PERSEPHONE IN CANADIAN FICTION

by

Jane Evans

B. A., University of British Columbia, 1976

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
(Dept. of English)

We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

April, 1978

© Jane Evans, 1978
In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of British Columbia, I agree that the Library shall make it freely available for reference and study. I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the Head of my Department or by his representatives. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Department of English

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

Date April 20th, 1978
ABSTRACT

Persephone in Canadian Fiction

The shaping of a work of art has its ground in the archetypal images in the mind of its creator. The novelist uses those myths which are true for him or her. When mythic criticism is applied to the work of a male writer, the themes are commonly recognisable, particularly that of the Odyssey, the great male quest. For women, however, the quest cannot be that of the wanderer seeking to reconcile the psyche of the blood-thirsty warrior to a life of peace. The female quest must seek a different reconciliation, that of a union of the great female figures of maiden, mother, and aged woman. This is the earliest and most powerful of archetypes and is personified in mythic terms as the Persephone-Demeter-Hecate triad.

There has been, in recent years, an attempt on the part of Canadian writers to come to terms with this myth, and with the self-actualised personality it represents. These three beings are at the same time one and separate; they are multi-facetteed, yet represent the great principles of fertility and its obverse, death.

The legend is well known: the maiden Persephone, while picking flowers, is abducted and raped by Pluto, King of the Dead. Her mother, the corn Goddess Demeter, searches for her the world over, decreeing in her despair that, until her daughter is found, nothing shall grow. At last, through the intervention of Hecate and the Gods, mother and daughter are re-united and the land again made fruitful. Persephone is, however, Queen of the Dead; nothing can change this. Nevertheless, like the corn, the Kore, or archetypal maiden, is eternally renewed. She is an integral part of the cycle of life and death in which the green corn becomes the yellow corn and dies to be reborn. In the psychological context, we can see this as the rationale for the death of life in winter and an assurance that there will be renewal.

The Great Goddess embodies all women; "in a single figure which was at once mother and daughter, she could represent all the motifs that recur in all mothers and daughters." Thus there must be

elements of this relationship wherever there are mothers and daughters.

In this paper I will show that women writers in Canada, particularly two of our most important, Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence, have been making extensive use of this myth. It occurs in many forms; even where not used overtly, its resonances can be felt. The mother-daughter relationship is now being seen as the prime source of psychic strength for women; until a union of understanding is reached, characters are tormented and unable to mature. Hagar Shipley has despised her mother and is unable to free herself from the marble embrace of inhibited emotion; only in her journey into the unconscious can she find wholeness of self. Rachel, in Jest of God, must also descend, but into an actual kingdom of the dead, to see herself as more than just a figure of sterility. The youthful Vanessa, of Bird in the House, is a strong and forthright character who sees her grandfather as the centre of her world. Her struggles to break the hold of this patriarchal figure show her that it is the women in her life, her mother, grandmother, aunt, who have been the true world, and the wound which will not heal is the loss of her mother. The Diviners, in the ambiguity of its title, hints that Morag is not simply a seeker after personal fulfillment, but on a greater and more archetypal quest.

Margaret Atwood's work is not so much the mythic journey as the shamanistic retreat inward and downward into a region of supernatural wonder. In Surfacing, the nameless heroine must break the hold of the father from the depths before she can be reunited with her true self which seeks the elemental mother. She herself seeks to be the gateway through which the mythical child can be born to reform the circle. Atwood's use of strongly feminine symbolism—water, mirrors, tunnels, labyrinths—intensifies our participation in the myth. Particularly in Lady Oracle, symbols are the means by which Joan hopes to gather together a wilfully disintegrated personality. Her failure is one of time, not intent; her moment has not (and may never) come.

These two writers are the culmination of a movement that has its roots in all female work. There are parallels in the work of artists such as Ostenso, Wilson, and Munro. As women have tried in the past to use the Odyssean quest, so there are men writers who are incorporating the Demeter quest into their work; I hope to show the relevance of this in the development of the myth.

Canadian literature has made extensive use of archetypes. In the growing strength of our women writers, we can see a whole new mythic dimension in this use of the oldest and most pervasive archetype. Socially and psychologically relevant, it is indicative of the growing subtlety of the female artistic consciousness.
# Table of Contents

Preface........................................page 1  
Chapter 1: Introduction................page 7  
Chapter 2: Margaret Laurence............page 18  
Chapter 3: Margaret Atwood...............page 46  
Chapter 4: Conclusion.....................page 71  
Selected Bibliography....................page 84
Persephone in Canadian Fiction

Preface

In the collective memory of the human race, as Jung suggests, are beings who incorporate within themselves our deepest dreams, wishes and fears. Recurring again and again in art and imagination, their presence is testimony to the necessity for a mythological focus for the forces we sense within us.

For the Greeks, three of these ancient presences were combined in the triad Persephone—Demeter—Hecate: the Kore, or maiden; the primordial mother, or Corn Goddess; and the Moon Goddess. This uniquely feminine figure represents, for woman, the psychic continuum of all life. The three-in-oneness of the triad implies an infinity of consciousness; mother and daughter are each contained within the other and both are within the aged woman, as she is in them. The androcentric Jung found these three figures difficult to reconcile, but for the novelist, the myth is a paradigm of woman's passage through life.

As the Odyssey is the archetypal male quest, so the search for the lost daughter of the Corn Goddess is the female quest. Maiden,

mother and crone, simultaneously one and three, they represent all aspects of woman's being, and each has a power equal to the other. In the search for her abducted daughter, Demeter is seeking part of herself which has been lost. The third figure of the triad, Hecate, has heard the cries of the Kore and joined in the search. In the Homeric hymn to Demeter, not only are mother and daughter to be thought of as "a double figure" but Hecate and Persephone are "as inseparable as Persephone and Demeter."  

The Cretan myth of Demeter pre-dates the Homeric hymn and refers to her love for the mortal hunter, Iasion. In barbaric Arcadia, the goddess met the same fate as the Kore. Pursued by Poseidon, whose name means husband of Demeter, she transformed herself into a mare but was caught, raped, and gave birth to a mysterious daughter whose name no one was permitted to utter. In her rage, she became Demeter Erinyes, or Nemesis. Here, as Kerenyi suggests, mother and daughter provide a paradigm for the inseparable unity of mothers and daughters:

> in a single figure which was at once Mother and Daughter, she could represent the motifs which recur in all mothers and daughters....

---

2 Jung, p. 110.


4 Kerenyi, p. 32.
But we must not assume that Persephone is simply the Kore victim of Pluto's rape; she has her own terrible aspect. Her dominion over the manifold powers of death gives her an added identification with her mother and, in a semantic connection with Perseus, behind her we can glimpse the Gorgon, Medusa.

As the maiden is raped by the Lord of the Dead and gives birth to Plouton (riches), so the earth is raped by the plough and gives up its bounty. According to Robert Graves, the abduction of the Maiden Goddess refers to male usurpation of the female agriculture myths in primitive times. While this may be so, there is no doubt that the matriarchy of the Grain Goddess is the highest step compatible with female dominance in ancient times. Her mystery was, at heart, the mystery of the continued existence of all living things; in her uniqueness is the universal principle of life and death. The myth of the maiden drawn into the earth appears as far away as Indonesia; the world-wide prevalence of the myth proclaims its universality.

In the Introduction to Kerenyi's *Eleusis*, Jung writes that the psychology of the Demeter cult is a product of a matriarchal order.

---


6 Jung, p. 132.
of society where the male is "an indispensable but on the whole disturbing factor." Jung is quite definite as to the cathartic and supportive effect on women of a bond such as that between Demeter and her daughter. It is no wonder that women long for this powerful relationship, as its rupture or perversion causes ambivalence in all other relationships.

Demeter's rage and despair at the loss of her daughter are complete but for Persephone, there are illusory compensations. Is she not to be Queen of the Dead? And does this not mean that she will have at her beck and call the mighty Ruler of the Dead himself? Perhaps, but will it be worth it? Separated from the source of life and growth, she will turn inwards into herself, into the darkness of the unconscious. For the daughter of the golden grain, imprisonment in the vault may lead to schizophrenia. Besides the trauma of her initiation into sexual experience, she must live side by side with her rapist, knowing that, if she takes any nourishment, she is doomed to darkness forever. As every reader of myth knows, she consumes a number of pomegranate seeds, ensuring her return to Pluto for a certain period each year.

7 Kerenyi, p. xxx.
There is a curious significance in the choice of pomegranate seeds in the myth. Not only is the pomegranate the symbol of the unification of diverse elements, but it is also a symbol of fecundity. In some areas, the fruit is called *side* and there is an accompanying myth of a virgin, Side, who took her life because of rape by her father. In an Orphic tale, the Kore is seduced by her father in the shape of a snake. Herakleitos, on the other hand, writes that Persephone's attacker is her brother, Dionysius. She is thus under attack by all males and there is threat even in those closest to her. Nevertheless, Persephone's acceptance of the seed from her male abductor is an integral part of her progression from innocence to maturity.

The danger is, of course, more profound than simply the defilement of loss of virginity, as the goddesses had the gift of restoring themselves to the virgin state at will. The real rupture involved is the attempted break of the mother/daughter bond by the disruptive aspects of the male principle itself.

In any case, Persephone's abduction, by whomever it is accomplished, tears her away from the side of her adored mother, causing both a physical and a psychic wound. Her journey downwards parallels

---


9 Kerenyi, p. 139.
Jung's described journey into the unconscious, the shamanistic descent into a world of supernatural wonder and terror, and finally, the plunge into schizophrenia by the besieged mind. She has moved into a universal, archetypal and symbolic world, and will touch the spirits of those who come after her. Those who repeat her journey will find, within themselves, a series of chaotic experiences, culminating, if they are lucky, in a new harmony and fulfillment, a rebirth into life.
Chapter I

The theme of renewal and re-affirmation is a familiar one in literature, and appears significantly often in the work of women writers. In the search for a meaningful mythology, the myth of the Mother and Daughter thrusts itself forward irresistibly. For the male writer, there is the Hero, whose adventures involve a search for identity through action and aggression; for the female writer, there is a figure who does not do, but simply is. This Hero's power lies in her essential being; like the Goddess, she has the power to give life, and this often acts as a catalyst simply by the benefits which are bestowed by her presence. We will find that this is the model for many of the novels of growth and integration which are, and have been written, by Canadian women novelists.

The natural world and the enigma of its relation to everyday life—these are metaphysical problems to which the mythical solution seems ready made. Martha Ostenso's first book, *Wild Geese*, is an attempt to combine the pragmatic outlook of Realism with the deeper vision of the mythic structure. Although callow in many ways, the book has a freshness of approach and a sincerity of feeling that evoke a response in the reader.

The story of a farming community in Manitoba, it concerns the struggle between the life force, as personified in the character of Judith Gare, and the morbid repressiveness of the father, Caleb.
Judith epitomizes the unthinking, instinctive vitality of youth; Lind Archer, the visitor from outside, sees her as "vivid and terrible ... the embryonic ecstasy of all life." Judith's passion for life is contrasted with that of the vapid Lind who watches, powerless to change the course of events. Amelia Gare, Judith's mother, has given birth to a child out of wedlock and married Caleb for fear of social ostracism. Her rejection of her husband, because of emotional fixation on her dead lover and lost child, has so embittered him that he has destroyed any chance for happiness the family may have had. He has become a power-crazed patriarch; his only joy comes from his seasonal rape of the land:

The early summer season was to him a terrific prolonged hour of passion during which he was blind and deaf and dumb to everything save the impulse which bound him to the land. (p. 75)

Completely alienated from her own daughters, Amelia identifies with Lind. At the re-appearance in her life of her illegitimate son, Mark Jordan, she determines "to isolate herself wholly from Caleb's children" (p. 135). Jordan is a figure of some mythic power; his arrival has pagan overtones. Lind first sees him on a horse, riding against the sky across a ridge; she knows he is from

---

"the world beyond Nykerk (New Church)." Symbolically, the land across which he rides has the beginnings of new growth after the scars of an old fire. In this, he, rather than Lind, is the fertility figure, but Lind is the Kore at the beginning of a different cycle. Jordan will be the catalyst who restores life to those over whom Caleb has had such terrible power. As Persephone gave birth to Plouton so Amelia has given birth to her own salvation.

