

THE CONCEPT OF MANAWAKA

IN THE FICTION OF MARGARET LAURENCE:

A BIRD IN THE HOUSE, A JEST OF GOD, THE FIRE-DWELLERS AND THE STONE ANGEL

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Abstract

Title: The Concept of Manawaka in the Fiction of Margaret Laurence: A Bird in the House, A Jest of God, The Fire-Dwellers and The Stone Angel.

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Topic: This thesis explores the concept of Manawaka in the Canadian-set fiction of Margaret Laurence.

Manawaka is either the central setting or a germinal, formative setting in all of Laurence's Canadian-based stories. Roughly analogous to Neepawa, Manitoba, Manawaka is intended to be in the realistic sense a small Canadian town.

But Manawaka is much more than a physical setting in Margaret Laurence's fiction. A close analysis of A Bird in the House, A Jest of God, The Fire-Dwellers and The Stone Angel, reveals in each case a female protagonist whose emotional repression is related to Manawakan values, but whose attitude toward Manawaka is fundamentally ambiguous. The resolution of her conflict in each case involves realization that there are positive, strength-giving aspects of the Manawakan heritage, as well as negative masking characteristics.

In essence Manawakan values are "puritan" values; it can be shown that the Canadian literary experience is also an essentially puritan one (in its positive as well as negative aspects). Thus her concept of Manawaka places Margaret Laurence's work in the mainstream of Canadian fiction (which is not, of course, to deny Manawaka's more universal literary significance).

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Chapter I

Introduction

With The Stone Angel (1964), Margaret Laurence made a very considerable literary reputation. S. E. Read called the novel "classically conceived, beautifully controlled, and brilliantly written,"¹ and Barry Callaghan echoed him, recognizing Hagar Shipley as "one of the most compelling figures in our literature."² Laurence's two subsequent novels, however, have fared less well. In comparison to Hagar Shipley, the daughters of Niall Cameron are generally seen as neurotic, ingrown and unappealing. Dennis Duffy, for example, dismisses the plot of A Jest of God as commonplace and banal (remarking "Well we've certainly heard that one before, haven't we?") and calls the novel an "interesting exercise for the left hand, perhaps."³ Similarly, F. W. Watt finds Stacey's four walls in The Fire-Dwellers "too narrow" for Margaret Laurence's "genius" to flourish.⁴ And Phyllis Gotlieb challenges Laurence to go beyond "what everyone knows but doesn't say," noting somewhat ruefully that "Margaret Laurence's territory now appears to be our world of coffee pots, headache pills, and sagging flesh, overshadowed by apocalyptic fears."⁵

There are two problems with such criticism of Laurence. First of all, reviewers have tended to expect Margaret Laurence not to

experiment or change, but to continue writing in the mode of The Stone Angel. Secondly, and more important, the charge of confinement in style and subject matter in her later novels implies failure on the part of critics to fully appreciate the important function of Manawaka in Laurence's work.

Margaret Laurence herself has placed much emphasis on the depiction of "place" in Canadian literature. In a 1970 interview, (for the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education), she quotes Mordecai Richler as saying of Montreal, "This was my time and place and I have set myself to get it exactly right;" her time and place, she continues, is the small prairie town of the 1930's.⁶ Thus Manawaka -- that archetypal Canadian small town which underlies all her Canadian-based fiction -- deserves close examination.

Manawaka is, it is true, a limited and very limiting environment in the Laurence novels. But it is far more than simply a physical setting. Rather, Manawaka is the formative influence in the lives of Laurence's female protagonists. As different as Hagar Shipley, Rachel Cameron and Stacey MacAindra are in many ways, Manawaka forms a most cohesive link between them; although all feel confined by Manawaka initially, their growth in each case depends on how they ultimately deal with the Manawaka in themselves.

If it can be argued that the presence of Manawaka in each of Laurence's Canadian-set novels is fundamental and significant, many further questions arise. Can the women be seen together as products of a common Manawakan heritage? Are the heroines of Laurence's Canadian novels actually various faces of the same female consciousness? Is it

useful, perhaps, to read Hagar Shipley, because of her advanced age, as a culmination of, as much as a precursor of, Rachel and Stacey Cameron (despite the exterior chronology of the novels)? Indeed, would it not be helpful to see Vanessa MacLeod of A Bird in the House as an adolescent, germinal character instrumental in interpreting the other three characters?

An exploration of the concept of Manawaka in the Canadian-based fiction of Margaret Laurence — A Bird in the House, A Jest of God, The Fire-Dwellers and The Stone Angel — seems warranted.

My examination of Margaret Laurence's own concept of Manawaka will be followed by a close study of the role of Manawaka in each of her Canadian novels, beginning with A Bird in the House. The novels will be examined in an order based not on their dates of publication but upon the age and development of the protagonist in each case: Vanessa MacLeod, an adolescent, will be discussed first, then the spinster Rachel Cameron in A Jest of God, followed by Stacey MacAindra, the mother in The Fire-Dwellers, and finally the old and fierce Hagar Shipley in The Stone Angel. Such an approach makes it possible to see Laurence's novels collectively, for together they portray four phases of female life, from youth to old age.

At that point it will be possible to explore through Manawaka the connections between the novels, and their protagonists, and to discuss the meaning of the Manawakan experience, which is at base largely a puritan experience. From there one may attempt to assess Margaret Laurence's role in Canadian literature, by setting her depiction of the Manawakan experience against current hypotheses about the nature

of the Canadian literary experience.

In all of this Manawaka is central. Taken together, Hagar Shipley, Rachel Cameron and Stacey MacAindra -- along with their prototype Vanessa MacLeod -- comprise Margaret Laurence's composite portrait of what it means to the sensitive individual to be "Manawakan"; and this relationship of the individual to his "time and place" is at the core of Laurence's Canadian-set work.

Footnotes: Chapter I

¹S. E. Read, "Review of The Stone Angel," British Columbia Library Quarterly, 38, Nos. 1-2 (1964), 41.

²Barry Callaghan, "The Writings of Margaret Laurence," Tamarack Review, No. 36 (Summer 1965), p. 51.

³Dennis Duffy, "Critical Sympathies," Tamarack Review, No. 42 (Winter 1967), p. 82.

⁴F. W. Watt, "Review of The Fire-Dwellers," Canadian Forum, No. 49 (July 1969), p. 37.

⁵Phyllis Gotlieb, "On Margaret Laurence," Tamarack Review, No. 52 (Third Quarter 1969), pp. 78-80.

⁶Margaret Laurence, Taped Interview, produced by OISE (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education), Toronto, 1970.

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Chapter II

Laurence's Fictional Aims:
The Literary Device of Manawaka

Margaret Laurence has clearly articulated her artistic goals and the place of Manawaka within her artistic framework.

She states in a 1972 interview with Donald Cameron that as an artist she prefers to deal in the world of the ordinary, and to attempt, above all, to create one living character in each book, to examine a single character at a time:

I realized quite quite quickly that what really grabbed me the most, what I really would like to do the most in a novel, was to, as far as possible, present the living individual on the printed page, in all his paradox and all his craziness.¹

The "living individual," moreover, should be as far as possible an ordinary person, who in his suffering and confusion is as important as those who are powerful and mighty. In the OISE interview, Laurence quotes Arthur Miller, stating that her artistic article of faith is Willy Loman's wife's cry, "Attention must be paid" to the ordinary man.² And in her 1970 interview with Robert Kroetsch she goes even further, emphasizing that although her characters, especially Hagar, are often called archetypes, "this is the important thing about archetypes -- they have to come across in the writing as individual people;"³ it is their

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individuality that matters most.

Laurence also emphasizes, however, that her way of seeing such ordinary, struggling characters is directly connected with her own background as a "smalltown prairie person;"⁴ she stresses that "only a Canadian born in a small prairie town could write about that very deeply from the inside and that . . . is my business."⁵ Hence the character whose pain Laurence expects the reader to feel is a product of the author's own background, a background that she defines paradoxically as a

kind of juxtaposition . . . on the one hand a repressed community, on the other hand a community in which the values of the individual were extraordinarily recognized, if only sometimes by implication.⁶

Her tool for portraying an individual struggling against such a repressive community -- which is at the same time a sort of dynamic force on the individual -- is that most pervasive presence in all her Canadian fiction, the town called Manawaka.

Manawaka is very realistically portrayed in Laurence's novels, and is, of course, closely modelled on Neepawa, Manitoba, where Margaret Laurence was born and grew up. (Such realistic detail is not surprising from one who praises Norman Mailer for his contention that in fiction "the truth is in the detail."⁷)

Today Neepawa is a retail and service centre for the surrounding diversified agricultural area -- "grains and grasses" in Manitoba terms --⁸ but it was settled in the late nineteenth century by Scots-Presbyterian families from Ontario, one of whom, Mrs. Laurence's paternal grandfather Wemyss, incorporated the town on November 3, 1883.⁹

Her maternal grandfather Simpson was one of the earliest settlers. Neepawa has a river, numerous poplar and spruce trees, a Regal Cafe and Flamingo Dance Hall, an air training base (or had, during World War II), and the names of Shipley, Currie, Conner and MacLeod carved on the gravestones of its early settlers -- all features of the Manawakan landscape.

Yet Manawaka is quite obviously more than a thinly-disguised biographical setting. As Edward McCourt remarks, "any native westerner who reads Margaret Laurence's novels will be able to identify Manawaka as the town he grew up in,"¹⁰ and Margaret Laurence herself acknowledges that it is intended to be, in her words, "an amalgam of many prairie towns."¹¹ In fact, Neepawa very much resembles Sinclair Ross' Horizon in As For Me and My House, which Laurence in her introduction to the book professes to admire because "It pulled no punches about life in the stultifying atmosphere of small ingrown towns, and yet it was illuminated with compassion."¹²

Thus Manawaka becomes the archetypal Canadian small town, isolated -- and hence ingrown -- against the cold, the sea or (in this case) the prairie. Given its symbolic function as a garrison against the prairie wilderness,¹³ then, Manawaka becomes much more than a realistic setting in these novels. It becomes a formative influence, a way of responding to life. Bowering calls the town "almost a character" in Laurence's fiction.¹⁴ Edward McCourt, in The Canadian West in Fiction, goes further: he sees Manawaka as a "shaping force" which "exists primarily as an influence on the human spirit . . . a shaping force which either emancipates or stifles, gives peace to or

makes mad its creatures."¹⁵ And this is the town where the generations of Laurence's characters grow up -- Hagar Shipley in the 1890's, and Vanessa MacLeod, Rachel and Stacey in the 1930's.¹⁶

There is merit in combining McCourt's observation that Manawaka is a force for good or for ill with an emphasis on Laurence's choosing to write about several generations whose experience is shaped by Manawaka. In a recent interview with Graeme Gibson, Margaret Laurence states a concept fundamental to her work: "I can't believe that all of life is contained today, and the past goes back a long way."¹⁷ The strength of Manawaka is largely related to its function as a repository of ancestral values. It has for generations endowed individuals with a certain staunch pioneer spirit and a highly verbalized sensibility, while it has simultaneously demanded (through the family, with its heavy ancestral overtones) a certain exterior conformity to community values from its inhabitants. The result is a fairly ambiguous pull on its more sensitive citizens -- toward communal conformity (for that ensures survival in the prairie wilderness) yet, paradoxically perhaps, toward individual action and assertion (for that pioneer characteristic ensures individual survival in any difficult environment).

There is a point in the Vanessa MacLeod stories where Vanessa stares at a ~~Bear~~ Mask of the Haida Indians, a mask that she associates with her grandfather, a fierce old man who wore a bear coat like a shield against the world:

I imagined I could see somewhere within that darkness a look which I knew, a lurking bewilderment. I remembered then that in the days before it became a museum piece, the mask had concealed a man.¹⁸

The image, in view of the mask all Laurence characters adopt, and the bewilderment all experience as individuals beneath it, is crucial to understanding the work of Margaret Laurence. As F. W. Watt states, in reviewing The Fire-Dwellers, the great "discrepancy between private and public selves" is surely her central theme,¹⁹ and for Margaret Laurence's repressed female characters, who are formed by Manawakan experience, the tension behind the mask is almost unbearable.²⁰

Footnotes: Chapter II

- ¹ Donald Cameron, "Don Cameron Interviews Margaret Laurence," Quill and Quire (March 1972), pp. 3, 11.
- ² Laurence, OISE taped interview.
- ³ Robert Kroetsch, Creation (Toronto: New Press, 1970), p. 55.
- ⁴ Margaret Laurence, "Sources," Mosaic, 3, No. 3 (1970), 84.
- ⁵ Laurence, OISE tape.
- ⁶ Cameron, "Don Cameron Interviews Margaret Laurence," p. 3.
- ⁷ Laurence, in Kroetsch, Creation, p. 57.
- ⁸ Lyn Harrington, Manitoba Roundabout (Toronto: Ryerson, 1951), p. 131.
- ⁹ Clare Alexander Darby, "The Novels and Short Stories of Margaret Laurence," M.A. Thesis, University of New Brunswick, April 1971. Darby deals with biographical information on Margaret Laurence and I am indebted to her for locating factual details about Neepawa which are included in the fictional Manawaka, and which I use in this paragraph.
- ¹⁰ Edward McCourt, The Canadian West in Fiction (Toronto: Ryerson, 1970), p. 108.

¹¹Laurence, "Sources," p. 82.

¹²Margaret Laurence, introduction to Sinclair Ross, The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), p. 7.

¹³I have borrowed Northrop Frye's terminology here, and will return to his basic garrison/wilderness hypothesis later in the thesis (in Chapter VIII). Northrop Frye, The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1971).

¹⁴George Bowering, "That Fool of a Fear," Canadian Literature, No. 50 (Autumn 1970), p. 41.

¹⁵McCourt, The Canadian West in Fiction, p. 108.

¹⁶Clara Thomas, Margaret Laurence (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969), p. 57, says that Hagar was a girl in the 1890's, Vanessa in the 1930's, and Rachel "only yesterday." She is wrong, because according to A Bird in the House, Vanessa and Rachel and Stacey were contemporaries and Rachel would be about five years younger than Vanessa at most.

¹⁷Graeme Gibson, Eleven Canadian Novelists (Toronto: Anansi, 1973), p. 204.

¹⁸Margaret Laurence, A Bird in the House (Montreal: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), "Mask of the Bear," p. 88. In Chapter III (entitled A Bird in the House) references to the Vanessa McLeod short stories will

be to this edition and will be identified in footnotes only by the title of the story and the page number. In later chapters, page references to A Bird in the House will be identified by BH and the page numbers (in brackets) within the text.

¹⁹F. W. Watt, "Review of The Fire-Dwellers," p. 87.

²⁰It would be interesting to probe the feminist aspects of Margaret Laurence's writing. In a woman's magazine article she admits that she has considerable sympathy for the women's movement, but that her way of dealing with it is not through protest or propaganda, for "It's a case of reform tactics against revolution and my way is at the individual psychological level using fictional characters." Donnalu Wigmore, "Margaret Laurence: the Woman behind the Writing," Chatelaine, 54 (February 1971), 28.

Chapter III

A Bird in the House

Before examining Rachel Cameron and her sister Stacey (or even Hagar Shipley) as products of Manawaka, it is most useful to look at Vanessa MacLeod. Vanessa appears as the central female "consciousness" in A Bird in the House, a collection of short stories so linked by the consistent voice of the narrator -- the grown-up Vanessa -- that it can be called an unconventional novel.¹

There are several reasons for studying Vanessa. Margaret Laurence (in the OISE interview) has called Vanessa her only autobiographical character,² and we know that it is significant that Margaret Laurence writes out of her own past experience. Also, Vanessa grew up with the Cameron girls, going to dances with Stacey, and she therefore shares experiences with them.³ But, most of all, Vanessa is an adolescent: she is the Manawakan personality caught in its developmental phase, and she sheds, therefore, much light on what Rachel and Stacey have become in their thirties.

Vanessa perceives Manawaka as a very repressive place. Because she is still a girl, family-enclosed, her perceptions about the town's rigidity are focussed on the "Brick House" of her grandfather.⁴ Its rooms, for example, are ordered against spontaneous life:

The living room was another alien territory where I had to tread warily, for many valuable objects sat just-so on tables and mantelpiece, and dirt must not be tracked in upon the blue Chinese carpet with its birds in eternal motionless flight. . . .⁵

From outside, the house is "sparsely-windowed as some crusader's embattled fortress in a heathen wilderness, its rooms in a perpetual gloom except in the brief height of summer."⁶

Yet her choice of words, in seeing the Brick House as a "fortress" is significant, for Vanessa — though she is a child — experiences some of the ambivalence toward Manawaka that Rachel, Stacey, and Hagar do as older women. At one point, seen against the violence of nature, the town's protection seems appealing to Vanessa; the night her father lies deathly ill, Vanessa lies secure in bed, but aware of a high wind and the "winter-stiffened vines of the Virginia creeper that scratch like small persistent claws against the red brick."⁷ On another occasion even her grandfather's barrenness seems gentler than the natural world beyond him:

The yard of the Brick House looked huge, a white desert, and the pale gashing streaks of light pointed up the caverns and the hollowed places where the wind had sculpted the snow.⁸

Nonetheless, Vanessa does perceive Manawaka, in the main, as physically austere and repressive; not surprisingly, to her the environment is also an emotional fortress. In Manawaka one is a prisoner of his ancestry, as her father tells her;⁹ one can never openly depend on others in the town for help, as her grandfather teaches her;¹⁰ and one must above all control oneself, as her cousin Chris admonishes her.¹¹ Significantly, whenever Vanessa needs to be temporarily

emotionally free (to recover from a death in the family,¹² or to conduct her first love affair),¹³ she flees to the fringes of town where the wildness of the natural world seems to support spontaneous emotion.

