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#### ABSTRACT

Between 1964 and 1974 Margaret Laurence (1926-1987) produced a body of fiction which established her as a major woman writer in a Canada where the emergence of post-war nationalism created a readiness to accept, buy and read books by Canadians about Canada. For this she created the town of Manawaka - partly based on her home town of Neepawa, Manitoba - which became the symbol of all Canadian small towns. The thesis is an examination in chronological order of her work: The Stone Angel, A Jest of God, A Bird in the House (short stories), The Fire-Dwellers, and The Diviners.

Her writing deserves attention because it portrays Canadian life with integrity. As fiction by a woman about women, her work shows none of the romantic fantasising of the lesser novelist. Happy endings are never guaranteed; relationships have unharmonious elements. She reveals a society which imposes restraints on women, making it difficult to achieve self-fulfilment in a male-oriented environment where traditional role patterns stifle legitimate female aspirations. However, her novels are feminist by implication and not in an obtrusive or polemical way. An emergent theme is the injustice suffered by disadvantaged minorities represented by the métis of Manitoba whom she saw as dispossessed of their land by the Anglo-Saxon settlers.

Mrs Laurence's technique was always experimental and developed from novel to novel. She employed variations of time and voice: the inner monologue is used to evoke an immediate response, the movement between past and present to highlight mood and temperament. These devices are examined in the thesis, as are her use of distinctive idiom and the symbolic elements of her writing.

Finally, her honest attempt to depict the extraordinariness of ordinary people in carefully worked and sympathetically conceived stories speaks to the universal longing to learn about ourselves.

THE CANADIAN FICTION OF MARGARET LAURENCE

Agnes G. Bradbury

M.A.Thesis, Department of English  
University of Durham

1987

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## PREFACE

It is perhaps appropriate to explain why I began research for a master's degree at sixty years of age, and why I chose the Manawaka novels of Margaret Laurence as my subject.

Few, if any, of those students who graduated with me from the University of Western Ontario in 1942 stayed on to undertake postgraduate work. The world we went out into was governed by memories of the depression and by the need to win the conflict in Europe. The young men went to war; the young women prepared to find jobs. Education was costly and most of us assumed that we would go out to earn a living as soon as possible in order to ease the drain on our parents' resources. Moreover, built into the social attitudes of the day there was the unspoken assumption that as a woman you would work for a while, probably at teaching, and then marry. And so it was - a few years of teaching, then marriage; several years at home then back to teaching. During those years back in the classroom, thanks to one of my colleagues, P.S. Rushforth, my love of and enthusiasm for English literature reasserted itself. In 1980 I decided to look around for a university where I could work toward a higher degree on a literary topic of my own choice. The University of Durham was prepared to provide the opportunity if I could decide on a topic for a thesis.

My inclination was toward a study of one of the nineteenth century women novelists - Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Elizabeth Gaskell or George Eliot - whose treatment of issues important to women interested me. All these novelists, however, had received so much critical attention that I had to look elsewhere. I turned to Margaret Laurence - whose novels The Stone Angel and A Jest of God I

had read a short time previous - and was struck by her treatment, in a twentieth century context, of the issues dealt with by the nineteenth century novelists I so admired. I realised that in her novels I had found my subject.

That I did not think at once of Margaret Laurence was due partly to the content of my Honours course in English at Western Ontario (in four years we spent only one term on Canadian poetry and fiction) and partly to my many years' absence in England (where I rarely heard of a Canadian novel). As Margaret Laurence explained in a broadcast conversation in 1972:

I think at one time it was extremely difficult to be a Canadian writer. We still had for many, many years a kind of colonial mentality, a great many people felt that a book written by a Canadian couldn't possibly be good. It had to come from either New York or the other side of the Atlantic to be any good. This whole cultural climate has changed incredibly, and particularly in the last decade. My first book was published in 1960, and the change in those twelve years in the whole cultural situation in Canada has been enormous. Canadian writers are probably in a better situation now than they have ever been before. Very few Canadian writers of any seriousness or worth do not find a considerable readership in their own country. (Graeme Gibson, Eleven Canadian Novelists, taped conversations for the C.B.C., Anansi, Toronto, 1973.)

This opinion is corroborated by Margaret Atwood in her book, Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature where she declares that 'Until recently, reading Canadian literature has been for me and for everyone else who did it a personal interest, since it was not taught, required or even mentioned (except with derision) in the public sphere.' (Anansi, Toronto, 1972, p.13)

Still influenced by the attitude described here, I was unprepared for the excellence I found in her fiction. In the following thesis, the chapters on the individual Manawaka novels were written (in their original form) as my direct response to their themes, plots and characters. Having thus drafted my own commentary, I turned to the



commentaries of others. Margaret Laurence is acknowledged as the first of the post-war generation of Canadian women to write novels on universal themes set in a Canadian milieu, and as such she became the matriarch of Canadian literature in the '60s and '70s. She was so forthcoming in discussing her work, and to some degree herself, that her conception of what she was doing is well known. Her statements have been quoted frequently, and her novels have already received much attention from critics, almost all of it laudatory.

In reviewing this body of criticism, and in re-writing my chapters on the novels, I have found it necessary to stand back and try to see Margaret Laurence in perspective, to consider her importance not as a Canadian writer only, or even as a woman writer, but simply as a contemporary writer. She described herself modestly in her last novel The Diviners as a 'wordsmith' and her dedication to her craft is obvious, in the structure of her novels no less than in their expression. Equally obvious is her commitment to the material - social, psychological, moral - of her fiction. Whether her possession of these qualities is sufficient to place her novels in the highest rank is debatable. I should say that they fall short of this, but that they are worthy of critical study as serious and competent novels on universal human problems set in a Canadian scene.

My bibliography consists of a mass of newspaper clippings from Canadian newspapers all across Canada, of numerous magazine articles from Canadian magazines, and a large selection of books. Most of the material has been obtained through the efforts of a huge circle of relatives and friends, especially in Canada, who have all acted as enthusiastic sources of material of all kinds. My press cutting service has been second to none, covering as it did almost every province in the Dominion.

My thanks go, therefore, to each member of this circle, both for their moral support and for their practical help. I am especially grateful to George Robinson, Librarian-in-charge, of the reference section at my alma mater, the University of Western Ontario. My family deserves special thanks for their backing and for their willingness to spare me for what became a consuming task involving a good many hours of neglect of household chores. P.S. Rushforth, my head of department at the Friends' School and a valued colleague, urged me on when morale was low, and nothing would have been accomplished at all without the kindly, courteous and constructive guidance of my tutor, Professor T. Craik of the University of Durham Department of English.

Agnes G. Bradbury.

## From Neepawa to Manawaka

A list of the honours which Margaret Laurence received during her lifetime includes all the most prestigious prizes Canada can bestow on a writer. Beginning in 1961 with the Beta Sigma Phi award for the best fiction novel by a Canadian, in the next fifteen years she twice won the Governor General's Medal for fiction, and became a Companion of the Order of Canada, while receiving numerous honorary degrees from universities as far apart as Halifax and Vancouver, acting as writer-in-residence at three universities, and three times gaining the President's Medal at the University of Western Ontario for her African short stories. Her second novel A Jest of God was made into a film Rachel, Rachel by Paul Newman for his wife, Joanne Woodward. Her books appear in literature syllabuses in colleges and secondary schools across Canada. Indeed, in 1976 she joined the ranks of such writers as Lawrence and Joyce in having a book of hers, her last novel The Diviners, condemned by parents in the Peterborough area for obscenity.

More recently she herself was the subject of a film, Margaret Laurence, First Lady of Manawaka, produced by the National Film Board of Canada, and premiered in Winnipeg on May 7th, 1979, with considerable brouhaha. A year previously Norma Edwards and Juliana Saxton devised a stage production in the guise of a one-woman show in which Norma Edwards presents The Women of Margaret Laurence, portraits of the five women from the Manawaka novels. This dramatic interpretation of Mrs Laurence's principal characters has since appeared on stages and in halls all across Canada and America to



the delight of both the initiate and those who have never heard of Hagar Shipley. Most recently, in 1983, Norma Edwards toured Scandinavia and England with her show, thanks to the Department of External Affairs of Canada. So, in spite of the fact that Mrs Laurence did not write a major work after 1974 when she completed The Diviners and declared that she had closed the file on Manawaka, she remains eminent in the literary world of Canada and beyond.

Superficially Margaret Laurence's life story suggests a girl who was as normal as blueberry pie. She was born in 1926 in the small Manitoba town of Neepawa, 125 miles north west of Winnipeg. Neepawa differed from hundreds of small towns all across Canada only in its setting in a prairie landscape. Otherwise it resembled communities from Ontario to British Columbia. By creating their towns, often arbitrarily, in the midst of unimaginable wilderness, the early settlers asserted their longing for order in the midst of chaos by laying them out on a grid pattern either side of a central Main Street lined with the usual ugly assortment of grocery, hardware and general stores, Chinese restaurant, commercial hotel, bakeshop, post office, newspaper office and gas station (evolved from the livery stable). Removed from this street devoted to the service of Mammon, churches and schools appeared in the residential areas which divided into that for the substantial dwellings of those who lived on the right side of the omnipresent railway tracks and that for the shacks of the less respectable of the town. The people living in these communities were self-sufficient, inward-looking and conservative, turning their backs on the outside world which threatened to overwhelm them. A community dropped into the middle of what felt like

wilderness tended to develop what Northrop Frye has labelled a fortress mentality.

Another little Main Street. In the foreground there's an old horse and buggy hitched outside one of the stores. A broken old horse, legs set stolid, head down dull and spent. But still you feel it belongs to the earth, the earth it stands on, the prairie that continues where the town breaks off. What the tired old hulk suggests is less approaching decay or dissolution than return. You sense a flow, a rhythm, a cycle.

But the town in contrast has an upstart, mean complacency. The false fronts haven't seen the prairie. Instead they stare at each other across the street as into mirrors of themselves, absorbed in their own reflections.

The town shouldn't be there. It stands up so insolent and smug and self-assertive that your fingers itch to smudge it out and let the underlying rhythms complete themselves.<sup>1</sup>

The inhabitants of such towns maintained a rigid code of behaviour based on puritanical, Presbyterian moral values where cleanliness was next to godliness and sloth was not to be tolerated. Their lives were supposed to be lived according to innumerable cliches or aphorisms which hung in samplers on the walls of their homes and appeared in children's copybooks. Margaret Laurence used her childhood and adolescent experience of life in this small prairie town to create the imaginary Manawaka of her five Canadian novels. Of course, Manawaka is not Neepawa as such,<sup>2</sup> as she herself pointed out:

Manawaka is not my home town of Neepawa - it has elements of Neepawa, especially in some of the descriptions of places, such as the cemetery on the hill or the Wachakwa valley through which ran the small brown river which was the river of my childhood. In almost every way, however, Manawaka is not so much any one prairie town as an amalgam of many prairie towns. Most of all, I like to think <sup>3</sup>it is simply itself, a town of the mind, my own private world...

In her widely read analysis of the novels, The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence, Clara Thomas makes much the same point:

Manawaka is not Neepawa, but its geography, the details of its

situation, its landmarks, and its people depend on Margaret Laurence's experience of Neepawa and on her ability to store in memory and transmute what she knew and what she felt of it into a created fictional world. All the history of her town had been woven into the fabric of the Manawaka works...<sup>4</sup>

What Margaret Laurence did was to recreate the atmosphere of such places, showing us how the people in them relate to one another, and revealing the way that the social structure of communities turned in upon themselves affects the lives of individual inhabitants. Dick Harrison in a study of prairie literature suggests that her prairie heroines are all

victims of the prairie's Manawaka culture -- its bigotry, its Calvinist self-repression, its dedication to a few limited and life-denying truths which may have sustained the pioneers but which stifle the next generation and isolate them from the life which should be accessible to them.<sup>5</sup>

In an interview, in which Bernice Lever asked her about her choice of a small town as the setting for her books, she commented:

There are a number of Canadian writers who work out of urban situations, of course, and probably an increasing number, but my own feeling about this is that a small town, far from being limiting, is a kind of microcosm. Anything that happens anywhere, in some way or other happens in a small town.<sup>6</sup>

Margaret Laurence's ancestry is typically Canadian, too. Her generation was still in contact with the pioneer days through grandparents who experienced some of the hardships and could recount the stories that their parents had told them of the opening up of much of Canada, especially the West. Her maternal grandfather, undertaker John Simpson, was of Protestant Irish stock who arrived from County Tyrone in Ireland in 1850; lawyer John Wemyss, her other grandfather, came from a Lowland Scottish family (a sept of the Clan MacDuff originating from Burntisland north of Edinburgh) which arrived in Manitoba in 1881. This closeness to a time when people

were strangers in a foreign land created an emotional tie with the Old Country which she examines in her final novel, The Diviners.

Her early years are untypical, however, in that they were more than is usual marred by family deaths, so the feeling that 'in the midst of life we are in death' pervades her books. By the time she was four her mother was dead and her Aunt Margaret Simpson, a teacher in Calgary, had come back to Neepawa to look after her young namesake. A year later Margaret Simpson married her brother-in-law, Robert Wemyss, and became the young Margaret's stepmother. Robert Wemyss junior was born two years before his father died of pneumonia in 1935. Very soon afterwards Grandmother Simpson died and the widowed Margaret with her two children moved to the Big House to take care of her father, John Simpson, the Grandfather Connor of A Bird in the House. In fact, in this collection of interconnected short stories which she claims represent her only autobiographical writing, Margaret Laurence works through in retrospect the traumas of the years between this move and her going away to college in Winnipeg in 1944.

When she (Margaret Wemyss) moved into her father's house he was an old man of eighty-two; her children were five and twelve, and she was a widow with very little money.

The intensity of Margaret Laurence's imaginative perception of the burdens laid on one generation by another seeded itself in these years. So did her empathy with particular women and their need to struggle towards freedom of the spirit - and so did her own fierce independence of spirit. When she lived in his house, Margaret resented her grandfather's authority over them all. His strength was her constant challenge to battle. She was challenged, but certainly not crippled, by this old, still fierce and autocratic man; her stepmother's supportive love and encouragement and her own strong spirit, well-matched to her grandfather's strength, were constant, counterbalancing dynamics towards growth and achievement.<sup>7</sup>

Young Margaret early showed a talent for writing which her stepmother nurtured. Later she recalls how from the age of seven she would fill five cent scribblers with her stories. When she was twelve one of them called Pillars of the Nation, in which she first used the name Manawaka, won honourable mention in a contest in the Winnipeg Free Press. The same newspaper printed another entitled The Case of the Blond Butcher in its Saturday section for young writers. While at Neepawa Collegiate from 1940 to 1944 she became editor of the school newspaper The Annals of the Black and Gold to which she also contributed poems and stories. Her stepmother, Mrs Wemyss, found an outlet for her own love of literature in helping to found and to run the Neepawa Public Library, and in encouraging her stepdaughter to read widely. The latter read omnivorously and recalls the deep impression which Sinclair Ross' novel As For Me And My House made on her young mind. In 1944 a scholarship made it possible to leave Neepawa to attend United College, Winnipeg. The leaving of her home town is later mirrored in The Diviners where Morag Gunn eagerly and impatiently boards the train which will take her into the world beyond Manawaka. She imagines she is leaving her life there behind, but as Margaret Laurence knows, we all carry with us the baggage of the past, a baggage which she later rifled to create the Manawaka world of her novels.

University life brought with it expanding interests along with an intensification of those Margaret Wemyss already had. United College, an Arts and Theology College affiliated with the University of Manitoba, prided itself on its tradition of independent thought and action, and 'the powerfully positive, liberal idealism of which she



was a part at United College exactly complemented her own intensity, her sympathy for individuals, and her emotional rejection of all social systems that would humiliate men and women and restrict their freedom.<sup>8</sup> Here she became associated with the Winnipeg Old Left, a Socialist group composed of members of the C.C.F., the C.C.P. and their followers, dedicated to social reform. In her biographical study Three Voices, Joan Hind-Smith portrays a self-assured, mature young woman already free of many of the emotional and psychological problems other young women tended to suffer at the same age.

Her graduation photograph shows a girl with a candid, unselfconscious smile, unlike the usual carefully posed pictures of that kind. She was engagingly uninhibited. Stories are told of her declaiming poetry on a fire escape one foggy night until the boys in an adjoining residence threw a pail of water over her, and of how she used to tramp around the common room singing loudly and off key.<sup>9</sup>

She was fortunate in having excellent English teachers at United. In an interview in 1979, she paid tribute to the late Bob Hallstead whom she described as 'more than teacher - he was critic and friend.'<sup>10</sup> Another major influence was Dr Malcolm Ross, who was later to become editor of Queen's Quarterly and who was to publish her first African short story 'Drummer of All the World' in his magazine. She contributed both poems and stories to Vox, the college paper, and became assistant editor in 1946.

After graduation in 1947 with an Honours degree in English, she worked for a year as reporter for the first cooperatively owned newspaper in Canada, The Winnipeg Citizen, where she wrote book reviews and a daily radio column, as well as covering labour news. This early experience as a journalist taught her to write quickly, accurately and succinctly but was at odds with that part of her that

wanted to write fiction. With her marriage in 1948 to Jack Laurence, a civil engineering graduate of the University of Manitoba, she began the travels that were to prove so valuable a stimulus to her imagination and to her need to write. The years between 1949 and 1957 saw a gradual acceleration in output which reached full flood in 1960 with the publication of her first novel This Side Jordan, set in Africa, followed at intervals until 1974 by the five Manawaka books set in Canada.

After their marriage Jack Laurence's work took them first to Finchley Road, London, England, and then to the desert Protectorate of Somaliland where he was commissioned by the British government to organise the construction of a series of earth dams (ballehs) to conserve water for the drought-plagued people of Somaliland.

It was no sudden whim on his part. As an engineer he felt a certain lack in any job he had had in Canada or in England. We lived in an increasingly organised world, a world in which the essential roads and bridges had already been built. He felt a need to work for once on a job that plainly needed doing - not a paved road to replace a gravel one, but a road where none had been before, a job whose value could not be questioned, a job in which the results of an individual's work could be clearly perceived, as they rarely could in Europe or America. It may have been a desire to simplify, to return to the pioneer's uncomplicated struggle. Or it may have been the feeling, strong in our generation, that life was very short and uncertain, and a man had better do what he could, while he could. Perhaps these feelings were good and sufficient reasons for going to Africa; perhaps they were not.<sup>11</sup> But they could not be shrugged off or ignored indefinitely.

By means of a magnificent bluff he was able to persuade the Colonial Office that his wife would be quite capable of coping with the rigours of life there even though there was no provision for married couples. Thus began the adventure which was to have a lasting effect on Margaret Laurence. In an oft-quoted passage from her travel book, The Prophet's Camel Bell, she observes: '...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.' 12

She concludes the same book with the words:

Whenever we think of Somaliland, we think of the line of watering places that stretches out across the Haud, and we think of the songs and tales that have been for generations a shelter to nomads on the dry and red plateau and on the burnt plains of the coast, for these were the things through which we briefly touched the country and it, too, touched our lives, altering them in some way forever.<sup>13</sup>

In 1952, in England, Margaret and Jack's daughter, Jocelyn, was born, and from 1952 to 1957 the family lived on the Gold Coast as it was called prior to 1957 when it became the independent country of Ghana. Their son, David, was born there in 1955. In this same year Margaret began to write her first novel, This Side Jordan, based on what she saw happening around her in the country as it stumbled towards independence. However, the writing of this novel was merely the culmination of a literary output which had been gradually building up ever since the Laurences arrived in Africa in 1950. In the two years which she had spent in Somaliland Margaret had filled her many spare hours first with learning the language, then with translating some of the poems and folk tales of the Somali people. This put her in touch with their traditions and history and fed an interest she developed in the effect of European/American twentieth century culture on the lives of simple people. She was deeply attracted to the proud independence of the Somalis with their ability to survive in spite of all the hardships which a hostile environment could impose. To her they were latter-day children of Israel; theirs was the story of the wanderings of the tribes as chronicled in the

Pentateuch which she now recalled with new insight. As a colonial with liberal views she had arrived in Somaliland with certain preconceptions which experience required her to alter. Some of the British colonial administrators whom she expected to dislike proved to be totally committed to the native population and the country where they served. Her translations of Somali poetry and stories were collected into a small volume, A Tree for Poverty, which was published in 1954, thanks to the efforts of the Colonial Administrator in Hargeisa. This was the first time that Somali literature had ever been translated or published, and it was her privilege to introduce the world to the humour, beauty and insight to be found in the oral legacy of a desert race.

In Ghana the landscape was the antithesis of that in Somaliland; lush, fertile, green, the Ghanaian people reflected this difference in their lively, extrovert nature. But they were subject to sometimes debilitating, often bewildering pressures as they struggled to adapt to the twentieth century. This was reflected in the short stories which Margaret Laurence now began to write. They appeared in various Canadian and American magazines over the next few years, beginning in the winter of 1956 with the publication of 'Drummer of All the world' in the Queen's Quarterly. Later collected into a volume called The Tomorrow - Tamer, they fall briefly into two categories - those in the tradition of Ghanaian folk myth and those dealing with alien people in an alien land. She was responsive to the confusion she could see around her amongst the Africans, torn as they were between the traditional way of life of their childhood and the civilisation brought to them by Church and Colonial Office in the name of

progress. The attitudes and behaviour of the white expatriates was equally absorbing. Two themes which later dominate her work begin to emerge at this time - her passionate interest in and championship of the outsider and the conviction of the importance of their mythology to a people, even in a modern world. These themes come together in This Side Jordan, the novel begun in Ghana but finished only after the Laurences had left to return to Canada where they lived for the next five years. Here Margaret was able to stand back and take a fresh look at the African years, to revise her opinions and to recognise how far her own attitudes had evolved during that period. Later, in 'Ten Years' Sentences' she describes this process. '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.'<sup>14</sup> In this same article she acknowledges the importance of the African experience. By this time, This Side Jordan had already been rewritten in an effort to be more fair to the English characters. Now it was revised yet again and finally appeared in print in 1960, as did three more of the African short stories.

In structure This Side Jordan resembles a railway track - two perfectly parallel story lines joined at regular intervals by wooden ties lead to the ramshackle town of Independence. This artificially symmetrical treatment stems from the author's attempt to give equal emphasis to two points of view. It does however detract from the virtues of a book which honestly tries to describe what was happening in the two Ghanaian communities, black and white, in the months leading up to independence. The doubts and fears of each are personified in the two main characters. Nathaniel Amegbe, a black

schoolmaster, is faced with decisions arousing conflict between his tribal cultural inheritance and his acquired Christian sophistication. Johnnie Kestoe has recently arrived from London to work in the textile branch of Allkirk, Moore and Bright, an export-import firm in Accra. He is forced to cope with his instinctive prejudice in the face of the Africanisation of the firm. Both men's wives are pregnant; each is at odds with her husband's attitude. The birth of the two babies in adjacent hospital beds is an obvious contrivance to enable the author to bring the two couples onto common ground, if only to show how much really separates them. Nathaniel, in naming his son Joshua, expresses the hope that this boy, born on the eve of his country's freedom, will not suffer from his father's paralysing conflict of loyalties and will help to lead Ghana forward into the Promised Land. 'Joshua, Joshua, Joshua. I beg you. Cross Jordan, Joshua.' <sup>15</sup> Both Nathaniel and Johnnie are assured a place in the new Africa, each as aide de camp to a man with a grand vision of the future. Margaret Laurence has since admitted that this was a rather facile, over-optimistic view of a situation fraught with infinite permutations for disaster. In 'Ten Years' Sentences' she comments: 'This was the prevailing spirit, not only of myself but of Africa at that time. Things have shifted considerably since then.' <sup>16</sup>

The preoccupation with form which is revealed in this her first novel has become one of the predominant features, for good and ill, of all her subsequent books. In This Side Jordan symmetry becomes contortion whereas in each of her later books the shape is a necessary adjunct of the whole. Here the two main characters are male and although they are not cardboard figures, they are not as vividly

conceived as her later women protagonists. This failure to create truly memorable male characters is one of the other features of all her novels. Of course in the African book she has set herself the difficult task of creating one individual who is alien to her on two counts: he is male and African. Under the circumstances she does remarkably well at making it possible for the reader to share Nathaniel's inner conflicts while exploring his doubts and fears. Africans who have read her work consider that she gets as close to empathy with the African mind as a European can. She herself says of her African writings: 'They were written by an outsider who experienced a seven years' love affair with a continent, but who in the end had to remain in precisely that relationship, for it could never become the involvement of family.' <sup>17</sup>

This Side Jordan won for its author the Beta Sigma Phi First Novel Award in 1961, the same year that the University of Western Ontario gave her the President's Medal for her short story 'A Gourdful of Glory' in which the market woman, Mammii Ama, awaits Free-Dom. 'I tell you, dis Free-Dom he be sweet sweet ti'ing. You wait small, you see. I tell you true. Market woman all dey be queen mammy den.' <sup>18</sup> The following year she received the same award for 'The Tomorrow-Tamer', a story with the echoes of a folk tale. It examines through African eyes the impact of civilisation on the village of Owurasu when a bridge is built over their river. How will the god of the river react to this new entity? What sort of spirit dwells in the bridge? They do not know. But when Kofi, the young man selected by the elders to work for the Europeans on the bridge, plunges to his death from one of the crossbeams, all is made clear.

'The bridge, clearly, had sacrificed its priest in order to appease the river. The people felt they knew the bridge now...The queenly bridge had paid its homage and was a part of Owurasu at last.'<sup>19</sup>

By now Margaret Laurence's interest was moving away from her African experience to a reassessment of her early years in a Canadian prairie town. She had been carrying in her head for some time a character who had presented herself and demanded to be fleshed out. With the creation of Hagar of The Stone Angel Margaret Laurence laid the foundation for a literary reputation which grew with every one of the four subsequent titles. She herself doubted whether anyone would want to read about a ninety-year old woman facing death and forced to take a backward look at a life which had been long, hard and in many ways disastrous. But the character would not go away. The public received the resulting story with astonishment and sympathetic recognition. However, the novel did not come easily. The first draft was set aside in 1962.

At this time Jack and Margaret had come to realise that their interests were in conflict. He was constantly on the move, fulfilling contracts for engineering works all around the world doing those jobs that 'plainly needed doing'. She wanted to get on with her writing, something such a nomadic existence made difficult. So in that year they separated amicably, he going off to Pakistan, she taking herself, her two children and her manuscript first to Hampstead in London, later to Elm Cottage at Penn in Buckinghamshire. Of her marriage, about which she declined to say very much, she did comment, 'We had twelve great years of marriage and stayed married for twenty-two years. We'd try to patch things up, but of course the



writing was part of it.<sup>20</sup>

In London she rewrote The Stone Angel and collected her African short stories into a volume published as The Tomorrow-Tamer. Her travel book The Prophet's Camel Bell, which grew out of her African diaries, came out simultaneously. The latter was a sensitive, humorous and evocative description of the two years she had spent in Somaliland as the wife of a Canadian civil engineer, travelling with him and sharing the hardships of camp life in a harsh, pitiless land where every human act was directed towards survival. In it she reveals how earnestly and eagerly she worked towards an understanding of the soul of the Somali people. When she failed to succeed as she would have wished, she was humble enough to blame herself, not them. These two books immediately established her as one of the best authors then writing in English about Africa.

The publication of The Stone Angel in 1964 established her as a fine writer for quite other reasons. By this time she had found an elderly house, Elm cottage, in Penn, and had settled down in semi-rural England for what was to prove nearly ten years of solid creativity. The Stone Angel was followed in 1966 by A Jest of God, in 1969 by The Fire-Dwellers, and finally, in 1974, by The Diviners. Early in the years in England she began to write the short stories which were to appear in 1970 as A Bird in the House. These were on her own admission an attempt to exorcise the ghost of her maternal grandfather, John Simpson, the autocratic, disagreeable old man whom she had hated as a child. In the writing she was able to re-live those years when he was such a powerful influence and take away the cutting edge of her hatred by coming to recognise in adulthood that

he was a man of his time, and, moreover, that she had inherited many of her own faults and virtues from him.

In an unproductive period after the publication of A Jest of God she interested herself in Nigerian writing and in Nigerian writers like Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe whom she met in London. This resulted in her being asked to write a critical study of this literature. Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Novelists and Dramatists, 1952-1966 came out in 1968. It is described by Clara Thomas as 'a work of expository scholarship and careful background research into tribal rites and customs ... a tribute to her particular "tribe" among all the writers of the world and, in certain areas, a statement that clarifies the purpose she holds in common with them.'<sup>21</sup> Although Mrs Laurence had written about Africa previously, she felt that it was important for Africans to write for and about themselves and about their past. 'In Nigeria, as in many parts of Africa, people lost their own self-value, their own distinctive voices, throughout three generations of colonialism. They were taught as children to despise their ancestors and the old gods, and the result was, of course, that they learned to despise themselves.'<sup>22</sup> She could identify with what the writers in her study were doing because 'Canadian writers, like African writers, have had to find our own voices and write out of what is truly ours, in the face of overwhelming cultural imperialism'.<sup>23</sup> Canadians too were Third World writers. Looking back on her book in 1969 she concludes:

This book... I now feel refers to a period of history which is over - the fifteen years in which Nigerian writers created a kind of renaissance, drawing upon their cultural past and relating it to the present, seeking links with the ancestors and the old gods in order to discover who they themselves were. This exploration

and discovery ended abruptly with the first massacre of the Ibo in the north, some two years ago. When Nigeria finally emerges from its present agony, it will be in some very different and as yet unpredictable form, and its writers may well find themselves having to enquire into themes they have so far hardly touched, such as the appalling grip on the human heart of tribalism in its hate aspect.<sup>24</sup>

Between 1968 and 1974 Margaret Laurence had a peripatetic life, travelling periodically to Canada where her fame had made her very much in demand as a writer-in-residence at Canadian universities, summering in a cottage on the Otonabee River near Peterborough, and still returning to Elm Cottage for lengthy periods. At last The Fire-Dwellers had been finished, and The Diviners, her last Manawaka novel, was slowly taking shape during the summer withdrawals to her riverside sanctuary. The stories about Vanessa MacLeod, who in reality is the young Margaret Wemyss, were collected and published in a kind of novel in 1970. The title, A Bird in the House, came from one of the stories in the collection.

