

"SEXUAL PROVINCIALITY" AND CHARACTERIZATION:
A STUDY OF SOME RECENT CANADIAN FICTION

by

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ABSTRACT

From its earliest beginning in Frances Brooke's The History of Emily Montague, set in Canada and published in 1769, women have been prominent in Canadian literature. Since that time, a very large number of Canadian novels written by both men and women have been primarily concerned with a female character. In this thesis, an attempt has been made to determine to what extent an author's fictional world view and characterization is influenced by his sex; the area was narrowed to that of the Canadian novel in the period of approximately 1950-1965. Novels by Brian Moore, Sinclair Ross, Hugh MacLennan, Morley Callaghan, Adele Wiseman, Sheila Watson, Ethel Wilson, and Margaret Laurence were chosen as the main objects of the study.

A recurrent theme emerged during the study of these novels; many of the authors appeared deeply concerned with the problem of personal and social isolation, and concluded that evil and fear, compassion and love neither originate outside the self nor remain confined to it. The metaphor used to characterize the fear-based isolation was often that of the wilderness, which might be internal, external, or both.

A final conclusion about these novels, which are almost all based primarily on female characters, is that the ones created by women are generally more interesting and convincing. The male novelists tend to emphasize the sexual roles played by their female protagonists, while the women authors have a stronger tendency to write about women as people whose sexuality is important, but whose total personality is not constituted by this one aspect.

INTRODUCTION

"Confronted with an anonymous piece of writing, have we any stylistic criteria for ascertaining the sex of the writer?" asks Harry Levin in his essay, "Janes and Emilies, or the Novelist as Heroine."¹ He answers his own question in part by asserting that "Coleridge's declaration that all great minds are androgynous may be the only solution to the dilemma. Falling short of that, one way or the other, we are all prejudiced by our sexual provinciality, whatever its province happens to be."² This need not, of course, be a bad thing. On the contrary, it may be that, as R.P. Blackmur puts it, "it takes a strong and active prejudice to see facts at all,"³ in the sense that an individual bias may serve as a focussing point, a key to facts and meanings which would otherwise be overlooked. Such a constructive prejudice, however, must be a conscious one, and the precise difficulty with sexual prejudice is that it tends, like racial prejudice, to be largely unconscious, stagnant, and uncreative.

Debates over the merits of authoresses as compared to authors can be found in the critical journals, and the

¹ Refractions: Essays in Comparative Literature (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p.252.

² Ibid., pp.255-6.

³ The Expense of Greatness (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1958), p.107.

opinions set down there inevitably reveal more about the critic who expresses them than about the abilities of women writers, whose styles, achievements, successes and failures vary as widely as do those of male authors, and for the same reasons. Nevertheless, since literature is created within a social context, extra-literary criteria must be expected in regard to women writers: the social area which they inhabit is so broad, so much is believed, and so little proven. Although new approaches to this question are apparent, it is not a merely contemporary consideration: the critical tendency to explain the style and achievements of female authors in terms of their sex was commented on, ruefully, by Charlotte Bronte. She and her sisters assumed noms de plume which could have been mistaken for the names of men because "we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality and for their reward, a flattery which is not true praise."⁴

Critiques based on biographical or biological factors, while occasionally legitimate and useful, are used too often as the sole approach to works by women authors. As Mary Ellmann notes in her chapter entitled "Phallic Criticism", "the literal fact of masculinity, unlike femininity, does not impose an erogenic form upon all aspects of the

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Levin, p.258.

person's career."⁵ Such an imposition is unfair to the author, as well as limiting for the critic. To fall back on such unsatisfactory criteria when approaching recent Canadian fiction would be impossible to justify, because not only does a very large proportion of it have as its central concern the identity and experience of a female protagonist, but many or most of the successful authors are women. In such a situation, where the traditional subgroup is no longer a minority to be defined in terms of its deviation from the majority or norm, the conventional criteria lose much of their usefulness.

Our culture's traditional range of feminine images extends into literature in various ways. Many fictional portraits of women are flat stereotypes: the changing fashions in female characters are described at length in an excellent study of the subject made by Robert Utter and Gwendolyn Needham.⁶ They note that Pamela, the heroine of Samuel Richardson's novel of the same name, possesses "many traits and qualities, no one of which adequately represents her without the others. Her daughters, the heroines of later fiction, too often have to get along with one trait apiece--⁷ as if the heritage had to be divided among the heiresses."

The absence of depth and complexity in many fictional women is possibly a result of the widespread cultural tradition

⁵ Thinking About Women (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 1968), p.31.

⁶ Pamela's Daughters (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1936).

⁷ Ibid., p.18.

which perceives man as a complex being, split between his material and spiritual aspects, and woman as a simpler creature who embodies either materialism or spirituality, but not both. From this elementary difference arise numerous stereotypes: the good woman, the bad woman; the greedy, grasping bitch and the generous, self-denying martyr; Moll Flanders and Clarissa Harlowe. Women in our literature have, for the most part, been "either . . . or" rather than "both . . . and." The dichotomy can be elaborated: another of its prevalent features is an association of women with nature and of man with art; this leads in turn to an equation of the creative achievement of male authors and artists to childbirth, and a belief that it is somehow "unnatural" for women to be voluntarily, rather than involuntarily, creative.

These basic views are only part of a long tradition of assigning generalized characteristics to both sexes. Typically, the qualities used to describe males tend to be considered those which distinguish our species, that is, they are "human" characteristics or those of mankind, while women are assigned a more limited set of distinguishing features. Her attributes tend to be negative; she is whatever man is not, and possesses those qualities which he prefers not to have ascribed to himself, although he may profess admiration for them. The most common and deeply implanted stereotypic qualities of femininity have been summarized at length by Mary Ellman in Thinking About Women (pp.74-145). The first one she notes is formlessness: in

this stereotype, the mind is equated with the body, so that the softer female body is assumed to be reflected in feminine thinking processes. A good example of this in literature is the stream-of-consciousness monologue of Joyce's Molly Bloom, where thinking becomes equated with menstruation. Another prevalent assumption is that of passivity, and a common sexual position is taken as symbolic of the entire personality. The stereotypic passivity of women is related psychologically to "Negro apathy"; in both cases, "the (male white) observer, having restricted the participation of the group, finds that inactivity is an innate group characteristic."⁸ In order to fulfill another culturally-assigned trait, that of instability, women are permitted to move from passivity to hysteria.

The characteristic of confinement results from the "natural" law and social practices which kept women limited to domestic participation; this gives rise to a number of related traits such as neatness, practicality, skill at small handiwork and, in the realm of ideas, a supposed confinement to small, narrow concepts and opinions. Piety, a much-admired feminine attribute until this century, consists of strict observation of man-made rules. Being presumably more spiritually inclined, women were expected to improve their husbands and children, and uphold the moral tone of

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Ellman, p.81.

the community. In opposition to this is the belief that women have a narrower outlook and lack spiritual depth, so that they are more concerned with immediate things and more materialistic than men. Finally, women are seen as more irrational (less logical and more intuitive) than men, and more compliant; because of their supposedly softer natures, lack of firm opinions, and illogical outlook, women are "naturally" more docile than are men.

Two strongly recurrent images or archetypes based on some of these cultural characteristics are those of the whore, either as the nameless, cooperative and uncritical sex object or the deceitful, grasping bitch, and the witch, an older woman who is feared because she possesses knowledge which men lack. The witch often symbolizes any power or understanding held by women which is related to their biological differences from men: thus, menstruation is a curse, purification is required after childbirth, etc. These qualities and their archetypal manifestations recur in fiction with depressing regularity, from the earliest fairy tales to the most contemporary novels.

Not all fictional heroines, of course, are entirely symbolic or abstract. In a discussion of the novels of Brian Moore, George Woodcock comments that "the ultimate test of skill among continental European novelists has always been the creation of a convincing heroine. . . . such novelists have shown the ultimate test of imaginative capability in crossing sex lines to create heroines more convincing

than those of most women novelists: . . . they have made their imaginary world complete and self-consistent."⁹ In addition to this, significant changes in the portrayal of women in literature have paralleled the changing social status of women over the centuries. In their study, Utter and Needham summarize this literary evolution:

The first stage is that in which all heroines of romance are perfect, and women who are bad are horrid and have picaresque novels all to themselves. This is the age of Pamela and Moll Flanders. Next the erring sisters are admitted to the same building as the perfect ladies, but have a wing to themselves, with impermeable walls. The perfect heroine is in the main novel and the picara in the interpolated tale-- . . . Even so early as Fielding, however, the separation is not water-tight; in Amelia Miss Matthews plays more part than merely to relate her story. The third stage is that of the double heroine, the perfect and insipid Amelia and the spicy Becky, the one "beautiful" and the other "but". The fourth stage combines the beautiful and the but in one heroine, whose beauty is set off by the quality thought of as a blemish, as by a mole or a patch. The fifth stage might be called "beautiful and . . ." or beauty plus, in which the vivacious qualities are put forward as additions rather than subtractions. The sixth stage . . . comes in the twentieth century, in which the heroine (still beautiful) does all that Tom Jones does and we regard her in the same light.¹⁰

Without disagreeing with this conclusion, I think a further stage can be discerned as well. In the present, the heroine is freed of the need to resemble a male hero, to "do all that Tom Jones does" in order to be seen as a completely human, real character. On the contrary, she can be something even more radical: in the hands of a skilled novelist, she

⁹ "Rounding Giotto's Circle: Brian Moore's Poor Bitches." Odysseus Ever Returning (Toronto/Montreal: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1970), p.40.

¹⁰

Pamela's Daughters, pp.407-8.

can be herself, whatever that may be.

The attempt by humans to explore and understand reality is timeless, but its manifestations have varied with different cultures and ages. In the fiction of this century, the attempt has often been introspective; writers such as James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf worked to discover and communicate the mysteries which lie deep within the self, and helped to shift the focus of literature from a character's external struggles with other people or with his environment to the inner ones of understanding and accepting the self. In 1838, Anna Jameson made a telling and caustic observation based on her experiences with women who were new emigrants to Canada: "I have not often in my life met with contented and cheerful-minded women, but I never met with so many repining and discontented women as in Canada. I never met with one woman recently settled here, who considered herself happy in her new home and country: I heard of one, and doubtless there are others, but they are excep-¹¹tions to the general rule." More than a century later, this statement is still of interest; although the contemporary search for security and meaning is directed inward, instead of outward against the external wilderness, it has not ceased to be accompanied by fears, doubts, and discontent. The search by an individual for greater self-knowledge and a more deeply-founded identity, like the attempt to establish a new society, necessitates leaving behind the old patterns

¹¹
Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd.. 1923). p.139.

which, although perhaps restrictive, were also familiar and comforting. In the unknown, there are unknown dangers.

From its earliest beginning in Frances Brooke's The History of Emily Montague, set in Canada and published in 1769, women have been prominent in Canadian literature. The non-fictional documentary works of Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill were among the first Canadian writings to cease imitating formal English styles: both Roughing It In the Bush (1852) and The Backwoods of Canada (1836) exhibit a direct, simple style and freer use of local Canadian idiom than most works of their period. Many subsequent Canadian novels have been written by women, and many of those written by men have been primarily concerned with a female character. To what extent an author's "sexual provinciality" appears to influence his or her characterization, and the relationship of this to the novels' themes, is the basis of the following study.

CHAPTER 1

THE BIOLOGICAL THEORY OF FEMALE PERSONALITY: BRIAN MOORE

No author's work is completely free from clichés, cultural truisms, or stereotypes. As readers, we accept secondary fictional characters who lack originality and complexity, since they are necessarily subordinate to the central figures. It is not a criticism, therefore, but merely an observation, to note that many examples of the female stereotypes mentioned in the introduction can be found in the works of Canadian authors of both sexes: Ronnie and Midge of Such Is My Beloved are no more limited than the long-suffering Doris of The Stone Angel, or Margaret Ainslie of Each Man's Son than Mrs. Plopler of The Sacrifice.

It is from the central characters created by an author that we demand depth and believability; it is through them that the author makes or misses his point. His relationship to his protagonist may be more or less direct; it is usually not very useful to speculate on the amount of autobiographical content in any individual created solely for fiction. Without resorting to this practice, however, it is sometimes possible to catch sight of a consistent angle of vision which forms part of a writer's characteristic approach to his material. Such an angle can be seen in some of the novels by Brian Moore; it is apparent in the confidential, intimate tone and the versimilitude of the world created through the perceptions of the central female characters of Judith Hearne, I Am Mary Dunne, and, to a lesser

extent, An Answer From Limbo. There is a subtlety to the realism of his technique in these novels; he seems inquisitive but a little hesitant as he enters these worlds and explores their occupants. It is partially because of this light touch that Moore almost never makes a serious mistake, in terms of tone, in the difficult job of presenting a fictional world built around central characters so different, externally, from himself as author; paradoxically, his lack of an absolutely assured approach, his occasional hesitancy, give authority to the overall effect.

There is no hesitation apparent in Moore's acceptance of the underlying theme of I Am Mary Dunne, however; for this woman at least, biology is destiny. This is not true only in a general sense, but in every specific detail of her existence, philosophy, experience, and feelings. Her sexual characteristics dominate every facet of her history and her personality. When she has the Curse, it is real--her whole life, for that time, is cursed. It is of such a time that the book's events consist.

In the morning of the day of the Curse, Mary has the "Juarez dooms", named after the trip she took to Mexico to divorce her second husband. When she tried at that time to see herself as an outsider would, she realized that she no longer knew who she was: "I am a changeling who has changed too often, and there are moments when I cannot find my way back." ¹² Part of the problem, of course, is that her name

has actually been changed so often, a process inevitably accompanied by self-questioning and doubt. The reality of a woman's loss of her own name and assumption of her husband's is symbolic as well, underlying as it does the cultural belief that a woman becomes part of her husband and finds her identity in his (but not vice versa). Mary's name has changed with each of her marriages, from Dunne to Phelan to Bell to Lavery, and with each change has come a corresponding accomodation in Mary. At the beginning of the novel she reflects on her early self-definition, "Memento ergo sum;" what she forgets and what she remembers are therefore of vital importance. That morning at the beauty parlor it is her name which she forgets, thus immersing herself in the "Juarex dooms."

The dooms are deepened by her encounter with the man in the street, after she leaves the beauty parlor. Since she has no strong image right then of who she is, his projected vision of her ("I'd like to fuck you, baby") has the power to hurt and depress her. The part of her mind which she characterizes as sensible tries to soften the impact by refusing to identify with his fantasy; "I decided that the real crime of the man I'd just encountered was that to him women were not human like himself, but simply objects he wanted to penetrate and hurt" (p.7) but this attempt to be objective breaks down when she recalls Jimmy, her first husband, who "believed he loved me" but who also, like the man on the street, saw her primarily as an object for his use.

She remembers how he showed her off like a new car, and at this point her "Mad Twin" makes explicit both her subjective response to the man's assault, and her self-contempt:

And me, how do I see me, who is that me I create in mirrors . . . When I think of that I hate being a woman, I hate this sickening female role-playing, I mean the silly degradation of playing pander and whore in the presentation of my face and figure in a man's world. I sweat with shame . . . and for what? So that men will say in the street, "I want to fuck you, baby," so that men will marry me and keep me and let's not go into that if I don't want the dooms in spades. (p.33)

But it is not she alone who creates herself; she is also a product of her husbands' visions of her. Her lack of self-confidence and sense of her own identity made her believe both the insults of Hat, who called her a whore, and of Jimmy, who called her frigid, widely disparate as they were: "It's funny I believed Jimmy, just as I believed Hat. In those days, I thought men more intelligent than women." (p.181)

Much of the tension in the character of Mary Dunne is a result of her sexual uncertainty and the difficulty she has in freeing herself from destructive relationships. Although she knew before she married Hat that it "would be the same thing all over again; the sex thing wasn't right with him, as it had not been right with Jimmy," (p.193) she does not trust herself or her perceptions enough to act on them. She is equally helpless in dealing with less important relationships, as when she cannot escape the embarrassment and sadism of Ernie Truelove or Janice Sloane who, like Jimmy, insist they love her.

So Mary is doomed, doubly cursed by her sexuality and

her social position as a woman: "All were men, all men judged me, all men were unfair." (p.171) This absolute statement of depression is the farthest extreme of a pendulum swing around the fulcrum of Mary's sexuality; the other extreme is her salvation. By telling Hat the truth about their sex life for her, she makes the first step toward a freedom with Terence in which the curse is replaced by blessings. "That's right," I said. "Terence is my saviour, I shall not want, he maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he restoreth my soul. . . . He's life after death." (p.113) With him, Mary's "doom dream, when naked is panic, when naked is the dooms" (p.177) becomes something very different. Even when she has begun making love with him "just as though I were a prostitute, . . . simply to prevent him from knowing the state I'm in" (p.176) the act becomes a sacrament: ". . . for with you, naked is make it new, there is no past, you are my resurrection and my life." (p.177) Mary Dunne's womanhood thus leads both to loss of self, and to her self-renewal. She is redeemed from the curse by love and by the honesty which, as Mad Twin and Buddy, both tortures and rewards her.