In fact, the essence of Vanessa's growing up in Manawaka is her learning to wear a mask. She must control her face and body. As Chris says: "let's learn to be a little tougher and not let on, eh? It's necessary."¹⁴ She must never make a "public spectacle of herself" as Noreen does in her emotional orgies at the Temple of the Risen and Reborn.¹⁵ Indeed her primary tutors in such control and concealment are her mother, Beth, and her beloved Aunt Edna, who furiously smoke upstairs in the aged parents' home (in order to relieve their emotional tension), then spray the air with Attar of Roses cologne so that no one will know. Beth wonders about the effect of this ruse upon Vanessa and says, "Do you think we are teaching the child deception?" Edna replies, "No, just self-preservation."¹⁶

As important as is facial control in this masking of one's feelings, moreover, it is control over speech that really matters. A Bird in the House has as its unifying thread the child Vanessa's struggle to not say what she thinks. She conceals her thoughts about Sunday school, about her grandfather's "pioneering," about the paint charts in Barnes' store,¹⁷ about so many things that her resulting inner tension is extreme:

I felt, as so often in the Brick House, that my lungs were in danger of exploding, that the pressure of silence would become too great to be borne . . . as . . . a thousand other arguments rose up and nearly choked me. But I did not say anything. I was not that stupid.¹⁸

Significantly her adolescent pride is in her control, her silences: she says, "I had been trained in both politeness and prudence," and later, "I was a professional listener."¹⁹

The other part of Vanessa's growing up is her realization that everyone around her wears masks, too. Her grandmother Conner, of whom she was most fond, was the very model of control: even when someone violated her religious and moral code by smoking against her will in her own living room, on a Sunday at that, she would say nothing. She would merely bring out the one ashtray she possessed, then suffer in silence.²⁰ Her grandfather Conner's mask conceals his deep sense of unworthiness at being married to someone so perfect, an "angel."²¹ Her grandmother MacLeod, a fierce old woman, knows she has never been the lady she pretends to be, yet preserves her haughty exterior even when she learns that the son she had always thought to be a wartime hero was nothing special after all.²² Even Vanessa's parents, she realizes, are masking their inner feelings. Beth becomes more and more like her mother, grandmother Conner, for neither could bear scenes and each (in Vanessa's words) conceals "a tigress beneath her exterior."²³ And her father conceals throughout his life a deeply-cherished wartime love affair that Vanessa discovers only after he has been dead for some years.²⁴

Vanessa learns another lesson as well, one that Rachel, Stacey and Hagar have also learned. In Manawaka, tremendous social controls are exerted on the personality, controls that create considerable inner tension. One method of survival, they learn, is to use certain escapist safety valves in the personality. One avenue of escape is the mind,

through the imagination. Vanessa is an imaginative child who writes tremendously romantic and totally unrealistic stories.²⁵ She also escapes through dreams which, however terrifying, seem to purge her of the stronger emotions and leave her capable of projecting a calm exterior the next day. When her mother is pregnant and hospitalized, for example, Grandma MacLeod insists that Vanessa face calmly the possibility of her mother's dying; and Vanessa does, but that night she dreams of "a caught sparrow fluttering in the attic, and the sound of my mother crying and the voices of dead children."²⁶ By morning she is again calm.

The second avenue of escape -- one that Vanessa is only learning to explore -- is her body. As a child, Vanessa attempts to expurgate grief by flying at Noreen, the servant girl, and attacking her with both fists.²⁷ As an adolescent, she conducts a tentative (and incomplete) love affair with Michael, a boy who believes what Vanessa already knows, that "there aren't any heroes any more."²⁸ And it is significant that her cousin Chris breaks down precisely because he has not permitted his body to channel off his tremendous emotions. Instead, he tries, fatally, to sever body and spirit, claiming that "they" could control his body all day long, but what "they didn't know was that he'd fooled them. He didn't live inside it any more."²⁹ Michael went mad; Vanessa learns not to, by using her body and inner spirit together to defeat whatever external forces there might be.

Vanessa is an "incomplete" character, an adolescent whose tensions and releases have not yet peaked. Thus she does not articulate as fully as the older Laurence protagonists the ambivalence of her

response to Manawaka. Yet an examination of the inner imagery she uses reveals how much she has absorbed about coping with life in Manawaka. She describes wild blue violets which are doomed to "frequent beheadings from the clanking guillotine lawn-mower" yet says they "dared to grow."³⁰ Her grandmother's bird is caged, yet that is its condition and it survives, and perhaps it "wouldn't know what to do with itself outside."³¹ The ladybird tries to climb a blade of grass and keeps falling down "unaware that she possessed wings and could have flown up;"³² nevertheless she continues to climb. The crying of the loons -- wild and haunting, yet somehow free -- seems connected to the human soul that, however pinned inside man, can still give voice in one language or another.³³ Vanessa's images are of confined creatures who have at the same time much potential, a certain amount of spunk, and the capacity to accept what limitations they must and still (as Clara Thomas puts it) "bash on."³⁴

There is, in the end, a similar acceptance of limitations by Vanessa, typified by her recognition that she will never be truly free of the ancestry which she has known in the form of her grandfather; she says, "I had feared and fought the old man, yet he proclaimed himself in my veins."³⁵ Nor can she really reject the Brick House that to her was Manawaka, because it had at its core a certain stern dignity that she herself has fallen heir to and respects as a part of her personality.

In her pride in the positive side of her Manawakan inheritance is a certain inarticulate recognition that any liberation of the self comes from within the self (like the ladybird who possessed wings but

didn't know about it) and that the capacity for self-expression and individuality is part of one's inherited capacities and trained responses to life. There is a paradox in Vanessa's realization of limitations in self-expression in Manawaka side by side with her realization that liberty may come from within the self formed in Manawaka. And this ambiguity in Vanessa's response to Manawaka is explored more deeply in the experience of Rachel Cameron.

Footnotes: Chapter III

¹For the purposes of this paper, A Bird in the House will be called a "novel," although it is technically a collection of short stories. Not only is the voice of the central consciousness (Vanessa) consistent, but the stories are arranged in a definite chronological order so that the character of Vanessa can be developed as in a novel. Also, the separate stories are "framed" by the grown-up voice of the narrator who looks back on her childhood and adolescence; this is a novelistic device as well. Hence I have opted for calling the book an "unconventional novel."

²OISE Taped Interview.

³See "Jericho's Brick Battlements," p. 194.

⁴One is reminded -- in the careful depiction here of Manawakan houses as well-manicured (or at least very "civilized" in appearance) -- of J. K. Galbraith's very Scots-Presbyterian ascetic values, outlined in The Scotch. In his chronicle of a small Ontario settlement not unlike Manawaka in many ways, he praises the controlled and cultivated look of a town, because that to him echoes solid English countryside respectability. He says, "The surviving English countryside, hedged, cultivated, trimmed and green, is lovely; a couple of thousand years ago the unkempt fens and forests and occasional patch of poor tillage could not have been very attractive." John Kenneth Galbraith, The Scotch (Baltimore: Penguin, 1966), pp. 32-33.

- 5ⁿ"To Set Our House in Order," p. 43.
- 6ⁿ"The Sound of the Singing," p. 3.
- 7ⁿ"A Bird in the House," p. 106.
- 8ⁿ"The Mask of the Bear," p. 77.
- 9ⁿSee "A Bird in the House," p. 96.
- 10ⁿSee "The Mask of the Bear," p. 73.
- 11ⁿSee "Horses of the Night," p. 148.
- 12ⁿSee "To Set our House in Order," p. 58.
- 13ⁿSee "Jericho's Brick Battlements," p. 195.
- 14ⁿ"The Horses of the Night," p. 148.
- 15ⁿSee "A Bird in the House," p. 98.
- 16ⁿ"The Sound of the Singing," p. 20.
- 17ⁿIbid., p. 7-11.
- 18ⁿ"The Mask of the Bear," p. 66.
- 19ⁿ"The Sound of the Singing," p. 11.
- 20ⁿIbid., p. 17.
- 21ⁿ"The Mask of the Bear," p. 86.
- 22ⁿ"To Set our House in Order," pp. 55-

²³"Jericho's Brick Battlements," p. 202.

²⁴See "A Bird in the House," p. 113. Margaret Laurence seems to have wanted to stress the fact that these characters were masked, and that Vanessa must learn, as part of growing up, that they are concealing inner turmoil. In unpublished correspondence with her editor (see the Margaret Laurence collection at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario), she argues that this aspect of Beth has been carefully brought out in all the stories, that "she comes gradually more and more to resemble her own mother, Grandmother Conner." The editor also wanted her to alter the section of this particular story where Vanessa finds her father's correspondence, understands his inner secrets, then grieves for him. The editor found such grief, after such a long time, unconvincing. But Margaret Laurence stresses that to see her father's inner self, beneath the mask, is the last note of Vanessa's childhood. She says that Vanessa "does grieve as though her father had just died now, because she is for the first time seeing him as an individual not as her father. And it's too late for her to let him know she understands."

²⁵See "Jericho's Brick Battlements," p. 178.

²⁶"To Set our House in Order," p. 53.

²⁷See "A Bird in the House," p. 109.

²⁸"Jericho's Brick Battlements," p. 197.

²⁹"Horses of the Night," p. 153.

30 "The Sound of the Singing," p. 4.

31 Ibid., p. 6.

32 "To Set our House in Order," pp. 58-59.

33 "The Loons," p. 127.

34 Clara Thomas, "Review of Jason's Quest," Canadian Literature,

No. 50 (Autumn 1971), pp. 88-90.

35 "Jerico's Brick Battlements," p. 207.

Chapter IV

A Jest of God

Rachel Cameron, like Vanessa, is entirely a product of Manawaka. At thirty-four she has taught for fourteen years in its elementary school, lives with a mother who is fully dependent upon her, and inhabits the same cage of an apartment over the Japonica Funeral Home as she did when her father was alive. But unlike Vanessa, Rachel is adult and entirely frustrated by the bonds of her environment. She is possessed, moreover, of a remarkable degree of self-awareness, as A. J. Rosengarten points out,¹ and recognizes the tremendous dualities within herself.² Indeed, from the first page of her chronicle she states her alternatives, as she then sees them, when she listens to the children's songs:

The wind blows low, the wind blows high
The snow comes falling from the sky,
Rachel Cameron says she'll die
For want of the golden city.³

The words -- and her mental substitution of her own name in the jingle -- are neither accidental nor incidental. Rather, they convey in miniature her theme and her quest. To Rachel, at the start of her story, her alternatives are to stay in this town where snow (with its suggestion of cold, loneliness, alienation) falls upon her soul, or to

flee like the Spanish dancers "out of this town" to the "golden" city somewhere else. Her quest for physical escape is, of course, paralleled in Rachel by a desire for emotional escape into a more liberated, individualistic personality.

To Rachel, Manawaka -- the town itself -- is an oppressive environment. Declaring from the start that her real mistake was, in coming back once she'd gotten away to study at university, Rachel perceives Manawaka through bleak eyes. Her mother's living room is typical: its constantly plumped chesterfield cushions and emptied ashtrays make the house look, in Rachel's words, "as though no frail and mortal creature ever set foot in it" (JG 18). Lifeless and unnatural, the environment is further formalized whenever people come to visit:

It might be the midsummer gathering of a coven, the amount of fuss we go to, lace tablecloth, the Spode china, the silver tray for sandwiches, the little dishes of salted nuts to nibble at. (JG 19)

Beyond their apartment the town itself is unappealing. Its one movie house, the Regal Cafe, the Flamingo Dancehall with its "mauve and green green shifting lights, and blare" (JG 57), and the Queen Victoria Hotel with its grey old men and thin voices -- all are dull and harsh. The Japonica Funeral Home is the epitome of Rachel's Manawaka. It features a blue light in the chapel that gives the illusion of noon even at midnight, has walls in a simulated pine wallpaper, and contains pews of (in Hector's unconsciously ironical words) "Real veneer" (JG 110). Here is a certain small town vulgarity, of course, but beyond that the chapel signifies the falseness, the phoniness, the image-making that is Manawaka.

Indeed, Rachel herself has been moulded and falsified by the two sets of parental values designed to equip her to face Manawaka. From her mother Rachel has learned decorum and physical constraint. As a ladylike creature, Rachel must align herself with the right people (Lennox Cates, a farmer, was the wrong sort, however good-looking and bright his children turned out to be), and participate in social rituals such as meaningless bridge chatter. Above all, she must control her body, never making a scene like those who lose control and speak in "tongues," and never exhibiting her body, for nudity "doesn't look very nice," as her mother puts it (JG 123). Consequently, Rachel comes to feel a loathing toward her body, which she perceives as long and narrow, like some awkward sort of bird.⁴

From Niall Cameron, on the other hand, Rachel has learned silence, the necessity for vocal control. Her father, a man who kept the traditional three wise monkeys as a paperweight on his desk liked to deal with the dead, Rachel comes to realize, because they were silent (JG 109). To ask him how he felt about his life "would have cut him too much" (JG 18). Hence, through her father, Rachel comes to control her voice, especially when she feels emotionally explosive; for example, when her anger toward Dr. Raven erupts, she says, "I could hurl at him a voice as berserk as any car crash," but she remains silent (JG 155). And, in the end, she comes to believe that her voice can never say the right things.

Rachel's burden is, moreover, that she knows the extent and the falsity of her own mask. She knows she is an "echo" of her mother (JG 9); she calls herself "My father's child (JG 148); she recognizes

that she has internalized the town's horror of eccentricity (JG 8) and has accepted its demand for conformity (JG 97). Her inner turmoil is constantly hidden. She says, "No one would ever know it from the outside, where I'm too quiet" (JG 10). Yet she despises her own masquerade: she belittles her propriety in going to church when she doesn't believe in it and her body's constant "prissiness" (JG 78); she decries her phony "Peter Rabbitish" voice (JG 10) and its inadequacy for saying what she really feels, as with James. In fact, Rachel's central cry is "Help me" because she is not what she seems and wants to break free but does not know how (JG 149).

Yet one of Rachel's greatest fears, for all her hatred of the social mask she wears, seems to be of losing her mask when under anaesthetic or by falling asleep in her classroom (JG 20). Thus she is horrified when she speaks in voices at the Tabernacle, defying her mother's code by making a spectacle of herself and her father's by voicing something deep within herself for all to hear.⁵

The essence of Rachel is, in fact, this duality within herself behind the mask. She knows she is divided and recognizes her divided self, referring often to "some part of myself," as if there is another part there too. She carries on explicitly divided inner dialogues:

What are you worried about, Rachel? I'm not worried. I'm perfectly all right. Well relax then. I am relaxed. Oh? Shut up. Just shut up. (. . .) We have discussed this a long time ago, you and I, Rachel. (JG 66)

Until her real resolution at the end of the novel, Rachel assumes this second voice -- the Manavaka voice which appears to mock her more rebellious voice -- is the "bad" one and must be overcome, be silenced.

In truth neither voice will be obliterated in Rachel, and her resolution will involve some compromise or union between her divided selves.

In the meantime, like Vanessa, Rachel's first search is for escapes, safety valves to syphon off her internal pressures. Throughout the novel she indulges in dreaming. Before Nick comes her daydreams are of romantic men who bear her away (like Vanessa), to some region beyond the town limits so that she may escape into a natural world where flowers and weeds alike are allowed to grow untrammelled. After Nick has made love to her, Rachel composes romantic scenes in which he praises her and, significantly, takes her to a summer house away from Manawaka and surrounded by fecund nature, by grain "the pale colour of ripeness with autumn coming on" (JG 126). Yet the adult and acutely self-aware Rachel knows dreams are no real answer:

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, and I see the sight of my other eyes for what it has been, distorted, bizarre, grotesque, unbearably a joke if viewed from the outside. (JG 132)

Nor do other primarily mental and verbal avenues of escape work. Rachel attempts prayer with a God she only half-heartedly believes in, but within a few pages the "he" of her anguished prayers has turned into Nick; then Rachel knows that if God has a voice "it is not comprehensible to me" (JG 149), and this avenue of spiritual communication is not open to her. She even considers madness as she contemplates the loons who are mad, "darning and laughing out there in the black reaches of the night water where no one could get them, no one could get at them" (JG 146). But madness is a gift denied to her and "foolishness"

is as far as she is allowed to go along that path (JG 175).

Denied mental relief, Rachel turns to physical forms of escape. At one point she almost consumes an overdose of liquor and barbiturates but something within herself stops her (JG 147-8).

More significant is Rachel's consistent search for motherhood, as if delivering a child of her body will purge her own inner turmoil. In Rachel's mind a child is almost a sacred thing because it has no social controls, as she implies when she says of the child she thinks she is carrying,

It will have a voice. It will be able to cry out. I could bear a living creature.
(. . .) It would be possessed of the means of seeing. (JG 142)

A child also guarantees its mother some lessening of that tremendous isolation Rachel experiences, and she bitterly envies her mother's and Stacey's communication over Stacey's children, as if there is a "League of matriarchs" from which she is cut off (JG 25).

Certainly Rachel's attachment to James is motherly; she dwells on his own mother's unworthiness to have him, even though Grace Dougherty is raising James with just the sort of freedom that Rachel herself was denied. Later Rachel confesses to Nick that her regret with her students is that they are hers for only a year. Much later she tells him she would like to have his child, and when she suspects she is pregnant she is basically happy for, she says, "When I think of it like that, away from voices and eyes, it seems more than I could ever have hoped for in my life" (JG 139). Ultimately, however, Rachel realizes that motherhood in itself is not the answer, will not guarantee her escape from Manawakan controls. Nick warns Rachel at one point that he

cannot "play God" by fathering a child (JG 130); similarly Rachel realizes much later, after the humiliation of the tumour, that physical motherhood would not have guaranteed her life-long spiritual liberation, for everyone's children are ultimately temporary (JG 175).

