Margaret Laurence's treatment of the heroine.

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MARGARET LAURENCE'S TREATMENT
OF
THE HEROINE

By
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ABSTRACT

Women in Canada have long been the objects of religious and social discrimination. Our male-dominated literature has generally reflected, reinforced or romanticized this cultural stereotype and, consequently, the number of multi-dimensional, realistic, and independent women characters in Canadian fiction has been very small. Margaret Laurence significantly augmented this small company with her portraits of the twentieth-century Canadian heroine. The purpose of this thesis is to analyze her treatment of the heroine in her four Canadian books, and to assess her contribution to this important facet of our literature.

Chapter One outlines the cultural stereotype that surrounds woman's traditional repression, and briefly examines the manifestations and romantic variations of this cliché in our literature. Chapter Two examines Laurence's biography and first African writings to find the genesis of her concept and treatment of "real" womanhood, and it notes the appearance of certain themes that greatly influence her Canadian novels.

Laurence primarily views "real" woman as a victim of society, man, and her own fears and frustrations. She must search beyond her role-definition to find a personal identity and freedom. Chapters Three and Four examine Laurence's fictional representations of the four ages of woman, their victim-
ization, alienation, and quest for "survival with dignity".
In A Bird in the House Vanessa and Edna both suffer the repression of Grandfather Connor but learn to conquer their fears and find freedom in an acceptance of love and life. Rachel Cameron, in A Jest of God, is the victim of social repression which is further magnified and distorted in her adolescent mind. Only by confronting and acknowledging reality can she liberate herself from her demons. The heroine of The Fire-Dwellers, Stacey MacAindra, is haunted by the violent threats of society, and its pressures on her marriage and her sanity. But when she abandons her escapist fantasies and faces the reality of life and death, she realizes that she can survive. The Stone Angel, Hagar Shipley, proudly rages throughout her life against female role-definition but finds, at the last, in accepting the imperfections of her existence, she can accept herself and find brief love and joy.

Margaret Laurence's portrayal of the reality and individuality of the Canadian woman has "raised" the consciousness of many women, and enlarged the understanding of men. She has also encouraged several younger female writers and their heroines are now also attacking the old romantic stereotypes and announcing their presence in the traditional male bastion of Canadian fiction.
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I

THE WOMAN AS HERDINE

To the woman he said
'I will greatly multiply your pain
in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth
children
yet your desire shall be for your
husband,
and he shall rule over you.' (Genesis 3:16)

The traditional Puritan attitude toward woman rests
on a narrow interpretation of the Judeo-Christian tradition
which names woman as the first sinner. Tempted and temptress,
she initiated the conflict between man and woman, and Man and
God; she was punished with pain and subjection. This view is
sustained by a selective quoting from St. Paul which unfairly
casts him as an early male chauvenist:

Let wives also be subject in everything to
their husbands. (Ephesians 5:24)

Briefly, what honour women had received in the early Hebrew
community, in the early days of the Christian church, and
during the medieval veneration of the Virgin Mary was denied
by the Reformation. And the Puritans eventually brought the
repressive Protestant doctrines concerning woman as the devil's
tool into the New World.
Religious attitudes have changed remarkably little in three and a half centuries; even secular North America remains under the sway of its Calvinist past. Women's liberation has only begun to attack those theologians who express the consensus of our puritanical society when they say:

Woman as God designed her can only be understood and appreciated as she is viewed in terms of her position beside man.¹

Sanctified by one theological stance and administered by society, this statement represents an intolerable burden for many women. Denied the rights and status of an individual, defined only by her relationship to man, woman must perpetually redeem her original sin by obedience and service to a male master. The Book of Proverbs has been used as a means of elaborating on this role in some detail:

Who can find a virtuous woman?  
For her price is far above rubies.  
The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her,  
so that he shall have no need of spoil.  
She will do him good and not evil  
all the days of her life. (Proverbs 31:10-12)

And, after a list of her domestic duties, it concludes:

She looketh well to the ways of her household,  
and eateth not the bread of idleness.  
Her children rise up, and call her blessed;  
her husband also, and he praiseth her.  
(Proverbs 31:27-28)

Through the ages Proverbs' definition has constituted the ideal in fact and fiction. But in recent decades Simone de Beauvoir, Mary McCarthy, and now a growing legion of female authors are challenging his archetype. Among them Canadian Margaret Laurence has won a place of distinction, as her heroines define the anguish of modern woman declaring her own personal non serviam.

Women are liberating their minds, but the structures of Canadian society are slow to change, and historically have always reflected our repressive dual heritage of Catholicism and Calvinism. Marie de l'Incarnation, Jeanne Mance, and Marguerite Bourgeoys were considered the first prominent women in New France; they founded the traditional feminine "services" of schooling and nursing. They were followed by les filles du roi who were utilized in Jean Talon's "stock-breeding programme" for the new colony. There was never much concern for their situations and sensibilities, apparently, but our pre-eminent historian A.R.M. Lower hastens to reassure us that they didn't corrupt our forefathers:

Their morals no doubt were just those of most women - in the safety of marriage, perfectly reliable.2

He points out that women were such a rare commodity on the frontier that their "market value" was high. But if they

consequently exerted considerable power and privilege in the new society it was in the role of sex-object and "every last ounce of reproductive power" was exacted from them. Catholic Quebec honoured motherhood but suspected sex; therefore, "the conduct of women, eternal Eves, came in for constant ecclesiastical censure." The province of Quebec still has its own system of civil law, dating back to the "Custom of Paris" in 1663, which effectively denied the woman any legal voice; as recently as 1964, for example, a married woman could not even undergo surgery without her husband's approval.

Female status apparently was not improved in British North America. English common law was even more discriminatory toward women than Roman law. In 1867 a British court confirmed the status quo:

Women are persons in matters of pain and penalties but not in matters of rights and privileges.

Where the Catholics had at least honoured the motherhood of Mary, the Calvinists suspected every aspect of her sex.

The Canadian frontier woman was less restricted by class and manners than her European contemporary. But when the freedoms of the bush gave way to the proprieties of urban

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3 Lower, p. 35.
4 Lower, p. 60.
life, the nineteenth century Canadian woman found it easiest to conform to the role of "lady". Yet this role, too, was a creation of man, who fortified it with Victorian morality and embroidered it with romantic idealism. After the First World War women began to emerge from their cloisters, only to re-enter them again in a variation of Victorian domesticity during the great suburban migration and population explosion of the 1950's. But in the last ten years profound technological and sociological changes forced them to re-examine their eternal role of affectionate helpmate and obedient servant. They discovered that while their position appeared reassuring, decorous, protected, and privileged, it was ultimately restrictive, degrading, and powerless. They now demand equal partnership in a world conceived and controlled by men. But as the Royal Commission on the Status of Women has indicated, equality in business and public life is not much closer in 1972 than in 1915, for men still echo Stephen Leacock:

Practically all of the world's work is open to women now, wide open. The only trouble is that they can't do it.  

Women are still repressed by the suspicious mind-set of Adam's society, and their own guilty insecurities as Eve's daughters. But man's grip on our culture has been loosened by Women's Lib, and Leacock's statement no longer goes unchal-
lenged in literary circles. For decades the talents of accomplished female writers have been patronized with male generalizations about women as miniaturists, delicate sensibilities, and custodians of domestic custom. And criticism has too often judged a worthy novel by the sex of its author and protagonist ("a woman's book")\(^7\), rather than its literary merit. However, serious women authors are now storming the literary patriarchy. In Canada Margaret Laurence was one of the first to boldly probe Adam's exploitation, and articulate Eve's search for freedom.

We have seen how the **Calvinist** theology of woman's sin determined the historical facts of woman's repression. Similarly, the philosophical doctrine of dualism which mistrusts matter (therefore the flesh, therefore sex, therefore woman) gave rise to social discrimination against her:

> It is our misfortune to be tributary to the main current of dualism that swept through the classicism of seventeenth-century France. Historically, our country began at the time when the new casuistry was attempting vainly to free man from an excessive responsibility, at the time of the Jansenist reaction, at the time when Pascal was inaugurating our modern age of anxiety and Descartes was proposing his sovereign divorces to the Western World. It was also the time when a new type of man appeared, the bourgeois, the prophet of 'the average'. It is the bourgeois who goes into mourning for joy, dresses in black and turns over to woman, as though it were an immoral game, the pleasure of ornamenting the body. He distinguishes himself from her to

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assert his difference, for he is really intimidated and incapable of freely risking exchanges with her or of allowing any resemblances between the sexes. And since it is still a man's world, all the blame, the reproaches, the mistrust, and the severity are directed against woman - chief object of desire and chief victim.

In Canada all these factors influenced our male-dominated literature and were reflected in its treatment of the Heroine.

D.J. Jones elaborates on the cultural and psychological roots of our literature in *Butterfly on Rock*. Canadian writing is distinguished by a pervasive sense of alienation, most often symbolized by the Old Testament figure of Adam separated from God, estranged from Eve, and cast out of Eden. If there is a promise of future redemption and a New Covenant, the symbolic bearer is still sleeping, undiscovered. Meanwhile, Adam wanders in a wilderness of exile and isolation, guilt and conflict, fearing a jealous and angry God.

The land actually represents the most vital, instinc
tual elements in man's life. But he feels threatened and helpless before it and therefore rejects this world of spontaneous nature and erects a protective barrier of convention and community. In Northrop Frye's words, man has constructed a "garrison culture" to wall out this hostile wilderness. And our literature reflects this conflict between culture and nature. Ignoring the voice of the land crying at the gates,

the culture becomes progressively more entrenched, exclusive, artificial and pretentious; man's natural and authentic emotions are repressed and haunt his subconscious. This "garrison mentality" is a manifestation of the whole heresy of dualism in Western civilization.

And, in the dualist tradition, it is Eve, "the mother of all living" (Genesis 3:20) that symbolizes nature and the qualities of the land: the irrational, instinctive life, spontaneous passion, feeling, and intuition. Accused and despised by Adam, she represents the antithesis to "the masculine logos of Western culture", that exclusive, perfectionist idealism, that mixture of prayer and greed and rationalism taught by the schools and endorsed by the churches:

Rather than accept the world as it is, western man has sought to transform it, to refashion the world in the image of his ideal. Certainly he has enlarged his understanding of nature to an astonishing degree, but more often than not he has used this understanding to consolidate his power over nature rather than to extend his communion with her. He has persisted in opposing to nature the world of ideas, the world of his ideal, and in his idealism he has tended to become exclusive rather than inclusive, arrogant rather than humble, aggressively masculine rather than passively feminine. In extremes he has declared total war on the wilderness, woman, or the world of spontaneous impulse and irrational desire. At the least he has sought to subjugate these unruly elements within himself by force of will. More largely, he has sought to bind them in the body politic by force of law. And more ambitious

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still, with the increased confidence in his power, he has sought to control them in the world around him and even to eradicate them from the earth. 10

Our literature has traditionally reflected our garrison culture. The feminine characters in fiction are usually exploited and rejected by the community, like Judith in Ross' As For Me and My House and Peggy in Callaghan's The Loved and the Lost, or they are subjugated and repressed within the culture like Margaret Laurence's heroines. And Western man, devoted to Church, State and Marketplace, sanctified by Science and Religion, is embodied in literary figures such as Jason Currie, instructing his daughter in weights and measures and social conformity, placing a monument to materialism and conventional piety over the sacrifice of his wife to his masculine ideal. In Canadian novels, from Frederick Philip Grove to Leonard Cohen, women are portrayed as the eternal victims of male pride and fear. This victimization of Eve has been encouraged in our male-dominated literature. Although the best writers have often exposed it with sympathy (recognizing that Adam, in destroying that part of himself that is Eve, unknowingly "destroys the human spirit and life itself" 11), their women have still remained cardboard clichés and their emphasis has been on man's loss and his

10 Jones, p. 57.
11 Jones, p. 72.
point of view. Not until the advent of modern women authors, especially Margaret Laurence, was the reality of woman's alienation convincingly portrayed from the inside.

The problem of Job is existential paralysis. Like him, modern man confronts a Creation that, however powerful and awe-inspiring, appears most often violent, irrational, unpredictable, and especially in human terms, unjust. He can neither embrace the Leviathan nor completely alienate himself from his own world; in attempting to annihilate the threats of disorder and death, he only increases suffering and violence.

Many Canadian writers have dwelt on this difficulty of embracing nature in the face of violence, and accepting life in the midst of death. They have also emphasized that there is no alternative. Paradoxically, the only defense for a garrison culture is to let the wilderness in; the only salvation for man is to affirm and celebrate the world which will ultimately end in death. This requires great courage, Paul Tillich's "the courage to be". This courage does not resist or compartmentalize life, but affirms the whole man and delights in the universal nature of which he is a part. In order to do this, man must be reconciled with Eve; only through her can he rediscover his identity and unity with all nature:

Leviathan, the sea, all nature and all time become one in Eve, in Adam's rib... In the decision to embrace her, man would recognize that he has always embraced her. And in
doing so he would discover that he embraced himself.  
The solution lies in a feminine inclusiveness. A masculine exclusiveness leads only to despair.\textsuperscript{12}

This is essentially a sacrificial view of life, an existential variation of Christ's teaching that whoever would save his life must lose it. The experience of suffering and death adds a significant and valuable dimension to human existence, giving rise to love, pity and courage. To accept death as a natural process is to affirm life.

Leonard Cohen definitively explored this theme through the narrator of \textit{Beautiful Losers}. But Margaret Laurence has added a further dimension by articulating Eve's viewpoint. Death is the ultimate lesson for her heroines. Confrontation with Death strips Hagar of her concern for "proper appearances" and allows her to rejoice in her own feminine nature. Acceptance of death frees Rachel from her garrison mentality and gives her the courage to affirm life. Stacey goes on from Rachel, learns to live with death, and bravely attempts "to explore the possibilities of life, to articulate a wilderness of experience, to exorcise the ghosts of the dead or mute."\textsuperscript{13} Unfortunately these daughters of Eve never manage to involve Adam in their revelation; therefore Eden is never

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Jones, p. 127.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Jones, p. 165.
\end{itemize}
perfectly restored.

As we have seen, in religion, society, and culture women have always been the object of discrimination. But for centuries females, in fact and fiction, accepted and collaborated in their own repression. To justify their existence as non-males they attempted to serve the male ideal, confirming and conforming to Solomon's standard.

In nineteenth-century Calvinist Canada this model-wife-and-mother was an absolute necessity in establishing and stabilizing a garrison culture in a harsh land. Some women were particularly suited to this role by temperament and training. Catherine Parr Traill in her Backwoods of Canada and Female Emigrant's Guide has left an admirable record of role-conformity; she was a pioneer paragon, "the modest, capable, energetic wife and mother, bearing sorrows with fortitude and earning joy in her family's devotion and the achievements of her home-making."¹⁴ She found freedom and fulfillment in adapting to a situation which exercised her pragmatic creativity.