In that same year was published her first children's book, Jason's Quest, which she describes as 'a gift' she received in 1967 during a period when The Fire-Dwellers was refusing to come right. To amuse herself and relax from the strain of the struggle to get this novel finished, she began to compose a tale about a colony of moles she and her children had seen at work in the garden at Penn. The story records the stages in a journey undertaken by Jason, a young mole from the underground city of Molanium. Jason, suitably kitted out with the Cap of Deeper Thinking and carrying about his person a pair of sun glasses provided by Oliver (the Owl's) Gran, sets out to discover, not the Golden Fleece, but the cause of an enervating illness that is slowly destroying the mole people. Its

anthropomorphic treatment owes much to Beatrix Potter and Kenneth Grahame, but its moralising is more in the tradition of Aesop and La Fontaine. Jason and the three companions he soon acquires all have distinctive reasons for the journey, but they are also interdependent, each contributing whatever is his particular strength to the common cause. They travel through the wilds of darkest rural England towards the big bad city of Londinium where they experience the best and worst of urban life. The story ends when, after a series of adventures amongst the low-life of the capital, Jason finds Perdita, 'The most beautiful mole girl he had ever seen',<sup>25</sup> at the Petunia Patch Club for Smaller Animals, and all is well, for she is much smarter than he is and diagnoses at once that the inhabitants of Molanium are dying of galloping boredom. Thereafter begins the New Age in the community under the ground, as Jason prods his people into the twentieth century. The change of name from Molanium to Molesville says everything.

As the tale develops its creator is able to comment, through the characters, on modern society. In a paper presented to the Canadian Teachers of English in 1970, Walter Swayze comments: 'the book is full of lively satirical insights into human attitudes, conventions, and fashions, and a sensitive awareness of the dangers of class and racial hatreds, pollution, the inanities of the mod world of swingers, right-wing reactionaries, detached academics...'<sup>26</sup> Are these concepts which the child reader can grasp? George Orwell's Animal Farm is a fable which does not pretend to be a book for children. Beatrix Potter's Mrs Tiggy-Winkle gets on in her hedgehoggy way with being the wild creatures' washerwoman and does

not comment, in the process, on the injustices of being a woman. Jason's Quest appears to be neither a political allegory nor a straightforward tale of animals behaving like little humans with never a hint of social comment. It is a rather intellectual exercise which reflects the education and interests of its author. One feels the adult reading to the child will appreciate it most. The Latin tags, the choice of names such as Strine for the ginger Australian cat, Spice for the Black Jamaican, or Perdita, and Jason, the hero who finds her, the parodies on music hall songs and hymns, the names of the newspapers - The Catchester Guardian, for example, it is all great fun, but adult fun somehow. Jason's Quest is a pastiche created by a lively intellect. The author is able to poke gentle fun at the fuddy-duddy attitudes she saw manifested about her in England in order to suggest that a greater willingness to change might help to cure the ills of modern English society. The book obviously gave her enormous pleasure to devise, but the would-be light jokesome tone is not her natural one, and it is doubtful whether the book has added anything to Margaret Laurence's reputation.

However, if we look some five years ahead to 1975 we find that she also wrote another children's story, The Olden Days Coat, in a book truly worthy of an author of her competence. It is a beautifully produced and illustrated slim volume which must appeal to any sensitive child. Blending past and present so skillfully that the reader is quite unperturbed by the movement in time, it tells the story of ten-year old Sal and the dream she experienced when looking through some of her grandmother's mementos. By the simple process of slipping into an old coat she returns to her Gran's time and shares

with her a special box which symbolises the continuity of life. The possibility that old objects are so permeated with the life of their past owners that they have the power to evoke special events from that life for others is convincingly explored by the author. The book also gives expression to one of her favourite themes, that of time as a river. Sal says: 'What a strange thing Time was. It went on and on, and people came into it and then went out again, like Grandad. There was a time when she, Sal, had not even existed, and now here she was, and would grow up and maybe have children of her own. Maybe someday she would even have a granddaughter. It was as hard for Sal to think of being old like Gran as it was to think of Gran having once been ten years old.'<sup>27</sup>

The book is a serious attempt to speak seriously to a child about an important fact of life, and in this it succeeds admirably without being stuffy or preachy. One reviewer asserts that 'It is a fully realized fantasy, one the reader can unquestioningly accept and enter into. It is one of the most difficult of all literary forms to write, and Margaret Laurence's achievement is all the more remarkable because good Canadian children's fantasy is almost non-existent.'<sup>28</sup> Another sums up by declaring '...Sal could be Swiss or Scandinavian or Japanese for that matter, for her experience and feelings will be accepted as their own by children everywhere.'<sup>29</sup>

Two more books for children followed: Six Darn Cows which appeared in 1979 was meant as a child's own early reading book; The Christmas Birthday Story, published in 1980, was a retelling of the Nativity in slightly less simple language for somewhat older readers. Both are attractively illustrated and produced but neither is

outstanding.

The Diviners, the novel over which she had struggled for four years, finally came out in 1974. This event marked the peak of her career. In 1975 she received the Governor General's Medal, the Molson Prize and four honorary degrees. However, the novel had a mixed reception from the critics. Some were wary of reviewing it as they were loth to risk having to detract from the reputation of an author who was by now a national institution. In fact, the novel reflects the difficulties the author experienced in the writing. Longer than her previous works, it gives the impression of being a final attempt to say everything she had ever said before, a summation of all that she had thought and felt about life and those who live it. It is not structurally untidy, yet it is hard to come to grips with it. There is so much there, it is difficult to know where to begin. It has the feel of a valediction, as indeed it has proved to be.

A selection of her occasional writing for magazines and newspapers was published in 1976 as Heart of a Stranger. It is a collection of uneven worth with some trivial entries of laboured jokiness. In 1977 she received the Periodical Distributors Award for the mass paperback edition of A Jest of God. Up until her death in January 1987, she did not write another novel, though in the last few months of her life she was working with her daughter Jocelyn on her memoirs.

The year The Diviners was published was another turning point in her life. She sold her English home and returned to live permanently in Canada. She did not return to live in the West where her roots were, but bought a yellow brick house in Lakefield near Peterborough

in Ontario. In 1974 she said that there was one piece of unfinished business: 'to go back to Neepawa, but I'm kind of scared to.'<sup>30</sup> There she busied herself with numerous public engagements and with her work. She saw herself as the elder statesman among the young writers coming along to take her place. Far from resenting them, she was actively encouraging, seeing them as the new generation of diviners who will discover new truths and in so doing take the novel along yet another path in its changing history. She had more time to devote to the feminist movement and to furthering the cause of Canadian writers as one of the founder members of the Canadian Writers' Union<sup>31</sup>

When Mrs Laurence set down the final sentence of The Diviners, 'Morag returned to the house, to write the remaining private and fictional words and to set down the title.'<sup>32</sup> she publicly announced that she was finished with Manawaka and its women. This was to be her last novel. At the age of forty-seven she was written out. The critics and her readers refused to accept this prophecy, but as it happened, it proved to be true. However, this does not affect the solid body of work on which her reputation is founded, beginning with the first Manawaka novel, The Stone Angel.



## Footnotes: Chapter I

1. Sinclair Ross, As For Me and My House, (Toronto, 1941), p.69.
2. Author's note - on visiting Neepawa in July, 1986.  
 On visiting Neepawa in July, 1986, it was possible to identify some of the main features of Manawaka, in particular the cemetery on the hill at the edge of town with its stone angel headstone. This however, was considerably smaller than Jason Currie's ostentatious memorial to his dead wife. The cemetery in fact was awash with petunias which Hagar so decried in The Stone Angel 'nearly circular beds of petunias proclaimed my father's immortality in mauve and pink frilled petals. Even now, I detest petunias' (p.64.) The Whitemud River (the Wachakwa) now flows through a well organised camp site. Her grandfather Simpson's house is identifiable at No 312 First Avenue (the Connor house in A Bird in the House). It was purchased on October the first, 1986 as a memorial and cultural centre which it is hoped will be designated a cultural site by the Manitoba government.
3. Margaret Laurence, 'Sources' also entitled 'A Place to Stand On', Heart of a Stranger, McClelland and Stewart, Bantam, (Toronto, 1976), p.3.
4. Clara Thomas, The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence, (Toronto, 1975), P.10.
5. Dick Harrison, Unnamed Country : The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction. (Edmonton, 1977), p.197.
6. 'Literature and Canadian Culture', An interview with Margaret Laurence, Alive, No 418 1975, p.29.
7. The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence, pp. 8-9.

8. The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence, p.13.
9. Joan Hind-Smith, Three Voices, (Toronto, 1975), p.14.
10. Margaret Laurence, Interview with T. Saunders in The Winnipeg Free Press, Saturday, May 19, 1979.
11. Margaret Laurence, The Prophet's Camel Bell, (Toronto, 1963), p.3.
12. ibid p.1.
13. ibid. pp. 236-237.
14. Margaret Laurence, 'Ten Years' Sentences', Canadian Literature, 41, (1969), pp. 10-16, p.12.
15. Margaret Laurence, This Side Jordan, (Toronto, 1976), p.282.
16. 'Ten Years' Sentences' p.12.
17. 'Ten Years' Sentences' p.11.
18. Margaret Laurence, The Tomorrow-Tamer, (Toronto, 1970), p.231.
19. The Tomorrow Tamer, p.103.
20. Marci McDonald, Interview with Mrs Laurence in The Toronto Star, Saturday, May 18, 1974.
21. The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence, p.189.
22. Margaret Laurence, 'Ivory Tower or Grassroots: The Novelist as Socio-Political Being', A Political Art, Essays and Images in Honour of George Woodcock, Ed. William H. New, (Vancouver, B.C., 1978), p.17.
23. 'Ivory Tower or Grassroots' p.17.
24. 'Ten Years' Sentences', p.12.
25. Margaret Laurence, Jason's Quest, (Toronto, 1971), p.151.
26. 'The Odyssey of Margaret Laurence', The English Quarterly, Vol. 3, (1970), pp. 7-17, p.11.

27. Margaret Laurence, The Olden Days Coat, (Toronto, 1979), p.7.
28. Adele Ashby, Review of The Olden Days Coat, Quill and Quire, Jan. 1980, p.26.
29. Unsigned Review of The Olden Days Coat in the Winnipeg Free Press, December 8th, 1979 (Entertainment and Leisure Section), p.7.
30. Marci McDonald, Interview with Mrs Laurence.
31. Margaret Laurence's face was familiar to Canadians from coast to coast from the frequent pictures which appeared in the newspaper. Marci McDonald, who interviewed her for The Toronto Star in 1974 described her as follows: 'she doesn't look like a writer. More like a strapping suburban Prairie housewife maybe - big, solid, the frame wrapped in a no-nonsense paisley shirt pulled out over pants, sleeves rolled up at the ready, black hair pulled carelessly back into a pony tail, hornrims hiding the slight Indian cast to the high broad cheekbones and high slanting eyes'. (May, 1974). Margaret Atwood met her 'Face to Face' for MacLean's Magazine in the same year. Her comment was that 'it was a little hard to believe that this warm unpretentious woman, dressed like a suburban housewife in slacks and shirt, and with her hair back in a ponytail, was a writer at all'. However, she warned that first impressions can often be deceptive. 'She is an intensely loyal friend, but a formidable enemy and she is not a safe person to underestimate'. (May, 1974).
32. Margaret Laurence, The Diviners, (Toronto, 1978), p. 453.

## Pride and Grace Dwelt Never in One Place

Young woman, attractive, genteelly educated, of well-to-do family, marries, against her father's wishes, handsome, virile, uncouth and happy-go-lucky widower fourteen years her senior: we all recognise the familiar recipe for disaster. *Mésalliances* such as this happen with depressing regularity. In spite of the fairy tales' wishful thinking and Barbara Cartland's assurances to the contrary, once married, people do not necessarily live happily ever after.

Hagar Currie, who made the mistake of believing this romantic scenario, had just such a naïve confidence in the efficacy of the marriage lines to make everything come right. This monumental error on her part determined the course of her life for more than sixty years and is the foundation on which Margaret Laurence built her novel The Stone Angel. The book allows us to look back, with Hagar, on the events leading up to her marriage to Bram Shipley, and more especially at the direction her life followed after this act which at a stroke cut her off irrevocably from everything she had had before, or could expect to have in the future. However, the novel is about much more than that symptomatic gesture of defiance. It is about a life laid waste by a pride so great that it blinds its possessor to the needs of those around her and brings her to her ninetieth year still unaware of how things could have been. Unloving and unfulfilled, she has yet to recognise why her life has been so joyless; indeed, she has not admitted that this is true. The book, then, is really about Hagar's journey, in memory, through the spiritual wilderness of her long life to a final state of grace.

The author uses a device she follows to a greater or lesser degree in all her novels. This requires the reader to move back and forth in time from the humdrum life going on round about, to the inner world of the central character, who has reached a crisis point. In Hagar's case we move with her down the last few months of her long life towards her death, while at the same time returning with her on a journey which leads her from her childhood and young womanhood as Hagar Currie through her marriage to Bram Shipley to her life as a married woman, mother, mother-in-law and grandmother. Each return to the past begins in the present and arises from some simple event or chance remark which occurs in the quiet, orderly life she now leads with her son Marvin and his wife Doris. The crisis point, however, is not her approaching death but the discovery that Marvin and Doris wish to put her in the Silverthreads Home for the aged.

A good many reviewers have criticised what they regard as a too orderly sequence of events in the flashbacks. Hagar recalls her past step by step in a chronology which is seen as artificial. Margaret Laurence accepts this as a valid comment, but admits to feeling that, in the end, it was the only way she could accomplish her task. She reasons that the flashbacks, presented as a jumble of events out of sequence, would raise an unnecessary barrier between the reader and the book's content. Certainly, since the reader is already required to move back and forth in time, it is an advantage not to have to operate one's own retrieval system for the re-arranging of episodes in order of occurrence as well. Is it necessary to see these events in sequence? A random account of things past would not have the dramatic impact which the ordered account of events provides, as we

watch the steady march towards Hagar's inevitable destruction of her husband and her younger son. In effect, it may be a more artificial device, but it serves the reader better.

The situation facing Hagar is a universal one - one which sooner or later we all encounter. Each of us will grow old, each of us may have to deal with elderly parents. In one case our outlook would inevitably be different from our outlook in the other. Cleverly, Margaret Laurence only hints at what is going on in the minds of Marvin and Doris. She does not seek to make the reader relate to them and their difficulties, which we can recognise must be intolerable at times. That would be another story and it would dilute the sympathy which we are asked to feel for this amazing old woman. We can only marvel at how patiently and comparatively equably they have borne their burdens for so long. We are asked to view the situation through Hagar's eyes. She is so irascible, contrary, critical and condescending that the reader frequently loses patience with her, but the author invites us to understand, if not to condone, what Hagar comes to realise all too well are her many faults, even if she refuses almost to the very end to admit them to anyone, much less to herself. The novel is about a woman who is so strong, so unbending, so proud that her own life, that of her father, her husband and her youngest son are all destroyed. The elder son, Marvin, only survives because he goes away. And all this because she is unable to let anyone into her innermost being, to allow her inner privacy to be invaded, to tell people how she feels, to actually say anything loving or kind which might suggest weakness. She has never learned to give. She is hard and cold, like stone; she cannot see the effect she

has on others; she is the stone angel she so despises yet cannot ignore.

Why is she like this? At the beginning of the novel Hagar does not even recognise these qualities in herself. Strong and self-sufficient, she has never had to look at herself, or the effect she has on others. She has lived with Doris and Marvin for sixteen years and does not see that she intimidates her daughter-in-law, whom she despises, and alienates her son who hates discord, is fiercely loyal to his wife, yet longs in his inarticulate way for his mother's love and approval still. It is her house and her things furnish it. She never forgets that. But old age and an insidious disease have gradually made it impossible for her to be self-sufficient, and pain and infirmity eat away at her strength. As her memory takes her more and more frequently into the past she is slowly led to a self-knowledge which she can scarcely accept. Even at the very last she cannot easily say she is sorry or admit that she may have been wrong. Her pride has been her undoing.

It is indeed a remarkable achievement on the author's part that she is able to sustain the reader's sympathy for Hagar even when she is at her most unlovable. The pride which made us all too often impatient with her is actually the very characteristic which claims our admiration when we see her proudly fighting to remain free and independent. 'The pride that destroyed her relations with others has given her the strength to be herself to the very end - and let death do what is may.'<sup>1</sup> According to Claudetts Pollock, the paradox of The Stone Angel is that 'one regards Hagar, who sins far more than she is sinned against, in a charitable light.'<sup>2</sup>

Almost certainly Dr Benjamin Spock and his fellow child psychologist would suggest that Hagar's inability to give love stems from her childhood. Her mother died giving birth to her, so she was deprived from the beginning of the motherly cuddling and touching that would normally have been given her. She did not learn to love or show affection through being loved. Once, when her father embraced her after he had punished her, she 'felt caged and panicky and wanted to push him away, but didn't dare.' (The Stone Angel, p.10) Of course, Auntie Doll was there, but somehow no one took her very seriously - the poor relation who inhabited the social no-man's land allotted to housekeepers and governesses. The household was very much male-oriented with two older brothers and a forceful, benign tyrant father, Jason Currie. The latter's tendency to beat sense into his children taught Hagar too early to practise self-control. There is no doubt she learned all too well not to show her feelings. But nurture was not all. Hagar's own nature, inherited from her father whom she at times feared, at others despised, and never loved, was the source of most of her inability to give. She herself recognises this, she 'who didn't want to resemble him in the least, was sturdy like him and bore his hawkish nose and stare that could meet anyone's without blinking an eyelash.' (pp7-8) Her father too was aware of the resemblance. "'you take after me," he said,..."You've got backbone, I'll give you that."' (p.10) For backbone we can, of course, read pride, for this was what it was. 'Both of us were blunt as bludgeons. We hadn't a scrap of subtlety between us.' (p.43) says Hagar. Her own natural tendencies were strengthened by her father's - his pride in his achievements (he was a self-made man), his own sense of



superiority because he came from a good Scots family, his Presbyterian faith in the virtue of hard work. Margaret Laurence makes sure we appreciate that the very characteristics which made Jason Currie a successful pioneer made him a failure as a human being. 'Pride endangers a soul because...it can be made to look like something else....In this novel it wears its favourite North American false face. It looks like sturdy independence, like courage, like "character"'.<sup>3</sup> He thought little of his two sons, Matt and Daniel, because they were weak, and Hagar suspects that he had despised her mother because of her lack of spirit. When she is asked to pretend to be her mother in an effort to comfort the dying Daniel, she is unable to assume this role, so Matt has to sit by his brother's bedside wrapped in his mother's old plaid shawl that Dan may think in his delirium that he is reunited at last with her whom he loved so much. Hagar is 'shaken by torments he never even suspected, wanting above all else to do the thing he asked, but unable to do it, unable to bend enough'. (p.25) Indeed, 'her lifetime involves a whole series of role demands, none of which she is able to meet.'<sup>4</sup> Jason Currie encouraged his daughter to feel that she was better than the rest of the townsfolk in Manawaka. She was 'haughty, hoity-toity, Jason Currie's black-haired daughter' (p.6) and Jason Currie was the town's most prosperous citizen. Early in life she was encouraged to be a snob, to observe the social proprieties required of the town's first family. Certain children such as Lottie Drieser and Henry Pearl were considered unsuitable as playmates or as guests at parties in the big house Jason built as the visible sign of his importance in Manawaka and in his own eyes. When she was nineteen she was sent to

Toronto to a young ladies' academy to be prepared for the role her father envisioned she would fill - his daughter, hostess to his friends, then later wife to a man he looked upon as suitable. Hagar describes herself as a 'dark-maned colt, off to the training ring' (p.42) as though she were to be broken as horses are. This idea of taming either people or nature reverberates throughout the novel. The pioneers, that generation to which Jason Currie belonged, had found that those who tamed their own wilder nature succeeded best in taming the wilderness of the country they had come to conquer and settle. To survive and defeat nature, one had to root out weaknesses in self, because it was a fight to the death. The young horse with its wilful unschooled nature must learn to subdue its wishes to those of its rider. It must be broken. The wild horse of the American West has always been a symbol of wild natural freedom. There are also sexual associations with the horse, as illustrated in Peter Shaffer's play Equus. Hagar fears and dislikes the horses on the farm. She prefers the paper beasts depicted in the reproduction of Rosa Bonheur's painting 'The Horse Fair'. (p.83) Bram, who at the beginning of the story is the personification of strong physical and sexual energy, loves the creatures 'so high and heavy they seemed, so muscular, so much their own masters - I (Hagar) never felt I could handle them'. (p.83) Hagar's conversion into a lady involves subduing many of her natural instincts and acquiring a set of values which reinforce her haughty sense of self-satisfaction. By subduing her fiery nature under the constraints of proper appearance, pride is given free rein. So, she came back two years later having learned

embroidery, and French, and menu-planning for a five-course meal, and poetry, and how to take a firm hand with servants, and the most becoming ways of dressing my hair. (p.12)

Then at twenty-four years of age, the handsome, proud Hagar meets the last man in the world her father would wish to have for a son-in-law.

Hagar's ill-conceived marriage to Bram Shipley is central to the novel. Why did she do it? How did she come to commit such an act of monumental folly? Was it a deliberate act of defiance directed at her father? Was she, unconsciously, perhaps showing her contempt for the social pretensions she felt existed in Manawaka? Significantly the author does not give us straight answers and she suggests that Hagar does not really know the reasons for her behaviour herself - she guesses at the truth but she never faces it outright. At the time when she meets Bram at a dance, she has consistently snubbed each of the young men her father has brought to the house for her to meet, whether through pure perversity because her father has chosen them, or because she found them genuinely boring we are not sure. Bram could not have been more different. She was captivated by his sheer animal vitality and his gaiety. 'Whatever anyone said of him, no one could deny he was a good-looking man. It's not every man who can wear a beard. His suited him. He was a big-built man, and he carried himself so well. I could have been proud, going to town or church with him, if only he'd never opened his mouth', (pp. 69-70) she recalls later. She remembers too that he was always laughing. Hagar even found his dirty fingernails attractive. Such is her naivete, coupled with the romantic side of her nature which as a child made

her long to be a Highlander like her forebears, that to her Bram is a hero from an adventure story. 'I fancied I heard in his laughter the bravery of battalions. I thought he looked a bearded Indian, so brown and beaked a face. The black hair thrusting from his chin was rough as thistles. The next instant, though, I imagined him rigged out in a suit of gray soft as a dove's breast-feathers'. (p.45) Lottie Drieser's opinion was rather less flattering - "'Common as dirt, as everyone knows," she breathed, "and he's been seen with half-breed girls."' (p.47)

Later in life Hagar wonders whether she might not have done as she did had Lottie not made that remark. Her announcement that she intends to marry him is as much a bombshell to the reader as it is to Jason Currie. She makes no mention of how or when Bram courts her and we can only assume that it was a clandestine affair and fairly brief. Once she had decided on her course there was no going back, nor did she wish it at the time. She felt free, unencumbered, as she described it. In her inexperience she was 'certain that Father would soften and yield, when he saw how Brampton Shipley prospered, gentled, learned cravats and grammar'. (p.50) Women have always imagined that they could mould their men into the people they want them to be. If there is mutual love and respect sometimes they can, but this has to be done by stealth, using tact and compromise, while being prepared to change too. Hagar had not the faintest conception of how to do this. So, she marries Bram, her black-haired pirate, and effectively cuts herself off from family and friends. The course of her life is changed forever, as indeed is Bram's. It is significant that Hagar never once admits her error. She recognises their mutual

unhappiness, but her pride will not allow her to actually suggest that she had been wrong.

Thus the scene is set for the next twenty-four years: long years of unremitting toil, poverty and social ostracism. Much later she summed it up in this way: 'The smell of it came back to me, the bone-weariness, the gray eternal scum of soap on tin wash basins'. (p.212) We early see how things are going to be. On the day of their wedding, on their arrival at the Shipley place, Bram presents Hagar with a cut-glass decanter with a silver top, obviously feeling he is giving her something very grand and beautiful. She scarcely looks at it, sets it aside and does not even say thank you. Then, when he suggest they make love, she remarks, "'It seems to me that Lottie Drieser was right about you.'" (p.51) These two incidents illustrate so very clearly why the marriage was doomed. First of all, Hagar was totally blind to other people's feelings. She rarely saw the effect that her actions and remarks had on others. She was one of those people who find it easy to be critical and rarely give out praise. They have such an innate sense of their own superiority that nothing anyone else does is completely satisfactory. She had married Bram against her father's wishes because she thought she despised the latter's values and aspirations, which she saw as pretensions. Yet, once married, she applied the same yardstick to Bram and later to her sons. She criticised his appearance, his speech, his manners and his daydreams. In the end she destroyed any spark of ambition he had had and quenched his laughter forever. She reminded him so often of the Currie superiority that he once urinated on the doorstep of the Currie General Store in a drunken act of bravado. He was driven more

and more to drinking with his cronies and took up with the social outcasts of Manawaka who at least accepted him for what he was. He could always feel superior to the lowest of the low - the Indians, the half-breeds and the Poles or Bohunks, those ignorant immigrants from Eastern Europe whom the settlers from Britain despised as stupid peasants. It used to anger Hagar to listen to the vainglorious stories of his plans for the future which he told to such people, when they came to the farm to help with the threshing, and she was humiliated on seeing how these men laughed secretly at what they knew was idle boasting. Bram was a weak man and she made him weaker. Such people as Hagar tend to bring out the worst in people, especially those less strong than themselves. In a moment of insight during her memories she admits: '...here's the joker in the pack - we'd each married for those qualities we later found we couldn't bear, he for my manners and speech, I for his flouting of them'. (pp.79-80)

Another of Hagar's failings was her inability to utter two very important phrases - "I'm sorry." and "I love you." Margaret Laurence makes much of the inarticulacy from which so many people suffer, making true understanding of each other so difficult. Jason Currie and his daughter had not been able to communicate with one another. The sister knew so little of her brothers that things she learned about them after they were dead amazed her. Somehow these four, then three, then two people had lived in the same house for a score or more of years and it was as though they had lived alone. So it was with Bram and Hagar. They communicated with one another only on a trivial level, living out their separate lives in the same house and only meeting in bed. Hagar becomes aware of this inability to

communicate with others as she lies dying and she wishes she could warn her grandson, or anyone, but she cannot. 'I'm choked with it now, the incommunicable years, everything that happened and was spoken or not spoken'. (p.296) This damaging inability of one human to communicate on a significant basis with another human being is one of the dominant themes in the Manawaka novels.

Hagar had had little preparation for the sexual side of marriage. In this she would be no different from most of the young women of her generation, few of whom would have had any sex education at all. The motherless Hagar was more likely than most to enter marriage ignorant even of the sex act itself. She thought 'love...must consist of words and deeds delicate as lavender sachets'. (p.89) There is little wonder, therefore, that she did not associate love with what Bram did to her in bed. However, we are given numerous hints that Hagar is sexually aroused and could enjoy the act of love, if she would allow herself to do so. Again, she cannot let herself unbend enough to show her pleasure - it would not be lady-like, and it would mean giving, something she cannot do. She recognises in herself those dark thoughts her father referred to as belonging to men, and by implication to him. Indeed, we know that he had once tried to have a liaison with Lottie Drieser's mother. Had Hagar been able to be Bram's lover as well as his wife that might have been enough to unite them. Yet the author suggests otherwise. If they had been equal in bed, Bram would have lost all his power over his proud wife. At least in bed she submitted. And so, 'Twenty-four years, in all, were scoured away like sandbanks under the spate of our wrangle and bicker'. (p.116)

Hagar's blindness and her pride affected her children's lives too. The first child, Marvin, she felt hardly anything for at all, because he was what she considered a typical Shipley - stolid, lumpish and unimaginative. The day Bram took her to the hospital for the birth, she felt 'that the child he wanted would be his, and none of mine...that I had sucked my secret pleasure from his skin, but wouldn't care to walk in broad daylight on the streets of Manawaka with any child of his'. (p.100) The child longed for her approval, yet she never saw this. When he was a little boy he would report to her after doing his chores, hoping for a word of praise and all she could do was shoo him away. The poignancy of that sturdy little figure hovering at her skirts silently pleading for a look or a touch completely escaped her. Bram is aware of how Marvin feels and of the hurt he suffers because of his mother's indifference. After all he has had some experience in this direction himself. He thinks "'He'll be as well, away.'" (p.129) Even then Hagar does not realise what is meant, though she admits to feeling an unfamiliar emotion when Marvin comes to say good-bye before leaving for World War One.

I didn't know what to say to him. I wanted to beg him to look after himself....I wanted all at once to hold him tightly, plead with him, against all reason and reality, not to go. But I didn't want to embarrass both of us, nor have him think I had taken leave of my senses (p.129)

Once again her fear of appearing foolish or soft stops her words in her throat, so Marvin never hears how she feels. And he remains away when the war is over. By going away he leaves behind a home where he has always felt second-best to his younger brother, John. He is indeed better away. Hagar's attitude to John is coloured by the fact that he is born while Bram is absent, so she has not had to



suffer the humiliation of his presence at the hospital. Also, John is physically more attractive and altogether more lively. Immediately his mother tries to set him apart from the Shipleys. He is like the Currie side of the family. He has his Grandfather Currie's get up and go. He'll make something of himself. Right from the start John is alienated from his father and burdened with the responsibility of fulfilling his mother's ambitions for him. She asks too much of a boy who has inherited more of his father's weakness than is apparent to his mother.