Her relationship with Nick, however, is not as sterile as the tumour would suggest, for the avenue of escape that Rachel most benefits from is undoubtedly her sexual liaison with him.⁶ Rachel, a virgin at thirty-four, had been highly frustrated by the physical inhibition imposed upon her by her mother's code. Alone, she seemed to masturbate (JG 56), certainly feared the lesbianism she saw in Calla and dreaded might lurk in her own mind (JG 75-76), and consciously desired a man, any man, even the faintly repulsive, hairy Willard:

However unacceptable it may be, to want to brush my fingertips across the furred knuckles of someone I don't even like, at least they're a man's hands. (JG 43)

Her desire for Nick is explicit from their first encounter (JG 67), and however embarrassed she is at her own awkwardness and the "shuddering" she barely understands (JG 83), her sexual appetite for him is never satiated. It is as if, for Rachel, physical communication through sex is the first real communion she has had with another person; she says to Nick with a sort of wonder that she can feel him "living there" under his skin (JG 129).

Beyond the physical release he grants her, her affair with Nick liberates Rachel; and Rachel's success in this encounter contradicts Ronald Sutherland's statement that in Canadian literature the sexual act is impetuous and foolish, entirely devoid of satisfaction.⁷

Before her suspected pregnancy, her confiding in Calla, her discovery of the tumour, and her defying her mother -- all of which result from the relationship with Nick -- Rachel had thought of Manawaka as divided into the Scots-Presbyterian world of emotional negation and that other, freer world inhabited by the Ukrainians and other uninhibited spirits like Calla.⁸ Those from the other side were inscrutable, but surely more liberated than she was, whether they were "Venusian" teenaged girls (JG 16-17), unusually self-contained and undecipherable children (JG 136), or always-held-at-a-distance adults like Hector Jonas.

During her crisis, however, Rachel is driven to confide in people more than before and begins to discover masks everywhere. Hector suffers from an inadequate sex life -- his wife laughs "at the crucial moment" (JG 112) -- and in this moment of confiding Rachel sees him "living there behind his eyes." Calla, despite her boisterous manner and penchant for wild colours, lives with lesbian tendencies that would outrage Manawakan sensibility, and experiences loneliness so extreme that she keeps a canary that can't sing, because she can at least hear it moving about (JG 121). Eventually Rachel penetrates her mother's disguises. Mrs. Cameron projects a careful "cuteness" through "stiff grey sausage curls" and glasses frames that are "delphinium blue and elfin" (JG 18). She calmly and openly bullies Rachel as much as possible. Yet behind this composed, studied mask is a fear that Rachel first comprehends when she overhears her mother talking in her sleep: "Niall always thinks I am so stupid" (JG 162).

It is the discovery of Nick's inner self, however, that most

influences Rachel. She had always admired his carefree manner and easy speech. Because he was a Ukranian, she assumed him "more resistant" and "more free" (JG 79). She admired his self-contained expression, his "hidden Caucasian face, one of the hawkish and long-ago riders of the Steppes" (JG 78). To her surprise, Nick reveals a tormented inner self: he feels guilt and hatred toward a twin brother who died long before;⁹ he fears in himself a growing resemblance to his father, Nestor the milkman (JG 64); and he hates the farm but knows his father expects him to take it over (JG 97). In the end Rachel can barely stand to see the unmasked Nick, in her words, "for the open tenderness I feel, seeing him so" (JG 93). Yet she learns from him a central truth that applies to her life and affects her future. Nick quotes Jeremiah to Rachel:

I have forsaken my house -- I have left
 mine heritage -- mine heritage is unto me
 as a lion in the forest -- it crieth out
 against me -- therefore have I hated it. (JG 97)

In A Jest of God, Rachel must come to terms with her heritage, and her decision to leave Manawaka concludes the novel and is her solution to her inner conflict. But it is a two-sided solution, parallel to her inner duality, the split between her rebellious voice and the Manawakan inner voice. Rachel hated Manawaka which transmitted itself through her parents to her. The mask she was forced to assume, through control of her speech and her body, was a tyranny -- a tyranny of ancestry, of a heritage like a "lion" within her -- with which she must come to terms.

Rachel's liberation came, of course, through the body, through

sexual experience. She and Nick made errors in verbal communication, as when Nick says, "It's never much good the first time" (JG 83) and when Rachel misinterprets Nick's photograph and his reply about it. But as Bowering suggests, Rachel is put in touch with her body through her relationship with Nick, and this begins her evolution.¹⁰ Significantly, this physical liberation precedes and seems to free her voice. After Nick calls, Rachel speaks flippantly to her mother, suggesting that Nestor's son became a schoolteacher through "Divine intervention" at the very least (JG 61); she admonishes her mother to do as she likes about the laundry and shows no concern for her health (JG 64); she ruthlessly resists her mother's request that she stay in on bridge night; she actually cries in front of Hector; and she speaks "aloud" to Calla about the pregnancy. Indeed, Rachel's inner voice has so changed her that in the end her mother is bewildered, and cries, "Rachel, you're not yourself. You're not talking a bit sensibly. I can hardly follow you." (JG 166).

The change in voice in Rachel signifies a basic alteration in her outlook. To discover the nature of that change it is necessary to return to a central part of her experience, the tumour. Rachel's own thoughts about the tumour are illuminating:

Doctor Raven puts a hand on my shoulder. His face is anxious. (. . .) Anxious in case I should be too concerned over the nature of the thing in me, the growth, the non-life. How can non-life be a growth? But it is. How strange. (JG 157)

After the operation, Rachel demonstrates the nature of the "growth" that the tumour instigated in her: under anaesthetic Rachel unconsciously

comments, "I am the mother now" (JG 160); the statement is later uttered quite consciously and repeatedly, and summarizes the meaning of her experience. If Rachel is now to make her own decision to go to the "Golden City," she is asserting her individuality and shedding the obedient-child mask Manawaka has required her to wear; but if she is the "mother" now and must take her "elderly child" to the coast with her she is not leaving Manawaka entirely behind.

Rachel's "pregnancy" and her giving birth to a sense of affirmation in herself is a complex symbolic episode in A Jest of God. Rachel's victory in leaving Manawaka involves freedom less than survival, as she well knows. Aware now that everyone is ultimately alone, and that communication will never be perfect, she compromises with fate. She may never have children and she may often look foolish, but she will set out believing that "Anything may happen, where I'm going" (JG 175). Like Jonah of the epigraph, she was swallowed by the dark but came out alive after all.

Yet one might wonder where Rachel gets the strength to face the facts and assert herself. That Rachel can accept her essential aloneness¹¹ is surely related to her "being the mother now." Rachel will leave Manawaka but she will take some of Manawaka with her, not only because she must accept the physical presence of her mother but also because she has internalized many of Manawaka's values and part of her inheritance from Manawaka is the strength to face difficult facts. The idea of pregnancy as a union of two genetic strains comes up again: Rachel's tumour is not a union between herself and Nick but comes entirely from within herself; that is, Rachel has symbolically united

those two strains in herself (her dislike of Manawakan social controls and her respect for the need for self-expression in the individual) and this union has produced her new awareness, courage and affirmation.

Rachel has, then, accepted her heritage — a heritage which she must take with her to the coast or wherever else she may go. In this she demonstrates an ambivalence in the end toward Manawakan values just as Vanessa does. And in The Fire-Dwellers, Stacey Cameron also struggles with Manawaka as it is contained within herself, also thinks of the heritage that is Manawaka which she as a mother now may pass on to others, and also eventually compromises with Manawaka.

Footnotes: Chapter IV

¹A. J. Rosengartén, "Inescapable Bonds," Canadian Literature, No. 35 (Winter 1968), p. 99.

²Surely Clara Thomas, Margaret Laurence, p. 47, oversimplifies when she refers to Rachel's "delayed adolescent search for identity." The intensity of Rachel's frustration is derived from the fact that she is not adolescent but thirty-four years old. She has an identity, but a very complex one that involves an inner conflict of which she is quite aware.

³Margaret Laurence, Rachel, Rachel (New York: Popular Library, 1966), p. 7. All other references to A Jest of God will be to this American edition and will be by page number (preceded by JG) within in the text.

⁴Rachel sees herself at various times as "the crane of a body, gaunt metal or gaunt bird" (JG 101), as "rising gawkily like a tame goose trying to fly" (JG 115), as "perching at the chesterfield's edge" (JG 116), and as a "tallness, a thin stiff white feather like a goose's feather" (JG 134).

⁵Laurence, A Jest of God, pp. 37-8. Interestingly, Margaret Laurence did not like this particular scene in the film "Rachel, Rachel" because it had lost some of the religious intensity associated with

speaking in tongues (See Laurence's unpublished papers, McMaster University).

⁶Critics dwell heavily on the tumour -- which is generally seen as a too-obvious device on Margaret Laurence's part. For example, see J. M. Stedmond, "Fiction," University of Toronto Quarterly, 36, No. 4 (1967), 382. Stedmond says the tumour is "a trifle too pat for the purposes of the plot." Because the tumour is read as so obvious a development, it is interpreted as the heaviest sort of symbol. Sandra Djwa is one who interprets the tumour as "death" which Rachel finally expels from her womb. Sandra Djwa, "False Gods and the True Covenant: Thematic Continuity between Margaret Laurence and Sinclair Ross," Journal of Canadian Fiction, 1, No. 4 (1972), 48. Although the tumour is, of course, a symbol of sterility, it is probably more useful to ask what the tumour does for Rachel, rather than what it stands for. In other words, perhaps the tumour should be seen as a dynamic rather than as a static symbol.

⁷Ronald Sutherland, Second Image: Comparative Studies in Quebec/Canadian Literature (Toronto: New Press, 1971), pp. 70-71.

Perhaps the context of this rather devastating comment should be given. Sutherland argues that sexual relations in Canadian literature generally are beset with guilt. In American literature the sex act is generally seen (says Sutherland) as "positive and satisfying," an "act of defiance." But in Canadian literature the tendency is "in the direction of impotence and incapacity to act, or an impetuous and foolish action entirely devoid of satisfaction."

⁸The two Christs seem to symbolize the two sorts of culture that Rachel perceives. At the Tabernacle the Christ figure with its bleeding heart is emotionally excessive (JG 31); in the Presbyterian Church, Christ is polite, and prettily drawn so as to resemble an effeminate insurance salesman (JG 41). Rachel can identify with neither.

⁹Laurence, A Jest of God, p. 76. McLay makes the point that in this novel the characters are so isolated that even the "relationship between twins is complex and shifting." C. M. McLay, "Every Man is an Island," Canadian Literature, No. 70 (Autumn 1971), p. 60.

¹⁰George Bowering also makes this point, that Rachel's relationship with Nick initiates her evolution. Bowering, "That Fool of a Fear," p. 49.

¹¹McClay sees this realization of man's essential aloneness as the main point or theme in A Jest of God. McClay, "Every Man is an Island," p. 58.

Chapter V

The Fire-Dwellers

Stacey Cameron MacAindra is Rachel's older, more sophisticated, sister. She has already settled in the coastal city, has produced four children, and has operated within the city's social and business circles. Thus, although her story is simultaneous with Rachel's (for it is not until the end of The Fire-Dwellers that Stacey learns her mother and sister are leaving Manawaka and joining her in the city),¹ Stacey is far ahead of Rachel in experience. In fact she had come to the same realization years before that Rachel does at the end of A Jest of God: Rachel says of Stacey, "She knew right away what she wanted most, which was to get as far away from Manawaka as possible" (JG 15-16). The question is — in light of both sisters' quest and Stacey's more youthful escape — whether Stacey in her big city² experience has really left Manawaka behind.

In The Fire-Dwellers, Stacey has certainly left Manawaka physically, to live as a housewife, the mother of four children, in a city known as the "jewel of the Pacific Northwest" (FD 10). Confined, however, to her suburban home on Bluejay Crescent (its very name suggests the street's unrelieved mediocrity), Stacey scarcely knows

the city. When she does go downtown her perceptions are all negative: she sees pigeons "shitting all over the granite cenotaph," old men "coughing and spitting" in the "feeble sunlight," "heel-squashed cigarette butts, Kleenex blown into or bawled into, and ashes" (FD 10-11). She can't bear to expose her children to the city, and associates the brasher city buildings most often with fire and shadows of atomic warfare.² Significantly when Stacey slips into a peaceful sleep at the conclusion of the book she "feels the city receding" and knows peace.

Indeed Stacey states clearly that the city is not her home, and that her real roots are in Manawaka:

Nearly twenty years here, and I don't know the place at all or feel at home. Maybe I wouldn't have, in any city. I never like to say so to anybody. I always think they might think it's obvious I'm from a small town. (FD 12)

She needed to escape it physically, and did so, but the town's psychological control over Stacey Cameron MacAindra is decisive,³ as the frequency of her flashbacks to her Manawakan adolescence and her similarity to Rachel in fundamental ways both illustrate.

Stacey is certainly more flippant, more sardonic, than Rachel, but she shares her sister's small-town family-induced inability to communicate. On the one hand, just like Rachel, she cannot communicate verbally with anyone. Because Stacey's mind is imprinted "with the tomb silences between Niall Cameron and his wife" (FD 29), Stacey has difficulty communicating with her husband Mac. With a measure of panic she reports that the "slightest effort at speech seems too much for him

lately, too debilitating" (FD 37). She records conversations between them in which nothing is said: "What are you thinking about, Mac? Oh nothing much. Well, what sort of nothing? For heaven's sake, Stacey, what does it matter?" (FD 136). Significantly, when Stacey writes to her mother she herself conceals all that matters, revealing only what does not (FD 155-56). Outside her family, she fails to communicate with Tess and wonders why they only talk about "the outer skin" and never about important things (FD 229). Indeed, only with her youngest daughter, Jen, who can't talk, does Stacey seem comfortable, affectionate and honest.

Nor (again like Rachel) can Stacey use her body as an instrument of communication. To begin with, she sees her body as an ugly thing and is obsessed with her thirty-nine-year-old, ten pounds overweight, "broad-beamed" figure (FD 9). She imagines her clothing to be all wrong, and on social occasions imagines it askew as well, her underwear on the verge of snapping and heaving in public (FD 106-107). Even at the height of her affair with Luke Venturi, Stacey is inhibited by a body she believes will repulse him -- "the stretchmarks of four kids, the lines of dead silver worming across my belly" (FD 210). In addition, even though Stacey is married and has the opportunity to communicate sexually, she has through years of experience learned that sexual communication does not exist in a vacuum. Her marriage has deteriorated; her sex-life with her husband has become sporadic and unsatisfying; he comes home exhausted at night and goes to sleep without touching her, largely because he finds their total relationship

inadequate.

Like Rachel, moreover, Stacey knows of her own façade. She recognizes her lies to Tess for what they are, despises her constant deception about herself whenever Mac's minister-father visits, and recognizes her own social mask at company parties.

But to a far greater extent than Rachel, and from the start of The Fire-Dwellers, Stacey is aware of the masks, the hypocrisies, of others and knows that everyone she meets is masked too. She says:

I'm surrounded by voices all the time but none of them seem to be saying anything, including mine. This gives me the feeling that we may all be one-dimensional. (FD 87)

When Stacey is briefly involved with Buckle Fennick, for example, and learns his terrible sexual secret, she is less devastated by this knowledge than Mac is, mainly because she has long perceived Buckle as costumed in his "sleazily shiny sports shirt" and has seen him as constantly acting (FD 53). She thinks at one point: "Buckle, when are you going to stop talking like that? Where do you get your lines? Old B-grade movies?" (FD 54). Similarly, Tess Folger's unhealthy practice with goldfish is shocking to Stacey largely because Jen may have been harmed by the ritual (FD 216-17); she herself has long seen Tess as too carefully groomed and dressed to be normal, as "done up like a Christmas present" so that Stacey wonders "what's really inside" (FD 192).

Stacey's intuitive recognition of masquerade in others is most obvious in her dealings with Thor. Long before Val Tonnere reveals that Thor is a "strawman" (FD 278) -- who comes, significantly, from humble circumstances in Manawaka -- Stacey has felt intuitively

that Thor is phony. His dress is a costume, a "luminous uniform;" to Stacey his face is a mask, "chiselled by an expert;" his hair is not real hair but a "mane" (FD 43). From her first encounter with him, in fact, Stacey has seen Thor as a "wizard" whose speech is similarly phony, peppered with the "honestlys" and "truthfullys" that only the false must use so liberally (FD 43-4).

Yet, significantly, recognizing masks everywhere does not encourage Stacey to drop her own. She uses frank, blasphemous, and sometimes coarse language as her natural mode of expression, but only in her mind, as Manawakan reticence requires. She muses, "Funny thing, I never swear in front of my kids. This makes me feel I'm being a good example to them" (FD 9). She worries, like her sister, about having an anaesthetic or undergoing hypnosis -- what if she talked about her real feelings (FD 106)? She conceals her feelings in letters home from the time she is twelve years old, preferring "How are you" and "I am fine" to the real questions like "what was actually in your mind all those years because I haven't a clue and it's only now that this bothers me" (FD 29, 156). Indeed, despite her detection of Thor's falsity, Stacey's first thought is not to compensate by being more honest herself at his party, but instead to adopt even more disguises than her normal mask: "I'll turn up in long black tights, a green wig, and a feather boa, mouthing obscenities" (FD 39). So afraid is Stacey to drop her calm mother-mask that she says she's become reluctant to go anywhere, even to the hairdresser, without a child or her husband along to reinforce her identity (FD 101).

Stacey's inner turmoil, then, does not echo exactly Rachel's

problem: Rachel wondered, "what will become of me;"⁴ Stacey knows what she is, a mother, and her central concern is "what will happen to my children because of what I am." It is noteworthy that Rachel's main image in A Jest of God was the bird, while Stacey is typified by the ladybird who must go home or her children, whom she has left alone, will perish.