In spite of his importance to the development of the plot, Jordan is the weakest character in the book. Both he and Lind are largely unrealised but Ostenson has given the people of the community a stature which is almost mythic. While centre stage is occupied by the male characters, one is always conscious of the women, moving, moving in the background. Lind observes "the unbelievable amount of work done by the women..." (p. 209). In spite of the oppression of their lives, those who have formed bonds with each other know some happiness, but those who, like Amelia, have shut themselves off from other women, suffer great misery. The women are treated in some instances as beasts of burden, and Thorvaldson, with his many daughters, is an object of scorn.

Amelia's life has been masochistically joyless, and her revulsion toward her husband is strongly sexual. She prepares the lamp:
which must be ready for his use should he want it... it had a long, white, glass pedestal, and a ruby coloured, round body, within which the wick floated like a red, swollen tongue. Amelia stood looking into the rosy globe as if it held some strange significance. (p. 160)

Trapped in Caleb's death-like embrace, she has never extended toward Judith and Ellen the nurturing love for which they yearn and in consequence, both are stunted emotionally. Judith has always been more the child of the abundant land than that of the rejecting Amelia; one of the most powerful scenes in the book has Judith pressing her naked body into the earth and arising, like Anteus, with fresh strength. Ostenso sees the land as both abundant and harsh; here the ideal mother is joined to the actual father in ironic contrast and it is, in fact, from the land that retribution for Caleb comes. He has appropriated to himself the bounty of the flax harvest; the destruction of the crop by fire sends him to his death in the muskeg. The sacrifice of the harvest has drawn the death-figure down into the depths; those who remain begin their lives anew.

Although we are told at the end that Judith is happy and will, in her turn, give birth, there is no resolution to the antagonism between mothers and daughters. Ostenso sees the life of women as paramount but fears the harshness of the land too much to admit its mythic power. Her prose is full of the beauty of everyday things-flowers, birds, the soft winds—but the land itself is inimical. For her, the quest is above the land, away from its de-
mands, in the flight of the wild geese. The unease caused by this evasion of reality is felt by Lind as she and Mark are united; above her are the geese "...a remote, trailing shadow...a magnificent seeking through solitude ...an endless quest..." (p. 230). In spite of the wealth of the natural world, there is a spiritual blindness here which has not recognised the possibilities of the mother/daughter bond. Of course, the mythic resonances are here; we can see Demeter in the remote trailing shadow, passing through the sky seeking the daughter who eludes her.

Ostenso's later novels are undistinguished; none has the compelling innocence of *Wild Geese*. One looks in vain for a development of the motif of mother/daughter search and integration, a development which might have given a coherence and distinction to Ostenso's canon. Imagination and vividness have carried the reader along, but for works which combine technical mastery with the mythic consciousness, we must turn to the novels of Ethel Wilson.

Two of Wilson's most satisfying books, *The Innocent Traveller* and *Swamp Angel*, make extensive use of the metaphor and symbolism of the great myth. In *The Innocent Traveller*, Topaz Edgworth continues throughout her life as the intensely vibrant child she was at the death of her mother. Time passes for her as if in a dream; the swift and imperceptible passing of time is one of Wilson's preoccupations. Her stepmother's death when Topaz is 45,
finds her still immature; the rest of her life is spent in search of surrogate mothering. The journey to Canada, while expressed in almost mythic terms, is irrelevant to her development; she cannot mature without the trauma of separation and sexual initiation. Her life is as ephemeral as a spray of light; "just small bright dots of colour, sparkling dots of life." Wilson writes in an Author's note:

> The metaphors are not mixed. The drop of water, the bird, the water-glider, the dancer, the wind on the canal, and Topaz, are all different and all the same. (p. vii)

The images are of light, flickering, youth; there is no transition to maturity. Like Yeats' "long-legged fly," Topaz skitters on the swiftly moving river of life; she is blind to the world around her. There is, nevertheless, a sense of value and purpose to her life. As always, Wilson's irony is elusive, but there is a clue in Topaz's name. The gem signifies spiritual truth, and in her innocence, Topaz has fulfilled her quest, which was simply for a life of joy, however transitory.

In Swamp Angel, a later book in which the style is less unconventional, the mythic theme is more immediately apparent. It tells the history of Maggie Lloyd's search for meaning in her life.

²Ethel Wilson, The Innocent Traveller (Toronto: Macmillan, 1949), p 243. Subsequent references are to this edition, with page numbers in parenthesis.
A widow, she has lost her little daughter through death and has herself been drawn into the spiritual death of marriage with Edward Vardoe. Their life together is disgusting to her and she longs constantly for her child. Able at last to escape into the mountains, she builds a new life through the gift of herself which she showers on others. She is mother incarnate; "her slow, soft curves" proclaim her femininity and her hands are infinitely nurturing. Verbs of fluidity abound—flowing, spraying, splashing—and convey the essence of the fertility of the water life. Where the two great rivers combine, one muddy and dangerous, the other clear and sparkling, Maggie leaves the alien river behind along with Vardoe, and follows the dancing, gleaming Thompson.

While living in Vancouver, Maggie has become involved with Mrs. Severance and her daughter Hilda. The older woman is one of a series of grossly fat and fertile figures we will encounter in these works; when she wishes to dispose of the central symbol of the book, a revolver called a Swamp Angel, it is to Maggie that she gives it. The transfer from older woman to younger is the transfer of the symbol of life and death from mother to spiritual daughter. Maggie takes to herself the power of life, but consigns the revolver, with its death aspects, into the depths of the lake where the fish swim around it in celebration of life. The barrier between life and death is dissolved in the fluid element. Maggie's
identification with water leads her to feel "at one with her two brothers the seal and the porpoise, who tumble and tumble in the salt-waves".³ Maggie uses her power to restore life to the aged Mr. Cunningham when she brings him back from "the point where Being touches non-Being" (p. 137). This notion, with which Wilson plays so nicely, is, in fact, at the heart of the Greek ethos; the idea of non-Being in Greek religion forms the root aspect of Being.⁴ The entirely fortuitous circumstances of life can have no meaning without the acceptance of non-Being as a valid state in which at any moment one might find oneself. As the bud contains the essence of the flower but is not the flower, so the Kore contains within herself both the bud, which is herself, and the non-Being of the woman with its potential for Being. Maggie's flowerlike qualities are altogether womanly; in her, the daughter is submerged within the mother. Jung writes that the daughter's Being is revealed like a flash in the mother's:⁵

"...turns over round the bend of the parabola of curved flight, sinks, and is gone..."

This passage is intensely evocative of Wilson's prose in Swamp Angel; construction as well as imagery appear again and again in the descriptions of Maggie's quest. It is Vera Gunnarson, whom

³ Ethel Wilson, Swamp Angel (Toronto: Macmillan, 1954), p. 99. Subsequent references are to this edition, with page numbers in parenthesis.

⁴ Jung, p. 120.

⁵ D. H. Lawrence, "Fidelity", in Jung, p. 108.
Maggie tries to treat as a daughter, who represents non-Being. In her insecurities and jealousies, she is the opposite of "truth"; her name is an added irony.

Here too, as Wilson said of The Innocent Traveller, the metaphors are not mixed. The book is full of sparkling light and rippling water. The only dark passages, both in language and in mood, are at the beginning when Maggie is immured with Vardoe in Vancouver. Even there, Maggie's use of feathers in her fly-tying allies her with the birds who flicker in the air, refracting the light in flashes of colour. She longs to leave the sea and go up into the mountains where there are rivers with fish swimming in them. Even the thoughts of the characters flicker and disappear in the changing light, and the sentences ripple like the flowing corn from Demeter's jars. Maggie's search for her lost little daughter cannot succeed but she herself is restored to emotional health and the future holds fulfillment for her.

We see in the novels discussed above the themes which proliferate around the myth of Persephone. The fundamental relationship for women is that between mother and daughter. This is the first bond known to the infant who is both herself and an extension of the mother. For the mother, there is renewal in the form of a daughter; as she looks backward into her childhood, her daughter, in her, looks forward into adulthood. The third part
of the cycle is the aged woman, who contains both younger women within herself, and also, through her death, a promise of rebirth and renewal. All carry the promise of fertility in some form, but for all three, fertility implies a death of some kind, whether psychical or physical.

The absence or rupture of this tremendous bond leads to the quest for its restoration, for the fulfillment of the archetypal triad. Unless the woman can reconcile, within herself, the maiden, mother, and crone, there cannot be maturity or personal fulfillment; some vital facet of herself will always be missing. We will see that some female characters turn away from this self-actualising cycle; there is a flight from incorporation of personality. This, of course, in no way negates the importance of the cycle. Often, the vehemence of the rejection is proof of its continuing power.

The search for integration is, of course, a component of the male quest but there is a different mythical framework in which to work. The male seeks a place to be, but in this place, however welcomed he may be, he stands alone. In the closest relationship of all, the woman reproducing herself from her own body, are uniquely feminine ramifications. In the closest of bonds is the greatest potential for struggle and resistance, and the fear of being engulfed by the mother can prevent the integration of the self.
The use of mythic archetypes is fundamental to the structuring of the artist's world, and the female quest motif appears increasingly in the work of many of Canadian women, and even some men, authors. Canadian women writers are looking increasingly inwards and this introspection is reflected in the subjectivity of their writing. In the work of two of our most popular writers, Margaret Laurence and Margaret Atwood, we find the myth used again and again, both implicitly and explicitly.
Chapter II

...the continuum moves inexorably.¹

MARGARET LAURENCE

Although their actions may seem, at times, to contradict this, Margaret Laurence's women yearn for abundance and fulfillment. Sterility is often represented by a dominant paternalism. The progress toward self-realisation involves struggle, a rejection of this paternalism, and an eventual turning to and embracing of the mothering principle.

_A Bird in the House_ is Laurence's most unequivocally autobiographical work, and for the young Vanessa McLeod, the centre of the world is Grandfather Connor. All in the house are subject to his autocratic rule, yet it is in the relationships between the women that the true family lies; there is genuine identification and the continuity of love between them. In "Jericho's Brick Battlements", Vanessa rejects the rigidity of her grandfather's repressiveness. Once the dominant figure in her life, he has become "the memory of a memory";² her mother has taken his place


²Margaret Laurence, _A Bird in the House_ (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974), p. 206. Subsequent references are to this edition, with page numbers in parenthesis.
in the structure of her consciousness. As she moves on in her life, Vanessa realises that, "Of all the deaths in the family, hers remained unhealed in my mind longest" (p. 206).

Vanessa can put her girlhood into its proper perspective because she has moved along the continuum into motherhood, into adulthood. In *The Stone Angel*, Hagar-Shripley does not achieve this transition until the very end of her life. Her own pride traps her in the Persephone role, and the psychological disruption caused by her refusal to assume the mother role imprisons her within the confines of sexual inhibition—the marble embrace of the Pluto figure—and only when she re-enters the cycle, can she find integration and fulfillment. Hagar connives at her own imprisonment within the arms of the Stone Angel; she is both victim and self-betrayer.

The death of her mother at her birth is the first break in the continuity of the myth; her refusal to comfort her dying brother by playing the mother role is the second and re-inforcing break. "To play at being her—it was beyond me."³ Her self-destructive denial of the mother arises because of what she sees as her mother's weakness in dying. To compensate for her loss, she has reshaped her mother's image into one she can despise. Hagar will

not be able to reconcile these two roles, both facets of her own personality, until she moves downward toward the end of her life, the Shadow Point which awaits her.