The fact that Terence, the individual man, is equated with her redemption, however, raises a basic question. Does Mary have any development or identity in herself after all? She breaks out of the destructive relationship with Hat, but not solely because it is bad for her. She leaves

him only after she has Terence to go to, and the fact that her identity depends on the man she is with is as true with Terence as it was with her earlier husbands. What is she, herself, as an individual within her relationships? That she is aware of her dependence on men, and that it forms a central part of her unhappiness, is evident in her words "I sweat with shame . . . so that men will marry me and keep me and let's not go into that if I don't want the dooms in spades." (p.33) This seems a strange statement for a woman who has supposedly found redemption through marriage. It seems necessary to note here that the basic difference between Mary's life with Terence and her life with Jimmy or Hat is made clear by Moore: with Terence, she experiences sexual climaxes. With her other husbands, it was "finishing myself off in the bathroom later, or lie awake, unfinished, the man asleep beside me and I awake, a sad, female animal." (p.177) With Terence, however, "it is not as it used to be with others, there is no fear, there is no 'Will I and when can I and if I can't then can I pretend it?'" (p.178)

Without underestimating the importance of good sexual relations in the life of any adult, it certainly seems that Moore's sexual provinciality is evident here. The theory that a woman's problems, no matter what their source or manifestation, can be solved by good sex with the right man, is a popular male myth. A belief in the magical power of sexual climax to nullify all the fears, disappointments

and self-doubts of either men or women seems almost startlingly naive. The only possible source of the presence of this supposition in the novel would seem to be an unexamined prejudice on the part of the author.

There are two levels to Moore's characterization of Mary Dunne; both are sexual. The history of Mary which emerges in the book is a sexual history, concerned almost exclusively with her relationships with men. Other dimensions of her personality are sketchy or non-existent. Secondly, this history is related through a screen or grid composed of premenstrual tension. We see Mary's life, or rather her sex life, through perceptions which are apparently temporarily distorted due to her menstrual cycle. At the end of the book, Moore suggests that the reader can disregard what he has learned; the problems, the unhappiness, the thoughts of suicide are not really "real", but merely a result of premenstrual tension: "there is nothing wrong with my heart or with my mind: in a few hours I will begin to bleed, and until then I will hold on . . . I remember who I am and I say it over and over and over, I am Mary Dunne, I am Mary Dunne, I am Mary Dunne." (p.241)

By structuring his book as he does, Moore raises the question of whether female personality itself is "real", i.e. a product of all the inherent and environmental forces on the self, or whether women are dominated in all aspects of their personality by their sexual cycle, which then appears,

bizarrely, as a deus ex machina instead of an integral part of the individual. The fantasy that women are passively controlled by their sexual cycle and sexual urges is expressed by Moore in his other novels as well; Jane Tierney, in An Answer From Limbo, cannot resist Vito, the "dark ravisher" of her dreams, even though she despises him. The same theme appears in The Luck of Ginger Coffey, although in this case it is clear that Moore, as author, is aware that it is because of Ginger's unrealistic sexual fantasies and his need to perceive Vera as his Dark Rosaleen, "exciting, a bit of a whore" that he is unable to really know or love her. Perhaps it is because the inner feelings expressed are those of Ginger and not Vera that Moore's treatment of the theme, in this case, seems more realistic to me than does its presentation in sections of I Am Mary Dunne or in An Answer From Limbo, where Jane's fantasies of "dark-complected, amoral, fierce young men"¹³ are a close but unconvincing counterpart of Ginger's. Something is lost when Moore attempts to portray the secret sexual thoughts of women; they are almost always masculine cultural projections.

The plot of An Answer From Limbo is sharply illustrative of certain aspects of North American culture in the 1950's. It is overlaid with a heavy Freudianism which decrees that Jane cannot possibly co-exist with Brendan's mother, that the

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Brian Moore, An Answer From Limbo (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1963), p.22. Other quotes from this novel in this chapter will be designated by page number in the text.

necessity of Jane's working will destroy her family, and that an artist must sacrifice his wife and children in order to succeed. Typical of that era also is Jane's acceptance of a surface, sexual definition of her identity. Unlike Mary Dunne, who is definitely a woman of the 1960's, strongly aware of what she calls "the silly degradation of playing pander and whore in the presentation of my face and figure in a man's world," Jane Tierney "worried that her breasts were too small and her bottom a little too lush, but she had her own style, she knew that; and that style extended from her clothes and make-up to her surrounding; it was her." (p.24) Thus she defines herself, essentially, as a body, complemented by its style of dress and make-up. The final state of loss in which she finds herself is a classic capsule description, in almost sociological terms, of a middle-class American woman of the 1950's: "She remembered herself at sixteen when she had hoped to become a painter. She remembered herself at twenty when she had wanted to make a career as an illustrator. At twenty-two she had lost faith even in her talents for that. She wanted babies: motherhood would give her life a meaning. At twenty-four, married and a mother, she had felt she needed some other cause to live for. She did not find one." (p.276)

Judith Hearne is a novel which, like I Am Mary Dunne, is concerned almost exclusively with one woman's point of view. In this book, Moore paints an empathetic portrait of a poverty-stricken, unattractive, unimaginative spinster in

a culture where the only acceptable role for a woman is that of wife or nun. To some extent, Judith too is defined in terms of her menstrual cycle; the crisis in her life which the book describes is precipitated at least partially by her menopause.

Earlier in her life, Judith had tried with all her meagre resources to find a place for herself in her narrow society. Against the wishes of her guardian aunt, she taught herself shorthand and typing, secured a job, and worked for three months--until her aunt had a stroke. After nursing her for some time, Judy again brushed up her skills, hired a housekeeper, and went back to work. Because of her aunt's emotional blackmail, however, Judy was forced to give up her work again, and returned home to nurse the old lady until her death. Afterwards, there was little money left for Judy; she tried to find work, but was told they wanted only young girls. Since then she had subsisted on her inheritance, eked out by the tiny sums she was paid for teaching piano and embroidery to children.

The almost total lack of choice and opportunity offered Judy, combined with her intense loneliness, the years of repression of her feelings, and her inexperience in most areas of life create for her a reality characterized by confusion and disillusionment. Such a reality is understandably difficult to accept. Judy escapes from its narrowness into fantasies of romance, which become more sexual in nature when

she drinks. Since her experience is so limited, these dreams are either comfortingly traditional images of herself as "an angel, she devoted her whole life to a sick aunt"¹⁴ or as a late-blooming beauty, finally admired by men after a lifetime of rejection. Her sexual fantasies are equally two-dimensional; they contain no elements of sensuality, but restrict themselves to stock cultural clichés of gypsy girls and Hollywood-style Roman orgies.

In the events of the novel, Judith is trapped by her inability to act or respond in any but the conventional patterns she has learned. Part of the torture she undergoes in her confused affair with James Madden is because "the male must pursue. Miss Hearne believed this. If Mr. Madden did not seek her company, she would be abandoned." (p.110) Finally, however, her desperation forces her to act against her own code, and she pursues him so that he must flatly, explicitly reject her. This uncharacteristic behaviour on Judy's part, and its results, are a turning point for her. In the ensuing struggle with her religious faith, she rises as an individual above the limitations established by her social situation and her narrow imagination.

Her doubts grow relentlessly; years of unanswered prayers haunt her. She fails in her efforts to suppress her doubt, and the priest fails her also, answering her

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Brian Moore, Judith Hearne (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1964), p.121. Other quotes from this novel in this chapter will be designated by page number in the text.

only with the familiar phrases which she has already tried, and failed, to console herself with: "Now, my child, we all have burdens put upon us in this life, crosses we have to bear . . . We should never be lonely because we always have God to talk to. And our guardian angel to watch over us. . . . All we need to do is pray." (pp.142-3) Feeling that her doubts are confirmed, Judith makes a pathetic attempt to have a sinful spree, permitted now that there is "no heavenly reason to feel guilt." (p.153) She visits her old friend Edie in a nursing home, pitying, with unconscious irony, "all those old women, poor old creatures, nobody to care about them, nobody." (p.157) After the nuns throw her out for bringing Edie a bottle of gin, she visits Moira, and strips away the years of illusion and hypocrisy which they have built between them. With brutal clarity, she demonstrates the extent of her desperation: "and I never liked you, Moira, that's the truth, I never liked you." (p.163) She also shows an astute awareness both of her own real situation and the culture which produced it: "you're too late, you've missed your market. Then you're up for any offers. Marked-down goods. You're up for auction . . . No offers. Then second best. No offers. Third? No offers. . . . That's what I've come to, Moira. Turned down by a doorman. And what's more, I didn't want to be turned down. I'd take him yet." (pp.164-5) At this point, there is no possibility of reversing the process of self-

exposure, no matter how cruel and humiliating the exploration is. Everything must be attempted. Judith returns to the priest, who cannot understand her need and scolds her like a child. She enters the church and tries, vainly, to open the sacristy. She does the unthinkable. And nothing happens.

In a world where an unimaginably daring action produces no response, there is no possibility of illusion or romance, no hope of rebellion. In the rest home, Judy responds mechanically to Moira's offer to resume their old relationship, and to Father Quigley's assumptions about her faith. Her mirror, which once showed her herself as a gypsy, permits no more illusion. "Old, she thought, if I met myself now, I would say: that is an old woman." (p.180) The pictures of the Sacred Heart and of her aunt are familiar objects to her and she keeps them near, but what they once represented no longer exists for her.

In the creation of the later portraits of Jane Tierney and Mary Dunne, Moore seems to believe that by understanding a woman's sexuality, the point of her difference from him as a man, he can understand all. Such a belief is logical in that it seems evident that if we can understand those areas in which we differ, and the rest is similar, we will have a total grasp of the other. Unfortunately, however, the result of Moore's application of this principle to his female characters is that in some cases they are

reduced to nothing more than that point of difference, their sexuality.

Judith Hearne is perhaps the fullest and most developed of all Moore's female characters. Unlike the others, she has little in herself which is intrinsically interesting. It is precisely because her abilities and resources are so narrow that one responds to her struggle with interest and compassion: were she young and pretty, it is unlikely that Moore could have become as engaged in the different aspects of her personality as he has. She is, in fact, the only one of his heroines who is not completely dominated by specifically sexual criteria. Her spinsterhood and sexual repression are important parts of her, but they are not everything. And, since this corresponds more closely to external reality, Judith is, for me, a more outstanding character than Jane Tierney or even Mary Duhne.

CHAPTER 2

AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSE: THE COMPLEX MRS. BENTLEY

As For Me and My House, by Sinclair Ross, is another novel which employs the technique of a first-person, feminine narrator, and like Moore's I Am Mary Dunne, the central female "I" is the creation of a male novelist. In spite of the vast social differences between the little prairie town of Horizon of the 1930's and the world of New York City of the 1960's, Mrs. Bentley and Mary Dunne share a number of characteristics. They are both basically strong people who are sometimes crippled by self-doubt and guilt; neither feels that she fits easily into the world around her, and they are both made as uncomfortable by the social roles which they wish to fulfill as by the ones they reject. Both women are childless, and each feels that her husband is the centre of her life and her chief raison d'etre.

The external demands for adherence to a rigid set of sexual roles made by the provincial culture of small towns like Horizon are a great strain on the Bentley's relationship. This factor is one of the first things revealed by Ross in his novel, which begins with a description of the Bentley's moving into a new manse. Mrs. Bentley is a better carpenter than Philip, but small town mores decree that he must do this kind of work, not she. For her to use a hammer "in the parsonage, on calling days, . . . simply isn't done." ¹⁵ They are not quite brave enough to drop openly

¹⁵
Sinclair Ross, As For Me and My House (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1961), p.3. Other quotes from this novel will be indicated in the text by page number.

their front of conformity to their congregation's expectations, and much of the emptiness and falseness which exists between them results from their consequent lack of self-respect.

There is a wide variety of critical responses to Mrs. Bentley. In his introduction to the New Canadian Library edition of the novel, Roy Daniells states that she represents all those women of the region who "never failed to respond with courage, intelligence, sympathy, and hopefulness to the worst of situations"; (p.x) to another critic she is "smug," but also "candid and reflective."¹⁶ W.H. New concludes that she is "the manipulating woman who has already destroyed her husband by confining his artistic talents, and who even now does not let up."¹⁷ Donald Stephens feels that "her major redeeming feature is her earnest desire for reconciliation with her husband,"¹⁸ while another critic finds her to be "all too obviously more a mother to him than she is a wife,"¹⁹ a judgment which is rendered more harsh than it might seem because of Philip's contempt and hatred for his own mother.

¹⁶ Donald G. Stephens, "Wind, Sun and Dust." Canadian Literature 23 (Winter, 1965), pp. 20-21.

¹⁷ "Sinclair Ross's Ambivalent World." Can. Lit. 40, p.26.

¹⁸ Stephens, Ibid., p.22.

¹⁹ Warren Tallman, "Wolf in the Snow." Can. Lit. 5, p.8.

Such a diversity of responses is a tribute to the depth and subtlety of Ross's characterization. There are several levels of development inherent in the full picture of Mrs. Bentley, some more obvious than others, and the conscious and unconscious reactions to each level all contribute to the final impression of her. On the surface, Mrs. Bentley's character is revealed by what she admits openly; the novel's structure is that of a diary. It is intimate in tone, and since ostensibly private in nature, the narrator is free to be as open and inclusive, honest and self-searching, as it is possible for her to be. She inadvertently reveals much in her private comments on her life, but the first area to examine is that which emerges from her clearly conscious description of herself.

One recurrent feature of her self-portrait is her feeling of inadequacy. She belittles herself and is often overwhelmed with feelings of guilt in relation to Philip. In these feelings, as throughout the book, everything is relative to him; when she wishes for a child, it is not for herself but to "give back a little of what I've taken from him, that I might at least believe I haven't altogether wasted him." (p.5) Her guilt and consequent anxiety form a permanent state of mind for her; as she admits, near the beginning of the story, "I've always been a little afraid, right from the day we met." (p.10) The continuing nature of this fear in her life is not difficult to understand:

she believes that she has ruined Philip's true career as an artist, and although she says repeatedly that that she hates the hypocrisy of their life together and that she wishes Philip would let go and get out of the ministry, she just as repeatedly hinders him from doing so. At the church meeting called to discuss their semi-adoption of Steve, for example, she is aware of a possibility of his breakthrough, and she squelches it: "I could feel the hot throb of all the years he has curbed and hidden and choked himself-- feel it gather, break, the sudden reckless stumble for release--and before it was too late, before he could do what he should have done twelve years ago, I interrupted." (pp.72-3) Again and again, she provides a false front for Philip, even as she pities and dislikes him for making use of it. As D.G. Jones observes in his recent book, Butterfly on Rock, "she knows he is a true artist and a false minister. Nevertheless she devotes herself entirely to maintaining that false position. It is in large part due to her skill in dealing with people that her husband has been able to go on living a lie. She in in this respect divided against her husband as well as herself."²⁰ She is in an authentic dilemma. Feeling guilty because she has (she believes) limited Philip, she tries to make amends by protecting him as much as she can from the criticism of the town, and from the open declara-

the failure of
 tion of¹ their life together. This makes it even harder for him to face and deal with the sterility of their existence; she devotes so much effort to making his life less intolerable that he in fact tolerates it, which he should not do and which she says she wishes he would not do.

The strain imposed on the Bentley's marriage by the culture's expectations of what men and women should do is a constant burden for them both. In addition to the irritations and tensions which they both feel, there is an additional strain on Mrs. Bentley as a result of her efforts to conform to her own view of what she should be as a wife. Her self-sacrifice in this area benefits neither herself nor Philip; her continuing efforts to deny her own interests have made her a parasite on, rather than a supporter of, her husband. She herself is not fully aware in this area, although she returns to it again and again as if it nags her for understanding:

It's a man's way, I suppose, and a woman's. Before I met him I had ambitions too. The only thing that really mattered for me was the piano. It made me self-sufficient, a little hard. All I wanted was opportunity to work and develop myself.

But he came and the piano took second place. I was teaching and saving hard for another year's study in the East, wondering if I might even make it Europe; and then I forgot it all, almost overnight.

Instead of practice in my spare time it was books now. Books that he had read or might be going to read--so that I could reach up to his intellect, be a good companion, sometimes while he talked nod comprehendingly.

For right from the beginning I knew that with Philip

it was the only way. . . . Submitting to him that way, yielding my identity--it seemed what life was intended for. (p.16)

The language in this passage shows a lack of certainty; "it's a man's way, I suppose," and "it seemed what life was intended for." Even the most definite statement of all, "for right from the beginning I knew that with Philip it was the only way," is thrown into serious question by her own assertion that her music attracted Philip in the first place--he proposed to her the night she played Liszt so well--and by her return to practicing for the church social in the explicit hope of winning him again. Perhaps, in fact, she has made a virtue of a sacrifice which he never wanted her to make. If this is so, it gives an edge of terrible irony to all her assertions of pity for Philip's wasted artistry, and explains in part the urgency of her need to perceive him as a sacrificed artist; perhaps it is herself she mourns for.

Her claim to artistry is at least as convincing as is Philip's. In places, she reveals clearly that she understands firsthand the essential power of art as a release and as a weapon: "Tomorrow I must play the piano again, play it and hammer it and charge with it to the town's complete annihilation." (p.13) But she rejected this power and ability when she married Philip, preferring instead to cast herself in the role of a traditional wife playing a secondary role to her husband. It is not clear that Philip

himself wanted this, and perhaps the resentment she inevitably feels at suppressing something which was so central to her is not rightfully directed toward him at all.