Early in the marriage Hagar has ceased to go into town with Bram because of the humiliation she experienced on account of his manners and speech when they did so. Thus she cut herself off bit by bit from the people she knew. She had no visitors to the farm except faithful Auntie Doll, and as the years went by she was less and less in touch with what went on in Manawaka. Because of this she was completely unaware of the effect her marriage and her behaviour had on her two boys. She did not know that her sons were figures of ridicule and abuse among the children of better-off families. To be fair, she did stop sending Marvin to school in a sailor suit, thus marking him out from the rest who all wore overalls, but as time went on and their financial situation worsened she cared less and less. She did not realise that the Shipley name set Marvin and John apart, forcing them to play with children from the wrong side of the tracks like the halfbreed Tonnerres. Marvin bore it stoically and never mentioned it. John was more volatile by nature. His mother used to marvel at the number of fights he seemed to get into. And it was from him she learned of the hateful nickname, the Shitleys, which the children had

given them. She complains that John 'had the knack of gathering the weirdest crew, and when I asked him why he didn't chum with Henry Pearl's boys or someone halfway decent like that, he'd only shrug and retreat into silence'. (p.127) He ganged up with the halfbreed Tonnerres amongst whom he was always trying to show his superior daring. Through John's association with the Tonnerres the author is able to introduce the theme of racial prejudice and the plight of the outsider, both of which are finally fully developed in The Diviners.

After twenty-four years of marriage which she endured in a state of suspended animation, certain that the bad times could not go on forever, a single event roused her from her sleep. When Lottie Drieser's daughter fails to recognise her, Hagar is stirred to take a good look at herself - in the local Rest Room mirror. What she saw appalled her. 'I stood for a long time, looking, wondering how a person could change so much and never see it. So gradually it happens'. (p.133) It is a tribute to the author's skill that the reader is as shocked as Hagar. Margaret Laurence has been at great pains to show how the ninety-year old Hagar loves fine clothes, and how much store she sets by outward or proper appearance as a yardstick of respectability and worth. The picture we glimpse of this unkempt woman in her shabby ill-fitting clothes opens our eyes with telling impact to what the years have done. Hagar does not recognise the person who stares back at her. Surely that 'brown leathery face' didn't belong to her. 'Only the eyes were mine, staring as though to pierce the lying glass and get beneath to some truer image, infinitely distant'. (p.133) For the first time in years she sees herself as others see her. Margaret Laurence frequently uses a mirror

as a literary device to show how the reality of what is actually reflected differs from what the viewer would like to see, or imagines is seen.

The sudden realisation of what both she and Bram had become broke the spell under which she had fallen. It was time to leave. Bram made no move to stop her. Indeed, we feel that he is surprised that she has stayed so long. So began part three of Hagar's life.

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

The author has structured her novel in such a way that this flight from Manawaka and Bram is paralleled in the contemporary part of the story by Hagar's decision to run away to avoid having to go to Silverthreads, the Nursing Home she so much fears.

In those sections dealing with present events we have been moving day by day through the everyday life she leads with Marvin and Doris in their comfortable home in Vancouver, toward the day when Marvin announces that she is booked to go into the Home in a week's time. Hints have been dropped that she is suffering from some sort of serious ailment, probably cancer. The author spares us none of the details of the inconveniences of growing old, with the attendant unpleasant tasks which Doris, who is, after all, around sixty years old, finds increasingly difficult to perform. Between fits of rampant memory, as Hagar calls it, we listen to this unrepentant, stubborn old woman keeping her unloved, and in some ways unlovely, daughter-in-law firmly in her place. She has a very low opinion of Doris altogether and it causes Marvin a great deal of secret anguish

to see his wife, whom he loves, so little valued by the mother he also loves. We tend to agree with part of Hagar's assessment of Doris, though we sympathise with her for having to deal with her cantankerous mother-in-law and on the whole we admire how well she copes. Hagar comes across as a vain, rather spiteful, and greedy old woman who hides her infirmities and her fears for the future with barbs from her sharp tongue. Recurrent twinges of remorse are never longlived and her keen sense of self overrides all other considerations. She will fight to the last to avoid making concessions either to her own failing flesh or to her well-meaning relatives. The author is so skilful in her portrayal of the aged Hagar and her fight to remain independent that the reader is forced to say, "Yes, that is exactly how it must have been." Indeed, it has been suggested that this novel should be required reading for anyone undertaking the care of old people. As she lies in bed, contriving ways and means, she says 'I've taken matters into my own hands before, and can again, if need be....Revelations are saved for times of actual need, and now one comes to me'. (p.139) Only a few pages earlier in the novel as she plans to leave Manawaka, she says: 'Each venture and launching is impossible until it becomes necessary, and then there's a way and it doesn't do to be too fussy about the means'. (p.135) Through this juxtaposition Margaret Laurence leaves us in no doubt that the two acts of flight are to be considered together. Hagar succeeds surprisingly well and we have the scene set for the last half of the story which deals with her adventure in getting to Shadow Point, with her stay there, and then with the final weeks of her life as she lies dying in hospital.

Interwoven into the present is the sad story of her life as housekeeper in Vancouver for an elderly recluse called Mr Oatley, and of the loss of her two men, John and Bram. In becoming Mr Oatley's housekeeper Hagar acquires a safe, comfortable, even luxurious, background better fitted to her education and early experience than the Shipley place. Throughout the novel the author uses the house as a symbol of Hagar's fluctuating fortunes. As Jason Currie's daughter she inhabits one of the finest dwellings in Manawaka. In it people live an orderly existence well protected from the wild countryside without. After her marriage she becomes mistress of a ramshackle grey wooden house, stark and square, which deteriorates over the years, even as she and her marriage do. Moreover, the house is out in the open prairie which the solid citizens of the town have turned their backs on. It is exposed to the wind and weather. Nature is only partially kept at bay as weeds invade the garden and the fields are but poorly tended. Bram is not made of the stuff required to stave off Nature's encroachment upon Man's domain. The house which Hagar inhabits with Mr Oatley is full of the kind of expensive objects which she values, but they have been acquired by rather dubious means, and neither she nor John feels really at home there. Margaret Laurence makes an important distinction between the exterior and interior of the Oatley mansion, a large edifice like the Currie house. If everything inside is orderly, the garden outside is filled with strange exotic growth like the monkey puzzle tree. The life that Hagar and her son live in that house is a lie. Only when Mr Oatley leaves her some money can she buy a place of her own. Is it any wonder she balks at having it sold by

Marvin and Doris? It is only in the tumbledown cannery at Shadow Point that she finally finds peace and a modicum of grace before returning to the smallest home of all, a hospital bed hardly larger than a coffin. At Mr Oatley's she may be surrounded by beautiful things, but it does not escape her sardonic wit that she is now in the same situation as Auntie Doll, a fate she never imagined she could share. She is required to assume an identity which in many ways suits her well, though we would think it a lonely existence. Once again she fails to see what is happening to John, who finds the responsibilities of being her man too much for him. His longing for some kind of acceptance after his experience in Manawaka leads him to fantasise first to his mother about his friends and then to his friends about Mr Oatley and the big house where he lives but does not belong. Finally life defeats him altogether and he returns to his home town to look after Bram who is dying and with whom he has kept secretly in touch. Early in the novel Hagar remarks on the closeness which existed between Bram and Marvin, a relationship which is broken when Marvin goes to war. Bram and John appear to have nothing in common - so she thinks. Yet it is John who is drawn to his father in the latter's need, and she is too obtuse to see why. When they were all three on the farm, her treatment of John cut him off from Bram. They resemble one another in that they are both basically weak men, destroyed by a woman of great strength, who asks them both to be other than themselves, and dooms both to failure because she asks the impossible. When Bram married Hagar he had no illusions about himself, but he got by and life was joyful. Hagar killed his joy and gave him none of the respect he needed to continue respecting

himself. John's natural eagerness for life was soon driven underground, to surface in wild deeds of bravado, one of which brought about his death. The targets his mother set for him were too high, and he soon accepted his low evaluation of himself. He understood his mother better than she understood herself and knew from bitter experience what she had done to her husband. No wonder he felt drawn to his father and to a life without joy or hope. For a time we think Arlene may save him, but is this realistic? John's gentle remark to Hagar, "'You always bet on the wrong horse. Marv was your boy, but you never saw that, did you?'" (p.237) suggests otherwise. The author respects her readers too much to propose facile solutions. In a way John's death seems a blessed release for a tormented soul. With his last breath he demonstrated how well he knew his mother. "'Never mind. Never mind." He put a hand on mine, as though he were momentarily caught in an attempt to comfort me for something that couldn't be helped'. (p.242) Thus did the dying comfort the living.

The story of Bram's squalid death in a drink-induced twilight, and of John's equally terrible end is gradually revealed as Hagar wanders about, in and out of the buildings of the old cannery where she is hiding. The final episode, John's wayward act leading to his killing his lover, Arlene Simmons, and to his own pain-racked death is told, in the dark, out loud, to a stranger called Murray F. Lees who has already revealed that he also has lost a son, in a fire for which he somehow feels responsible. It is significant here that Hagar at last tells her story to someone else - and that she is finally able to weep for her lost men. The catharsis complete, she is forced

to face the little future she has left and make the best of it.

It is essential to acknowledge the great importance Margaret Laurence places on the flight to Shadow Point. On the face of it, Hagar runs away to avoid being relegated to the nursing home. However, at a deeper level she has embarked on a voyage of self-discovery which requires her to accept that part of her, the unconscious, or what Jung calls the shadow, hence the name Shadow Point. This flight/journey calls for a descent into the depths of her Self, so Hagar must struggle down overgrown steps into a place of both dereliction and rank natural growth. Especially significant is the presence of the sea, that final symbol of the depths from which all life has sprung and to which Hagar refers frequently, either directly or indirectly. She feels threatened by its presence yet also strangely drawn to an element where she imagines man can cut loose from physical inhibitions. 'Now I could fancy myself there among them (the drowned), tiared with starfish thorny and purple, braceleted with shells linked on limp chains of weed, waiting until my encumbrance of flesh floated clean away and I was free and skeletal and could journey with tides and fishes.' (p.162) It is important to note, too, that when Hagar is dying she thinks of herself as under the sea. She will soon have her wish and indeed be free. At Shadow Point the side of her nature which she had always suppressed surfaces for a time and she allows herself momentary periods of enjoyment. She takes pleasure in her natural surroundings and compares herself to Meg Merrilies the old gypsy in Keats' poem, remembered from long ago, 'Hagar, defiant to the last, prefers (to the twenty-third psalm) a poem about a strong, wandering woman, a colourful non-conformist, a



social outcast like herself'.<sup>5</sup> She decks her hair with dead but beautiful June bugs, in place of the inappropriate prim hat she had chosen to wear when she set off on her adventure. When she stumbles, falls and cannot rise, she swears like a trooper. This is quite a reversal for one who has always been so insistent on correct speech. It is impossible to ignore the extensive symbolism which the author employs throughout this part of the novel. The descent into a hidden place, and the presence of the sea with its mythical creatures give way to the symbol of the gypsy life with Meg Merrilies as a free spirit in tune with the natural world around her. She is a part of the wilderness which symbolises the untamed, both in nature and of the human spirit. Hagar always was in touch with the natural world. Throughout the novel she constantly refers to the plants and trees she sees around her. She responds to them more than she does to people. The pioneers had come and tamed the wilderness, setting up boundaries or limits, building walls and fences to hold back what was untamed or untamable. In the first two and a half pages of the book there is an extended and explicit metaphor centering around the Manawaka cemetery and the stone angel standing over the Currie plot. We are shown a place where human hands have attempted to create a civilised oasis in an uncouth land. But Hagar notices that

sometimes throughout the hot rush of disrespectful wind that shook the scrub oak and the sparse couchgrass encroaching upon the dutifully cared-for habitations of the dead, the scent of the cowslips would rise momentarily. 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 civilized, 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, before the portly peonies and the angels with rigid wings, when the prairie bluffs were walked through only by Cree with enigmatic

faces and greasy hair. (p.5)

The reference to the Indians of course suggests that there are wild people too who must be kept out. These are personified in the Tonnerres with whom John seeks excitement and friendship, and who seem to have a wildness of nature which makes them alien to the sober citizens of Manawaka. Not quite Indians, neither are they quite like the British settlers.

The pioneers' struggle to ignore the natural wildness around them is typified by the Currie house which Hagar describes as 'antimacassared in the wilderness'. (p.43) The constant struggle to hold back the physical wilderness is paralleled by the spiritual struggle to tame man's baser instincts, as required by the Presbyterian and Calvinist teaching of the time. All too often this led to spiritual pride. Margaret Laurence wishes the reader to associate Hagar Shipley with the biblical Hagar who was condemned to wander in the wilderness because she thought herself above her station once she had born a son to Abraham. Her pride brought about her exile in the loneliness of the desert places.<sup>6</sup> Hagar's pride condemns her to a life of spiritual segregation and sterility, because she represses those feelings in herself which could mean loss of control, or in personal hurt if she opened up to another. She pays dearly for the civilising influence referred to at the beginning of the book. (She) 'in a sense is still paying for the conquest of the land which demanded that the pioneers so ruthlessly conquer themselves....the difficulty is that she cannot "un-conquer" herself'.<sup>7</sup> However, her free association of herself with Meg Merrilies signifies a loosening of this rigid control, making it

possible for her later, when in hospital to recognise that 'pride was my wilderness'. (p.292)

Gradually this search for some self-understanding becomes a religious quest. 'Perhaps I've come here not to hide but to seek'. (p.192) What had begun as a negative act of defiance and escape may really be a going forward instead of a running from. Soon after her arrival in the old cannery, in the gray dwelling which she successively calls a fortress, my house, my castle, she finds an old bed awaiting her rest and says 'My room has been prepared for me'. (p.155) An old rusty bucket in which she finds water becomes 'a well in the wilderness'. (p.187) As darkness begins to fall on her second night, Hagar sings 'Abide With Me'. Then her father confessor arrives - not a very prepossessing one, in the person of Murray F. Lees, salesman with the Dependable Life Assurance Company. They share a cup of wine and some of Hagar's unleavened crackers; then Hagar is at last able to face up to her part in her son's death and mourn for her men. She finds she is able to reveal to someone feelings and thoughts never expressed openly before. Then, when they part, she can bring herself to reach out to touch his wrist, apologise for harsh words spoken a few moments before, and say how sorry she is about his own lost child. The reaching out, the touching, the apology - they are all new experiences for the proud old woman.

And so, to the end of the long journey. When brother Matt died, Auntie Doll said he simply let himself die without a struggle and Hagar 'found this harder to bear than his death even. Why hadn't he writhed, cursed, at least grappled with the thing?' (p.60) Hagar does not give in so easily. Margaret Laurence's choice of epigraph—a part

of Dylan Thomas' poem where he urges: 'Do not go gentle into that good night, Rage, rage against the dying of the light'<sup>8</sup>-leaves us in no doubt as to how Hagar will go into that good night. Hagar is unrepentant to the last. Although she does acquire a good deal of self-knowledge, even if a bit late, she finds it hard to change. 'I'm ashamed. But I won't take back the words... Oh, I am unchangeable, unregenerate'. (p.293) 'Bless me or not, Lord, just as You please, for I'll not beg'. (p.307) When Mr Troy, the minister at Doris' church, visits her in hospital, she asks him to sing the hymn 'All People That on Earth Do Dwell' for her. His fine singing voice moves her deeply and, suddenly, as the last line 'Come ye before Him and rejoice' rings out in the ward, she realises for the first time what she had wanted from life all the while, instead of the joyless, frozen existence hers had been.

I must always, always, have wanted that - simply to rejoice. How is it 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 any child of mine or even the plain light of morning, or walking the earth, all were forced to a standstill by some brake of proper appearances - oh, proper, to whom? When did I ever speak the heart's truth?

Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains with me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched. Oh, my two, my dead. Dead by your own hands or by mine. Nothing can take away those years'. (p.292)

Through her relationship with the other patients in the large public ward where she finds herself to begin with, she becomes more aware for the first time of the sufferings of others - the poor German woman who prays all night in her own language for release in death, and the little bird of a woman, Elva Jardine, who will

probably never leave the hospital alive but keeps up a pretence for the sake of her husband. Hagar's initial irritation and impatience grow into sympathy. She at last learns to accept people for what they are, not for what they appear to be, and to accept help when offered. Appearances do not matter when you are face to face with death. She is quite upset when she is moved into a semi-private ward, but here too she is able to take a small step towards new understanding in comforting the young Chinese girl who comes to occupy the other bed. It is for this attractive though rather spoiled child that she performs her first truly unselfish act. Then, at last, in a final act of - she will not call it love - she gives Marvin what he wants, the assurance that he has been a better son to her than John. She feels that it is a lie, yet she knows she must say it, and once said, she recognises it as true. Unrepentant to the end she may be, but she has been granted a little insight. She is no longer quite so blind to the needs of others.

Hagar, in fact, has been like the stone angel that gives the book its title, a title which is central to the core of the book, as image and symbol. Throughout the novel, in the process of developing this symbolism, the author uses words like stonily, transformed to stone, unable to bend, cold, unseeing, terrible strength when referring to Hagar. Indeed, she uses them about herself. The very first paragraphs of the novel draw our attention to this symbol of Victorian respectability and sentimentality. Hagar's father has imported the monument from Italy to stand over the grave of his wife in the family plot. The statue is 'the first, the largest, and certainly the costliest' angel in the cemetery. (p.3) Jason Currie had bought it

'in pride to mark her bones and proclaim his dynasty, as he fancied, forever and a day'. (p.3) The most unusual feature of the angel, in Hagar's view, was that it was sightless - the eye sockets were empty. So the imposing memorial stood on a hill overlooking the town, remote and blind, a visible but unfeeling reminder of her father's dominance over the town. She regards the angel as the public expression of her father's pretensions, his pride in family, the importance placed on appearance. She suspects that he really despised his wife for her lack of spirit, yet he has raised this showy monument to her. It was hypocrisy. Later, she like the angel was modelled into the young woman her father felt would do him credit, just as the sculptor had shaped the statue. She recalls the day when she arrived back from the East; how delighted he was with the result of his investment and how she wished he would 'not nod and nod as though I were a thing and his'. (p.43) When she makes the grand gesture and marries Bram, it could seem that she had discarded all this, but her nature was as unbending as the statue, her warmth locked away and her insight into the value of human beings blurred by a set of standards acquired from her father and her education. Even though her marriage would seem to deny this, she still cared for proper appearances. She was cold, hard and blind, and like the statue, she is all that is left of the Currie family to proclaim Jason's dynasty. Yet, the author's technique in allowing Hagar to tell her own story makes it possible for the reader to recognise, from the old woman's words and deeds, that beneath the cold unbending exterior lies a passionate and sensuous nature which only finds outward expression in her love of bright colours, especially in her clothes, in her reaction to the feel of things, and

in her enjoyment of food.

When Bram dies his daughters Gladys and Jess object but Hagar insists on his being buried with the Curries, beneath the angel. She does not understand clearly herself why, but her father and the son-in-law he refused to acknowledge end up as names on either side of the red marble namestone on the Currie plot in Manawaka cemetery. John makes a perceptive comment which his mother only comes to understand at a much later date. To him 'they're only different sides of the same coin, anyway, he and the Curries. They might as well be together there'. (p.184)

To Hagar it is not quite so simple. She, as a Currie, could not have a husband who was not worthy of a place in the family plot. In life he had failed to rise to the challenge of becoming like her father. In death she would do it for him. As she herself is approaching death, she recalls a visit she made with Marvin to the plot years after Bram died. A young caretaker who does not know them shows them round like tourists. To him it is merely the Currie/Shingley plot, a monument to two pioneering families. Suddenly she comprehends what John had meant. 'The both of them. Both the same. Nothing to pick and choose between them now. That was as it should be'. (p.306) They were both a part of that history which had seen the opening up of the West. They had both been pioneers - one upright in the eyes of the world, the other one 'downright' by the standards Vanessa MacLeod mentions in A Bird in the House. To another generation they shared the same past and met the same fate. Hagar thus recognised a truth that makes a nonsense of the preconceptions she had taken into her marriage, and of the set of values which had

kept them apart. Of course, because of the method Margaret Laurence uses in telling the story, the reader is always aware of the truth long before Hagar herself sees it. We see what her eyes do not, and marvel at her blindness.

Margaret Laurence is well aware of the ironies that fill everyone's lives - the jokes of God she calls them. Indeed her second novel is called A Jest of God - a book about how things really are as opposed to the way Rachel Cameron imagines them to be. The Stone Angel is full of the ironies, large and small, which make up the web of Hagar's life. We can but smile at her showing such a knowledge of how to handle men when she is commenting to herself on the game of mothers and fathers two small children are playing on the beach at Shadow Point.<sup>9</sup> 'Stupid girl. She knows nothing. Why won't she praise him a little? She's so sharp with him. He'll become fed up in a minute. I long to warn her - watch out, watch out, you'll lose him'. (p.188) Who better than Hagar would know that! Even Hagar laughed at the irony she saw in her becoming a housekeeper like Auntie Doll. "'Like Auntie Doll,'" I said. "That seems peculiar. You never know what's going to happen to you in this life." (P.141) However, it is the larger ironies that form the important strands of the story. Hagar's relationship with Lottie Drieser Simmons is full of ironical implications. As children together at school it was Lottie who was the outcast because of her illegitimacy while Hagar belonged to the favoured few. The latter started life with every imaginable advantage a child could have. But, later she has to go to Lottie for help to enable her to escape from the farm and her life with Bram. Lottie has made a conventional, suitable marriage with one of the respectable



boys of the town. She is now one of the elect and Hagar is not. Hagar knows that she will jump at the chance to buy anything which had been in the Currie family, so this is how she raises the money to finance her flight. Of course, we cannot forget that it was Lottie who made the remark about Bram which Hagar says might have influenced her decision to marry him. Then, we get the feeling that these two women are fated to associate with one another because John falls in love with Lottie's only child Arlene. 'If people had told me forty years ago that my son would fall for No-Name Lottie Drieser's daughter, I'd have laughed in their faces.' (p.203-204) Lottie and Hagar once more have to conspire together, for Lottie is as unwilling as Hagar to see the two marry.

The reader is encouraged to wonder whether a marriage between these young people would have been any more successful than that of Bram and Hagar. Arlene's childhood upbringing resembled Hagar's in many ways, and John is a Shipley! Of course, we shall never know, because the young ones have to be sacrificed to parental pride, Lottie's as well as Hagar's. By linking these two women together in two acts of complicity, Margaret Laurence is able to accentuate Hagar's stature vis-à-vis Lottie. The latter, in spite of her anomalous position in Manawakan society, has managed to acquire a certain social standing - something Hagar has thrown away. Lottie, in spite of her frail, fluffy outward appearance is quite tough underneath, 'tiny and light with yellow hair fine as embroidery silk, bold as brass although her dress was patched and washed raw.' (p.11) Tough, or insensitive, she is quite as aware of the importance of proper appearance as is Hagar. Still, in spite of Hagar's fall in the

eyes of the world, she is able to use Lottie because she knows how well the latter remembers who she was and what her family represented. Hagar can stoop to ask Lottie's help without feeling diminished because she still recalls what Manawaka thought of the Driersers long ago. She thinks so little of Lottie really that she is able to use her without a qualm. Although we deplore this attitude in Hagar, the author has created in her a character so much bigger in every way than Lottie that we understand why it is done and fully appreciate the irony of the situation; we share Hagar's recognition of the ironical twist in fortunes which makes it all necessary.

Undoubtedly the greatest irony of all lies in the way the Shipley boys turn out. John, whom Hagar regards as the one who will emulate her father and become somebody, turns out to be more of a Shipley than a Currie. Hagar considers him more fit than Marvin to receive the Currie plaid-pin which symbolised all that her father's family stood for: its proud Scots origin, the evocative crest and the stirring motto, 'Gainsay Who Dare'. Yet John valued it so little that he traded it for a jackknife. It had no relevance to his life or times. Nor was he capable of acquiring the virtues implicit in its symbolism. The elder son, whom Hagar had regarded as a typical Shipley, and so rather inferior, leaves home and at least makes a limited success of his life. Free from any delusions of grandeur, Marvin, the plodder, the peacelover, does more with his small talent than even his mother had done with all her promise - her beauty, her intelligence, her education. All that was somehow wasted. At the end all Hagar has to show for her life is the love of a son she has failed to take very seriously. At least Marvin has the love of a good

wife and the satisfaction of seeing two children apparently successfully launched into a career and marriage.

The structure of The Stone Angel does make demands on the reader as the story shifts from present to past and back again, but the novelist handles the transition so well that the difficulty is minimal. The style of the one story line differs from the other in such a way that we soon come to recognise by the rhythm of the prose which story we are presently involved in. The contemporary tale of Hagar's activities with Marvin, and particularly with Doris, is told plainly, without fuss, using many short simple sentences and much conversation. When Hagar is reflecting on what is happening or what she is going to do, the sentences are brief, pared to the bone. The reflective passages dealing with the past are more complex, the sentences are more convoluted, the language is more charged.

Margaret Laurence is masterly in her use of original simile and metaphor.<sup>10</sup> Clara Shipley is described as 'a vat of a woman'. (p.46) When Hagar went back to visit John on the farm 'the days dribbled on so slowly, like sand through an egg timer'. (p.193) Her room in the hospital 'at night is deep and dark, like a coal scuttle, and I'm lying like a lump at the bottom of it'. (p.298) When she runs away to Shadow Point 'enormous leaves glow like green glass, the sunlight illuminating them'. (p.151) The author is particularly skilled, through her attention to the minutiae, in evoking reality. The vignettes we are given of the physical environment are painted with sure accurate strokes, so that, although we occupy Hagar's thoughts, we can also move about with her in the rooms and the countryside either in reality or in flashback. Critics have pointed to Hagar's

skill in describing things as being too literary, indeed as being an intrusion on the author's part - a demonstration of her own love of description. Margaret Laurence defends herself by suggesting that even simple people may have a rich inner life which can be filled with poetic imagery, though they may not be able to verbalise it. Hagar is not a simple person. There is no reason why she should not express herself in thought in a way she does not adopt in actual conversation. Dennis Cooley, in 'Antimacassared in the Wilderness' makes an interesting point - 'Hagar is so withdrawn that she...seldom speaks to anyone, as the paucity of her dialogue in The Stone Angel indicates.'<sup>11</sup> On the face of it this is true. From a practical point of view the author does not need to use dialogue to reveal Hagar's nature because the entire book is a revelation of self by means of inner monologue. The fact that Hagar appears to speak little may be the result of natural inclination or of years spent amongst people to whom, because of her sense of superiority, she has little to say. Margaret Laurence suggests to us a person who lives very much in her head, where she is perfectly capable of seeing the natural things around her clearly and of reacting to them by describing them in retrospect with accuracy and acid humour. She has learned not to waste words, as one would expect in those strong, taciturn and inhibited Scotsmen, among whom she was encouraged to acquire the manly virtues rather than imitate the female weaknesses of her mother or Auntie Doll. She talks little because she finds little to talk about amongst people with whom she has little in common. She is certainly not an intellectual, but she is significantly better educated than anyone around her. Moreover she is doomed to live much

of her life among people whom she neither understands nor likes. Her pride does prevent her from making the effort to communicate in order to find out what makes them function. To someone like herself they are not worth the bother. 'The linguistic tension, between formal and informal, enacts a social tension that exists both within Hagar and within the social structure of the world she inhabits.'<sup>12</sup> Mode of speech, as mode of dress, can be used as a yardstick measuring worth, in the world which Hagar outwardly rejected, but whose influence she carried with her to the end. Margaret Laurence shows how Hagar places great importance on the formal correctness of language as a means of demonstrating her superiority. '... in Western Canada, by buying Hagar an Eastern education, he (Jason Currie) imposes on her an artificial tongue and presumes that he has thereby provided her with status.'<sup>13</sup> Hagar thinks so too. She derides as common and uncouth the inability of either Marvin or Doris to use 'I' and 'me' correctly. Marvin's letters home are dismissed with the comment that they were always badly spelled. She remarks that she could have felt proud of Bram, if only he would not open his mouth to speak! However, in the last days of her life she is able to identify this rigidity of attitude in herself and unbend a little. Sandra Wong asks her

"You okay, Mrs. Shipley?"  
 "Quite okay."

I have to smile at myself. I've never used that word before in my life. Okay - guy - such slangy words. I used to tell John. They mark a person.' (p.301)

Reading novels is a very personal exercise. In the final analysis a writer's success must be measured in terms of her success in

creating characters to whom the reader can relate. When that reader is able to say, "Yes, that is true, because I have seen it in my life or in the lives of those around me." then the novelist has succeeded. It is impossible for us to remain indifferent to Hagar Shipley. As her story unfolds our emotions shift from impatience to astonishment, to anger, to admiration, never to indifference. Must we pity her? No. Neither did Margaret Laurence intend us to do so, nor do we feel she needs our pity. She made a choice and she took the consequences. She never expressed regret. She never says "If only." At the very end she made one concession - to Marvin, out of a kind of love she did not know she had. Her last words to Doris, however, are as chiding as ever. It is Marvin's last comment which the creator of this extraordinary character would, I am sure, want us to remember: "She's a holy terror,"...spoken with such anger and such tenderness.' (p.304-305)

## Footnotes: Chapter 2

1. John Moss, Patterns of Isolation, (Toronto, 1974), p.232.
2. Claudette Pollock, 'The Paradox of The Stone Angel', Humanities Association Review, Vol. 27, (1976), p. p. 267-275.

She draws attention to the skill with which Margaret Laurence keeps the reader's sympathy with Hagar, partly by giving her what Pollock calls archetypal associations, and partly by engaging us in what is basically a redemptive process. So, she manages to 'keep our loyalties from straying too far from Hagar's side'. (p.274) Her other main suggestion is also of interest - she sees Hagar as a female King Lear seeing the themes of blindness and of parent-child relationships as similar.