Her sister's creative imagination, on the other hand, was more dramatic and romantic. Susanna Moodie represents an acceptable variation on Solomon's pattern: "the romantic rebel, revolting against her predestined 'place', but so so charming, or gifted, or both, that sometimes an indulgent

¹⁴ Clara Thomas, "Happily Ever After", Canadian Literature, XXXIV (Autumn 1967), 43.
Providence has allowed her a happy ending. A talented and ambitious writer, Susanna was a rebel to her place and role, temperamentally at odds with woman's conventional position and especially ill-equipped and unwilling to conform to it in a harsh pioneer society. Roughing It in The Bush portrays her exile and struggle; she found her only freedom and fulfillment in her writing:

If these sketches should prove the means of deterring one family from sinking their property and ship-wrecking all their hopes, by going to reside in the backwoods of Canada, I shall consider myself amply repaid for revealing the secrets of the prison-house, and feel that I have not toiled and suffered in the wilderness in vain.

Susanna was slowly hardened, in temperament and appearance, by her environment; she eventually learned to bake bread and till the fields. But she was an unconventional farmer's helpmate for her imprudent husband and it required the intervention of "indulgent Providence" to save them from disaster. The Lieutenant-Governor, in response to Mrs. Moodie's charming and gifted plea, offered her husband the position of sheriff in the relative civilization of Belleville.

The Strickland sisters are factual illustrations that some women, by works or grace, do manage to "live happily ever

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15 Thomas, p. 43.

after" in our Calvinist society. But the role-conformist and romantic-rebel types have always been most common in popular woman's fiction. These sentimental, stereotyped heroines are now mainly confined to the pages of _The Ladies' Home Journal_ and Harlequin Romances, but until the mid-twentieth century they were the only fictional females created by Canadian women authors. This is not greatly surprising, "in view of the virtual monopoly of romanticism in Canadian fiction of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries". But it is a reflection, I believe, of the brainwashed, willing subservience of women that, long after Frederick Philip Grove exposed their victimization in _The Settlers of the Marsh_ ("the struggle began again, to end with the defeat of the woman")¹⁸, our best female authors went on dispensing the opium of conformity instead of demanding women's freedom to be themselves.

Sara Jeannette Duncan is an example of this. She wrote contemporaneously with Grove's first novels. "Canadian fiction had before her no woman writer of such literary skill and range, and has had only two or perhaps three since."¹⁹


¹⁸ As quoted in Jones, p. 76.

She was an exponent of "the analytical school of realism," patterning many of her themes and techniques after William Dean Howells and Henry James. Avoiding the sentimental didacticism of most nineteenth century Canadian novelists, she captured the essence of our small town life, politics and religion, with affectionate objectivity.

As an expatriate Canadian, Duncan was a strong advocate of Imperial Federation and she made it the ostensible subject of her one Canadian novel. But the authoress wisely never allowed her political convictions to mar the drama of her fictional creation. The real theme of this novel concerns the eternal conflict between social conventions and human aspirations, and it is worked out in the context of two romances. In a reversal of Henry James' usual scenario, the New World exercises a refining influence on old customs. Lorne Murchison is enamored of the Imperial idea in much the same feverish, obsessive way that he is in love with the pretty frivolous snob Dora Milburn. The failure of his Imperial dreams in a pragmatic Canadian election coincides with the loss of Dora to a shallow English dilettante, but Lorne has gained more in maturity and fortitude. His sister Advena's love for the Reverend Hugh Finlay is almost sacrificed for the sake of old world conventions until new world common sense and initiative intervene in the person of Dr. Drummond.

Although Duncan's writing can be self-conscious, overwrought, and old-fashioned, her dialogue, description and
characterization generally demonstrate the same fine perception and quiet humour that characterizes Margaret Laurence. The Imperialist is a realistic and revealing, social and political commentary. But her treatment of the heroine adds nothing to the comprehension of woman's reality; her novel simply reinforces the romantic stereotypes with two particularly memorable portraits.

Mrs. Murchison, the heroine's mother and model, personifies the Calvinist-Presbyterian ideal. She administers her household and family with energetic and charming competence. Her church, community, husband and children "rise up and call her blessed", for she is judged on the "proper appearance" of her house and table:

   It was a table to do anybody credit, with its glossy damask and old fashioned silver and best china that Mrs. Murchison had brought as a bride to her housekeeping - for, thank goodness, her mother had known what was what in such matters... Mrs. Murchison came of a family of noted housekeepers; where she got her charm I don't know. (38)

An interesting, likeable character, she is also provincial, petty, prejudiced, and "typically feminine", more interested in Lorne's shirts than the affairs of Empire.

Advena is the romantic rebel. To her mother's despair, she reads and dreams and walks in the rain when she should be practising domestic skills and acquiring feminine graces:

   When you have seen your daughter reach and pass the age of twenty-five without having learned
properly to make her own bed, you know without being told that she will never be fit for the management of a house... Advena justified her existence by taking a university course for women at Toronto and afterward teaching the English branches to the junior forms in the Collegiate Institute, which placed her arbitrarily outside the sphere of domestic criticism. (33)

But since every woman's fulfillment supposedly must be a man, Advena's gifts soon attract the intellectual Reverend Finlay. Their love and courtship, self-sacrifice and tragic parting, sufferings and miraculous reunion are surrounded by an aura of romantic melodrama:

She had a passionate prevision that the steps they took together would lead somehow to freedom. (70)

He was not prepared to take her out of the tempest, helpless and weeping and lost for the harbour of his heart. (248)

Of course this slight, sentimental, sexless treatment of the feminine "romantic interest" in the novel was customary in Duncan's time. But it seems oddly inconsistent with her serious, incisive, and realistic analysis of the masculine interests of politics and religion. Moreover, we sense that while the male characters are portrayed true to their natures, Mrs. Murchison and Advena, with the romantic gloss removed, might look more like Mrs. Cameron and Rachel in A Jest of God.

There is a third type of woman who, judging from our historical and cultural background, represents the real majority. She is the victim, the woman who can neither conform comfortably nor rebel romantically. If "a novel must deal
essentially with the eternal irony created by the conflict between manners and customs, on the one hand, and human desires and aspirations, on the other\textsuperscript{20}, this heroine's desires never accord with social demands, nor can she rely on Providence to ease her adjustment. Duncan briefly acknowledged this realistic figure in the person of Mrs. Crowe, worn and aged by years of toil and childbirth on her husband's farm, but then romanticized her with her final epithet:

She sat on the sofa in her best black dress with the bead trimming on the neck and sleeves, a good deal pushed up and wrinkled across the bosom which had done all that would ever be required of it when it gave Elmore and Abe their start in life. Her wiry hands were crossed in her lap in the moment of waiting; you could tell by the look of them that they were not often crossed there.... The whole worn figure was strenuous and the narrow set mouth and the eyes which had looked after so many matters for so long...the sum of a certain measure of opportunity and service, an imperial figure in her bead trimming. (188)

It was left to our contemporary women authors to portray this feminine counterpart of the modern male anti-hero, and attempt to articulate her alienation, victimization, and quest for identity and freedom. In Canada Margaret Laurence was one of the first of these modern women authors. Her portrait of the twentieth century Canadian heroine is the culmination of our past search for a realistic woman, and a

\textsuperscript{20} Claude Bissell, "Introduction", in Sara Jeannette Duncan, The Imperialist (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), p. viii
model for many of our later female novelists. And while Margaret Atwood, Marian Engel, Audrey Thomas, Alice Munro, and others may have drawn Eve more adventurously (in experimental style and sexual subject), none have yet captured her individual identity as well.
II

MARGARET LAURENCE'S HEROINE: THE BEGINNING

Most critics would agree with George Woodcock that the ultimate test of skill among novelists is the creation of a convincing heroine, and few Canadians have mastered this art. As we have seen in Chapter I, our male authors have generally rejected or romanticized their female characters, while our women novelists were less numerous and unwilling to increase their vulnerability by unclothing their reality. Therefore the appearance of Margaret Laurence's first Canadian heroine, Hagar Shipley, was greeted with enthusiastic critical praise. Completely realistic, and boldly individual, Hagar is one of the first and best anti-heroines in our literature.

When The Stone Angel was published in 1964 Margaret Laurence was practically unknown to the reading public; her wide reputation now mainly rests on her works of the last eight years (one of which has become a movie). But her talent has not sprung suddenly and miraculously from a void. Laurence spent her life observing, recording, analyzing and experiencing her subject on three continents before the per-

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ceptive creation of her first heroine. It is this background that gives her the confidence to say "what I care about trying to do is to express something that in fact everybody knows but doesn't say". ² What Laurence expresses, in the characterizations of Hagar, Rachel, Stacey and Vanessa, is the reality of womanhood. The process of discovery and reflection on this reality, and the genesis of her concept of womanhood can be found in her biography³ and is especially recorded in the three books arising out of her African experiences.

Margaret Laurence was her own first heroine. A sensitive, self-dramatizing child, she was creating books around her imaginative self from the age of nine. The autobiographical content in A Bird in the House and The Fire-Dwellers is especially pronounced. But in all her works Laurence has reshaped the various facts of her experience into patterns of meaning, just as the older Vanessa did in her book, and certain recurrent themes seem to possess a personal significance.

Margaret Wemyss was born in 1926 in the small town of Neepawa, Manitoba. Her mother died when she was four and her


³ Bibliographical material from Thomas, Laurence, and Donnalu Wigmore, "Margaret Laurence: The Woman Behind the Writing", Chatslaine (February, 1971).
lawyer-father, having remarried her maternal aunt, died when she was ten. In the financial pinch of the Depression, Margaret, her step-mother, and step-brother moved into Grandfather Simpson's brick house where she lived until going away to college in Winnipeg in 1944.

For Laurence the past is always present, and the facts of her life in Neepawa are constantly recreated in her books about Manawaka, especially *A Bird in the House*:

I like to think that the novels are rendered fictionally except that sometimes I think things are totally fictional and it turns out they are really borrowed from the subconscious. 4

Moreover, several of the major themes surrounding the development of her fictional heroines may be traced to concerns of her own early years. For example, an awareness of death and loss and the problems of a one-parent family came early to Laurence. She also grew up in the forced intimacy of three generations, resenting the dead hand of her ancestral past and the repression of a stern Calvinist patriarch. And when at seventeen, like Vanessa, she escaped into a liberating love, the man deceived and betrayed her. These experiences are reflected in her books. And while the intentional fallacy is always suspect, it is neither pejorative nor unreasonable to suggest that Laurence's consciousness of the

4 Wigmore, p. 52.
reality of womanhood arises from the pattern of her own experiences as a woman.

Margaret Laurence married an Albertan civil engineer in 1948 and moved to England. In 1950 Jack Laurence got a British government job which sent them to the Somaliland Protectorate (now independent Somalia) where he was in charge of a reservoir-building project in the desert. From 1952 to 1957 they were on a similar project in the Gold Coast (Ghana), where both their children were born. Out of their life in Africa emerged Laurence's first publications: A Tree for Poverty, a translation of traditional Somali literature; her travel-biography, The Prophet's Camel Bell; a novel, This Side Jordan; and The Tomorrow-Tamer and Other Stories. Her awareness of the real conflicts of life, and the burdens of race and sex, was intensified in this exotic, primitive environment. And we find in these African books the seeds of many of Laurence's themes which were later developed in a Canadian setting.

The Prophet's Camel Bell recounts Laurence's life in Somaliland and predates, in content, any of her published works. But although she kept detailed diaries throughout her sojourn, she later found many of her first impressions were sentimental "bosh", and in fact mentally recreated and re-evaluated her experiences at a distance of ten years before writing the book. Again, Laurence is her own first heroine in publication. The protagonist we meet through
her first-person narration dominates the book with her wit, intelligence, energy, and probing mind; she is perhaps the most engaging, exciting character of all her creations. The Prophet's Camel Bell is less a travelogue than a story of spiritual growth and emotional maturing:

In your excitement at the trip, the last thing in the world that would occur to you is that the strangest glimpses you may have of any creature in the distant lands will be those you catch of yourself. (p.1)

And in Laurence's personal development we catch glimpses of all her later heroines.

Laurence wanted to become involved with the native people through their lives and literature. But so often their problems appeared totally alien and mysterious, and their tragedies without meaning. Finally she was forced to relinquish her fantasies of perfect harmony with Abdi and the other Somalis and admit, as her heroines Rachel and Stacey have reiterated since then, that perfect communication is impossible:

My feeling at this time was that I would never understand. (188)

But, like her alter-ego Vanessa, in retrospect the author also realizes that behind its mask each life has a wholeness and integrity that demands consideration. Laurence devotes four chapters to perceptive, rounded character studies of those Somalis she knew best, and two more chapters to the
expatriate groups which were often collectively condemned but actually deserved sympathy, qualification, and often respect. Moreover she weaves the painful events she witnessed, with the joys and accomplishments, into a meaningful pattern of education for herself, and evolving freedom for Somalia:

Out in the Haud, we felt we had heard the Prophet's camel bell. We had come to know something of these desert people, their pain and their faith, their anger, their ability to endure. The most prophetic note of that bell, however, was one we scarcely heard at all, although the sound was there, if we had had ears for it. In less than ten years, the two Somalilands that had been under British and Italian administration had joined and gained their independence as the Somali Republic. (237)

At twenty-four Laurence bore some similarities to her later characterization of Rachel Cameron, although she was never that paranoid arrested-adolescent. But, introspective and self-conscious, she felt isolated from both the conventional "memsahib" community and the native women in purdah. She sometimes felt gauche and insecure with the more reserved Somalis, and then in recollection was appalled by her brashness and air of superiority. Her idealistic "doctoring" of the workers with bandaids and laxatives soon changed to a guilty perception of her selfish motives:

What had I known of life here at all?... It seemed to me that I had been like a child, playing doctor with candy pills, not knowing - not really knowing - that the people I was treating were not dolls. Had I wanted to help them for their sake or for my own? (62)
In the Haud constant suffering and capricious tragedy surrounded Laurence. Her awareness of death, quest for meaning, and desire for spiritual security have been echoed by all her heroines since:

So the Koran gives suffering a meaning and refuses the finality of death. I saw the necessity of this belief, without which life for these people would be intolerable. I would have shared such a faith, if it had been a matter of choice, but I could not. (82)

But although she did not share the Somalis' fatalism neither did she waste herself "in fury and desperation". (53). She accepted the reality of death and went on to make the best of whatever life she had. This is also the lesson of Hagar, Rachel and Stacey.