It was the piano first, then Philip. They were the essentials; the rest I took casually. One of my teachers used to wonder at what he called my masculine attitude to music. . . . I never thought or cared for anything but the music itself. . . . And that's the hard part, remembering how strong and real it used to be, having to admit it means so little now. . . . That's what he's done to me, and there are times I can nearly hate him for it. I haven't roots of my own any more. I'm a fungus or parasite whose life depends on his. (p.151)

Having thus given up something "essential," she pours all her energy into Philip, who must replace it. Her life "depends on his": the consequent burden on him is enormous. He must live and achieve enough for both of them, and if he fails, he fails for both. His resentment of such a demand, which neither of them consciously understands, would explain a great deal of his frustration and impotent anger, as well as his inability to respond to her. In such a situation every additional manifestation of her self-sacrifice and accomodation of him would increase the unspoken demand which he feels, increase his anger and separation from her, and increase her anxiety and guilt, leading back again to her self-defeating attempts to please him. They are in a vicious circle, continually exacerbating each other's feelings of failure and inadequacy.

Since Mrs. Bentley has chosen Philip over her music, whether such a choice was necessary or not, he is all she

has. Since he is all she has, she wants to possess him totally. She is quite honest about this: "All these years I've been trying to possess him, to absorb his life into mine, and not once has he ever yielded." (p.64) Faced with such a need, and such a threat of being absorbed, Philip's only hope of retaining his identity is to withdraw from her, and since she feels that she has submitted and yielded her own identity to him, the fact that "not once has he ever yielded" takes on added strength. Mrs. Bentley understands the dynamics of their conflict clearly, and makes a perceptive statement about it: "his own world was shattered and empty, but at that it was better than a woman's. He remained in it. He was no longer young, had nothing much left to dream about, but at least he could shut himself away from me." (p.64) Then, characteristically, she tries to explain it away by falling back on her usual theme of Philip the artist, and by generalizations about the nature of men and women, expressed with the lack of conviction noted above in a similar context: "partly because he was an artist, because he had to draw; partly because he was a man, and the solitude of his study was his last stronghold against me. I understand it well enough tonight. It's a woman's way, I suppose, to keep on trying to subdue a man, to bind him to her, and it's a man's way to keep on just as determined to be free." (p.64) Having given up so much of her own identity, she clings to the

belief that Philip is a real artist, infusing that concept with enough prestige to do for both of them. Philip is about as far from being "free" as it is possible for a man to be; she wishfully ascribes such qualities to him because she lives through him, vicariously. The generalizations about a "man's way" and "woman's way" are cold comfort in the Bentley's failure to achieve any satisfaction with each other. It takes courage to face and really see such a bitter truth, a courage Mrs. Bentley does not have here. Later, however, the theme emerges more plainly, and she enunciates a piercing awareness of her part in their situation:

I must still keep on reaching out, trying to possess him, trying to make myself matter. I must, for I've left myself nothing else. I haven't been like him. I've reserved no retreat, no world of my own. I've whittled myself hollow that I might enclose and hold him, and when he shakes me off I'm just a shell. Ever since the day he let me see I was less to him than Steve I've been trying to find and live my own life again, but it's empty, unreal. The piano, even--I try, but it's just a tinkle. And that's why I mustn't admit I may have lost him. (p.75)

The degree to which Mrs. Bentley is conscious of the complex threads in her life with Philip is impressive, and so is her bravery in trying to untangle them. Perhaps we learn even more, though, from what she reveals inadvertently.

The overt theme of her diary is her attempt to be close to Philip. She feels that she has hurt him, perhaps

irreparably, by marrying him, and her story is largely concerned with her repeated efforts to please him, understand him, help his painting and, hopefully, to inject some warmth into their sterile relationship. Her need to perceive Philip as a frustrated artist, no matter what the context, is the central myth of their marriage,²¹ from Mrs. Bentley's point of view, and acts as a catch-all explanation of and excuse for Philip's individual failures and for all their lacks as a couple. A central function of the myth is that it allows Mrs. Bentley, who professes to respect her husband, to overlook his apparent emptiness as a person. On their vacation, when Philip shows to such disadvantage and is so universally disliked, she explains it away by saying that "when he's really impossible, it's because the artist in him gets the upper hand." (p.102) The tone of this explanation, and the explanation itself, recur so often that "methinks the lady doth protest too much."

"It was simple enough. There was no hard thinking to do, nothing tangled to get straight. He's an artist, that's all . . . " (p.102) Her compulsion to characterize Philip in this way may stem partly from the opportunity it gives her to avoid becoming really involved with him, and risking a real confrontation. After she learns of his affair with Judith, for example, she masks her inability to take a

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I use the word "myth" to mean, not something untrue, but an unexamined belief or value system which both accept, and which forms the fundamental basis of their relationship.

chance on losing him by expressing her feelings. Instead, she falls back on the familiar refrain: "with a man like Philip you can't afford rights or pride." (p.126)

Another possible interpretation of this theme is that Mrs. Bentley identifies all too closely with Philip's inability to create. Perhaps she, like Philip, was unable to remain truly committed to an artistic discipline; she, however, had a socially acceptable excuse for giving it up, and he does not. To recognize that Philip just does not have the qualities needed to be an artist might mean facing an unflattering picture of her own "sacrifice."

It is impossible to speculate on Philip's real abilities as a painter, since we see everything through Mrs. Bentley's eyes, but it is not really important. Whether or not he can create, he doesn't, and Mrs. Bentley's assumption that it is entirely due to her is unconvincing. In addition, it undercuts her insistence that she respects him; it seems unlikely that she really respects the man whom she consistently portrays as such a passive victim of circumstances. Beginning with her description of their marriage, she assumes full responsibility for what he is. Typically, the passage begins with a generalization about women and men, and proceeds with an automatic reference to his artistic nature. In this case, it is advanced as the reason why he cannot love her: "Perhaps, too, he knew instinctively that as a woman I would make claims on him, and that as an artist he needed above all things

to be free. I was patient. I tried hard. Now sometimes I feel it a kind of triumph, the way I won my place in his life despite him; but other times I see his eyes frustrated, slipping past me, a spent, disillusioned stillness in them, and I'm not so sure." (p.33) The key phrase is "despite him;" does she really believe that such a "triumph" is possible, that she somehow broke his will to such an extent? It would help to explain why she feels so guilty, but it is hard to believe that such a thing is possible.

In addition to her insistence that it is she who has prevented Philip from realizing his potential, Mrs. Bentley assumes complete responsibility for their life together since their marriage. Some part of this, surely, is an illegitimate assumption: "for these last twelve years I've kept him in the Church--no one else. The least I can do now is help get him out again." (p.107) Surely Philip, too, had something to do with it; it is true that the restrictions of a small town ministry erode his self-respect, but he is essentially a hypocrite because he does not believe in the things which he continues to do. There are indications that he does not concur with his wife's picture of her role in his life; after Steve has been taken away from them, he makes one of his few clear statements of the novel when he says that "if a man's a victim of circumstances he deserves to be." (p.119) Mrs. Bentley cannot hear this. Perhaps it is impossible for

her to admit that Philip is a failure because of his own inadequacy. This assumption of illegitimate authority is her greatest fault, and shows itself in many unattractive ways. She does not really respect Philip as an equal, capable of taking responsibility for himself. In fact, she often refers to him as if he were a child--"Paul's gone, and I've put Philip to bed"(p.35)--and the fact that she is aware of her tendency to "get impatient being just his wife, and start in trying to mother him too" (p.4) seems to indicate that she is not really conscious of its incongruity with her professed awe of his superiority.

She constantly interferes with the natural flow of things out of a misguided sense of what is right for Philip. She refuses to teach Steve piano, for instance, although he is more interested in music than painting, because she does not want Philip to be hurt. She thus restricts everyone's freedom; Steve's, her own, and Philip's too. Here again her awareness of this fault does not deter her indulgence of it: "it always turns out the same when you make up your mind that what's right for you must be right for someone else. I made up my mind about Philip once--and as a result see what he is today." (p.150) In a similar way, Mrs. Bentley's ostensible sympathy for Philip becomes, after innumerable repetitions, almost unbearably patronizing. She constantly excuses him by assuming responsibility herself for everything that happens in their

lives, thus effectively negating him as a person. It seems unlikely that there is as great a "discrepancy between the man and the little niche that holds him" (p.4) as she insists. A great man could not really be held for twelve years in a little niche if it pinched him too severely. This image seems to refer both to the social role of minister and, literally, to Mrs. Bentley's sexual hold on him through marriage. She denigrates herself but nevertheless asserts her hold over him, thereby diminishing him even more.

In a few places in the book, Mrs. Bentley's desire to control Philip actually emerges as sinister. She examines and analyzes him, creating him in her own image and defining him as she wants him to be. After a conflict with him, she goes to bed and "in the quiet darkness there I defeated the Philip who a little while before had repelled me with his laughter. Away from him, without the insistence of his voice or face, I was able to restore him to his actual self." (p.145) The "actual self" she restores him to, however, is a neurotic fantasy of "him suffering and alone and in need of me." (p.146) In another incident, although she is aware of how unhappy Philip was until Steve came to live with them, she remarks after the boy has been sent away that "it was good to have him to myself again." (p.118) She does not really want him to be happy, content, mature, or responsible; her strong desire is for him to be sick

and helpless, dependent on her: "I think it's what I've been wishing for ever since we met . . . And just for once I'd like to have him helpless enough really to need me, to give me a chance to reach him, prove myself." (p.122) The questionable tone of this wish is mirrored in her explicit statement after Steve has gone that she hopes Philip's will, his desire to create and be fulfilled, is truly broken:

"it will be easier if it's really resignation, if the dreams have run themselves out, if he submits at last to the inevitable, to me." (p.120) This particular statement throws into doubt all her protestations of support for Philip's self-fulfillment as a person and an artist; it also brings into question her explanations of Philip's avoidance of her. Her usual rationalization, expressed in varying ways, is that Philip "resents his need of me. Somehow it makes him feel weak, a little unmanly. There are times when I think he has never quite forgiven me for being just a woman." (p.23) In view of what she herself says, however, Philip's fears and withdrawals are well-founded. Since she really wants him sick, helpless, and submissive, he has little choice but to attempt to preserve himself by suppressing any need for her he may have.

Operating simultaneously with Mrs. Bentley's overt and inadvertent self-disclosures is the symbolic level of As For Me and My House. Ross has drawn on a deeply-based cultural tradition which equated femininity with nature.

In this case, the dry prairie landscape mirrors Mrs. Bentley's sterility; she is, as Donald Stephens notes, "a²² kind of reverse earth mother" who is both attracted to the prairie because of its openness, freedom, and relative honesty compared to the mean little false-fronted town, and repelled by its emptiness and drought.

The character of Judith, like the landscape, symbolizes that part of Mrs. Bentley which is unconscious, repressed, and yet vital. The two women are, in many ways, opposites. While Mrs. Bentley is full of words, endlessly analytic and intellectual, Judith is still. She is fertile and potent. Determined to be independent, she had saved and studied singlemindedly and the surrender of her interest, unlike that of Mrs. Bentley, was the result of external force and did not come from a self-betrayal. Judith is a sacrificial figure; she embodies greater life than Mrs. Bentley as well as imminent death, and she is literally sacrificed in the creation of a new life at the end of the book. If she is seen as representative of a part of Mrs. Bentley which is suppressed and hidden, then her death ensures that the narrow, controlling aspect of Mrs. Bentley's character will continue to dominate. Both women lose much, if this is so.

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"Lilacs Out of the Mosaic Land: Aspects of the Sacrificial Theme in Canadian Literature." Dalhousie Review 48, p.501.

Ross's characterization of Mrs. Bentley is profound and perceptive. Only in a very few places is the portrait unconvincing; once or twice, for example, he puts into her mouth general statements about women which do not ring true. On the whole, however, Ross's creation is both consistent and convincing.

The novel ends on a note of ironic ambiguity. The Bentley's decision to leave Horizon, and the presence of Philip and Judith's baby, seem to denote a radical break with the hypocritical world of false fronts, false ministry, and sterility. On the other hand, the fact that it is Mrs. Bentley once again who makes all the decisions--to leave, to adopt the baby, to name him Philip too (so that she will not always know the difference between them) might also indicate that nothing fundamental has actually changed, and that she is merely increasing her scope for dominating and manipulating Philip. This suspicion is intensified by her private decision to continue to "sacrifice" herself to him: "I thought at first that we'd put the piano in the store and sell music too, but the more I think about it the more I'm convinced that Philip would be better without me. In workaday matters I'm so much more practical than he is that in a month or two I'd be one of those domineering females that men abominate." (p.160) In view of the entire picture, this last statement is heavily ironic. The book ends with Mrs. Bentley's

remark about the future interchangeability of Philip and his child: "that's right, Philip. I want it so," (p.165) which may be variously interpreted as optimistic, quietly confident, hopeful, threatening, or ominous. The lack of a clear-cut conclusion is one of the factors which makes the novel profound, and is perfectly consistent with Ross's characterization of Mrs. Bentley throughout it.

Early in the story, Mrs. Bentley says of the town that "we're detached, strangers, seeing it all objectively, and when you see it that way it's just bickering and petty and contemptible." (p.44) One might see the Bentley's relationship in these same terms, "all objectively" had Ross not succeeded so well in creating an interesting, complex and engaging narrator who makes it possible for the reader to become more deeply involved in the events and themes of the book.

CHAPTER 3

CHARACTER AS SYMBOL AND THE THEME OF SACRIFICE: THE LOVED AND THE LOST AND THE WATCH THAT ENDS THE NIGHT

Neither Morley Callaghan's The Loved and the Lost nor Hugh MacLennan's The Watch That Ends the Night is solely or even predominantly concerned with a female character. The first is basically the story of a man, Jim McAlpine, and his relationships over a brief period of time; the second is as much or more concerned with George Stewart and Jerome Martell as with Catherine. In both novels, however, the major woman is assigned a unique role and is of primary importance in any understanding of the author's theme. There is a strong similarity between Catherine Stewart and Peggy Sanderson; they have many of the same characteristics and play similar roles in the authors' fictional worlds.

The most dominant characteristic of both women is their symbolic quality. Neither is very convincing as a real, fully-developed personality, although they possess some humanizing idiosyncrasies, but the elements of an archetypal female figure can be clearly discerned in both. Eugene F. Timpe's description of the archetype may serve as an approach to this concept:

Graphically, the Feminine archetype may be thought of as a circle with two diameters crossing it at right angles. One diameter represents the static or elementary characteristics; the other represents the dynamic or

transformative. The elementary diameter extends from the absolute negative to the absolute positive, from the Terrible Mother, typified by the mysteries of death, to the Good Mother, related to the mysteries of vegetation, birth, rebirth, and immortality.

Transformatively, the diameter passes from the positive, the inspiration mysteries, to the negative, the mysteries of drunkenness, ecstasy, madness, impotence, and stupor. 23

Both Peggy and Catherine are described as being very beautiful women, but their physical beauty is only part of their attraction to the men in their lives. At the heart of their beauty is a sense of self-possession. Because of it, Catherine appears dignified, even stately, although she is a small woman. Peggy's "small face had a childlike prettiness, and yet she was not baby-faced; she possessed a strange kind of stillness."²⁴ This juxtaposition of qualities not usually found together is repeated in the description of other aspects of their personalities.

Peggy is perhaps less clearly realized as a character than is Catherine, but her stature as a strongly religious symbol is unquestionable. She practices the humanity which her minister father preached and, like a saint, is martyred for it. Catherine is also described in religious terms. To George, in fact, she is religion: "I had made Catherine the rock of my life. As a boy, at least for a time, I had been religious and believed that God cared for me

²³ "Ulysses' and the Archetypal Feminine," Perspectives in Literary Symbolism (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1966), p.205.

²⁴ Morley Callaghan, The Loved and the Lost (Toronto: The MacMillan Co. of Can. Ltd., 1951), p.15. Other quotes from this novel will be indicated by page number in the text.

personally. In the Thirties I had said to myself: There is no God. Now I had Catherine . . . "²⁵ One of his early impressions of her, as a boy of seventeen, was of a goddess clothed in green or in light itself, with "a nimbus around her," (p.54) and when she kisses him, it is his "first experience of a miracle." (p.33) Peter Buitenhuis suggests that MacLennan may have modelled this character on St. Catherine of Siena, who wrote of her experience with what she called the "inner cell" of knowledge of God, "into which the individual can withdraw to gain strength with which to encounter the world."²⁶ Catherine Stewart has a stillness, an "inner cell" of being which enables her to cope with her illness.

George admires and loves Catherine for "her strength, her essence, her mystery in which occasionally I had almost drowned," (pp.26-7) but he also resents it, because in order to maintain that strength she sometimes retreats to a place of solitude within herself. Her ability to cope with her illness and to love life in spite of it irritates him; it gives her "a strange serenity that . . . had the odd effect of excluding me, as though she had gone to some place to which I would eventually arrive . . . " (p.28) When she is near death after an attack, he feels deserted by her;

²⁵ Hugh MacLennan, The Watch That Ends the Night (Toronto: Signet Books, 1966), p.8. Other quotes from this novel will be indicated by page number in the text.