There is in Stacey tremendous tension between her sense of self, her individuality, and her sense of responsibility toward her family. And the conflict is essentially within the Manawakan syndrome. On the one hand she longs to be Stacey Cameron again, prettier than she knew then, a lively and rebellious individual (FD 50); on the other hand, as a Manawakan, she knows family ties are not to be ignored and she must transmit inherited social values to her children. Stacey is, therefore, a prisoner of her ancestry in a sense more complicated than in Rachel's case. For Stacey's memories of home are coloured exclusively by the fact that her parents never really communicated with one another (FD 48-9) and that she and her parents, especially her mother, never understood one another very well:

There was this gopher on the road, Mother, and somebody had shot it with a twenty-two and all the stomach and that was all out and it wasn't dead yet. Please, dear, don't talk about it -- it isn't nice. But I saw it and it was trying to breathe only it couldn't and it was. Sh, it isn't nice. (I hurt, Mother. I'm scared.) (Sh, it isn't nice.) (I hurt, you hurt, he hurts -- sh). (FD 176)

At the same time she realizes that she, Stacey, sees the world with the same "kind of weak eyes" as her mother had, that she is a product of her Manawaka upbringing (FD 170).

Hence Stacey constantly fears that she is setting an example for her children of falseness, of all the things she hates -- hates but perpetuates (FD 9). She runs to her sons when one of them "is trapped in his nightmare, alone in there," for she would rather they turned out "queer" than that they be trapped into a restrained "masculine" role (FD 30); yet she suffers inner conflict at thereby defying their father's code for them (FD 124). She worries about Jen, caught inside a world of silence -- is it her fault, that Jen can't talk, and should she be doing something about it? But most of all she worries about Katie, her adolescent daughter, who seems so beautiful to Stacey and who is as "simple and intricate as grass" (FD 143). Katie is rebellious and outspoken, she is beginning to date boys who have a reputation for smoking marijuana, and she is old enough to almost understand her mother's return from her encounter with Luke (FD 190). But most of all, she invokes echoes in Stacey of herself as a teenager, one who never got along with her mother yet lives her whole life imprisoned by her mother's foibles and inhibitions (FD 50-51). For Stacey the burden is in attempting to raise her children to be more liberated than she was, in light of her own inner conflicts.

And this surely colours Stacey's relationship with Matthew, Mac's father. Not only does Matthew pry, and try in his gentle way to influence the raising of Mac's children (especially over church attendance), but Stacey perpetuates his values by refusing in front of her family to admit her own and the children's deviations from his code:

. . . I long to tell him I don't see life his way
 -- gentle Jesus meek and mild and God's in his
 heavens all's right with the world. But I can't.

Mac would be furious. Anyway, why do it? So I should be relieved of habitual fib-telling? It wouldn't be worth the commotion. (FD 71)

Stacey resents Matthew for forcing her to betray her own falseness.

She lives in tremendous dread that she may harm her children unalterably by enmeshing them in the treacherous web of their enmeshed parents' values.

Like Rachel, Stacey attempts escape in the face of her inner tensions. She too is an inveterate dreamer and for the most part her dreams of escape conveniently eliminate the children. She dreams of her long-ago, past-perfect honeymoon at Timber Lake; she projects herself as a composed science fiction heroine emerging beautiful from a mechanical "chrysalis" that rejuvenates and refines (FD 105); or she becomes a part of some romantic historical scene (FD 96). Basically Stacey's dreams are of an adult world -- away from town and city -- where people "live without lies, and . . . touch each other" (FD 96). But Stacey's every dream concludes with an ironic allusion to reality.

Drinking, another form of escape, provides some physical release, whether at Thor's parties or at home alone in the middle of the night (FD 115, 147). Through the balm of gin and tonic Stacey becomes the dancing girl she was at one time or tells the wicked stories that party people do (FD 140, 115). Yet drinking is no final solution, either, and Stacey suffers mental anguish after a typical bout:

Stacey, tottering over to Thor's court. Stacey, arguing in a loud harridan voice, her hair disarranged, her make-up long since vanished (. . .) Oh God. Two pink soap tablets tumbling out of her handbag. The gusts and shrieks of pointing laughter. (. . .)

Stacey, regaling the company with corny slightly low joke about -- what? Joke about Thor. Oh God. Stacey, believing they were laughing with her. (FD 117)

Stacey, like Vanessa and Rachel, attempts escape through physical as well as mental routes, specifically through sex. Her "affair" with Buckle is minor and incomplete. It paves the way, however, for Stacey's real affair with Luke, whose relationship with her does provide some sort of release. But with Stacey it is less the sex act itself which liberates her (for she is not a deprived thirty-four-year-old virgin), but the combination of love-making and talk with Luke that frees her.

Significantly, Luke is young, unfettered, and quite articulate. To begin with, he recognizes intuitively that Stacey has been held down and has been taught to hide her real self (FD 188-189). He knows how to let himself speak, says Stacey, and she responds to him by talking as well; she even calls him the only person she can "break through" to (FD 229). Indeed, Luke's words stay with Stacey a long time; he teaches her some distance or perspective in dealing with life, telling her that an individual can never alter "the face of the world" and that "Everything looks better and worse from the outside" (FD 203, 206) -- in other words that life is paradoxical and arbitrary, and that one's best response is relaxed compromise, acceptance. Luke had lied to Stacey about his age, of course, but ironically enough he taught Stacey more truth about herself and life than anyone else had. When he reiterates the rhyme about the ladybird he is in fact negating all her escape routes: she can never be a totally free individual again; she

is foremost a wife and mother; her best response to life is some sort of acceptance.

Stacey's solution, like Rachel's, is one that does not offer complete freedom but does offer personal and familial survival. The fire-dweller of the title is, of course, Stacey herself, whose fears are often seen in terms of holocaust but whose fires are largely within; as her mother said to her long ago, "Stacey . . . you must learn to bank your fires" (FD 220). After her affair with Luke, Stacey recognizes two truths: "The past doesn't seem ever to be over," and "there is nowhere to go but here" (FD 267-8). In a sense, like the gull whose "simple knowledge of survival" so impressed her at the start of the novel, Stacey must choose to live, simply live, within her environment.

And Stacey's "environment" is her family. Thus when Mac is distraught over Buckle's death -- and the manner of his life that he had masked with leather jacket and jeans -- Stacey is able to reach him with her own truth; ". . . that's crazy, Mac. You're not made of granite. Nobody is" (FD 266). The fact that Mac can embrace her in public as he never could have before, that he can allow himself to weep, that they can really talk about the whole Thor episode, and that the act of love is once again a form of communication between them -- all this stems from Stacey's new attitude, her acceptance of her life.

To some extent Stacey's adjustment is a matter of resignation. She is resigned to recurring silences in her marriage and now assumes "Silences aren't all bad" (FD 298). She will still drink more than she should, but she will do it in front of Matthew without the hidden-in-the-mixmaster pretense she has always assumed for him. She accepts

the fact that she will never be young again or have a decent figure again. After a few more years of coping and surviving she may have "a hide like a rhinoceros" (FD 294). But all of them will survive, including Mac, for (in Stacey's words), "he's a whole lot stronger than he thinks he is. Maybe they all are. Maybe even Duncan is. Maybe even I am" (FD 294).

The key word here is "stronger." Like Vanessa and like Rachel, Stacey discovers some inner strength that enables her to face her situation, to make a statement of affirmation about herself, and to carry on -- with some dignity and some hope. On the one hand, Stacey does not delude herself that her personality -- formed by Manawaka, her ancestry and her family -- will basically alter. She has already influenced her Katie, she knows, in ways that could never be undone.

Not, on the other hand, should those ways be undone. As in A Bird in the House, The Fire-Dwellers is preoccupied with family and particularly with motherhood. In response to the fish episode, for example, Katie consoles Stacey as if she were the mother (FD 216-17). In a fragment of time she will be the mother, for as Stacey says of Katie:

One day she will have to take over as the mother, and she's beginning to sense it. No wonder it frightens her. It damn near terrifies me, the whole business, even after all these years. (FD 282)

In seeing Katie as a mother Stacey surely implies that her daughter will also have to face, then transmit, the ancestral values. At that point Katie (like Rachel, like Stacey, like Vanessa, even like Hagar Shipley) will have to face her past and carry it with her -- as conveniently as

possible -- forever.

In the end Stacey has adopted that sort of cheerful and committed endurance that implies acceptance of the disciplined, positive values of Manavaka, and that guarantees survival in Margaret Laurence's fiction; and she notes that her daughter will need to do the same things. Stacey, like her Manavakan contemporaries, feels a certain ambivalence toward its values.

Footnotes: Chapter V

¹Margaret Laurence, The Fire-Dwellers (New York: Popular Library, 1969), p. 312. All other references to The Fire-Dwellers will be to this text and will be identified by page number (preceded by FD) within the text.

²Laurence, The Fire-Dwellers, p. 16. Djwa, "False Gods and the True Covenant," p. 45, connects Stacey's fear of nuclear fission with her own internal holocaust and states that Stacey fuses her fears with "Dante's hell and the Day of Judgment in Revelations."

³I disagree with Marion Engel, "The New Margaret Laurence," Saturday Night, 84, No. 5 (1969), 38-39, when she says that Stacey "wants, and feeds on . . . the open communication of the small community." The comment seems unwarranted when Manawaka is always portrayed as such a closed community.

⁴Laurence, A Jest of God, p. 101. In the Gibson interview, Margaret Laurence says that Rachel's problem was fear within herself while Stacey's problems were more outside of or beyond herself.

Gibson, Eleven Canadian Novelists, p. 201.

Chapter VI

The Stone Angel

It is fitting to deal with Hagar Shipley -- Margaret Laurence's most complicated character, and her oldest -- last. At ninety, on the verge of death, Hagar views a lifetime of Manawakan values from a complex vantage point. As her physical world shrinks around her from house size, to hospital ward size, to private room size, and eventually (as she ruefully remarks)¹ to coffin size, Hagar must reconcile her various remembered selves into one cohesive individual. And, like other Laurence protagonists, she must successfully relate that individual to her Manawakan background.

Throughout The Stone Angel, Hagar is preoccupied with her identity. Utterly alone, as she tells Mr. Troy when he tries to comfort her, she wonders why no one but Bram ever called her by her name, why her grandson remembers not herself but only the candy she used to give him, and how the world will remember her:

Hard to imagine a world and I not in it.
Will everything stop when I do? Stupid old
baggage, who do you think you are? Hagar.
There's no one like me in this world. (SA 250)

The explicitly divided dialogue underlines Hagar's basic disquietude: she experiences an inner conflict or identity crisis which must be

resolved, it seems, before she can allow herself to die and which stems, it can be argued, directly from her Manawakan upbringing. Although she lived outside of town with Bram and in the city with Mr. Oatley, then with Marvin and Doris, Hagar herself stresses that the city has only been a "kind of home" since she left Manawaka (SA 36); the corollary is that Manawaka has always been her real, her spiritual home.

Certainly, as a girl Hagar is dominated and shaped by Manawaka. As the daughter of Jason Currie, storekeeper and pillar of the community, Hagar perceives the importance of externals and façades. The houses are brick, built by Hagar's father and other Scots/Ontario immigrants, and are very properly trimmed: she recalls, for example, that "White wooden lace festooned the verandas in those days, sedate trimming on the beige brick houses such as my father had built"

(SA 22). The Presbyterian Church is similarly restrained, plain and bare except for the silver candlesticks engraved with her father's good name. Even the Manawakan hospital is notably stark and pristine in its "shiny enameled walls and the iron white cots, the deathly aroma of ether and Lysol" pervading its halls (SA 99). Not surprisingly, because she was raised in so astringent an environment, Hagar's own appearance is appropriately restrained²: "How anxious I was to be neat and orderly, imagining life had been created only to celebrate tidiness, like prissy Pippa as she passed" (SA 5).

Hagar's Manawakan manners are similarly proper. After two years at an Ontario finishing school she has acquired enough external polish, in dress, in manners and in social accomplishments, to earn her father's deepest praise. He tells her "You're a credit to me" and permits her

for three years to play the role of his hostess on public occasions (SA 43-45). Thus, through her father's constant vigilance regarding personal appearance, reputation and social position, Hagar absorbs concomitant social values -- the habitual snobbery that Elva Jardine, who comes from Freehold, finds typical of Manawaka. At one point it seems ironical that Hagar has absorbed so much of her father's snobbery: she automatically scorns his only involvement with a woman (however fleeting that relationship was) because the woman is "No-name Lottie Dreiser's mother" and therefore a consort beneath the Currie station (SA 18).

Perhaps more fundamental to Hagar than her social veneer is her Manawakan training in inner control. Emotionally, she is trained not to communicate clearly with others. It seems significant that Hagar's father speaks to her most often in detached homilies, and that she in turn fails to communicate fully with either of her brothers. When Dan is dying she cannot play the role of their mother for him, and when Matt does play-act for Dan he makes throttling gestures around Hagar's throat to keep her from communicating this action to their father. Later Hagar muses, "if I had spoken and tried to tell him -- but how could I?" (SA 26). In her family, people seldom reach one another by speech.

Related to her inability to speak is Hagar's inability to cry, to reveal deep emotion. When she refuses to let her father see her cry, she is rewarded by her father's praise for her control: "You've got backbone, I'll give you that" (SA 9-10).

But most important perhaps (in view of her basically passionate

character) is Hagar's training in sexual repression. When Hagar announces she wants to marry Bram, her father's first question (had Bram touched her?) reveals his fear of sexual expression. And this reaction follows two earlier sexual episodes in Hagar's upbringing: in one incident, Jason Currie had warned his daughter that men have "terrible thoughts" (SA 44); much earlier, her father had beaten Hagar with a ruler (for endangering his reputation), then had embraced her so tightly that she felt panicky and caged (SA 9-10). In Manawaka, sexual feeling seemed to be a basically masculine experience, contained in one's private thoughts, and tinged with sadism (or at the very least with pain) and entrapment. As an alternative to such physical release, furthermore, Hagar's father offers her stern Calvinistic values -- sublimation through determination, hard work and "elbow grease" (SA 13).

Yet Hagar, as an old woman recalling her life, makes it very clear that she was always ambivalent to Manawakan values. Through her memories and her comments on the past she stresses her fundamentally passionate nature and her rebellion, even as a child, against her father's standards. To the young Hagar, for example, the Manawakan cemetery seems to embody the spirit of the town, and in the opening pages of the novel she makes clear her scorn toward it. The cemetery itself, with its funeral parlour smell and its "planted peonies, dark crimson and wallpaper pink, the pompous blossoms hanging leadenly," impinges on the "faint, musky, dust-tinged smell of things that grew untended and had grown always" (SA 4-5). Hagar reads the tombstone inscriptions and mocks Regina Weese for her respectability and

propriety:

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. When Regina died, from some obscure and maidenly disorder, the old disreputable lady rose from sick-smelling sheets and lived, to the despair of her married sons, another full ten years. (SA 4)

And the Stone Angel herself, her wings pitted in winter by snow and in summer by grit, views the town with sightless eyes, "doubly blind," Hagar seems to feel, because she attempts to ignore nature and maintain propriety on the outer edges of town (SA 3).

Thus although one side of Hagar (her external self) has absorbed certain Manawakan values, another part of her (her internal nature) has always opposed Manawaka. Hence she often associates the whole of Manawaka with its uglier aspects, like the dump, where materialistic cast-offs require purgation by fire:

Here were crates and cartons, tea chests with torn tin stripping, the unrecognizable effluvia of our lives, burned and blackened by the fire that seasonally cauterized the festering place. (SA 26)

And she identifies herself from youth to old age with wild and passionate nature as opposed to town proprieties.

But her sense of rebellion is constantly set against a penchant for respectability which Manawaka has created in her, and Hagar's complexity as a character is rooted in this tension between the two sets of values within her. Hagar's marriage to Bram Shipley reveals this duality. Hagar sees it as a rebellious act, remembering herself as "drunk with exhilaration" at her daring (SA 49). But her marriage

actually reveals Hagar's retention of many of her Manawakan values.

In fact, Hagar as a woman never completely sheds her early Manawakan training. When she is first married, Hagar is very pleased to have escaped from the town of Manawaka to its outskirts and to a home of her own. Proud of her own handsome appearance and Bram's good looks, she thinks of herself as a "chatelaine" and rejoices that she will never have to care for the houses of other women, like her aunt (SA 51). Inherent in her thoughts, however, is her basic Manawakan snobbery. Confident herself, she wonders why her mother in her portrait looks so worried: after all, Hagar says, her mother was raised properly and should have no doubts about propriety (SA 59). Certainly Hagar suffers no such self-doubt; she herself snubs Bram's family as vulgar, remarking, "They were all Mabels, Gladyses, Vernons and Marvins, squat brown names, common as bottled beer" (SA 32).

Hagar also retains Manawakan emotional control during her marriage to Bram. She rarely communicates with him, even when her sons are born, keeping her fears about Marvin's birth to herself, and silently wishing she could bear John by the wayside rather than have the "starched and virginal" hospital matron scorn Bram (SA 122). And sexually, although Hagar is passionate and enjoys sex, she does not use the act of love as a means of communication and emotional release with Bram:

He had a banner over me for many years.
I never thought it love, though, after we wed.
Love, I fancied, must consist of words and deeds
delicate as lavender sachets, not like the things
he did sprawled on the high white bedstead that
rattled like a train. (SA 80)

Indeed, it can be argued that Hagar's marriage crumbles because of her Manawakan values. That the Shipley place was never painted annoys her constantly.³ She longs for the comfort of town where nature is less threatening, and says at one point, "I used to like snowstorms in town, when I was a girl, the feeling of being under siege but safe within a stronghold;" on the Shipley place, in contrast, snowflakes seem threatening and crazed by a hostile wind (SA 86). Her repression of that part of sex which involves open communication seems to lead -- just as her father had taught her -- to Hagar's working like a "dray horse," and offering herself cold comfort: "At least nobody will ever be able to say I didn't keep a clean house" (SA 112). But most of all Bram's public behaviour becomes outrageous to Hagar, especially when he urinates on the steps of her father's store in town. The older Hagar acknowledges the nature of their failure, noting the conflict between her Manawakan values and Bram's lack of them. She had assumed she could change Bram's social shortcomings, she says, and adds at another point, "we'd married for those qualities we later found we couldn't bear, he for my manners and speech, I for his flouting of them" (SA 50, 79-80). But her statement makes it clear that the real conflict was less between Hagar and Bram than between the two sides (propriety and rebelliousness) of Hagar's character.