This narrowing toward the focus of Hagar's life is echoed in the structure of the book. Laurence has manipulated the time sequence so that the reader sees Hagar's journey as lasting both a lifetime and the few moments of consciousness before death. "Time has folded in like a paper fan" (p. 90); as a fan opens and shuts from a fixed point, so Hagar's memory expands and contracts, soaring outward into the past and returning to the immediate. The book appears at first reading to have a conventional temporal structure, but Laurence undercuts this through shifts in perspective and verb tense. As Hagar lies on her hospital bed, she begins the long retreat inward and backward into the depths of memory. There she encounters those who have been important to her and sees her own failures in her dealings with those she has loved.

Hagar's narrative begins with the Stone Angel which "used to stand" on the hill in the cemetery. Here, the use of tense emphasizes the indefinite past of memory. The angel is doubly blind, "unendowed with even a pretense of sight" (p. 3), as Hagar will be blind to the needs of others in her life. All around is the burgeoning life of the prairie-flowers, weeds, insects—kept at bay by those to whom rampant growth is threatening. Hagar's dealings with natural life are disturbing; the dying chicks she
sees in the garbage dump are life perverted. Fresh from the egg, they are at the same time a symbol of death. Lottie, the one who has the strength to destroy the chicks, is herself described as "light as an eggshell" and will in her turn be destroyed by Hagar. Images of intense vitality surround the still centre which is Hagar. She moves within scenes of bursting life, but is unaffected. Her clothing is described as lilac, or narcissus coloured; her dress is pure silk, "spun by silkworms fed on mulberry leaves" (p. 29). Everywhere are flowers and insects, but Hagar is the embodiment of Margaret Atwood's Persephone, the girl with the gorgon touch, who longs for human warmth:

But always she meets a marbled flesh,
A fixing eye, a stiffened form...
(Formal Garden)

Full of vibrant life himself, the man she marries is destroyed by her coldness; socially, of course, her marriage is a downward journey. Robert Graves writes of Persephone as "she who brings destruction"; she must kill the sacrificial king to bring life to the waste land. For Hagar, the life force must be destroyed because she fears its power over her. Nothing for Bram

4 Margaret Atwood, Double Persephone (Toronto: Hawkshead Press, 1961), n. pag.

Shipley flourishes after marriage; even his bees die. Hagar has feared his horse, commonly a symbol for the life force and sexual drive, and the death of Soldier ends any chance of understanding between them.

Later, Hagar will destroy her beloved son because of her fear and displeasure at his sexual happiness with Lottie's daughter, Arlene. Mother and son wrestle with the Stone Angel and John, after her marble embrace, will die because of the loss of love.

Hagar's nature is passionate, but she equates sexual desire with the loss of power; she is alternately drawn to and repelled by sexual experience. Like the invisible "other" in D. H. Lawrence's extraordinary poem, "Bavarian Gentians," she conspires in the embraces of John and Arlene, but ends by causing their death.

"Let me guide myself...where Persephone goes" writes the poet:

D. H. Lawrence suggests that Persephone goes willingly into the halls of darkness; in joining Pluto, she joins herself. "The blaze

---

of darkness" extinguishes "Demeter's pale lamps" testifying to the strength of desire. Hagar has known this passion but has stifled it, denying it fulfillment for the sake of pride. This realisation comes to her at the end of her life when she can admit that "Pride has been my wilderness" (p. 292).

In her search for release and joy, Hagar must constantly descend until she reaches a depth within herself where joy will be possible. There are innumerable instances in the book of her descent in search of experience: the Stone Angel has stood but is now fallen above the town: Hagar and Doris wait in the bowels of the Hospital for the X-rays: the most significant journey, paralleling Persephone's journey and also the Jungian descent into the unconscious, is the climb down to the Cannery beside the sea. Like the unconscious, the Cannery is a "place of remnants and oddities" (p. 215). The emptiness of Hagar's life is epitomised by Shadow Point; on the surface, without the strength to grow spiritually, she is in the shadows. Only when she has the courage to descend into the Cannery, and into her own past, can she re-emerge into the light. The sea itself terrifies her with its dangers, both physical and psychological, of being "drawn fathoms down into depths as still and cold as black glass" (p. 235). Even her dying body draws her to the depths with its reminders of bowels and blockages. She is unable to purge herself of the waste
of her life and it is this concentration on her own subterranean being that causes her discomfort in the Cannery as she sits with "balloon belly" on the floor.

Hagar has come to the Cannery to avoid the Old People's Home, a mausoleum for which she is not yet ready. Her impulse has driven her to the only place she can integrate her life. At Shadow Point, recognition awaits her in the darkness which has always "teemed with phantoms" (p. 205) for her. It is, of course, these phantoms with which she must learn to deal before entering the final darkness. As she climbs down the steps, she is no longer clad in flower colours but in a beige housedress "patterned rather bizarrely in black triangles" (p. 145). The triangles, a three cornered symbol of unity, have replaced the artificial flowers of her clothing. Now she moves through natural growth; there are ferns, flowers and blackberries, and Hagar sees herself as Keats' old Meg Merrilees:

Old Meg she was a gypsy,
And lived upon the moors;
Her bed it was the brown heath turf,
And her house was out of doors. (p. 163)

Meg is the archetypal outcast woman wanderer at one with Nature, a Demeter figure, in fact. In ironic emphasis, Hagar's self-realization comes through contact with the man she meets named Murray Lees, who is with Dependable Life Assurance. The euphony of his name, Murray Ferney Lees, is contrasted with an unprepossessing
appearance. Clara Thomas suggests that his function is analogous to that of the Fool in *King Lear*, but he is also the goddess in male form, conferring the gift of self-knowledge on Hagar. His presence protects her from sinking into the depths; "If I were alone... I'd be drawn out and out, with each receding layer of water to its beginning, a depth as alien and chill as some far off frozen planet" (p. 224). Lees talks of his joy in sex with his wife, and the death of their child; Hagar finds she can finally talk of the loss of her beloved son, John. She must now face the responsibility for the tragedy of her own life. It is not until she can speak of her son's death that she can move through the last barrier, self love, to a final peace. She sees her interference in her son's life as the result, not of concern for him, but of pride and selfishness, the desire to keep him for herself. Even after his death, she had remained dry-eyed, the Stone Angel still.

The death of John through his mother's interference, like that of the sacrificial King at the hands of Persephone, restores life to the Prairie. "That same year, the rains fell around Manawaka in spring and early summer, enough to head out the wheat" (p. 244). With memory comes the release of tears; she is finally purged.

7Thomas, p. 71.
She imagines that John is present and gives her blessing to his life with Arlene. Hagar is approaching the "hinge of the fan," where her life and the three facets of her personality can become whole.

The ascent to the light begins with the arrival of Marvin, the neglected son, who brings his mother to the Hospital. As the focus narrows, the rooms in which she lies become smaller; "the next room will be the smallest of the lot," says Hagar (p. 282).
For now, she is in a room of flowers whose delphinium curtains and primrose walls are a foreshadowing of the reunion with Marvin, who deals in paints with marvelous names, Parisian Chartreuse, Fiesta Rose.

Also exorcised in the Hospital are Hagar's fear and rejection of other women. She has constantly referred to the women around her in animal terms: her mother has been the brood mare; Lottie is a chicken; Doris is a sow; others are cows and heifers. Her acceptance of their flesh, and of course, her own, as part of their common humanity, is a result of her growing humility and the realisation that she is part of all women.

Her self-centredness dissolves more and more in contact with those from whom she needs care. The courage of the minister, Troy, in singing to her in the ward, causes her to listen to the actual message he brings; "come ye before Him and rejoice" (p. 292).
This leads to her final acceptance of all her guilts, not only in the death of John, but in the ruin of her husband, Bram. She can accept that it was her repression and coldness, prompted by "some brake of proper appearance" (p. 292) that stifled his warmth and vigour. She can now offer to Marvin the love she has denied him; she can assume the mother role. With this assumption, the triad can be completed and fulfilled. Hagar's own body and spirit become the place of sacrifice and exaltation, the site of the mythic journey; she is goddess, hero, shaman, and life giver. Paradoxically, she has contained within herself both life and death. Her imprisonment has resulted from the fear of loss of self-esteem; the arms Plutonic which have enveloped her have been the chains which she carried within her; "they spread out from me and shackled all I touched" (p. 292). This Persephone becomes one with Pluto, not in death, but in a positive integration leading to acceptance of the life and death cycle. The blue smoking darkness and the light of Demeter's lamp, in the Lawrence poem, have both been absorbed into the light of Persephone's realisation that both light and dark come from within her. These contrarieties must be accepted as Hagar accepts the truth and falsehood of her last words to Marvin. A lie and yet not a lie; distinctions become narrower until they disappear into a kind of universal truth.
There is no time left; the focus has shrunk until now "the world is a needle" (p. 307). Hagar's death follows inevitably, for the world can shrink no farther. Her last act is to wrest from the nurse's hands a glass of water; in this baptism is eternal life. This death is an ongoing event, not a finality. Laurence has begun the book with the past indefinite and ended it with a kind of indefinite future with the dying woman surging forward into "and then—" (p. 308). Death is not an ending but part of a new beginning as the growth and death of the fertility cycle carries always the promise of a new beginning. Through shifts in perspective, time and memory have woven into a skein by which the reader's attention has been linked with the fate of Hagar Shipley. There is, both structurally and emotionally, a drawing inward to Hagar's consciousness; like time, this has grown in concentration as it moves toward its focus. As the hero returns from his supernatural journey—with the power to bestow boons—so Hagar has interrupted her metaphysical journey to bestow "boons, on those left behind." The plunge inward into the sea of memory has revealed her as the archetypal woman, capable of giving or withholding life. As her spiritual pride has drained the life from her relationships, so her new-found humility brings

with it the possibility of renewal.

Spiritual pride masked by an obsessive fear of appearing foolish is also the basis of Rachel Cameron's inhibitions in A Jest of God. Laurence has compared the two women:

Rachel's hang-up in a sense was very similar to Hagar's, although it was very, very, concealed. Because anyone who is desperately afraid of having human weaknesses, although they feel very unself-confident, as Rachel did, is in fact suffering from spiritual pride.

Unmarried, and moving toward middle age, Rachel's sense of identity is terribly weak; projecting this onto others, she constantly asks, "Who does she think she is?"¹⁰

The novel is full of splits and contrarieties, as the most banal pronouncements convey profound significance. About her work as a teacher, Rachel says, "It's my living," and truly it is, as without the daily contact with children, there would be nothing in her life of any value. In spite of her desperation, though, we find that Rachel has had chances to enrich her life but has refused them; Laurence emphasizes throughout that we live the life we have chosen for ourselves.

¹⁰ Margaret Laurence, A Jest of God (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974), p. 55. All references are to this text, with page numbers in parenthesis.
As the town of Manawaka is split in two, between Ukrainians and Scots, so, symbolically, Rachel is split in two, between her fantasy self and the conformist who dreads exposure of any kind. Almost all of her dialogue is interior; when she speaks, there is little substance in what she says. Yet her cry of "Nick, listen," is a deeply felt longing for connection which he cannot accept.

Of Ukrainian background, he represents for her the uninhibited exotic, the inhabitant of the "Golden City" of the children's song. Both Nick and Rachel are part of a pair, the other of which embodies the ideal of the parent. Nick's recovery from the polio which killed his twin, Steve, his father's favourite, has left a burden of guilt from which he cannot recover; for Rachel, her sister Stacey, mother of four, small and plump in her mother's image, is a constant reminder of what she is not.