3. Robertson Davies, Review, 'Self-Imprisoned to Keep the World at Bay', 1964.
4. Margaret Tanaszi, Feminine Consciousness in Contemporary Canadian Fiction, University of Leeds, 1977, p.230.
5. Joan Coldwell, 'Hagar as Meg Merrilies', Journal of Canadian Fiction, Vol. 27, (1980), pp. 92-100, p.94.
6. Anne Thompson, 'The Wilderness of Pride', Journal of Canadian Fiction, Vol. 4, (1975), p.p. 95-110.

Her emphasis is on the wilderness-garden theme which she sees as running symbolically through the novel. Hagar's life has been spent in a series of wildernesses from which her nature makes it impossible for her to escape. Thompson emphasise the store of Biblical knowledge which Margaret Laurence acquired in her early years and which still permeates her symbolism. 'The displaced

garden or wilderness leitmotif is sounded and repeated with variations throughout The Stone Angel. It is an integral element in the structure.' p.100.

7. Dick Harrison, Unnamed Country, (Edmonton, 1977), p.194.
8. Dylan Thomas, Poem written for his father's death.
9. The episode on the beach at Shadow Point precedes Hagar's recollection of the time when she inadvertently eavesdrops on an afternoon rendezvous between John and Arlene when they 'play house' too, but in a rather more adult way. (pp.205-209)
10. In her essay on 'Atwood and Laurence: Poet and Novelist' (Studies in Canadian Literature, Vol. 3, (1978), pp.255-263) Linda Hutcheon discusses the way the technique of each writer is reflected in the fact that one is a poet, the other is a novelist. Poets use a technique which requires a good deal from the reader. The novelist, or at least Margaret Laurence, finds it difficult to trust the reader to understand what is said, and therefore is inclined to spell things out more carefully. Hutcheon draws attention in particular, when discussing Mrs Laurence's novels, to the number of similes and metaphors she uses in The Stone Angel. She points out how the simile proliferates at the beginning of the novel, but as the story progresses and the author is sure she has established her symbolism with the reader, she progresses to the metaphor, which is a more sophisticated device than the more obvious simile. She feels she can trust the reader to understand what she is saying.
11. Dennis Cooley, 'Antimacassared in the Wilderness', Mosaic, University of Manitoba, Vol 11, (1978), p.p. 29-46, p. 32.



12. William New, 'Every Now and Then', Canadian Literature, Vol 96, (1982), p p. 79-96, p.82.
13. William New, p.85.

. Where Angels Fear to Tread

The inner world is the important one in the lives of Margaret Laurence's heroines. In the background, the everyday life going on around them is just that - mundane, recognisable and unimportant. In the foreground the Rachel or Hagar or Morag whom others do not know observes and analyses, reflects on the past, comments on the present; it is this running commentary, the total recall, the individual reaction which the reader is invited to share. Margaret Laurence depicts an inner landscape in which you come to feel at home, and along its paths, from time to time, you meet yourself. Here are revealed the secrets these women have never been able to share with anyone. For, among other things, her books are about people's inability to communicate. They are also about surviving. Her women are victims of circumstance as well as prisoners of their own natures. They must learn to live with themselves and to become careless of the world's opinion. The second Manawaka novel, A Jest of God, is about passing judgments and making false assumptions based on prejudice. It is also about the plight of women in a man's world, about loneliness and isolation, about fear and despair, and ultimately about insight, acceptance, love and hope.

In A Jest of God, Rachel Cameron talks to herself - not with the endearing dottiness of the absent-minded professor, nor with the harmless chattiness of the eccentric recluse, but with the feverish compulsiveness of someone aware that she is teetering on the brink of insanity, monitoring her every action, analysing her every reaction. The inner monologue is so absorbing that the reader identifies

totally with her, so much so that as you read the novel, the 'I' of the story becomes 'me', and at the end of the first reading at least, you find it impossible to remember her name, only your own.

Margaret Laurence used the device of the internal dialogue before in her first Canadian novel. In response to critics who dislike this approach, she revealed in 'Gadgetry or Growing' that her first instinct was to use the third person, but after several attempts to do so, she had to concede defeat - it could only come right in the first person.<sup>1</sup> However, the tone here is quite different from that of The Stone Angel. In the latter, Hagar is tough, stubborn, and proud, meeting life and the blows it directs at her fearlessly. If she makes mistakes, they are on the grand scale; nor does she shrink from the possibility of making them. Her response to life is completely positive; Rachel's is totally negative. Where Hagar acts, Rachel is acted upon. She is continually holding herself in check, making excuses for not doing what she would like, finding reasons why she must do what she doesn't want to do. Fundamentally what she fears most is making a fool of herself. The use of the first person narrative gives authentic voice to this mental turmoil and allows the reader to perceive the disparity between outward appearance and the inner life of the character.

To make a fool of oneself, to be an oddball - in the eyes of the community of any small Canadian town this is to be avoided at all costs. In England eccentrics are usually tolerated and treated with amused acceptance. Not so in Canada. Many of the early settlers - English Methodists and Scottish Presbyterians - went there seeking freedom of worship as well as escape from hardship. They were

earnest, hardworking folk who had very definite ideas of what constituted proper behaviour for respectable people, and there was much gossip about and looking askance at those who failed to behave properly. 'Manawaka society reproduces itself as it moulds individuals to accept the status quo and their place within it' is the way Hughes puts it.<sup>2</sup> There are none so conformist as the Non-conformists. For women, to talk of sex was taboo. To become pregnant outside wedlock was a social disaster, a terrible warning to nice girls. To enjoy making love was unladylike. Men were beasts, only after the one thing. In a permissive age this coy and puritanical attitude to sex must appear ludicrous. But this is the outlook which the author and her heroines will have encountered in their small town. Judy Kearns points out with some justification that 'The primary flaw in conventional reasoning about the novel are the assertion that Rachel's problems are all her own fault, and the disregard for Laurence's subtle depiction of the coercive effect of social pressure.'<sup>3</sup>

Rachel herself says of the Scots who settled in her home town that 'they knew how to be almightier than anyone but God.' (A Jest of God, p.65) From childhood, therefore, she has been impressed with the necessity of behaving in the manner expected of her, and she has grown up into a quiet, inhibited woman who appears to accept the role she is expected to play - that of devoted daughter and dedicated school teacher. This would suggest that she has successfully lived up to the town's and her family's expectations. However, Rachel feels deeply that she is a failure because she has not been able to fill the role which society as a whole, and Manawaka as its

representative, sets aside for a woman - that of wife and mother.'...the construction of femininity is bounded by fundamental social laws that delineate the parameters of a woman's life.'<sup>4</sup> She is a spinster, one of those women with no place in a male-oriented society. Even Grace Doherty, whom she considers moronic, has been able to fulfil her function as a female. Four words from Judy Kearns's essay - 'anatomy shall be destiny'<sup>5</sup> - perfectly sum up the situation. Rachel suffers through the realisation that she has not been able to learn the rules of the game and catch her man. There are frequent references throughout the novel to the way young women are expected to behave, and how soon they learn to assume the feminine role assigned to them.

...Rachel's account of life in Manawaka and her recollections of the forces which have shaped her adolescence and young womanhood make clear the coercive affect of pressure from a society which upholds a masculine value-system, and two of the factors indicating Rachel's strength at the end of A Jest of God are her symbolic move away from that society and her ability to disregard the stereotypic vision which is inappropriate for the individual personality.<sup>6</sup>

Rachel remarks that even the little girls in Grade Two will do anything to ingratiate themselves, and to her, the teenagers seem unmistakably feminine because of their preoccupation with their hair styles. Even Mrs Cameron and her elderly friends continue to practice the female arts, with their interest in clothes and hairdos and their coy mannerisms, though they no longer have any men to please. Rachel recalls the agonies of attending the local dance hall where the greatest fear was that no one would ask her to dance, so she danced even with Cluny Macpherson, who in acting the clown made her look silly too - or so she imagined. She feels she does not live up to the

female stereotype; she is too tall, too thin, too serious, too shy, too tense, too anything you could mention. This sense of being found wanting distorts her vision of herself. Society decrees that she can only find release from her situation through a man, that is, by becoming what Carolyn Heilbrun calls 'an event in the life of a man'.<sup>7</sup> Rachel is convinced that there is no hope of this. She finds consolation in imaginings drawn extensively from the romantic fiction mass-produced for women. Ultimately, in order to survive, she must learn 'to handle personal relationships and to control her destiny within the limitations imposed by that society (in which she lives).'<sup>8</sup> She must begin to see herself in a realistic light, not just as a woman, but as a person of some account in her own right.

The reader enters Rachel's life in her thirty-fourth year; crisis point has been reached; she is convinced she is going mad. Trapped in this Manitoba town where she has always lived, she feels stifled. The opportunity to escape from home which so many girls seize when they go away to college was never really hers because her father died towards the end of her first year at University in Winnipeg and she had to leave, first, because there wasn't enough money for her to continue, and second, because her mother, who has a heart condition, feared living alone. Fourteen years later she regards herself as unattractive, unlovely and unloved. She longs for love, yet dares not reach out to anyone lest she be rebuffed. Those people who offer her friendship, like Calla Mackie, a fellow teacher, and Willard Siddeley, her headmaster, are rejected because they offend her sensibilities and appear ridiculous or misguided to her. She cannot bear Calla's eccentricities - her brash clothes and her religious

fervour. Willard she finds physically repulsive yet is amazed to discover that she longs to touch his 'spotted furry hands'. (p.9) This appals her. She cannot admit to herself this need for physical contact with others. Secretly she lavishes love on her pupils, or special pupils, the latest being James Doherty whom she longs to touch and for whom she feels 'exasperated tenderness'. (p.3) The father who died those fourteen years ago haunts her thoughts - somehow she suspects that he too longed for a love he did not get. She still seeks answers for questions she never dared put to him when he was alive. In retrospect she is beginning to see how lonely he had been and to understand what she now recognises as his dependence on alcohol. When her own longings become intolerable she finds release in erotic dreams with her 'shadow prince'. (p.19) Even this horrifies her. Trapped in a cage of respectability, she prowls up and down, seeking a way out. Under her quiet exterior a battle is taking place, as she rages against the fate that has brought her to the age of thirty-four and given her nothing.

Physical appearance can affect one's self-regard and Margaret Laurence uses Rachel's external attributes to highlight what she feels. She hates the way she looks because she imagines that it makes her conspicuous and different. She considers that her unusual height and extreme thinness make her unlovable. Her creator requires her constantly to catch glimpses of herself in shop windows or mirrors, seeing herself reflected as 'the stroke of a white chalk on a blackboard' (p.29), 'some skinny poplar sapling' (p.61) or 'this giraffe woman, this lank scamperer'. (p.75) Her face is narrow and angular; her eyes are grey; her hair is mole brown; and her hands are

'large and too thin, like empty gloves'. (p.8) All this suggests that Rachel accepts 'a masculine society's emphasis on a woman's appearance and the competitiveness and superficiality which it promotes in women's relationships with each other.'<sup>9</sup>

The emphasis on thinness and pallor creates a ghostlike quality, and indeed Rachel does seem to haunt Manawaka rather than inhabit that town. Her walks tend to be alone, often at night, and she drifts from place to place hardly daring to recognise passers-by, especially former pupils, towards whom she feels a strange unease bordering on alienation. She wanders through her empty days like a sleepwalker and when she catches glimpses of herself in mirrors it is as if she were looking at a stranger or an alter ego. Her thinness also suggests physical stiffness which is linked to the inner tension she experiences. Calla, who also longs for love, understands surprisingly well - 'we hold ourselves too tightly these days.' (p.27) Rachel's inability to relax either in mind or body is typified by moments like the one in the classroom when she holds a new piece of orange chalk so tightly that it snaps in her fingers. Later, Nick Kazlik chides her for not relaxing even in the act of lovemaking. Her physical stiffness and inner tension are manifestations of her inability to let go or to act naturally. She has lost the ability to act instinctively because of her fear of doing or saying the wrong thing - of being laughable. Nor is she able to laugh. She seems completely humourless, though on rare occasions she does manage a nervous, girlish giggle which she instantly labels false. The book is overwhelmingly joyless - none of the people really laugh - each is trapped in a private hell, a recurring theme in Margaret Laurence's



books.

This self-absorption can be irritating, so, although Rachel is obviously intended to be a sympathetic character, it is possible to lose patience with someone so wedded to her own misery that she cannot see or feel that of others. Critics express just such irritation in statements like:

The reader, instead of identifying, finds himself (herself, too, I should think) silently shouting at her to get some eye-liner, save for a mink, strong arm a man, kill her mother and stop bitching. 10

The solutions Robert Harlow suggests, if we ignore their flippancy, simply help to reinforce what has been said about male attitudes to female disaffection. In fact, men amongst the critics have reacted in a much more hostile way than women, first to A Jest of God, and later especially to The Fire-Dwellers, where attitudes which we now label feminist are expressed. Clara Thomas's perception is more acute:

'Rachel requires enormous authorial tact and skill to engage and hold, and then to impel, our sympathy and respect....her voice, through the book's first three chapters, is like one long, barely controlled scream.'11

Janov's book The Primal Scream bears as its cover picture Munch's famous painting which could equally have served for A Jest of God.

In her egocentricity Rachel is like a child, inexperienced, insecure and 'me-orientated'. In fact, her mother continues to treat her like a child in many ways and she herself says that when she examines herself in the mirror, she doesn't look her age. Her face doesn't yet look lived in. So her story is one of growing up - late, but not too late.

The novel is also about communication, verbal or non-verbal. None of the characters is able to express what he really feels. Rachel

accuses her mother of listening but not hearing, and this is what might be said of them all. She reflects that her parents gave up talking to one another years before her father's death. The father was never able, for instance, to tell anyone the horrors he had experienced during the First World War, and which kept him away from the annual Armistice celebrations in the town, causing him to say, "'It has a fine sound the lies the pipes tell.'" (p.57) Rachel really doesn't hear when Nick tells her he cannot give her what she wants, though she recognises early in their relationship that he is somehow apart. Calla is desperately lonely, yet Rachel cannot hear her silent pleas because of her preoccupation with herself. People's inability to make themselves understood one to the other is symbolised in Rachel's unexpected and shattering experience of speaking in tongues at the Pentecostal gospel meeting she unwillingly attends with Calla. All her pent-up fears and emotions pour forth in a stream of unintelligible gibberish which leaves her empty, shocked and more frantic than ever. C.M. McLay feels that Margaret Laurence's primary message is that 'we can never truly know another human being, never penetrate behind their façade, since words which reveal also conceal. We must accept others as they appear to us, reach out to them in compassion, yet be free to stand alone.'<sup>12</sup> The word 'alone' is crucial to an understanding of the novel, for when all is said and done each individual is alone and lonely. Nick and Calla, Mrs Cameron and Willard Siddley, each is alone, like Hector Jonas, whom Rachel sees 'living there behind his eyes' (p.128), or like Nick whom she feels "'living there under your skin'" (p.147). McLay's words from Matthew Arnold, 'We mortal millions live alone' express the sense of

human isolation found in A Jest of God. His choice of title for his critical essay, 'Every Man is an Island,' which inverts Donne's well-known image, further emphasises what he sees as a dominant theme.<sup>13</sup> Finally, after Nick has gone, Rachel's stark sad words 'We were not well acquainted.' (p.154) form the epitaph to their relationship.

The mental turmoil which Rachel experiences is reflected in the way the author structures the book. What Rachel thinks to herself becomes the mainstream of the story. The conversations she has with others are reduced to noises off. Her banal, repetitive conversations with her mother, where she is constantly saying "I'm sorry.", take place against a background of inner resentment and doubt. This device creates tension in the reader while recreating Rachel's own tension. Her talk with herself consists of question after unanswered question. One short sentence follows another to produce the staccato, frenetic effect of a mind darting here and there in search of peace. She questions, she criticises, she analyses, she worries, but she never rests. It is as exhausting for the reader as it is for her. Yet in the rare moments when she opens herself to what is around her, especially in the natural surroundings, her response is positive. Then the language becomes lyrical and poetic, and the author's genius for apt, unusual simile and metaphor reflects this. Those which Rachel uses to describe herself are especially fresh and evocative. One of Margaret Laurence's particular skills is that of accurately reproducing the speech patterns and idiom of ordinary conversation, and using variations of them to distinguish one character from another. For example, we could never confuse Calla's voice with

## Rachel's

The time scale of the novel is fairly short - really only a few months from spring through summer to autumn, but these few months are the most important ones in Rachel's whole life. We meet her at crisis point and we are intimately linked with her as she goes through a releasing as well as traumatic experience which makes it possible for her to take the necessary first positive step towards a new life. The person who unwittingly precipitates the change is Nick Kazlik, a contemporary of Rachel's at school, back in Manawaka for a rare visit to his parents. For want of something better to do, he invites Rachel to a movie, about the only entertainment available in the town. She spends the rest of the summer listening for him to telephone; her moments with him while they make love are the only moments when she feels really alive. She cannot accept the relationship for what it is, the proverbial brief encounter, a summer romance only. Perversely, though at one level she expects little, she naïvely hopes for more than Nick can give. Dimly Nick recognises and fears her great need, but ultimately he cannot accept responsibility for filling it. "'Darling, I'm not God, I can't solve anything.'" (p.148) When all comes to all, he will not be tied down. His father would like him to take over the farm which he has worked since he came to Canada from the Ukraine, but Nick cannot face giving up his independence as a teacher in Winnipeg. 'Representing as Nick does the shift from a rural ethnic mosaic to urban assimilation, he cannot go back.'<sup>14</sup> He too has problems which the reader is allowed to merely glimpse, much as Rachel does. She, of course, comes to realise at last how much some of them resemble her own. His inability to respond to

his parents' need of him grieves but does not persuade him. His quotation from Jeremiah, "I have forsaken my house - I have left mine heritage - mine heritage is unto me as a lion in the forest - it crieth out against me - therefore have I hated it." suggests a torment he prefers not to admit. Since the reader must not know more than Rachel knows, we never do understand Nick's behaviour in any depth. We must not be distracted from our heroine whose own grasp of salvation is fragile enough. So, Nick leaves the area without a word of goodbye to Rachel; the reader is left with her to puzzle over his strange behaviour.

After his departure, Rachel imagines herself pregnant, a social calamity in such a community as hers. Unworldly as she is, she does not know how to go about getting an abortion. In her despair she tries to commit suicide but cannot even do that. She calls this last failure opting out, and she discovers in herself the desire to survive. Finally she prays, though she has little hope of an answer to her prayer from a God she has ignored up to now. But she confronts Him, accepting, as she says, that 'All the nuts and oddballs turn to You.' (p.171) In saying this she admits to belonging to this group herself. She has moved past the fear of being thought eccentric. She has made a fool of herself and she will have to live with it, so she will have her baby, come what may. Really, she wants the baby anyway. She had done nothing to prevent a pregnancy, partly through physical fastidiousness, but also, we feel, because subconsciously she wanted a child. On their last evening by the river where they first made love, she tells Nick, "'If I had a child, I would like it to be yours.'" (p.148) The ultimate irony, the jest of God, is that there

is no baby, rather a tumour, benign as it happens. Are we to think that a foetus might have been malignant? Certainly having an illegitimate child would have had a destructive effect on Rachel's life in Manawaka.

Throughout the novel Margaret Laurence uses irony in two different ways. There is the irony of chance and there is the irony built into the story to enable the author to make important thematic observations. Thus it is possible to emphasise how preconceptions can lead to false assumptions. There is irony in the discrepancy between what Rachel sees and what the reader knows to be true. Because James Doherty was not at school on two or three occasions, yet was seen playing by the river, Rachel assumes that it is because his mother, Grace, whom she knew at school, does not care about her son. She assumes too that Grace cannot possibly understand James' genius as she can. During their interview Rachel discovers that Grace cherishes her clever son as much as she herself does and with more right. There's the rub. Again, when Nick shows Rachel a photograph of a boy of six looking very much like himself, she asks, "Yours?" and when he says, "Yes.", she assumes that it is a photo of a son of his, whereas it is in reality a picture of himself. Nick is not married. Rachel's child is as illusory as the son in the photograph. Neither has any substance. Both are figments of Rachel's imagination. How ironical, too, that Rachel makes a fool of herself with the son of the Ukrainian milkman whom her mother (representing the respectable Scots community in Manawaka) looks down upon. Not only does she break the moral code laid down by these people, she breaks the social code as well. In choosing to make Rachel's lover a man of Ukrainian origin

Margaret Laurence reveals her interest in Canadian ethnic minorities and so, in the plight of the dispossessed. In three of her novels male representatives from some of the outsider groups are the saviour-lovers of her WASP protagonists. Stacey's Luke is an Italian; Morag's Jules is from the ultimate race of outsiders, the *métis*. Conversely, all her women represent that group of immigrants, once also dispossessed, whose sense of moral superiority relegated the others to the wrong side of the tracks. There is irony here in the fact that the British immigrants, by their attitudes, were reproducing the kind of society from which they had earlier found it necessary to flee.

Rachel herself sees it as ironic that, when she has no one else to turn to, she goes to Calla whom she has shunned all summer. Somehow she instinctively knows that, alone of the people in town, Calla will not make judgments. The greatest of all the ironies is contained in the episode in Dr Craven's office. He has known Rachel since she was a child. Now she is going to him to reveal that she is "a fallen woman", as she imagines. When she confesses to having missed a period, the doctor benignly asserts that at least, knowing the kind of girl she is, they can eliminate the possibility of a pregnancy. The mental agony and fear experienced by Rachel during the physical examination, as she awaits the terrible moment when he will have to retract those words, is the climax of the story. This is replaced by hysteria which the doctor assumes to be caused by the fear of cancer. We know, as readers, that it is a combination of sorrow at the loss of her baby, and fury at the cruel God who has played such a joke on her, making her suffer so much for so little.

That we are to link Rachel Cameron with Rachel, the wife of Jacob of the Old Testament book of Genesis, is never in any doubt. First we see her lavishing secret love on certain of her Grade Two children over the years. Then, when Rachel and Nick have their summer romance, she reveals how intensely she longs for their union to be fruitful. Indeed she sees herself as akin to that other Rachel, and silently pleads with Nick in the words of the Bible. 'Give me my children.' (Genesis XXX,1) What she says aloud - "If I had a child, I would like it to be yours." is picked up by Nick whose reply: "I'm not God." echoes Jacob's angry retort to his wife: 'Am I in God's stead?' (Genesis XXX,2) Later, in the doctor's waiting room where Rachel weeps, the scene invokes the words of Jeremiah: 'A voice was heard in Ramoth, lamentations and great weeping; Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children because they were not.' (Matthew II, 18; Jeremiah XXXI,15) The linking of Rachel and Jacob (Nick) is an interesting echo of the Biblical symbolism found in The Stone Angel. Hagar marries Bram (Abraham). Jacob, as son of Abraham, represents the next generation of Jews. Niall Cameron would be the same age as Marvin, Hagar's son, so Rachel would be a contemporary of Marvin's daughter and Hagar's granddaughter, Tina.

The discovery that Rachel has a tumour brings with it the possibility that she has cancer and will die. In fact, death plays a predominant role in the novel, as it does in all Margaret Laurence's novels. Rachel and her mother live above the funeral parlour where her father used to carry out his mysterious duties as an undertaker. It is now owned by Hector Jonas who, as any typical North American businessman would, has installed a blue neon sign which flashes



Japonica Funeral Chapel, and offends Rachel's sense of propriety. The sign becomes a symbol of the changing attitude of the town to the subject of death. To mention death is taboo; like so many aspects of life there, it is made respectable through outward show and form. Rachel is obsessed by the memory of her father and the fact that he worked with bodies, embalming them, painting them to look alive. She begins to suspect that he preferred the dead to the living; was he more at home with his cadavers than with warm flesh and blood? Could it be that he hated touching living human beings? Was this why her mother seemed 'to come alive' when he had died? Was there some connection here with what he had seen on the battlefield, about which he could not bear to talk? There are no answers to these questions. Rachel feels herself somehow dead, too, stiff and cold, like a corpse. On the evening when she forces herself to use her mother's discarded douche, she is drawn downstairs to the place of death, her father's domain. She feels she has killed something alive. At the same time, because she values herself so little, she cannot believe that anything living could come from her. In Hector's place of work she finds a kind of comfort and peace. His matter-of-fact attitude to death and his dealings with it make it possible to see his as a job of work like everyone else's. Previously, because she had never been allowed to descend into her father's domain, she had imagined it a place of hideous secrets and macabre sights. Finally, she is able to see her father in a different light, when Hector asserts that he feels Niall Cameron had had the life he wanted. Rachel realises that he had been free to choose to change, but he had not. So, she is free too, and she can change. We the readers recognise that the alteration

has already begun when we note that Rachel is able to allow Hector to put his arm around her shoulder without her shying away at once. Physical touch, she is learning, can be a comfort.

Rachel's descent into the underworld of the dead, the funeral home, may be seen as parallel with Hagar's descent into the overgrown cove by the sea. In this symbolic way each must reach down into her innermost self to exorcise her ghosts and free herself from the dead hand of the past. Each is unwittingly aided in this process of catharsis by a very ordinary little man, in one case an insurance salesman, in the other an undertaker. Both are connected with death. The irony is obvious. Both of the women face up to the death of beloved men, mourn them and let them go. Hagar's release came almost too late; Rachel's makes it possible for her to move on, rather than mark time as she has been doing. Her descent is a 'major symbolic action in which Rachel comes to terms with past and present, the living and the dead' and 'thus (takes) a crucial step towards her maturation.'<sup>15</sup>

The last time Rachel and Nick make love, and she cries out inwardly, "Give me my children", Nick suddenly draws her attention to the fact that the cemetery can be seen from where they lie, symbolising in a sinister way the death of their relationship. Rachel has her operation, signalling the death of her imaginary child. During her stay in hospital she fantasises about Nick for a day or so - she will be Mrs N. Kazlik; but finally she accepts that hope of anything from him must die too. 'A gate closed quite quietly, and when I tried to open it again, it wouldn't. There wasn't any way round it. No way in, not there, not any more. Visa cancelled.'

(p.183) The finality of Rachel's words is unmistakable. Under the anaesthetic during her operation Rachel mumbles "I am the mother now." The child Rachel is dead. She will now take the dominant role in organising hers and her mother's lives. She comes to realise for the first time, too, that her mother clings to her so because she is terrified of death. She decides to make a clean break with her past. They will go away to Vancouver where she will have a new job in a new environment and can make a fresh start.

Now that Rachel has ceased to worry about what others will think, she is able to take a more positive stance. In the past she has been paralysed by fear, which meant that she always saw her life in terms of what she could not do, lest she be made to look foolish. However, having become a fool, she finds the fear worse than the fact. Moreover, for the first time she stops thinking so much about herself and can look outwards actually to see other people in a more charitable light. Her new clarity of vision regarding herself can now include others, to whose needs she had previously been blind. As she talks to Nick's mother and father, she silently acknowledges that Nick 'had his own demons and webs...he had to draw away, knowing that what I wanted from him was too much.' (p.189) In her farewell conversation with Willard Siddley she recognises his lack of confidence and his need for an affirmation of himself as a colleague and headmaster, even as a man. In addition she suddenly realises that she is hearing people differently - listening AND hearing.

Throughout the novel Rachel's attitude to her mother and to Calla has been crucial, serving as an indication of her frame of mind. In the beginning her mother embodies all those attributes of Manawaka

society which Rachel secretly questions but has not the courage to openly oppose. In her interminable dialogue with herself she forever examines the validity of the beliefs and evaluations which Mrs Cameron expresses on behalf of all respectable Manawakans. These tenets are composed of numerous thou-shalt-nots. Rachel's new view of things makes it possible to recognise that there also are some can-dos. One of these is to take responsibility for her own life and to make decisions which are hers alone. She will not abandon her mother, but she will no longer be shamed into inaction. To Mrs Cameron this appears callous, but in fact Rachel's sharpened insight improves her ability to comprehend her Mother's need for love and reassurance, in the face of her unspoken dread of loneliness and death. The daughter never for an instant considers leaving the mother behind, neither does she allow herself to be dissuaded. She is the mother now. As the bus carries them to their new life in Vancouver, Rachel says with compassion, 'Beside me sleeps my elderly child.' (p.201) There is no longer the confusion of roles expressed earlier in the words: 'Surely I love her as much as most parents love their children. I mean, of course, as much as most children love their parents.' (p.114)

In the early chapters of the novel Rachel's grudging friendship with Calla Mackie symbolises her attitude to life. She finds it difficult to give herself to any relationship. Calla's proprietary manner, her eccentric mode of dress, her apparent total lack of taste and her devotion to a freakish manifestation of Christianity all offend Rachel's sense of the fitness of things. Calla appears to lack all those qualities which society considers womanly; moreover, she

does not seem to mind looking outlandish. Rachel is ashamed of her embarrassment and repugnance - '...her taste in furnishings seems so horrible to me that it creates a kind of horrible snobbishness in me...' (p.133) Calla embodies everything that Rachel wants above all else to avoid. Only when her own experiences have opened her eyes is she able to appreciate Calla for what she is - a loyal, loving woman who makes no judgments and holds nothing back. She is capable and independant, realistic in her expectations, and optimistic in temperament. Most important, Rachel sees for the first time how very alone her friend really is. 'Calla, listening in the early morning or in the darkness for some sound.' (p.137) 'Calla, pillar of tabernacle, speaker in tongues, mother of canaries and budgerigars.' (p.198) These words are spoken with real pity and understanding. Calla too could weep for her unborn children. By her reassessment of Calla's worth, Rachel reveals her own growth in love and sympathy. In the end she can bear to say that she regrets that things are not different; she can accept the love that Calla offered her though its lesbian overtones once shocked her. Calla voices what we feel Rachel would now be able to say - "'I'll survive.'" (p.198)

As the story ends, Rachel reveals how much she has changed when she says that she feels nothing any more. This may not be good, but it is restful. Gone is the frenetic mental dialogue. There is a sense of peace and calm after the hurricane. She can now accept whatever life brings. It may be better; it may not. Something, or nothing, may happen. She will be 'light and straight as any feather....' and 'will drift and settle, and drift and settle.' (p.201) This image of the feather appears earlier when Rachel first thinks she is pregnant and

is searching frantically for a solution. After an incident at the bus station, she catches a glimpse of herself - 'a thin stiff white feather, like a goose's feather, caught up and hurtled along by some wind no one else could feel.' (p.153) There the image suggests someone driven along unwillingly by an uncontrollable force. Now she is in control; she can let things happen. No more fighting against life - roll with the punches. She will be the same in many ways, but in the most important way of all she will be different. She will be able to take things less seriously, perhaps even laugh. In time. She has survived.