As Hagar grows older and is separated from Bram, then widowed by him, Hagar continues to live and to raise her sons largely by Manawakan social values. Emphasizing their appearance, as Manawaka had trained her, Hagar spends the money Mr. Oatley pays her on clothes:

I spent my first few months' salary entirely on clothes, a delphinium-blue costume for myself, hat, gloves, shoes, the lot. I threw away the wide-legged trousers John had worn, cut down from Marvin's old ones. (SA 156)

Later, when Oatley dies, leaving her money, it is significant that Hagar immediately buys a house -- to house the few good things she had salvaged and retained from the Currie home. Similarly, Hager raises her sons according to Manawakan social standards, constantly correcting their grammar, failing to communicate fully with them (SA 238, 242), teaching John to play store and to work hard, just as Jason Currie had taught her, and reprimanding John for drunkenness because it ruins her reputation.

Even as an old woman, driven to live with stodgy Marvin and Doris, Hagar's Manawakan values remain. Much of her hatred for old age stems from her degenerating physical appearance -- the blubber that shakes when she cries, the puffed face, white with purple veins, and the dry powdery old skin. Still concerned with appearance, she emphasizes to Elva Jardine that Bram was strong, black-bearded and handsome. She clings tenaciously to the house and things that proclaim her status, identifying herself with these possessions, as she herself states clearly:

If I am not somehow contained in them and in this house, something of all change caught and fixed here, eternal enough for my purpose, then I do not know where I am to be found at all. (SA 36)

And, in a curious sort of religious snobbery, she scorns Mr. Troy's version of heaven as somehow chintzy: "how gimcrack a place it would be, crammed with its pavements of gold, its gates of pearl and topaz,

like a gigantic chunk of costume jewelry" (SA 120).

Similarly, Hagar clings to social propriety. She derides Doris' faulty grammar. She rebukes Murray Lees for forgetting his manners when they are in a deserted musty cannery together. And she expresses annoyance that in a hospital ward she must sleep "cheek by jowel" with "heaven knows who all" (SA 255).

Even when she is dying Hagar longs for emotional control such as she learned when a child in Manawaka. Throughout The Stone Angel she emphasizes her humiliation at losing control of herself, appalled at her uncontrollable tears and her unguarded speech. Equally humiliating is her loss of physical control -- her incontinence, her constipation, her inability to even undress herself.

Such acknowledgement that Hagar continues to accept Manawakan values and to pass them on to her sons throughout her life, however, negates neither her constant rebellion against Manawaka nor her personal growth as she begins to reconcile these two warring sides within herself. Like Vanessa and Rachel and Stacey, Hagar gradually becomes more and more aware that Manawaka required masks, and that she herself had assumed a façade which strangled something important inside her. Because Margaret Laurence has arranged Hagar's flashbacks chronologically, it is possible to trace the development of this perception, and to examine the nature of the rebellious self behind the mask of Hagar Shipley.

As a girl, Hagar describes herself as rebellious. She also describes quite vividly the strong Highlander ancestor whom she imagines must have bequeathed some strength to her. But in describing her

girlish regret that he had abandoned his descendants to the prairies, she seems to fear that in Manawaka, so far from the Scottish homeland, her inherited strengths may have been diluted or paled by the prairie experience:

How bitterly I regretted that he'd left and had sired us here, the bald-headed prairie stretching out west of us with nothing to speak of except couchgrass or clans of chittering gophers or the gray-green poplar bluffs, and the town where no more than half a dozen decent brick houses stood. . . . (SA 15).

Similarly her girlish pride in her "toughness" causes her to scorn Manawakan values: she refuses to cry when her father expects it and scorns weak-minded Regina Weese. But at the same time Hagar wonders vaguely why she so squeamishly avoided the egg-smashing that Lottie Drieser could carry out. In both instances Hagar experiences pride in the ancestry which has given her personal strength and individuality beyond the ordinary but simultaneously experiences fear that she may not live up to that ancestry. Hagar fears above all any vulnerability or weakness in herself which may cause others to think less of her.

Later, as a married woman, Hagar similarly takes pride in her control which she equates with strength of character. In her relationship with Bram she holds herself back, refusing to communicate with him through sex: she says, "I prided myself on keeping my pride intact, like some maidenhead" (SA 81). When Bram confronts her about her squeamishness about real life, pointing out that horses are acceptable to her only when they are in pictures and can't drop manure (SA 83), Hagar remains silent, masked, admitting no weakness, no

vulnerability, to him.

It is during her marriage to Bram, however, that Hagar first recognizes that this stoical sort of pride has rendered her masked. Significantly, this revelation comes to her as she gazes at her face in a public mirror in a town washroom: she is horrified and says, "Only the eyes were mine, staring as though to pierce the lying glass and get beneath to some truer image, infinitely distant" (SA 133). Hagar has seen that her exterior self in its aloofness is not real, that something is missing.

Recognition that she is masked does not suddenly alter Hagar. When Marvin has left and John dies after a drunken driving spree, Hagar's emotional control, her mask, is a reflex action:

. . . I shoved her arm away. I straightened my spine and that was the hardest thing I've ever had to do in my entire life, to stand straight then. I wouldn't cry in front of strangers, whatever it cost me. (SA 242)

And as an old woman Hagar notes she has retained some of her mask, for she believes one must dissemble for the sake of others, like Marvin (SA 5). Indeed, part of Hagar's dignity in old age hinges upon her ability to retain a social mask as a guard against total invasion of her privacy; at one point when her mask is threatened she says,

My head is lowered, as I flee their scrutiny, but I cannot move and now I see that in this entire house, mine, there is no concealment. How is it that all these years I fancied violation meant an attack upon the flesh? (SA 74)

Yet it is through recognition of masks, her own and those of others, that Hagar is eventually able to reconcile the antagonistic

forces within herself. As a girl she intuitively penetrates her father's mask when he beats her, then says it has hurt him more than her; Hagar calls this a "barefaced lie" (SA 10). As a young woman she perceives Bram's mask. She notes with some surprise that despite his belittling of town values he too wants a dynasty, just as her father did; and she later states with some scorn that Bram is trying to impress the threshing gang by boasting of the improvements he will make to the place by next year. Though she laughs at her father's pretence and despises Bram's pretensions, by the time Hagar recognizes Mr. Oatley's façade she is rather sympathetic; grateful for the cool distance he keeps between them, she describes him in a way that highlights his loneliness:

That house of Mr. Oatley's -- like a stone barn, it was gigantic, and he there alone, living in the library, speaking feelingly of his love for the classics and slipping detective novels between the calf-bound covers of Xenophon's Anabasis, scarcely setting foot in the drawing-rooms and yet insisting that everything be kept up to scratch for the visitors who never came. I can't complain. He was good to me. (SA 155)

Her sympathy for Mr. Oatley foreshadows Hagar's ultimate recognition that her own sons are masked, and that she has made them that way. John at one point tells Hagar that she always bet on the wrong horse: "Marv was your boy, but you never saw that, did you?" (SA 237). In truth, Hagar "bet" on neither. She manipulated both, altered both, but saw in John more potential. When Marvin's grammar never improves, when Marvin refuses to wear the sailor suit she prefers, when Marvin enlists for World War II although he is only

seventeen, Hagar relinquishes him quickly for, in her opinion, he is the sort of boy destined for such a duty anyway. Later Hagar recognizes that he had masked himself in self-protection: "It seemed to me that Marvin was the unknown soldier, the one whose name you never knew" (SA 182). In fact it seems no accident that Marvin becomes a house-painter (a maker of façades) and that Hagar finds this information worth recording.

With John, Hagar's manipulation is more drastic. Assuming from his birth that John is the son her father would have wanted,⁴ Hagar tries constantly to improve him. The Shipley place must have pictures so John will be cultured. John must have the Currie pin and value it as the true heir of the Clanranald MacDonalds. John must have proper clothes and the right friends. Thus by the time that John is a schoolchild he is torn. He weeps because his friends mock "Bramble Shitley;" however obscurely, John loves his father and is enough like him to care for him in his last illness and imitate him in self-destructive drinking bouts. He learns to lie about his friends at school, inventing fictitious ones in an effort to please his mother. And he learns not to communicate well with others, as Hagar observes when she sees John and his half-sister Jess speaking in "parallel lines that never met" (SA 195).

Indeed there is irony in the manner of John's death. In one of the rare unmasked conversations between John and his mother, he has just spoken clearly concerning his relationship with Arlene: "This may come as a shock to you. But it's not her grandfather I'm going around with, nor she with mine" (SA 204). But his clear statement to

his mother brings about her last attempt to manipulate him: when Hagar and Arlene's mother arrange to send Arlene away to separate the lovers, it seems quite obvious that John responds, subconsciously at least, by killing Arlene and himself in a fatal drinking accident (SA 239-40).

Hagar, moreover, realizes that she has destroyed her sons and that she must make amends in some way before she dies. Thus her personal identity crisis (her discovery that her proud mask has robbed her of something in life) is compounded by a sense of having sinned against her sons (by attempting to force a mask upon them). Like Vanessa, Rachel and Stacey, Hagar seeks escape or release from her tension. But because her crisis comes so late in life, when she has really only the experience of death left, her "escape route" is more complex than Vanessa's or Rachel's or Stacey's.

To begin with physical release, Hagar is, of course, beyond sexual pleasure. In view of her own sexual life -- where physical enjoyment was never paralleled by verbal communication with Bram -- Hagar can only envy and admire the sexual communion that others achieve. Thus, though she resents the "nerve" of John and Arlene, making love on her Toronto couch in broad daylight, she grudgingly admires their openness with one another:

Nothing to bless themselves with, they had, not a penny in the bank, a gray shell of a house around them, and outside a grit-filled wind that blew nobody any good, and yet they'd closed themselves to it all and opened only to each other. It seemed incredible that such a spate of unapologetic life should flourish in this mean and crabbed world. (SA 208)

Hagar's own substitution for sexual experiment all her life is physical activity, especially work. This is also denied to her as an outlet when she is old. It is true that Hagar does "escape" physically in face of the threatened Silverthreads Old Age Home, but surely her journey to Shadow Point and its deserted cannery is abortive, for Murray Lees notifies Marvin and Doris, who recapture her -- now, of course, for the hospital rather than the nursing home. There, bedridden and trussed, she cannot even administer to her own bodily needs.

On the other hand, release through the imagination is also limited in Hagar. She says that her imagination was always active when she was a child, teaming with "phantoms, soul parasites with feathery fingers, the voices of trolls, and pale inconstant fires like the flicker of an eye" (SA 205). And as an old woman she does imagine that she can impinge on the fantasy of the small girl and boy on the beach; she does imagine that metallic-looking dead June bugs in her hair will restore her to queenly beauty; and she does imagine that Bram has been restored and she can now reach him by speaking, "Bram, listen --" (SA 116). But, for the most part, for Hagar, imagination is confined to the more realistic realm of memory, and if it is to serve her it must be through some reconciliation of herself with her past.

Ultimately Hagar's solution lies neither in physical release nor in fantasy, for her particular Manawaka-mask is a social one, expressed through snobbery, through manipulation of others, and above all through pride. Hagar's pride has always been a two-sided trait. On the one hand it is the source of her strength, the rebelliousness

and the independence she knows she has inherited from staunch Scottish forebears. On the other hand, it is also her weakness, and at this point (when she recognizes how through pride she destroyed her sons) Hagar herself speaks of it as a sin, connected to her fear of weakness and vulnerability;

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. Oh, my two, my dead. Dead by your own hands or by mine? (SA 292)

Thus her release must come through spiritual gestures -- reconciliatory and humbling -- toward those she enmeshed, as if in setting them free she herself will be liberated into death.

It follows that when Murray F. Lees wants Hagar's pardon for betraying her location to her son, at first she is too proud to bestow it; but when she does forgive him ("bless" him), she feels immediately "lightened and eased" (SA 253). When Sandra Wong needs a bedpan, Hagar's first reaction is anger and she is too proud to go for it; then she fetches it at great cost to herself and immediately knows the release of "paining laughter" followed by peaceful sleep (SA 302). More significant is Hagar's attempt to make peace with her sons. Through Murray Lees and the purgatory of the cannery, she makes her peace with John in a fever of sickness and hallucination, then knows such release that she says she could have begged pardon of God that night (SA 248). And, finally, her very real gesture toward Marvin, through what she calls a "lie," seals her peace; she tells him, "You've not been cranky, Marvin. You've been good to me, always.

A better son than John" (SA 307, 304).

At this point Hagar has humbled herself and made peace with others. Consequently she feels more than she had ever expected of life (SA 305), and knows the joy she was previously missing:

This knowing comes upon me so forcefully, so shatteringly, and with such a bitterness as I have never felt before. I must always, always have wanted that -- simply to rejoice. How is it I never could? (. . .) Every good joy I might have held . . . 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? (SA 292, italics mine)

Hagar's proud and stoical mask -- while the source of her strength in time of hardship -- had cost her the pleasure of rejoicing with those she loved.

Hagar's language, particularly her inner personal imagery, supports this interpretation of her struggle as acknowledging some sort of mask in her personality, then breaking free in a limited sense at last. Hagar's name, as critics point out,⁵ in its biblical context suggests bondage, and her consistent image of herself as an Egyptian, caught in a spiritual desert, reinforces this impression. She imagines her mother's angel-memorial was carved by Italian masons for the "needs of fledgling pharaohs in an uncouth land" (SA 3). She calls herself an "Egyptian with rowanberries in her hair" and speaks of her three-year service in her father's house in Egyptian bondage terms (SA 40, 43). When she is old and undergoing hospital tests, the pattern of imagery continues: ". . . I may disintegrate entirely, like the flowers found on ancient Tutankhamen's tomb, which crumbled

when time flooded in through broken doors" (SA 111). And in the end she feels herself to be a mummy-like exhibition, for all to see, imprisoned in a museum case.

Connected with the Egyptian imagery which suggests bondage, is Hagar's perception of herself as a trapped animal, such as a fenced cow, or an impaled earthworm. At times, in related imagery, she compares herself to a helpless insect, like an overturned ladybug or a caught fish.

Most frequent among Hagar's self-images which emphasize her bondage are bird images. She calls herself a malevolent old crow silent on a fence. She says her heart beats "like a berserk bird" against her "cage of bone" (SA 95). She compares herself to an old hawk caught and wonders, "Have I grown so weak I must rejoice at being captured, taken alive?" (SA 251-52). And in the end, the final indignity, she is strapped into bed, in her phrase, like "a trussed fowl" (SA 285).

To some extent Hagar's image of herself as trapped is balanced by her perception of the wilderness, or even the settled prairie beyond town, as free and exciting. As a child Hagar sometimes endowed the shanties outside town with a magical fairy quality. But later the prairie seems more frightening to her: during storms the lightning reminds her of angry claws at the cloak of God, and the depression-pocked landscape seems deadening and hostile, full of boarded windows like bandaged eyes, barbed wire fences, and Russian thistle (SA 161). Eventually, when she contemplates the wilderness beyond the prairie, it is in Old Testament terms: it amuses her to imagine Mr. Troy's

reaction to a "locust-fed" raving John the Baptist emerging from the wilderness, but she knows she would be terrified too (SA 38).

In effect these two sets of images -- those of Egyptian bondage and those of a fearful wilderness -- correspond to the duality within Hagar; she sees Manawaka as binding and too restrictive, yet she feels drawn to its security and ancestral strength when faced with the larger world outside. And given Hagar's hatred of her own bondage, but fear of the wilderness, it seems she would have remained poised between the two, had not the threat of Silverthreads intervened and acted as a catalyst to drive her toward the wilderness, to Shadow Point and the deserted cannery. Her physical journey to Shadow Point, then, becomes highly symbolic, for Hagar has chosen rebellion or at least independent action as a means of solving her inner conflict as well.

Frank Pesando has called Hagar's voyage to the sea "sinister" and links it to an apocalyptic (in the Old Testament sense) vision of hell.⁶ In fact Hagar's experience there is less hellish, as Pesando uses the term, than purgatorial. To begin with, the cannery is a hostile, punitive place. The ferns overgrow the steps and branches puncture Hagar's arms like needles. The sea is alien and chill, like a strange frozen planet, full of "sly-eyed serpents," killer whales and "phosphorescent creatures dead to the daytime" (SA 224-25). While there Hagar visualizes fellow-creatures suffering, fish scaled and writhing and clams with fluted shells pried open. If, as D. G. Jones suggests, she goes to the wilderness to reclaim herself,⁷ it is a redemption through suffering (cold and sickness and hallucinations) and Hagar herself thinks of it in purgatorial terms, wondering what

albatross she must have slain to be so punished (SA 186). One is reminded in this flight of what Hagar said of a former flight, to the city and Mr. Oatley:

To move to a new place -- that's the greatest excitement. For a while you believe you carry nothing with you -- all is cancelled from before or cauterized, and you begin again and nothing will go wrong this time. (SA 155) -

Predictably, at the cannery, through Murray Lees, Hagar does redeem herself, being forgiven by John in a mystical exchange and forgiving Mr. Lees in turn. And the remaining experiences by which Hagar frees herself (her kindness, humility and joy) stem directly from this purgation.