Rachel is the Biblical mother, crying for her children; names here are important, sometimes oppressively so. As the lily is the flower of death yet represents a kind of abundance, so Calla is full of love for Rachel, but it is a love which must ultimately be sterile. Mrs. Cameron, fixed in eternal girlhood, is ironically really called May. The news that she is not pregnant but carrying a tumour is given to Rachel by Dr. Raven; significances seem endless. Even place names make connections; from her initial frustration in the Parthenon Cafe, Rachel moves to the final scene, where the bus moves "like a great owl through the darkness." Thus,
in spirit, the owl of the virgin goddess Athena is sweeping Rachel away from the Temple, Parthenos, the place of the virgin. Taken too far, this sort of thing can distract the reader, who becomes engrossed in secondary significances.

But behind all the Christian references, and the linguistic tricks, is the structure of the great myth. Rachel and her mother live over the funeral home which her father started. The apartment, a place of doilies and bric-a-brac, is her mother's domain; her father's is below, with the "unspeaking ones." In sleep, in a Jungian dream, Rachel goes down:

—Stairs rising from nowhere, and the wallpaper the loose-petalled, unknown flowers. The stairs descending to the place where I am not allowed, ...He is behind the door I cannot open. And his voice—his voice—so I know he is lying there among them, lying in state, king over them. He can't fool me. He says run away Rachel run away run away. I am running across thick grass and small purple violets—weeds—dandelions. -(p. 19)

The pun on "lying" will be resolved when Rachel realises that her father too "had the life he wanted" (p. 124).

The psychic release from this half life begins with a visit to the Tabernacle of the Risen and Reborn, with Calla. The painted walls are "dense and murky, the way the sea must be, fathoms under" (p. 30). Rachel's reaction is, as always, "I must go away." Thwarted by the mass of people, she thinks for the first time of the Dionysian rites; "...will Calla suddenly rise and keen like the Grecian women on the hills..." (p. 31). This image is a direct
correspondence to the myth, as Persephone's brother, Dionysius is often equated with her abductor. Not Calla, but Rachel, will be carried away, will rise and keen, as she falls into an ecstatic trance babbling in tongues. With great skill, Laurence uses rhetorical devices to build the tension. Death images, animal images, give way to sexual, with the singing of the dithyrambic hymn, "In full and glad surrender, I give myself to Thee." In a parody of the bandaging of death, Rachel says, "The muscles of my face have wired my jawbone so tightly that when I move it, it makes a clicking sound" (p. 34). Her ecstatic utterances, when they come, are a release from spiritual death, from the bond with the death figure of the father. The voice, and the woman, are dragged from the crypt where they have been hiding, into an extraordinary visibility. No longer will Rachel deny her own existence because she is not seen; that denial has been taken from her, although she will try to cling to it. Her shame expresses itself in a violent reaction to Calla's gesture of love. The crude humanity of the Tabernacle has released in her the desire to give life, not only to herself, but to another, to bear a child.

Her subconscious longing is given expression in her intercourse with Nick, but Laurence alerts the reader to the irony in this relationship. Nick assures Rachel that the place is "as
private as the grave;" undressing, he "slither(s) out of his grey flannels like a snake shrugging off its last year's skin" (p. 90). Despite her sexual longing, Rachel is unable to respond fully to him; she is trapped between her mother's and her father's worlds, with assurance from neither:

There are three worlds and I'm in the middle one, and this seems to be a weak area between millstones. (p. 94)

Nick, too, is in a kind of no-man's land, having turned his back on a heritage that claims him in spite of himself. The winter suspension of Rachel's life is nearly over. The Tabernacle has brought her the first breaking up; to interpret her vision, she needs an oracle, which she finds in the unlikely shape of Hector Jonas, her father's successor in the funeral chapel. In the climactic scene of the book, she realises that she is kin to the Dionysian women:

I'm out of my mind. Mad as any Grecian woman on the demented and blood-lit hills. (p. 116)

Going down from her mother's place, she feels the trampled rose of the carpet beneath her feet. In an echo of the Tabernacle, she begs Jonas, "Let me come in" (p. 119). But Hector is no Niall Cameron. The place of death has been sanitised and trivialised. Where Niall had reigned among the "unspeaking ones", Hector is the super salesman selling Relief and Modified Prestige. He is nevertheless the catalyst for Rachel's realisation that her father had chosen the
realm of death, chosen the company of those with whom he need not connect, and it is for her to choose the world of light and life. Not the kingdom of her mother, because her mother has stifled her own life urges, but a new kingdom of loving and giving; she must become the mother in order to fulfill the cycle of maturity and growth.

Although Hector has superficially blocked out the apocalyptic aspects of death, within her Rachel carries the reminder of the death in life she has led all these years. Her ambivalent feelings toward pregnancy, her fear and longing, make her intensely aware of her former obsession with death:

What I thought in those days was—whatever you feel, don't say it or sing it, because if you do, it will mortify me. (p. 162)

Laurence's skill at conveying layers of meaning through words is again evident as Rachel says, "It can't be borne." True of the child she believes she is carrying, true of her situation, and eventually, true of the tumour of which she is as yet unaware. Its removal is the last barrier to a new life. As she moves westward with her mother, she sees that even the bearing of children is unnecessary to her fulfillment; she has given life to herself. This has been the ultimate jest of God, that she herself held the key to the crypt, that she had chosen the life she wanted.

If, in The Stone Angel, our recognition of the myth is retrospective, in A Jest of God it is immediate and vital. Hagar's self-
acceptance comes too late to allow her more than a token integration before she is swept forward into the darkness. Rachel's strength is tentative but positive; her fulfillment will come from the knowledge that she is in harmony with the cycle of growth, maturation and eventual old age. "I will be different. I will remain the same" (p. 201). The woman she has become contains both mother and daughter, contains all possibilities. Laurence has said, of Rachel; "Her emergence from the tomb-like atmosphere of her extended childhood is a partial defeat—or, looked at another way, a partial victory."¹¹ Rachel is aware of the ambivalence of her "partial victory," but the ego strength she has gained enables her to see her life as opening out in space and time; she has been given "a place and a meaning in the life of the generations."¹²

In The Diviners, Laurence raises an historical event to the mythic level; this is one of the significances of her title. In an exploration of the ways in which human subjectivity makes use of myth, she begins the book symbolically at Batoche, with the struggle between the Metis and the Arkanys, the Orkney men. Here, Tonnerre meets Gunn, the thunder of righteous possession meets the gun of the new displacement. As the Scot is dispossessed of his land, so he in turn dispossesses the Metis. The focus is


¹²Jung, p. 162.
at its widest, the meeting of the protagonists; it will narrow and narrow until it meets in the person of Pique Gunn Tonnerre, the inheritor of the legends of both races. The child of Morag Gunn and Jules Tonnerre, she must reconcile the living future with the dead past, somehow to accept the truth in each.

The book actually begins during the summer in Morag's life when she must examine her life; she has come to that point in the cycle when she must relinquish the urgencies of youth. It is a rite of passage in which the aging Morag searches the past for the girl she was, and for acceptance of the woman she will become. Always a strong woman, she has attributed that strength to her heritage, to the songs and myths that have helped to shape her art. It is not until she can place her own life in the perspective of constantly reshaped memory, the river of memory along which she, and now Pique, are moving, that she can see the dead past as myth which must be interpreted to accommodate the future.

Living in a small farmhouse in Ontario, Morag is writing a novel which we may assume is *The Diviners*. Before the house, the river flows both ways: 13

This apparently impossible contradiction, made apparent and possible, still fascinated Morag, even after the years of river watching.

13 Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners* (Toronto: Bantam, 1975), p. 3. All references are to this text, with page numbers in parenthesis.
The river and memory are one in metaphor; both are ultimately unknowable, flowing in currents, eddies, layers, showing what they choose to show. Morag has been watching all her life; maturity has brought the knowledge that there is no absolute truth in memory, only the personal voice.

Her first memories are invented, prompted by snapshots of herself as a small child. These memories are fantasy; "I am remembering myself, composing this interpretation..." (p. 8), not only fantasy, but filtered through the many layers of Morag's experience. There are snapshots, Memorybank movies, and innerfilm memories within the Movies, and even imagined conversations with Catherine Parr Traill which evolve out of Morag's feelings of inadequacy.

Her real memories begin with the death of her parents, when she goes to live with Christie and Prin Logan. Prin, short for Princess, is a woman whose fear of the world has led her retreat into a life of purely oral satisfaction, eating until she is turned into an immobile mountain of flesh. An immense parody of fertility, Prin has had a dead child, and is like a child herself, "a young child who's yet to learn much speech" (p. 250). The power of language is a major theme in the book; all who are deprived of their "mother" tongue are powerless in some area of their lives. Prin is the reverse of her husband; Christie's
speech spills out in oracular eloquence. It is from him that Morag hears the tales of Piper Gunn and Black Morag, his woman, and their heroic struggles to make a new life for themselves. His Scottish heritage is all important to Christie but to some extent he is like his wife; his imagination is imprisoned, having lost the Gaelic. Nevertheless, he is a soothsayer, although what he speaks is that version of the truth which fulfills his needs.

Christie has the "gift of the garbage-telling" (p. 75). He is the town scavenger, taking the detritus of his world to the Nuisance Grounds, where he sifts and examines it. His name leads inevitably to thoughts of a Christ figure, and he does indeed take upon himself the sins of the world. The inner life of the town lies before him—alcoholism, sexuality, an aborted fetus—but he condemns no one. A shaman, he throws the bones for Morag and Jules Tonnerre, nicknamed Skinner, the Metis boy who is the descendant of Rider Tonnerre of Batoche.

History has come to Jules through his father, Lazarus, and he believes that because he has his grandfather's name, he will have his power. But Jules is doubly deprived; he has lost both French and Cree and this is a burden he will not be able to overcome.

In memory, Morag sees him standing silent through the singing of the Maple Leaf Forever, and thinks childishly, "He comes from Nowhere. He isn't anybody" (p. 70). Knowing nothing of his culture, she sees him as lacking identity. Jules will later accept society's
rejection of him, and sing of his father:

Lazarus, he was King of Nothing;
Lazarus, he never had a dime.
He was sometimes on Relief,
he was permanent on grief,
and Nowhere was the place he spent his time.

(p. 462)

Like Niall Cameron, Lazarus reigns as King of the Dead, and it is in his place, the valley where the Tonnerres live, that Morag has her first sexual experience. With Jules, ironically in the uniform of the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, she goes down to the Valley through the snow of late winter, and although their intercourse is incomplete, it is the beginning of a relationship which will profoundly affect Morag's life. The Valley becomes literally the place of death when Piquette, Jules' sister, used and abandoned by her white husband, dies in the burning Tonnerre shack with her two children. For Morag, a witness to the desolation, the nauseating smell of burnt flesh and the despair of Lazarus are an indictment of society's treatment of Jules' people. There is only death, spiritual and physical, for those who remain in the Valley; only Jacques, Jules' younger brother, will escape to live at Galloping Mountain.

Morag's escape comes with the end of the war, when she goes to University. Her farewell to Prin, who has nearly lost speech entirely, is not to a mother figure but to a child, imprisoned in a "hulk of anonymous oxflesh" (p. 173). At the University,
she marries Brooke Skelton and during her marriage to him, his terrible need for reassurance, for the reflection of his own identity from her, causes her to submerge herself, to play the role he has assigned to her. Part of the message from the Memory-bank Movies is that they had lied to each other; each had sought for something which the other had falsely tried to reflect. In her longing for a child, Morag is trying to reaffirm her growing maturity. Her unquenchable vitality and the demands of her art finally cause the breach between them, when her novel is accepted for publication, and Brooke cannot hide his fear and hostility. This period of her life has been a kind of death of the spirit, and her escape from Brooke's denial of life comes when she again meets Jules.