The background themes of The Prophet's Camel Bell have influenced all of Laurence's subsequent works. She acknowledges the psychological insights into the master-servant relationship and the problems of exile which she gained at this time from O. Mannoni's book (Prospero and Caliban: A Study of the Psychology of Colonization). And the Pentateuch from which she has drawn much of her imagery, diction, and the symbolic figures of Hagar and Rachel, first became meaningful for her among the Somali children of the desert.

But most significantly for this study, the subjection and oppression of women which is usually disguised in Western civilization was pathetically apparent to Laurence in this primitive culture. She saw child prostitutes; adolescents
married off to old men; women scorned and beaten and oppressed, forced into painful puberty rites, long years of agonizing childbirth and harsh drudgery and an early death, often watching their children die with them of thirst and malaria. Life was bitter for all Somali nomads but the men were at least more free and independent according to religious, legal, and social mores. In the faces of these Somali women we can see an exaggerated, primitive picture of Stacey MacAindra; this was perhaps Laurence's first graphic realization of the woman as victim.

Laurence began her first novel, This Side Jordan, during her five years on the Gold Coast but rewrote half of it after leaving Africa, because she had "been unfair to the European characters". The setting of this book is Ghana approaching Independence. It is a country in transition, painfully casting off both the ancestral bonds of tribalism and the white man's repression of colonialism. We see the tremendous problems of adjustment to Africanization, for both the African and English communities, through the eyes of Nathaniel Amegbe, a black schoolteacher, and Johnnie Kestoe, the accountant for an English import-export company. Confused and frustrated, they stubbornly re-enact the history of Ghana: the frightened, propitiating but resentful Negro and the greedy, white racist and ravisher:

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5 Margaret Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentences", Canadian Literature, XLI (Summer, 1969), 10.
She was a continent and he an invader, wanting both to possess and destroy. (231)

But the death of the old order also brings hope of a new freedom, equality and cooperation in the birth of the new nation (symbolized by the babies born to Aya Amegbe and Miranda Kestoe). *This Side Jordan* explores the meaning of this freedom, conceived in dignity and self-respect.

Nathaniel, like his country, is torn between loyalty to the customs and values of his tribal past and the Western, Christian "enlightenment" of the mission school and the city:

You have forgotten your own land. You live in the city of strangers and your god is the god of strangers and strange speech is in your mouth and you have no home. (104)

To achieve a sense of freedom and self-worth he must resolve this schizophrenia, identifying himself with the new Ghana, and assimilating "the pride and roots" from the past into the idealism and hope for the future.

Despite his doubts and humiliations, Nathaniel finally conquers the guilt of yesterday and finds the courage to possess tomorrow, for the sake of his work and his son:

My God is the God of my own soul. and my own speech is in my mouth...and my home is here at last (275).

Nathaniel's decision is really timeless and universal, for we shall see it repeated, much the same, in another decade and country by a woman, Rachel Cameron.
In contrast to Nathaniel, Johnnie Kestoe is a ruthless opportunist in the guise of a realist. Through him we meet the white "ruling class", actually the pathetic exiles, alcoholics, and incompetents of English society, "the relics of a dead age" (123) desperately trying to preserve their last foothold.

Johnnie has risen from the London slums, haunted by a past as full of brutality and superstition as Nathaniel's. But he adopts the same Western ethic as Hagar Shipley, defining freedom as power and status, exploiting enemies and betraying friends in his ambition. Like Hagar, he finally discovers his only true liberation from pride and fear in accepting his kinship with all mankind. His brief recognition of the humanity of the African whore and his kindness to her are the first evidences of his humanity:

He took her hand and held it closely for an instant. Then he stooped and picked up her crumpled green cloth from the floor. Very gently, he drew it across her body. It was all he could do for her, and for himself. (234+)

Yet, in the end, he still supports Africanization grudgingly and only out of expediency.

Ultimately both Nathaniel and Johnnie are tarnished heroes, and the final optimism in the book arises mainly from the character of their wives and the simultaneous birth of their children. For there arises the hope that Mary will assuage the hatred in her father's past with a new love, and
Joshua will "cross Jordan" (282) into the promised land of freedom.

The women are not dominant figures in this Laurence novel, but we can see in Miranda Kestoe and Aya Amegbe a development in maturity and self-awareness that liberates them from their dependent female groups and their own fears. The English memsahibs are pathetic, frightened mourners at the burial of colonialism, still touting "whitesupremacy" to bolster their husbands' images and disguise their inadequacies. Miranda Kestoe, on the other hand, is an intelligent, idealistic but perceptive liberal who tries to foster communication, understanding, and respect between the two cultures. But, when constantly rebuffed by society, repressed by her husband and misinterpreted by the Africans, she becomes fearful and apologetic. She is a re-creation, really, of Laurence in Somalia, well-intentioned but misjudging her own motives as an "amateur anthropologist" (53), or as Laurence says:

[There] are many of those who believe they feel only sympathy towards people of another land, and whose "sympathy" may lead them to see these people not as they really are but as the beholder feels they ought to be. (5)

This kind of relationship based on projected dreams is, of course, not confined to imperialism; Laurence examines its other manifestations in The Stone Angel and A Jest of God. And, as Stacey MacAindra's marriage illustrates, "communication" is sometimes an excuse for manipulation. Therefore,
when Johnnie walks out on his wife's inquisition and Aya rebuffs her help, Miranda must learn to respect the distance between people and the privacy of their lives and minds:

I don't want to probe any more. Just to accept. (236)

Aya Amegbe is bound to the superstitious, tribal past more closely than her husband. Pregnant, lonely and frightened, she relies on the primitive rites and familiar roles dictated by her female relatives. And Nathaniel bitterly resents her illiteracy and unsophistication, her childish dependence on superstition and fear of modern technology. He constantly attempts to repress her native imagination and exuberance into staid conformity, and isolate her from associations with the past through her family, and friends like Charity Donkor.

As Victor Edusei's cynicism contrasts with Nathaniel's idealism, so his mistress is a counterpoint to Aya's innocence and integrity. Charity was an illiterate, superstitious bush-girl like Aya, who has adopted the seductive sophistications of the city. Her life is dedicated to the enjoyment of serving and gratifying man and bearing his children. His payment to her is scorn and resentful exploitation. To Johnnie, she is only a possible prostitute; to Nathaniel, she means another failure for his friend; to Victor, she represents a bitter consolation prize for defeated dreams.

Aya and Charity share the same heritage and environment, but Aya is more a soul-sister to Stacey MacAindra than
to Charity Donkor; she is not content to accept the age-old
tereotype of woman as an ignorant sex-object and inferior
domestic possession. She determines to take her place beside
her husband:

'I think you have forgotten that a woman goes to
her mother's people when she reaches the eighth
month,' she said. 'But I will not do it, Nathaniel,
even if Adua goes back. I will stay with you.' (73)

Her act of courage is greater than his when she commits her
life and her son to the future in the dreaded hospital. And
her independence and strength amaze Nathaniel when she stands
up to Miranda as he never would. For Joshua is her son also;
he will need as much guidance from her as from Nathaniel to
find the promised land, "this side Jordan".

Laurence's Ghanaian stories were written contemporane-
ously with her first novel. Though originally published
separately, they are united by one theme, also common to The
Prophet's Camel Bell and This Side Jordan: the death of the
old Africa and the birth of the new. The conflicts that
arise in the transition are explored in these stories in
their various aspects and attitudes: humorous, satiric,
ironic, sentimental, and bitter.

The destructive impact of technological civilization
on tribal life is illustrated in the title-story of the col-
lection. Kofi dies because he does not understand the white
man's scientific shrines ("Did he think it was alive?" 103 ).
In "The Voices of Adamo" the hero also dies trying to impose
the ancient patterns on the new society, substituting the regimen for his lost tribe. Yet, ironically, despite her tragedies, Africa stubbornly assimilates the new ways and people into the old concepts and structures. The Owurasu bridge is accepted as a new god; Adamo rejoices because he can stay with his "family" until death. As "The Pure Diamond Man" humorously narrates, even supercilious, amateur anthropologists are humbled before the reality of the country. And in "The Perfume Sea" two superbly characterized European exiles find love and dignity in adapting to the native environment.

In these collected stories Africa is no longer the helpless victim of white rape; she is emerging into freedom and independence. But this entails new problems concerning the nature of freedom, and alienation within independence. These are themes which extend throughout Laurence's writings and are especially relevant to the liberation of women which she explores in her later novels.

Three stories illustrate how impossible it is for white outsiders, no matter how integrated and sympathetic, to lead the black man to freedom. In "The Drummer of All the World" Matthew must finally accept his alienation in his former home:

My father thought he was bringing Salvation to Africa. I do not any longer know what salvation is. I only know that one man cannot find it for another man, and one land cannot bring it to another. (18)
Nor can a white woman dictate freedom and fulfillment to the woman of another culture and belief, as Constance discovers in "A Fetish for Love". Laurence defines freedom as self-consciousness and dignity; it must evolve naturally, from within. Western projects and proposals are simply irrelevant here, as "The Merchant of Heaven" realizes when confronted with the image of a strapping, black Christ surrounded by the suffering and starving of Africa.

"Godman's Master", in contrast, is a complicated tale about the possibilities and perils of enlightened blacks liberating their own people. As Moses helps Godman progress from slave to serf to freeman, the story re-enacts the history of civilization, explores the quality of freedom, and portrays the development of a personality towards mature independence and human dignity:

'I have known the worst and the worst and the worst', he said, 'and yet I live. I fear and fear, and yet I live.'

'No man', Moses said gently, 'can do otherwise.' (159)

"The Rain Child" is the antithesis to this story. Ruth Quansah is too westernized to even communicate with her black homeland and so remains an alien in both worlds. Having adopted the sterile, repressive, white "garrison culture", she is appalled by the primitive customs (and perversions) of Africa, and the character of African women, exuberantly full of life and love:
Kwaale threw back her head and laughed. Her hands flicked at her cloth and for an instant she stood there naked...Still laughing, she knotted her cloth back on again and the young man put an arm around her shoulders and drew her close to him.

Ruth, tidy and separate in her frock with its pastel flowers, stared as though unable to believe what she had seen. (127)

Her schoolteacher Violet Nedden, lonely and emotionally frustrated, introspective and self-censuring, could be an early sketch for Rachel Cameron. She attempts to comfort "the outcast children" (132) and bridge the culture gap, but must finally, like Laurence, accept their alienation and her own, and plead for understanding:

'Thou shalt not oppress a stranger, for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.' (114)

This scriptural reference (from Exodus 23:9) is frequently invoked by Laurence to express the theme common to all her heroines' stories: the child or child/adult journeying through the country of experience toward the promised land of inner freedom is always an exile.

The final story, "A Gourdful of Glory", examines the meaning of freedom for three generations of African women. To four year old Comfort, Independence is a modern hospital and life, instead of the fetish priest and death. To her mother, it means prostitution to Western ways and fashions. To Mam-mii Ama it means free bus rides. When, after the Day of Independence, her pathetic existence continues unchanged she is
temporarily disillusioned. But an encounter with a mocking white woman arouses her pride and imagination. She realizes that true freedom means self-respect and the courage to accept the responsibilities of life:

'Mammii Ama, she no come rich
Ha-ei! Be so. On'ye one penny.
She nevah be shame, she no fear for nothing.
D' time wey come now, like queen she shine.' (244)

It is a lesson for all "liberated" women that Laurence repeats in the stories of Hagar, Rachel and Stacey.

In Laurence's African writings we see her personal development in maturity, self-awareness, and perception of the reality of others, particularly the women. The experiences, concepts, and personalities which she recorded in these books are transposed, expanded and reflected in the themes and characters of her later novels. In many ways, Laurence's Canadian heroine was born in Africa.

In technique too, Laurence's later accomplishments are amply foreshadowed here, with a few flaws. Laurence's writing has always been skillful and controlled; she has an exceptional eye for detail, ear for speech, and grasp of language. She blends the objective viewpoint of thoughtful research with the subjectivity of involvement, interest, and respect for people. Her characterization of both races is fair, true, and convincing; even Ghanaians have praised her "highly informed insight" into their culture. Most of all, her descriptive

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imagery exactly captures the exotic, torrid, earthy feeling of Africa; no trace of the glacial frigidity of most Canadian novelists mars her treatment of nature and sex. Significantly, she has most often found the essence of Africa in its women, as in this description from "The Drummer of All the World":

The flame tree whose beauty is suddenly splendid — and short-lived — like the beauty of African women. The little girl dancing with her shadow in the stifling streets. The child sleeping unmindful, while flies caress his eyes and mouth with the small bright wings of decay. The squalor, the exultation, the pain. (19)

The main flaw in Laurence's African fiction is an over-emphasis on theme. In This Side Jordan the balanced, symmetrical structure is too contrived, the symbolism too obvious, the dénouement too fussy in apportioning rewards and tying up loose ends. Even Nathaniel's inner turmoil is displayed tidily, and Johnnie's background is invested with too much "significant" tragedy. In The Tomorrow-Tamer and Other Stories, the obvious didactic point to each story sometimes betrays the material, as in the tricky ending to "The Perfume Sea". Yet, the colour and the characters of these books always rise above the critical flaws, and Laurence's later writing demonstrates a growing ability to balance these virtues against her didactic desires.

Margaret Laurence left Ghana in 1957. At that time the prevailing spirit, both of her young self and emerging Africa, was optimism. While her African books faithfully
represented the situation there in the late 1950's, she feels things have changed since then and any writing about Africa must now be done "from the inside, by Africans themselves". 7

After five years in Vancouver, the Laurences moved to England where they were divorced in 1970 and the author now lives with her two children. Turning from the predominant subject of men in Africa to women in Canada, Laurence felt she was coming home "to the area of writing where I most wanted to be, my own people and background". 8 This confident ease and instinctive familiarity with her subject have characterized her Canadian books. In Manawaka Laurence creates a world less exotic and elusive, but more completely apprehended and consistently expressed. Laurence's optimism has also been modified since she left Africa and underwent her own exercise in marital non-communication:

Perhaps I no longer believed so much in the promised land, even the promised land of one's own inner freedom. 9

In her Canadian novels the quest for freedom still continues but is usually resolved for the heroine more tentatively and more realistically.