Undoubtedly the central and conclusive image in Hagar's experience is the Stone Angel of the title. Hagar is the stone angel, of course, blind at the start of the story, called "angel" by her son John who knew her best, left in the end alone in a "bed as cold as winter" (SA 81). More important, Hagar sees herself as the stone angel, at least subconsciously: she describes her old skin as white and chalklike, as if left out in the sun too long (SA 54). She describes her skin at another point as "silvered white" and her hair as "damask" as if she were not human but cast from some ornamental substance (SA 79). She compares herself in old age to a snow angel caught in a blizzard and about to freeze. And, very clearly, she states at John's death, "The night my son died I was transformed to stone and never wept at all" (SA 243).

Hagar's attitude toward the fate of the stone angel, moreover, reflects her own progress from pride through self-acceptance and

redemption. In the beginning she mocked the stone angel for representing her mother's "feeble ghost" (SA 3). But as time goes on and Hagar sees that she too is masked, bound and stone-like, she identifies with the statue so strongly that she forces John to restore it when it has fallen, and tries to wash off the wanton lipstick marks on it that offend propriety. Only in the end, when Hagar is working to free herself of the mask of Manawakan propriety that bound her all her days can she look at the angel, tilted and askew, and not worry about its appearance, saying of her last visit: "We didn't touch her. We only looked. Someday she'll topple entirely, and no one will bother to set her upright again" (SA 305).

Hagar's last gesture, in seizing the glass from the nurse, is, of course, a re-assertion of her pride, her rebellious sense of independence. But as a gesture of independence it can best be seen against her previous statement, "Oh I am unchangeable, unregenerate" (SA 293). Hagar has made several basic changes in her life: she has shed her aloof and proud mask and bent to reach out to her sons, to Murray Lees, and to Sandra Wong; and in doing so she has known joy and freedom from certain Manawakan inhibitions for the first time in her life. Images of baptism assert Hagar's spiritual renaissance. She says, in the novel's final episode, that she is "bloated and swollen like soft flesh held under by the sea," and her taking a glass of water as a final gesture reinforces this impression of grace and spiritual rebirth.

But, like Rachel, Stacey and Vanessa, Hagar in her final sequence acknowledges the source of her strength in making these

gestures -- the independence which is also an inheritance from Manawaka and is "unchangeable," "unregenerate" (as it should be) within her.

Like the other three Laurence protagonists, Hagar Shipley is ambivalent toward Manawaka and achieves "freedom" partly through recognition that she will never be completely free, partly through recognition that freedom is to some extent the ability to love, to share, to give of oneself to others. Like the stone angel itself, her spirit must ultimately "topple entirely" in the face of death but with her last breath she can and will -- in the words of Dylan Thomas used as the epigraph of the novel -- "Rage, rage against the dying of the light." Paradoxically, rebellion against the submissiveness she had assumed to be Manawakan was also a Manawakan trait.

Footnotes: Chapter VI

¹Margaret Laurence, The Stone Angel (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964), p. 282. All other references to The Stone Angel will be to this edition and will be identified by page number (preceded by SA) within the text.

²The adjective "astringent" is Hagar's own: she describes the Currie house, for example, "where the air was astringent with mothballs" (p. 59).

³Again and again Hagar emphasizes that the Shipley place -- until Bram leaves it -- is disgraceful, as if to assure herself that she did have grounds, surely, for deserting him. At one point, for example, she describes the outside of the homestead with its rusting machinery like aged bodies on the lawn and its porch caving in like toothless jaws (p. 169). Then she berates the inside of the house as well, where dust lies thick and the flower pattern on the rug is barely discernible through the dirt (p. 171).

⁴Whenever Hagar mentions John's qualities, she stresses that he is a better son because her father would have been so proud of him. She says: "A great pity your grandfather never saw you, for you're a boy after his own heart" (p. 123). It is as if, in fact, Hagar sees in John the son her father wanted when instead he got her (see p. 14).

⁵Several critics connect Hagar Shipley to the Old Testament Hagar, and Old Testament images do dominate in The Stone Angel.

William New makes an interesting point, however, when he connects Hagar not only to the Hagar of Genesis but also to the New Testament interpretation of Genesis: New cites St. Paul's references to the Hagar of the Old Testament and illustrates that St. Paul's "Agar" is strongly associated with the concept of bondage. William H. New, Introduction to Laurence, The Stone Angel, p. viii.

⁶Frank Pesando, "In a Nameless Land: The Use of Apocalyptic Mythology in the Writings of Margaret Laurence," Journal of Canadian Fiction, 2, No. 1 (Winter 1973), 54-55.

⁷D. G. Jones, Butterfly on Rock: A Study of Themes and Images in Canadian Literature (Toronto: University Press, 1970), p. 44.

Chapter VII

Connections Between the Novels

At this point, following analysis of her four Canadian-set novels, it is possible to outline connections between Laurence's major works of fiction and to propose a theory based upon those connections. Margaret Laurence's use of Manawaka, it can be argued, is connected with the puritan ethic. The ambivalence which her characters feel toward Manawaka is in essence an ambivalence toward the values of puritanism.

To some extent, of course, Laurence's female protagonists are individual and distinctive. Vanessa, in A Bird in the House, is a fledgling character. In her chrysalis state she is learning the necessity for physical and emotional control in Manawaka, and experiencing the first tensions that such control brings. Rachel, in A Jest of God, is caught in the same small-town environment, but -- after years of repression -- she struggles to free herself from its strictures through emotional and physical expression. Stacey, in The Fire-Dwellers, is masked like Vanessa and Rachel, but has the emotional and physical outlets (through her marriage and children) that Rachel completely lacks. Stacey's dilemma is to reconcile her own personality, with its imperfections, and her self-expression, with

the demands of society and the needs of her children who are so influenced by her strength or lack of it. Hagar Shipley, on the other hand, goes beyond Stacey. In The Stone Angel, after a lifetime of controlled behaviour and repressive, dominating motherhood, she must make amends for the pain she has caused others and realize within herself some of the joy she has missed throughout her life. In Hagar the necessity for balancing personal independence and social responsibility peaks.

In spite of such individual differences between the characters, however, valuable connections between them can be made. Each protagonist is female and clearly depicts a separate stage or period in female life. The reader therefore tends to see the protagonists collectively, and it seems significant that in her own introduction to Sinclair Ross' short story collection, The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories, Laurence has tended to see the Ross characters collectively. She sees still fairly young women trying to resign themselves to a drab existence, "shut into themselves, shut out of their husbands' inner lives," and she notes, "In lieu of expressed love towards their men, these prairie women take refuge in attempting to instill small and rigid and meaningless portions of 'culture' into their children's lives."¹ Whether or not she is correct in assessing these stories, in her emphasis on women collectively, and upon women passing on values in a small, enclosed society, Laurence appears to be reading her own predilections into Ross' work.

Some critics have attempted to connect the repressed female protagonists of Laurence's Canadian-based novels in a similar way.

Phyllis Grosskurth, considering The Stone Angel, A Jest of God and The Fire-Dwellers, notes: "Aspects of Women might serve as a general title to Mrs. Laurence's three explorations of female problems."²

Barbara Pell, in an unpublished thesis, includes A Bird in the House and sees Laurence as depicting the "four ages" of women: Vanessa as childhood with its emphasis on conformity, Rachel as adulthood with its guilt and paranoia, Stacey as motherhood with its social pressures and family anxieties, and Hagar as old age with its acknowledgement of a lifetime of loss.³ Alternatively, on a mythological level, as Elizabeth Waterston interprets Canadian literature, Margaret Laurence can be seen as covering the universal "story of life" -- a hero, or central figure's birth (Vanessa), his quest or apprenticeship (Rachel), his marriage and maturity (Stacey) and his old age and decay (Hagar).⁴

Laurence herself, however, has in various interviews laid the foundation for an even stronger connection between the female protagonists in the four novels. She notes that although A Jest of God and The Fire-Dwellers were conceived simultaneously and The Fire-Dwellers was in fact begun first, after three of four starts it became apparent that Rachel's story must come first.⁵ She notes that Stacey is likely to become a matriarch much like Hagar.⁶ She points out that Stacey is, in various ways, "Hagar's spiritual grand-daughter."⁷ And she summarizes that, in actuality, she has dealt with four generations: Hagar's (the pioneer generation); Vanessa's parents' (the sons and daughters of pioneers); the Cameron girls' (her own); and Stacey's children's (the new generation).⁸

Hence there are strong reasons for connecting chronologically,

in a generational sense, the protagonists of Laurence's Canadian novels and thus for perceiving an ancestral line and a common heritage between those characters. Or -- seen compositely -- Margaret Laurence has, in other words, created one female protagonist whose lineage and "racial memory" reaches from the pioneer days of Canada to mid-twentieth century.

Yet if the novels are to be read as four phases of the same female consciousness, two important questions remain: what is the essence of that female experience; and what is the significance of that experience for Canadian literature?

Certainly each of Laurence's female protagonists is repressed, physically and emotionally, and each attempts with some success to escape her bondage. But, most significantly, each recognizes, at the same time that she will never be truly free of the bondage that is her heritage.

Thus Vanessa as a child, in A Bird in the House, experiences no intense inner crisis, yet she is learning to cope, as George Woodcock points out, "within small and threatened groups."⁹ In response to that small-town pressure, she feels, in her own words, "frantic to get away from Manawaka and from the Brick House" and she fears that escape is not possible; yet when her mother sells the MacLeod silver and the Limoges china and Vanessa does leave town to attend university, she reflects, "In some way which I could not define or understand, I did not feel nearly as free as I had expected to feel."¹⁰ Indeed, the mature Vanessa who returns to Manawaka twenty years later reminds us that she never really left Manawaka behind because, personified as it is by her

grandfather, its values are ingrained in the blood which flows through her veins.¹¹

Similarly Hagar Shipley, despite her reconciliation with her sons and her new-found ability to "rejoice" with Sandra Wong (these actions representing her liberation) retains much of her fierce pride (which she had connected to her lifelong bondage). Although Hagar recognizes that she is not entirely free of her pride (when she comments that she finds herself "unregenerate"), it is significant that Laurence chooses to end the novel with an assertion of Hagar's pride. When she seizes the drinking glass in a last defiant action, Hagar is asserting the value of her pride: it is her pride which causes her not "to go gentle into that good night;" and that, as the epigraph suggests, is her strongest, most admirable characteristic. Through this gesture which signifies her rage to live, Hagar echoes Vanessa in emphasizing the dual function of Manawaka within the formed character. For sensitive Manawakans it is necessary to recognize both the harmful side of its values, and the positive strength-giving side.

Rachel and Stacey also recognize their own limitations and the need for a measure of resignation in the end. Rachel copes with the influence of the small town upon her through a very clear compromise: she accepts the fact that she will never be completely free -- "I will walk by myself on the shore of the sea and look at the free gulls flying" (JG 175) -- and goes on from there. Stacey also survives because she accepts something less than perfect, through love for others, as Margaret Laurence explains:

Her freedom is a kind of inner freedom, which she only partially achieves, of course, by realizing and accepting the fact that at least until her children are grown up or away from the nest, there is simply no way she can get out without damaging herself and all of them more than she is prepared to do.¹²

Neither Rachel nor Stacey completely escapes; therefore, the inner strictures that influence the Manawakan character.

In fact, the clearest statement of the inescapability of the Manawakan heritage, and the necessity then to come to terms with it, is seen in the relationship between Stacey and Rachel. In A Jest of God, Rachel constantly looked upon Stacey as a freer spirit. Because she left Manawaka young, Stacey is assumed to live a life where "Everything is all right for her, easy and open" (JG 89). Stacey, on the other hand, refers in The Fire-Dwellers to her sister "always so clever" (FD 12) as if Rachel's intelligence somehow made life easier for her. Three points can be made.

First, there is irony in the complete isolation of the sisters, for each is totally unaware that the other is going through a crisis and would like to confide in her. Rachel, in A Jest of God, feels moved toward Stacey and says, "I want to see my sister" (JG 106).

Stacey is equally drawn to Rachel in The Fire-Dwellers:

I'd like to talk to somebody. Somebody who wouldn't refuse really to look at me, whatever I was like. I'd like to talk to my sister. I'd like to tell her how I feel about everything. No. She'd think I was crazy, probably. She's too sensible ever to do that sort of thing, like today, or like with Luke and all that. (FD 286)

Both sisters are so thoroughly "masked" that they cannot unburden themselves even to each other. Secondly, it wouldn't matter much where

Rachel and Stacey chose to live as adults. They were shaped by Manawaka, and life would not be easy for them because of the lessons they learned in Manawaka. Despite their different characters and circumstances, the Cameron girls are sensitive, individual, yet bound quite consciously to the past that they must sooner or later come to terms with. And thirdly (a point which substantiates or reaffirms the second), because each lives out the other's alternative (Rachel seeking escape to the city from the stultifying emptiness of her life, and Stacey seeking escape from the city and the overwhelming complications of family life) there is no real alternative, no escape: one's best response is not to run away, but to face that ancestry which is inescapable and draw upon what is strongest in it.

In fact both Rachel and Stacey do find the strength to face the future within the Manawakan heritage. Rachel leaves the town, but takes her mother -- a symbol of Manawakan values -- with her, facing an unknown future bravely. Stacey stays with her family, in a similar gesture of strength, for the inverse reason: she must pass on what is strongest in Manawaka to her children so that they can be transmitters of that heritage for the next generation.

Thus, taking her four characters together, Margaret Laurence's composite protagonist emerges as a woman who has found only partial liberation in her world. Survival (which is a limited sort of freedom) is for her largely a matter of courage and old-fashioned endurance in the face of tremendous internal strictures and external pressure on her life.¹³ But the protagonist survives, with some pride and dignity, because of her acceptance of her own limitations: and her new-found

strength to face those limitations (and to carry on fairly hopefully from there) comes paradoxically from the Manawakan heritage within her. The term "heritage" is appropriate, for the combination of acceptance (a sort of abnegation) and strength (a positive attribute within oneself) is linked in each case with a recognition of the power and demands of one's ancestry.

Hagar, for example, emphasizes the Scottish ancestry her father has bequeathed to her and kept alive through the constant references to the Highlander Curries sept of the Clanranald MacDonalds, until at her death she thinks of herself very clearly as being gathered in her new-found peace to her "fathers." Vanessa says of her grandfather that he was, perhaps, immortal in ways it would take her half a lifetime to comprehend (BH 205), and then in her closing statement, where she emphasizes her identity and strength of character, she alludes to the old man's blood in her veins. Rachel also stresses that she is her "father's child" (JG 148) and reinforces her generational ties by her repetition, as she at last takes control of her own life, that she is the mother now; it is as if the ancestral heritage must go on, in her, with or without her own consent. Stacey echoes the others in her concern for values passed on from generation to generation. She remembers the certainty her own mother felt in her values, wonders how to deal with her own children given her self-doubts, worries that Katie soon will have to take over as the mother, and in her resolution, at the end of the novel, feels confident because she will "mutate into a matriarch" -- a statement replete with implied certainties and ancestral truths.

To Margaret Laurence's female protagonist, the Manawakan experience -- the mask and one's limitation in escaping it -- is linked indisputably to her lineage, her heritage, her ancestry. Laurence has, moreover, in various articles and interviews, dealt with the centrality of the concept of ancestry to her work.

To begin with, she discusses very frankly the importance of her personal background to herself and her writing. Of herself and Neepawa, Laurence states:

I couldn't wait to get out of that town. Then, years later, I found I had to come back and examine all those things, examine my own family, my own roots and in some way put to rest the threat that had been there. I think that, in a sense, this is what I have done.¹⁴

And in the same article she states clearly, "I think that I came to write about my own background out of a desire -- a personal desire -- to come to terms with what I call my ancestral past."

Not surprisingly, therefore, Margaret Laurence connects ancestry to her main themes as a writer. Her most central theme, she explains in a 1972 interview with Irving Layton and Clara Thomas, is freedom, but freedom "linked with survival which . . . has to be linked with some kind of growth."¹⁵ Growth, she explains in an interview with Don Cameron, means "the individual coming to terms with his own past and with himself, accepting his limitations and going on from there, however terrified he may be."¹⁶ In a very recent interview with Graeme Gibson, she extends this idea:

Individuals can to a certain extent liberate themselves. But I don't think that they can ever wholly get away from some of the things that they have inherited, cultural things, concepts and so on. And I don't think that real liberation comes from turning your back on your whole past or on your ancestral past. Rather it comes through coming to some kind of terms with it. . . .¹⁷

Here Laurence reinforces one of her earliest statements about her art (in the OISE interview of 1970) where she stated her belief that liberation comes from freeing oneself from the dead hand of the past, without actually throwing it over.

Thus Margaret Laurence exhibits a certain ambivalence toward the ancestral past -- the very past symbolized through her concept of Manawaka. On the one hand, the repressive mask which Manawaka imposes on the protagonist is a harmful thing, for it interferes with her reaching out to others. Thus it is connected with the inability to communicate which Laurence has said is her "message," if she has one:

human beings are capable of great communication and love and very often fall very short of this. We simply do not communicate much or at as deep a level as we are capable, and one would hope through one's characters to point some of these things out.¹⁸

But at the same time each of the Laurence protagonists exhibits inner strength that seems connected in her own mind to the blood, the ancestry, the very past that binds her. Indeed the very words that the protagonists use in the novels -- Hagar's "clan," Vanessa's "immortal" and "blood," Rachel's "father's child" and "am the mother now," and Stacey's "matriarch" -- are connotatively strong, forceful and positive expressions.