One of Laurence's most ambivalent characters, Jules has embraced death when, in spite of his awareness, he refuses to conform to white society. As rescuer of Morag from death in life, and as a singer of songs, he is an Orpheus figure, with the power to bestow life. He does this through his songs, giving new life to his legends. Morag goes with him to his room; in spite of its squalor, on the floor is earth-coloured linoleum, covered with red poppies. Morag tells Jules of Prin's funeral, of singing Jerusalem the Golden, with its message of milk and honey in the pastures of the blessed, and of her realisation of the sterility of her life with her husband. "I'm the shaman,"
says Jules (p. 273); their intercourse is the magic she needs to break the grip of Brooke's morbidity. This is his gift to her; Morag's to him is the truth about his sister's death. Her exorcism of Brooke mirrors his exorcism of Piquette's death, during "the deep and terrifying night" (p. 275). Their brief affair over, Morag travels to Vancouver on the train. Looking out of the window, she thinks of the crocuses under the snow; people didn't know, she thinks, "they didn't know the renewal that came out of the dead cold" (p. 282). The "dead cold" of her life with Brooke is over and her renewal will come with the birth of her child.

It is at this stage of the book that Morag feels her life moving on in the cycle. Entitled "Rites of Passage," the chapter she writes now moves swiftly through memory. The Rites are multi-layered in themselves, as the young Morag moves into maternity, the child Pique moves through childhood, and the mature writer moves into middle age. The many facets of memory enable Morag the writer to be all three simultaneously; even the photographs of the child Pique are indistinguishable from those of the child Morag. The unique psychic reality of the grain goddess who is three-in-one is contained in the artist who, through her art, is mother and daughter, even as she moves inexorably toward old age. In her love for Pique is the knowledge
that her daughter has replaced her on centre stage:

Mine [her life] hasn't been so bad. Been?
Time running out. Is that what is really
going on, with me, now, with her? Pique,
harbinger of my death, continuer of life.
(p. 290)

But in the Memorybank Movies, Pique is only now born, in Vancou-
ver. Morag's life is full of her writing and her child; casual
affairs are frighteningly unsatisfactory. On a brief visit,
Jules tells her of the death of his brother and of his dying
sister Val. Of his brother Jacques at Galloping Mountain, Jules
says, "Maybe it's not too late for him and his" (p. 341). When
Morag tells Pique of Galloping Mountain, the child says pro-
phetically, "I'm going there someday" (p. 369).

Pique's search for her heritage will be successful; Morag's
is not. On a visit to Scotland, where she is involved with a
curiously insubstantial character named Dan McRaith, she is
within reach of Sutherland, the mythic place of Christie's tales:

...I don't need to go there because I know now
what it was I had to learn there...it's not mine,
e except a long way back. I always thought it was
the land of my ancestors, but it is not. (p.391)

The revelation that her true home is the land where she was
born is a psychic turning from the land of her fathers; rebirth
and renewal can only come from a going forward, rather than a
turning back. Laurence has said, of her own background:  

I recognised that, in point of fact, these ancestors were very far away from me and that Scotland to me was just an ancestral memory, almost in a Jungian sense.

This knowledge takes her back to Canada and a dying Christie in Manawaka; his last words are an acknowledgement of his love for her and of her power to transmute the mundane to the mythic. As her farewell to Christie is the sound of the pipes, so it is her farewell to the strength of imposed cultural memories, memories which can now be seen as a living but not dominant part of her heritage.

That this heritage is very much a part of her day-to-day consciousness is emphasized by the use of the present tense in the Memorybank Movies. The present contains its own vitality and can sustain the use of the literary past; Laurence intensifies the immediacy of memory as Morag moves in imagination through her past life. Pique's growing involvement in her own history is given direction when Jules visits them for the last time. His gift to her is his songs; as Persephone transmuted Pluto's seed into riches, so Pique can purge Jules' songs of their bit-

terness by making them part of her oral heritage. To Morag, Jules gives the kilt pin which Lazarus had obtained from Hagar Shipley's son John. In a kind of totemic exchange, Morag is able to give him the knife which Lazarus had traded for the pin, given to her by Christie years before. This knife will return to Pique when, dying of cancer, Jules cuts his throat. In his illness, he is deprived of his songs, the only language he has left. But this language has been corrupted by his hatred; he has been trapped in the destructiveness of a concentration on an irrecoverable past. In his communication to his daughter, the songs are purged of this destructiveness and can be used by her to build a new consciousness of race. She in her turn will pass on the tradition at Galloping Mountain, where Jaques seems to be raising a new inheritor for the land.

In spite of his death-like aspects, Jules, too, is one of the Diviners, both in the sense of being a seer, and as one who can bring riches from the depths. For Morag, he represents the liberation of her sexuality and the giver of the greatest gift, her daughter Pique. From Christie, Morag has received her memories of a heroic past; her own growing maturity has transmuted these memories into her living art. From yet another diviner, the old man Royland, comes the realisation that her own gift will one day have to be relinquished, passed on:
The gift, or portion of grace, or whatever it was, was finally withdrawn, to be given to someone else. (p. 452)

Morag is herself, of course, the greatest diviner, and the wealth she has brought from the depths is her strength and her ability to pass on this strength to her daughter. With the realisation that there is no truth, and all truth, in memory, comes her acceptance of the forces which carry her along the continuum towards old age. The approach of winter is, for her, both actual and symbolic; as Pique goes west, to a new life, Morag will remain, the oracle of truth, writing down her "private and fictional words."

While not as symbolically evocative of the Persephone myth as The Stone Angel and A Jest of God, the presence of the myth in The Diviners is unmistakable. Without an identifiable mother figure, the young Morag searches for personal truth and fulfillment amidst the memories of the fathers. The actual father figure of Brooke contains her within a life where there can be no growth, a life where language is not fresh but used to redefine old ideas. Because this life is sexually satisfying, she can accept it, until her longing for a child, for the continuity of motherhood, drives her out. From the birth of her daughter, Morag gains strength and maturity; as her writing was the catalyst which released her from Brooke, so now its power
is a reflection of her growing rejection of those elements of the past which are fixed, not capable of transformation or new life. Words and language have been the manifestation of the wealth and fertility of the imagination; now this richness can be passed on in ever greater abundance.

While *The Diviners* is the most complex in structure of Laurence's novels, its heroine is one of her most straightforward. Unencumbered by the rigidity and fear of personal invasion which characterise Hagar Shipley and Rachel Cameron, she moves forward in her life to a greater knowledge of herself and her strengths. Her reconciliation of life and death, of past and future, is expressed in her writing, as Pique's will be in her songs. Morag's last words are of the river, symbol of life and movement. "Look forward into the past and back into the future, until the silence." (p. 453). This is not the silence of death, but the silence at the centre of the cycle which is the eternal present. It is within this centre that Laurence's most memorable heroines move, in their search for fulfillment and growth.
Chapter III

"Right now I'm working with labyrinths. 
...at the centre of the labyrinth was the mother."

MARGARET ATWOOD

To enter the labyrinth means, presumably, that one wishes to reach the centre, but there is a terrible ambivalence here; will it be the Mother one encounters, or the Minotaur? And how is one to tell the difference? To discover the Mother in the maze is to discover the self; if there is schism within the individual, there may be rejection and flight. The labyrinth with which Atwood works is, of course, the psyche, and the choice is between life and death. The embrace of the Mother implies psychical integration, the embrace of the monster is the death of the spirit.

Because of their separation from the Mother, Atwood's heroines are denied the protection of her strength, and find themselves threatened by both man and society. Where man and woman should be allies, they have, because of man's corruption by a trivialised society, become alienated from themselves and each other. Sex is a weapon rather than a union and often, in Atwood's poetry, death comes in sexual images.

1Gail van Varseveld, "Talking with Atwood," Room of One's Own, 1, No. 2 (1975), 66-70.
Sometimes the maze is entered in the belief that love lies within. Marion, in *The Edible Woman*, threads her way through the streets, and the hallways of his building, to find Peter, who will try to devour her. Joan Foster, the *Lady Oracle*, enters the labyrinth in an ostensible search for romantic adventure, but finds instead an irrecoverably fragmented self. The multiple personae she has projected have appropriated her life.

Only in *Surfacing* does the heroine seem to be re-united with those elements of her personality which symbolise the flow of the cycle, but even here there is equivocation. Although she is beginning a new life, she has carried death within her, in her identification with the father.

The woman who has embraced death, and consequently sterility, is a familiar figure in Atwood's work. Her first book of poems, *Double Persephone*, is a sombre depiction of love as death. The lovers are imprisoned within a Hermaphroditic body, supremely self-contained. Persephone is life and death in one:

\[\text{The dancing girl's a withered crone;}\]
\[\text{Though her deceptive smile}\]
\[\text{Lures life from earth, rain from the sky.}\]
\[\text{It hides a wicked sickle;}\]

---

In "Procedures for Underground" Persephone brings the dead with her, to surround her as "an invisible cloak." The descent and subsequent ascent have brought "wisdom and great power" but she walks among the shades, who beckon her "back down."

Persephone will long to return to her chthonic lover; her assumption of the role of Queen of the Dead and her reluctance to re-enter the world of growth has effectively shut out the Mother. Thus, she must be incomplete. Atwood's work contains many instances of perverted maternity and inimical relations with the Mother. Persephone's union with the Lord of the Dead is an escape from the fertility which lies ahead in her maturity.

The flight from the re-affirmation of self which fertility implies is evident in Atwood's first work of fiction, *The Edible Woman*. Marion McAlpin's hold on herself is tenuous; the first words of the novel are ominous, "I know I was all right on Friday..." Although the style is light and amusing, images of fear and dissolution appear more and more thickly until we are faced with Marion's breakdown.


4 Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969), p. 11. All subsequent references are to this text, with page numbers in parenthesis.
All her efforts have been toward camouflage: her clothing is nondescript, she goes to great lengths to make herself appear conventional, and her job is one of the non-productive jobs so prevalent in our society. In her work for a food testing service, she confronts daily the meaninglessness of her work and the increasing efforts of society to trivialise life. She has chosen her lover carefully; he is a man with so little identity that she can enter into him almost without danger. The building in which he lives is an extension of him; wires dangle like nerves, the floors have "a rough, gray, underskin," soon there will be secretions from the shiny surface. His apartment is equally unfinished, with sparse furnishings, but with an extensive collection of guns and cameras. Marion can block out the threat as long as the eyes of the cameras are hidden.

Sex with Peter is undistinguished and openly equated with a death image. As they make love in the bath, Marion sees herself as a drowned woman, the water rising to cover them both. This image recurs often in Atwood's work, prose and poetry. The image of the reflective surface actually containing the drowned yet sentient woman is a powerful one. The woman has retreated into her reverse self; as one and yet unattainable because out of reach, her two personae can maintain a kind of integrity impossible when vulnerable.
But Peter, too, has a reverse image; Duncan, whom Marion seemingly conjures up, is also a figure of death, but on a more mythic level. She is terribly afraid of invasion of self, either by love or by fertility. When Peter proposes to her, she realises that her attempts to put a reflective surface between herself and the world have failed; her strong identification with the disembowelled rabbit of his hunting story leads her to flee in panic. Eventually, she consents to marry him, and sees her own reflection, now captive within his eyes. A further intrusion into her already fragile sense of self is Ainsley's announced intention to become pregnant, and the frightening fecundity of Clare and Joe. Clare is turning into an ironic echo of Blake's Vegetable Woman, "looking like some strange vegetable growth," while her children are likened to limpets and other parasites.

Marion's flight from all this takes her to the laundromat where she again meets Duncan, who is cadaverously thin, and whose skin is unearthly in the glaring light of white tile. Together they watch the clothing behind the round glass eyes of the machines. Unlike the eyes of Peter's cameras, where the image is frozen into immobility, there is movement here but also a flight from humanity. Marion feels "as serene as a stone moon" (p. 99), in the white glare. Duncan will not tell her where he is from,
only that it is a mining town, with no vegetation. "...I'm not human at all, I come from the underground," he says (p. 141). It is his dream to have no seasons, but permanent white leaves on black trees. As they part, they embrace; his body feels like "parchment stretched on a frame of wire coathangers," and an advertisement urges Marion to "give the gift of life" (p. 101).