With her usual integrity Margaret Laurence does not condescend to her readers by giving them a happy-ever-after ending. We know, as do the author and Rachel, that the new life will in many ways be like the old. Rachel is realistic enough in her self-appraisal to admit she 'will quite frequently push the doors marked Pull and pull the ones marked Push.' (p.202) This single sentence with its multiple imagery of the individual who cannot get in or out, who cannot escape from or may not enter into life fully, sums up her dilemma. But she can learn to read the signs and make conscious decisions. During the learning process which she has undergone, she has come to recognise how much her view of what is right, proper and desirable is the result of conditioning - the acquisition of a Manawakan Scottish Presbyterian set of values with its emphasis on propriety. She has been subjected to the 'suffocating pressure of parents, society, religion'<sup>16</sup> to such an extent that she will never be totally free from this inheritance. Rachel knows she will be taking these built-in prejudices with her, just as she is taking her mother, who symbolises

them, to Vancouver. The difference is that Rachel is in charge. She has liberated herself enough to be able to come to terms with the legacy of her Manawaka past. Her survival will be based on self-knowledge, compassion for others and the willingness to take risks. Her final words are a request for mercy and grace, but first of all she opens her heart in pity for the terrible loneliness of God.

Margaret Atwood, Canada's current best-selling woman novelist, calls her guide to Canadian Literature Survival.<sup>17</sup> In it she suggests that the one distinguishing feature of Canadian fiction is that the characters are all engaged in a battle with life from which they emerge bloody but not bowed. They may not win, but they do survive. Rachel, we feel, will survive, as did Hagar, and as will Stacey and Morag. Is that what life is all about? Margaret Laurence suggests that it is. A Jest of God which begins in despair and near-madness, ends on a note of hope for the human condition, tinged though it may be by the acknowledgement that God's fools may not always get what they want. In The Diviners Morag asks Royland, the water diviner, how divining works. Perhaps his reply could sum up what must be our attitude to life. "'I don't reckon I really need to understand it. I just gotta do it.'" (The Diviners. p.26) So Rachel and Hagar and Morag just gotta do it.

## Footnotes: Chapter 3

1. Margaret Laurence, 'Gadgetry or Growing: Form and Voice in the Novel', Journal of Canadian Fiction, Vol. 27, (1980), pp. 54-62.
2. Kenneth James Hughes, 'Politics and A Jest of God', Journal of Canadian Fiction, Vol. 13, (1978), pp 40-54, p.41.
3. Judy Kearns, 'Rachel and Social Determinism', Journal of Canadian Fiction, Vol. 27, (1980), pp. 101-123, p.104.  
This is a very useful 'feminist reading' of the novel, dealing sensibly and without exaggeration with the 'difficulties encountered by a contemporary woman struggling against the forces which have moulded her,' and remarking on Margaret Laurence's success 'in presenting an affirmative glimpse of Rachel's ability to cope with her life in the future, and in providing, ultimately, an androgynous vision which goes beyond the sex roles.' (p.102).
4. Susie Orbach, Hunger Strike, (London, 1987), p.43.
5. Judy Kearns, p.101.
6. Judy Kearns, p.106.
7. Carolyn Heilbrun, Towards Androgyny, (London, 1973), p.50.
8. Judy Kearns, p.103.
9. Judy Kearns, p.115.
10. Robert Harlow, 'Lack of Distance', Review in Canadian Literature, Vol.36, (1967), pp. 71-72;74-75, p.74.
11. Clara Thomas, The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence, (Toronto, 1976), p.80.



12. C.M. McLay, 'Every Man is an Island', Canadian Literature, Vol 50, (1971), pp. 57-68, p.68.
13. C.M. McLay, p.57.
14. Kenneth Hughes, 'Politics and A Jest of God', p.44.
15. Warren Stevenson, 'The Myth of Demeter and Persephone in A Jest of God', Studies in Canadian Literature, Vol. ., (1976), pp. 120-123, pp. 122-123.
16. Donald Cameron, 'Of Tyranny and Growth', Journal of Commonwealth Literature, Vol. 5, (1968), pp. 133-135, p.133.
17. Margaret Atwood, Survival, (Toronto, 1972).

## Will the Real Stacey Please Stand Up!

The Fire-Dwellers is a bigger book than the previous three novels in the sense that it attempts more and takes more risks. Whether it succeeds is open to question. In some ways it tries to do too much. It is not as intensely claustrophobic as A Jest of God, but then it is projected on a wider screen. It is not as poignant as The Stone Angel, but then its heroine, Stacey MacAindra, is less than halfway along the journey Hagar Shipley has completed. Margaret Laurence wrote A Bird in the House as a means of coming to terms with the ghosts behind the locked doors of her own childhood. Some of the questions asked in this latter book are those raised in The Fire-Dwellers, but these only hang in the air and are not answered. In the book now being considered the questions are the novel: questions about marriage and the family, personal identity and commitment, integrity and compromise, self-destruction and survival in a world which seems bent on blowing itself to smithereens at any moment.<sup>1</sup>

Stacey, like her sister Rachel, and like Hagar and Vanessa, is the product of a Manawakan upbringing, so she bears the same scars as they, scars that have been inflicted by the early influence of a common puritanical environment which still values the pioneer and protestant ethic. As a young woman she escapes, as indeed the others do at some stage in their lives, but she has not been able to get completely away from this early indoctrination. She is always very much aware of what she ought to do, according to those standards, even though what she actually does is frequently quite different.

This discrepancy between what she feels she should aim for and what she finds is humanly possible for her to achieve creates tension in Stacey, and so in the novel. She experiences a feeling of guilt which in turn leads to a sense of inadequacy and failure. Add to this high moral tone typical of her girlhood the myths created for modern man, and especially woman, by the selling industry. In the consumer society everyone is supposed to be beautiful, slim, efficient, amusing, interesting and presumably happy. It is not surprising then that many lesser women, like Stacey, feel they are not coping. One of Margaret Laurence's greatest risks is her choice of such an ordinary and certainly not particularly accomplished woman as her main character. Nevertheless she 'decided to risk the perils of inconsequentiality in deference to that neglected, unappreciated household drudge conventionally known as Mom, who might just have something to say after all, and more surprising still, might possess sufficient eloquence to express it.'<sup>2</sup> Other critics have variously described her as 'a fat slovenly woman'<sup>3</sup> 'one of the most likeable losers in modern fiction'<sup>4</sup> 'flagrantly undisciplined and touchingly real'<sup>5</sup> 'fading, aging, tiring'<sup>6</sup> 'an ordinary woman whom Margaret Laurence has challenged us to recognise as individual and extraordinary'<sup>7</sup>. The word 'ordinary' is also used by Patricia Morley<sup>8</sup> and by Allan Bevan in his introduction to the New Canadian Library edition of the novel.<sup>9</sup> However, Stacey's ordinariness is deceptive, because her secret life, which the reader is privileged to share, proves she is an individual whose sheer vitality, honesty and sardonic humour make her into a very real and interesting person. Diana Loercher comments that the author does not pander to her

readers by telling them what to think of Stacey. Rather, by means of the literary devices she uses, she forces them to listen to Stacey's voice as she spills out her worries, her frustrations, her fears and her fantasies. Because she talks to herself a good deal she is painfully honest about what she sees as her shortcomings. In the first chapter of the book alone the reader is asked to believe that she is a fat slob, a rotten old bitch, a lunatic, badly educated, antedeluvian, a monster, an old swayback, a kid ruiner. In other words, 'She scrutinizes herself with a relentless, and often hilarious honesty.'<sup>10</sup> We of course know that all these epithets are only half true, and by the end of the story we have come to see how brave, honest, loving, responsible, clear-sighted and sensible she really is. She herself admits that 'what goes on inside isn't ever the same as what goes on outside.' (The Fire-Dwellers, p.33) The device by which the reader shares in the inner ruminations of the protagonist, yet is able to see things so dispassionately and realistically, because he is a different person, is one Margaret Laurence has used before in both The Stone Angel and A Jest of God. In the case of Hagar and Rachel we are able to observe and understand them better than they understand themselves. With the author's intensification of the technique in The Fire-Dwellers we are asked to be Stacey, and this places a greater responsibility on us - we must exchange sympathy for empathy, so detachment is more difficult. It is a highly successful method of ensuring the reader's involvement - such intimate knowledge of a character's thoughts and feelings, coupled with the freedom to make personal, individual judgments which may not coincide with the protagonist's, draw us on to the very end

to see whether we are right. Margaret Laurence does play fair with her readers. Her characters reveal themselves honestly, warts and all, and there are no spurious happy endings - just an indication that some progress has been made towards greater freedom, some self-knowledge has been gained, and that, except for Hagar, life does go on. Because the emphasis is on what Stacey is thinking, the author leaves out a good deal of the detail of what she actually does every day. This has led one reviewer, a male, to label her as lazy, someone who sits around all day drinking gin and reading magazines. 'One wanted to ask him who the hell he thought got the meals and washed the dishes in the MacAindra house.' is Mrs. Laurence's comment in an address at the University of Toronto in 1969.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Stacey is a doer; when something is wrong she does try to put it right. Indeed she is a very busy lady. This busyness is one of the features of her life against which she is rebelling because it leaves her so little time for herself.

Written in the sixties about the sixties, The Fire-Dwellers succeeds in encapsulating that decade of the twentieth century so well that a hundred years from now a reader should be able to say with certainty, "This is how it was then." The MacAindra house on Bluejay Crescent in Vancouver is a real house - 'this large square structure with its high-gabled grey shingled roof, its evergreen painted cedar-shake-covered walls and its only slightly sagging screened verandah' (p.31) and a lilac front door! At the back are 'the back yards, the white-flowering dogwood trees for climbing, the alleys where garbage tins teeter and lean, castaway cats scrounge, the garages empty in daytime and littered with planks and tins of

nails and stiffened paintbrushes...'(p.9) As the story progresses we visit every room in it while we watch the MacAindras working out their private destinies. Margaret Laurence is also very meticulous in her use of clothing as a clue to mood and character, so the references to what the women in the novel wear are not only numerous, they accurately reflect the period. Sheath dresses, jeans, T-shirts, plastic earrings in pure primary colours, shoulder length straight hair - they are all there. At a deeper level we are presented with an era of pot-smoking, free love, ad-mass, consumerism, media saturation, pop psychology, space travel, the Vietnam war with its napalm and its flame throwers, as well as peace marches against the ultimate weapon, the nuclear bomb. The holocaust is at hand; your children will burn, so 'Ladybird, Ladybird, fly away home.'

The author asks us to look at this confusing, frightening and demanding world through the eyes of Stacey MacAindra, who at thirty-nine finds it all too much. The horrors of the outside world enter her life through the Ever-Open Eye (television), on the radio, and in newspapers. Every sort of disaster to which the human race is prone is revealed in infinite permutations day after day, until she is in a constant state of panic. Her vivid imagination creates situations where her family is threatened by indescribable horrors and she is helpless to do anything to save them. In the ultimate nightmarish disaster she is required to nominate just one of her four children to save and she cannot conceive that she could choose. While Stacey is an individual housewife coping with the pressures of twentieth century society in the sixties, Margaret Laurence also wants us to see her as Everywoman, the ordinary woman, face to face

with forces over which she has no control, overwhelmed at times by the horrors and nastiness of a world gone mad, yet a world from which she cannot escape. The only way, says the author, is to recognise these malign outside forces, accept that they do exist, and then get on with living in that all-too imperfect world.

In Ibsen's play A Doll's House, written in 1879, when Nora Helmer announces that she is leaving her husband, Torvald, she explains that she must go because she is not just a wife and mother, but a human being who must find her own identity, not play the roles into which the implications behind those two words force her. Ninety years on, Stacey MacAindra née Cameron, modern housewife and mother, feels exactly the same, though she has not the courage to escape completely as Nora does. She feels that '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.' (p.95) Her creator sees Stacey as typical of a generation of women whose lives were patterned by what was the accepted norm when they were young. Women got married, had children and remained faithful to their husbands. Indeed, the Manawaka novels are full of references to the roles which society requires its women to play, and of the damage this can do to them in terms of loss of identity, freedom of choice and personal fulfilment. In this regard Margaret Laurence can be said to represent the feminist cause. Each of her women is the victim of the stereotyping which goes on in a male-oriented world, and each therefore suffers great injustice. Stacey's role as wife and mother seems to require her to constantly ensure that everything is always, always 'all right'. Mac needs to be reassured over and over again that she is all right, the children are

all right, that life itself is all right. These two words are a kind of shorthand for innumerable unexpressed feelings, sometimes of concern, sometimes of fear, sometimes of a desire to be free of trouble. They are used as a mantra against the dangers of the outside world. Stacey recognises what they can be... '(a) total lie. They are runic words, trinket charms to ward off the evil eye.' (p.292) As a woman, it is part of her job to provide a sense of stability and safety for her husband and family.

You don't want to know. You want everything to be all right. Is everything all right. Stacey? Yes, everything is all right. Okay, I get the message. If that's the way you want it that's the way it will be. From now on I live alone in a house full of people where everything is always all right. (p.169)

Yet, Stacey feels, no one seems to care whether she is all right. In fact, in a moment of real insight, she recognises a similar need for reassurance in Luke '... he wants me to say everything's all right. He, too.' (p.201) So, there is no comfort from him either. She is on her own. As Stacey approaches her fortieth birthday, she looks back on sixteen years of life which have not really belonged to her at all. She has no status. As a result she has lost her self-esteem. She constantly questions her success as a mother and longs for someone to assure her that she is doing a good job. Instead, in a serio-comic comment on the times we live in, the author shows Stacey's confidence being further undermined by the endless stream of pseudo-scientific articles which appear in women's magazines, all in their way guaranteed to make you feel a failure - 'Are You Castrating Your Son?' (p.15), 'Nine Ways the Modern Mum May Be Ruining Her Daughter.' (p.14), 'Are You Emasculating Your Husband?' (p.56), 'A Nervous Breakdown Taught Me Life's Meaning.' (p.165). It is all a matter of



keeping score. Spot the Supermum. Naturally, Supermum is slim, another of the obsessions associated with Stacey's generation. Constantly she promises herself to go on a diet to lose those ugly inches she has gained around the hips, those extra pounds which symbolise the loss of her youth and reinforce the low opinion she has of herself.

This loss of self-esteem stems not only from what she considers are her physical shortcomings, but also from the fact that she feels herself to be uneducated. She left school at seventeen, took a secretarial course in Winnipeg and migrated to Vancouver. This sense of inadequacy has led her over the years to take evening classes to improve her mind - Mythology and Modern Man, Aspects of Contemporary Thought, Man and His Gods, Varying Views of Urban Life - few of which she has finished and none of which seem very relevant to her situation. In the first chapter of the book Margaret Laurence uses an unread copy of The Golden Bough on the bedside table as a symbol of all this unproductive searching for knowledge; it is still there, still unread, at the end of the story.

Stacey also feels apologetic for the fact that she is a small-town girl. After twenty years in Vancouver she still does not feel at home there and only in the period of crisis when we first meet her does she venture into the seedier parts of the city down by the waterfront - a tiny step out of the groove in which she is caught. Her eagerness to leave Manawaka is a reflection of what happened to countless young people born and educated in small towns all over Canada. Life and living were elsewhere - Go West, Young Man,

Go West. Could it be that all cities are filled with displaced persons like her?

This sense of not belonging is also expressed by Morag in The Diviners, when she lives in Toronto with Brooke. Margaret Laurence's own attitude to cities is echoed here. She freely admits that she feels uncomfortable and out of place in urban surroundings, so it is not surprising that her characters tend to distrust such places as Toronto or Vancouver. Since it was upon cities that the first atom bomb attack took place, Stacey's imagination tends to lend substance to the ever-present threat of annihilation from nuclear attack by picturing what her city of Vancouver would look like after such an attack.

The buildings at the heart of the city are brash, flashing with colours, solid and self-confident. Stacey is reassured by them, until she looks again and sees them scarred, open to the impersonal winds, glass and steel broken like vulnerable live bones, shadows of people frog-splayed on the stone like in that other city. (p.11)

Perhaps this inability to feel at ease in the city is inherent in everyone who has spent his early years in a small town where the scale is smaller and the individual is more visible. It is especially interesting to note that both Stacey and Morag find Vancouver so enclosing when, in fact, the ever-visible mountains and the numerous inlets which bring the sea into the heart of the city take away many of the confining features of less beautiful cities.

In the novel, the author suggests that society tends to believe that what people wear, how they look, holds the key to what they are. She herself uses what her protagonists wear as a pointer to their characters. But she also goes to great lengths here to show us that

outward appearance is not necessarily a good guide to the inner man. The prime example of the truth that all is not what it seems lies with Thor Thorlakson whose immaculate suits, silver mane of hair and sculptured features hide just plain runny-nosed Vernon Winkler from Manawaka. Stacey is vehement that what people see of her is not the real Stacey - she is 'a mermaid, a whore, a tigress' (p.12). To all her friends she appears efficient, practical and competent. Inside, she feels inadequate, confused and dishonest, so to bolster up her ego, to help her to cope, to silence the inner voice, she pours herself yet another gin and tonic. Early in the novel she says she would like to be 'slim, calm, good-tempered, efficient, sexy and wise...Also beautiful. Beautiful and intelligent' (p.45). A tall order! She has a deep longing to give and receive love. She dare not be too demonstrative with the boys, lest Mac think she is spoiling them. Two-year old Jen is still baby enough to cuddle and draw warmth from. But this is not enough. Only in the sex act can she satisfy the deep needs of the very sensual woman she is. Mac works so hard he is often too tired to make love to her when he comes home, so she feels empty and unfulfilled. Her longing for sex becomes so strong it almost results in disaster with Mac's friend, Buckle Fennick. She is filled with self-loathing at the feelings which drive her, as though she were a freak or a whore. 'Sometimes I think I'd like to hold an entire army between my legs.' (p.19) By thus explicitly spelling out Stacey's deep need for sex, which is carefully not confused with what is commonly called love, then showing how guilty this physical longing makes Stacey feel, the author points to an attitude which has been inherited from a background where a stern code of Victorian

morality declared that sex was wicked and women in particular must not desire, much less enjoy it. No wonder Stacey often sees herself as little better than a prostitute and hastens to insist, 'I'm not like that.' (p.206) Moss puts this into words when he says 'Laurence's protagonists share with most of us on a narrower scale the conflict between roles imposed by gender and what we sense is our essential self somewhere deep within us, surging randomly to the surface.'<sup>12</sup> Apart from the need for sexual release, she longs more than anything else to feel wanted. Her relationship with Mac has deteriorated so much that sex between them has become perfunctory and unsatisfying. It is no longer a joyful sharing of one with the other. Sometimes what is expressed is more like hate than love. In the brief encounter with Luke Venturi she convinces herself that when they made love he wanted her - in spite of what she imagines herself to be. The very fact of being wanted and treated as a person in her own right is the beginning of her rehabilitation, as it were. 'I look better to myself now than I did a week ago'. (p.221) In keeping with her nature, Stacey is much more clear-sighted about her affair with Luke than Rachel can possibly be over her involvement with Nick. The former recognises that in a very real way she is playing out one of her own sexual fantasies, and in her heart of hearts she knows that she will always fly back to her children. Separation brings pain but it is not unbearable, and the guilt is minimal, just one more thing to add to an already long list of things about which she feels guilty. To be restored to personhood is worth it. She still rages internally at herself and her life, and longs to be able to get away, to have some time to herself when she does not feel the need to be back home where

people are depending on her to make sure everything is always 'all right'. 'If only I could get away, by myself, for about three weeks.' (p.44), 'I would like to live on a desert island.' (p.171) In the future she will probably continue to long to be her own person; at present she feels her family 'nourish me, yet they devour me too.' (p.17) She may often wonder 'Is this all there's ever going to be, just like this? Until I die.' (p.129) And, doubtless she will continue to carry on long internal conversations with God, to whom she directs much of her soul-searching, and of whom she is constantly asking unanswerable questions. In fact, she is not terribly sure that He even exists, 'God knows why I chat to you, God - it's not that I believe in you. Or I do and I don't, like echoes in my head.' (p.66) Still, the conversations go on for reasons even she cannot explain. She would like to believe there is someone listening and mourns her disbelief. Again, a habit acquired in childhood dies hard, even in the pagan world in which she lives. Beckett would say that we as humans retain the old rituals long after we have ceased to believe in them. Nevertheless, by the final page she is able to say 'Never mind. Give me another forty years, Lord, and I may mutate into a matriarch.' (p.308)

It is now clear to her that she is no longer the Stacey Cameron she keeps conjuring up in memory. Philip Larkin, in his poem 'Maiden Name' says:

Marrying left your maiden name disused.  
 .....  
 How beautiful you were, and near, and young,  
 So vivid, you might still be there among <sup>13</sup>  
 Those first few days, unfingermarked again.

Stacey MacAindra cannot be the same as Stacey Cameron because there

has been too much living in between. Yet she longs to be young once more, in a moment of forgetfulness calls herself Stacey Cameron and at one point ruefully exclaims, 'Everything will be just fine when I'm eighteen again.' (p.175)

Although Stacey is the main character in The Fire-Dwellers Margaret Laurence has gone to great pains to create a number of other real people too. The MacAindra children are all individuals in their own right, each one possessed of qualities which make him or her unique. Colour of hair and eyes, shape of head, height, age, personality - nothing is forgotten. Each one is also a source of individual worry to Stacey. She fears for Katie as, on the verge of womanhood, she goes out into the world where so many traps are set for the young. Yet from her own experience at that age she knows that nothing she says will be of any help. Ian is secretive and unable to express his feelings which, like his father, he hides behind a stern mask of self-control. Slow, dreamy Duncan longs for acceptance by both his older brother and his father. She also feels unable to help her male children. Jen, at two years of age, still does not talk and Stacey is torn between the fear that her daughter is mute and the greater fear that she is being a fussy mother. Most carefully drawn, yet least accessible is tall, lean Clifford, Mac to his friends, husband of Stacey, father of Katie, Ian, Duncan and Jen, son of Matthew, friend of Buckle. As a character he is not as fully realised as Stacey, but since the reader can only see him through her eyes, this is right. No two individuals can know one another fully. In the wedding photo we see at the beginning of the novel, he looks out on the world 'hopeful, confident, lean.' (p.4) Stacey remembers him as

'a guy who was confident and... outgoing and full of laughs and free from doubts, fond of watching football and telling low jokes and knowing just where he was going, yessir....'. (p.170) Now, at forty-three he looks much the same except for the webbed lines around his eyes and on his forehead. But he seems to have gone 'underground' (p.22) and to have lost his sense of humour. Now he is tense, over-serious, touchy. Whereas Stacey drinks too much, he smokes too much. Because he did not finish University, he has no qualifications and has had to make his living as a travelling salesman, a soul-destroying job which finds him plodding home each week-end dog-weary after a week on the road, too tired to even talk, and only longing to be left alone. He has a deep sense of failure that he has not done 'something that meant something' (p.256), a fact Stacey only learns when it comes out on one of the rare occasions when they are able to open up to one another. She had accepted that he 'didn't know what he was getting himself into, just as I didn't' (p.23) when they married, but was unaware of how deeply he felt his responsibilities and how heavy they weighed upon him. Because he is a man of integrity, his wife is surprised when he takes on the job with the Richalife promotion which she regards as a charade and a confidence trick. She is even more surprised that he appears to believe in what he is asked to do. In some fundamental way she is unable to fathom what he thinks and feels, partly because they do not talk to one another on any but the most superficial level. Because the novel is Stacey's story, we hear her inner dialogue, but somehow we suspect that there is a similar, complementary dialogue taking place in Mac's head.



One of the dominant themes in this book is marriage. Above the MacAindra bed a wedding photograph shows 'Stacey twenty-three, almost beautiful, although not knowing it then, and Mac twenty-seven, hopeful, confident, lean, Agamemnon, king of men or the equivalent at least to her.' (p.4) Such an icon could be found in countless other homes throughout the Western world. In Stacey's case it hangs above the place which is the focal point of her marriage. Moreover it represents the death of a dream - her king is just a man like any other after all. The bedroom is often the place where a couple can discuss things privately; it is also the place where they can reaffirm their feelings for one another through sex. Sixteen years on, as far as Mac and Stacey are concerned none of this happens. To Stacey's constant pleas, "Tell me about it." "Talk to me." Mac's usual reply is, "Christ, am I ever beat." What conversation they have is usually brief, and trivial. "You okay, Stacey?" "Yes, I'm okay." "Good night." Their lovemaking has become routine and perfunctory; in Stacey's case, unsatisfying. In some cases it even becomes 'making hate' (p.163) The photograph has become a bitter reminder of the physical beauty and high hopes they have lost somewhere along the way. Stacey mourns this loss, and somehow feels responsible, so she is constantly apologising. 'Sorry' becomes a ritual word, used over and over again, in the hope of making everything 'all right'.

But theirs is not the only marriage we see. In the previous novels the supporting cast are left as shadowy figures, sketchily developed. The reader's attention was meant to home in on the central character. In The Fire-Dwellers the story ranges wider to include



more people, each of whom is given a greater significance. Tess and Jake Vogler from next door would appear to be happy. But their marriage runs into disaster when Tess tries to commit suicide and is confined to a mental home. Little Julian Garvey, courteous and pleasant to everyone else, bullies and carps all day long at his large, earth-mother wife, Bertha. Stacey's parents, as she remembers them, were locked until death did them part, living in separate compartments, he down among the dead men with his whisky bottle, she upstairs with her tranquillisers and sleeping pills. Mac's mother and father shared nothing except the daily tasks of serving the spiritual needs of Matthew's congregation. Buckle Fennick's marriage to Julie, a girl from Manawaka, ends in divorce after four years.

Margaret Laurence makes it clear that the real difficulty lies in one person's inability to communicate at any significant level with any other. In each case the one party to the union has quite a different conception of the other's needs. Jake Vogler, absorbed in his own sense of inadequacy over his personal appearance, has no inkling of his beautiful wife's wistful sense of intellectual inferiority or of her deep longing for children. What he thinks she wants is totally at odds with what she most desires. Yet he loves her. Stacey is perceptive enough to recognise the situation as it is. When she is talking about the MacAindra house, she says, 'Mac hates it more every year because it's dowdy and reflects on him, or so he thinks. Or so I think he thinks.' (p.31) It is a fruitless exercise in understanding. She thinks he thinks, therefore.... He thinks she thinks, therefore... and they are both wrong.

Stacey is depicted by the author as someone who desperately needs to talk to someone else out loud. She needs verbal communication more than Mac who is naturally more reticent and inward-turned. In this way they are incompatible, but it has to be remembered that people like Mac who make their living by selling want not to have to talk when they get home, while Stacey who is home alone all day with a child who does not wish to speak long for adult conversation. Of course it goes deeper than that. Stacey feels that her inability to get Mac to tell her what is going on in his head is another sign of failure on her part. She takes her husband's need for what is today called space to indicate that he no longer cares for her, and she mourns the fact that they no longer seem to share their private lives. She also has the naïve belief that people should be able to tell each other the truth. At the same time she recognises that she herself does not do so, and that the way people deal with one another seems to have little to do with the truth as she sees it. The world appears to her to be run on lies, yet she wonders how it could be otherwise. Perhaps the pain would be too much for them all to bear. She likes honesty but finds that honesty cannot always be the best policy. By the end of the novel, she has accepted that complete communication is neither possible nor even totally desirable.

Only to Luke can Stacey speak easily about how she thinks and feels. Why is this? Is it really true? Luke appears to be less complicated, less inhibited by the social conventions, one of the new generation who do not accept all that nonsense about commitment, responsibility, duty, stability. He has no ties; he wants none.

Stacey believes he understands because he listens and laughs at her worries, but is he perhaps laughing at the fact that she worries? Stacey has apparently not learned that it can be easier to talk to a stranger about the things that matter most. Still, the author does allow us hope, symbolised in Jen who decides to speak at last, and her first words are an invitation to a social act, "'Hi, Mum, want tea?'" (p.299) In time Stacey and Mac will learn to let the one see into the other's soul, occasionally, if not always. Buckle's death and Duncan's near-drowning bring some of their secrets into the open, and at the end of the novel at least they understand more about one another. Mac being Mac will retreat underground again. Stacey being Stacey will long again from time to time for reassurance that she is worthy. But they will rub along. They will survive - together. Marriage is a trap which they both accept. Whether that is what it should be is another story. In the final pages the author re-creates for us the scene with which she began, but it is night now, not morning. The wedding picture is still above the bed. What takes place there that night, between husband and wife, is an act of consolation 'for everything that neither of them can help nor alter' (p.367). But Margaret Laurence has already spelled out for us what the new generation think of marriage. Katie says, "It's for the birds!"

Writing about marriage leads naturally into a treatment of family relationships and the inability of the different generations to really know one another.<sup>14</sup> Throughout the novel, real understanding only comes in fits and starts, often resulting from some remark allowed to escape in times of crisis. From day to day each of the

characters inhabits his private world, his 'cave' as Stacey calls it, looking out from different vantage points upon the events they share. By stealth really, the author allows us to catch glimpses of what is going on in the minds of others. Duncan's 'I never do anything right' (p.119), Ian's 'Can't you leave me alone? Can't you just leave me alone?' (p.215), Katie's 'Just don't ever bawl me out again, eh?' (p.182) are all remarks which have escaped in an unguarded moment from the world where there be dragons.