²⁶ Hugh MacLennan (Toronto/London/Sydney: Forum House Publishing Co., 1969), p.58.

she "disappeared into a force I knew to be nothing but an impersonal spirit fighting for existence" (p.312) and he feels angry because she apparently does not need him. Sometimes his complaint is more general, more related to her entire personality. As he says, "sometimes this impersonality of her feeling for others, for life itself, made me resentful because I felt myself excluded. She understood what it is like to die, and I didn't, and that made the difference." (p.37) It is not only Catherine's illness or her familiarity with death which make George feel excluded, however. The same theme appears in the midst of his admiration for her painting. Describing her as an artist he says, "This Catherine was ambitious. This Catherine was also strangely solitary in her core and--I dare say this now--there were days when she seemed totally to exclude me because of this communion she had established with color and form. Yes, she was ruthless. All artists are" (p.26) (Shades of Mrs. Bentley!) Whatever the excuse, however, whether Catherine's illness, or painting, or marriage to Jerome, George often finds himself full of contradictory feelings because he resents her way of achieving the very qualities he loves in her.

Jim McAlpine finds himself in a similar position with Peggy Sanderson. Having been attracted to her because she is strong enough to be herself, he begins to resent her self-possession and calmness. It becomes for him "an irritating serenity (which) made him feel he wasn't really

interesting her." (p.33) The same quality in both women simultaneously attracts and repels, arouses love and anger.

In a further example of the religious mold in which both women are cast, neither Peggy nor Catherine wishes to conform to the demands of the material world, but neither is allowed to relinquish it without making a sacrifice. Catherine, who tries to avoid the world of politics and social involvement, who believes that "if only the world would leave us alone . . . our days would be a paradise," Z(p.205) loses Jerome to that world. Peggy loses jobs, suffers personal slander, and finally dies for her failure to conform to its expectations.

Secondary female characters who act as contrasts to Peggy and Catherine are used by both authors. At the beginning of Catherine and George's story, Catherine is set in opposition to George's domineering Aunt Agnes, who represents all the forces of established order and the status quo. In discussing the conflict between the world of appearances and the world of spontaneous feeling which runs throughout much of Canadian Literature, D.G. Jones has pointed out that figures who represent the latter tend to be "marginal members of society, outcasts";²⁷ Catherine's illness sets her apart from the conventional social world and makes her such a figure. Similarly, Peggy is implicitly

²⁷ Butterfly on Rock, p.43.

compared to Catherine Carver and exists in opposition to her and the values which she represents. Although Callaghan's portrayal of Catherine Carver is not unsympathetic, her world ultimately destroys Peggy. Peggy lives chaotically, juxtaposing people and experiences in unusual ways, and she expects other people to live their own lives with no interference from her. Catherine Carver, on the other hand, has a passion for straightening up the things around her, including other people's lives. In spite of her strong desire for love and understanding, she fits too well into the superficial society of the city which is described as being completely "her town, at least the small part of it that was not French." (p.5) She unconsciously articulates her role with perfect clarity at the hockey game when she remarks to Jim, "Why quarrel with the home crowd?" (p.166) Peggy cannot avoid seeming to do just that all the time; because of her unique personality, she is almost always in opposition to the status quo.

Catherine Stewart's true antithesis is Norah Blackwell. Norah, like Catherine, is feminine in certain conventional ways: she is slim, delicate, and beautiful, with a low, musical voice. She is also "exceedingly competent . . . her slim, small hands were strong and deft, and in her work she thought like lightning. . . . about her work she was as professionally objective as a surgeon." (p.112) In view

of Norah's role in the story, it seems possible that this description of her professional competence is meant as a warning that there is something unnatural about her; such a supposition would be quite consistent with the author's somewhat narrow and sentimental picture of women. Catherine is wholeheartedly loving and completely faithful sexually, first to Jerome and then to George. Norah deceives her husband and finally leaves him; after her affair with Jerome, she becomes indiscriminately promiscuous. A more important difference, in view of Catherine's reluctance to be involved in the world and her insistence that "I'm a woman and a personal life is all I can understand," (p.230) is Norah's passionate partisanship in social issues. That she is a real foil for Catherine, and not just a two-dimensional minor figure, is made evident by George's response to her. Prepared to hate her for hurting Catherine, he finds her convincingly gentle and sincere, "her whole being like a flower which had opened after a long frost." (p.257)

It is in terms of the central theme of the novel--the acceptance of death which is prior to real life--that the two women are most obviously in contrast. Catherine learns to "live her death," as Jerome puts it; she is full of a force, an essential power of life which equals and thus negates death. George describes it as a force which "refuses to be bounded, circumscribed or even judged. It creates, it destroys, it recreates. Without it there can

be no life; with much of it no easy life. It seems to me the sole force which equals the merciless fate which binds a human being to his mortality." (p.27) Norah, who ironically pictured Catherine as a symbol of a sick civilization, has none of this power, and when her life becomes bitter, she seeks out death and kills herself.

There is an evident relationship between the symbolic function which both Peggy and Catherine fulfill and the ambiguity of response which they provoke. Catherine's occasional withdrawals to renew her strength threaten George, and Peggy's goodness seems to act as a reproach to those around her, arousing their hostility. In this respect, she is a true literary daughter of Clarissa Harlowe; her spirituality and refusal to compromise in order to defend herself seem to invite attack. Remembering the leopard she showed him on their first meeting, Jim says of her that "she had been held in the spell of all the fierce jungle wildness the cat suggested. She had waited, rapt and still, for the beast to spring at her and devour her. He must have suspected then that her gentle innocence was attracted perversely to violence, like a temperament seeking its opposite." (p.101) Whether or not Jim's feeling is correct, the passage illustrates the mixture of reactions which she provokes. Jim is strongly attracted to her unconventional ways, and almost as strongly repelled by them.

The men of both novels also share similar characteristics.

Peggy and Catherine teach not so much the acceptance of death as a full, conscious acceptance of life itself, and both George and Jim learn the lesson painfully and late. Part of the real acceptance of life is acceptance of life as it is, and this George finds almost impossible to do because it means accepting Catherine's illness and her imminent death. Jim finds it difficult because, in order to accept Peggy as she is, he must trust and have faith in her and in others; he cannot do this because he does not trust himself. He projects his inner feelings onto others, and torments himself with doubt, jealousy, and hate: "If she were so friendly with them, wouldn't she let them come to her room? And they, of course, would be charmed by her unspoiled freshness and want to possess it as he, himself, had wanted to possess it when he tried to kiss her." (p.56)

Since he is unable to accept his own feelings, he searches for someone to blame for his frustration and finds himself in a paradoxical situation where innocence equals guilt: "Her own life could be blameless. But was there another side to her nature suggested by her actions? Blamelessness could be carried too far--it could have dreadful consequences. When he had tried to kiss her, she had been blameless; she had merely turned her head away. But it could have been taken as a coy gesture. It could have provoked him to grab her and kiss her and go ahead." (p.44) Since he is unable

to believe in her completely, he sees her actions through a distorted perception. Peggy is an ambiguous figure, also, unless Callaghan intended an almost unbelievable naivete to be part of her character, so Jim's ambivalence is not completely unfounded. What is at fault in his attitude to her, however, is that he never concedes to her the ability to order her own life or to know her own mind. One of his first reactions to her is a desire to protect her, in spite of her wish to be independent; it is very important to his ego that he be able to feel a little superior to her, a little patronizing. Peggy fits into his fantasy of what women should be like only once; one evening when she is more dressed up than usual in a conventional way, Jim feels that "now he knew that she had always belonged in his own world. She looked like an exquisite little figurine done with a delicate grace and belonging in some china cabinet." (p.125) It would certainly be extremely difficult for Jim, who wants a woman who would fit this image, to accept the unorthodox, independent part of Peggy which is so central to her identity. After the fight in the nightclub, he betrays her because once again he is unable to believe that she really does know what she wants; in this case, she insists that she wants him, but he gives in to his mistrust, and she is murdered. Later, he realizes what

he did: "That was the sin. I couldn't accept her as she was. . . . In a moment of jealous doubt, his faith in her had weakened, he had lost his view of her, and so she had vanished." (pp.232-3) Fictional characters whose function in a work is as strongly symbolic as is Peggy's and Catherine's rarely undergo significant development during the story; they are created whole, as it were, or at least with their major characteristics fully formed. There is a change in Peggy at the very end of The Loved and the Lost; having lost her belief that she could not bring harm to others if her own motives were pure, her self-confidence falters and she seems ready to accept Jim's values and guidance. This apparent change, brought about by exhaustion and disillusionment, comes too close to her death to know what it would have meant in terms of her personality. Perhaps her faith in herself had weakened, as Jim's had, and could not have been regained.

Catherine Stewart has more particular identity as a character than Peggy does, and she also undergoes a significant change within the course of the novel. From her childhood she struggles against the limitations imposed on her by her illness and tries to extract from life as much of its essence as she can. At seventeen, she offers herself to George sexually, and comforts him with a maturity far beyond her years when he is unable to respond to her. As

a university student she is reckless in her pursuit of experience, and when she marries Jerome, she lives as fully as possible with him. Her world is an intensely personal one in which the main feature is her love for Jerome; it is because of this that she resists his political involvement so fiercely, and hates the external world for its interference with the personal life which, for her, is all of life. Jerome says simply at one point that "a man must belong to something larger than himself." (p.252) Believing this, he leaves her to fight fascism in Spain, and Catherine's private world collapses. She undergoes a period of complete breakdown, a death of self: "I don't know where I am. I don't know who I am. I don't know anything." (p.265) Into this emptiness comes, first, an awareness of what has been lost--"it's so awful for a woman to learn that human love isn't sufficient," (p.266)--and then, after a time, a realization that Jerome was right. She too finds that, to live, she must belong to something: "Sally is what I must live for now. Poor little girl, she's the bigger thing that gives her mother a reason for existing." (p.291) The personal, narrow kind of love she had felt for Jerome she now refuses. When George asks her to marry him, she says, "I'm tired of love. . . I'm exhausted by it. All of me, body and soul. Now I'm beginning to be free of it, and how can I face it again?" (p.295) After this point, although

she accepts love again when she marries George, there is a knowledge in her which gives her a unique distance, a quality of "otherness" which is increased by her personal awareness of the imminence of death. George Woodcock describes this quality in her when he says that "Catherine is just about as near as we are ever likely to get in modern Canadian writing to the princesse lointaine of chivalrous romance, and her distance from the other characters and from reality is there throughout, until in the end she is shown receding from George towards death, a kind of light-filled phantom." ²⁸ Some manifestations of this distance make George feel frightened and resentful; at other times, however, he is able to perceive and accept the strange impersonality of her will to live: "the essential Catherine-- what now was the essential Catherine--sometimes seemed to me like the container of a life-force resisting extinction." (p.304) His acceptance of that part of Catherine which withdraws from him remains painful and incomplete, however, until the final stages of the story.

George's character undergoes more development than that of any of the others in the novel. He is a shy, confused, easily-dominated youth who grows into a man seriously lacking in self-confidence or inner direction. His statement early in the narrative that "I have never felt safe.

Who of my age could, unless he was stupid?" (p.6) is not merely a reference to the politics of the age he lives in, but is characteristic of his outlook in all areas. In his personal life, he avoids commitments by idealizing Catherine, who is conveniently unattainable after her marriage to Jerome. Significantly, it is after Jerome leaves for Spain and Catherine is more accessible to George than she has been since they were children that George voices his first criticism of her: "This fixation I had on Catherine had endured so long it had become part of my life. . . . There was no sense in pretending that there had not been moments when I had felt angry with Catherine for not having dismissed me outright. . . . Why this acceptance and non-acceptance of me? Had she, perhaps without knowing it, thought of me as a kind of insurance policy?" (p.288) The passage shows George's essential passivity as well as his very low self-esteem. Perhaps to compensate for what he believes to be his inferiority, he wants Catherine to be perfect. At one point, attempting to describe her, he says, "I don't know how a man can describe his wife to somebody else, unless he dislikes her . . . women seem able to recognize with perfect clarity the flaws in the men they love. Men lack this ability." (p.25) This is not a very convincing generalization; it seems more likely that George is unable to love Catherine unless he can idealize her, no matter how much of reality he has to suppress in

order to do so.

Catherine and George spend several happy years together after their marriage, but when Jerome returns, so do George's jealousy and self-doubt. Catherine has a serious attack, and he panics: ". . . her expression excluded me. . . . I had made her my rock and my salvation, and now she was not my rock and not my salvation. . . . Her calmness almost annihilated me." (p.311) Full of fear and anger, he lashes out against what is happening with some of the force he has always repressed: "This is destruction! I heard myself say. Of her. Of me because of her. Yes, she has destroyed me. Jerome has destroyed me. Life has destroyed us all. All for nothing. For nothing, for nothing, for nothing." (p.317) It is George's turn to learn, through this destruction or extinction of self, the secret which Jerome and Catherine have learned before him. He feels his ego and identity endangered, like "a tiny canoe at the mercy of an ocean," (p.321) and he is finally overwhelmed. But he survives the darkness, is healed, and comes to understand that the destruction is not "for nothing" but for life; that his fear of death has been a fear of life, and that "life for a year, a month, a day or an hour is still a gift." (p.322) As she paints her joyous pictures between operations, Catherine is the embodiment of this truth. George finds his own strength, his own peace,

a place within himself to retreat to as Catherine does, in order to be renewed. His rock and his salvation are no longer external, so they can no longer be threatened. "Within, not without. Without there is nothing to be done. But within." (p.321) The key to his understanding is his acceptance of the dual nature of life, the mysterious paradox which must be grasped with faith and not with logic: "This, which is darkness, also is light. This, which is no, also is yes. This, which is hatred, also is love. This, which is fear, also is courage. This, which is defeat, also is victory." (p.322) George finds a new salvation in this, and it is largely through Catherine and Jerome, who have "destroyed" him, that he is reborn into a person who can open himself to his life and live it, aware of all its dangers and inevitable pain. He knows and accepts and welcomes the knowledge that "to be able to love the mystery surrounding us is the final and only sanction of human existence." (p.349)

The similarities noted between the roles of Peggy and Catherine are partly explained by the fact that Callaghan and MacLennan are both attempting primarily to communicate an idea; both novels are, in a sense, extended exempla whose first purpose is didactic. The lesson each professes is similar: that, to be whole, one must accept uncertainty, doubt, and death, to rise above them in affirming a life

which includes all these dark qualities. In both novels, the main female character is both teacher and example of this philosophy, and it is largely because of this relation to the theme that they emerge as such symbolic characters. Both succeed in their role of teacher and spiritual mother, although to different degrees. From the beginning of The Watch That Ends the Night, Catherine is, as Peter Buienhuis puts it, "a partly mythical figure. She seems to stand for the emotional and intuitional power that the best women have traditionally represented in Western literature. She possesses also mysterious powers of survival and motherhood, for her weak heart should logically have condemned her to a life of inaction and sterility."²⁹ After her operation, Catherine recovers, although she remains very frail and transparent. George is now her equal in understanding and can accept her lesson in a continuing way; as he says, "light came from her constantly into me." (p.348)

In The Loved and the Lost, Jim does not really grasp the meaning of Peggy's life and example until after it is over. She too had tried to communicate to him that mystery and paradox of life which was at her core; if he had been able to understand her when she told him how she became aware that "beauty could be painful in a strange way," (p.40) or why, for her, the leopard and the little church belonged to the same pattern of meaning, he would have known

²⁹ Hugh MacLennan, p.58.

not only her but himself. Her acceptance of apparent contradictions seemed perverse to him, and it is only after her death that a beginning of understanding comes to him. Peggy had threatened to disturb the status quo of the various groups she moved in because she did not respect the customary lines between them; she is a martyr to the desire of those groups to remain separate, to preserve the security of their isolation and exclusiveness. In the end, the order is maintained at the expense of freedom, tolerance, and joy. The church and the leopard are to be kept separate; the church, and Peggy, are annihilated as a result. Like Father Dowling at the end of Such Is My Beloved, Peggy inhabits a world of love, which does not deny its opposite, but embraces it, and not the world of law which seeks to define and exclude the "other" from the self and, in attempting to destroy it, is itself destroyed.

In order to teach their lesson, Peggy and Catherine both move from the desirable, birth-oriented "Good Mother" aspect of the feminine archetype described above through the phase of "Terrible Mother" who reveals the mysteries of death (as when George feels himself "destroyed" and Jim loses his future career as well as Peggy) and then back again to a new phase of "Good Mother" which typifies rebirth and immortality. In response to this transformation, George and Jim also move from their initial role of lover to a position more like that of a son; because of Peggy's

death, Jim remains at this unequal stage, but George moves through his own transformation to become Catherine's lover once again and for the first time, in terms of the book's didactic theme, her true equal.

CHAPTER 4

CHARACTER AS SYMBOL AND THE THEME OF SACRIFICE: THE DOUBLE HOOK AND THE SACRIFICE

The main function of the characters in The Double Hook, like those in the novels discussed in the previous chapter, is symbolic. Unlike Catherine Stewart and Peggy Sanderson, however, they are much more integrated with their fictional surroundings. The objective world pictured in this novel reflects an invisible, absolute order or pattern; the condensed syntax and clustering of images around the central metaphor of the double hook results in an intense, complex work which makes one essential point richly and strongly. In the novels by Callaghan and MacLennan, the symbolic female character is set apart from the others and from her social context, but all the characters of The Double Hook are part of the novel's symbolic pattern. They are what they are; they exist in relationship to themselves, to each other, and to the dry landscape which they inhabit. Nowhere does the author step in, either directly or through one of the characters, to imply that any of them could be any different. Kip comments on the various qualities which identify them, but his observations rest on a basic acceptance of the others, not a questioning. The symbolic aspects of Peggy's and Catherine's characters are present largely for didactic reasons and not because the novels themselves are expressions of symbolist literature; each author, wishing to prove

an essentially intellectual point, has created a woman who fulfills the function of spiritual guide and teacher to the main male characters of the novel. In addition, both women possess individualized characteristics, but such realistic or individualizing aspects are extremely minimal in The Double Hook. Without being explicitly described as such, the characters in this book are far more like elemental forces or spirits than those of Callaghan and MacLennan, who seem to have attempted to graft this quality onto realistic, rounded fictional types created from different basic premises. The attempt is not wholly successful in either case; Peggy and Catherine are neither fully developed as realistic characters, nor as powerful as they would be had they been presented more forthrightly as symbols, as is the case with Sheila Watson's characters.