III

LAURENCE'S HEROINE AS VICTIM: VANESSA AND RACHEL

Women, in fact and fiction, have too long been prisoners of the male imagination. Coming home to Canada, writing with mature, experienced perception, and confidently speaking her own "idiom and way of thought", Laurence helped liberate the Canadian heroine from a history of romantic stereotypes and cardboard clichés. Her women are neither cheerful, domestic paragons, nor brilliant, romantic rebels, for both types take their orbit and definition from a "superior" man. Nor are her females puppets of radical feminism, for Laurence confesses:

I had had to abandon every ism except individualism and even that seemed a little creaky until the last syllable finally vanished of itself, leaving me ismless.2

She portrays the reality of woman as a multi-faceted individual, a companion and fellow-traveller of the modern anti-hero.

In her heroine's search for identity and freedom, Laurence traces the four ages of woman's development: child, maiden, wife and mother, widow. These also represent four

1 Laurence, "Ten", p. 16.

stages of alienation and victimization, and woman's growing inability to conform to an imposed, ideal role which is incompatible with her real temperament and modern life-style. The villain of repression is threefold: society, man, and woman herself.

Unlike Willa Cather, Laurence does not portray the land as a presence of benign continuity. It does represent, however, an elemental and authentic life that is the opposite of our artificial and sterile "garrison culture". Her heroines are indoctrinated and repressed by a stern Calvinist heritage, based on pride and fear and prejudice, that decrees a life of joyless labour for all mankind and obedient servitude for women. As Laurence indicates by frequent analogy, she sees this as an Old Testament society, alienated and unredeemed.

Man inevitably represents the forces of this society. Though Laurence may portray him with sympathy, he is still Adam rejecting or repressing Eve. He may also be a helpmate or a fellow-victim, but it is man's relationship with the heroine which precipitates or defines her alienation and unhappiness. Laurence's women find their greatest fulfillment not in, but in spite of, men.

Laurence's work is not, of course, merely a virulent attack on male chauvinism. True to the modern concept of the anti-hero, her women are their own worst enemies. In

3 Thomas, Laurence, p. 57.
attempting to conform and succeed in society they have embraced the ethic of pride and fear, denied their natures, and rejected reality. Their tragedies are seen, not as existential absurdities with no cause and effect explanation, but as part of the paradox of Life. Although the demands of society and sex vary the plot, this tragedy is ultimately of universal, not merely "feminine", significance. It is the story of a search for identity and inner freedom, and the mistakes and compromises made along the way until one is merely grateful for survival - the potential of the personality "to survive with some dignity, toting the load of excess mental baggage that everyone carries, until the moment of death."\[4\]

Laurence tells this story with consummate skill. Her imagery is striking; her descriptions vividly detailed; her language is controlled and her dialogue particularly convincing. In the years since her African books Laurence has become more involved with novels of character\[5\] and it is her characterization that provides the impact of reality. Her heroines are the foundations of her books and acceptance of them is a prerequisite to all other suspension of disbelief. Therefore she says "one wants to figure out some form which will express the characters in the best way one can...the characters and their situations tend to develop in one's mind simultaneously

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with the verbal forms which will convey them." In her four Canadian books she has primarily chosen the first-person singular narrative form to get inside her protagonists. It is a form which is fraught with difficulties, but is powerfully realistic when successful. Above all, it establishes the speaker, the Heroine, at the centre of Margaret Laurence's literary creation.

Laurence's book of Canadian short stories, *A Bird in the House*, is the most autobiographical of her works. It is narrated retrospectively by the heroine Vanessa MacLeod who, in looking back on her childhood, actually orders her anecdotal experiences into the form of a loosely-knit novel. The first four chapters chronologically relate the main events of her past; the next three trace thematic threads through the background of those years; the final chapter is a summary and dénouement.

The child Vanessa is not portrayed with the tragic intensity of Laurence's adult heroines but her journey from childhood to maturity is no less significant than their stories, for it represents the foundation pattern for all Laurence's works. *A Bird in the House* traces Vanessa's growing awareness of the painful paradoxes of Life which she attempts to understand or, failing that, to accept and live with as part of her "mental baggage". This theme is repeated

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with variations in the novels of Rachel, Stacey and Hagar. Vanessa describes the tragedy of alienation from society, from loved ones, and from reality. But, for the most part, she experiences this tragedy vicariously, through a recognition of the reality of other people, "which is one way of realizing one's own reality." Thus, the perception of others' sufferings prepares her to accept her own when, finally, the perceiver becomes part of the perceived. Vanessa lovingly views her parents, sharply observes her grandparents, and occasionally documents outsiders. But she identifies most fully with the female protagonist she most resembles, her Aunt Edna.

Manawaka society was based on Calvinist respectability and the pioneer work ethic. It demanded financial prosperity from men and domestic success from women, and had no charity for careless non-conformists like Dan Connor, or hapless failures like Harvey Shinwell and Chris Connor. Vanessa was especially conscious of the women who were victims of the injustice of society's demands and the inefficiency of its machinery. Piquette Tonnerre was an outcast half-breed, reviled and rejected by the "upright" people of Manawaka. Though feigning indifference, she tried desperately to conform to society's standards through a respectable

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marriage:

How great her need must have been, that she had been forced to seek the very things she so bitterly rejected. (125)

Her inevitable lonely failure ended in drunkenness and death.

Piquette's tragedy is an extreme picture of the fate of many women, including Vanessa's beloved aunt, when they cannot conform to the social ideal. The Depression was a failure of society, but society went on demanding success from its victims. Many writers, including Morley Callaghan and Hugh MacLennan, have described the unemployed man's frustration when unable to fulfill his defined role as breadwinner. But through Edna Connor Laurence shows the effect this failure of society had on women. Robbed of the opportunity to be economically independent (the acceptable modern version of the "romantic rebel"), yet fearful of accepting the traditional role of wife and mother in precarious times, Edna is forced into a guilty, unnatural dependence on her parents.

Because of the Depression and her father's death Vanessa and her mother are also forced to take refuge in the Brick House. But it proves to be a haven for none of these women. Grandfather Connor is the typical representative of that garrison society which represses and enslaves women to its ideal. Like Hagar Shipley's father, he is characterized by his property:

Hardware - that was certainly the right thing
for him to go into, wasn't it? Can you imagine him in software or - heaven forbid - perishables? (13)

He is sternly dogmatic and prejudiced, cruelly outspoken and dictatorial. With the self-righteousness of an Old Testament patriarch he professes a religion based on justice and judgement, but actually puts his faith in the harsh pioneer virtues of respectability, independence, hard work, and material prosperity:

'I done a sight better than I would've if I'd sat at home like some fellows.' (10)

And with patriarchal contempt he tyrannizes his womenfolk, harshly stifling their natural impulses toward love and laughter, mercy and trust:

'She asked Father to be nice for her sake... For the sake of all the years if they'd meant anything at all. But he couldn't even do that.' (81)

He most determinedly attempts to rule and repress every aspect of Edna's life, regarding her as a social failure, a dependent chattel, and an insubordinate servant:

He couldn't for the life of him see why she didn't get a man for herself and get married like every other decent woman. (180)

He humiliates and isolates her, treats her as an object, denies her autonomy and self-respect. But she is the only woman who will oppose him "head-on" (176) and assert her indi-
viduality. In this way she communicates strength and confidence to Vanessa, who is also a strong-willed non-conformist; Edna also gives her the indelible impression of woman as the victim of society and man.

Vanessa's formative teen years are thus spent in a household dominated by the masculine tyranny of her grandfather, and this frustrating impression of womanhood. With her aunt in the position of a rebellious adolescent, and her mother returned to the paternal prison, Vanessa has no other positive female example to follow. Therefore her entire growth, understanding and acceptance of womanhood is seen as opposition and counterpoint to the strong male figure of her grandfather. In her childhood she is a helpless witness and victim of his oppression, but in the strength of first love she finds the courage to oppose him:

I shouted at him, as though if I sounded all my trumpets loudly enough his walls would quake and crumble. (199)

With the impetus of hatred this female Joshua overcomes "Jericho's brick battlements" to escape and fulfill the dreams of independence and freedom denied to her aunt and her mother.

Vanessa eagerly flees from Manawaka society and her grandfather, but she cannot entirely escape their legacy of pride and fear and the prison of the past:

Now I was really going. And yet in some way
which I could not define or understand, I did not feel nearly as free as I had expected to feel. (203)

The adult Vanessa does not reveal the development of "half a lifetime" (205) which now enables her to view the past with such understanding, acceptance, and forgiveness. But her growth no doubt owes a great deal to the example of her aunt, and the precepts of her Grandmother Connor.

As a child Vanessa imagines her inability to perfectly understand and communicate is due solely to youth. But in retrospect she realizes that communion with others has always been hindered by the masks which her family wear to protect themselves from revealing or admitting reality. These shields are constructed by fear and pride, and maintained through self-delusion; inevitably they cause only suffering and misunderstanding on both sides of the barrier. Symbolically, Vanessa explains:

I saw one day in a museum the Bear Mask of the Haida Indians....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. (38)

So Vanessa is particularly struck by the revelation that "The Great Bear" (61) wears the most perfect mask of all to proudly hide his real guilt and need from others, and fearfully conceal his real inadequacy and failure from himself. For she realizes that she and her aunt inescapably "take
after" (36) the old man:

'I don't believe Mother ever realized he might have wanted her tenderness. Why should she? He could never show any of his own. All he could ever come out with was anger. Well, everybody to his own shield in this family...Edna's is more like his than you might think.' (87)

Edna's mask is ultimately less tragic than her father's, for he wears his to the grave. But her flippant "wise cracks" (87) disguise a pride of independence and a fear of commitment to love and surrender to life that much more effectively prevents her from marrying than her father's harsh treatment of suitors. Though social and family pressures may have molded the bars, Vanessa finally realizes that Edna constructed her own prison. And, like Rachel, and Hagar, she has to conquer pride and fear and accept love in order to escape it. Her accomplishment and liberation is an important example to her niece:

It was only a pity she had had to wait so long to go. I wondered how long I would have to wait. (193)

In retrospect, it has a significance beyond the Brick House, for it symbolized freedom from the prison of the past and the self.

Laurence's heroines are usually their own worst enemies. Like Edna, they erect their social masks and retreat behind them into a private world of self-delusions and lost hopes. Even Vanessa briefly hides behind Edna's old excuse
to evade reality:

'It's just the same as it used to be with Aunt Edna,' I stormed to my mother. 'Remember the men he drove away with her? Until Wes, nobody kept coming around for long.'

'It wasn't really that way,' my mother said. 'A man isn't driven away that easily, Vanessa.' (200)

But *A Bird in the House*, like Laurence's other novels, thematically links the acceptance of reality with the attitudes toward death and religion. Vanessa recognizes this connection in her selective descriptions of the maid Noreen, her Grandmother MacLeod, and her Grandmother Connor.

Noreen belongs to the Tabernacle of the Risen and Reborn. Her exotic fundamentalist beliefs embroider reality with "violent splendours" (100) and mythologize death in a Heaven "seventy-seven thousand miles square", with "four gates, each one made out of a different kind of precious jewel". (99) Although a complete contrast to Noreen, Grandmother MacLeod also lives on illusions. She tries to fashion a proud existence out of ladylike virtues, lace handkerchiefs and embellished history. Her religious faith, like Mrs. Cameron's, is based on empty rituals and conventional homilies; her response to the reality of death is a concern for proper, and artificial, appearances:

Grandmother MacLeod...was never seen crying, not even on the day of my father's funeral. (108)

Grandmother Connor, in contrast, is supposedly
schooled from life, but in fact her deep faith enables her to face any reality with strength and courage and equanimity:

I don't think in her own eyes she ever lived in a state of bondage. To the rest of the family, thrashing furiously and uselessly in various snarled dilemmas, she must often have appeared to live in a state of perpetual grace, but I am certain she didn't think of it that way, either. (72)

She is also the only woman to exercise love, understanding, forgiveness, and even some power, toward Timothy Conner. When recalling the painful experiences of the past, the deaths and losses in her life, and trying to assimilate and understand them, Vanessa discovers that maturity and survival of the spirit depends on the acceptance of reality. Thus Vanessa most admires her Grandmother Connor's example. Although she sadly realizes she cannot share her grandmother's beliefs ("It mattered, but there was no help for it." [110]) she obviously remembers her precepts. And it is clear from the honesty and charity with which she reviews her past that she has absorbed her grandmother's most important lesson in facing life:

Acceptance was at the heart of her. (72)

The heroine's recognition of this lesson represents the epiphany in each of Laurence's novels, but is the premise for A Bird in the House. These stories illustrate Laurence's concept of spiritual survival "with dignity", bearing the mental baggage of a lifetime; Vanessa confronts the realities of
her past with courage and finds the freedom of acceptance and forgiveness:

I had feared and fought the old man, yet he proclaimed himself in my veins. (207)

The tone of this book is quiet and reflective. As always, Laurence's perfectly detailed descriptions, authentic dialogue, and gently mocking humour are powerfully convincing and memorable, especially when combined in one scene such as the arrival of Uncle Dan. She creates the realistic atmosphere of a home where the Depression is a constant shadow but not a disaster. Her imagery is especially important; in half the stories the title-image is an animal, and symbolizes the main character and elucidates the theme. The title of the book, and of the central story, is an animal-image which introduces a theme of particular concern to Laurence: "A bird in the house means a death in the house." (102) And Vanessa's instinctive rejection of this image of death ("I wanted only to avoid the sight of it lying broken on the floor" [102]) is an interesting preview of the attitude we will encounter in Rachel Cameron and Hagar Shipley.

Each story is well-constructed and self-contained but the book is conceived as a whole. The net effect combines the wide scope of a novel with the concentrated focus of the short story. And, by often re-examining the same chronological periods in different stories, with a different pattern and viewpoint, the adult narrator revalues her life and
recognizes the significance of events which the child unconsciously experienced. This double-perspective of adult and child is an extremely difficult device, for the narrative voice must "speak as though from two points in time, simultaneously". But Laurence exercises complete control over her method, feeling her way into Vanessa's mind at each stage of her development, and reassessing and rounding-out the other characters in the book. This technique obviously throws great stress upon the narrator who alone "chooses which parts of... the past have to be revealed in order for the present to be realized and the future to happen". Therefore, in A Bird in the House, it is Laurence's treatment of the heroine which is of ultimate importance.

Vanessa narrates the memories of childhood; in A Jest of God Laurence explores the next stage of a woman's development. In keeping with her realistic portrayal of the Heroine as Victim, it is seen not as a joyful, romantic blossoming but as an agonizing, reluctant transition. Rachel Cameron, at thirty-four, is an emotionally retarded adolescent who finds the desires and demands of womanhood inescapably thrust upon her. Her deeply introspective mind is a morass of guilty fear and defensive pride, resulting from the pressures of her "garrison" society, the failure of her relationships with men,

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8 Laurence, "Time", p. 128.

and particularly her own refusal to accept the reality of her existence. Laurence painstakingly explores Rachel's prison from the inside through the narrative form of the first person singular, present tense. This demanding technique, expressing alienation and helplessness within a disinterested universe, has invited comparison with the masters Joyce, Kafka, and Camus,\textsuperscript{10} with one important qualification. Laurence's subject is a woman whose primary alienation is from herself.