Stacey makes the mistake of believing that she is a bad mother because she does not know what is going on in her children's minds, but as the novel progresses and she recalls her relationship with her own mother, she comes to accept that that is how it is - nobody knows everything about anybody; we instinctively know more about those we love than we think we do; we understand more when we try to stand in the other person's shoes. In her final summing up of her duty to Katie she recognises 'that there isn't much use, at this point, in telling her anything. She's on her own, so help her. So help her.' (p.302) In a conversation with Donald Cameron, Mrs Laurence says:

I feel that human beings ought to be able, ought to be able to communicate and touch each other far more than they do, and this human loneliness and isolation, which obviously occurs everywhere, seems to me part of man's tragedy. I'm sure one of the main themes in all my writings is this sense of man's isolation from his fellows and how almost unbearably tragic this is.

Margaret Laurence does not merely draw our attention to the undercurrents flowing in the young MacAindra family. She reminds us that here is a universal human predicament which each generation faces anew. Matthew, Mac's father, comes too late to recognise that

he has been unfair to his son. Stacey's parents, Niall Cameron and his wife, were so busy with their private dance of death that they did not see its effect upon their daughters. Studies of The Family have become of intense interest to present day sociologists and psychologists. What holds families together when the interrelationships can be so destructive? The author has Stacey wonder why Buckle's mother, a prostitute, allowed him to be born and why he in turn cares for the disgusting caricature of a woman she has become. Why does Stacey take in Matthew when his failing sight makes it impossible for him to live alone, although she knows that his presence will irritate her to the point of - yet another gin and tonic? Perhaps blood is thicker than water, and duty is still a word with some meaning.

In The Fire-Dwellers the author says a great deal about the complicated relationships between father and son, mother and daughter. Although Mac and Stacey live in the sixties, they have inherited the traditional attitudes towards male and female roles. Mac believes that the man's role is that of provider, that the male must be strong and that a wife belongs to her husband alone. 'I won't have anybody else touching you, see.' (p.162) he grinds out when he believes Stacey has been unfaithful. The fact that he is unfaithful is quite another matter! He is constantly reproaching his wife for what he considers her coddling or spoiling of Ian and Duncan. He is terrified that they will not grow up to be manly - in every sense of the word. He fears their 'insufficient masculinity' (p.26) or that he might have 'a pansy for a son.'(p.27) At one point he lashes out at

Duncan with the words, 'Okay - you're going to get hurt; you're going to get bashed around; that's life. But for heaven's sake, try to show a little guts.' (p.118) Open displays of affection are unmanly, so he tries to hide the tears he sheds over his friend Buckle's death. He sacrifices his integrity to do a job he doesn't believe in because he must provide for his family. Stacey, on the other hand, recognises in herself an ambivalent attitude to her beautiful daughter, Katie. She envies her her youth, her beauty, her vitality, her freedom, because they all remind her of Stacey Cameron at the same age. Twenty-five years on she longs to be in her 'teens again and to dance, because to her to dance is to be really alive. 'Dance hope, girl, dance hope'. (p.135) One of the most telling scenes in the book is the one where Stacey, wearing tight green trousers, purple blouse, gold high-heeled sandals, and full of gin and tonic, spends an entranced afternoon in the basement room dancing with abandon to her old 78's. Even more telling is the sequel - a brief scene in the evening of that same day when she stands unseen, watching her fourteen-year-old daughter dancing alone in that same room to her records. Stacey must accept the fact that from then on she may have to be satisfied with 'dancing in her head.'

Margaret Laurence has chosen to use an extremely complicated technique in structuring the novel. Clara Thomas calls it a 'Fast-shuttering, multiscreen camera and soundtrack technique.'<sup>16</sup> There are five different layers to the story and as a consequence the reader is required to behave rather like a juggler to keep all the balls in the air at once. But after a few pages, there is no

difficulty. Day to day events are written in the present tense to distinguish them from the inner dialogue which is going on in Stacey's head and which may at any moment intrude upon what is happening around her. Her conversations with herself sometimes comment on what is happening, more often reveal her constant search for any relevance in her life. These musings can be either in the past or the present tense, and they swing wildly from mood to mood. In them we find the key to knowing the real Stacey. Her voice rings through the novel and there is a different sound for each of her many faces, public and private. At intervals we are given flashbacks of events from Stacey's past. These are always sparked off by some event or idea which presents itself in either of the other layers. Many of them go back in time to before she was married, when she was Stacey Cameron, young, happy and alive. This reflects one facet of her problem; she cannot accept that she is no longer that young girl. The flashbacks are set back from the margin rather like long quotations and are easily recognisable. At less frequent intervals there are italicised passages which represent Stacey's fantasies - daydream or nightmare. Finally there are the passages of Pinteresque conversation which are set out like a script with never a "he said" or "she said" in sight. The breakfast scene at the beginning of Chapter Four where Stacey is getting everyone off to work or school is so lifelike in its depicting of total chaos that it is only when the door slams that you realise that the whole effect has been created by conversation alone, with the inevitable radio blaring in the background. It is wonderfully ordinary. All are realistically interwoven and

interactive as we would find it in life.<sup>17</sup>

Such a complicated structure demands a similar complexity of vocabulary and here the author really comes into her own. She has a wonderful ear for the nuances of everyday speech. The vocabulary used in conversation is contemporary and varies in idiom to suit each individual speaker. When Stacey is talking to her family she falls easily into the slangy language of her children. Conversations with outsiders like Tess tend to be cliché-ridden and repetitive. Only with Luke does she seem to carry on any sort of intelligent conversation. But her inner voice has more variety and depth - sometimes blasphemous, sometimes very articulate, frequently sardonic, always incisive. In the passages of fantasy the language is more literary, filled with the descriptive passages the author loves so well. Eccentricities of punctuation are also used to create certain effects. Sentences in conversations are frequently left unfinished and un-stopped to imitate the way people tend to cut in before statements are finished, or leave their comments hanging in mid-air. In the internal conversations at times of greatest stress, punctuation disappears entirely. Throughout the novel every now and then we happen upon the usual passages of apt description heavy with imagery which are one of the author's trademarks. When Stacey is walking beside the harbour,

the gulls are spinning high, freewheeling. Wings like white arcs of light crescenting above the waterfront. Voices mocking piratically at the city's edges...(p.9)

Morning, and the sky is like the water-colour blue from a paintbox. Warm-cool, the air smells of grass and last night's rain. On Bluejay Crescent the laburnum branches bend a little



with the yellow wind-swaying burden of blossoms, and the leaves of the big chestnuts are green outspread tree-hands. Kids under school age are out already, whizzing up and down the sidewalks with wagons and tricycles. In the distance the mountains form the city's walls and boundaries, some of them snow mountains even now, as though this place belonged to two worlds, two simultaneous seasons. (pp. 71-72)

The woman is gigantic, outspread like rising dough gone amok, swelling and undulating over the stiff upholstery of the chair, gaping body covered with tiny-flower-printed dress huge and shroud-shaped, vastly numerous chins trembling eel-like separate but involved, eyes closed, and at the end of the Kodiak arms, contrasting hands neatly made, fine-fingered, encrusted with silver-and-gold-colored rings which might almost have been costly, from the way the hands flairfully wear them. (p.157)

The progress of the story from chapter to chapter is uneven, reflecting Stacey's inner turmoil. On the surface life is structured by the continuum of looking after the family. Days pass anonymously, a clever device to suggest the sameness of it all. Neither Stacey nor the reader really knows what day of the week it is - except for Sunday when Mac is home all day. More than one quarter of the book, in two chapters, deals with the two steps Stacey takes to find love - first unsuccessfully with Buckle, then for a time with Luke. After this the chapters get shorter as her rebellion against her lot grows less and her acceptance of life as it is increases. She reaches a state of equilibrium. She does not accept her lot joyfully, but she does accept it. She allows some of her dreams to die. With her typical sardonic humour she looks forward to a future where she is determined to cope. Will there be a tomorrow? Yes, but take it one day at a time.

Not only has Margaret Laurence used a different structural technique in this novel, she has also leavened it with much more

humour. There are few laughs in either The Stone Angel or A Jest of God. In A Bird in the House Aunt Edna Connor's wisecracks are her defence in her situation, but the tone of the novel is serious at heart. In The Fire-Dwellers the author gives Edna's wit to Stacey. What saves the latter's sanity in the end is her ability to see the ridiculous in things. At moments when she is at her lowest ebb, she is often able to bring herself back on course by some wisecrack directed at herself or the world or God. Her wit is sardonic rather than comic, and she is quick to see the irony in events. Tess Vogler tells her, 'I wish I had your way of laughing at everything, Stacey.' (p.97) We know that Stacey feels you have to laugh or you would cry.

No story of Margaret Laurence's is free from irony, and there is no one more aware of life's little ironies than Stacey. But, the biggest irony of all is one of which she is totally unaware. In fact, unless the reader is a devotee of the Laurence novels and has read A Jest of God that irony will go unobserved. Here is a kind of joke to be shared by the cognoscenti. It is the device used by Anthony Powell in his series of novels Dance to the Music of Time, where the same event appears in more than one novel and assumes a different significance depending on who is relating it. In A Jest of God we see Rachel and her mother reading a letter from Stacey at breakfast. They infer that she is rather an overprotective mother. It is written in her usual breezy, elliptical style and as usual, they conclude that all is well. After all, the Stacey they know is so very competent and confident. In The Fire-Dwellers the reader is shown Stacey writing the letter to her mother and it is the same, word for word, as the

one Mrs Cameron reads to Rachel, but - there is another letter, written only in Stacey's head, the one she would like to send but dare not, because she thinks her mother would neither understand nor be able to help. In it she agonizes 'I don't know what to do. I worry. I get afraid. I drink too much. I get unreasonably angry...'. (p.149) To compound the irony the reader of the two books knows that at the very time when Stacey is having her encounter with Luke Venturi Rachel is discovering love/sex with Nick Kazlik. In a way the two men resemble one another in that they are both of immigrant non-WASP families and neither wants to become too committed. The time span in the two novels is almost identical - June through summer to September. The final twist comes when Stacey receives Rachel's letter informing the MacAindras of the Cameron's intention to move to Vancouver. Mac's reaction is, 'Holy Jesus, that's all we needed.' (p.308) They have already had to give Mac's father a home. When will his responsibilities end? Neither he nor Stacey know why they are coming, while we know Rachel is on the same journey towards self-fulfilment as her sister. A subsidiary irony lies in Rachel's belief that her sister has everything that could make one happy.

Any treatment of this novel would be incomplete without some comment on Margaret Laurence's statement about the society of the sixties. It is central to the book, and although the core of the novel is Stacey's dilemma, the society in which she lives has created it. There are pitfalls for the novelist who wishes to highlight social evils and Margaret Laurence has fallen into one or two. Certain scenes are made part of the story though they add very little

to the development of the central theme. It is noticeable that nothing of the sort has crept into the previous novels, but this may well be because the setting in them was a small town. In The Fire-Dwellers we have moved to the Big City, a mercantile centre where invisible waves of sound and picture move through the air and enter every home. The choice of Vancouver as the background for the squalid commercialism the author describes is most apt - this debasing of human values takes place in one of the most beautiful cities you could imagine, a city which in turn stands as a monument to progress in the midst of the most breathtakingly spectacular landscape.

What kind of society does the author describe? First of all, it is one which is bombarded with information. Some of this is trivial, much of it seems to be of disasters. The crucial point about this surfeit of news is that it invades the privacy of the home through the radio and through what Stacey refers to as the Ever Open eye. It is difficult to escape. Moreover, for Stacey who is at home all week alone, especially in <sup>b</sup> the evenings, the media provide company while helping to pass the lonely hours.

The nature of what she sees and hears so horrifies her that she has developed a morbid fear of some kind of disaster striking her family. She sees death and destruction before her in her own home and she is afraid. It begins to appear as though she lives in a world conceived by Hieronymus Bosch. In part this is why, whenever she leaves home, she has a compulsion to get back. She wants to feel safe within its four walls, yet she is sure some day even that will not be

possible. She watches the disasters on television and knows that a film crew must be taking the pictures, almost as if it were a movie. She is terrified that one day she will open the door and find them filming in her street. In her subconscious she fears the Big Bang. In real life she sees one of Ian's school friends knocked down and killed by a car and Duncan nearly drowns on an outing to the beach. Death is never far away.

However troubling Stacey's problems and frustrations are to her, they gain a peculiarly ironic resonance when they are set against the insistent gloom of the global situation... In contrast to such appalling conditions all over the world, Stacey's problems are minuscule, her own family more precious... This knowledge also has the... effect of fostering the feeling that nothing is 'all right'. Her sensitivity to the dire global situation simply intensifies her feelings of confusion and powerlessness. 18

The author chooses fire as the greatest danger threatening Stacey's world partly because it is the element most awesome and horrible to man, partly because it provides a parallel to her fiery nature. Fire can consume and destroy; it can also cleanse and purify. The novel's central theme is encapsulated in the words of the nursery rhyme 'Ladybird, Ladybird, fly away home, Your house is on fire, your children will burn.' These words form the novel's epigraph; they also insist on rising to the surface of Stacey's mind, in times of crisis, to express her compulsive need to return to Bluejay Crescent to make sure that everything is 'all right' with her fire-dwellers. Her obsessive fear of the fire, the holocaust, is counterbalanced by her love of the water, of the ocean. Of course, water is the element least compatible with fire. In times of trouble she is drawn to the sea. It is there that she meets Luke, who calls her Merwoman. He too

Loves the sea. She seeks and finds release by the waterside, but then must return to the city she imagines is threatened by fire because that is where her responsibility lies. Then even the sea lets her down, because it almost takes from her her son, Duncan. Still even this act of betrayal has a beneficial result because she and Mac are able, for a time at least, to approach one another in love, which still does burn in them both, if only fitfully and often damped down. Stacey wonders, 'Will the fires go on, inside and out? Until the moment when they go out for me, the end of the world.' (p.307)

The other twentieth century phenomenon which the author attacks is the world of selling and advertising. The weapon she uses is ridicule or parody, inviting the reader to laugh with her at the devices manufacturers use to sell their products. She suggests that beneath the surface it is all a huge confidence trick played on innocent, gullible people. The Polyglam Party held at Tess Vogler's pokes splendid fun at the method adopted by some firms for selling in the home. Women readers will recognise it as a parody of the Tupperware Parties which were so popular in the sixties. We are asked to look at the proceedings through Stacey's eyes, a bonus because she sees the whole evening as a kind of sad farce. The author cannot resist giving us a typical Laurencian description of the Polyglam lady -

The plastic lady is petite and emaciated, high frothed-up hair metallic blonde, high thin teetery heels supporting bird-bone ankles, face gay-gay-gay with its haggardness fairly well masked by tan makeup and the scarlet gash of a lipstick smile. Her sleeveless silver dress shimmers like the scanty robe of some oracle, and on the right breast it bears the iridescent ice-blue letters 'Polyglam'. (pp.83-84)

Moreover, if we read the passage carefully we see that the author is describing a woman desperate to sell because her living depends on it, and prepared to go to any ridiculous lengths to do so. Indeed, does Mac not find himself in the same situation? Another invidious feature of this kind of selling is that people feel obliged to buy things whether they want them or need them. No one goes home empty-handed from the Polyglam Party. Early in his career Mac had given up his job selling encyclopedias because he suddenly realised he was talking people into buying books they could not afford for reasons which they did not fully understand. But at forty-three he can no longer afford such scruples.

The marketing of beauty products and the social pressure to "look good" are also attacked, again through the medium of laughter. The beauty parlour where Stacey goes for her hair-dos is described as a kind of shrine to beauty with the hairdressers in their priestess gowns performing their magic on the customers. Not even the Avon lady escapes Margaret Laurence's barbs, though in this case she is called the Hatshepsut Lady. Just try to say that when you have had two gins and tonic! The author is very naughty in her choice of name for this range of beauty products, yet another line of 'non magic jars and lipsticks' (p.4) like the ones already sitting on Stacey's dressing table. Hatshepsut was an Egyptian queen who was so hated that when she died her name was erased from every surface. Ergo, did she ever exist? Tess Vogler has bought the complete range of these beauty products, again in her own home.

- it's only sold door-to-door. This awfully nice woman came

around and I asked her in more out of politeness than anything you know and then we got talking and well I mean I don't usually buy cosmetics door-to-door but this sounded so interesting. They're all natural products. (p.185)

Tess does not need anything to improve her already flawless complexion, but she has bought them, partly because she lacks confidence, partly because her life is empty and she is lonely.

However, all these other sales gimmicks pale into insignificance before the Richalife promotion with which Mac becomes involved. Margaret Laurence spares us none of the details of this glossy, expensive, tasteful example of the soft sell. The product is simply a course of vitamin pills but a mystique, accompanied by an aura of scientific validity, is created round them by means of personal evaluation quizzes, by elaborate charts to tailor the course of pills to the individual, even by graphs to record the progress towards all those physical and mental benefits the pills are said to bestow. Best of all, they come in pretty colours, a different one for each day of the week, rather like medicinal Smarties. The culmination of the sales promotion is the Rally which Stacey attends without Mac's knowledge. Through her amazed eyes we see a carefully orchestrated production which bears all the earmarks of a revivalist meeting without the hysteria, or of a twentieth century version of the rites in the Temple of Vesta. Vestal virgins sing hymns about the benefits of Richalife and Thor Thorlakson, the Billy Graham of the patent medicine world, delivers a speech reeking with sincerity to tell a rapt audience about his life BR (Before Richalife) and AR (After Richalife). Thor himself is so beautifully packaged he seems almost



inhuman, the android of advertising.

In a society where few people hold strong religious beliefs the vacuum is filled by such public relations exercises as Richalife which offers a New Way of Life, an improvement in the quality of living, and a chance for lonely people to belong to a group. Richalife, promising rejuvenation through vitamin pills, is a secular parody of the religious vision of the Promised Land: 'Both Spirit and Flesh altered!' (p.34) The Revival Meeting is now the Richalife Rally but it offers many of the same things. There is the togetherness of the search for that better life, the verbalising of longings in song, the testimonial of success from someone worthy of admiration, the leader who is apparently all the things one could wish oneself to be. Through Stacey we see a world full of lonely, unmotivated people looking for something to give purpose and hope to their lives. In this way the author comments on a world adrift upon a sea of disbelief and disaffection.<sup>19</sup>

Why does Margaret Laurence take such a risk in devoting so much of her novel to the world of selling, for risk it is? She leaves herself open to the accusation that the book is simply a novelistic report from a member of the Advertising Standards Authority. Obviously she does want to castigate what she considers the dubious ethics of the image-makers. However, we must realise that Stacey's inner tensions arise in part from the fact that she is a product herself, her aspirations stemming from a society that is dedicated to consuming. But the author's main reason for introducing the Richalife promotion is surely to create tension within the novel. In the first

instance, the fact that Stacey feels uneasy about the campaign, finding it all rather laughable and irrelevant, increases the strain between Mac and her. It seems to her that he has become deeply committed to a job which is unworthy. Yet again, Stacey's vague sense of recognition when she meets Thor Thorlakson, 'bat-winged 'Mephistopheles,' (p.44) introduces a whisper of doubt into the reader's mind. Is he all he seems? Moreover, tension develops between Mac and Thor for reasons which we do not immediately understand. Thor would appear to be subtly but deliberately trying to undermine Mac's position with the firm, forcing the latter to work doubly hard, so increasing his alienation from Stacey more. Finally, there is tension in Mac himself because, although he does not really believe in many of the Richalife techniques for selling the product, he feels that in this new job lies his last chance to provide well for his family. In the past he has kept his integrity and managed a reasonable standard of living. By joining the Richalife team he has taken a step towards giving them a richer life financially. For this he is prepared to sacrifice some of his principles and compromise. He salves his conscience with the thought that at least the pills do no one any harm. In fact, when Julian Garvey comes to ask for a course of Richalife products, Mac sends him home emptyhanded, so his old scruples are still there. Of course, the author cannot resist introducing the final ironic twist. Thor is recalled to Head Office, and Mac is given his post, on the very day when he had decided to resign from the team. Thus he will be able to get rid of some of the more pointless features of the sales initiative. The ultimate irony

is that by this time we, like Stacey, know who Thor really is and why he has victimised Mac.

Does the book have a happy ending? Of course not. Life is not like that, says Margaret Laurence. We accept this but still want reassurance that all will be well, or that the MacAindras are all right, at least for now, so Stacey's final words are soothing. 'Temporarily, they are all more or less okay.' (p.308) Everyone can relax; give a sigh of relief. Another crisis has been successfully weathered. Let us enjoy it before the next one arises. Watch out for next week's thrilling instalment!

The characters make the important discovery that they can cope after all, that they will survive, and they get on with living. This in itself is comforting. However, they have no illusions about happiness being an assured element of the human condition. In The Fire-Dwellers Stacey accepts that life will go on very much the same, but she has discovered that she has inner resources to call on when the crises come.

A few more years of this life, God, and if I'm not demented, I'll have a hide like a rhinoceros. Odd - Mac has to pretend he's absolutely strong, and now I see he doesn't believe a word of it. Yet he's a whole lot stronger than he thinks he is. Maybe they all are. Maybe even Duncan is. Maybe even I am. (p.285)

## Footnotes: Chapter 4

1. F.W. Watt, 'Review of The Fire-Dwellers', The Canadian Forum, (1969), p.87.
2. Diana Loercher, 'Her Price for Coping', The Christian Science Monitor, (1969), p.203.
3. Peter Sypnovich, 'A True Middle-Class Heroine', The Toronto Daily Star, April 29, 1969, p.28.
4. Phyllis Grosskurth, 'Wise and Gentle', Canadian Literature, 43, (1970), p.91.
5. Miriam Packer, 'The Dance of Life: The Fire-Dwellers', Journal of Canadian Fiction, 27, (1980), pp. 124-131, p.125.
6. John Moss, A Reader's Guide to the Canadian Novel, (Toronto, 1981), p.160.
7. Clara Thomas, The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence, (Toronto, 1976), p.115.
8. Patricia Morley, Margaret Laurence, (Boston, 1981).
9. Allen Bevan, The Fire-Dwellers, Introduction to the New Canadian Library Edition, (Toronto, 1973), xiii.
10. Diana Loercher, 'Her Price for Coping', p.203.
11. Margaret Laurence, 'Gadgetry or Growing', Text of a speech delivered at University of Toronto, 1969, reprinted Journal of Canadian Fiction, (1980), pp. 54-62, p.60.
12. John Moss, Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel, (Toronto, 1977), p.75.
13. Philip Larkin, 'Maiden Name', Nine Modern Poets, (London, 1966), p.154.

14. Hilda Kirkwood, 'Revolution and Resolution', interview with Margaret Laurence, Canadian Forum, Vol. LIX, (1980), pp15-18.

Kirkwood makes a pertinent comment about family relationships in general, and the complicated and confused attitude Stacey holds towards Katie, when she remarks in the interview with Mrs. Laurence that 'It is a love/hate motif - and a power struggle.' Margaret Laurence replies by saying 'This is a fascinating theme and the relationship between generations has always interested me. The generation gap in life is partly fiction, but I would like to write further on the tension between mothers and daughters and indeed between sons and fathers.' We should note that two of Mrs Laurence's most forthright characters are motherless - Hagar and Morag. But the relationship between Rachel and Mrs Cameron is very like a tug-of-love and Morag and Pique experience periods of real spiritual separation. A detailed and compassionate examination of the mother-daughter relationship, from the latter's point-of-view, can be found in Nancy Friday's My Mother, My Self, (Glasgow, 1977).

15. Donald Cameron, 'The Black Celt Speaks of Freedom', interview with Margaret Laurence in Conversations with Canadian Novelists, (Toronto, 1973), p.105.

16. Clara Thomas, The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence, p.124.

17. Margaret Laurence, 'Gadgetry or Growing.'

In this address, Margaret Laurence explains: 'I was, I think considerably influenced, although subconsciously, by years of T.V. watching. I kept thinking, "What I want to get is the effect of voices and pictures - just voices and pictures." I

became obsessed with this notion, as it seemed to convey the quality of the lives I wanted to try to get across... both voices and pictures in a novel have to be conveyed only through the printed word...I wanted the pictures - that is, the descriptions - whether in outer life or dreams or memories, to be as sharp and instantaneous as possible, and always brief, because it seemed to me that this is the way - or at least one way - life is perceived, in short visual images which leap away from us even as we look at them... The inner monologue, of course, is strictly in Stacey's voice, and it was through this, largely, that I hoped to convey her basic toughness of character, her ability to laugh at herself, her strong survival instincts... The reason that I did not use any quotation marks in The Fire-Dwellers was that I wanted to get, once again, the sense of everything happening all at once, the way in which talk flows in and out of people's lives and is not cut off or separate from events.' pp. 88-89.

18. Margaret Tanaszi, Feminine Consciousness in Contemporary Canadian Fiction, (Leeds, 1977), p.220.
19. Author's Comment: Although the Richalife Rally appears to be rather exaggerated as described by Margaret Laurence, her belief that fact and fiction are never far apart (see The Diviners) is borne out in an article that appeared in The Times, Tuesday, December 10th, 1985, where a similar rally for a new American product being introduced to Britain caught the journalist's notice. The product, Herbalife, was being promoted at Central Hall, Westminster, where 'the platform was decked out with green

and yellow plants (the Herbalife colours). Two large TV screens at the front of the hall displayed the Herbalife logo. Loud American rock music was playing. Suddenly, just as Bruce Springsteen reached the climax of "Born in the USA", the screens sprang into life to show a bouncy woman in a bright blue jumpsuit, sweeping - half running and giving a strange whoop - on to the centre stage to rapturous applause. Introducing herself as Caroline Hazledine, she quickly launched into a sales pitch about Herbalife... Finally, the star of the show, was presented... Looking like a younger Bruce Forsyth, with jutting jaw, gleaming teeth and sharp pin-striped suit, the tanned Thompson related how his friend Mark Hughes had prevailed upon him to sell.....'

## To Put Away Childish Things

More often than not grandfathers are portrayed as benevolent creatures, mellowed with age and prone to dandling grandchildren on their knees while regaling them with tales of the olden days - each a model for that epitome of good humour, Father Christmas. At least so they appear in children's storybooks and certain television commercials. The truth may be somewhat different. Vanessa MacLeod's maternal grandfather, Timothy Connor, of A Bird in the House, was quite another breed, an archetype who would be at home in one of those epic novels or long-running serials which chronicle the fortunes of a dynasty tyrannised by its founder. In real life Margaret Laurence's maternal grandfather, John Simpson, dominated her life as Vanessa's Grandfather Connor does hers; the former is the model for the latter. For years after Mr Simpson died Margaret Laurence suffered pangs of guilt because she hated him so much. In writing about her fear and dislike of him she acknowledged these sentiments, accepting them and translating them into tolerance and understanding. Margaret Atwood has suggested that the theme of the tyrannical grandfather (or grandmother,<sup>1</sup> or both) recurs more frequently in Canadian fiction than elsewhere, because he embodies those characteristics of strength, determination and singleness of purpose which are needed in the successful pioneer.

Grandparents are obsessed by work; they have unbending wills and sets of "principles" which the author may feel his own generation has lost. They are grimly religious, and more than willing to police and censor the morals of others. They rule, or attempt to rule, their children with a rod of iron. They are patriarchs and matriarchs, and their cosmic rigidity goes far beyond the strength necessary to build and sustain a pioneering community.<sup>2</sup>



When such attributes, admirable in themselves, repress such emotions as love, compassion, and sympathy because they might be seen as weakness, the results can be very destructive of human relationships. The patriarchal society which this represents, with the emphasis on the so-called masculine virtues, produces conflict, and results in injustices, especially for the women. As a child Vanessa is vaguely aware of this unfairness; as she grows older her awareness grows too. Her love for her mother and her Aunt Edna, coupled with a fierce sense of her own worth, makes her resent the power which her grandfather possesses to shape all their lives. This resentment can only be replaced when she sees how he too is a victim, crippled by the demands made on him to enable him to succeed and survive. The theme of A Bird in the House is, therefore, the arrival at this understanding.

The eight short stories in the book were begun in 1962, nine years after her grandfather's death, while Margaret Laurence was living in England. Time, distance and the very act of setting down her feelings combined to help her to accept what she had always considered unacceptable. The stories are, therefore, fictionalized autobiography. In the fiction she becomes Vanessa MacLeod who experiences all the resentments and hot anger towards her Grandfather Connor that the author had felt for her Grandfather Simpson. But in the end each comes to an understanding and acceptance of the grandparent as he was.

In an interview, Journal of Canadian Fiction, she reveals:

Only after I had finished writing these short stories did I begin to realise that, although I had detested the old man at the time,

I no longer detested him. I had come to some kind of terms with him, whereby I could realize that even though he had been a very hard man, he had had a very hard life and he had characteristics of strength and of pride that were admirable - and the other side of the coin was his inability to show affection.<sup>3</sup>

How did Margaret Laurence go about this exorcism? Each of the eight stories is an entity; it may be read on its own and will stand or fall on its own merits. Inevitably some of them are stronger than others. But together they make more than just a collection of short stories; together they form a kind of novel. Patricia Morley considers that 'The collection forms an unconventional novel, linked by character, setting, narrative voice and structure.'<sup>4</sup> George Woodcock in an essay in Canadian Literature reaches the same conclusion. To him, 'Story flows into story, to such an extent that when they are collected a perceptible development from one to the other becomes evident, and it is hard to know whether to define A Bird in the House as a collection of tales or as a loosely knit and unconventional novel.'<sup>5</sup> Robert Gibb's introduction to the New Canadian Library edition of A Bird in the House expands on this idea. He maintains that 'Organically this book is one, but technically it is a book of stories' and he goes on to suggest that 'the extrication of particular narrative threads from the nexus has a clarifying effect... Isolating particular narrative lines gives clarity and emphasis to the discoveries made and creates an artifice of sequence out of the mass of experience.'<sup>6</sup> Certainly the method has produced a work which feels more approachable, one where the essential elements are more definable, and where the reader can be more certain of drawing the correct conclusions. The opposite is true of the novels. In them so much is provided for our consideration that we are never

sure we have acknowledged the significance of it all.