The atmosphere of The Double Hook is, at the beginning, one of sterility and paralysis. The land and the people are dry, parched, and hopeless under the domination of the old matriarch, Mrs. Potter, a figure whom even the animals shun: "they'd turn their living flesh from her as she'd turned hers from others."³⁰ Under her influence, the people of the community are isolated from each other, inarticulate and blinded by the wilful ignorance and cutting-

³⁰ Sheila Watson, The Double Hook (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1966), p.21. Other quotes from this novel will be indicated by page number in the text.

off of perception which is symbolized by Coyote (representing fear) and his sinister promise: "In my mouth is forgetting/ In my darkness is rest." (p.29) Mrs. Potter is an example of the "Terrible Mother" aspect of the feminine archetype described above,³¹ or the black goddess of death in the mythology of Robert Graves' The White Goddess. She is omnipresent in the beginning, quenching life in the community and in her children, an inverted figure with great emotional power since she is a mother who has given life only to strangle it. Her grip extends even beyond the human community to the barren land itself: "the old lady was there in every fold of the country," (p.43) and it lasts beyond her death because she has created a successor in her daughter Greta.

More than anyone else, Greta is a victim of the old woman's negative, life-fearing aura and, although she had been as eager as James to be rid of her mother's oppressive presence, she is not freed by her death. On the contrary, she becomes even more like her, taking her place, insisting on being mistress of the sterile house, dominating James, and finally destroying herself. As James realizes after he has killed his mother, Greta has merely replaced her: she had "sat in the old lady's chair. Eyes everywhere. Nothing had changed." (p.43) Ara reflects after the fire that "Greta had inherited destruction. . . . She lived no

longer than the old lady's shadow left its stain on the ground. She sat in her mother's doom as she sat in her chair." (p.113) Part of the doom is the rigid, fear-based repression which masquerades as morality in the wasteland of the old woman's world. The grip on the young girls is especially harsh; William admits that Greta was the victim of far more pressure than he or James, and that she too had once been young and free: "You wouldn't know how she was. Sliding down the stacks and falling into the creek. Ma was hard on her, he said. She thought grief was what a woman was born to sooner or later, and that men got their share of grief through them." (p.113)

Lenchen is subjected to the same uncharitable hardness: in her mother's eyes she is "a fat pig of a girl" (p.29) since she has lost the price of marriage, her virginity. "Men don't ask for what they've already taken." (p.29) Lenchen accepts this view, at least partially, but there is a note of rebellion in her words when she tells Kip that she has nothing for him: "Nothing worth having. Nothing that someone else wouldn't take back from you. Girls don't have things to give. I've got nothing of my own." (p.62)

The conflict between the older, repressed, death-oriented figures led by Mrs. Potter and their children results in Lenchen's exile, Greta's death, and James' blinding of Kip. As D.G. Jones observes, "as long as the members of the community remain under the old woman's spell

they cannot act, they cannot love, they remain frustrated, isolated, divided one from the other."³² Greta's death breaks the spell, however; the balance of power shifts to the young and the creative, regenerative aspects of life begin their ascendancy. Although his mother's hold is still strong enough on James that he betrays Lenchen, he is determined after her death to free himself. He rides to the town, and there learns that escape is impossible; the town is merely an extension of the wasteland. His first sight there is the river, and "the dark figure of his mother playing her line out into the full flood." (p.92) After losing the money for his escape in an encounter with a whore, he thinks of Lenchen and their child, and "saw clearly for a moment his simple hope." (p.121) From secret love-making, denial, and escape he moves to openness, determination, and a sense of value in his life: "Whatever the world said, whatever the girl said, he'd find her. Out of his corruption life had leafed and he'd stepped on it carelessly as a man steps on spring shoots." (p.127) The change which has taken place in him is rewarded; fate grants him a new beginning when he returns to find his mother's house in ashes. He experiences liberation and rebirth with this dramatic ending to his mother's power: "He felt as he stood with his eyes closed on the destruction of what his

heart had wished destroyed that by some generous gesture he had been turned once more into the first pasture of things." (p.131) He resolves to build a new house for himself, Lenchen, and the new generation, a house further down the creek and all on one level.

James is the most active agent in the novel; his transformation and assumption of responsibility most clearly exemplify what Margaret Morriss calls "the religious ritual celebrating the re-entry of love into the wasteland."³³ All the other characters, however, are part of the pattern too. Felix Prosper's passivity is replaced by his proper role as the community's spiritual leader; Angel and her children return to him, restoring the satisfying balance which exists between his vision and tenderness and her practical, intuitive wisdom. William's view that "it's better to be trusting and loving," (p.75) comes closer to realization, and Ara, barren and unsure of herself, has a vision of the parched land flowing with water and the promise of redemption: "Everything shall live where the river comes, she said out loud. And she saw a great multitude of fish, each fish springing arched through the slanting light." (p.114) Kip, blinded because he betrayed James' trust and perverted his unique gift of perception, accepts his altered state and finds a place for himself at Felix Prosper's; Lenchen is transformed from guilt ("all because of me the whole world's

wrecked" (p.117)) to a madonna, bearing new hope for them all. Even her bitter mother is able to open her heart and prepare a welcome for the new child. The community experiences a collective miracle of unification, centering on Felix's house; it is marked outwardly by the birth of Lenchen and James' child and by Felix's experience of transcendence as he watches the birth: "If only he could shed his flesh, moult and feather again, he might begin once more. His eyelids dropped. His flesh melted. He rose from the bed on soft owl wings. And below he saw his old body crouched down like an ox by the manger." (p.126) He is the spiritual father of the new baby, and of the renewed community, just as James is the physical one. The victory of life and unity over the divisive forces of fear is accomplished; a new order, more vital and more humane, has replaced the old.

The clarity and concentration of the dialogue and description in the novel are outstanding. The work appears simple because of the sparseness of the style and the primitive, circular movement from death to life which is simultaneously its structure and its content. It has a classical effect, a feeling of ongoing truth which is not bounded by specific time or place or people, and this elemental nature is emphasized by the fact that the lines between man and the land are blurred; Greta's housecoat, for

example, makes her appear to be "a tangle of wild flowers grown up between them," (p.62) and the old woman is inextricable from the entire landscape. Coyote, who makes fear articulate, is both animal and human, a totemic figure of prophecy and adversity. He speaks last; it is clear that the new order is not a simple replacement of the old repression with unrestricted freedom, but something more subtle and difficult: an acceptance of the dual nature of existence, and a refusal to let the presence of fear continue to block everything positive. Fear is still present, but it is no longer all. As the child's birth symbolizes hope, Coyote's final message is a reminder of the price of hope: life is both pain and pleasure, and if the pain is not accepted, there can be no life at all, only a barren nothingness. Life is a double hook, and both sides are swallowed together or not at all: "when you fish for the glory you catch the darkness too. . . . if you hook twice the glory you hook twice the fear." (p.61) This is the same theme as that of The Loved and the Lost and The Watch That Ends the Night. Only through a full acceptance of life with all its contradictions, apparent injustices and cruelties, its immutable death sentence, can one truly live with freedom and joy. George Stewart finally comes to accept the double-edged nature of life, the meaningful paradox which can be grasped only with faith. He is describing what Shíela

Watson calls the double hook when he says, "This, which is darkness, also is light. This, which is no, also is yes. This, which is hatred, also is love. This, which is fear, also is courage. This, which is defeat, also is victory." The Double Hook succeeds to a greater extent in communicating this truth than does The Watch That Ends The Night; it is a better book, more consistent, intense, and original. Its images form an effective, integrated pattern which is as spare, complex, and carefully structured as a poem. The religious or mystical truth embodied in it is more suited to this pseudo-poetic form than to the broad social surface of MacLennan's novel. The Double Hook also surpasses The Loved and the Lost, because it makes no pretence at realism. It is not anchored so specifically in one time and place; it has a timeless, transcendent quality which is necessary to properly support the spiritual and mythological content. The Loved and the Lost strives for this, but Callaghan weakens his effect by placing the entire burden of creating and carrying this aspect on one character, Peggy; her function in the novel thus isolates her from the other characters and disrupts the novel's unity. All the characters in The Double Hook are symbolic; all inhabit the same kind of reality and reflect a correspondence between their inner selves and the external landscape of their lives. The Double Hook says essentially the same thing as the other two novels, but it says it much more effectively.

A novel which deals with the same basic theme, but

handles it from an extremely unusual angle, is Adele Wiseman's The Sacrifice. The novel is unique in that it is the only example in recent Canadian fiction of a book written by a woman but concerned almost exclusively with a masculine protagonist; the book's subtitle is "a novel of fathers and sons." One of the things which is immediately obvious about the character of Abraham is the extent to which he assumes a role customarily designated as feminine in non-Jewish North American culture. His background is strongly patriarchal; because of this, many of the "natural" prerogatives which women ordinarily enjoy because of their ability to give birth are superseded and replaced by male ceremonies and privileges. In countless ways, Abraham assumes full responsibility for all of his family's affairs. His wife, Sarah, plays only a minor role in the family and in the novel. It is Abraham who chooses their house and plans its improvements, consulting his son Isaac but not his wife. As a parent, he fills the place of both father and mother, reducing Sarah's activity in this area to a marginal level. His memory of his dead sons is passionate; as he states flatly to Chaim, his children were his whole purpose: "my mission was my family, to bring up my sons." When Isaac approaches them, he says simply, "My life." (p.60) Sarah's relative unimportance is reflected in the portraits of the other women in the novel. Almost all are two-

dimensional, narrow creations who serve merely to fill in the background dominated by Abraham. They are types, not people: Sarah, the meek, defeated wife; Laiah, the grossly sensual semi-prostitute; Mrs. Knopp, the aspiring social climber, and Mrs. Plopler, the narrow-minded gossip. Only Ruth, Abraham's daughter-in-law, has some elements of complexity. The emphasis throughout the novel is almost totally on Abraham and, to a lesser extent, Isaac.

The sacrificial theme is central to many novels published in Canada over the last two decades; The Loved and the Lost is one example of the recurrent pattern. Peggy Sanderson tries to live by love and not by fear, embracing rather than excluding that which her cultural background rejects as foreign. She is finally sacrificed to the desire of those around her to remain isolated, to maintain barriers between themselves. The vision which motivates Peggy (as well as Catherine in The Watch That Ends the Night and the entire structure of The Double Hook) is of a world perfect in its imperfections; D.G. Jones describes the vision as one which "not only comprehends suffering and death but sees in them the conditions that make possible the highest human values."³⁵

Abraham is no stranger to suffering, having lived through the apparently purposeless tragedy of his sons' murder, and he hopes desperately that he will not be required to sacri-

³⁵ Butterfly on Rock, p.139.

fice his third son too. Although it is not possible for Isaac to study as long as Abraham would like, he grows and works and Abraham is proud of him. Like his father, Isaac sees himself as one who nurtures; thinking of his family, he feels that "he himself would keep them alive, feed them from his inexhaustible store of life-energy." (p.141)

But it is only a moment later that he has his first serious attack of illness, and not long afterwards he takes the action which ultimately results in his death. Abraham sees him carrying the Scrolls from the burning synagogue "like a revelation bursting from the flaming heavens" (pp.195-6) surrounded by fire and glory.

Isaac never quite recovers from this experience; his claustrophobic dreams of entrapment torture him while he grows physically weaker. It is ironic but perfectly consistent with the story that the Torah he rescued from destruction at the cost of his life is a symbol of his father's, not his own, beliefs; the story is Abraham's, and he never really sees his son nor accepts in him anything which he does not wish to see. It is because of this wilful blindness that Isaac is, in a sense, sacrificed by his father. Ruth has been aware of it, and after Isaac's death there is conflict between her and her father-in-law. On the night of their final argument, she accuses him of driving Isaac to death: "You wanted one son should make up for three.

What did you care that God only gave him heart enough for one." (p.290)

The centre of the novel, the meaning of the sacrificial ritual, is closely tied to Abraham's patriarchal background. The ritual of sacrifice is, essentially, a substitute for the natural act of birth: the sacredness of creation, of giving life, is replaced by the sacredness of taking it. The sacrificial slaughter, like birth, is a mystery. For Abraham, it was also an initiation into adulthood and a transcendent, god-like experience, which he describes in words which could apply equally well to the act of giving birth: "it was not until after I had been forced to take a life that I really changed and was no longer a child. . . . Who has to take a life stands alone on the edge of creation. Only God can understand him then. . . . I felt as though I had suddenly been taken out of myself, as though this moment did not really exist and as though it had existed forever, as though it had never begun and would never end." (p.37) Along with the fear and horror he felt at being forced to kill, there is a sense of indescribable power. Abraham cannot resist the temptation to see himself as god-like, the creator and destroyer of life. In his discussion of procreation with Isaac, the motif recurs; he replaces the biological facts of life with a version in which man is the sole giver of life, like God,

and woman merely the inert soil in which the life grows:

"a man could be compared to the wind, which must riffle through life, always seeking. A woman waits, rooted in the earth, like a tree, like a flower. Patiently she lifts her face to receive the gift of the wind. Suddenly he sweeps across the earth and stoops to blow the dust. Then she comes to life; she seizes it, clasps it, and works with it the miracle of creation." (p.110) Abraham is very proud of his originality in describing creation thus, but the prototype is the Biblical story of God's creation of man.

In the confused depression into which Abraham falls after Isaac's death, aggravated for him by Ruth's growing independence, he comes to spend some time with Laiah. He does not like her, but he is lonely and they are thrown together partly by circumstance. Slowly, she comes to represent, in his mind, all that is sterile and unnatural, like the deaths of three sons before their father: "All her life from the time when he had first heard of her she had used the means and denied the end. She was like a great over-ripe fruit without seed, which hung now, long past its season, on the bough. . . . She had denied creation, and to deny is to annihilate." (p.261) On the night of his quarrel with Ruth when she accuses him of killing Isaac with his expectations, he goes to Laiah. He is temporarily insane; all his repressed guilt and frustration come

to the surface. Believing that he has finally come to her for love, Laiah experiences an unaccustomed hope (which renders the ensuing dialogue even more grotesque) that he will compensate for all her disappointments and "give her back more, all that had been taken and all that had been freely given." (p.295) Abraham is not sure at first why he is there, and they engage in a conversation which is an exercise in almost total misunderstanding on both sides; for her, it is a ritual of love and for him, one of death. Abraham's mind fastens on words and phrases which build his conviction that she is "the other part of him--that was empty, unbelieving, the negation of life, the womb of death. . . . Did he come at last to accept the shadow, to embrace the emptiness, to acknowledge his oneness with the fruit without seed, with death, his other self?" (p.300) Thus projecting onto Laiah that part of himself which he cannot accept, he grows more and more desperate: he wants to do the impossible, to kill death. He begins to believe that she is mocking the death of his sons, and as he hesitates on the brink of taking her life, she, still thinking of love, urges him to hurry. In that moment, in his confusion between life and death, she appears beautiful to him for the first time; he is standing once again "on the brink of creation where life and death waver toward each other . . . now was the time for the circle to close, to

enclose him in its safety, in its peace." (p.303) Once again he is illuminated by the sacrificial ritual, but the truth which flashes into him now is of his tragic self-deception. Almost before the act itself is complete, the word "Life" rings in his mind and he begs Laiah to live again. He is made blindingly aware of that which he had tried to deny: that life is precious above all things, and inseperable from death. His refusal to accept the death of his sons and his wish for god-like powers of creation have led him to the destruction of life, and he realizes that the "womb of death" is not within Laiah, but himself. He understands himself at last, seeing the arrogance of his denial of death in himself. He sees that the negation and the emptiness were his own, that "I have taken life . . . that I have killed my sons, that I have made myself equal with my enemies, that it was in me, womb of death, festering, in no one else. . . . It was in me. I was not content to be as He willed it. I wanted more. I had to be creator and destroyer." (p.326)

In the insane asylum he is humble, full of love and tenderness, no longer angry even with himself but filled with sadness and acceptance. "I took what was not mine to take," he tells his grandson Moses. "What was given to me to hold gently in my hands, to look at with wonder."

(p.344) Here, as in The Double Hook, there is a resolution at the end and a hope in the new generation. While still

young, Moses learns from Abraham the truth which his grandfather arrived at so late and with so much difficulty: that the enemy is not external. His hand, and the hand of his grandfather, "the hand of a murderer," (p.345) are not so different; Abraham's hand is strong, warm, and fuses naturally with his own. The boy feels love for the old man. By this acceptance, Moses is freed from the bitterness of the past, his heart is opened, and the chains of denial, misunderstanding, and repression are loosened. Once again the point is made that true freedom lies in being caught on the hook which has points of both transcendence and death, in being committed to life itself. The theme of all four novels might be rephrased as a question from John Glassco's poem, "Villanelle": "Why has the darkness and the distance grown, / Why do we fear to let the stranger in?"³⁶ and in each case, the answer is the same. The stranger is the self, and through understanding and acceptance of the stranger within, fear loses its stranglehold and becomes just another of many experiences, not the blind ruler of a whole life.