\textit{A Jest of God}, like Laurence's other books, is the story of a woman who cannot find or cannot fit the role which her world demands of her. Like Edna Connors, she is a modern, educated spinster who is frustrated in her ambitions for independence. When family pressures force her to leave university after her father's death, she returns to the unnatural role of a child in her mother's house.

Rachel's mother is an egocentric hypochondriac desperately clinging to her Scots-Calvinist respectability for her only meaning in life. Though she is the opposite of Grandfather Connor, cloaking her manipulative, destructive words in frail, sugary accents, she nevertheless represents the repressive forces of society and ancestry to Rachel.

Rachel, weak and insecure, attempts to conform to the expectations of her society as taught by her mother. She represses her dreams and desires, practicing apologetic submis-

\textsuperscript{10} Robert Harlow, "Lack of Distance", \textit{Canadian Literature}, XXXI (Winter 1967), 72.
sion, obedient service and a frightened mixture of rebellion and dependence:

Do I doubt her pain? At times I do and then again at other times it causes a panic in me and I wonder what I'd do here, by myself. (54+)

But she is emotionally frustrated and socially alienated. She feels patronized by the matrons and mothers of the town because she is unmarried. But her socially-acceptable role of spinster schoolteacher does not reassure her; she is guilty and frustrated because she is denied the deep maternal involvement she longs for:

I must stop referring to them as my children, even to myself. (8)

Treated like a child, haunted by the sexual fantasies of womanhood, and frightened of the sickness of old-age Rachel cannot secure any sense of identity or self-respect:

What a strangely pendulum life I have, fluctuating in age between extremes, hardly knowing myself whether I am too young or too old. (54+)

Manawaka's Calvinist society teaches not only fearful repression but the pride of proper appearances. Mrs. Cameron's church is respectably aesthetic and subdued, disguising the painful realities of life and death, that are the jests of God, behind pious clichés and tasteful facades:

A stained glass window shows a pretty and clean-cut Jesus expiring gently and with absolutely no
inconvenience, no gore, no pain, just this nice and slightly effeminate insurance salesman who, somewhat incongruously, happens to be clad in a toga, holding his arms languidly up to something which might in other circumstances have been a cross. (41)

Rachel's mother reflects this artificiality in her life and home. But Rachel is always miserably self-conscious that even her sterile and unnatural existence fails to achieve the necessary standard of conformity.

In a hesitant, schizophrenic rebellion Rachel romantically empathizes with the individualists in society, like James Doherty, and envies the aliens in town:

[The Ukrainians] always seemed more resistant, I guess, and more free. (79)

She even retreats to a fantasy-world "right away from everywhere" (21) to find a brief sexual release. But she is constantly torn between her desire for freedom and the restraints of her society, her "mother's voice". (9) This schizophrenia drives Rachel to nervous hysteria when she instinctively responds to the unstructured, uninhibited emotion in Calla's Pentecostal Church; her sense of freedom and release is immediately followed by shame and fear:

Chattering, crying, ululating, the forbidden transformed cryptically to nonsense, dragged from the crypt, stolen and shouted, the shuddering of it, the fear, the breaking, the release, the grieving - (37)

It is significant that Rachel also instinctively seeks
her freedom in male figures, partly due to her repressed sexuality and partly because they represent an antithesis to her mother. Even Calla is masculine in appearance and sexual desires. But Rachel's reaction to men is again split between attraction and revulsion:

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. (43)

It is, however, with Nick Kazlik that she finally finds a brief liberation and the courage to rebel, to trust her instincts and desires. Through him she emerges from her fears and her fantasies, at least enough to replace her dream-prince with a real man.

But men inevitably fail Rachel; they are not strong enough to sustain the burden of trust and dependency she places on them. To her needs they respond like little boys, like James "too preoccupied with his own concerns to bother with anything else". (10) Her father retreats to the isolation of his mortuary, leaving Rachel feeling guilty and resentful. Nick refuses to accept the responsibility of her sexual awakening and the burden of her dependency:

He had his own demons and webs. Mine brushed across him for an instant, and he saw them and had to draw away, knowing that what I wanted from him was too much. (165)

But although they are too weak to carry her, Rachel's
men lead her away from her childish dependence on mother and society by their example and their encouragement:

'What's the matter, darling?' Nick's voice, puzzled. 'You want it, too. You know you do.' (81)

Rachel, like all of Laurence's heroines, must then go on alone to find emotional maturity and acceptance and survival.

Nick says: 'I'm not God. I can't solve anything.' (130)

In expressing his own limitations, Nick is also releasing Rachel for this independent quest.

The reader can see that Rachel is a victim of her society's alienation, her mother's repression, and her men's desertion. But, paradoxically, it is Rachel's own recognition of these injustices, and her passive self-pity and humble subjection, that really prevent her emotional growth and liberation. Laurence risks our becoming frustrated with her heroine in order to show us repeatedly the imperative necessity of Rachel's confronting her own responsibility for her life. She must honestly examine the sterility of her life at its source, change what she can and accept what she can't. These are Laurence's "rules of survival". 11

Vanessa MacLeod's story is full of the painful realities of life and the frequent visits of death. To confront

suffering and grief so honestly and naturally is a "childlike"
attitude that requires great emotional maturity in an adult.
Rachel, in contrast, follows the example of her mother and her
society in rejecting these unrefined elements of existence.
Inhibited by pride and fear she censors her world according to
the artificial standard of "proper appearances". When it in-
evitably fails to conform she withdraws into a cotton-battling
world of fantasy. It, however, affords her no better conso-
lation:

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

She is handsome, she is pretty,
She is queen of the golden city." (7)

The childhood rhyme emphasizes her immaturity and her depend-
ence on others' opinions for her standards and identity. She
is neurotically insecure and intolerant when faced with human
emotions ("people should keep themselves to themselves -
that's the only decent way"[35]) and undisguised frailties
("I can't bear watching other people make fools of themselves
...it threatens me"[35]). Therefore, she becomes incapable
of any relationship demanding honest communication and under-
standing, trust and acceptance, love and charity ("she tried
bribing me with hyacinths - what a nerve"[15]).

But Rachel also demonstrates at times an intelligent
self-awareness, an ironic sense of humour, and great reserves
of strength and love. It is precisely the unnatural repression
and distortion of these instincts that result in her emotional aberrations. But these qualities also hold the potential for new life, given the freedom from fear and pride. Meanwhile, she tortures herself with the neurotic symptoms of adolescent dependency, transferred maternal instincts, hypochondria, hysteria, paranoia and mental masochism:

Perhaps we'd twist for old times' sake, two caricatures, dog outreached to tree, the others' laughter howling louder than the music. (58)

Vanessa's view of Nature is awesome but benevolent ("the sun warming her to the heart."[59]). Rachel's concept of Nature is a reflection of her unnatural attitudes toward life. Egocentric and hypersensitive, she can only see it subjectively as a mirror for her own fears. The images of animals and birds are repugnant: usually predators ("all around me, crouching and waiting...the beastmen prowled and waited"[33]), or victims like herself ("the dead blue eyes of the frozen whitefish"[12]). The landscape becomes a malignant extension of her existence:

artificial, indefinite, an abstract painting of a world. The darkening sky is hugely blue, gashed with rose, blood, flame pouring from the volcano, or wound, or flower of the lowering sun. (78)

The sterility of her life is also matched by her sexual experience. A thirty-four year old virgin, frightened and repressed, barren and childless like her Biblical namesake,
she finds her only release in guilty masturbation fantasies:

His hands, his mouth are on the wet warm skin of her inner thighs.
Now--
I didn't. I didn't. It was only to be able to sleep. The shadow prince. Am I unbalanced? (22)

Associated with these unnatural responses, metaphorically (sex as a symbol of "death"), and in the context of the novel (p. 21-22), is Rachel's refusal to accept the reality of death. Because she had always been persuaded to view her father's work with shame and repugnance ("those rooms on the ground floor where I was told never to go" [17]) she denies death first with her defensive pride in social appearances:

No one in Manawaka ever dies, at least not on this side of the tracks....We are a gathering of immortals. We pass on through Calla's divine gates of topaz and azure, perhaps, but we do not die. Death is rude, unmanners, not to be spoken to in the street. (17)

And then, more desperately, she reveals the terror that she has sublimated in her dreams:

The stairs descending to the place where I am not allowed. The giant bottles and jars stand there, bubbled green glass. The silent people are there....He is behind the door. I cannot open. And his voice - his voice - so I know he is lying there among them, lying in state, king over them. He can't fool me. He says run away Rachel, run away, run away. (25)

Her attitude toward death is a mixture of perverted fear and guilt associated with her father, and haughty rejection inher-
ited from her mother. Either way, her denial of the natural element of death (symbolized by the funeral home which is her metaphoric "prison") reflects her refusal to accept the painful realities of life, the jests of God (an attitude which becomes her real prison and tragedy.)

Rachel's emotional growth into womanhood, her lessons in acceptance and survival Laurence has telescoped into one painful summer. Her affair with Nick represents a triumph over her fear of committing herself to an authentic relationship. Symbolically, she experiences the "death" of self in sexual surrender and brings love into the grave; as they make love Nick recites:

The grave's a fine and private place
But none I think do there embrace. (82)

She finds the courage to cast off her childish dependencies, social inhibitions, and sexual repressions, and finally express her instinctive desires for love and new life:

If one speaks from faith, not logic, how does that turn out? I do not know, except that I am so strong in it, so assured, that it cannot possibly go wrong.

'Nick... If I had a child, I would like it to be yours.' (130)

With new confidence she makes an unconventional visit to the funeral home. There Hector's prosaic treatment of the details of dying as a natural adjunct to living dispels her social horror and childhood guilt. She rejoices in an unself-
conscious friendship:

He slides an arm around my shoulder. I don't protest or move away. (111)

And in a moment of self-knowledge she accepts the responsibility for her own prison - and her own liberation:

The life he wanted most. If my father had wanted otherwise, it would have been otherwise. Not necessarily better but at least different. Did he ever try to alter it? Did I with mine? (110)

Now there is a potential for freedom and hope in the song:

There is a happy land
Far, far away (111)

in contrast to the bitterness in her first rhyme:

Rachel Cameron says she'll die. (7)

Rachel, however, still is conscious that she has exchanged one dependency for another, imperfect one:

I'm not afraid when I am with [Nick], but when I'm not with him, it seems to return. (116)

But when Nick leaves her, with the possibility of his unborn child in her womb, she discovers that she can now face the realities of life and death alone and find salvation in her own resources. Painfully she rejects abortion-murder and suicide as the easy way out, to affirm even the painful elements of life. In triumph over her social indoctrination and in
obedience to her natural instincts she realizes:

At that moment, when I stopped, my mind wasn't empty or paralysed. I had one clear and simple thought.

They will all go on in some how, all of them, but I will be dead as stone and it will be too late then to change my mind. (148)

After metaphorically passing through "death's immigration office" (154) and funeral "chapel" (156) and descending into a death-like unconsciousness, she rises to accept the loss of her baby, her fantasies, and her former life, with the new maturity and independence of an adult: "I am the mother now." (160)

Rachel has conquered pride and fear and adapted to the painful realities of her existence and its potential for freedom and love and joy. She now approaches her mother and her friends with honesty and understanding; she makes decisions for the future and acts on them with determination and optimism. She can finally leave her funeral home prison on wings strong and free, "smooth and confident as a great owl" (174)

Where I'm going anything may happen. Nothing may happen. Maybe I will marry a middle-aged widower, or a longshoreman, or a cattle- hoof trimmer, or a barrister, or a thief. And have my children in time. Or maybe not. Most of the chances are against it. But not, I think, quite all. What will happen? What will happen. It may be that my children will always be temporary, never to be held. But so are everyone's. I may become in time slightly more eccentric all the time....Anything may happen, where I'm going. (175)

The whole sacrificial theme of this novel, is implied
in the title. The conventional wisdom of society denies and disguises the ironies of life, the jests of God: imperfection, injustice, uncertainty, indignity, and finally death. But when the "life" in Rachel's womb becomes "death" she cannot escape the reality that she has become the "foolish" butt of A Jest of God:

All that. And this at the end of it. I was always afraid that I might become a fool. Yet I could almost smile with some grotesque light-headedness at that fool of a fear, that poor fear of fools, now that I really am one. (158)

Now she must recognize a greater wisdom to enable her to live with the knowledge:

'Trany man among you thinketh himself to be wise, let him become a fool, that he may be wise.' (119) —

Rachel symbolically loses her wisdom in order to be wise, and sacrifices her life in order to be saved. She accepts God's jokes and becomes "the fool" who understands and shares them:

What is so terrible about fools? I should be honoured to be of that company. (172)

God's mercy on reluctant jesters. God's grace on fools. God's pity on God. (175)

Laurence creates a plot with the authenticity of detail, description, and dialogue that "suggests a psychiatrist's case-book" and weaves it with imagery, symbolism

12 Thomas, Laurence, p. 51.
and deeply-felt atmosphere into a work of art.

The parasitic mother-daughter relationship is a stereotyped situation that even Hagar Shipley satirizes in *The Stone Angel*.

Rest in peace
From toil surcease
Regina Weese.

Laurence breathes life and sympathy into this cliché. But some writers have questioned her technique. Because everything comes to the reader through Rachel's neurotic, egocentric consciousness, we never receive a precise, objective view of the world and the people around her. According to some critics (Thomas and Harlow) Mrs. Cameron and Nick are stereotypes of the selfish mother and casual seducer and the characters suffer from the necessity of explaining themselves in dialogue, thereby having to strike poses and give orations. Bowering, on the other hand, values subjectivity more than objectivity:

Here is a rare privilege in our fiction, the enjoyment of hearing the mind moving, rather than being on the receiving end of recollection, arrangement, description, and expression.13

Though I agree that the two supporting characters are limited, it is most important that the reader is constantly

aware that that is how Rachel sees them; that is what governs her life and her reactions. Otherwise she, the heroine, the centre, the raison d'être of the book, would be implausible. We empathize with her life from the inside of her prison, her mind; an omniscient author, with great distance and tact, could only evoke a patronizing sympathy from us. As Laurence says: "I recognize the limitations of a novel told in the first person and in the present tense, from one viewpoint only, but it couldn't have been done any other way, for Rachel is a very introverted person."¹⁴ No one questions the clarity of Laurence's minor characters and the impact of her scenes. I think it should also be seen that Laurence has used Rachel's perceptive and witty comments with great skill to give the reader an objective view of reality that her heroine, with dramatic irony, does not appreciate. The author is constantly in control of her material, which is more than one might say of critics who contradict their criticisms:

If she made a doubtful decision about how to tell the story one must admit that she does get it told and that it has - especially in the last fifty pages - the power to move. One-handed applause is perhaps not enough.¹⁵

¹⁴ Laurence, "Ten", p. 14

¹⁵ Harlow, p. 75.
IV

LAURENCE'S HEROINE AS VICTIM: STACEY AND HAGAR

The Fire-Dwellers is Laurence's most recent novel but its heroine in age and marital status fits between Rachel Cameron and Hagar Shipley. Stacey MacAindra has the fire and guts of "Hagar's spiritual grand-daughter"\(^1\) and the apprehension and anxiety of her fictional sister Rachel. She also follows the same growth pattern as they and Vanessa in a search for her own personal "rules of survival". The repetition of this theme emphasizes Laurence's concept of the sisterhood of women and the universality of their struggle.