In each story or chapter Vanessa begins at a specific point in her life; in each she moves on from that point to a position of greater understanding and acceptance. According to John Moss 'Each story is shaped towards some particular cluster of insights on Vanessa's part, which she intuitively responded to as a girl and young woman, and comments on from the vantage of maturity with a mixture of guarded warmth and ironic tolerance.'<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, the stages in her development are very carefully mapped out for us, with a deliberate emphasis, in story after story, on Vanessa's age. Again and again we read such phrases as 'for I was ten that spring' (A Bird in the House, p.4) 'when I was eleven' (p.116), 'with a thirteen-year-old', (p.152), 'I was twenty', (p.203), making sure we know exactly where we are. The device can become rather tiresome in the long run, but it does give us a timetable for development, and somehow we suspect that the device is one the author has hit upon to ease her own way through the chronology of those ten years of progress towards self-knowledge. Of course, it also betrayed the fact that this is a collection of short stories. As she thinks her way step by step, each of the stories grows out of the last and moves on from it. There is a steady development of character, producing a cumulative effect missing from such collections as a rule. Normally the short story tends to deal with a unique situation and depends on an unexpected twist or quirk to give it interest. The short story writer does not have the scope to make the characters grow in stature or change with time. The reader learns something of the natures of the people involved and may see possibilities for

change as a result of the events depicted, but there cannot be that depth of character development which is possible in the novel. This is where Margaret Laurence's eight stories differ from the usual collection. Together they do reveal growth. Compare them with Katherine Mansfield's collection of charming short stories about her childhood in New Zealand. Written out of homesickness, they depict her family enjoying their pleasant, comfortable, middle class lives in a variety of situations, but the people do not alter. It is almost as though they were preserved in aspic. Margaret Laurence's reason for writing her stories makes the end product different.

As each story came into being in the years between 1962 and 1970, it was given a life of its own. Individually all except the last appeared in one or another publication, or were read on radio. 'Jericho's Brick Battlements' was added when they were collected into book form. Always they were bound by unity of theme into a whole. Apart from having a common background in Manawaka they are unified in theme by Vanessa's progress toward maturity through the slow, steady, painful process of growing up and learning to understand the conflicts and sorrows of the adult world. The stories are told as a personal narrative. It is right that we should see things through her eyes as we come to comprehend with her the meaning of the dramas she observes being enacted around her. Moreover, since they are a working out of the author's own attitudes to her grandparent, it is almost inevitable that they should be told in the first person. However, using the first person narrative could impose certain limitations on the reporting of what goes on because, after all, Vanessa is a child and not omniscient. The author overcomes this difficulty by making

Vanessa what she herself calls 'a professional listener' (p.11). With the child's wiliness she has learned so well the art of being invisible, of appearing not to be listening, that the adults, especially her mother and aunt, tend to speak and act as though she were not there. On those occasions when she is excluded from the adult presence, she has her 'listening posts' (p.77) to which she resorts. In this way she eavesdrops and overhears many things which reveal the pressures and unhappiness besetting the grown-ups. She stores up this knowledge until she is old enough to make sense of it all.

In fact the actual narrator is the older Vanessa, the forty-year-old woman who recounts the gradual loss of her childish innocence as she grows up. Kent Thompson refers to this method as 'the device of the double-perspective... The adult narrator learns from what the child experienced and failed to understand'.<sup>8</sup> The first person narrative has also been used in The Stone Angel and A Jest of God. In these novels the reader sees through the eyes of the main characters, while being able to assume a more dispassionate stance, enabling an appreciation of the realities of the situation described, since it is possible to make allowances for the personal bias of the narrator. In the short stories the mature Vanessa does this for the reader. Although they retell events from her childhood and are to be seen through the child's eyes, the adult storyteller uses these experiences to arrive at conclusions, sometimes implicit, sometimes more explicitly expressed at the end of a story or chapter, to represent Margaret Laurence's own coming to terms with her childhood. By reliving her early experiences, where she felt so much helpless

anger and frustration, coupled with a sense of deep injustice, she is able to see events in a different light. The very act of recall requires that she reassess her previous childish reactions and look beyond the obvious to the truth - all humankind, and that includes Timothy Connor, find the act of living a difficult and puzzling exercise. The exorcism is when she can admit her blood ties with her grandfather, with all that that means. 'I had feared and fought the old man, yet he proclaimed himself in my veins'. (p.207).

As we begin the stories Vanessa's life gravitates between her Grandmother MacLeod's house where she lives with her parents, and the Brick House which shelters her mother's family, the Connors. Both houses are large and ugly; both are monuments to the status in the community earned by the owner builders; neither belongs to the young family. The author makes us very much aware of the exclusiveness of their lives. The stories are about what goes on in the Connor and MacLeod families, behind the closed doors of those two imposing houses built by pioneers of the town of Manawaka. Vanessa recognises this clannishness when she says 'what I really saw was only what went on in our family.' (p.136) When she is twelve her father, Dr Ewen MacLeod, dies of pneumonia leaving his young family with no means of support. Thus Vanessa, her mother, and Baby Roderick must move into the Brick House. This narrows the young girl's world still further. She describes the Connor place as 'plain as the winter turnips in its root cellar, sparsely windowed as some crusader's embattled fortress in a heathen wilderness, its rooms in a perpetual gloom except in the brief height of summer'. (p.3) Indeed, like the fortress it resembled, it both kept people in and locked them out. Edna, the

youngest of the Connors, is forced to live there because she is unable to find a job; her eldest sister, Beth MacLeod, must live there because she is a penniless widow. Moreover, people rarely visit for fear of Grandfather Connor's brusque inhospitality. Nor can we imagine Vanessa inviting her school friends round to play at her house. Margaret Laurence skilfully implies that the child lives a double life, one with her contemporaries, another with her family, and that it is the latter which concerns us. As we read the stories, Vanessa seems strangely isolated, a solitary child who spends a great deal of time reading anything she can lay her hands on, writing highly imaginative, romantic fiction, wandering about the empty rooms and attics, and always, always listening and watching. But we do know that she also enjoys riding her bike, climbing trees, sharing secrets with her best friend, Mavis, skating at the rink on Saturday; later, we find her drinking coffee and listening to the juke box in the town café, going to dances, even falling in love. In fact, she is a normal, lively young girl. The difference lies in the emphasis. We are required to see her as the adult Vanessa sees herself when examining those aspects of her childhood which she perceives have been crucial.

The private world which we are invited to share is very much a woman's. After their mother's death the two sisters, Beth and Edna, spend their lives together protecting each other from their father, giving one another moral support, sharing the household duties in the Brick House. More and more they draw Vanessa in to participate in their secret lives - the daily conversations in the kitchen away from 'him', or the frequent retreats to Edna's bedroom for a furtive

cigarette and more private talk. At one point Edna, who is not so very much older than her niece, says to her, "'We're making you grow up before your time.'" (p.49) In fact they are teaching her the tactics of survival. It is the two women's love and encouragement, coupled with her observation of the way they cope with the blows life deals each of them, that make it possible for her to come to terms with her own heartbreaks. Margaret Atwood makes a point of the apparent lack of joy in the lives of the people in A Bird in the House, and Henry Kreisel says, 'We are given here the Manitoba of the 1930's, a black, pinched, puritanical environment...'<sup>9</sup> In theory this should be true. In fact it is not. Admittedly there is a good deal of death and sadness incorporated into the stories and one of the lessons Vanessa has to learn is that there is much grief hidden behind the everyday masks people wear while they get on with their lives. However, it is difficult to think of her as an unhappy child. Even her grandfather's lowering presence does not kill her natural exuberance and joy. She simply learns early to check them in his presence. Moreover, the stories reveal how much the indomitable Aunt Edna with her wisecracks and her manic but therapeutic piano playing contributes to helping her niece maintain a sense of proportion. There may not be much joy in the Brick House - even the canary only sings on rare occasions - but Vanessa does not see her childhood as unhappy. It was a grim time; Grandfather Connor was a grim man. The grown-ups had secret sorrows. But her life was neither sad or deprived, because it was filled with the humour and love provided by her aunt and her mother. In a strange sort of way, even the brother whose birth takes up an entire story in the book-'To Set Our House in



Order<sup>o</sup> - is excluded. Once the child for whom she 'felt such tenderness and such resentment'<sup>o</sup> (p.112) has been born, he is only mentioned in passing in the rest of the stories, except 'The Half Husky'<sup>o</sup>. We must assume then that he is not a part of the drama with which we are to concern ourselves. Vanessa does not ignore his presence - she tells us in a sentence or two that he is about, then gets on with what she is doing. Ten years difference in age would explain some of this, but more likely it is simply that for the purpose of these stories he is not important. Old for her years, she is closer to her mother and her aunt than to the brother who occupies territory she has long since left behind.

In her writing Margaret Laurence handles time in a variety of ways. In The Stone Angel we are given two narratives running parallel to one another, one in the present, one in the past, linked by the central character, Hagar Shipley, who actually tells both. In the eight stories in A Bird in the House time moves forward in a series of advances and retreats. Each advance takes us a bit further forward from Vanessa's childhood to womanhood. After each gain there is a return to a spot in the early years from which we can then move even closer to the present. In 'The Sound of the Singing'<sup>o</sup> at the beginning of the collection, Vanessa is ten. 'In A Bird in the House'<sup>o</sup> the story begins when she is twelve but she is seventeen when it ends, whereas in the last story 'Jericho's Brick Battlements'<sup>o</sup> we have a span of nearly eight years from twelve and a half to twenty. In all they cover a period of twenty years, that time when her Grandfather Connor was the single most prominent influence in her life. When she was twenty her grandfather died, but it was twenty years on before she

really came to terms with her memory of him.

From her vantage point beyond childhood, Margaret Laurence/Vanessa MacLeod is able to sift and order her memories until they shape themselves into stories which will show her making sense of her experiences. At first she watches and absorbs. As her awareness increases she becomes, first, angry at what she sees as unfairness manifested around her, then later, resigned to the inexplicable way individuals suffer yet survive. She also has to learn that not everyone does survive. Piquette Tonnerre is destroyed, long before her death in a fire, by her desperate longing to be found acceptable by the society Vanessa represents. The knowledge that her Indian blood puts her beyond the pale cripples her far more than her diseased bone. Vanessa's cousin, Chris, defeated by life, retreats into a silent world of fantasy where no one can reach him. Thus the fact that there will be casualties to the system must be accepted too. As she moves in retrospect through the years she gradually recognises the path and reads the signpost which have led her slowly to a deeper perception of what it is like to be an adult.

Margaret Laurence is very much aware of the tendency in families towards a 'not-in-front-of-the-children' attitude, because 'they wouldn't understand'. Grown-ups affairs are assumed to be beyond the comprehension of children, and of course, they are at the time, as Vanessa herself admits. It is only later that the perceptive older child will piece together the casual comments and overheard remarks to arrive at certain insights which later, adult life will confirm. As a child, Vanessa is a stranger in the adult world which she inhabits. She does not know the whole story, nor the reasons why

things are as they are. Agnes and Tim Connor, her Aunt Edna, her mother and father, her Grandmother MacLeod - they all have pasts about which she knows little or nothing. With time more is gradually revealed, so her knowledge is increased and understanding grows. Her father, Ewen MacLeod, in speaking of his own father's loneliness in the cultural desert of Manawaka, expresses what she later recognises as a fundamental truth: 'Sometimes a thing only hits you a long time afterwards.' (p.51) As she learns more about her father, and later about her grandfather, she comes to see that people are many persons all in one. Nothing is simple. Nothing is straightforward. Both men are products of their past. Her father had come to terms with his past. She must do so too. In many of the stories a simple event is made more significant when she learns then, or at a later date, some secret about the grownups around her. An analysis of the various stories reveals a movement from learning within the family to an awareness of the misery which exists in the world outside, first in Manawaka and then further afield. This, of course, reflects the universal experience. Our first lessons about human relationships are learned in the family setting. Only gradually does this environment open out to include, first, neighbours, and other relatives, then the community, finally the world at large. In this collection of stories, the first four concentrate on Vanessa's experience among the members of her immediate circle - her great uncle Dan, her Grandmothers Connor and MacLeod, birth and death in the family. However, as the last four unfold, her horizon gradually widens to bring her in contact with those outside the brick battlements referred to in the final chapter. Indeed, just as in the

biblical Jericho the walls came tumbling down to allow free access, so the walls of the fortress that was the Brick House of the first chapter are breached first when Wes Grigg, a rather unlikely knight in shining armour, rescues and frees Aunt Edna, the equally unlikely maiden in distress, by marrying her and taking her away to live at the C.N.R. station. During World War Two Manawaka itself was invaded by dozens of young men from all across Canada who had come for air training at South Wachakwa, and brought with them their experiences of other worlds. Finally Vanessa herself escapes to go to college in Winnipeg, and the opening up process is complete. Each of the last stories deals with a different disadvantaged group. A representative of that group enters Vanessa's life for a moment, only to pass out of view again, to be remembered in later years with awakened consciousness of that individual's suffering. Piquette Tonnerre in 'The Loons' symbolises the Métis nation and its lack of status in Canadian society, while Cousin Chris with his imaginary, Faustian 'Horses of the Night' represents the hundreds and thousands of young people whose lives in the thirties were blighted by unemployment, want and lack of hope. In 'The Half-Husky' Vanessa sees, for the first time, how those upon whom her sort look down, the dregs of society, the people from the wrong side of the tracks, the 'downrights' live. The smell of failure she recognises in Ada Shinwell's house remains with her, to be revived in adult life when Vanessa MacLeod/Margaret Laurence as author describes the Shipley farm kitchen, and the sensible horrors of the home where Morag Gunn lived out her early years with Prin and Christie Logan.

'The Sound of the Singing' and 'Jericho's Brick Battlements', which are the first and last stories, as well as the longest, illustrate clearly the progression which occurs throughout the book. Each begins with the same action, albeit two years apart - that is, going to the Brick House. However, even this simple act illustrates a difference of situation which in turn results in a more intense awareness of self. Kent Thompson draws our attention to this fact when he points out that 'some stories re-examine the same chronological period as other stories but examine them with a new focus, and a different pattern of events.'<sup>10</sup> In the first, Vanessa is merely going there for Sunday dinner. We are introduced to the looming presence of her grandfather and to the benign sweetness of his wife, to the delicate nervousness of Vanessa's mother, and the saving humour of her Aunt Edna. Into this milieu breezes Uncle Dan, Timothy Connor's brother as well as his Jungian shadow. They are the opposite sides of the same coin, and Vanessa receives certain messages about family relationships which the reader can decode, although she does not do so at the time. In the last story, Vanessa, her mother and her brother are going to live there, and the fortress gates are slammed behind them. Here the learning is much more complex in nature and covers a great deal more time - thirty years, in fact - for the last few paragraphs are the reflections of the mature Vanessa who has told the stories and extracted the lessons therein. She had escaped, so she thought, but she is not as free as she imagined, because she carries with her all those early experiences and influences. In distancing herself from her grandfather she can see him more objectively, but the real acceptance comes in recognising

that he lives on in her.

The stories 'To Set Our House In Order' and 'A Bird In The House' deal with the MacLeod side of the family, and again are very much family-centred. Whereas in the opening story Timothy Connor reveals a great deal about himself through his attitude to his shiftless brother, and we glean considerable information about the Connor household, in these two stories we are able, with Vanessa, to recognise some of the sadness which haunts the life of Mrs. MacLeod, and of the sense of guilt which keeps her son, Ewen, bound to her in spite of himself. The stories are full of secrets, of hidden longings and hints of unfulfilled dreams. Into this world of stillborn hopes comes a new life, Vanessa's brother Roderick. Yet even this child is made to carry the name of one who is dead, one who in dying blighted his mother's life and burdened his brother with the guilty need to try to be a substitute, thus killing his own aspirations. Vanessa comes to see both the illusions which people cling to in order to hide the truth, and the roles which people are required to play, often also hiding their own true longings. To her, life seems a very disorderly affair, full of apparently random events which affect its course for good or ill with little reference to what humans would like.

In the story which gives the book its title, death, not life, is the theme, for Vanessa's father dies and she loses her belief in God. It begins with the Armistice Parade to commemorate the dead of World War One, a ritual which the twelve-year-old girl finds embarrassing and meaningless. This leads to a conversation with her father which

brings them closer together for a moment, and allows her to glimpse his attitude to being overseas as a soldier, to catch undertones of meaning in his evasive manner. This is especially poignant because in a few months he is dead. Some years later she uncovers one of his secrets - the existence of a young French girl whom he had known overseas. Margaret Laurence helps us realise how much Vanessa has learned about life by having her burn the photo and letter she finds without mentioning it to her mother, keeping what might be a hurtful truth to herself. Her own experience 'when I was seventeen and in love with an airman who did not love me' (p.112) has made her sensitive and perceptive enough to know that silence, in order to spare another hurt, is sometimes necessary. We are also made aware of the length of time it has taken for her to appreciate even a part of the truth about her father. Vanessa's loss of religious belief is ultimately connected with the loss of her father. Death meant 'Nothing. It meant only silence, forever.' (p.110) It is set against the fundamentalist beliefs of Noreen, the hired girl, whose technicolour view of Heaven and Hell is presented as a simple, harmless way of brightening up a dull life, in the days prior to colour movies or television or video nasties. Margaret Laurence depicts in each of her books except The Fire-Dwellers some form of pentecostal emotionalism which she presents as being as unrelated to true religion as the insipid formalism of the Presbyterian or Methodist churches. The one provides release and hope for the loser; the other puts the seal of approval on a social system its followers have created in its name. The title, A Bird in the House, refers

directly to an incident when a sparrow is caught in the house but we have been prepared for this event by previous references in 'To Set Our House in Order'. While the MacLeods were waiting for the birth of Beth's baby, Vanessa was aware of undercurrents of sorrow and worry in the house. When she goes to bed, she listens to the night noises which are audible in a house when it is quiet. These rustlings include the imagined sound of 'a sparrow that had flown into the attic through the broken skylight there'. (p.41). Two days later, the night before the baby is born, she sleeps and dreams she 'could hear the caught sparrow fluttering in the attic, and the sound of mother crying, and the voices of the dead children'. (p.53) These explicit references to a trapped bird are symbols of the entrapment experienced by all the characters, especially Vanessa, and lead directly to the scene in Vanessa's bedroom with the real sparrow. This event foretells a death in the house, according to superstition. After Dr MacLeod's death, the bird comes to symbolise Vanessa who is trapped in her grandfather's house by her father's death. The author often employs the trapped bird as a symbol of human lack of freedom.<sup>11</sup>

The last of the stories dealing with the family alone is 'The Mask of the Bear'. This title springs directly from the last paragraph of the chapter where Vanessa describes an experience from later life. In a museum she sees an Indian bear mask and is reminded of the only occasion when her grandfather's mask slips to reveal the man beneath - at the death of his wife, Agnes. The sudden expression of raw emotion from her grandfather terrifies Vanessa whose concept



of grown-ups is shattered by the revelation of a private face behind the public mask. Later she can extend this knowledge to see beneath the outward face to the man hidden there and catch a fleeting glimpse of all that has been repressed. This theme of role playing, or the wearing of a mask which presents to the world the face that custom expects, is found in each of the Manawaka novels, but is most explicitly developed in this collection of stories where the protagonist sees that one after another of the people she knows and loves have been forced by life to play parts which they find run contrary to their deeper natures. Yet the mask has become so much a part of each of them that to discard it would leave each as vulnerable as a tortoise without its carapace.

Although the stories ostensibly deal with ten years in Vanessa's life, they are filled with references to other times. She has heard of the pioneer days through the family history as embodied in her grandparents. Her father and his brother, Roderick, were caught up in the First World War which affected a whole generation of Canadians. Roderick's death overseas determined the course of Ewen's life. The Depression and the accompanying Drought in the West are historical events which have an impact on her family, creating some of the tensions which she notices first and then comes to understand. The Second World War also impinges on her Manawaka years, forcing her attention away from the small town to the outside world she is soon to join. Thus the stories are set in the context of a wider Canadian history of which she is a part and of which she gradually becomes aware, as she grows in understanding and appreciation of her own

smaller history.

When Grandmother Connor dies, she overhears the family discussing her grandmother's relationship with the grandfather. It is revealed that Tim Connor had had an affair with someone in Winnipeg years before. This fact is lost on her at the time, but can be understood later. When she is seventeen she discovers that during the First World War her father had known, and perhaps loved, a young French girl. This throws new light on a remark he had made to her five years previously when they were discussing how he had felt about the war. These bits of knowledge, revealing hidden longings and weaknesses in her adults, help her to accept those she knows as complex human beings. As the grown-ups reveal, little by little, snippets of their past, sometimes directly, sometimes to her eavesdropping, she becomes increasingly aware of the pressures and turmoils which beset people, and of how hidden influences govern their behaviour. Only Grandmother Connor seems secure in her Christian faith, unmoved and unruffled by the troubled lives around her. Everyone else seems always to be 'threshing furiously and uselessly in various snarled dilemmas.' (p.72)

These words, suggesting creatures caught in a net or trap from which they cannot free themselves, hint at one of the previously mentioned underlying themes of the book. This is the theme of entrapment. It is most specifically used in reference to Vanessa who is the bird in the house of the title story. She is caught up in a situation from which she must escape or perish. However, the rest of the characters are equally trapped, forced to accept situations not

of their own making; bound by feelings of guilt, or duty, or love, to assume roles they do not care for - like Dr. Ewen and Aunt Edna; lost behind a persona presented to a hostile world they had originally to conquer - like Grandfather Connor; relegated to second-class citizenship, or no citizenship at all, by a self-righteous, judgemental, racist and puritanical society - like Harvey Shinwell and Piquette Tonnerre; deprived of opportunity for fulfilment by social breakdown - like Cousin Chris. None of them is free to develop his own potential. Beth MacLeod recognises their dependant situation when she tells Edna: ..it would be wonderful if you could get out.' (p.186) Edna's later reply in which she uses the words 'the old dungeon' reinforce this.

One could be excused for feeling that the stories have a certain Victorian morbidity about them. Death seems to be ever present, waiting to affect the lives of the characters in them. Moreover, physical death for some member of the family results in dead hopes and aspirations for other members. The death of her younger son, Roderick, in the First World War has already affected the life of Grandmother MacLeod. "'When your Uncle Roderick was killed,' she said, 'I thought I would die. But I didn't die, Vanessa.'" (p.45) Moreover, her husband's death has made it impossible to continue 'being a lady' as she would have liked. When Grandmother Connor dies, Vanessa is bewildered by the way her grandfather breaks down and cries. She is shaken and frightened. When her father dies she tries desperately to help her mother cope with her bereavement, although it is not until years later that she can truly mourn him herself. Only

at Grandfather Connor's funeral does she comprehend what he had represented. Throughout the stories there are other deaths too - the cruel burning to death of Piquette Tonnerre and her children, the slaughter of so many of Manawaka's young men at Dieppe, Uncle Dan's ignominious death as a 'downright' failure, the stillbirth of Vanessa's baby sister. We can perhaps forgive Margaret Laurence for her overemphasis on the fact that death is never far away when we discover that first her own mother, then a few years later her father, died when she was about Vanessa's age. It is easy from the vantage point of the late twentieth century to forget that even fifty years ago death from influenza, pneumonia, poliomyelitis, enteritis, postpartum infection were commonplace prior to the discovery of antibiotics. An untimely death in the family was, therefore, a much more common occurrence than it is today.

The stories begin in the year 1935 when the Great Depression had been biting into people's lives for some time, and somehow, like Death, this Depression very nearly becomes a character in the book. Certainly its influence pervades the pages. Vanessa hears those around her talk about 'the Depression', and although she does not understand quite how or why, she is aware that people's lives are different from what they might have been otherwise. 'For me the Depression and drought were external and abstract, malevolent gods whose names I secretly learned although they were concealed from me, and whose evil I sensed only superstitiously, knowing they threatened us but not how or why.' (p.136)

Woodcock makes the point that the Depression drove people back

into the family for succour and support. Certainly Aunt Edna is forced to return home rather than stay on in Winnipeg as one of the mass of unemployed. Vanessa's father, Dr MacLeod, cannot make enough money to support a household of his own, so his family must live with his mother. 'The depression in fact renews the pioneer intensity of relationships within small and threatened groups, and that intensity Margaret Laurence mordantly evokes.'<sup>12</sup> The early pioneers had huddled together in small family groups, pitting themselves willy-nilly against outside hostile natural forces. In the thirties families were forced, by the failure of society, to return to the family unit with all its curtailment of personal freedom. Yet, as William New suggests, if the family could be a prison, it could also be a shelter, something Vanessa had sensed when she called the Brick House a fortress. Safety was purchased at the expense of freedom, a costly luxury none of the inhabitants could afford in the circumstances. When Edna is considering the possibility of leaving the family unit by marrying Wes Grigg she confesses '...I have the feeling that the absolute worst wouldn't happen here, ever. Things wouldn't actually fall apart.' (p.187)

The most poignant story in the book is 'Horses of the Night' which deals with the destructive effect the Depression has on the hopes of Vanessa's cousin, Chris, who typifies countless young Canadians whose ambitions were stifled by the lack of employment and the shortage of money for further education. Chris dreams of being a civil engineer. He tells Vanessa,

"I got this theory, see, that anybody can do anything at all,

anything, if they really set their minds to it. But you have to have this total concentration. You have to focus on it with your whole mental powers, and not let it slip away by forgetting to hold it in your mind. If you hold it in your mind, like, then it's real, see?...'(p.139)

In the end he is broken because he will not bend and spends the rest of his life in a mental institution in a state of total withdrawal. His defeat is complete. He might as well be dead. Margaret Laurence, like anyone who was a child during the Depression, knew it as a powerful and corrosive influence on the lives of everyone. She also deals with its effect upon that generation's young people in The Stone Angel. In that novel, John Shipley and Arlene Simmons are thwarted in their plans to marry and settle down because there are no crops, no work, no money.

The two characters that come across most strongly in A Bird in the House are Vanessa and her grandfather. Margaret Laurence's male characters are not usually fully realized, well-rounded creations. Her strength lies in her portrayal of women. But in Timothy Connor she has given us a living, breathing human being. Perhaps she has succeeded so well because she had a real-life model to follow. Grandfather Connor becomes to us a real person. She describes him in great detail - his physical size, his 'brown, beaked leathery face', the terrible basilisk stare from his piercing blue eyes. Vanessa compares him to a huge grizzly bear. He even sports a malodorous bearskin coat in winter. He never walks, he stumps or stalks. When he wants to get away from anyone he retreats into the cellar as into a cave from whence the angry squeak of his rocking chair signals his displeasure to the whole house. In addition, he has all the surliness

and bad temper of the proverbial 'bear with a sore head'. When he speaks his words are 'bludgeoning' or 'spearing'; he makes a virtue of plain speaking; he never, never smiles. There are many resemblances to Jason Currie of The Stone Angel which was written before these stories, and we may surmise that he was a preliminary sketch for the more fully developed character in A Bird in the House. Timothy Connor does engage our sympathy when we realise how lonely he must be, having cut himself off so completely from others by his low opinion of anyone not like himself. But he is proud, unbending, cold and cruel, so the chief feeling the reader experiences is surely the one Vanessa herself has - a sense of impotent rage as we watch him browbeating and denigrating everyone around him. He is unlovable, unloving and always angry. Why is he always so angry? He is an upright citizen and proud of being a pioneer, but somehow no one else seems to be interested. He has tremendous physical energy which has to be expended in constant activity. He is no intellectual. We suspect also that he is probably a man of great passion with a boundless need for love. He and his wife, Agnes, seem strangely ill-matched - like the lamb lying down with the lion. Yet there is a hint that she chose him in preference to his fun-loving, easy-going, shiftless brother, Vanessa's Great Uncle Dan. Her death leaves him bereft and bewildered. His family are distressed that he who treated his wife with such apparent disregard in life should declare her 'an angel' in death. His son, Terence, suggests that this may have been the rub - it is hard to live with an angel; it makes one feel so unworthy.

Is the portrait of Grandfather Connor overdone? Perhaps. But we must remember that Margaret Laurence is depicting him as her Grandfather Simpson seemed to her at the time when she was within his sphere of influence. In addition we must recognise that he is also a creation of the author's imagination, exaggerated to match Vanessa's overreaction to him. At his funeral Vanessa MacLeod has a moment of insight when she begins to grasp what he represented. Perhaps being a pioneer, as he had been, required those attributes which made him the hateful person she had found him to be. She began to see that he had a place in history in his time, and she came to accept the fact that, though she had despised him, he was part of her past, indeed part of her very self.