CHAPTER 5

THE IMPORTANCE OF POINT OF VIEW: DISTANCE AND IDENTIFICATION IN TWO NOVELS BY ETHEL WILSON

The fiction of Ethel Wilson, like that of most Canadian women authors, deals almost exclusively with female characters. The portraits of men in her books tend to be slight; they are introduced mainly to move the plot along or to fill out the pictures of the central women. Her fiction does not, however, follow a strict formula: considerable variation in the authorial point of view results in the creation of unique and memorable characters. Of those novels in which there exists a fairly close identification between author and protagonist, Swamp Angel is the most effective. The Innocent Traveller, also excellent in its way, is more biography than fiction, and Hetty Dorval and Love and Salt Water are less fully realized. The two novellas which comprise The Equations of Love are the best example of Mrs. Wilson's style and characterization when the point of view is more detached.

There is little or no identification between the author and the heroines of The Equations of Love. Both Tuesday and Wednesday and Lilly's Story are the creations of a consciousness which very obviously feels itself superior to its work. There is an element of mockery, a patronizing light-

ness of tone in Mrs. Wilson's approach to her characters in this book. This quality appears to result in part from the fact that she is dealing with people from a lower social class than herself; Myrtle Johnson is a cleaning woman, while Lilly is first a waitress in a Chinese restaurant, then a servant, and finally a hospital housekeeper. Both women are essentially two-dimensional, although cleverly drawn. They are striking, as fictional caricatures often are, but neither is developed fully enough as a character to raise her story above the level of an extended anecdote.

Tuesday and Wednesday is less a unified short novel than an entertaining collection of personality sketches. Myrtle Johnson controls the novella, as she controls her husband Mort, by apparently inexplicable shifts of temperament. Mort's first, necessary consideration each morning is whether Myrtle was "pleased last night and will she be pleased this morning when she wakes up, or am I in wrong again . . ." ³⁷ In addition to being "a complete mistress (or victim) of the volte-face, of the turnabout," (p.6) she has a way of drooping her eyelids that can make anyone except Aunty Emblem "feel insecure and negligible." (p.6) To the author, her enigmatic manner is merely a way of bullying people, and she dwells at some length on Myrtle's injustice to the woman on the bus and to her employer, Mrs. Lemoyne. It is clear in

both incidents that Mrs. Wilson is slightly defensive about her own position vis-a-vis her cleaning-lady character; she takes pains to vindicate the woman with the alligator shoes whom Myrtle has contemptuously dismissed as "a society woman." (p.10) "The woman was actually a school teacher on leave of absence, and she had put her small house to rights, prepared dinner ahead of time, packed her nephews down to the beach with their lunches, put on her best clothes of which she was very proud, and was going to have lunch with her favourite sister-in-law to show her the new alligator shoes." (p.10) Mrs. Lemoyne is not defended quite so explicitly, but her timidity is treated sympathetically and Myrtle is criticized for exploiting it. This marked sensitivity to social differences intrudes in an odd way between the author and her character, creating a distance which, although not bad in itself, tends at times to sound sarcastic and carping. She is even more patronizing towards Mort, but her basic criticism of him is the same as that of Myrtle: he is lazy, rebellious, and gives himself airs to which he is not entitled by his station in life. When his employer deserts him at her husband's return, Mort tumbles from his fantasy of himself as "successful male, successful gardener, old and trusted employee, unique landscaper" to "a working man insulted and snubbed by a rich man who no doubt had made his money by graft," (p.17) an attitude of working-class defensiveness with which Mrs. Wilson is obviously out of sympathy.

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appears to be a mistake
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This edge of apparent snobbery in the author's attitude is repeated in her description of other aspects of Myrtle's life; she is presented as unimaginative, selfish, and not very clean: "she did not see that the room was dingy and needed cleaning. . . . that there was no attempt at cheer or colour in the room; that, in short, everything was uniformly dingy and need not be so." (p.8) Even when Myrtle appears to try to do something nice, it is dismissed as mere play-acting: "by the time she had climbed the two uncarpeted flights of stairs to the top of the house, she was the housewife, the loving wife unselfishly arranging a pleasant evening for Mortimer." (p.18) When she learns that Mort has been drowned while in the company of his friend Eddy Hansen (an event so major compared to the succession of small anecdotes which precede it that it almost unbalances the novella completely) her tears quickly give way to "rage and scorn and hate." (p.118) She is concerned only with her own image: "For her, Myrtle Johnson that was Myrtle Hopwood, to be now an object of pity as a woman whose husband was no good, and had died a drunken death in poor company-- . . . all this was not to be borne by Myrtle." (p.119) So bitter is she at this blow to her self-esteem that, had Mort reappeared, "she would not have welcomed him back to the living; she would have reviled him; she might have struck him." (p.119) Only the surprising insistence of Vicky Tritt that Mort is

a hero and Myrtle a hero's widow makes it possible for Myrtle to think kindly of him again: all is surface, all is ego.

The other characters in the story are equally two-dimensional, although somewhat more sympathetically presented. Auntie Emblem is the perfectly womanly woman, a stereotype which is superficial but attractive. Her lower-class characteristics are included in the portrait--she reads movie magazines, dyes her hair, wears too much rouge, and plays cards with her gentlemen friends on Saturday night--but they are played down in contrast to the description of Myrtle. The author is tolerant, even fond, of Auntie Emblem. She may play-act too, but she does it nicely; she is a "comely golden old comedy actress playing her part very well." (pp.23-4) She is soft, forgiving, a good manager of men, "born to be a wife and a mistress, and to each of her three husbands she has been honest wife and true mistress." (p51) She would pamper a husband when he drank too much, not scold him; in this and other things she seems designed to put Myrtle to shame. Mrs. Wilson's patronizing tone is still discernible, but it is softer and more benevolent.

The other woman in the story, Victoria May Tritt, is Mrs. Emblem's opposite. While Auntie Emblem knows nothing else, Vicky Tritt "does not know what it feels like to be a woman." (p.56) She is almost pathologically shy, a

spinster who is so repressed and colourless that she makes Rachel Cameron of A Jest of God seem vibrant and daring by contrast. The chapter devoted to describing Vicky's life is a set-piece, a striking picture of a figure who is as close to zero, in terms of personality, as it is possible to get and yet retain some identity as a human being. As Aunty Emblem observes, no one wants her; her only ties are to her employer, her landlady, and her cousin Myrtle, none of whom have any personal interest in her. "She is anonymous, as a fly is anonymous." (p.66) Sometimes she feels lonely, but she is not often aware of it; she lives in a routine which somehow manages to fill the seven days of the week. Romance and excitement touch her life only through the "Personal" in the classified advertisements. It is Vicky, however, who transforms Mort into a hero with her amazing lie (which is ironically close to the truth) to Myrtle, an action so out of character and so astonishing that it eclipses Mort's death and makes it seem almost mundane in comparison. It is Vicky's story which is the real climax of Tuesday and Wednesday.

The novella, ultimately, is a trivial work. The author's position of superiority in regard to her characters is too obvious, while the cleverness of her description results in a series of skilfully-executed sketches held together very loosely by an anticlimactic plot. It is not really a novel, nor yet a short story, but something between

the two: an episode padded with set-pieces of description and characterization. The character vignettes are similar to those in The Innocent Traveller, but in Tuesday and Wednesday they are required to bear the whole weight of the fiction's content, and they are not enough in themselves to be satisfying.

In Lilly's Story, the other section of The Equations of Love, the author does not dislike her main character as much as she does Myrtle. There is no temptation to assume that Mrs. Wilson actually identifies with Lilly, however; once again, although some admiration for Lilly is expressed, the viewpoint is from a position of superiority. In terms of plot, Lilly's Story is an intellectualized "True Confession": Lilly comes from a "bad" family in which the mother is portrayed as an irresponsible drunkard and the father a woman-chaser; she herself is easily bought by a Chinese houseboy in return for a few stolen presents; she has an illegitimate child, goes straight, pays for her crime with years of devoted service to the ideal of respectability, and is finally rewarded by marriage to a decent man. The initial descriptions of Lilly are harsh. She is "the pale slut" (p.145) running from the police, a "homeless worthless bitch" (p.164) who lives with a miner because it "seemed the easiest thing to do." (p.161)

She is to be saved, however, and the thing which saves her is her desire for respectability. This foreign idea

is born in her by her encounter with the wealthy young girls in the Nanaimo grocery shop. Lilly, on seeing them, "was conscious of something bright and sure which these girls had and which she had not. She could not see what it was, nor touch it; but it was bright and sure, bright and sure. Lilly suddenly felt cheap and dusty." (p.166) This first inkling of a vastly different way to live becomes a passion to Lilly, and the birth of her daughter intensifies it. She names the baby Eleanor, after one of the girls in the shop, and she herself is transformed into Mrs. Walter Hughes, the widow of a farmer. She dedicates herself to the notion that "Baby must be like folks" (p.173) and she is quick to learn the ways of Major Butler's household, quick to sense the correct ways of gaining favour. Here again, as in Tuesday and Wednesday, there is a picture of a mistress-servant relationship which, while drawn primarily from the servant's point of view, is strongly sympathetic to the mistress.

Lilly is single-mindedly maternal, in her narrow way; her "whole body and spirit which had never known a direction were now solely directed towards giving Baby everything that Lilly could give her." (p.173) She coolly avoids an entanglement with Major Butler, for Eleanor's sake. She works hard and keeps to herself, apparently requiring no physical, intellectual, or emotional satisfaction of any kind except for the reward of seeing that her daughter is

"not common. She's better than folks, she's like she was Mrs. Butler's kid." (p.187) The event which makes her leave the security of the Butler's is hearing Eleanor referred to casually as "the maid's child;" (p.195) this is enough, with her new system of values, to make her look for a more respected and independent kind of occupation. She becomes the housekeeper of a country hospital, remaining there until Eleanor has grown up and far beyond Lilly herself. Throughout the years at the hospital, Lilly's single-mindedness makes her refuse the possibility of an advantageous marriage to the chairman of the hospital Board, and ruthlessly repress in herself the strong attraction she feels for Paddy Wilkes. Her sacrifices are rewarded; Eleanor grows up to be a well-educated, cultured and sensitive woman with whom Lilly has almost nothing in common and whom she does not understand.

With the reappearance of Yow, the Chinese ghost of her distant past, Lilly flees from the hospital where she has worked for twenty-five years. But she has been punished enough; she has earned some peace and security. Once safe in Toronto, she begins to take a little interest in her appearance, meets a dull but kindly widower, and agrees to marry him: "She would be without fear; nothing, surely, could touch her now. There would be security and a life of her very own in the house of Mr. and Mrs. Sprockett." (p.277) Mr. Sprockett does not seem to be a very great reward for so

many years of self-sacrifice, but this is perhaps another instance of Mrs. Wilson's rather smug way of dealing with characters of a lower social class. Not knowing them personally, she apparently assumes that they are simple, and it is for this reason that Lilly's Story, like Tuesday and Wednesday, is somewhat disappointing. It too has some excellent set-pieces of description, and short pictures of at least two women who rise above the limitations placed on the others (Mrs. Butler and the wise, kindly matron of the hospital) but the plot is weak and Lilly's character and motivation unconvincing. It must be concluded that Ethel Wilson is dealing with the unknown when she attempts to present the feelings and ideas of the central women in The Equations of Love: she makes intelligent guesses and indulges in speculations which are often interesting, but the stories operate almost exclusively in a social sphere. They are not deeply engrossing, because of this narrowness of focus, and the characters lack depth and believable complexity.

The author's point of view in regard to her main character in Swamp Angel is radically different from that of the novellas. Maggie Lloyd is a fully three-dimensional character, a striking woman who has her fair share of weaknesses and more than enough strengths to compensate for them. There is a slight family resemblance between her and Lilly: both women can be resolute and self-sacrificing in order to gain an objective, and both are remarkably self-sufficient, but Maggie is far more intelligent, sensitive, and aware of the

beauty and complexity of the world around her. Lilly can see little beyond her goal for her daughter. Maggie, much more imaginative and conscious of the people and things surrounding her, is both more critical and more compassionate than Lilly. Similarly, Mrs. Severance in Swamp Angel is reminiscent of Auntie Emblem in Tuesday and Wednesday, but she too is a more fully developed character and is more understanding, sophisticated and articulate than Mrs. Emblem.

The tone of Swamp Angel is markedly different from that of The Equations of Love as a result of the shift in Mrs. Wilson's point of view. Instead of condescension, which in this novel is reserved for the relatively minor characters of Edward Vardoe and Vera Gunnarsen, there is a strong sense of authorial approval of the main characters, and especially of Maggie. The awareness of mystery and harmony which is the book's central theme is expressed mainly through the development of this character. Maggie's integration with the motion and flow of the natural world is a spiritual journey which begins when she escapes from the city and an inharmonious marriage to a man she does not respect, and she is symbolically reborn into singleness and newness during her stay on the Similkameen River. Her ~~outstanding~~ outstanding characteristic, the most Christ-like one a human may possess, is compassion. As her desertion of Edward shows, however, she is capable of an almost ruthless resolu-

tion in pursuing what is right and good for her. Maggie is not a common fictional woman in that she is both sympathetic to the reader and yet endowed with a strong and unmistakeable will. Part of the reader's sympathy is elicited because Edward is so thoroughly unlikeable. He is a "human doll,"³⁸ a mechanical man frantic with ego, a mink with sharp teeth, a dog with spaniel eyes. It seems inconceivable that Maggie could have married such a man in the first place, but Ethel Wilson astutely places the motivation within that aspect of Maggie's personality which is most dominant: she married him because it is her nature to care for others. It was "an act of compassion and fatal stupidity." (p.16) This surprising juxtaposition of concepts is only one of many instances which make clear that even the most apparently benevolent qualities and acts can be double-edged.

Closely related to the natural symbolism which carries much of the novel's meaning is the characterization of Maggie as a swimmer. The image occurs first after her observation of the battle between the eagle and the osprey (a passage which is much better integrated thematically than the similar one in Lilly's Story): "As she returned to the shore and reality, Maggie felt like a swimmer who will dive in, and will swim strongly, this way, that way,

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Ethel Wilson, Swamp Angel (n.p.: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1962), p.26. Other quotes from this novel will be indicated by page reference in the text.

straight ahead, as he shall choose. But he will swim."

(p.90) The image is expanded as her relationships with others, especially Vera, are described in terms of it:

"Maggie thought sometimes It's like swimming; it is very good, it's nice, she thought, this new life, . . . but now I am alone and, like a swimmer, I have to make my way on my own power. Swimming is like living, it is done alone.

. . . I will swim past obstacles (Vera is sometimes an obstacle) because I am a strong swimmer." (p.99) The ability to swim is central to her characterization. Because of it, the water transforms her into something graceful and beautiful, (a seal or a god) but if she could not swim, it "would no doubt kill her and think nothing of it." (p.100) Edward, in contrast to Maggie, cannot swim; he is in danger of drowning in his self-pity before Mrs. Severance rescues him. She warns him that he "will go down and out of sight" (p.48) if he does not change his ways and try to swim a little. It may be difficult; even Maggie sometimes falters: "It was not so easy sometimes to say I am a swimmer and I swim round obstacles. The words became smug and flatulent." (p.140) Her self-doubt has good grounds: she is not a paper figure, and she has major struggles and trials in the novel. It is in her relationship with Vera Gunnarsen that her weaknesses are most fully exposed. Vera is Maggie's antithesis: she is weak, self-pitying, unintelligent and jealous of Maggie. Because of her self-centeredness,

her refusal or inability to lay down her unhappy past, she poisons the life of her family and is constantly out of harmony with her environment. For her, the natural world is threatening. Trees strike out at her and she cannot find a path through the dark woods; she even tries to drown herself in the lake where Maggie swims with so much pleasure. The curse she labours under is vividly articulated by Mrs. Severance, who sees her as "the unhappy Vera; house-bound without an opening window, hell-bound, I think." (p.152)

In the context of Maggie's relationship with Vera, the description of her stay at Three Loon Lake as "a happy marriage" (p.84) is heavily ironic. The capable Maggie takes over most of Vera's duties at the lodge, and her assumption of control is apparently "justified" because she is helping Vera, who cannot manage alone. She handles Vera's resentment and weaknesses as well as she can, and her self-confidence is hardly disturbed even by Vera's strongest outbursts: "she was deeply hurt and she was angry, but she knew that she was stronger-and she thought that she was wiser, too-than Vera . . . " (p.89) The language in this passage is clearly that of a struggle for power, and Maggie is eventually defeated, at least temporarily. Her defeat is due to her overconfidence in her own abilities as much as to Vera's stubbornness: "With all her fine talk and with all her high thinking she had not been able to cope

with one unhappy human being. . . . Human relations . . . how they defeat us." (p.142) Maggie appears at her worst in this incident. Her capability slips over the line into domination and manipulation, and she is not only unkind but also hypocritical to Vera, whose pent-up anger is touched off by Haldar's offer of their house to Maggie for the winter. Maggie hits back in a way which is as unfair as it is harsh: "You little damn fool. You should go down on your knees and be thankful. You still have your husband and your child, don't you?" (p.89) Both Vera and the reader are totally unprepared for this. The statement has nothing to do with the real conflict between the two women, and seems to be nothing more than a cheap trick of Maggie's to shame Vera. She had no previous knowledge of the facts of Maggie's life, and such a crushing remark allows no rejoinder. Vera is left with her initial anger unresolved, and an additional burden of unearned guilt. The statement that Vera should go down on her knees in gratitude because she still has her husband and child is absurd; Haldar is presented as cold, gruff, unreasonable, and hostile to his wife. The fact that Maggie herself deserted her husband makes her admonition to Vera dishonest as well as cruel. Does she apply a different standard to Vera, or is Haldar irreproachable because he likes fishing and the outdoors, as Maggie's father and first husband did? Maggie's inex-

plicable attitude on this point is revealed again the night that Vera attempts suicide; incredibly, Maggie tells her that she is "a happy woman with a husband and a child and a home." (p.89)

This is the only occasion on which Maggie is presented in a truly unsympathetic way, however. There are elements of ambiguity in the response of others to her, expressed mainly through the conditional language used in the diction ("perhaps she was beautiful," (p.14) "he thought she seemed strong" (p.75)) but there is no question about the essential superiority of her character. She is perceptive, practical, and kind; she rescues Allan from loneliness and old Mr. Cunningham from the cold; in the end she is even ready to try to rescue Vera from her self-destructiveness. The novel is an account of the freeing and strengthening of her most authentic self, that self which is beautiful, "divine and human in . . . self-forgetfulness." (p.91) If it is sometimes necessary for her to be ruthless or to appear almost arrogantly self-sufficient in order to achieve this, it is an acceptable paradox and one which is quite in keeping with the religious aspect of her development; she renounces much of the ordinary human experience in order to achieve a deeper harmony with all of creation, the "miraculous interweaving" (p.150) of which she is so much a part.