Stacey is the most complex of Laurence's heroines and, probably, the most likeable. A middle-aged housewife and mother, she is as much like the adult Margaret Laurence as Vanessa is the author's young alter-ego, and The Fire-Dwellers is written out of the idiom and memory of Laurence's generation. But the book is more than a personal memoir; it is another protest against society's stereotypes of women:

I was fed up with the current fictional portraits of women of my generation - middle-aged mums either being presented as glossy magazine types, perfect, everloving and incontestably contented, or else as sinister and spiritually cannibalistic monsters determined only to destroy their men and kids by

\(^1\) Laurence, "Ten", p. 15.

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hypnotic means. I guess there are some women like the latter, but I don't happen to know any of them. There are no women like the former; they don't exist.²

In Laurence's words, Stacey is an "anti-heroine" who is struggling, against these models, to survive in an external world which is going up in violent flames, and find peace in an internal world where playing grown-up has inescapably changed to living with the painful consequences of middle-age.

The author herself feels the form of this novel is her widest and most experimental, with third-person narration and fantasy sequences interspersed with her usual first-person stream-of-consciousness. This combination has proved to be her most successful technique.

More than any other Laurence heroine, Stacey is conscious of the perils of her external society and its pressures on her inner life. She perceives herself dwelling in a world which is slowly being consumed by the flames of violence and insanity. Her dread of imminent holocaust and death is reinforced by horrifying reminders from radio, newspapers, and television - "the ever-open eye":

Some new kind of napalm...
The woman was holding a child about eighteen months old and she was trying to pluck something away from the scorch-spreading area on the child's face. (102)

As a result, she lives in a technicolour nightmare of terror

² Laurence, "Ten", p. 15.
for her children's emotional stability and physical safety:

Come on, Stacey, only a little way. The hands. She is holding the hands of one. Which? She will not be allowed to return. Only this one can she take with her, away from the crackling smoke, back to the green world. She must not look to see which one. (34)

Over the years she has attempted to defeat these fears with fantasy solutions, usually a miraculous escape to "the great north woods" (65) where she would hack out a pioneer existence for her children while quoting Shakespeare, or, as a last resort, put them out of their misery with her father's old revolver.

Unlike Rachel, however, Stacey is too pragmatic and prosaic to ultimately trust her dreams for any comfort. She immediately picks holes in her fantasies and wryly compares them to science fiction inventions. She realizes that even if she could dismiss the threat of cosmic destruction she would still be trapped by the innumerable daily anxieties about her home and family. She constantly worries about her children: that the streets are too dangerous, and then that their home is too sheltered; that her discipline is too violent, and then that her love is too overprotective.

Although Stacey gratefully fled her small prairie town, she now finds all her fears focused and symbolized in "the eternal flames of the neon forest fires" (175), the lights of the modern metropolis. She is alienated by the sordidness and inhumanity of the city:
Nearly twenty years here, and I don't know the place at all or feel at home. (12)

She feels disconnected from the newspaper accounts of poverty and violence in the urban core. But she can no more easily identify with the ingratiating phoniness and dishonest promises of perfection offered to the suburban housewife by the Poly-glam lady and the Hugh Hefner-figure, Thor Thorlakson. In these various guises society threatens her family's security and Stacey's own inner freedom, confidence and stability.

Stacey's "garrison culture" has taught her generation from childhood to repress their natural feelings and honest responses until communication is impossible:

What's the matter with us that we can't talk? How can anyone know unless people say? How can we feel it's indecent? (175)

These silent robots are then expected to fill certain model roles:

Mothers with young, untired faces glow contentedly. Fathers with young untired faces smile proudly and successfully. Grandmothers with young untired faces gaze graciously and untroubledly. (95)

Modern society even provides instruction sheets to measure one's progress toward perfection. They are especially aimed at the more vulnerable and victimized sex:

"Nine Ways the Modern Mum May be Ruining Her Daughter" (18)
"Are You Castrating Your Son?" (19)
"Are You Emasculating Your Husband?" (61)
Faced with the human impossibility of matching her rumpled, broad-hipped, under-educated, and middle-aged self to society's ideals of womanhood, Stacey is filled with guilt and self-contempt. More and more frequently she requires a furtive gin-and-tonic for courage to face the inner doubts and external pressures of her life.

Of all the male characters in Laurence's Canadian fiction Mac MacAindra is the most fully and sympathetically presented. His father, an upright minister of the Establishment, bowed to the god of appearances as obediently as Grandmother MacLeod, Mrs. Cameron, and Jason Currie. Even in Stacey's eyes Mac is less a villain than a fellow-victim of social hypocrisy and parental restraint:

Must remember you're a minister's son, dear, and set a good example. (137)

As an adult, therefore, he conscientiously attempts to fulfill his role of successful provider and responsible husband-father. The inevitable pressures of job-competition for an under-educated, middle-aged salesman, multiplied by his financial and family obligations, trap Mac in the same guilt-anxiety cycle as Stacey. But the male ideal demands self-reliant strength and confidence. Mac can neither turn to Stacey for mutual comfort nor bear the extra burden of her confessions. Ironically, it is the role-conformity that seemed to promise Mac a perfect life that undermines his marriage and alienates his wife:
If he doesn't deal with everything alone, no help, then he thinks he's a total washout. Thanks, Matthew – you passed that one on all right, but at least you had your Heavenly Father to strengthen your right arm or resolve, to put the steel reinforcing in your spine. Mac's only got himself. And if he doesn't speak of it to some extent, one of these days he'll crack up.

Okay, I guess it has to be that way, Mac. If you insist. It would've helped me, though. It would've made me feel you needed me, even just to talk to. (266).

His silent, dutiful labours and fatherly sermons on self-discipline conceal a basic dissatisfaction that only erupts in petty quarrels over imagined slights. Stacey is the inevitable target of his frustrations; she is also the victim of his silence. For she can interpret it only as resentment, reproach, regret. This widens the gulf between them:

He's really hurt. And I'd like to comfort him but how can I – it's I who've caused it. And yet I hate him for feeling that way about me, I might as well be a car or a toothbrush. (168)

Laurence is not unsympathetic to her male figures but she is mainly concerned with women as the perpetual victims on the battleground of marriage. Female weapons may be more cunning but the Articles of War are written by men. All the wives in The Fire-Dwellers suffer from complexes of guilt and inferiority (usually intellectual/academic), inspired by their husbands' constant criticism or scornful silence. This loser-syndrome (symbolized by the large goldfish consuming the smaller) drives Tess Fogler to despair and suicide. For while women may privately rant and nag they are at an insu-
perable disadvantage in the world of men:

With four kids? How could you walk out on him, Stacey, whatever he did or was like? You couldn't, sweetheart, and don't you forget it. You haven't got a nickel of your own. This is what they mean by emancipation. (127)

And, as Laurence points out, they have been thus since the beginning:

Our father Adam. 'Leave me alone.' And maybe Eve thought 'Okay, Sahib, if that's the way you want it,' and it was after that she started getting crafty. (175)

This marital situation is recreated in Laurence's novels from This Side Jordan to A Jest of God (Mrs. Cameron: "Niall always thinks I am so stupid" [162]), and we will also see how unsuccessfully Hagar Shipley rebels against this destructive stereotype.

To escape the status of an inferior slave, to find an identity and "something that belonged only to her" (218) - a relationship with respect and honesty and intimacy - Stacey surrenders to Luke Venturi. As Nick Kazlik helped Rachel, Luke offers Stacey a brief interlude of freedom and independence. She takes this long-desired opportunity for confession and absolution and finds a new sense of self worth:

I look better to myself now than I did a week ago. (230)

But Stacey cannot rely on any man to sacrifice his own needs
for her salvation, not her burdened husband, his perverted friend, nor Luke.

As Laurence hints from the first romanticized characterization of Luke (a bohemian writer-adventurer), their affair is impossibly unreal, an incarnation of all Stacey's dreams of recaptured youth and wilderness freedom:

I'd like to start again, everything, all of life, start again with someone like you - with you - with everything simpler and clearer. No lies. No recriminations. No unmerry-go-round of pointless words. Just everything plain and good, like today, and making love and not worrying about unimportant things and not trying to change each other. (213)

This is fantasy and escapism. Luke is only a sensitive, kind, boy, young enough to be her son. He cannot save her, but ironically it is through this dream-lover that Stacey sees reality. She realizes that even he is gently but selfishly using her:

Maybe it gives him something, to imagine he's like the rain in a dry year?... What does he think? I'll never know. (211)

Perfect communication is impossible and perfect love a myth. With Luke's departure she renounces her fantasies and admits her inescapable situation and its problems:

Luke?...you showed me where I belonged....Even if you'd been older, or I'd been younger and free, it wouldn't have turned out any simpler with you than it is with Mac. I didn't see that at one time but I see it now. (286)
It is then her responsibility to find any possible peace and grace within that life.

Laurence's heroines have consistently suffered from a loss of personal identity and freedom within the roles thrust upon them by society and men, but the problem is most complicated for Stacey MacAindra. There are so many roles demanded of her and so many conflicting expectations for their fulfillment. By turns wife, mother, daughter, mistress, business partner, friend and neighbour, she is supposed to be strong and efficient while soft and submissive, and generally radiantly beautiful and cheerful. In reality she finds herself slightly neurotic and alcoholic, just coping with the "mental baggage" (41) of the past, and the fast-accumulating suitcases of guilt, frustration, alienation, despair, and loss of any identity or purpose outside the four walls of her prison home:

How is it I can feel that I'm spending my life in one unbroken series of trivialities?... It would be nice to have something of my own, that's all. I can't go anywhere as myself. Only as Mac's wife or the kids' mother. (101)

Thirty-nine is a point-of-no-return but Stacey persists in looking back. She dreams of childhood and drunkenly attempts to recapture her former beauty and grace:

I love to dance. I love it. It can't be over. I can still do it. I don't do it badly. See? Like this. Like this. (141)
But she realizes the pathetic vulgarity of her behaviour when she later sees Katie swaying gently to the music.

Against all evidence, she believes that "everything would be all right" (8) if only she could control and change certain details of her life — her education or appearance or relationship with her husband. This myth persists even when she recognizes its absurdity:

Like, I guess I mean, everything will be just fine when I'm eighteen again. (183)

So she tries to re-create the simplicity and freedom of her youth with Luke but finally must acknowledge reality and accept the responsibilities of maturity, as Rachel symbolically did:

I'm old enough to be his mother. (238)

Stacey's petty worries and ineffectual fantasies are really symptomatic of a greater malaise that also afflicts Rachel, Hagar and the majority of Laurence's characters. It is a desperate fear of death as the ultimate loss of Self. Conditioned by the same environment as her sister, Stacey's attitude toward the reality of death alternates between escapism and obsession. She variously attempts to elude death by concentrating on the details and daydreams of life, to frustrate it by building a wall of protection and intimacy around her family, to defeat it by containing its terrors within her imagination:
I've always thought of death, wondering what form it would take for me, what face it would wear, what moment in my time it would choose for our encounter...imagining it in order to defeat it. (223)

She even calls on a God she desperately wants to believe in but can't trust, to control the visitations of death:

Please. Let them be okay all their lives...Let me die before they do. Only not before they grow up. (82)

But there is no reprieve from her existential anxieties that life and death are equally without pattern or purpose of respect for the individual:

Sometimes a person feels that something else must have been meant to happen in your own life, or is this all there's ever going to be, just like this? Until I die...Holy Mary, Mother of God, be with me now and in the hour of my death. If only I could say that, but no. (137)

Therefore the images of death and infernal destruction dominate Stacey's nightmares, her conversations with Luke, her views of the world around her (natural or man-made), her relationships with friends and loved ones. This obsessive paranoia is symbolized by the childish rhyme that haunts her throughout the novel:

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

Rachel Cameron passively wallowed in self-pity and
self-delusion. The reader never becomes as frustrated with her sister because Stacey does not indulge her neuroses. Despite her ironic self-doubts she survives each daily struggle with some courage and even wit:

Thanks. Heap coals of fire on my head. I'm made of asbestos. (251)

She actively seeks to confront and communicate her anxieties in her relationship with Luke. But their love-making turns out to be only a metaphoric "death" and release; her real fears and burdens are actually multiplied.

Ironically, it is a series of coincidental and unconnected crises, the very substance of life that Stacey is trying to either control or escape, that proves the turning point in her story. In Buckle's accident, Tess' suicide, and Duncan's drowning, Stacey's worst fears are realized. The capricious, meaningless ironies of life and death are no longer phantoms of her imagination but realities which she must accept. The truth of her existence is revealed; no charms or prayers, precautions or sacrifices can guarantee her any more comfort or control of her fate than Buckle had. On the other hand, Stacey walks through the valley of death with Duncan and miraculously emerges with new hope and the realization that mere survival is the greatest gift and goal:

I can't stand it. I cannot. I cannot. I can't take it. Yeh, I can, though. By God, I can, if I set my mind to it. (298)
The Fire-Dwellers ends in even more compromise and less optimism than A Jest of God. Some of Stacey's problems (e.g. Mac's job) are solved, but others reappear to take their place (e.g. Matthew moves in). The shadow of three deaths has touched Mac, too; it forces him to face the lower depths of his life and share some of its terrors with Stacey. But the greatest progress is within our heroine's mind. Having confronted death, Stacey can accept the other imperfections of her life and the individual reality of herself apart from the "good wife" ideal:

I used to think there would be a blinding flash of light someday and then I would be wise and calm and would know how to cope with everything and my kids would rise up and call me blessed. Now I see that whatever I'm like, I'm pretty well stuck with it for life. (308)

She sees that age, anxiety, and isolation are inescapable and, perhaps, indispensable facts of human existence:

Maybe the trivialities aren't so bad after all. They're something to focus on. (316)

The world is full of people living in burning houses and "the grace isn't given" (316) to put out all the fires. But the victims can sometimes huddle together for comfort:

They make love after all, but gently, as though

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3 See Chapter I, page 2, n.b. The Hebrew phrase translated as "virtuous woman" in the King James Version is rendered as "good wife" in the Revised Standard Version.
consoling one another for everything that neither of them can help or alter. (316)

and be grateful for fleeting mercies:

Temporarily, they are all more or less okay. (317)

Margaret Laurence felt that the writing in *The Fire-Dwellers* was her best and most incisive yet. In a few deft strokes she creates an atmosphere or scene of startling, and sometimes grotesque, reality:

Built like the back of a barn, she was. She must've looked real cute, crawling around on her hands and knees, with her great big tits bumping along on the floor. (271)

But with the same spare writing she gives continuity and comprehensiveness to the widest, most experimental form she has so far attempted.