Now in a schizoid state, Marion, like the rabbit, goes underground. She is in "a private burrow." The novel is no longer in the first person. The change to the third person marks the beginning of the ritual; the seeker becomes the Other and must be observed. The first realisation of her ordeal comes in the identification of her steak as having been part of a living creature. The archetypal fertility figure she sees in her reflection in a spoon (huge torso narrowing to a pinhead) has not disturbed her, but when the meat appears she is prevented from eating it. This is the first of a series of injunctions against various foods. On the surface, her actions appear to be a revolt against society's attempts to consume her, but on a deeper level it is she who is being punished for acquiescing in that consumption.

Just as Pluto is an integral part of Persephone, as the death wish is an inescapable part of the human personality, so Duncan is a kind of animus figure for Marion. "I'm the universal substitute" (p. 145), he tells her, and as such, is not only the reverse mirror image of Peter, but can also represent Marion's
flight from growth and renewal. As Peter represents the death of the self through society, through mediocrity, Duncan is the death wish within the schizophrenic self.

Like the two dolls she has carried with her since childhood, the dolls which resemble Peter and Duncan, she has carried with her this desire for the oblivion of the self. It is not until she reaches the centre of the labyrinth at Peter's party that she sees her danger. Here is the culmination of her wanderings through corridors and streets, and she sees that the figure awaiting her is armed. As Peter aims the inimical eye of the camera at her, she sees him as destroyer and herself as victim; "She should never have worn red. It made her the perfect target" (p. 244). Though her escape from Peter is not to safety, it nevertheless brings her to a tentative acceptance of herself and her death wish.

With Duncan, she goes on a journey to a ravine within the city. As they descend into it through clusters of dead weeds, Marion sees the marks of horse's hooves. At the centre of the ravine is a pit into which they gaze. The sight of this enormous sexual image makes Duncan "feel human." When Marion ascends from the ravine, he remains behind.

Restored to a kind of spurious normalcy, Marion cleans her apartment and bakes a sacrificial cake which she offers to Peter
as a substitute for herself. His refusal to eat she sees as a tacit admission that he will accept only the real woman, but Duncan willingly consumes her surrogate.

The ending is not entirely satisfactory, and as always with Atwood, highly ambiguous. Marion's breakdown has begun in summer and ended in winter; she is left suspended with no sense of resolution. There can be no fulfillment with Duncan, who speaks of sex as "the coup de grace." Atwood has given her heroine little choice; she may have overcome the spiritual destruction inherent in her society, but she must still face her own fear of growth and fulfillment.

Atwood's next novel, *Surfacing*, is also concerned with this theme, but there is a much more serious treatment of the mythic aspects of psychic dissolution and recovery. Again, the central character is a woman threatened by man and society, but her background, that of a reclusive child, has made her breakdown more profound. Because the world has been attacking her body, through bad food and bad sex, the heroine has a strong desire for self-dissolution, either into psychic withdrawal, or into a primitive state of non-being. She has become schizophrenic through her inability to reconcile the demands made upon her with her inner convictions about the sacredness of life. Her breakdown takes on the dimension of myth as she becomes the
shamanistic figure, the bridge between the mythic spirits of place and time, and the individual who must come to terms with the conflict of the life and death impulses.

As she fantasizes about her husband and child, we learn that she has rejected any involvement but the sexual with her lover, Joe. Sex is necessary to satisfy the body, but emotional relationships are too dangerous. In Atwood's poetry, the dichotomy inherent in a relationship where union is both sought and feared is represented as a body divided:

```
your body with head
attached and my head with
body attached, coincide briefly.
```

The division of body and mind, and by extension, the divided psyche, is the product of a profound alienation from the true source of life. The narrator of Surfacing realizes the danger; "if the head is detached from the body," she says, "both will die" (p. 76). Nevertheless, she has been powerless to prevent this happening to her; "At some point, my neck must have closed over, pond freezing or a wound, shutting me into my head" (p. 105). Her friend Anna, too, has been split, but irrevocably. The head shows a face, painted and unmarked, while the orgasmic cries are those of a trapped animal.

5 Margaret Atwood, Power Politics (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), p. 11.
The novel begins as the Seeker, who is nameless (traditionally a sign of great power), returns to the lake where she spent part of her childhood. Accompanied by Joe, David and Anna, she has come to find her father who has disappeared. The marriage of David and Anna is a truly corrupt relationship of interdependence and hatred. Their mutual humiliation is contrasted with what the heroine imagines to have been the marriage of her mother and father. David and Joe are making a film of monumental aimlessness and triviality called "Random Samples."

Part one is in the present tense, as reader and Seeker move through the familiar setting of woods and cabin, seeking the father. "I'm all right," she tells us, her pain evident in every attitude. There are memories of her family, and a growing realisation by the reader that it is the mother who has provided the still centre, the power of stability in her childhood:

My father explained everything, but my mother never did, which only convinced me that she had the answers but wouldn't tell. (p. 74)

Although she senses that "the only place left for me is that of my mother" (p. 52), it is as yet impossible to take that place; she must not only exorcise the spirit of the actual father, she must rid herself of the influence of the paternalistic society in which she lives.
The central metaphor of the book is the descent into darkness where a supernatural experience occurs, and the subsequent ascent back to light and life. One can either remain in the darkness and drown or be reborn into life. The mother has the power to restore life to the dead; as the Seeker stands beside the lake, she remembers that "it's the same dock my brother fell off the time he drowned" (p. 32). His restoration had been due to the power of the mother and she believes that she herself watched the resurrection, present in her mother's womb. Memories of her own child surface, staring out from within the sterile womb of a glass jar.

Emotionally greatly disturbed, she sees the lake as "blue and cool as redemption...the goal reached after great suffering" (p. 15). But the lake is imbued with the spirit of her father, and this spirit bars the way to the mythic reconciliation she seeks. All around her are evidences of the paternalistic society she fears and she attributes this damage to "the Americans." This term is applied to anyone who destroys the sacredness of natural life, but, in fact, the dead heron, with which she identifies so strongly (both semantically and actually) has been killed by Canadians. In her work, she has been denied the colour red, because of cost. Now, as primitive man would stain with red
that which he wished to bring to life,\textsuperscript{6} she feels her hands stained with the blood of the dead bird, and the ritual is about to begin.

Although her disturbed personality was formed in childhood in the shock of constant transition from isolated cabin to city, the manifestations of her breakdown have begun with the descent into anaesthetic during her pregnancy:

They slipped the needle into the vein and I was falling down, it was like diving, sinking from one layer of darkness to a deeper, deepest; when I rose up through the anaesthetic, pale green and then daylight, I could remember nothing. (p. 111)

Not childbirth but abortion, the destruction of her child is felt as a betrayal; "it was hiding in me as if in a burrow...I let them catch it" (p. 145). Thus it is the child she seeks as well as the father, and she seeks them in the depths. Her search takes her to a place of submerged Indian rock paintings, a sacred place, and there she enters the water, entering her own reflection. What she finds, of course, is death, although she cannot yet accept this. Her longing to find her father is equated with death in the depths; reintegration of the personality and and self-actualisation await in the light above.

\textsuperscript{6}Cirlot, p. 53.
Estranged from Joe because of his proposal of marriage, she nevertheless plans the ritualistic conception of a child whom she will both accompany to the land of the living, and model herself upon in her final crisis. Joe is acceptable because his body has hair on it, he has known silence, and he is not one of the Americans. Their intercourse is the invocation of a supernatural being:

I lie down, keeping the moon on my left hand and the absent sun on my right...then I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it had been imprisoned so long, its eyes and teeth phosphorescent: the two halves clasp, interlocking like fingers, it buds, it sends out fronds. (pp. 161-162)

She will incorporate death in life; as the child grows within her, she herself will go through the stages of foetal development, to be reborn at the appropriate time. Simultaneously mother and child, both will rise from the depths into the light.

Destroying the film, hiding, she remains behind as Joe, David, and Anna leave. The period of purification before rebirth must be endured; as in The Edible Woman, there are progressively fewer places she can go and foods she can eat. Now even the talismanic leather jacket worn by her mother has lost its power, and she destroys the contents of the cabin, the remnants of her former life. "I abolish them, I have to clear a space" (p. 177).
She bathes in the lake and waits, naked but for a blanket, for the space to be inhabited. The real world falls away as she retreats into herself and, all humanity gone, she identifies totally with the spirit of the place:

I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning
...I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place. — (p. 181)

Her mother appears to her in a hallucination, but vanishes again. Only when she sees her dead father in the terrible form of a creature from the pictographs does the recovery begin, but within the recovery are the remnants of a compulsion toward dissolution:

I see now that although it isn't my father it is what my father has become. I knew he wasn't dead...when I go to the fence, the footprints are there, side by side in the mud. My breath quickens, it was true, I saw it. But the prints are too small, they have toes; I place my feet in them and find that they are my own. — (p. 187)

Her identification with the father is strong enough to project the vision that it is he, not she, who is the mythic being. Atwood means us to feel that the quest has brought a tentative fulfillment, but here is evidence to the contrary. The eyes of the creature have reflected the image of the heroine, yet if she herself is the creature, she is still within the reflection and has gained little.
And suddenly it is over. The terrifying encounters, the chaotic experiences, even the mad journey, come to an end. Mother and Father lose their mythic power and become merely eccentrics, as the heroine prepares to live out her life. Within her she carries "the time traveller...the first true human" (p. 191); conceived in the place of death, this child is to bring fulfillment, and reaffirm the interrupted cycle of her life. But the supernatural episode is over; it has culminated in an almost banal resolution, and only the place retains its power, "asking and giving nothing."

Atwood has, in Surfacing, made an attempt to come to terms with a mythology of place, rather than culture. This may not be possible. No matter how the Seeker disassociates herself from her background, there is the weight of archetypal memory to reckon with, and when that memory is common to many cultures, how to escape it?

In her third novel, Lady Oracle, Atwood is less straightforward in her use of the mythic theme. The heroine is already dead; she imagines that this is her own doing and that she can return at any time, but she is trapped in a kind of limbo from

7Jung, p. 130.
which she will not be able to escape. She sits in Italy, in Terremoto, the place of moving earth, to which she has fled from what she would have us believe is a mock-drowning.

Joan Foster is possessed of three, perhaps four, personalities. Three of these express themselves in literary works of a genre suited to themselves. Joan, who writes the *Lady Oracle* we are reading, is undistinguished to the point of invisibility. Although described as a lush Rossetti figure with red hair and green eyes, we never have a sense of her presence. Others see her, but to the reader, she is a shadow woman, out of reach. Under the *nom de plume* of Louisa M. Delacourt, she writes novels of Gothic romance, in which slim virginal girls are menaced by voluptuous red-haired women. A third literary persona has written a visionary work, also entitled *Lady Oracle*; Joan appears in all three, in various guises.

As a grossly fat child, she had indulged herself to punish a rejecting and demanding mother. An early memory provides the basis for a life-long fantasy. At a dancing recital where she was to have danced as a butterfly, in gauzy wings and ballerina dress, she is betrayed by her mother and forced to dance as a mothball. Although she triumphs, the longing for the butterfly costume remains; the fat child is transformed into the mythic
Fat Lady, revelling in her weightlessness, singing, smiling, wafting across Canada on her mythic journey. Part of Joan's struggle is to reconcile the grotesque aspects of this figure with the joy and freedom it also represents. Sex, too, has a double aspect. A man holding a bunch of daffodils suddenly exposes himself to her; because he is not threatening, she is not frightened. Later, when companions have tied her to a post in a ravine, she is freed by a man whom she identifies with the daffodil man. Her first sexual experience is thus transformed into one of relief and release:

Was the man who untied me a rescuer or a villain? Or, an even more baffling thought: was it possible for a man to be both at once?

I turned this puzzle over in my mind time after time, trying to remember and piece together the exact features of the daffodil man. But he was elusive, he melted and changed shape like butterscotch or warm gum, dissolving into a tweedy mist, sending out menacing tentacles of flesh and knotted rope, forming again as a joyful sunburst of yellow flowers.