Ethel Wilson does not completely surrender the dis-

tance between herself and her heroine in Swamp Angel, however, although it is clear that there is a much higher level of identification with her character here than in The Equations of Love. Unfortunately, the devices she employs to establish the distance are intrusive, and they weaken the novel. At times there is a teasing quality in her refusal to commit herself completely to Maggie; the repetition of conditional statements becomes annoying. In addition, the author sometimes overtly contradicts her character in parenthetical comments which are coy and irritating: "she thought that she could read easily the faces of her own race (but she could not); (p.25) "She could never sink, she thinks, (but she could)." (p.100) "Her avatar tells her that she is one with her brothers the seal and the porpoise . . . but her avatar had better tell her that she is not really seal or porpoise" (pp.99-100) This device does establish distance between author and character, but it does so at the expense of the novel's surface flow and unity. Except for this flaw, however, the style is close to perfect. Mrs. Wilson's tendency to judge her characters is not entirely absent, but it is minimal in this novel, and the condescending tone which is so intrusive in The Equations of Love is also kept under control. The final impression is of a skillfully-crafted, consistent work which succeeds in presenting its difficult theme largely through the very high level of characterization achieved in Maggie Lloyd.

CHAPTER 6

WOMEN OF THE GARRISON: THREE NOVELS BY MARGARET LAURENCE

When considered together, the heroines of Margaret Laurence's three most recent novels comprise a portrait of Canadian women which is greater than the sum of its parts. Rachel and Stacey are actually sisters within the structure of the novels, but Hagar is no less an ancestor for being unrelated by blood. Understanding her character permits a fuller comprehension of the other two; the social forces which have shaped her are modified but still predominant two generations later.

Since all three novels are written as first-person narratives, the tone is an essential part of the characterization, and that of The Stone Angel is caustic and self-confident from the first. Hagar is a rebel; she is the strong daughter of a strong father, and her powerful will makes it hard for her to compromise and co-exist with others, including her father. A Presbyterian storekeeper, he values discipline, the accumulation of wealth, and proper appearances to the exclusion of all else. No charity or imagination disturbs his hard complacency; as a child, Hagar both identifies with him and feels herself superior to the other people in the town, and resents him, since she is bound by his rigid social restrictions. She cooperates with his narrow virtues for the most part, although it is clear from the first

that there is another, unacknowledged, aspect of herself which underlies her decorous exterior. Remembering how she walked in the graveyard because it had well-kept paths, free of mud and thistles, she pictures herself: "How anxious I was to be neat and orderly, imagining life had been created only to celebrate tidiness, like prissy Pippa as she passed."³⁹ But the scent of wild cowslips from beyond the "civilized" plots encroached upon her even then, and she "could catch the faint, musky, dust-tinged smell of things that grew untended and had grown always, before the portly peonies and the angels with rigid wings . . . " (pp.4-5) In Hagar's early years, the inhibitions are so strong that she cannot get beyond them even to comfort her dying brother, Dan, by putting on their mother's old shawl and holding him: "I was crying, shaken by torments he never even suspected, wanting above all else to do the thing he asked, but unable to do it, unable to bend enough." (p.25) Jason Currie sends her east for two years to a finishing school, so that she will be a credit to him in the town; on her return, she is filled with fury by his reaction to her, which is "to nod and nod as though I were a thing and his." (p.43) She wants to teach school, but he forbids it. Her independence would be unflattering to his self-esteem, and his thinly-disguised sexual jealousy is aroused by the idea of her

mingling with common men. Speaking from his lack of self-trust, he tells her that "men have terrible thoughts." (p.44) Hagar stays home, but has her revenge in ignoring the "suitable" men her father brings home and finally eloping with Bram Shipley, a widowed, shiftless farmer. She and her father never speak to each other again.

Her relationship with her husband is a strange mixture of contempt and awe; as she reflects in her old age, they married each other "for those qualities we later found we couldn't bear, he for my manners and speech, I for his flouting of them." (p.79) She never stops trying to change his lazy ways, improve his manners, and generally mould him to the likeness of the father she rebelled against but whom she resembles so strongly. She is attracted to Bram, however, because he is so foreign to her; he is handsome, virile, and sexually experienced. He introduces her to a world of which she knew nothing at all before their marriage, and of all the people in her life, he alone relates to her in a direct, personal way. At one point he interrupts her nagging of him with a telling remark: "You know something, Hagar? There's men in Manawaka call their wives 'Mother' all the time. That's one thing I never done." (p.80) Remembering that incident, she reflects that "it was true. He never did, not once. I was Hagar to him, and if he were alive, I'd be Hagar to him yet. And now I think he was the

only person close to me who ever thought of me by my name, not daughter, nor mother, nor even wife, but Hagar, always."

(p.80) This realization comes to Hagar late, long years after Bram has died. Her father's shadow proves too strong for her while she lives with her husband; she cannot bend enough to get along with him. Social and psychological inhibitions keep her silent ^e when she should speak; the results, both tragic and ironic, are all too commonplace in intimate relationships. Bram is an excellent example of the outsider or misfit, whom D.G. Jones sees as representative of the unconscious parts of the mind in many works of Canadian fiction; his association with horses, themselves symbolic of repressed vital energy, underlines this aspect of his character. Hagar struggles with her fear of Bram's horses, but because of her pride, she never tells him that it is fear she feels: she preferred to "let him think I objected to them because they were smelly." (p.83) She is the principle victim of her own pride, however. Trapped within conventions which she herself reinforces, she cannot respond openly to Bram even when she would like to. In an insight which is at the same time admirable and pathetic, Hagar describes the situation:

His banner over me was love . . . He had a banner over me for many years. I never thought it love, though, after we wed. . . .

His banner over me was only his own skin, and now I no longer know why it should have shamed me. People thought differently in those days. Perhaps some people

didn't. I wouldn't know. I never spoke of it to anyone.

It was not so very long after we wed, when first I felt my blood and vitals rising to meet his. He never knew. I never let him know. . . . I prided myself on keeping my pride intact, like some maidenhead.

(pp.80-81)

It is ironic but inevitable that Bram unwittingly cooperates in the hypocrisy and mutual ignorance which marks their sexual relations. After one of Hagar's rare expressions of tenderness towards him, when he had lost a favourite horse, he turns to her in bed and she "felt so gently inclined that I might have opened to him openly. But he changed his mind. . . . 'You go to sleep now,' he said. He thought, of course, it was the greatest favour he could do me." (pp.87-8) In the end, she leaves Bram, rejecting finally the parts of herself which he represents and returning to the barren security of a world of proper appearances.

Her son John accompanies her to Vancouver; he is perhaps the only person whom she ever truly loves. He grows from a bright, charming, dishonest boy into a bitter, drunken adult who returns to Manawaka to nurse Bram as he dies and who mocks Hagar when she insists that he is different from and better than his father. Hagar is tormented by the same unacknowledged sexual jealousy which her own father suffered from, and she cannot bear John's attachment to another woman. She arranges for his girlfriend to be sent away, despite the fact that it is due to her that John is "just

about okay, after a long time." (p.237) Too selfish and jealous to accept them, she pushes them apart; John gets drunk one last time and kills himself and the girl he loves in a crash.

It is only much later, when Hagar is very old, that she experiences a resurgence of her early rebellious spirit. It brings with it the courage to encounter some of the truths of her past. Elated by her own resourcefulness in escaping from Marvin and Doris, frightened by the isolation and vulnerability of the cannery, her mind opens to many forgotten memories and she longs, after all those years, for Bram. He would make short work of intruders, she thinks; with him, she would not be alone in the wilderness. This, and the nearness of the sea, which carries strong connotations of death, "a black sea, sucking everything into itself," (p.225) and her picture of herself in the water, "waiting until my encumbrance of flesh floated clear away and I was free and skeletal and could journey with tides and fishes," (p.162) although she is quick to say that she'd "not hasten the moment by as much as the span of a breath" (p.192) all remind her of her youth with Bram, when she did move with the tides even within her "encumbrance of flesh." The adventure, the wine, and the unusual intimacy with a stranger lead her mind back also to John, and enable her to remember and accept her responsibility in his death: to admit that it was her jealousy

and pride which destroyed him. At ninety, she learns a hard truth, and although she is unable to change her behaviour much at this point, she becomes more conscious of her tyranny towards Doris and her lack of charity to Marvin, who has tried to please her for so many years, and she is ashamed. In the hospital, she experiences a moment of understanding which was prepared for by the revelations she gained in her journey into the forest; Mr. Troy sings "Come ye before Him and rejoice," and Hagar is illuminated:

I must always, always, have wanted that--simply to rejoice. How is it I never could? . . . Every good joy I might have held, in my man or any child of mine or even the plain light of morning, of walking the earth, all were forced to a standstill by some brake of proper appearances--oh, proper to whom? When did I ever speak the heart's truth?

Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched. (p.292)

Hagar, brought up within the confines of a culture which was created in opposition to the natural world, reinforces its barriers and enslaves herself and her children within it. By attempting to suppress or ignore those human parts and characteristics which are not neat and orderly, she has repressed not only her sexuality, but also her tenderness, empathy, and pity. Cut off from others, she has lived alone, understanding no one and misunderstood by all in turn. It is too late, at ninety, for Hagar to change much, but she

does see Marvin's patience and his need for her approval, and she experiences a kind of unselfish love at last when she is able to tell him, out of her pity for him, what he needs to hear: that he has been a better son to her than John was.

Rachel and Stacey inhabit very different worlds from that of Hagar, but it is a fallacy, as Hagar observes in relation to Rev. Troy, "to think that half a century makes all the difference in the world." (p,41) It does not; "the brake of proper appearances" is almost as strong and as destructive for the younger women as it was for their fictional ancestor. In fact, although some external restrictions have been modified, neither Rachel nor Stacey possesses the sheer strength or willpower of Hagar, and it is thus actually harder for them to break through the barriers which isolate them from warmth and contact with others. Hagar would undoubtedly dislike her "grand-daughters"; Stacey would probably remind her of "that fat Doris" and Rachel is the image of Regina Weese, another dutiful daughter of Manawaka whose self-sacrifice Hagar cannot find it in herself to pity: "I always felt she had only herself to blame, for she was a flimsy, gutless creature, bland as egg custard, caring with martyred devotion for an ungrateful fox-voiced mother year in and year out." (p.4) Hagar would be partially correct in these impressions, and perhaps even entitled to the contempt

which accompanies them, because she is a stronger woman. It is that very strength, however, which defeated and dehumanized her and which, reaching out beyond her in the culture, has created and strengthened the barriers against self-realization which Rachel and Stacey encounter.

In a sense, Rachel fulfills one part of Hagar, and Stacey another. By their time it is quite respectable, even for the daughter of a "good" family, to be a schoolteacher; some of the social limitations on women have disappeared. Stacey, although certainly not fully free sexually or maternally, is far more so than Hagar was. Outwardly, then, their lives are different and freer, but inwardly, little has changed.

Rachel is tortured by her own self-consciousness; she lives in a continual agony of embarrassment and anticipated embarrassment. Blackmailed by her hypochondriacal, demanding mother and chafing in her job under the patronization of Willard Sidley, she escapes into a lonely fantasy world in which a "shadow prince"⁴⁰ will come to her rescue. The novel's central theme is Rachel's search for some valid identity, a sense of self which cannot be present in the narrow circumstances of her emotional life. Teaching is not enough; she remembers with self-directed sarcasm her illusion

that it once seemed "a power worth possessing." (p.7) She worries about becoming eccentric, and about her attachment to some of the children she teaches. More than anything, she fears the open expression of emotion; her precarious facade of compliance to Manawaka's expectations in regard to unmarried ladies caring for their invalid mothers would topple if her own anger were ever released. This is what horrifies her most about the fundamentalist church which Calla takes her to: "How could anyone display so openly? . . . People should keep themselves to themselves--that's the only decent way." (p.35) A world in which all strong feeling is repressed must be governed by formal rules and proper appearances, the conventional morality of the small town. In such a value system, virginity is "a woman's most precious possession" (p.84) and behaviour is governed by such petty dictates as "women shouldn't phone men. Everyone knows that." (p.116) It is this world which Rachel questions, belatedly, in A Jest of God; her overdue rebellion against it is tentative at first, but finally decisive. It requires a shadow prince, an outside agent to enable her to begin to be aware of her own needs and to act on them.

Nick helps her to discover herself: "Am I like that? I never knew." (p.92) She learns little about him, but much about herself and her relationship with her mother, her fantasy world, and her defences against reality. Before

Nick leaves, she has overcome much of her overscrupulousness of manner and much of her pride, a loss which renders her "all at once calm, inexplicably, and almost free." (p.125) Nick's role in her life is clearly that of the "knifing reality" which she knows she needs: "the layers of dream are so many, so many false membranes grown around the mind, that I don't even know they are there until some knifing reality cuts through." (p.132) After he leaves her and she thinks she is pregnant, Rachel embarks on a journey into a personal wilderness of emotion which contains the threat of death and a struggle between conflicting desires. The fantasy world which she customarily retreats to can no longer help her; she must "choose between two realities," (p.117) and the accomplishment of her difficult choice leads to a new acceptance of herself: "I am not so clever as I hiddenly thought I was. And I am not as stupid as I dreaded I might be. Were my apologies all a kind of monstrous self-pity? How many sores did I refuse to let heal?" (p.149) With this surrender of the self-pity which has characterized her, Rachel becomes an adult. No longer controlled by her own weakness, nor by the reactions of other people, she comes to the conclusion about her baby which is best for her: "Look, it's my child, mine. And so I will have it. I will have it because I want it and because I cannot do anything else." (p.149) Rachel finds a kind of salvation in this liberating act, although not the kind she had once envisioned, and

even the heavy disappointment of learning that she is not pregnant after all and the trauma of the operation, which leaves her "a dried autumn flowerstalk . . . an empty egg-shell skull," (p.161) do not destroy her newly-found independence and resolution. She announces to her mother that they are going to move, rejects all the blackmail which her mother tries to use on her, and surrenders her old role of passive victim. "I am the mother now," (p.170) she says, accepting responsibility for her own life and also for her mother, who is, in fact, dependent on her. There is an openness now in Rachel to possibilities which her apprehension had never allowed her to experience before: "Where I'm going, anything may happen. Nothing may happen. . . . It may be that my children will always be temporary, never to be held. But so are everyone's." (p.175) Her experience has given her "the courage to take life as it comes without exhausting herself in a continual attempt to anticipate its dangers . . . " ⁴¹ She begins, like Hagar, as a victim of her social circumstances, but she frees herself to a significant degree and the inner voice of the narrative is much less self-mocking at the end. Reality, once faced, is not so terrible as it seemed; Rachel's fantasies dwindle and become less important in her life. An echo of Hagar's revelation is present in the final lines of the novel as Rachel, headed

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D.G. Jones, Butterfly on Rock, p.164.

west, recalls the psalm: "Make me to hear joy and gladness, that the bones which Thou hast broken may rejoice." For her, it is not too late to welcome joy.

Each of the three novels contains a verse which underlines the characterization of the central figure. Hagar, elated by her own daring and success as she descends the wooden steps through the forest, remembers a poem by Keats which she has not thought of for more than forty years, and recites it to herself:

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.
Her apples were swart blackberries,
Her currants pods o' broom;
Her wine was dew of the wild white rose,
Her book a churchyard tomb.

In contrast to this independent, gypsy image which Hagar identifies with, the verses associated with both Rachel and Stacey are children's rhymes. Rachel's is a reference to the fantasy world so central to her personality at the beginning of A Jest of God:

The wind blows low, the wind blows high
The snow comes falling from the sky,
Rachel Cameron says she'll die
For the want of the golden city.
She is handsome, she is pretty,
She is the queen of the golden city.