The form of this novel includes direct third-person narrative, Stacey's idiomatic inner commentary, and her more formal, poetic fantasies and memories. This split-narrative is Laurence's most successful technique. The mental transitions and flashbacks are freer and less contrived than in *The Stone Angel*. The perspective is more open and objective than in *A Jest of God*, with less necessity for rhetoric and posturing in the minor characters.

Critics have disagreed on the relative merits of Tess and Buckle. While they are somewhat melodramatic, I find them credibly absorbed into the fabric of Stacey's story.
Thorlakson-Winkler, however, is an unfortunate, though amusing, caricature, surrounded by too many coincidences.

Luke Venturi is perhaps the most romantic, consciously artsy character Laurence has ever created. But this is more indicative of his thematic function than her artistic failure. Luke is created as a real person who personifies Stacey's subjective dreams and desires, just as her family represents her objective responsibilities and needs. The split-narrative expresses Stacey's split-personality for, first or third-person, the voice is always hers. Therefore, on the subjective level, Stacey temporarily accepts Luke's world and ignores the objective, appraising voice that tells her and the reader that she does not belong there:

Very well, then, we deceive ourselves. Bugger off voice. I'm happy as I am, at least momentarily. (213)

Nevertheless, it is in the description of Stacey's "real" world, the banal, middle-class family life, that Laurence is most successful. Mac MacAindra is, considering that we see him mainly from Stacey's viewpoint, a sympathetically rounded and convincing character. Also Stacey's children (unlike those in The Honeyman Festival or Mrs. Blood) emerge as distinctive individuals, and her relationship and response to them is movingly credible. As in A Jest of God, Laurence has taken an ordinary cliché of womanhood and animated it with individuality and insight. A Jest of God was very success-
ful within its limitations but I find The Fire-Dwellers less limited.

As ever, Laurence's heroine is the centre and foundation of her creation. Stacey is completely, disturbingly believable. Whether addressing God or her children, her thoughts and words are recorded with fidelity, sympathy and humour. Laurence neither condescends to her problems nor presents her anxieties as disembodied concepts. But Stacey's inner and outer lives are inextricably woven into a memorable physical presence that is pathetically human:

...thirty-nine, hips, ass and face heavier than once, shamrock velvet pants, petunia-purple blouse, cheap gilt sandals highheeled, prancing squirming jiggling... (144)

and at the same time amazingly valiant.

The heroine of The Stone Angel, Laurence's first Canadian novel, is a grotesque figure of old age: obese and flatulent, irritable and forgetful. But, "rampant with memory" and life (5), she recalls the whole cycle of womanhood, and unites the experiences of Vanessa, Rachel, and Stacey in one long, indomitable life.

The actual events of the novel cover only the last two or three weeks of Hagar's life, but in flashbacks she creates and reviews her ninety years in a final struggle to understand and order the tragedy of her life. She has constantly rebelled and fought against her life, her society, her men, her own nature, and above all, her mortality. It is
this indomitable will that makes Hagar the most definitive and memorable of Laurence's heroine-victims and, perhaps, of all those in Canadian literature. Hagar's reluctant, painful journey toward self-knowledge unfolds a classic modern tragedy compounded of social injustice and self-destruction. But in her final illumination and catharsis she learns the lesson of acceptance that we have traced through the stories of Vanessa, Rachel, and Stacey, and with this she finds at last a measure of peace and, perhaps, of grace.

The structure and technique of this novel are the most consciously contrived of all Laurence's Canadian books. In the symmetrical pattern of parallel scenes, past and present are sometimes artificially juxtaposed or awkwardly joined. Laurence's skillful writing, however, overcomes this rigidity of form. The illusion of reality is again created by her description, dialogue, and the characterization of her heroine-narrator upon whom, as always, the whole credibility of the novel depends. Hagar has been called "as unpleasant a heroine as one is likely to meet". She is also Laurence's finest creation, slipping "beyond the realms of obvious fiction into the world of reality" and into the company of literature's

4 George Robertson, "An Artist's Progress", Canadian Literature, XXI (Summer, 1964), 53.

5 S.E. Read, "The Maze of Life", Canadian Literature, XXVII (Winter, 1966), 12.
great characters. She cannot inspire the love we gave Stacey, 
the compassion we offered Rachel, or the camaraderie we felt 
for Vanessa. But her wit and spirit and courage and aggres-
sive affirmation of life command our respect and, at the last, 
our sympathy.

Rachel Cameron and Stacey MacAindra are the reluctant 
victims of society's requirements and restraints. But Hagar 
Shipley has been taught from childhood to embrace the barren 
security and respectability of her "garrison culture":

How anxious I was to be neat and orderly, imagining 
life had been created only to celebrate tidiness, 
like prissy Pippa when she passed. But sometimes 
through the hot rush of disrespectful wind that 
shook the scrub oak and the coarse couchgrass en-
croaching upon the dutifully cared-for inhabitations 
of the dead, the scent of cowslips would rise momen-
tarily. They were tough-rooted, these wild and 
gaudy flowers, and although they were held back at 
the cemetery's edge, torn out by loving relatives 
determined to keep the plots clear and clearly civi-
lized, for a second or two a person walking there 
could catch the faint, musky, dust-tinged smell of 
things that grew untended and had grown always. (5)

The cowslips and the disrespectful wind represent the elemen-
tal wilderness, the antithesis to Hagar's "garrison culture"; 
the freedom of life which is personified by Bram Shipley. 
Hagar is attracted to his uncouth virility but her real al-
legiance is to propriety, and their marriage proves to be 
just another challenge for Hagar to prune and mold undisci-
plined nature into social conformity.

Hagar revels in "proper appearances" and, unlike 
Rachel and Stacey, does not sense until the end of her life
that they have bought her a hollow existence. But from the first she rejects the stereotype of womanhood decreed by society and defended by men. She despises "flimsy gutless creatures" (4) like her mother, Regina Weese, and Auntie Doll, and rejects their parasitic roles of solace and servitude. Yet, like Edna Connors and Stacey MacAindra, she is bitterly bound by her material dependency:

I did not go out teaching. I stayed and kept my father's accounts, played hostess for him, chatted diplomatically to guests, did all he expected of me, for I felt (sometimes with rancor, sometimes with despair) that I would reimburse him for what he'd spent, whatever it cost me. (45)

Thus Hagar's life is a constant battle for independence against the restraints of her society and her men. As a child Jason Currie rules her life. Like Grandfather Connors he is an "upright" man of property, professing conventional religious values but actually revering hard work, perseverance and upward mobility:

God might have created heaven and earth and the majority of people, but Father was a self-made man as he himself had told us often enough. (17)

Hagar at first eagerly emulates him and tries to please him. Then, realizing his basic contempt for all women and his exploitation of her ("as though I were a thing and his" [43]), she attempts to escape. But, locked in a woman's conventional role she can only fly to another man's prison, to become an
object for his gratification:

Let's see what you look like under all that rig-out, Hagar. (51)

and his glorification:

I saw then with amazement that he wanted a dynasty no less than my father had. (101)

Although exceptionally intelligent, ambitious and educated, Hagar is trapped in a social and legal dependency more humiliating than Stacey's contemporaries experience fifty years later. She attempts to achieve vicarious success by molding her husband and sons into her father's image. But the age-old battle between woman's frustrated ambitions and man's stubborn independence destroys both parties:

Twenty-four years, in all, were scoured away like sandbanks under the spate of our wrangles and bicker. (116)

Bram and John, like Nick Kazlik and Luke Venturi, have their own dreams and demons; they are too weak and self-centred to carry the burden of Hagar's also. Moreover, it is impossible for them to lead Hagar out of her unhappy bondage as long as she insists that salvation lies in material prosperity. When they fail her she rejects them for a rich old man and an over-furnished mansion. But with cruel irony, her life-long homage to the world of appearances only wins her the despised role of housekeeper-nurse and the empty reward of a houseful
of furniture:

If I am not somehow contained in them and in this house... then I do not know where I am to be found at all. (36)

All her life Hagar fights the domination of men but the victory she forces from them is hollow. Significantly, it is a man, Murray Lees, who at the end affords her the opportunity for confused, humble confession and grants her absolution on behalf of her betrayed men:

'It's okay', he says. 'I knew all the time you never meant it. Everything is all right.' (248)

Now, even in the light of day, she can call a truce in her proud battle for independence and gratefully accept Lees' kindness ("a kind of mercy" [253]), and Marvin's help ("Marvin's arms are like a steel brace around me" [254]). Having finally been shown the way, Hagar can go on to make restitution in her brief remaining time, and find some understanding and acceptance of her life and a glimpse of salvation.

Hagar's sterile, unhappy existence obviously owes much to the precepts of her father and the pressures of society. But she is too strong and self-willed not to bear the ultimate responsibility for her own tragedy. Like Rachel, Hagar suffers from her refusal to acknowledge and accept the realities of life and death. She proudly suppresses all the unrefined elements of her existence under a socially-acceptable veneer; she self-righteously denies any responsibility
for the destruction of lives around her. The resolution of Hagar's tragedy is given in symbolically Christian terms: only by losing her pride of life and surrendering to the necessity of death can she be resurrected into love, freedom, and joy.

Hagar rages throughout her life against the realities of existence:

I can't change what's happened to me in my life or make what's not occurred take place. But I can't say I like it, or accept it, or believe it's for the best. I don't and never shall, not even if I'm damned for it. (160)

She especially rejects the inevitability of death:

Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light. (11)

And she refuses all contact and comfort to the dying, whether deformed chickens in the town dump or her suffering brother Dan. She scorns the weakness and acceptance with which others meet death:

I found this harder to bear than Matt's death. Why hadn't he writhed, cursed, at least grappled with the thing? (60)

Her fear and repugnance of death are based on the fierce pride of life and the materialistic values inherited from her father. She is convinced that his attention to hard work and proper appearances earned him supremacy over life and immortality in death:
His soul need never peer down from the elegant hall of eternity and be offended by cowslips spawning on his grave. (63)

Following his example she represses all natural desires and instinctive responses, imposing discipline and convention on all Nature and Man, and becoming the incarnation of her petrified cultural ideal, "the stone angel".

"Doubly blind" (3) like the angel, in her own pride and fear, Hagar refuses to know and accept the real nature of her family or her self:

'You always bet on the wrong, horse,' John said gently. 'Mary was your boy but you never saw that, did you?' (237)

She is alienated from reality within a selfish dream of molding a replica of her father. To that end she rejects Bram, ignores Marvin, and idealizes John. No spontaneous love, empathy, joy or sorrow for them could penetrate her ambition:

I found my tears had been locked too long and wouldn't come at my bidding. The night my son died I was turned to stone. (243)

Hagar's unreal existence is reflected in her attitude toward Nature. She can never share Bram's elemental love of the land and animals, but feels threatened by their independent force:

I never cared for horses. I was frightened of
them, so high and heavy they seemed, so muscular, so much their own masters. (83)

And just as the town controls the cemetery cowslips, Hagar demands that the farm become picturesque and profitable.

Even more destructively, Hagar represses her natural desires to surrender to Bram in their sexual relations:

It was not so long after we wed, when first I felt my blood and vitals rise to meet his. He never knew. I never let him know... I prided myself upon keeping my pride intact, like some maidenhead. (81)

Thus what might have been the foundation for honest love and communication in their relationship becomes a further excuse for hypocrisy, guilt, and resentment, as Hagar continues to insist on the romanticized, socially-admired, and artificial ideal of marriage:

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. (80)

In all her relationships with others Hagar's pride in appearances and fear of reality eventually lead her to a sterile, joyless isolation. Like "the Egyptian" (40), her Biblical namesake (Genesis 16 and 21), Hagar wanders in a metaphorical wilderness and lonely exile because of her pride. In bondage to the ambitions of the flesh and the world, she cannot participate in the covenant of the joyful new life (Galatians 4: 23).
Age, the loss of her husband and son, and the frustrations of her dreams for them have still not softened Hagar. She clings to material possessions for her identity; she has no understanding or sympathy for her family, no acceptance for her life. Ironically, it is in a final, proud bid for independence, her flight to the cannery by the sea, that she finds redemption.

Hagar's climb down to the seashore is a symbolic descent into death. Physically dying from illness and exposure, she can no longer avoid its reality. Death surrounds her in the images of the gull ("a bird in the house means a death in the house" [217]), and the night sea "hoarding sly-eyed serpents, killer whales, swarming phosphorescent creatures dead to the daytime" [205]), and becomes movingly real in the story of Murray Lees. Listening to his tragedy Hagar realizes, as King Lear did in the presence of the Fool, her unavoidable kinship with all men in the elements of Life and Death:

'I had a son,' I say, 'and lost him.' (234)

She discovers, as Stacey did, that we all live in burning houses and must trust and accept each other for survival. Now Hagar can finally strip the social lie from John's death ("one was killed - in the last war." 104 ), and surrender to the reality of it, admitting her responsibility and begging forgiveness.

While in her refuge at the seashore Hagar also begins
to appreciate and accept the natural beauties of life. She is dependent on the rain for drink, the forest for shelter, and the creatures of the wood for companionship:

Now, I perceive that the forest is not still at all, but crammed with creatures scurrying here and there, on multitudinous and mysterious errands. A line of ants crosses the tree trunk where I am sitting. Solemn and in single file they march toward some miniature battle or carrion feast. A giant slug ooze across my path, flowing with infinite slowness like a stagnant creek. My log is covered with moss - I pluck at it and an enormous piece comes away in my hand. (192)

For the first time she has become involved in the natural life surrounding her. And, like the rain, her "well in the wilderness" (187), these are images of fruitfulness and life, of rebirth and renewal for Hagar. The sterile imagery of the prairies is replaced by the complex metaphor of the sea, suggesting baptism and resurrection, and symbolizing the flux of life which Hagar has now accepted over the rigid system so long imposed by her pride. This is coupled with "a strongly-marked sacramental pattern" supported by the hopeful Christian imagery of wine and wafers, water, fishermen, and the sanctuary (cannery).