While these images—food, sex, flowers—are equated with joy and freedom, all is well, but there is always the fear inherent in the rescuer/villain ambiguity.

---

Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart-Bantam, 1976), p. 61. All subsequent references are to this edition, with page numbers in parenthesis.
Her real fears are reserved for her relationship with her mother. With a kind of fascinated horror, she watches her mother apply make-up. "I suddenly realized that instead of three reflections, she had three actual heads, which rose from her towelled shoulders on three separate necks" (p. 64). It is not the triple-headed monster that frightens the child, but the man she imagines waiting outside the door, a man who will enter and "do something terrible, not only to my mother, but to me" (p. 64).

The mother is a figure of immense frustration. Married to a man she does not love, all her ambitions unrealised, she sees her child as "a huge edgeless cloud of inchoate matter which refused to be shaped into anything for which she could get a prize" (p. 65). With her father Joan has a relationship of tentative respect. An anaesthetist at Toronto General Hospital, he has the power to restore life to the dead. This can, of course, be seen as the power to bestow death on the living and during the war, we find that he had been a killer of a curious kind. Working with the French Underground, "his job was to kill those they thought were fakes" (p. 73). Not only had he become accustomed to this job, he had grown to enjoy it. Joan sees him as a shaman, who knows the truth about life;
because of him, she invests the men with whom she becomes involved with the power of life and death.

It is with his sister that Joan has her only supportive relationship. A surrogate mother, she is a large appealing lady who wears a fox fur, is involved in spiritualism, and works for a firm which makes sanitary pads. This job embodies the negative aspects of society's (Joan's mother) attitude and the positive aspects of the natural (Louisa) attitude. Louisa M. Delacourt advises those with menstrual and other problems; she is sublimely sensible and it is she who shows Joan the way of escape from her mother. On her death, she bequeaths her estate to Joan on the condition that she lose one hundred pounds. As she does so, Joan takes on a new identity, that of the thin girl she is pretending to have become, but she also assumes her aunt's identity as she takes her papers and wallet.

In England, it is as Louisa that she begins to write Gothic romances at the suggestion of her first lover, Paul. A vision of her mother, in good suit and white gloves but weeping disconsolately, announces her death, and sends Joan back to Canada. She imagines that she feels nothing but guilt but she embarks on an eating binge, a kind of placatory identity ceremony, in an effort to invoke her mother's spirit. The mother is irrevocably
associated with the Fat Lady; the thin beautiful woman is the
dark side of the fat joyful one.

Arthur, whom she marries, is another shadowy figure who
nevertheless has power; Joan sees him as a figure in the
Coliseum, thumbs up, thumbs down, "the gesture that would pre­
serve or destroy" (p. 15). She keeps her identity as Louisa a
secret, working out her subconscious needs in the characters of
her novels. Officiating at her marriage is Leda Sprott, the
spiritualist who first revealed to her her mother in astral
form. Under the name of Eunice Revele, she 'reveals' to Joan her
power to reach her subconscious through automatic writing. This
entails entering the mirror, in which is an image of the self.
The seeker looks into the reflection and is drawn into the
labyrinth of the mind; like Bluebeard's wife,\(^9\) what Joan finds
there is the danger inherent in the adoption of multiple person
alities. The primal figure within the labyrinth is a woman; she
is sometimes in a cave, sometimes a boat, sometimes under the
earth. Almost a goddess, she is enormously powerful, but it is
not a happy power;

\[
\text{She kneels, she is bent down} \\
\text{under the power} \\
\text{her tears are dark} \\
\text{her tears are jagged}
\]

\(^9\)Gloria Onley, "Power Politics in Bluebeard's Castle."

*Canadian Literature* 60(Spring 74), 21-42.
her tears are the death you fear
Under the water, under the water sky
her tears fall, they are dark flowers
(pp 223-24)

Here again is the obsessively used image, that of the woman beneath the water. Drowned yet seeing, as she looks upward, what she sees from the depths is "the water sky." Death is in the depths of the water as it is in the depths of the earth. And, of course, the death of the self which is contained within the mirror is also contained in the reflective surface of the water. This will be the manner of Joan's death; she will enter the water and drown, trapped in her own reflected image.

The voyaging woman is part of the book within a book. As the Gothic romances are the work of Louisa, so the visionary Lady Oracle is the work of that aspect of Joan which identifies with the woman in the labyrinth. We can recognize her from her portrait:

She sits on the iron throne
she is one and three
the dark lady the redgold lady
the blank lady oracle
of blood, she who must be obeyed (p. 228)

As one and three, she is the three-fold aspect of women, of which the mother, maiden and crone are manifestations. The voyaging
mother, the crone within her cave, and the daughter on the throne of iron, she is the oracle of blood, at once threatening and life-giving.

By now, Joan's identification with her characters is growing out of control. The wicked red-haired Felicia is coming to a bad end, but is treated with more sympathy. Felicia, as "happiness," is closely linked with the Fat Lady who also represents Joy. But in spite of Felicia's power, she dies by drowning and the pallid Charlotte triumphs. The barriers are breaking down further as the drowned Felicia begs for Arthur's love. Joan's disturbance, hitherto confined to the romances, is becoming apparent, as the villagers and her landlord eye her with apprehension. Her fear at the news that a mysterious man has arrived searching for her expresses itself in images of a fat woman, caged, "a captive Earth mother" (p. 330).

Another vision of her dead mother brings the admission that "I loved her, but the glass was between us, I would have to go through it" (p. 330). Joan sees now that it has been her mother within the labyrinth awaiting her, "she had been the lady in the boat, the death barge." In spite of her love for her mother, Joan still fears her power; "My mother was a vortex, a dark vacuum" (p. 331). It is not until she enters the maze of the Gothic novel that she can come face to face with the aspects of herself which contain the mother within them.
In her final fantasy, Charlotte has been cast aside and it is a revivified Felicia who enters the maze. The scene which Joan sees as she begins her vision mirrors the scene within the maze with blue sky and small white clouds. As Felicia/Joan walks along, the path is lined with daffodils, the flower of her childhood sexual adventure. At the centre, four women await her; two are like her, with red hair, green eyes, and small white teeth. The two others are Aunt Louisa with her ratty fox fur, and the Fat Lady in spangled costume and false wings. We now have three Felicias, or two Joans and a Felicia, representing the various facets of Joan's psyche. The Louisa figure is the alter ego of the Gothic novelist, the Fat Lady is the alter ego of the Joan who has written the visionary Lady Oracle, and Felicia is herself the Joan who struggles for happiness within the labyrinth of her life. The daffodils become brambles, and when she tries to escape through a door, it is the demon lover of the Gothic tale, Redmond, who awaits her. She realizes her danger as he turns successively into her father and her various lovers, becoming at last Arthur, her husband. As Redmond once more, he embraces her and as his face becomes a skull, begins to strangle her. As Joan withdraws from her vision, she hears someone at the door; "I opened the door, I knew who it would be" (p. 343). But
the reader does not know, and is not told. We may assume that the visitor is Death; he is, says Joan "the only person who knows anything about me" (p. 345). The final chapter adds nothing to the book, being simply an account of her growing trust in him and her resolve to write science fiction instead of Gothic novels.

Although laden with an overabundance of symbolism, the intent of the novel seems fairly clear. The mother has succumbed to external standards of beauty and is frozen in her immaturity. Frustrated, she subjects her daughter to impossible demands and the daughter takes refuge in the shape which will exasperate the mother the most, that of fat person. Joan turns herself into an obese figure of ridicule, yet this figure comes to represent joy and freedom for her. We see her plainly as a fat child, but when she becomes beautiful red-haired Joan, she loses reality; in conforming to her mother's standards, she loses herself. Her writing is the song of the Fat Lady; as the mythic figure bobs gently against the roof of the tent, so Joan floats in the water; "if there's one thing I knew how to do, it was float" (p. 306). And finally, in Terremoto, the clothing she has buried beneath the house (and the fears which she has buried in her subconscious) swells up with all her vanished flesh and engulfs her. "My ghost, my angel," the Fat Lady settles on her and obliterates her. The abundance she represents is both attractive and repellent;
the message within the maze seems to be that it is this
dichotomy with which Marion will have to come to terms as she
enters yet another ambiguous relationship.

In Margaret Atwood's work, we sense a search and exploration,
a kind of melancholy encounter with the experience of women.
There is a deep fear of the subterfuges in the human personality
when it seeks to achieve a balance between what is desired and
what is allowed. Atwood catches exactly the self-hatred of women
who have acquiesced, although perhaps reluctantly, to society's
conflicting demands. The ultimate destructiveness in this role-
playing lies in the impossibility of truly rewarding relation­
ships.

Soaring into the air, suspension in air and water, attempts
to enter a foreign element: all these are, for Atwood, metaphors
for a search for personal truth, for the fulfillment of potential.
For her women, the descent into the realm of the underworld is
to be a prerequisite to maturity and happiness but often, she
seems to find the state of non-being which this exemplifies more
attractive than alternative, a return to life and light.
Persephone reigns as Queen of the Dead on her iron throne; and
the fertility and renewal of the mother remain unattainable.
...it is to reach her that this whole journey has been undertaken.¹

In the works of Margaret Laurence, the emphasis has been on the positive aspects of the myth; reintegration of the self follows the distress of separation (or alienation) from the mothering principle. Whereas Margaret Atwood’s female characters struggle to avoid being victims on a personal level, they are victimised socially in a more profound way. Deeply pessimistic about relationships, they see the sexual experience as an invasion, almost an obliteration, of self by a demoralised society. The heroine of Surfacing is misunderstood as she says "I think men should be superior" (p. 111), but the remark springs from her resistance to the role being forced on her and her fear of the stereotypical male as personified by David. She glimpses her own potential for growth, and her mythic passage toward this potential is a journey from the world of darkness to the world of light. But even here, there is ambivalence and no real development of the mother/daughter cycle; if her child is a son, will her tenuous hold on her new-found strength withstand the intrusion?

¹Alice Munro, Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You (Scarborough, Ont.: Signet Books, 1975), p. 197. Subsequent references are to this edition, with page numbers in parenthesis.
The society Atwood indicts is a paternalistic one and the threat of social pressure from the male prevents true psychic connexion between man and woman. Her characters lack the ego-strength of Margaret Laurence's Hagar Shipley or Morag Gunn. Hagar's denial of the sexual joy she feels with her husband stifles the growth of their relationship, and only on her death-bed can she reconcile the divisive elements of her personality. For Morag Gunn, the progression through sexual initiation to fulfillment and growth is familiar and sought after. The straightforwardness of her personal quest parallels her growing desire to rid herself of the fixation on her paternal heritage. The downward course of Jules Tonnerre epitomises the destructive side of this obsession but this death figure does not demand a companion on his journey; he leaves Morag free to reach her own heights.

The heroine of The Diviners moves from girlhood to womanhood along a timeless and predictable path; in Alice Munro's Lives of Girls and Women, Del Jordan has set her feet on the same path. The book is a chronicle of a young girl's growing awareness of her own sexuality and her place in the world. Del's feelings for her mother are ambivalent; "I did want to repudiate her...at the same
time I wanted to shield her" Del thinks in her embarrassment at Mrs. Jordan's social intransigence. She sees the waste of her mother's searching, disorganised intelligence, yet cannot help but respond to the malice and disapproval of the aunts, Elspeth and Grace. Her love for her mother contains both identification and contempt, identification with her mother's unique resistance to the bombardment of feminine messages from the world, contempt because the adolescent Del secretly longs to participate in the romantic charade.

