticism has chosen to remain with this particular critical focus while Ross has moved on to explore issues and techniques of greater complexity.

Themes of human sexuality and psychological development in Ross's work have not been adequately studied and yet as the second chapter of this study indicated, the author has exhibited a continuing concern with these areas. Before critics reject these subjects as not properly belonging to the domain of literary criticism, they should realize that they are rejecting issues which are important to an understanding of Ross's use of characterization and figurative language. When Philip Bentley says, "If a man's a victim of circumstances he deserves to be" (House, p. 212), it is not enough to say that he is embittered and moody. The novel gives us a picture of his youth and allows for a more intricate, and sometimes more ambiguous, impression of his character. Ross gives his readers insight into motivation and the result is a rich psychological and spiritual portrait. Sexual relationships in Ross's work deserve closer study as well. His treatment of the subject in earlier works was rather modest and probably reflected the conservative attitudes of Canadians during the 1940's and 50's. The adulterous act between Philip Bentley and Judith in As For Me and My House is cautiously revealed by the author through Mrs. Bentley who hears muffled laughter in her darkened house. As he added to his number of published works, Ross began to treat a wider range of sexual experiences with increasing candor. This has been true of the subject of homosexuality and although he has never directly depicted a relationship of this kind, he shows himself sensitive to the unique problems of homosexuals in Sawbones Memorial.

The complex and sometimes sensitive nature of Ross's themes makes them well suited for symbolic representation. As was shown in the third chapter of this study, he has recognized this potential and utilized it to a high degree. His characters, faced with the challenges and disappointments of their environment, see their highest aspirations represented by

certain objects upon the landscape. The fact that Ross uses groups of symbols, such as those of motion, suggests that he is using this method to order and give thematic coherence to his work. Whether a character's perception is trained upon a horse or upon a train, he associates the image with freedom, strength, and beauty. As the title of Chapter Three suggests, symbolism is the method by which Ross presents the worlds of dream his characters create. An understanding of this symbolism is important to an appreciation of the extensive use of dreams in Ross's work.

The symbols that appear in Ross's fiction do not themselves comprise the fully articulated dream that this study has devoted itself to examining: symbols are the recognition by a character of a qualitative compatibility between some aspect of his inner and outer worlds. The dream, the phenomenon which often becomes a world as strong as or stronger than the world of external realities, is often accepted by the dreamer as being part of his actual surroundings. It is this linking of dream to reality, this restructuring of reality, which is the highest creative act for many Ross characters. They are 'making' themselves and others over into a desirable image in much the same way a sculptor sets out to reform the shape of his clay. For some characters this waking dream or fantasy is no more than an escape from reality or the giving of flight to repressed desires. Perceived in this way, the waking dream serves a function akin to that of the nocturnal dream. Larson in The Well yearns wistfully after trains, but knows only too well he will never board one. For other characters though, the dream is seen as a logical means of making their presence meaningful in the world. As he grows to adulthood, Sonny McAlpine in Whir of Gold sees himself as a successful musician in the idealized, distant future. The dream becomes the catalyst for a momentous decision: he decides to leave the relatively safe surroundings of his rural community

for an uncertain life in the streets of Montreal. His goal, his dream, is to become more than a country boy from the prairies; his dream is to become unique amongst his fellow men. It is this desire which gives his life direction, expectancy and purpose.

What Ross's characters gain in purpose and direction through dreams though, they often lose in flexibility. They cease to be able to react to or act in harmony with the demands of their environment. Many of them are frustrated artists of one kind or another, and the picture they have of themselves isolates them from the people around them. Philip Bentley is barricaded in his study and Sonny McAlpine is virtually imprisoned in his tiny apartment; both men cannot face an outside world that might provide contradictions to their cherished dreams. There is a duality in Ross's work with regard to the phenomenon of dreams: the act of dreaming provides the dreamer with a possible noble alternative to his world, but at the same time is a possible means for the character to experience even greater despair and alienation than he supposed himself to endure before. Throughout his work, Ross has used this theme, and the severity of the message appears to increase from The Well to Whir of Gold. Likewise, the accomplishment of his craft seems to diminish from As For Me and My House onwards, at least as far as the novels are concerned, until Sawbones Memorial. The weakening coincides with a sacrifice of style and character development to the verbalization of philosophy.

With the fourth novel, Sawbones Memorial, there is a return to the strength and clear-sightedness of earlier works, coupled with what would appear to be a less bitter, more reconciled tone than is found in Whir of Gold. Doc eases out of his job a tired but wiser man who has learned to temper his dreams with a knowledge of the demands and limitations of the world; the town of Upward prepares itself for what it feels will be an

exciting era of relative prosperity. For this reason, Sawbones may be a very misleading novel, for even if Ross's own intention to write a sequel to it, about unhappy relationships, were not known, precedence would tell readers that this last novel is only the first part of the familiar cycle of hope and despair, and does not mark a departure from basic themes.

Ross has shown himself to be more than the prairie realist some have felt him to be. Reading him as a writer of specific time and place is not inaccurate but merely insufficient. Ross in this way may be compared to Hardy, who dealt principally with the people of one relatively small area but in so doing revealed truths that were certainly not provincial in kind. In another light, Ross invites comparison to the Romantics, or at least to those writers influenced by these explorers of the mysterious and beautiful. He is a writer who likes to touch the inner flesh of human ambiguity, to sense the workings of psychological complexity. The depth and diversity of his fiction deserve study of wider scope and perception than has been previously employed.

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