With realization comes the possibility of redemption from her former hollow existence and rebirth into a new life with "a kind of mercy" (253) and freedom and love. There is no time for a complete transformation of character but Hagar

6 Thomas, Laurence, p. 42.
does undergo a significant change of attitudes. She no longer finds it necessary to hide behind a self-centred pride in proper appearances:

I, Hagar Shipley, always fastidious if nothing else, drank with a perfect stranger and sank into sleep huddled beside him....And to be frank, now that I give it a second thought, it doesn't seem so dreadful. (249)

She freely moves to extend and receive forgiveness. And with a new understanding and compassion for other people, she can now swallow her pride and pretensions and assume the role that they need:

Now it seems to me that Marvin is truly Jacob, gripping with all his strength and bargaining: 'I will not let thee go except thou bless me.' And I see that I am thus strangely cast and have been so from the beginning perhaps....It's in my mind to ask his pardon, but that's not what he wants from me. (304)

Having accepted the world, she can finally admit her own life. In a moment of self-knowledge and cathartic release the stone angel receives vision:

I must always, always have wanted that - simply to rejoice. How is it that I never could? I know, I know. How long have I known? Or have I always known in some far crevice of my heart, some cave too deeply buried, too concealed? Every good joy I might have held, in my man or in every child of mine or even the plain light of morning, of walking the earth, all were forced to a standstill by some brake of proper appearances - oh, proper to whom? When did I ever speak the heart's truth? Pride was my wilderness and the demon that led my 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. (292)

This revelation and confession liberate Hagar from the past and confirm her resurrection to new life. Now she is eager to give love:

'Marvin. You've been good to me, always. A better son than John.' (304)

and gratefully accepts any evidence of affection:

'She's a holy terror,' he says. Listening, I feel it is more than I could now reasonably have expected out of life, for he has spoken with such love and such tenderness. (305)

For the first time in her life she knows some joy and freedom:

I lie here and try to recall something truly free that I have done in ninety years. I can think of only two acts that might be so, both recent. One was a joke - yet a joke only as all victories are, the paraphernalia being unequal to the event's reach. The other was a lie - yet not a lie, for it was spoken at least and at last with what may perhaps be a kind of love. (307)

and, because of this, at the end perhaps a kind of grace:

I wrest from her the glass full of water to be had for the taking. I hold it in my own hands, There, There. (308)

Despite some flaws, even this early novel reveals Laurence's skill and insight as an author. She builds up
Hagar's story scene by detailed scene, beginning with the opening description of the Manawaka cemetery which immediately establishes Hagar's credibility and authority as a narrator. These first paragraphs demonstrate the layers of meaning that we see throughout the book. Our first, detailed, sensuous impressions are heightened by the emotional substance, and then the thematic significance of each scene.

As in A Jest of God, the details of incident and atmosphere are authentic enough to illustrate a textbook on geriatrics. This may not seem to compliment a work of art, but, as Thomas points out:

Mrs. Laurence has said of her writing that she wants to put down on paper what everyone knows but nobody has thought of saying: truth of detail plays a large part in life.\(^7\)

And, where many writers escape into euphemism and sentiment, Laurence seasons her realism with tart humour and revealing honesty:

When he'd bent, enormous and giant, I could not believe there could be within me a room to house such magnitude. When I found there was, I felt as one might feel discovering a second head, an unsuspected area. Pleasure or pain were one to me, meaningless. I only thought - well, thank the Lord now I know, and at least it's possible without the massacre it looked like being. I was a very practical girl in many ways. (52)

The novel is based on a symmetrical pattern of

\(^7\)Thomas, Laurence, P. 43.
parallel scenes, past and present, leading up to the moment in the cannery where past and present fuse and Hagar can accept both and go on to a future of redemption. This structure is contrived and the transitions between past and present are too obviously "written":

Being alone in a strange place, the nurses' unseeing stare, the receding heat of the day - all bring to mind the time I was first in a hospital, when Marvin was born. (99)

Even Laurence "wouldn't go to great lengths to defend the form of the novel."\(^8\) But I think there is some justification for it in terms of the story. The pattern conveys an important idea of Laurence's: "the past and future are both always present, present in both senses of the word, always now and always here with us."\(^9\) By juxtaposing Hagar's illusions and her real life this technique also gives the reader a more objective view of her story. And although the chronological flashbacks sacrifice something in reality, they make it easier for the reader to follow the development of Hagar's tragedy. Most importantly, just as the form of _A Jest of God_ was the only possible narrative vehicle for Rachel, so the tidy pattern of _The Stone Angel_ demonstrates exactly the order which Hagar imposes on life. And the whole illusion of life in the

\(^8\) Laurence, "Ten", p. 13.

novel, and the autobiographic technique, depend ultimately on our acceptance of Hagar. So it is her total reality that overcomes the technical flaws and finally compels belief in her story.

In each of Laurence's three novels the narrative voice is significantly connected with the theme; the first indication of this is the epigraph which opens each book.

If I pass the burial spot of Nero
I shall say to the wind, "well, well"
I who have fiddled in a world on fire,
I who have done so many stunts not worth doing. (v)
Carl Sandburg, "Losers"

This is Stacey's voice in the epigraph from The Fire-Dwellers; it conveys her sense of helplessness and worthlessness in a world being consumed by its own violence. This theme is also illustrated in the narrative mixture of first and third persons within the book. The first-person narrative dwells on Stacey's inner doubts and fears. But the third person narrative, although really still her voice, expresses an objective awareness, involvement and concern for the outside world and the people in it that Hagar and Rachel never demonstrate.

If I should pass the tomb of Jonah
I would stop there and sit for awhile;
Because I was swallowed one time deep in the dark
And came out alive after all. (v)

The epigraph for A Jest of God also comes from Carl Sandburg's "Losers"; the title of the poem stresses the
habitual position of Margaret Laurence's heroines. This epi-
graph resembles The Fire-Dwellers', but is more introspective
and agonizing, like Rachel's narrative voice, with its omni-
present obsession with "I". It expresses Rachel's tentative,
subjective victory over her own demons; she is barely conscious
of those waiting outside her. These lines also explain Rach-
el's salvation: an ordinary humanity which demands no grand,
tragic sacrifice but adapts to the demands and disasters of
life and brings rebirth and new hope out of death.

This personality characteristic is the opposite of
Hagar's, as indicated by her epigraph:

Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light. (ii)
Dylan Thomas

Similar to A Jest of God, the epigraph and narration of The
Stone Angel is self-centred. But unlike Rachel, Hagar's epi-
graph and narrative voice express her highly-motivated and
ordered control of life, in both the past and present tense,
which rules the novel's structure. This verse also suggests
Hagar's magnitude and intensity as a tragic character. There-
fore, she alone of our heroines, after her moment of self-
consciousness and catharsis, is artistically required to die.
V

THE HEROINE AS A WOMAN

Ever since the rib episode, women have been defined by their relationship to men. And for centuries the daughters of Eve have been regarded as representatives of "the world, the flesh and the devil", and therefore the objects of discrimination by religion and society. They could only redeem their original sin by obedient servitude to men.¹

Our male-dominated Canadian literature has reflected this stereotype in its treatment of the heroine. And female authors, perhaps fearing scornful epithets about Women Writers, have collaborated in the cliché, concocting romanticized roles to justify the existence of their female characters, and their own authorship, in a man's world. Thus, the heroine has remained a prisoner of the male imagination.

Margaret Laurence liberates the heroine and presents her as a realistic, independent, individual woman. A victim of role-definition, she must search for her personal identity, freedom, and dignity, and find the same existential solutions as the modern anti-hero. Laurence's first fiction, in Africa,

¹ See Chapter I, page 2.
was primarily concerned with male identity crises and their point-of-view. But her greatest accomplishment has been in viewing these themes of universal human aspiration through her own eyes, the eyes of a woman.

Laurence's four ages of woman illustrate the development of "the heroine as victim": that woman of history and reality whom Duncan and followers deliberately ignored or romanticized. From childhood Vanessa learns that Calvinist ethics forbid a woman's joy and love, and that man is the traditional author and enforcer of this "garrison culture". To preserve the facade of conformity, everyone must mask their real natures and needs which subconsciously reappear as frustration, fear, and guilt. Therefore, when Rachel finds herself as a domestic non-conformist, unmarried at thirty-four, she reacts not with Advena Murchison's romantic idealism but with psychologically-credible guilt and paranoia. In A Jest of God, the heroine views the mother who preaches role-requirements, and the lover who satisfies his needs and rejects hers, as degrading and destructive, not humorously endearing as seen through the rose-coloured glasses of The Imperialist.

Even conformity doesn't bring comfort, as Rachel's respectably-married sister learns. The social pressures for false perfection increase and she must bear the anxieties of her family too. The "loser syndrome" of wife-and-motherhood

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2 See Chapter IV, page 72.
means responsibilities without respect, and frustrations without freedom. Hagar looks back on a lifetime of loss. She was indoctrinated with the masculine logos, then expected to achieve it in feminine bondage. To compensate, she constructs an artificial existence and calls it success, ignoring any unaccommodating aspects of reality. Thus, the life of Laurence's heroine draws to a close, unlike Duncan's woman, neither comfortable in conformity nor romantic in rebellion, but simply unable to apprehend and accept her individual reality.

Laurence, therefore, produces no happy endings, through the grace of "indulgent Providence". The only answer to her heroine's dilemma, tentative and difficult, is to accept the imperfect realities of life and self (the greatest of which is death), and be grateful for the opportunity to survive and find some dignity in existence. Inner freedom may be impossible, but paradoxically, inner acceptance may make freedom, love, and joy more possible.

The majority of women writers (like the majority of men writers) have always produced quantities of romantic escape fiction. But many male critics, who would never class James Joyce with Arthur Hailey, have persistently grouped serious studies of the heroine by female novelists with this literary popcorn, under the general, pejorative title of

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3 Thomas, "Happily", p. 43.
"a woman's novel":

Presumably because it dealt mainly with a woman and her problems, it could be categorized as something trivial.

Although Margaret Laurence was one of the first in Canada to risk this paternalistic put-down, there is now a growing international company of serious female authors committed to portraying the heroine as a human being and demanding serious literary consideration for her problems.

As never before, Canadian novelists (such as Margaret Atwood, Marian Engel, Alice Munro, Audrey Thomas, and others) are stressing female biology and sexuality to explain their characters, and illustrate the pathetic comedy of being a woman with the same needs and desires as a man but without his opportunities for gratification. Even some male critics are now finding universal significance in these portraits:

It is women whose lives most clearly bear the marks of what we call man's fate; terrified of pregnancy, borne down by the cares of motherhood, obsessed with time running out on their beauty and their chances of escape, caught in the unending cycles of menstruation, they exemplify in their bodies and their lives the human condition.

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5 Grosskurth, "Trapped", p. 20.

6 Woodcock, Odysseus, p. 43.
Ironically, Woodcock is particularly commenting on Brian Moore's heroines. But when Laurence and her companions show us woman from the inside, they clearly demonstrate that Moore, with all his good intentions, could never be Mary Dunne.

Of course, not all the New Women Writers are successful. Some bog down in self-pity or strident aggression or villainous-male stereotypes; some still deny woman's individuality, freeing her from a role of absolute submission only to demand a role of absolute liberation; some distort reality with polemics as thoroughly as Duncan disguised it with pleasantries. Laurence still seems to be the most skillful of Canadian writers at avoiding these pitfalls.

Laurence creates a complete, consistent fictional world in each of her books. She does not dismiss the male characters surrounding her heroines as cardboard villains; for the most part, they are believable individuals within the context of each novel, and often sympathetic fellow-victims:

I'm not sure men need to be attacked. Men have a lot of problems. Life is a very anxious thing for a man who has a family to support, rent to pay, a job to keep. This is the kind of thing I was trying to express in the case of Mac.?

In The Fire-Dwellers Mac MacAindra and his children all possess well-characterized, individual personalities. In contrast, in The Honeyman Festival Minn's children are just

7 Wigmore, "Laurence", p. 54.
demanding, dirty "they", and her husband is an affectionate letter-writer half a world away; Mrs. Blood's story-book children and polite, sympathetic husband are no more real to us.

Although we know Laurence's heroines intimately through their first-person narratives, we are not restricted or imposed on by their biological phenomena; the author's perspective is constantly in control and she does not offer feminine physiology as a facile excuse for their actions. Her women are also closely related to their communities, and their environment influences them deeply. In contrast, the reader is trapped within Minn Burge's pregnant body throughout her novel, and Mrs. Blood's miscarriage and identity-crisis, apart from a little local colour, has no real connection with Africa (compared to Miranda Kestoe's pregnancy, for example.)

Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* is an entertaining, absurdist novel. It reflects the new interest in fantasy and surrealism in Canadian literature and, consequently, a comparison between her book and Laurence's realistic writing is difficult. But, even tongue in cheek, Atwood seems to encourage the self-pity, self-righteousness, and paranoia of her heroine until the reader becomes bored and impatient; this is a danger Laurence more successfully avoided in *A Jest of God*. Nor is Atwood's tricky ending, although symbolic, as meaningful and satisfying as Laurence's conclusion.

The recent woman writer who seems to compare most
favourably with Laurence is Alice Munro. The structure of Lives of Girls and Women is very similar to A Bird in the House, hovering between a book of stories and a loose novel. It has inspired great praise as "a delight, a wonder, a blessing to be devoutly thankful for". And in Munro's sensitive portrayal of Del Jordan's development, we find the intimately-convincing characterizations, perceptive descriptions of small-town life, and natural, uninhibited treatment of life and sex that have distinguished Laurence's work. It only lacks, perhaps, the concentrated unity of Laurence's theme of sacrifice and survival.

Although I have criticized certain facets of these new (often first) novels in comparing them to Laurence's mature works, they are generally accomplished, insightful writings. They illustrate the tremendous contribution that many women are making to Canada's increasingly-respected literary environment. Many of these authors own their original inspiration, or the climate in which their works are received, to Margaret Laurence. Because she recognized the reality, articulated the needs, and expanded the consciousness of woman (and, perhaps, enlarged the understanding of man), there is now a distinctively 'feminine voice' in the male fortress of Canadian fiction. And the Heroine may finally be treated as a Human Being.

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