Del lives in two worlds. There is the world of business affairs, in which her mother tries to make her way; enfold ing this, observing it, judging it, is the world of women which Mrs. Jordan rejects because she sees in it nothing but the domestic and the mundane. But it is here that the great events of life take place: birth and death, love and hate, growth and decay. Here, Del's aunts are tough, carefree and strong. But in the Jordan house, they become "sulky, sly, elderly, eager to take offense" (p. 30). To them, Mrs. Jordan is both absurd and threatening; Del's greater insight into both worlds will give her the strength to live in both.

The gaiety and commotion of the female world contrast with the deceptive calm of the other. Del's father, a man of perception and humour, lives at the end of Flats road with his son, Owen, and the hired man in "masculine self-centredness" and squalor. The danger of the unknown surfaces as Del dreams of her father's meat house:

Once I dreamed that I went down to my father's meat house, a screened shed beyond the barn where in summer he kept parts of skinned and butchered horses hanging on hooks. The shed was in the shade of a crab-apple tree; the screens would be black with flies. I dreamed that I looked inside and found, not unexpectedly, that what he really had hanging there were skinned and dismembered human bodies. (p. 95)

And again:

I dreamed my father had set up an ordinary, humble, block of wood on the grass outside the kitchen door and was lining us up—Owen and my mother and me—to cut off our heads. It won't hurt, he told us.... (ibid.)

The worlds of the mother and the father are separate; that of the mother is loving and full of stimulation for growth, but the world of the father, of the male, is ultimately dangerous. Within the depths of the unconscious, even the amiable Mr. Jordan is transformed into a death figure, personifying Del's fear of the masculine hatred of women (p. 98).

In spite of these fears, puberty brings a longing for the mingling of the two worlds, and, for Del, a consequent loss of
power. Untouched psychically by a childhood sexual experience, she is now a victim of adolescence; "I would think with nostalgia of how bold I had been, for instance, with Mr. Chamberlain" (p. 155). As she experiments sensually, her strength returns and she sees sex as a surrender "...not the woman's to the man, but the person's to the body, an act of pure faith..." (p. 181). As wild roses brush the cab of the truck, Del drives with Garnet French to Jericho Valley, where his house is down in a hollow. On their return, they make love, and the sensual trance this induces in Del causes her failure at the examinations which would have taken her to the world outside Jubilee, the world where her mother had longed to be. But Del is shamming compliance, and her power reasserts itself in the struggle with Garnet when he tries to baptise her. In forcing her beneath the water, he is trying to bring her into his world in which she can face only intellectual and psychic stagnation. Del realises that she has deceived him:

I felt amazement, not that I was fighting with Garnet but that anybody could have made such a mistake, to think he had real power over me. ...it seemed to me impossible that he should not understand that all the powers I had granted him were in play, that he himself was—in play, that I had meant to keep him sewed up in his golden lover's skin forever, even if five minutes before I had talked about marrying him.  

(pp. 197-98)
Leaving Garnet, she walks through the cemetery back to Jubilee; "As I walked on into Jubilee I repossessed the world" (p. 199). In turning her back on the life her lover offers, a life "that required you to be buried alive" (p. 198), Del is asserting her birthright, the right to give birth and life to herself. Her strength lies in her ability to reconcile the physical and intellectual sides of her personality, and in her unabashed joy in her own sexuality.

It is this joy that has been unknown to Lou, in Marian Engel's *Bear*. An archivist, she lives "like a mole, buried deep in her office...." There are occasional mechanical sexual encounters with the Director of the Archive, which contain no possibility for joy. When the Institute for which she works inherits the estate of Colonel Cary of Pennarth, Lou is sent to an island in the north, to research and classify.

There is a bear, she is told on her arrival, a bear who will soon awaken, and for whom she must care during the summer. In her joy at the discoveries on the island, she feels no fear of the animal. And indeed, if Lou is, as she wonders, a Platonist, then the bear is a kind of demi-urge, a link between the real and the mythic worlds. In her research, Lou finds that Colonel Cary had

---

been a woman with a bear; that she, Lou, is taking part in a continuing ceremony.

With hardly a hint of anthropomorphism, Engel makes the reader a witness to the ritual, as Lou enters into a relationship which brings her into touch with her deepest sexuality. As the bear-headed goddess brought riches and fertility to Arcady, so the creature in the bear mask brings Lou back to life in Pennarth, the place of the bear's head. There is nothing bestial in the pleasure they take in each other but Lou must learn that her animal nature can be taken only so far; when she attempts intercourse with the bear, he threatens her. The blood which flows from her wound, like menstrual blood, symbolises the end of a cycle, a cycle which has ended, as it must, in sterility. Her acceptance of her own potential for life ends the adventure. As winter approaches, she must return to the Director and her subterranean office, but with the promise of a new life. From her contact with the bear, she has learned "what the world was for."

Both Munro and Engel emphasize those aspects of the myth which result in joy and integration for the individual, but there is a being involved here with whom the male can identify. While outside the cycle, he is a part of it because his intervention, however unwelcome, is the catalyst which sets it into motion. The King of the Dead seeks to take possession of the promise of life which the Kore represents; within the framework of the myth, his
sexual access to her is the most powerful means at his disposal to control this promise of life.

It is from this different perspective that the male novelist approaches the myth. In Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John*, the central character is unmistakably the hero as death figure. Tay John arises from the grave at birth with a mythic power. During his life, as Harvey Fergusson writes, he finds that "the heart of civilisation is woman, and that woman is at the heart of his ordeal." His relationship with Ardith Aeriola ends in their flight together; her name, with its suggestion of light, air, and ardour, implies that he is appropriating these qualities to himself. Tay John disappears into the ground, with Ardith's dead body behind him on a sled; he has returned with his captive and her unborn child to his mythic kingdom, perhaps to begin the cycle again.

In contrast, Hazard Lepage, in Robert Kroetsch's *The Stud-horse Man*, appears to be seeking life, but he too is absorbed in the deathly aspects of the myth. Ostensibly in search of a mare for his stallion, Poseidon, he is actually seeking to embrace death in the shape of the mother, *la mere*. In a symbolic sense,  

4 Harvey Fergusson, Introduction to *Tay John* by Howard O'Hagan (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974), n. pag.
if mother and daughter are one, Hades (or Pluto), in embracing
the daughter, will find that the mother too is in his arms.
With her enormous power, she will resist him successfully, and in
her triumph will be the death of his desire to take unto himself
all life.

In the manner of a fertility ritual, the novel represents the
sustained challenge of Hazard, the archetypal male, to the female
principle. In spite of Kroetsch's apparently playful treatment of
the myth (a young male character is named Demeter)\(^5\) and his amusing
style, this is a sombre account of a search for death through
sexual adventure. In another of Kroetsch's novels, Badlands, two
women undertake a journey in search of William Dawe, a man with
a "magical hump." This is of course not only a reference to the
actual hump on his back, but also to his sexual power. The two
women are his daughter, Anna, and another woman, also named Anna,
an Indian with whom Dawe wandered through the "badlands" more than
fifty years before. At fifteen, Anna Yellowbird had seen Dawe as
the guide, "the hunchbacked man...who could find the way to the
place of the dead."\(^6\) At the end of their journey through the place


\(^6\)Robert Kroetsch, Badlands (Don Mills, Ont.: Paperjacks, 1975),
p. 148. Subsequent references are to this edition, with page num-
bers in parenthesis.
of bones, the women are joined in a re-affirmation of life:

Anna looked at the stars and then at me, and she did not mention dinosaurs or men or their discipline or their courage or their goddamned honour or their goddamned fucking fame or their goddamned fucking death-fucking death. (p. 270)

This is a powerful indictment of all that has been considered an indispensible part of the male ethos; the masculine stereotype is directly equated with death. At the end of the journey, Anna Dawe destroys the reminders of her father's work as the two women leave the place of death:

We walked out of there hand in hand, arm in arm, holding each other. We walked all the way out. And we did not look back, not once, ever. (p. 270)

The aging, and the aged woman, together with the youthful self of Anna Yellowbird, encountered on the journey, turn their backs on all things pertaining to the male. Two aspects of the same character, they destroy the death figure (Dawe and his magical hump), and move on into the cycle, in complete rejection of the male principle.

The transition from rejector of the male to his destroyer is almost imperceptible in Sharon Riis' powerful little book, The True Story of Ida Johnson, but follows the mythic theme.

Apparently a waitress in an Alberta cafe, almost a stereotype of
disadvantaged womanhood, Ida is Nemesis in disguise. Pregnant and married at fourteen, at eighteen, Ida kills her husband and children, a terrible yet not unexpected solution to her entrapment. The reader listens, with Luke the androgynous Indian boy, to the remorseless telling of Ida's life story, and agrees that, yes, this was inevitable and as it should have been. As Ida tells her story, the emotional undercurrents between herself and Luke are explained; he is Lucy, her childhood friend, and the two women are parts of a double character. Lucy, in her wanderings, has seen herself as a Jew; "We are all Jews. I am a Jew." But it is the male Luke who is the Jew, the dispossessed. When Lucy reassumes her true identity, she is taken up into Ida's strength, she "comes home." As Ida takes Lucy to her sunlit yellow room, she assumes the mythic proportions of the goddess, above joy, above sorrow, even above death. There is a suggestion that the wrathful Ida will destroy any male with whom she connects, as Lucy says of the room:

7 In the cyclical epic, Cypria, the abducted Kore is called Nemesis. For a discussion of this, see particularly Jung, p. 122.

8 Sharon Riis, The True Story of Ida Johnson (Toronto: Women's Press, 1976), p. 90. Subsequent references are to this edition, with page numbers in parenthesis.
Its very perfection provides the Final Solution.
None but the holy could live in a room like this;
none but the whole. The terrible strength of it
would eat them alive. (p. 107)

Here, it is the younger, frailer Lucy who has been seeking the
mother, but this mother is the death-dealing, reverse image of
the goddess of fecundity. Powerful and implacable, she contains
all within herself. Those who search for life, or those who search
for death, can find what they seek in her, as she is the giver of
life and the Queen of the Dead at one and the same time.

This is of course the true meaning of the myth; the venge­
ful Ida is the other side of Ethel Wilson's Maggie, who would
envelop the world in motherly arms. These two extremes encompass
the variety of a myth capable of many interpretations. The joy
and serenity of Hagar's end balance the anger of Joan Foster's
mother at her daughter's escape. Anger surfaces often in these works
in various guises but is basically a reaction against patriarchal
social pressures. In fact, those who struggle to be reunited with
the mother may be reaching for a joy only possible in a matriarchal
situation. In the fulfillment of a true relationship with the
mother, a relationship with the maturing self, we can see the
figures of the mythic mother and daughter, from whose reunion springs
psychic tranquillity and growth.

Alice Munro writes of her mother in "The Ottawa Valley:
it is to reach her that this whole journey has been undertaken. With what purpose? To mark her off, to describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to get rid of her; and it did not work, for she looms too close, just as she always did. She is heavy as always, she weighs everything down, and yet she is indistinct, her edges melt and flow. Which means she has stuck to me as close as ever and refused to fall away, and I could go on and on, applying what skills I have, using what tricks I know, and it would always be the same.

All the components of the myth are here, the longing for union with the mother, the longing to escape from her, and the realisation that she is inescapable. The sacrificial rites to Deme- ter have disappeared, but their significance remains, turned inward in the female psyche. The Maiden must be abducted and the Mother must grieve; their reunion is the source of woman's strength. In this rebirth, as the green corn springs from the golden grain, Mother and Daughter are contained within each other, as they are in all women.

9Alice Munro, Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You (Scarborough, Ont.: Signet, 1975), p. 197.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


"Atwood's Gorgon Touch." Studies in Canadian Literature, 2, No. 2 (Summer 1977), 146-63.


Secondary Sources, cont.:


Secondary Sources, cont.:


__________. Review of *Double Persephone*, by Margaret Atwood, in *Alphabet*, 4 (June 1962), 69-70.


Secondary Sources, cont.:


van Varseveld, Gail. "Talking with Atwood." *Room of One's Own*, 1, No. 2 (Summer 1975), 66-70.