This seeming paradox, or the basic ambivalence of the Laurence protagonist toward Manawakan values, then, invalidates any facile or one-sided interpretation of the Manawakan experience. For instance, in "False Gods and the True Covenant," a 1972 article, Sandra Djwa writes:

The characters of Margaret Laurence all live in the same little 'fundamentalist town' characterized by Mrs. Bentley and they all live their lives in stifling relation to the old gods of their fathers -- gods which are dead and no longer viable for today's world yet nonetheless inescapable gods. Dominated by these gods which in some cases have been assimilated into a harsh and punishing super-ego, each character lives a child-like or inauthentic existence dominated by the dead parental voices of the past.¹⁹

Djwa overemphasizes the negative aspects of the "gods," or the Manawakan heritage, and in noting a "fundamentalist town" and "a harsh and punishing super-ego" raises another problem -- the relationship between Margaret Laurence and puritanism in her Canadian-set stories.

If Manawaka, with its rigid, masking values, includes ancestral ideals and taboos that are to be construed as puritan, and if Margaret Laurence's female protagonists can be read as four generations of women affected by those values, the original generation -- that of Hagar's parents -- becomes very important. Hagar's father, Jason Currie, was a pioneer in Manawaka, one of the original Scots-Ontario settlers. Laurence, in describing that generation (and Hagar because she was so influenced by it), has written:

How difficult they were to live with, how authoritarian, how unbending, how afraid to show love, many of them, and how willing to show anger. And yet they had inhabited a wilderness and made it fruitful.²⁰

And certainly, much of Hagar's family life reflects this repression, which could well be called puritanical.

Puritanism, as an aspect of Mrs. Laurence's work, must be separated from the purely religious, almost ecclesiastical, interpretation often assigned it.²¹ First of all, puritanism may generally be used, as Patricia Morley notes, to imply a set of cultural attitudes such as a sense of sin and guilt, and a rejection of beauty and pleasure (as Hugh MacLennan, for example, sees it).²² It may also refer to the doctrine of work, propriety and frugality that Perry Miller stresses.²³ In his harshness toward Hagar and his emphasis to her on the value of hard work, Jason Currie represents this puritan generation in Manawaka. Secondly -- again as MacLennan would have it -- puritanism is often seen as a set of values which may continue in generations which have ceased to have traditional religious faith.²⁴ In Margaret Laurence's novels, in fact, the sense of real sin, the inability to take much pleasure in life and the overemphasis on physical work cease with Hagar's generation. Thus, thirdly, the definition of puritanism -- as it applies after the earlier generations -- must be broadened, if puritanism is to be detected there.

Certainly Rachel, Stacey, and Vanessa (to a smaller extent) all feel guilt. Vanessa, for example, remarks on how often one says "I'm sorry" in her family, as opposed to other families where "please"

is the magic word (BH 92). Rachel is constantly feeling guilty, as when she tries to contain her resentment of her relationship with her mother:

It's her only outlet, her only entertainment.
I can't begrudge her. Anyone decent would be
only too glad.

As I am, really, at heart. I'll feel better
when I've had dinner. I don't begrudge it to
her. . . . How could I? (JG 19)

And Stacey, too, feels much guilt toward her family as is indicated by the panic Luke arouses in her by repeating the "Ladybird" verse to her and suggesting her children may perish while she enjoys an affair (FD 236-37).

Yet the attention of the reader is less on the nature of that guilt than on their tremendous awareness of, ruminating over, their guilt. And in examining this psychological process, Levin L. Schucking's The Puritan Family is very helpful.

Schucking emphasizes the psychological effect of puritanism on the individual. He sees the puritan individual as possessed of a sense of personal dignity and a measure of self-awareness well above the ordinary.²⁵ "Guilt" or fear of guilt spurs such a person to a "searching and tireless pre-occupation with the self,"²⁶ which is, of course, a dominant trait in all Laurence protagonists from Hagar through Stacey. But Schucking's strongest point concerns the reticence of the puritan:

There is nothing that makes us more keenly aware
of the characteristic armour with which these
people surrounded themselves than the use of the
expression 'to give oneself away' to denote the
full opening of the heart.²⁷

And here, of course, Schucking is describing that same repression, or division between the public and private selves which can be called the Mañawakan "mask" and which so insulates Hagar, Vanessa, Rachel and Stacey.

To see Margaret Laurence's protagonists as "puritan," of course, is not particularly original. F. W. Watt, for example, describes

Hagar's sexual repression as "Puritan."²⁸ Sandra Djwa calls Margaret Laurence's "mode of perception, like that of Ross, . . . essentially puritan."²⁹ And Clare Alexander Darby in her unpublished thesis similarly sees Hagar and Rachel as "products of puritanism."³⁰

But puritanism is seen invariably by critics of Margaret Laurence's work as an essentially negative force, and Laurence herself, on the contrary, holds quite ambivalent attitudes toward that force. This is evident in her comment about Hagar's father's generation, however unbending they were, having made the earth fruitful, and in her evaluation of her own grandfather who was harsh and puritanical but passed on many characteristics, "both good and bad" to his descendents. One good characteristic he bequeathed to his family, in fact, was his tenacity,³¹ and tenacity or endurance is certainly a hallmark in Laurence's fiction. Indeed, Perry Miller also emphasizes both sides of the puritan personality and points out that the strength of the puritan mind was its "realism," its toughness, its ability to withstand any disaster, no matter how crushing.³² One is reminded here of the toughness of Hagar, Vanessa, Rachel and Stacey in their proven ability to face up to life, accept limitations and still forge ahead. Margaret Laurence's characters thus exhibit the

positive side of puritanism as well as its negative, repressive side. And perhaps it is this ambivalence toward the puritan ethic -- in its non-theological sense -- that most accurately places Laurence's work in the mainstream of Canadian writing.

Footnotes: Chapter VII

¹Margaret Laurence, Introduction to Sinclair Ross, The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), p. 9.

²Phyllis Grosskurth, "Wise and Gentle," Canadian Literature, No. 43 (Winter 1970), p. 91.

³Barbara Helen Pell, "Margaret Laurence's Treatment of the Heroine," M.A. Thesis, University of Windsor, 1972, pp. 100-101.

⁴Elizabeth Waterston, Survey: A Short History of Canadian Literature (Toronto: Methuen, 1973), p. 145.

⁵Laurence in Cameron, "Don Cameron Interviews Margaret Laurence," p. 11.

⁶Laurence, OISE tape.

⁷Margaret Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentences," Canadian Literature, No. 41 (Summer 1970), p. 15.

⁸Laurence in Cameron, "Don Cameron Interviews Margaret Laurence," p. 11.

⁹George Woodcock, "Jungle and Prairie," Canadian Literature, No. 45 (Summer 1970), p. 84.

¹⁰Laurence, "Jericho's Brick Battlements" in A Bird in the House, pp. 202-203.

¹¹Ibid., p. 207.

¹²Laurence in Cameron, "Don Cameron Interviews Margaret Laurence," p. 3.

¹³See Laurence, Introduction to Ross, The Lamp at Noon, p. 12.

¹⁴Clara Thomas, "An Interview with Margaret Laurence and Irving Layton," Journal of Canadian Fiction, 1, No. 1 (1972), 66.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁶Cameron, "Don Cameron Interviews Margaret Laurence," p. 3.

¹⁷Gibson, Eleven Canadian Novelists, p. 203.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 190.

¹⁹Djwa, "False Gods and the True Covenant," p. 45.

²⁰Laurence, "Sources," p. 82.

²¹See Darrett B. Rutman, American Puritanism: Faith and Practice (New York: J. G. Lippincott, 1970), pp. 4-7. He discusses the relationship between ecclesiastical puritanism and behavioural puritanism, and points out that everyone, puritan or not, was religious in the seventeenth-century English and American colonies. Nor was puritanism a unique set of economic, social or political values. In

essence Rutman equates puritanism with what we call middle-class values, or the "Protestant" ethic. These "puritan" tendencies can be separated from New England, then applied to values elsewhere.

²² See Patricia A. Morley, The Immoral Moralists: Hugh MacLennan and Leonard Cohen (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin and Company, 1972), p. 5.

²³ Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, The Puritans: A Sourcebook of their Writings (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), II, 384.

²⁴ Morley, The Immoral Moralists, p. 5.

²⁵ Levin L. Schucking, The Puritan Family: A Social Study from the Literary Sources (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 2.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁸ F. W. Watt, "Fiction," University of Toronto Quarterly, 34, No. 4 (1965), 374.

²⁹ Djwa, "False Gods," p. 49.

³⁰ Darby, Thesis, p. 3.

³¹ Laurence in Thomas, "An Interview with Margaret Laurence and Irving Layton," p. 66.

³² Miller, The Puritans, I, 59-60.

Chapter VIII

Margaret Laurence and Canadian Literature

In her ambiguity toward the puritan values embodied in Manawaka, then, is Margaret Laurence within -- or even at the centre of -- the Canadian literary tradition?

There is, of course, a very strong desire among Canadians to define the Canadian experience (as opposed to the American experience or the British experience), and to determine from that point whether there is a distinct Canadian literary identity. Even Northrop Frye, for example, approaches the problem of defining the Canadian identity very tentatively; in The Bush Garden he writes,

. . . I keep coming back to the feeling that there does seem to be such a thing as an imaginative continuum, and that writers are conditioned in their attitudes by their predecessors, or by the cultural climate of their predecessors, whether there is conscious influence or not.¹

And critics who do describe a Canadian literature often do so in terms of what the literature is not, or what it lacks, as if Canadian literature were a bleached-out after-image rather than something vital in itself. Thus George Woodcock, in a book on Mordecai Richler, notes the absence of any "distillation" of Canadian life -- due to the presence of so much regionalism -- in Canadian literature.² David Stouck,

in an essay entitled "Notes on the Canadian Imagination," sees the Canadian imagination as obsessed with "the limitations rather than the possibilities of human experience," especially when opposed to the very positive American dream of incorporating a conquerable frontier.³ And Margaret Atwood also describes the Canadian literary experience as lacking in vitality, governed in fact by the will to lose; consequently she summarizes,

The tone of Canadian literature as a whole is, of course, the dark background: a reader must face the fact that Canadian literature is undeniably sombre and negative, and that this to a large extent is both a reflection and a chosen definition of the national sensibility.⁴

Yet the Canadian sensibility has been shaped by the Canadian historical experience, and any overall interpretation of the nature of Canadian literature should take into consideration those fundamental shaping factors. In fact there are at least two very positive (that is, peculiar or definitive) aspects of that historical experience which may shed light on Canadian literature.

In North America, because it was a consciously-settled "New World," the mode of settlement of the frontier became a very fundamental cultural yardstick. Canadian settlement, moreover, differed basically from American settlement patterns. William Kilbourn, for example, in the introduction to Canada: A Guide to the Peaceable Kingdom explains that, in contrast to the American experience, lawlessness has never been a part of Canadian settlement mythology, because in Canada organized society arrived with the settlers or ahead of them:

the Bankers, the Ministers, the RCMP, the railway agent and the Hudson's Bay factor all preceded the people and organized for them.⁵

Margaret Atwood makes the same point in Survival:

Canada never had a Wild West, for the simple reason that the Mounties got there first. Law and Order and the garrison with its palisade were there before the Natty Bumpos and the settlers hit town.⁶

In Red Lights on the Prairies, James Gray adds (in discussing the settlement of Winnipeg) that this institutional establishment was actually "reinforced soon afterwards by the arrival of several thousand families from Ontario who took possession of the countryside in the name of the Queen, the Flag and militant Protestant Christianity."⁷

Hence, much like Grandmother MacLeod in "To Set Our House in Order," it appears that Canadians held from the beginning a vision of order as inherent, or at least desirable, in their universe -- and of order as connected to social institutions, with their implied social values.⁸

The second identifiable characteristic in the Canadian historical experience, and thus perhaps in Canadian literature, is connected with the first and involves a sense of place -- less in a strictly geographical sense than in a territorial and clannish sense -- located at its narrowest in the family and at its broadest in the small town or the urban neighbourhood. For example, Harry Boyle in his biographical account, A Pinch of Sin, celebrates "place" in a small rural, Ontario town, where he was taught by his relatives that "life is a kind of stew, and no matter what anybody says it goes better

with a pinch of sin."⁹ Edna Staebler (in Sauerkraut and Enterprise) evokes that sense of place in Kitchener-Waterloo where there is a passion for cleanliness and order, and even distinguished citizens are seen doing their own yardwork.¹⁰ The implication is that in the Canadian experience, whether it is an Ontario town or the more recently-settled west, family-centered communities are the dominant influence on the individual. Again Kilbourn summarizes this Canadian historical characteristic:

"Among peoples as diverse as the Metis and the Doukabours, the community and its custom was the dominating force. . . ." (italics mine).¹¹

The small town, therefore, (or urban neighbourhood, but that is less relevant here) and particularly the family as the institution within it which translates and passes on the social values of that small town, become extremely important in Canadian experience. They preserve order; and they create that sense of place which defines them, like islands, against the larger outside world. Indeed, given that small society -- that place defined by communal cultural values -- and given the Canadian emphasis on "order," the Canadian woman emerges as one likely to be valued for her conformity. Thus it is not surprising to note that a distinguished and erudite Canadian, William Osler, in his commencement address to nurses on May 7, 1913, advised women that their supreme virtue as active women should be "tact . . . the saving virtue"¹²: tact is a tacit declaration not to disrupt order, and to wear, instead, a very social mask such as the one adopted in Manawaka.

One other factor should be noted. While accounts of Canadian historical experience tend to focus on the institutions and their

values which have shaped the country, modern Canadian literature will -- as is true of twentieth-century literature in general -- concentrate on the individual and look (as through a telescoping lens) through the individual's eyes at the community and the vast country beyond. But to be valid, any general interpretation of Canadian literature which examines that individual must also take into account the historical factors, particularly order and the community, which created the Canadian sensibility in the first place.

There are currently two distinguished and fashionable ways of looking at Canadian literature. One "school" of interpretation centres on Northrop Frye and his "garrison" theory; the other thematic approach is Margaret Atwood's, as outlined in Survival. Both relate Canadian literature to geographical as well as historical factors and both go some distance in relating the themes of Margaret Laurence to Canadian literature as a whole.

Northrop Frye, in The Bush Garden, relates Canadian culture to Canadian geography, stating succinctly, "To enter the United States is a matter of crossing an ocean; to enter Canada is a matter of being silently swallowed by an alien continent."¹³ Using descriptions of nature drawn largely from Canadian poetry, Frye builds a case for seeing nature in Canadian literature as a large and hostile force, and the town or settlement as in essence a "garrison" against the encroachment of this bleak environment. Such a settlement automatically becomes repressive to the individuals within it:

A garrison is a closely-knit and beleaguered society, and its moral and social values are unquestionable. In a perilous enterprise one does not discuss causes or motives: one is either a fighter or a deserter.¹⁴

In a garrison, Frye continues, one does not question moral and social codes, for the garrisoned society feels itself too vulnerable to tolerate deviation. Indeed, the real fear is not of the outside world --

The real terror comes when the individual feels himself becoming an individual, losing the sense of driving power that the group gives him, aware of a conflict within himself far subtler than the struggle of morality against evil.¹⁵

Other critics, who follow Frye, expand this basic concept. D. G. Jones, in Butterfly on Rock, applies archetypal mythology to Frye's framework and sees the garrison/wilderness conflict in Old Testament terms so that Adam is seen as cast into an alien wilderness in Canadian literature, and scattered prairie settlements become archetypal, like the scattered tribes of Israel in bondage to alien powers.¹⁶ At the same time, because the garrison-town is repressive, the wilderness -- despite its usual portrayal in demonic imagery -- becomes a symbol of the unconscious and the irrational in the lives of the characters and a motive, to some extent, for escape.¹⁷ David Stouck, using the same basic concepts (such as the dwelling as a refuge from an austere landscape) goes one step further than Frye or Jones, and characterizes the Canadian imagination as a "romantic" one with its emphasis on retreat from social pressures toward nature, despite the fearful natural forces.¹⁸

Stouck's very debatable "romantic" construction aside, Frye's theory of the town as a garrison does, of course, echo those cultural characteristics (the emphasis on small communities and the emphasis on order in such small societies) found to be common to the Canadian historical experience. The town as a garrison also explains some aspects of Margaret Laurence's *Manawaka*, such as its emphasis on propriety, conformity and the wearing of a mask as an alternative to deviation and/or escape.

But the garrison theory does have flaws. Specifically, one is struck by the negativity of any portrayal of man caught so hopelessly in a rigid social pattern which is in turn dominated by the vast forces of nature. As D. G. Jones has stated, the difficulty is how to account for the affirmation of individuals in Canadian fiction (for characters are more than sacrificial victims in Canadian literature); Jones concludes,

The world is a wilderness; guilt, isolation, the menace of death are inherent in the human condition. Yet the problem of how to affirm such a world, posed over and over again in the work we have studied, is resolved by accepting these conditions. That acceptance effects a real transformation. . . . Then the wilderness becomes a garden.¹⁹

Such a conclusion is surely too facile. The Laurence protagonist, for example, achieves her limited sort of freedom not by total submission or mere endurance but rather through a balance between the pressures of society and the needs of the individual; her resolution of the conflict between herself (perhaps symbolized to some extent through the wilderness beyond *Manawaka*) and the social values of the

town, her family and particularly her ancestry, lies not in submission to external forces but in recognition that she has internalized some of those forces and can use what is good in those forces to effect a partial liberation. And as with any real person who because of ambiguities must live between polarities, it is a balancing act, precarious at best, but offering some satisfaction and optimism to that individual. Nor does the wilderness ever become a "garden," an Eden; growth depends on realistic as opposed to romantic perceptions in the renewed individual.