The verse associated with Stacey is both an indication of the endangered, practical world she inhabits, and a threat:

Ladybird, ladybird,
Fly away home;
Your house is on fire,
Your children are gone.

Although she is Rachel's sister, Stacey is very different from her: she is less inhibited, more dishevelled, overweight, rumpled, and less genteel than her sister. A structural device used in all three novels is that each woman has a strong inner voice which constitutes a subversive running commentary on reality beneath her external compliance to decorum; in Hagar's case, this voice breaks through frequently, for she no longer feels much need to suppress it: "What do I care now what people say? I cared too long." (p.6)

Rachel's inner voice defies her mother, taunts herself for her cowardice, and sometimes breaks through her self-pity with a refreshing, stringest realism. Stacey's private commentator is perhaps the most articulate of the three, but she is so intimidated by what she believes to be her inferiority in every area that she is often unable to benefit from its candid perceptiveness. In fact, she fears it: "what goes on inside isn't ever the same as what goes on outside. It's a disease I've picked up somewhere." ⁴² She picked it up, of course, in the same place that Rachel did: the Manawaka funeral parlour, where feelings were to be hidden and a polite surface maintained at all costs. By the time Stacey is an adult, she no longer trusts her own reactions. In a literature course, for example, she spontaneously identifies with Clytemnestra's revenge for her slain child.

42

Margaret Laurence, The Fire-Dwellers (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1969), p.33. Other quotes from this novel will be indicated by page number in the text.

When the professor offers a conventional patriarchal interpretation of the play, however (that the serious social crime was not Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigeneia, but Clytemnestra's revenge on him), she doubts her first response.

Her habit of measuring herself against the yardsticks of the social system is another reason why she lacks self-confidence. Since the culture professes unrealistic standards, Stacey always feels herself to be a failure. As presented in popular fiction and advertising, the middle-class housewife must be a perfect mother, but Stacey feels ambivalent about her children: "they nourish me and yet they devour me, too." (p.17) A woman is supposed to be glamorous, "a mermaid, a whore, a tigress" (p.12) but she is too fat and unfashionable to qualify: "who is going to go through life remembering to hold their thigh muscles in, just so they'll have an attractive ass?" (p.19) She likewise fails to be the supportive wife which it is her "job" to be to Mac, because her own needs are unfulfilled and she does not respect his work. Trying to make these various roles come together in a unified way is yet another impossibility: as Phyllis Grosskurth points out, "the heart of Stacey's problem is that society forces so many roles upon her that she can find no clear line of continuity connecting one posture to another."⁴³ The barrage of advice, criticism, and just plain meddling which is aimed at women defeats Stacey;

⁴³ "Books in Review," Canadian Literature 43 (Winter, 1970), p.91.

endless streams of pseudo-expert opinion shake her confidence in her own abilities. Her doubts are punctuated by the sinister implications of popular articles in women's magazines: "Nine Ways the Modern Mum May Be Ruining Her Daughter"; "Are You Castrating Your Son?"; "Are You Emasculating Your Husband?"; "Are You Increasing Your Husband's Tensions?" She is caught in a cycle of guilt and resentment in which it is very difficult for her to retain any objectivity, and she feels that all these dire warnings are personally directed at her.

Whenever Stacey is with her children, she thinks of herself as "on duty." Both she and Mac are trapped by their responsibilities, but she feels guilt in addition to her resentment because, for Mac, she herself is part of the trap. At the same time, she is jealous of his relative freedom: "I'd like to be on the road. Not for anything but just to be going somewhere." (pp.19-20) Another part of herself condemns even this small need: "this is madness. I'm not trapped. I've got everything I always wanted." (pp.72-3) Like Rachel, she tries to find something outside of herself that can save her, but she is too controlled by her feelings of guilt to be able to accept it even if it could happen. She is more desperate than either Hagar or Rachel because, although she is in fact equally isolated from warmth and acceptance, she believes that she has "everything she always wanted" and that her unhappiness is therefore reprehensible; her despair is accompanied by self-incrimination. A sense

of inadequacy undercuts her even when the cause of her anger is clear and justifiable, weakening her ability to fight against the empty chaos of her life. She lives precariously close to the edge of breakdown; the lid clamped on her feelings is always in danger of flying off.

Both Stacey and Rachel are lonely, but Stacey's isolation is rendered more unbearable by the fact that she is surrounded by a family, and feels alone in the midst of a supposedly intimate circle. Rachel has a measure of privacy in her solitude--some room to dream--but Stacey lives in the midst of voices and demands and the EVER-OPEN EYE of the television which rob her of her privacy without substituting companionship. As she puts it, "I live alone in a house full of people where everything is always always all right." (p.169) Her affair with Luke is, essentially, an attempt to demarcate a small area in her life for herself; it creates an exception to her feeling that she "can't go anywhere as myself. Only as Mac's wife or the kids' mother." (p.95)

Ironically, each sister envies and feels inferior to the other, each believing that the social mask worn by the other is real. Rachel considers going to Stacey for help when she thinks she is pregnant, but dismisses the idea because "she'd just give me good advice, maybe, not needing any herself. God damn her. What could she possibly know?" (p.146) On her side, Stacey pictures Rachel as a perfectly-controlled, ladylike, self-sufficient, and much brighter woman than she. Each believes the other to be more com-

petant and more content. Stacey left the same small town long before Rachel, and is not as obviously controlled by its mores, but it is that same morality which makes her fear, in spite of herself, that her sexual infidelity will be punished by some harm coming to her children. It is the training received in Manawaka which makes her unable to reject her role as victim at the Polyglam demonstration:

"Don't rock the boat. Why can't I? Why am I unable to? Help me. Who? How strange if Bertha and Tess were thinking the exact same thing. We could unite. This could start an underground movement." (p.87) She says this only to herself, however: the rest of her continues to cooperate with her own exploitation. Mac's insistence on formal fidelity, regardless of the emptiness of the rest of their relationship, stems from the same uncharitable moral code; after Stacey's pathetic encounter with Buckle, Mac reasserts his ownership rights by "making hate with her." (p.163) Although he does not love her, he insists that no one else may touch her, arousing her hatred in return: "I might as well be a car or a toothbrush." (p.162)

In order to establish some kind of buffer zone for her mind, Stacey drinks gin, dances by herself, and tries to recapture the feeling of being wanted, accepted, and desirable. This fantasy ends abruptly because, in her drunken state, she burns herself badly on the stove. In the sober awareness which follows her shock, she assesses her situation: "Mac-I'm scared. Help me. But it goes

a long way back. Where to begin. What can I possibly say to you that you will take seriously? What would it need with you, what possible cataclysm, for you to say anything of yourself to me?" (p.141) But Mac is not prepared to listen to her, nor to talk of himself, and Stacey's life continues to close oppressively inward until the night she runs away and meets Luke. She is much older than he, but he is direct and warm and knows how to listen, which is a rare experience for her. The A-frame is like "a small strange cathedral" (p.189) but Luke's youth ultimately makes Stacey feel old, a carrier of death. The stretch-marks on her body from her pregnancies are "stigmata . . . like little silver worms," (p.18) "lines of dead silver worming across my belly" (p.202) and she wishes that he could see her as she had once been, and not as she is. The easiness of his acceptance of her, in spite of this, makes her wish for a new beginning: "I'd like to start again, everything, all of life, start again with someone like you-with you- with everything simple and clearer. No lies. No recriminations. No unmerry-go-round of pointless words. Just everything plain and good, like today, and making love and not worrying about unimportant things and not trying to change each other." (pp.205-6)

But when Luke asked her to go away with him, she could not do it. At the same time, Buckle's death leads

to slightly increased communication between herself and Mac; she sees with pity that his trap is as harsh as hers, that he believes he must do everything completely alone or else he feels himself a failure. He is, unfortunately, passing on the same chain of pathetic defences which he acquired from Matthew, his father, to his own sons, Ian and Duncan. Driven more than ever by guilt, Stacey draws back from her tentative effort to establish a private area for herself and makes a weighty addition to her burden of self-sacrifice. She agrees to take Matthew, her difficult father-in-law, into their home. The novel ends on an optimistic note which, although modified, is still difficult to accept. It is the day before Stacey's fortieth birthday, and "temporarily, they are all more or less okay." (p.308)

If the plot's conclusion is to be consistent with what has preceded it, it is hard to justify this ending unless the earlier novel, A Jest Of God, is taken into account as well. At the end of it, Rachel and Mrs. Cameron are on their way west, Rachel heading for what she hopes will be freedom but what is in fact a mess, at least so far as Stacey is involved in it. By considering the endings of the two novels simultaneously (a step which seems reasonable since they both end at the same point in time), a heavily ironic interpretation is possible. The extra demands of Matthew, to which those of Mrs. Cameron are shortly to be added, will inevitably strain Stacey's limited resources

to the breaking point, when perhaps one of the articles she mentions, "A Nervous Breakdown Taught Me Life's Meaning" may prove of some use to her. Or perhaps, with the help of a few of Stacey's enormous gin-and-tonics, the two sisters will get past the family facades they maintain, get to know each other as people, and find in each other the confidante and friend which each of them needs so badly.

Each of the three novels is focussed entirely through the consciousness of one character, but some measure of objectivity is achieved in each case by the distance which exists between the inner voices of each character; this is a quality which H.J. Rosengarten describes as the "corrective distance presented within the character's own view of herself."⁴⁴ In her article, "Ten Years' Sentences," Margaret Laurence comments on her use of the technique and explains why she felt it necessary: "I recognize the limitations of a novel told in the first person and the present tense, from one viewpoint only, but it (A Jest Of God) couldn't have been done any other way, for Rachel herself is a very entwined person."⁴⁵ With The Stone Angel, the author says that she felt "the enormous pleasure of coming home in terms of idiom,"⁴⁶ and that Stacey is "in various ways . . . Hagar's spritual grand=daughter."⁴⁷ Beneath the surface differences

⁴⁴ "Opinions and Notes," Canadian Literature 35, pp.99-100.

⁴⁵ Canadian Literature 41, p.14.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.13.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.15.

of their lives, and greater than the barriers of time or circumstance which separate them, is the similarity of the struggle for all three women: to know, to be open, to be brave enough to give what is needed and, braver still, to take what is needed too. All fail, to varying degrees, at what is considered by our culture to be the special province of women, that of establishing satisfying human contact; but they share a common spirit. Hagar's words best describe that spirit, and could apply to any one of them: "beyond the changing shell that houses me, I see . . . the same dark eyes as when I first began to remember and to notice myself. . . . The eyes change least of all." (p.38)

CONCLUSION

Hagar's description of herself as a "changing shell" which houses the essential, consciousness-seeking self is dramatically echoed in a series of recent poems by Margaret Atwood. Titled The Journals of Susanna Moodie,⁴⁸ the poems are based on Mrs. Moodie's recorded experiences in the bush and settlements of Canada more than a century ago; Miss Atwood's poems capture both the bitter reality of that experience, and its lingering psychological effect on the present culture. One of the most outstanding is "Further Arrivals"; it embodies a personal vision of the historical and contemporary wilderness, and the relationship between the two, which is so consistently recurrent a theme in the novels discussed in this paper.

After we had crossed the long illness
that was the ocean, we sailed up-river

On the first island
the immigrants threw off their clothes
and danced like sandflies

We left behind one by one
the cities rotting with cholera,
one by one our civilized
distinctions

and entered a large darkness.

It was our own
ignorance we entered.

I have not come out yet

My brain gropes nervous
tentacles in the night, sends out

fears hairy as bears,
demands lamps; or waiting

for my shadowy husband, hears
malice in the trees' whispers.

I need wolf's eyes to see
the truth.

I refuse to look in a mirror.

Whether the wilderness is
real or not
depends on who lives there.

Although the poem begins with an account of the physical voyage up the St. Lawrence River into the unknown heartland of the country, it quickly becomes apparent that the "cities rotting with cholera" and the "civilized distinctions" which are left behind are figurative as well as literal. The symbolic nature of the journey is then made explicit: the "large darkness" of the wilderness which the settlers entered was "our own ignorance." In the works of recent Canadian writers, the focus has shifted to the conquest of inner fears and unknowns, but the metaphor of wilderness and civilization has lost none of its relevance. Desmond Pacey has observed that "in Canadian literature (the) paradoxical awareness of the glory and terror of the natural environment is everywhere,"⁴⁹ and the fact that the environment is an internal one in many of the novels does not alter the essential truth of his statement.

⁴⁹ Essays in Canadian Criticism: 1938-1968 (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1969), p.235.

Even on a journey to a new land, however, the past cannot be left completely behind. Mrs. Moodie and others like her rebuilt and fortified the "civilized distinctions" which were to trap Mrs. Bentley in Horizon, Hagar Shipley in Manawaka, and Jim McAlpine in the social world of Montreal. It was fear which rebuilt those restricting walls and created a wilderness within them, "fears hairy as bears" which fill the mind with imaginary dangers. Hagar discovers this at ninety, having finally given up her concern for appearances (What do I care now what people say? I cared too long). She expresses her understanding in a characteristically stark, yet deeply moving, manner: "Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched." With this understanding, she emerges briefly from her isolation and is able to reach out to someone else.

Mrs. Bentley tries to break away from the "civilized distinctions" of Horizon which erode her self-respect and have placed an intolerable strain on her marriage, but since her move occurs at the end of Ross's novel, amid a number of ambiguous elements, it is not clear whether she will succeed in truly freeing herself. She, like Judith Hearne, Jim McAlpine, Mary Dunne, and Stacey MacAindra, has not clearly emerged from the large darkness of her ignorance, in

spite of a great effort and the achievement of considerable self-awareness. Rachel Cameron knows the wilderness of projected fears very well, but she, like Hagar, confronts them at last, ceases to wait for her "shadowy husband," and closes her ears to the "malice in the trees' whispers." Vera Gunnarsen is unable to do this; for her, the forest remains dark and threatening. Trees and brambles strike out at her as she stumbles along in "the immense hostility of her world."⁵⁰ Jim McAlpine and George Stewart know this hostile world also; Peggy Sanderson's death leaves Jim at least partially condemned to a darkness which she was unable to teach him to accept. George is lucky enough to receive the lamp which he demands; he finds his wilderness illuminated when he finally come to understand that "this, which is darkness, also is light."⁵¹

It takes an unusual and hungry vision to grasp much of reality; as Margaret Atwood puts it, "I need wolf's eyes to see/the truth." The line recalls the all-seeing, all-knowing Coyote of The Double Hook, a novel which in its classic, mythic form appears unconcerned with specific contemporaneity and realism. Yet it, of all the novels discussed here, communicates most strikingly the deeper, transcendent truth which is the concern of so many of the writers. Since inner and outer reality cannot be neatly divided, truth is reflected

⁵⁰
Swamp Angel, p.144.

⁵¹
The Watch That Ends The Night, p.322.

in both internal and external worlds: evil and fear, compassion and love neither originate outside the self nor remain confined to it.

This is the lesson which Abraham comes to learn also in The Sacrifice. Like the narrator of Miss Atwood's poem, he "refuse(d) to look in a mirror," and consequently made the mistake of perceiving his own sin as external to himself. He is only delivered from the tragic darkness of his ignorance by the double-edged ritual of sacrifices, which teaches him that "it was in me, womb of death, festering, in no one else." (p.326) The final three lines of "Further Arrivals" are a concise statement of the recurrent theme: "Whether the wilderness is/real or not/depends on who lives there." Only by confronting the fear-based inner wilderness can light and life be reborn. Some of the characters in the novels reach this illumination, and others do not, but none reach it without first entering the "large darkness" of the self.

The essential concern of these novels is surprisingly constant; the differences among them are largely ones of style and characterization, rather than theme. It is in these areas that the question of "sexual provinciality" becomes relevant. Since few minds are completely androgynous, it is perhaps not surprising to find that, in this group of novels which are almost all based on female characters, the ones created by women are, in general, more interesting and convincing. Partial exceptions must be made for Adele Wise-

man, whose protagonist is male, and Sinclair Ross, whose Mrs. Bentley is the many-sided product of an unusually assured and imaginative mind. Brian Moore's heroines fail in an important way because of the author's tendency to reduce them to biological puppets; they are interestingly carved and skillfully manipulated, but puppets nevertheless. Both Morley Callaghan and Hugh MacLennan present not women, but ideas or symbols in female clothing. Although the symbols represent various qualities, they fail to come alive as people. The male novelists tend to emphasize the sexual roles played by their female characters; even Sinclair Ross presents his heroine almost exclusively in terms of her role as wife.

The women authors have a stronger tendency to write about women as people whose sexuality is important, but does not constitute the total personality. Sheila Watson's The Double Hook presents women as symbolic, archetypal figures, but this level of reality is extended to all her characters, and no pretence of realism is made. The story operates in the supernatural realm of the fairy tale and myth, and succeeds because of its internal consistency in that sphere. In Swamp Angel, Maggie's original problem is marital, but it plays a very small part in the total meaning of the story. She has been lost, and the identity which she rediscovers in the wilderness is not limited to the sexual; it is less specific than that, more human, and more profound. Margaret Lawrence's heroines, while deeply involved with

their relationships to men and to their children, are similarly not limited to those areas alone; their struggles are with problems which cross all the boundaries which divide people: fear, pride, repression, and loneliness. These are not "women's problems," but those of all humanity. The characters created by these women authors are, in general, more convincing as women. At the same time, they are more clearly human; in capturing the essential personality of a character, both the specific characteristics of sexuality and the more general ones which extend beyond it are more profoundly realized.

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