Margaret Atwood's approach in Survival is in some respects a more satisfying hypothesis. To begin with, Atwood focusses on the individual as he is portrayed in Canadian literature, whereas Frye takes a larger societal view. Atwood sees the individual as victimized by larger pressures: "stick a pin in Canadian literature at random," she says, "and nine times out of ten you'll hit a victim."²⁰

The larger pressures, moreover, go beyond the wilderness/garrison level. According to Margaret Atwood, in some Canadian literature sheer physical survival is stressed and in earlier writers the obstacles faced by the victim are external -- the land, the climate, for example -- but in later writers the emphasis shifts to obstacles impeding spiritual survival.²¹ Often, for example, the victim is trapped in a family situation but cannot break away;²² and often family influence is extended by what Miss Atwood calls "ancestral totems" -- usually "explorer" or "settler" figures, often personified by a domineering grandfather,²³ who become symbolic of group unity and identity and also exert great pressure on the individual through the family.

Atwood, of course, attributes the Canadian interest in victims to a broad cultural factor (the colonization of Canada through the American economy) but in her emphasis on a deep-seated cultural fear of extinction in Canada and in Canadian literature,²⁴ she does point out the ambivalence often associated with the individual: his desire for escape is constantly balanced against the importance of the group and collective preservation.²⁵ When the individual recognizes external pressures (usually those of the group upon him), he experiences internal pressure:

Sometimes fear of these obstacles becomes itself the obstacle, and a character is paralyzed by terror (either of what he thinks is threatening him from the outside, or of elements in his own nature that threaten him from within). It may even be life itself that he fears; and when life becomes a threat to life, you have a moderately vicious circle.²⁶

In the face of such dire emotional experience, survival -- bare survival -- becomes a priority in Canadian literature. The result is a very gloomy negative sort of atmosphere in Canadian literature, despite the fact that (Atwood maintains) there are a few "halting but authentic" breakthroughs by characters who are almost hopelessly trapped.²⁷

Like the garrison/wilderness theory, Margaret Atwood's survival hypothesis takes into account the emphasis on group or collective values and the collective emphasis on orderly conformity to social values. And especially in its exploration of the social values passed on through the family and its ancestral myths and values in Canadian literature, Atwood's Survival does shed light on Margaret Laurence's Manawaka-based fiction. Indeed, the emphasis in Survival

on the individual as caught between social values and individual freedom in Canadian literature reflects Laurence's characters' ambiguity toward Manawakan values in their struggle for emotional survival.

But, like the garrison/wilderness approach, the survival theory has limitations. One writer, Morris Wolfe, in reviewing the Atwood hypothesis, remarks rather wryly:

I keep having the nagging feeling that it isn't just Canadian literature that's about survival -- at least not any more. According to Robert J. Lifton, survival is the dominant theme in the literature of our times. If that's true it may mean that although economically the world is being Americanized, literarily it's being Canadianized.²⁸

The objection to seeing survival as an exclusively Canadian literary experience seems a valid one.

But more specifically, the portrayal of the survivor is flaccid:

Margaret Atwood writes,

The survivor has no triumph or victory but the fact of his survival; he has little after the ordeal that he did not have before, except gratitude for having escaped with his life.²⁹

In Margaret Laurence's fiction, as in other Canadian fiction, the individual after her experience is considerably more triumphant. In her resolution (at least temporarily) of her own divided allegiance to Manawakan values, in striking a balance or achieving a tension between social values and individual expression, the Laurence protagonist definitely experiences some optimism and some joy.

There is perhaps one other way of looking at Canadian history

and Canadian literature, and that is as an essentially puritan experience. Many critics perceive the Canadian experience as puritanical without calling it by that name. For example, G. Jones implies aspects of puritanism in the Canadian character when he stresses Canadian confidence in principles, doctrines and rules rather than in spontaneous processes in people and nature (this in Butterfly on Rock).³⁰ Similarly High Hood suggests a puritan basis in Canada when in a 1967 essay, "Moral Imagination: Canadian Thing," he suggests Canada missed the whole nineteenth century Romantic movement: in Canadians' preoccupation with settlement in that century, he says, "We worked with the moral and religious instincts (for we can hardly call them ideas) that we'd brought with us from seventeenth and eighteenth century England and France."³¹ To Hood, the Canadian lack of "Romanticism" led to emphasis on those very rigidities often supposed to be puritan.

Critics who do use the word "puritan" to describe Canadian experience, moreover, use the term harshly and rigidly. As early as 1943, in an essay called "The Problem of a Canadian Literature."

E. K. Brown assailed the puritan strain in Canadian literature and predicted its demise:

Puritanism is a dwindling force, and the time is not far off when it will no longer exercise its ruinous restraint upon the themes or language of a Canadian writer who is addressing the public.³²

Hugh McLennan (in Cross Country, 1949) also sees Canada as sombre and puritan, comparing the Canadian self-image to a Sunday suit and a stiff white collar -- a stifling uniform appropriate to the Canadian

character.³³ More recently, 1961, Ronald Sutherland attacks Canadian culture as absorbing the human insignificance and impotence aspects of the Puritan ideology, and refers to puritanism as a "psycho-philosophical hangover" in Canadian works, especially those by women writers.³⁴ Most significant, however, is Margaret Atwood's very rigid interpretation of puritanism in Survival: she emphasizes the grimly religious, obsessed-with-work matriarchs and patriarchs in Canadian literature, and connects their "cosmic rigidity" to Canadian economic colonialism:

Calvinism and Colonialism have always fed each other, and their interaction is circular: Calvinism gives rise to the "I am doomed" attitude, which fits into the Colonial "I am powerless" one.³⁵

Yet puritanism, as has been previously illustrated, can be seen as a positive as well as a negative force: it can be defined as involving stern, often guilt-producing values, embodied in ancestral and parental strictures; but puritanism also produces, in its broad definition, remarkably self-aware individuals who are capable, potentially at least, of drawing upon that heritage for the very strength needed to liberate themselves from its excessive controls. That is, puritanism carries within itself the potential for creative self-restraint.³⁶ And if, as Patricia Morley argues, in The Immoral Moralists, puritanism is seen as not exclusive to Canada but certainly very prominent in its culture,³⁷ it explains much about Canadian literature.

Puritanism would explain, for example -- without reference to economic superstructures as in Survival or to wilderness as in the

garrison theory -- the emphasis on grim perseverance in the Canadian imagination. In Kilbourn's words,

The need to wrestle a livelihood from a cruel land has put a premium on some of the sterner virtues -- frugality and caution, discipline and endurance. Geography even more than religion has made us puritans. . . .³⁸

Even the one very positive value which Margaret Atwood recognizes -- the ability in Canadian literature of characters to face the facts, grim as they may be³⁹ -- is an essentially puritan value and endemic to Canadian experience.

Puritanism would explain the emphasis in Canadian literature on patriarchal values. Canada as a young country is only a few generations from the pioneer stock who were puritan in outlook and from whose disciplined values arose the sense of order which prevailed in the families who together comprised the social values of the small, fairly isolated settlements. The Canadian writer is himself only a few generations away from the pioneer, puritan stock. The pioneer values have become the writer's ancestral past. Margaret Laurence maintains that almost all Canadian writers are writing, in one way or another, out of the experience of the founding generations:

What we really have done is to try in some way to come to terms with our ancestral past, to deal in this way with these themes of survival and growth, and to record our mythology . . . perhaps not consciously, but after a while consciously, this is what we are trying to set down.⁴⁰

In a sense, writers, at least through her generation, cannot avoid what she calls "the ancestral thing" -- "The feel of place, the tone of speech, . . . things that have been handed to you by your parents and

your grandparents and so on."⁴¹ And given the newness (historically speaking) of Canadian experience, it is hardly surprising that Canadian writers should create small geographical places -- like Manawaka, Horizon, or even St. Urbain Street -- and grapple with the stern, order-dominated values of the immigrant-founders.

Finally, puritanism explains the emphasis in Canadian literature on the search of the individual for meaning within his cultural context. Schucking, as previously discussed, argues strongly that puritanism produces self-aware, introspective characters. Certainly, Canadian literature (as appraised by Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood, for example), dwells on characters of sensibility caught between individual and social needs, and this sort of tension can be defined as puritan. One critic, Sandra Djwa remarks on the "equipoise" of such characters between their inner convictions and the traditional values (what she calls "faith"):

This sensibility does seem to emerge as a kind of latter-day psychological puritanism in which salvation is redefined in relation to the discovery of the self and true grace is manifested by a new sense of life's direction.⁴²

Although her language is fairly extravagant, the point that "salvation" comes through discovery of the self -- a self which involves strengths as well as weaknesses -- is good; it explains how survival in Canadian literature is not a matter of simply giving in to social pressures but of using what is in oneself to strike a balance between personal and societal values.

Margaret Laurence's Manawakan fiction, it has been argued, portrays just this sort of tension, equipoise, balance or ambiguity

between the communal/ancestral/social values and the aspirations of the individual. In her portrayal of Manawaka as "puritan" in that it reflects these stern ancestral values, she can be said to write within a very demonstrable Canadian tradition. And insofar as her characters exhibit strength and respect for these puritan values as well as some rebellion against them, the Canadian ambiguity toward puritanism -- with its good as well as bad aspects -- is similarly reflected.

Footnotes: Chapter VIII

¹Northrop Frye, The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1971), p. 250.

²George Woodcock, Mordecai Richler (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), p. 10.

³David Stouck, "Notes on the Canadian Imagination," Canadian Literature, No. 54 (Autumn 1972), p. 11.

⁴Margaret Atwood, Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 245.

⁵William Kilbourn, Introduction to Canada: A Guide to the Peaceable Kingdom (Toronto: University Press, 1970), p. xv.

⁶Atwood, Survival, p. 121.

⁷James H. Gray, Red Lights on the Prairies (Toronto: MacMillan, 1971), p. 6.

⁸This idea is also developed by Atwood, in Survival, p. 121.

⁹Harry J. Boyle, With a Pinch of Sin: Fond Recollections of a Rural Boyhood Some Forty Years Ago (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1966), p. 9.

¹⁰Edna Staebler, Sauerkraut and Enterprise (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969), p. 73.

¹¹ Kilbourn, Introduction to Canada, p. xv.

¹² William Osler, quoted in Robert M. Hamilton, ed., Canadian Quotations & Phrases, Literary and Historical (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965), p. 247.

¹³ Frye, Bush Garden, p. 217.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 226.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Jones, Butterfly on Rock, p. 15.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 33-34.

¹⁸ Stouck, "Notes on the Canadian Imagination," pp. 11-12.

¹⁹ Jones, Butterfly on Rock, p. 183.

²⁰ Atwood, Survival, p. 39.

²¹ Ibid., p. 33.

²² Ibid., pp. 131-32.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 79.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 132.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 33.

- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 245.
- ²⁸ Morris Wolfe, "Atwood's Guide to the Geography of Survival," Saturday Night, 88, No. 1 (1973), 33.
- ²⁹ Atwood, Survival, p. 33.
- ³⁰ See Jones, Butterfly on Rock, p. 67.
- ³¹ Hugh Hood, "Moral Imagination: Canadian Thing," in Kilbourn, Canada, pp. 29-30.
- ³² E. K. Brown, "The Problem of a Canadian Literature," in A. J. M. Smith, Masks of Fiction (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1961), p. 51.
- ³³ Hugh MacLennan, Cross Country (Toronto: Collins, 1949), p. 166.
- ³⁴ Sutherland, Second Image, pp. 68-69.
- ³⁵ Atwood, Survival, p. 239.
- ³⁶ The concept of creative self-restraint is expressed in Morley, The Immoral Moralists, p. 2.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- ³⁸ Kilbourn, introduction to Canada, p. xiv.
- ³⁹ Atwood, Survival, p. 141.

⁴⁰Laurence, in Thomas, "An Interview with Margaret Laurence and Irving Layton," p. 66.

⁴¹Laurence, in Gibson, Eleven Canadian Novelists, p. 194.

⁴²Djwa, "False Gods and the True Covenant," p. 49.

Chapter IX

Conclusion

One must return, in concluding, to the initial problem raised by critics regarding Margaret Laurence's later works: is Manawaka a too-limited environment or (especially in the case of Stacey) an overemphasized formative influence? Robert Harlow thinks so: in reviewing A Jest of God in Canadian Literature in 1967, Harlow writes of Laurence that

Her milieu is a small town, a cramped set of quarters, and her view of the world is correspondingly, and necessarily, narrow. Herein, it seems to me, lies the problem. The cosmic joke promised by the title, the technique and bare-bones narrative structure, is never delivered.¹

The word "cosmic" is important: in narrowing her artistic universe to Manawaka, a small prairie town, can Margaret Laurence depict a broader Canadian experience? Or, if she does depict an essentially Canadian experience, can she simultaneously be seen as an artist of universal import and relevance?

It is evident, as has been discussed, that Manawaka is a strong and formative influence in all of Margaret Laurence's Canadian-set fiction, and that Manawakan values are partially negative (as in their

masking, repressive effects) but have a positive side as well (as a source, for example, of strength, fortitude and endurance, as Laurence's characters demonstrate). It has also been argued that Manawakan social values correspond quite clearly to the so-called puritan ethic, which itself plays a large role in the Canadian historical and literary experience. Thus her fictional use of Manawaka, a repository of puritan values, does place Margaret Laurence in the mainstream of Canadian literature.

But the essence of Laurence's approach to Manawaka is surely her ambivalence toward it. Through her female characters, who together comprise a three-generational experience, one going from adolescence through old age, Margaret Laurence has dealt with the far-ranging effects of this Manawakan upbringing. None of her characters can "escape" their Manawakan heritage, yet none really wants to escape it in the end. Rather each character comes to realize that one cannot dismiss the past -- one's ancestry -- particularly when that ancestry is a source of strength as well as weakness. The Laurence protagonists retain a certain ambivalence toward their past, for while it is repressive in many ways, it is also a source of strength, pride and affirmation. Ultimately each resolves to accept what is best in herself and go on from there, realistically facing the future -- realizing all the while she can draw on the best from the past, the ancestral heritage.

But through this ambivalence toward the dominant social ethic (which in Canada seems to be a puritan value system), Margaret Laurence surely portrays simultaneously a fairly universal and contemporary

literary theme. Laurence herself has suggested the variety of responses which people can feel toward her work; she says of Hagar that while Canadians saw her as their grandmother, and American readers saw her as an old North American woman, British reviewers "saw her as a universal old woman about to come to terms with her death."²

That is, although her protagonists are Canadian and operate within a clearly Canadian value system, there is in Laurence's work a sense of the universal in the struggles of fairly self-conscious female protagonists for identity, for affirmation, for role extension, in the face of a repressive social structure. Despite the specifically Canadian overtones of *Manawaka*, it can on the universal level suggest the basic human dilemma of the individual wrestling with social needs and values (and wrestling with the degree to which he has internalized them, in their strengths as well as their weaknesses).

George Woodcock has expressed fear that regionalism, or celebration of locality, in Canada is so strong as to strangle any emerging national identity.³ Margaret Laurence, however, sees the use of regional settings as a way of reaching out toward a national identity, and then beyond it:

I don't think that Canadian writing has to express an identity which is homogenous. I don't think that it does and I think it is a good thing that it doesn't. If we have any meaning at all, it is in our variety — for example, it is a very different experience to grow up in a small prairie town in Manitoba, or in Halifax, or in Uklutet, B.C. or anywhere else in Canada. These are particular local experiences, but perhaps the writer's only way of getting at values and meanings which are able to reach out beyond their geographical boundaries is through portraying people in individual locales.⁴

Perhaps Desmond Pacey, however, explains the relationship between the local, the regional, the national and the universal best. In his essay on "The Canadian Imagination," Pacey opposes those writers who find Canada dull in comparison to the United States (which has vitality, youth) and the United Kingdom (which is picturesque, old). Such writers tend either to become satiric at Canada's expense or to concentrate on local idiosyncrasies to the point of emulating travel literature. Pacey demands instead that writers explore with seriousness, with probity, their local experiences. Then, Pacey argues, the universal, the human, will emerge:

Most literature which has universality, such as the novels of Hardy or the plays of Shakespeare or the poems of Milton, achieves this universality by the profound exploration of the central issues of its own place and time, and I am convinced that the Canadian works of imagination which will have universal appeal will be those which most searchingly explore Canada.⁵

In such a sense, Margaret Laurence achieves universal stature. She has depicted her "time and place" through Manawaka so clearly that it evokes a strong, definitively Canadian atmosphere.⁶ But Manawaka is also a microcosm, to some extent, which reveals a measure of truth about all human experience: that life is never easy for those who think, that the individual must relate himself to his time and place and must come to terms with his society and his ancestral past.

In imagining other people than Canadians reading Margaret Laurence and appraising Manawaka, one is reminded of a comment that Margaret Laurence herself once made about Africa. In The Prophet's Camel Bell (1963) she writes,

In your excitement at the trip, the last thing in the world that would occur to you is that the strangest glimpses of any creature in the distant lands will be those you catch of yourself.

That glimpse that everyone might catch of himself in her novels is perhaps the lasting achievement of Laurence's Manawaka -- for all that it appears to be a tight little world of modest consequence.

Footnotes: Chapter IX

¹Robert Harlow, "Lack of Distance," Canadian Literature, No. 31 (Winter 1967), p. 72.

²Laurence in Thomas, "An Interview with Margaret Laurence and Irving Layton," p. 66.

³George Woodcock, Mordecai Richler, p. 11.

⁴Laurence in Thomas, "An Interview with Margaret Laurence and Irving Layton," p. 66.

⁵Desmond Pacey, Essays in Canadian Criticism: 1938-1968 (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1969), p. 238-240.

⁶Undoubtedly part of Laurence's intention is to write for her own people. In Kroetch, Creation, p. 63, she says, for example, that "it is a good thing to be able to read, as a child, something that belongs to you, belongs to your people." But to see her as writing only for Canadians would be simplistic.

⁷Margaret Laurence, quoted in William H. New, Introduction to The Stone Angel, p. iii.

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