What funeral could my grandfather have been given except the one he got? The sombre hymns were sung, and he was sent to his Maker by the United Church minister, who spoke, as expected, of the fact that Timothy Connor had been one of Manawaka's pioneers. He had come from Ontario to Manitoba by Red River steamer, and he had walked from Winnipeg to Manawaka, earning his way by shoeing horses. After some years as a blacksmith, he had enough money to go into the hardware business. Then he had built his house. It had been the first brick house in Manawaka. Suddenly the minister's recounting of these familiar facts struck me as though I had never heard any of it before.... I was not sorry that he was dead. I was only surprised. Perhaps he even was immortal, in ways which it would take me half a lifetime to comprehend.(p.204)

As for Vanessa, what kind of person is she? She is a rather intense child, self-centred and self-sufficient, perhaps just a bit precocious even priggish. One of the terrors of her young life is that people will laugh at her. In her fear of being thought silly she is very much like Rachel Cameron in A Jest of God. She has a perverse



interest in anyone who is regarded with disfavour by her grandfather and other models of respectability. She confesses to a secret admiration for all the shiftless old men who congregate on the steps to the Bank of Montreal, as well as to a great attachment to her incorrigible Great Uncle Dan - as long as there is nobody about. He is all the things Timothy Connor is not, the obverse of the characteristics which Timothy reveals to the public. Since Vanessa dislikes what her grandfather is, she is naturally attracted to Dan. However, being her Grandfather's true granddaughter she cannot wholly approve of such a man. She cannot bear to be embarrassed or appear to differ openly from the opinions held by polite society, here represented by that part of it to which she belongs. In adolescence she confesses 'I never turned down an invitation, for reasons of status. I would willingly have gone out with the village idiot, had there been one, rather than not go out at all.' (p.193) She feels the same conflict of feeling towards Piquette Tonnerre.

I was ashamed, ashamed of my own timidity, the frightened tendency to look the other way. Yet I felt no warmth towards her.... at this moment, meeting her again, she repelled and embarrassed me... I wished she would go away. I did not want to see her. I did not know what to say to her. It seemed that we had nothing to say to one another. (p.124)

We realise that this is, in part, immaturity. It is also indicative of the value judgments she has learned from those in Manawaka. In later years she recognises in herself the tendency she always had of 'holding back with a terrible strained force for fear of letting go and speaking out and having the known world fall to pieces'. (p.133) She however does so at a later stage, when she

argues hotly and passionately with her grandfather at times. She tends to dramatise situations, a failing her mother recognises in her, when she tells Vanessa "'Stop dramatising everything"'. (p.166) over the latter's reaction to Harvey Shinwell's theft of the family telescope. Perhaps this is part of being an author, for in fact Vanessa writes stories. In making her a budding writer Margaret Laurence is simply re-enacting what she herself was doing at that age. Indeed, 'The pillars of the Nation' which Vanessa mentions in the first story was actually one which Mrs Laurence had written for a competition when she was a girl. However, Vanessa's scribblings serve another purpose in the work. They reflect her romantic nature and her innocence, while parodying the popular romances of the early part of the century. She abandons each story in turn when she comes to see that in real life things do not happen quite like that. This is, of course, all part of the total process of growing up. She does not however, cease to write. Nor does she cease to watch and listen, storing up impressions for future use.

Morag Gunn of The Diviners is also a budding writer, but her writing serves a different purpose. In her stories she is able to escape from the squalor of her life into a world of proud, brave people facing a hostile world. Marian Engel makes an interesting comparison between Vanessa and Morag: 'The early life of Morag Gunn is the underside of the early life of Vanessa MacLeod'.<sup>13</sup> The two young girls have many characteristics in common, not least good singing voices, as is suggested in The Diviners where Vanessa is chosen to sing the solo in the grown-ups' Christmas service, because

she would have a better dress to wear on such a special occasion. Both girls are strong individuals, who are prepared to fight for their freedom. However, by being freed of parents when she is five years old, Morag has more scope, though her position at the bottom of the social heap makes her struggle for selfhood a difficult one. Vanessa, surrounded as she is by a family, is held more firmly by their invisible ties and never truly escapes. 'A different spirit emerges from a household where the emotions are polished with beeswax every day.' (p.23) Morag, although for a time she submits to the rules of the society she so desperately wishes to join, finally is able to go her own way and be herself. Christie Logan, as surrogate father, is unconventional in outlook and aims merely to develop her strength and pride in herself, so she will be able to survive in a world he claims to despise. We feel it will be more difficult for Vanessa, influenced as she must inevitably be by blood bonds which hold her for a much longer time. She has expectations to live up to and family duties to perform. Orphans can be anything they wish. Members of families have obligations.

In the end it becomes difficult to separate Margaret Laurence from her creation, Vanessa MacLeod. The author shows us how closely she too has observed and listened as a child, for her description of natural surroundings, rooms in houses, commonplace family activities is so precise that we have no doubt she has been there. One of her strengths as a writer is her ability to recreate dialogue with great accuracy. Her characters speak naturally in the idiom of their day; each has his individual voice, reflecting his generation and his

education. They do not all sound alike. She also has the gift of being able to produce memorable descriptive phrases which are truly picturesque. Grandmother MacLeod speaks in 'a voice like frost on a windowpane, infinitely cold and clearly etched', (p.91) or 'in her clear voice, never loud, but distinct, like the tap of a sterling spoon on a crystal goblet.' (p.40) Her hair is described as 'bound grotesquely like white-feathered wings in the snare of her coarse night-time hairnet.' (p.40)

This book is, like the others, set in the prairie town of Manawaka. Readers of the Laurence novels become as familiar with the town and its inhabitants as they do of Mariposa, or Deptford, or Cabbagetown, or Barchester. The fact that we come to think of Manawaka as a real place testifies to her success in evoking the atmosphere of a typical small Canadian community. In these stories she creates a world inhabited by two only of the Manawaka families. In it lives Vanessa who is part Margaret Laurence, part her own person. Through her the fictional town merges with the author's own childhood world in the similar small Western town of Neepawa. In this community, half fantasy, half fact, there exist characters based on her own relatives, characters she has used before or will use again in later novels, and characters which belong to this book alone.

Irony plays little part in the writing here, unlike that in the previous novels where Margaret Laurence relies heavily on this literary device to bring home the points she is making about life's workings. There is, of course, the ultimate irony of life itself, where what seems to be is other than the reality. Although the

stories are far from gloomy, there is an underlying sombre tone, a note of sadness which is always there. The moments of deep personal sorrow are handled without sentimentality, with a brevity that is more telling than a spate of words. The night Ewen MacLeod dies, Vanessa recalls:

I heard a sound. It was my mother, and she was crying, not loudly at all, but from somewhere very deep inside her. I sat up in bed. Everything seemed to have stopped, not only time but my own heart and blood as well. Then my mother noticed that I was awake. I did not ask her, and she did not tell me anything. There was no need. She held me in her arms, or I held her, I am not certain which. And after a while the first mourning stopped too, as everything does sooner or later, for when the limits of endurance have been reached, then people sleep'.(pp. 107-108)

If we consider the stories as forming a kind of novel, we have to tolerate a certain irritating repetition of details - locations, ages, facts which we already know. The difficulty arises because they were first written as separate tales and so each had to contain some basic information relating to the families. Moreover, the stories are not all equally strong. 'The Half Husky' probably contributes least to the overall development of the theme, though it is the only story where we see Grandfather Connor outside the Brick House. On the other hand 'Horses of the Night' is by far the most compelling and poignant. The cumulative effect of the stories is not as powerful as that of the previous novels. Still its underlying theme, the individual's journey towards self-knowledge, accepting his own frailty, is the same. The child becomes an adult when it learns to recognise its place in the scheme of things. Each individual is unique and separate, yet is also a part of the stream of life which we call history.

In 'To Set our House in Order' Vanessa describes her Grandmother MacLeod's house where they lived as a place of many doors, leading to rooms where she was not encouraged to go. There were many secret hiding places there too -

...odd shaped nooks under the stairs, small and loosely nailed-up doors at the back of clothes closets, leading to dusty tunnels and forgotten recesses in the heart of the house where the only things actually to be seen were drab oil paintings stacked upon the rafters, and trunks full of outmoded clothing and old photograph albums (p.42)

The eight stories in the collection A Bird in the House record the steps by which Vanessa MacLeod sorts through the detritus of the past, reaches into the secret places, opens the doors of those rooms, and so clears the way to a mature understanding of the human condition.

## Footnotes: Chapter 5

1. Margaret Laurence, 'An Interview about Literature', Journal of Canadian Fiction, Vol. 1, (1972), pp.65-69.

Here Mrs Laurence makes the revealing comment that in her opinion... 'British readers saw her (Hagar Shipley) as a universal old woman about to come to terms with her death; American readers tended to see her as a North American old woman, Canadians saw her as their grandmother'. (p.66)

2. Margaret Atwood, Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature, (Toronto, 1972).

Chapter VI, 'The Family: Masks of the Bear' - the choice of title is revealing. The theme is one of family relationships as they appear in Canadian writing. This symbol is identical to the one used by Margaret Laurence for one of the short stories in A Bird in the House, 'The Mask of the Bear', which deals with Vanessa's awakening understanding of her grandfather. Margaret Atwood obviously considers that Mrs Laurence's description of Timothy Connor is apposite to the general experience of many Canadian writers dealing with his generation.

3. Margaret Laurence, op.cit p.67.
4. Patricia Morley, Margaret Laurence, (Boston, 1981) p.109.
5. George Woodcock, 'Jungle and Prairie', Book review, Canadian Literature, Vol. 45, (1970), pp. 82-84, p.84.
6. Robert Gibbs, Introduction to A Bird in the House, (Toronto, 1974), XI.

7. John Moss, A Reader's Guide to the Canadian Novel, (Toronto, 1981), p.162.
8. Kent Thompson, Review of A Bird in the House, The Fiddlehead, Vol. 84, (1970, pp. 108-111, Reprinted in Margaret Laurence, Ed. Wm. New, (Toronto 1977), p. 152.
9. Henry Kreisel, 'A Familiar Landscape', Tamarack Review, Vol. 55, (1970), pp. 91-94.
10. Kent Thompson, op.cit. p.153.
11. Arnold Davidson, 'Cages and Escapes in Margaret Laurence's A Bird in the House', University of Windsor Review, (1981), pp. 92-101.

Davidson deals here in detail with what he considers to be the main theme of the book. He maintains that '... most of the characters reflect the book's central metaphor and are thus symbolically interconnected. Simply put, the stories chart how they are all caught in parallel captivities and engaged in divergent flights'... 'The most basic "cage" in the book is the limitations of self.' (p.99) Margaret Laurence corroborates this in her taped conversation with Graeme Gibson in Eleven Canadian Novelists. She discusses with him this very point of the trapped bird and uses the illustration of Vanessa's grandmother who like her canary was more or less happy in her cage, in contrast with Vanessa and her father who were not, so they beat their wings against the glass like the sparrow in A Bird in the House.

12. George Woodcock, op.cit, p.231.
13. Marion Engel, 'Steps to the Mythic', Journal of Canadian Studies, Vol. 13, (1978), p.237.



## Parcels of the Dreadful Past

The critics have used such words as 'sprawling'<sup>1</sup>, 'untidy'<sup>2</sup> 'unlady-like'<sup>3</sup>, to describe Margaret Laurence's last book, The Diviners. Clara Thomas is kinder in calling it 'a complex and a profound novel'<sup>4</sup>. In reality it is a tapestry, a story into which the author has tried to weave all her previous themes, with special emphasis on time and history. Moreover, she has introduced a new and dominant theme, that of the writer's function in society. The obsession with time is balanced by an analysis of the process and meaning of writing; the two are united by the suggestion that the novelist and the historian have similar functions.

To the central character in Margaret Laurence's four previous Manawaka books time is a crucial factor. They have all reached a point in the present when it is necessary for them to re-appraise the past. To Hagar time is an enemy because, after the re-appraisal with the consequent acknowledgement of the wasteland she has created, she is not spared to put things right. Self-knowledge has come too late. Rachel and Stacey are more blessed, since each is able to project herself into a future which may be uncertain, but which at least should offer more fulfilment, thanks to their new awareness of their needs. Rachel's response is more dramatic than her sister's, but then she has more ties to loosen: the straitjacket of the Manawaka social and moral code, the suffocating dependence of her mother, her own morbid conjectures about her father. For Stacey the future will

probably not be much different from the present; she remarks that 'Tomorrow everything will look better, or at least different. Optimist.' (The Fire-Dwellers, p.29), but she recognises in herself the strength to accept the past and to get on with living, however unsatisfactory it may seem. One preoccupation which neither Hagar nor Rachel share with her is the constant fear that in fact there may be no future for her or her children in the apocalyptic age in which she lives. Vanessa, from her vantage point in maturity, is able to look back on events in her childhood, recall her reactions then and recognise how time and distance have made it possible to come to terms with them. Indeed, Margaret Laurence emphasises again and again the importance to everyone of being able to come to terms with one's past, to learn to accept what cannot be changed and to live comfortably within its framework. Once this is accomplished one is free to get on with self-fulfilment.

Morag Gunn, in The Diviners, has the same journey to make as Hagar and Vanessa. She too travels back in time to re-experience the past and to identify the milestones on the road to understanding her place in the scheme of things. But in this novel both Morag and her creator are looking at time as more than that represented by one lifetime. Time has become history and the emphasis is on the relationship of the generations one to another and on the importance to the individual of recognising his debt to the past, a liberating experience which allows him to see himself as part of a continuing tradition. Clara Thomas refers to it as 'the need of any individual for a historical past to feed into his present.'<sup>5</sup> In so doing,

Margaret Laurence extends the idea of personal history into the history of a people or a nation. She readily admits that her African experience first gave impetus to this feeling she has of the importance to the individual of a recognisable place within a tradition. The ambivalent attitude of many Africans to the past as their countries moved forward into the twentieth century was very apparent to her. Somehow, she felt, the story-teller or writer must help people to face the tug-of-war between past and present. In her critical analysis of the work of African writers, Long Drums and Cannons, she recognises a commitment which she shares with them 'to illuminate the past of their people in order to bring a sense of dignity and continuity to the lives of men and women in the present.'<sup>6</sup> It is important to the individual to know from whence he sprang, to have continuity with the past, 'to have a place to stand on.'<sup>7</sup> Margaret Laurence sees the writer as an important agent in the process of self-determination. 'We have little identity until our story is told'<sup>8</sup> she asserted in an interview with Michel Fabré. In identifying with the emergent African nations, now moving into the post-colonial period, she is by inference suggesting that Canadian writers too have a duty to help their fellow Canadians value themselves more and appreciate their heritage. Clara Thomas couples her name with writers from Nigeria and the West Indies when she says, 'The passing on of the authentic heritage of their people is a central preoccupation of writers today, particularly of writers of the post-colonial nations... writers who accept a strong social and political, as well as an artistic responsibility in writing out of

their own culture and primarily for their own people.<sup>9</sup> Margaret Laurence confirms what is seen as her affinity with these writers when she writes

I began to see how much my own writing had followed the same pattern - the attempt to assimilate the past, partly to be freed from it, partly in order to understand myself and perhaps others of my generation, through seeing where we had come from.<sup>10</sup>

The writer, by telling the story of one person in the context of his time and place, is telling the story of a generation. This leads us to Margaret Laurence's belief that fiction and history are twin disciplines. She shared with W.L. Morton, whom she greatly admired, the belief that history is a matter of personal experience, of an individual response to external events, and that each presentation of the facts will be unique because it will be conditioned by the mind of the perceiver. History is what happens to people as well as to nations. The boundary between fact and fiction becomes blurred, as recognised by Morag Gunn, 'convinced that fiction was more true than fact. Or that fact was in fact fiction.' (The Diviners, p.25.) The historian needs 'to reconcile the actual and the mind's landscape.'<sup>11</sup> This is achieved 'by that "passionate thinking"... which fuses the thing seen and the person seeing, that reconciles the seer and the seen, that is part of the magic of art, and part also of the historian's craft.'<sup>12</sup> In a personal tribute to Morton, Margaret Laurence wrote:

We agreed that the two disciplines (history and fiction) were closely related. The fiction writer seeks to create a world that has been experienced as an external 'real' world and as an internal one. The historian selects the facts and interpretations. Both try to arrive at some kind of truth which can never be complete but which will possess its own integrity.<sup>13</sup>

P.H. Easingwood recognises in this statement 'her wish to see fiction as a kind of history, and through it to relate the past to the present and the future.'<sup>14</sup>

This interpretation of the function of history is at variance with many historians' belief that history should be what they choose to call fact. When Morag is twelve, Christie Logan unearths his copy of the history of his regiment, the 60th Canadian Field Artillery, and reads her the official account of the battle of Bourlon Wood.

"Oh Jesus," Christie says, "don't they make it sound like a Sunday School picnic?"... "Well, d'you see, it was like the book says, but it wasn't like that also. That is the strangeness."(p.90)

Christie's story is history too, and in every way gives a truer account of the horrors of war. Both Vanessa's father and Rachel's experienced these horrors in World War One and their stories, no less true than Christie's, were too terrible to share with anyone.

So strong is Margaret Laurence's conviction that the mental health of individuals and of nations is dependent on their having a firm grasp of their stance vis-à-vis others that both her pronouncements and the comments of those writing about her work are full of such words as ancestors, ancestral past, ancestor worship, heritage, inheritors, and inheritance, myths, the mythic and mythology, legends and tradition, or simply roots. Of course, when we begin to use words like myth or legend we have left the realm of history for fiction anyway.

Morag Gunn, alone among the Manawaka women, is deprived of family at an early age and has no history except that provided by some faded

photographs and a few equally dim memories of those first five years which ended so finally with the 'metallic clank of the farm gate being shut.' (p.17) as she was carried away from her birthplace. Many of the memories she has are recognised by the adult Morag as wishful thinking or fantasy. Yet she clings to the photos, referring to them as her 'totems', with all that the word implies of tribal history and legend, of native story-teller and myth. Christie recognises Morag's deprivation and by means of his stories of Piper Gunn and his proud wife, Morag, with whom she can identify, (that Morag 'who was never afraid of anything in this whole wide world'. p.52), he gives her the necessary belief in herself to survive. Christie in fact performs the function of the shanachie, the Gaelic story-teller, genealogist and transmitter of family lore. At one point, too, he is by implication connected with Ossian. Lazarus Tonnerre passes on to his son, Jules, similar pride in his heritage through stories of the Métis and the Riel Rebellion. Later, both Jules and Morag pass on to Pique these heroic tales of courage and endurance which become part of her mythology. Moreover, each parent speaks of these things to the world at large either through folk song or fiction.

Apart from making a statement about time and history, Margaret Laurence, in her novel, The Diviners, examines the role of the writer in society by allowing her readers to share in the actual birth and growth of a novelist, as well as to feel what it is like to create a fiction. Writers frequently describe the process of creation in their novels and proffer theories about the function of the novelist in society. However, it is less usual for an author to do these two

things by writing a book about a novelist writing a novel, where parts of the novel we read are the novel as it is written. Such a device requires the reader to assume a stance rather like that of the photographer photographing someone taking a photograph.

The book has two threads. The first leads us through the day-to-day life of Morag Gunn, author, struggling to write her sixth book at the same time as she attempts to deal with the people and problems which surround her and threaten to take over. The second is interwoven with the first and is a biographical account of Morag's journey towards and arrival at the point where we join her - a sort of bildungsroman. The question the reader must ask is: Is the story of the second thread the novel which is being written in the first? And the answer to this is almost certainly 'Yes'.

From this we can see that the structure of this last of the Manawaka novels has all the complexity which we have come to expect in Margaret Laurence's books. As usual we move in and out of the inner world of the main character. However, the author has returned to the shape she used in her first book, The Stone Angel, where there is a movement back and forth from the present to the past, with the two stories progressing forward in time at an unequal rate. The time scale in the present covers a mere few months in the summer; that of the past stretches over the lifetime of the central character up to the moment when we first meet her. The process is one of examining the past in order to understand why things are as they are in the present. In The Stone Angel Hagar Shipley faces death; Morag Gunn, at forty-seven, simply faces a future which has been determined by her

past. Her crisis is not oblivion, but loneliness without her daughter who sets out on her own voyage of self-discovery. 'In some ways, Morag is what Hagar might have been if she could have broken completely free from the stone angel mould as her instincts often lead her to do.'<sup>15</sup> The structure of The Diviners does differ from the earliest novel in that Margaret Laurence borrows from the intervening books, A Jest of God and The Fire-Dwellers, the device of the inner dialogue, to reveal the deeper thoughts and feelings not made public in the narrative. In other words, it is a judicious amalgam of the differing methods with which she has experimented in previous novels. More matter of fact, like The Stone Angel, it is neither as disturbed in tone as A Jest of God nor as convoluted in structure as The Fire-Dwellers.

The quietness of tone grows out of the description of the life which the mature Morag leads in her quiet backwater where time, like her river, flows at a steady pace, season by season, while she sits at her work table, becalmed as she river-watches. The stance of watcher is set immediately -

The river flowed both ways. The current moved from north to south, but the wind usually came from the south, rippling the bronze-green water in the opposite direction. This apparently impossible contradiction made apparent and possible, still fascinated Morag even after the years of river-watching. (p.1)

and is emphasised throughout the novel by such references as 'Morag went downstairs, made coffee and sat at the table, looking at the morning river.' (p.55) The sense of observing is also reflected by the minute descriptions of her natural surroundings which usually accompany these references. It is important too that the reader be



aware of Morag's isolation. Her farmhouse is set in a wild garden on the wrong side of the river for MacConnell's Landing, and for much of the time during the summer when the novel is written she lives alone. Morag refers to her place as 'her island' (p.356), an apt association since Royland, and anyone else for that matter, must reach her by boat. Her isolation symbolises the role of the writer who is an observer, who needs solitude to practise her craft. However, Morag is not only a watcher of the river; when we first meet her she is being forced into the role of observer to her daughter, Pique, as she sets out to find her own truths. What Morag did before she reached her quiet retreat Pique must do by herself. Morag's experiences cannot help her daughter. Indeed, the discovery of Pique's farewell note sets Morag off on her reminiscences which show us how she fared in the same search.

The novel's structure is not simple.

In The Diviners, Margaret Laurence is dealing with the longest, most complicated prose-narrative that she has written, with a great increase in the challenges and perplexities of weaving a complex of persons, places and time together.<sup>16</sup>

The movement between the two parallel stories is extremely subtle. Throughout that part of the book dealing with the present, the reader is given facts which only assume relevance much later in that part which recreates the past. For example, at the beginning of Chapter Three Morag has a telephone call from her daughter Pique's father. We are not told his name, we wonder why he is not living at the farm with Morag, we sense a mystery, but it is many pages on into the book before we know the answers to our unspoken questions. Morag in turn telephones someone called Ella, obviously a good friend, and again we get the feeling that she is important to Morag but our curiosity must

remain unsatisfied for some time before we learn her place in the story. Ella mentions McRaith; once more we get the feeling that his name has strong associations for Morag, but we cannot stop the story and say, "Wait a minute! Who's he?" This device cleverly duplicates the experience of a stranger introduced into a group of people who all know each other well. Family secrets are only revealed as intimacy increases. So, the reader must wait until he knows Morag better to become familiar with the gallery of people who are connected with her past. By now Margaret Laurence has polished to perfection the skills of leading her reader back and forth in time, a step forward here; two, three steps backward there. Simple strategems like a glance at herself in the mirror, a telephone call, a photograph in the newspaper, the playing of a record, the writing of a letter, the sight of a blue heron or a skein of geese flying south trigger off memories of the past. In this book these flashbacks are treated as clips from a movie.

In contrast to the quiet, ordinary quality of the characterizations of Morag and Royland and the low key of their voices, scenes and characters within the Memorybank Movies are full of sound, movement, energy, colour and drama.

The history of Morag Gunn is divided into sections like chapters, each of which is called a Memorybank Movie and carries a title like the subtitles in the old silent films. To emphasise the sense of immediacy which Morag herself feels as she recalls the events of her past, these sections of the novel are written in the present tense. By contrast, the actual present as far as she is concerned is recounted in the past tense. This use of the past tense in recounting what is happening in the present keeps the reader at arm's length, observing the observer. The immediacy of what Morag recalls, and

which the reader experiences for the first time, is suggested by the use of the present. In both strands of the novel the author uses the third person - yet another device which emphasises the sense of standing back to watch. Only in the italicised sections which represent Morag's innermost thoughts do we find the first person used - as one would expect.

A device Margaret Laurence has not used before involves the parcelling up of the eleven chapters into five significant units: a brief section at the beginning and at the end of the book, plus three much larger ones of several chapters each, and of approximately the same length, which take up the main part of the novel, and deal with Morag's memories of her life from age four to forty-four. Clara Thomas describes this structure as 'epic in both its intentions and its techniques'<sup>18</sup> and says that it 'incorporates many of the traditional epic techniques.. the stories of heroes and their battles, the lists and heightened descriptions, the contained epic, the transposition of the oral into the written - and one magnificent epic simile'.<sup>19</sup> Each unit bears a title which encapsulates the most important single influence on Morag during the years it chronicles. Of the three long middle sections, the first, 'The Nuisance Grounds', brings the reader into living, breathing contact with a way of life few will have experienced. In our first contact with Manawaka as Morag recalls it, the author gives us 'a multi-sensory, wide-angle lens camera setting'<sup>20</sup> picture of a town we have met in her other books, but seen now from a different perspective, negative of the previous positive. For fifteen years after the death of her parents in an epidemic of poliomyelitis Morag Gunn lives in a home permeated

by the smell of the town dump, the Nuisance Grounds. Her adoptive father, Christie Logan, is the garbageman or Scavenger. During those years spent on Hill Street on the wrong side of the tracks in Manawaka she suffers the indignity of being the outsider, the lowest of the low in Manawakan society, only slightly more highly regarded than the Tonnerres, the halfbreeds who inhabit the valley of the Wachakwa River below the town. As she reaches adolescence the driving force in her life becomes her determination to get away, and her growing sexuality drives her to a strange, loose liaison with Jules Tonerre, outsider extraordinaire, a métis, halfbreed or bois brûlé. With him she has an inexplicable empathy. The section ends as Morag lies listening to the sound of the night train on its way to the great Out There.

Phase Two of her life begins with Morag aboard that very train, 'on the night train to Everywhere... swifiting into life.' (p.173) Towards the Halls of Sion - towards Jerusalem the Golden - or in this case, to college in Winnipeg. It seems to her that what she is seeking are all the trappings of respectability which she was denied in Manawaka. As she says to Ella Gerson, the only close friend she makes in the one year she is at college,

I want to be glamorous and adored and get married and have kids. I still try to kid myself that I don't want that. But I do. I want all that. As well. All I want is everything. (p.182)

At nineteen she aspires to being a carbon copy of the girls like Vanessa MacLeod and Stacey Cameron whom she envied and tried to emulate in her hometown. And, hey presto, that is what she becomes in no time at all. As child bride of the handsome, distinguished, older man, Professor Brooke Skelton - English and hallmarked for success -

she enters the fairytale world of happy ever after. Over the next four years Morag learns to tolerate, if not to like, city life in Toronto, where she works hard at acquiring all those middle class, acceptable attributes she lacked in Manawaka. Model wife, she would like to become a model mother, but Brooke seems strangely reluctant to become a father. Gradually Morag realises that his childhood experiences of family life have so marred him that he cannot face embarking on the long term commitment of being a parent. Morag is his child, his woman, his one love, his little one. "I like it here with just the two of us." (p.222) Morag has been making good use of her time with Brooke by reading her way through the great novels of Western culture. Then she begins one day, almost unexpectedly, to write a novel herself. It takes her three years and distracts her temporarily from her frustrated longing for a child. A trip back to Manawaka for her adoptive mother Prin's funeral reawakens in her the fierce desire to be taken seriously, a feeling she has been stifling during her years with Brooke. Suddenly

she hates it all, this external self who is at such variance with whatever or whoever remains inside the glossy painted shell. If anything remains. Her remains. (p.248)

Part of her seems to have died. She returns to the flat, as if to a prison, and knows she must escape, because

remaining there meant to be chained to that image of yourself which he (Brooke) must have and which must forever be distorted. (p.257)

Brooke unwittingly drives her to break with him because of his cruel and racist remarks about Jules Tonnerre with whom she takes refuge and by whom she conceives a child. At the end of this period in her life we see her once again on a train.

Once again, going into the Everywhere, where anything may happen. She no longer believes in the Everything out there. But part of her still believes... The train moves west. (pp.281-282)

and ten years have passed.

During the next ten years, in 'Rites of Passage', Morag undergoes all the trials which initiate her into full status as a human being whose apprenticeship has been long and painful. Her reward is a sense of peace and self-knowledge which will enable her to live out the rest of her life in acceptance and hope. We see her on the move from one temporary abode to another, bringing up her daughter, Piquette Tonnerre Gunn, by herself, writing for a living, searching for a resting place. She has cast aside the trappings of respectability and struggles to earn respect as an individual in her own right, as a novelist and as a person. Hers is a lonely, semi-nomadic, sometimes hand-to-mouth existence, but the inner toughness, which she refers to as bloody-mindedness, helps her to survive. Her search for love leads her into several squalid, casual encounters, and the only man she could contemplate marrying is already married. Four novels later she is called back to Manawaka to Christie's bedside. His death leaves her in the grip of a black depression which makes it impossible for her to take any decisions for the future. "'Save me O God, for the waters are come in unto my soul'" (p.413) But fate takes a hand and she sees an advertisement for a farm at a place called McConnell's Landing in Southern Ontario. Morag has found a home at last. 'Land. A river. Log house nearly a century old, built by great pioneering couple, Simon and Sarah Cooper. History. Ancestors.' (p.414) Indeed, the word 'ancestors' is most important. She has at last found a place rooted in Canadian history which includes her past, and she can begin

to put down roots too. When Jules Tonnerre re-enters her life for the third time, he sings to his fifteen-year old daughter, Pique, of his ancestors and hers, and of their part in Canadian history. He receives from Morag a knife Christie had given her many years before, the only present he had ever given her. This knife had once belonged to Jules' father, Lazarus Tonnerre, so it is a link with his past. This heavily symbolic gesture ends the journey into the past. Moreover, the knife becomes Pique's at her father's death. A plaid pin, the parallel symbol for that other group of dispossessed, the Scots, remains in Morag's possession. It too will go to Pique on her mother's death, and she will have received her full inheritance.

The short chapter which concludes the book shares its title with the novel as a whole. In a matter of a few weeks, Jules is dead, having taken his own life, possibly with the very knife Morag had given him, rather than die slowly and painfully from cancer of the throat, and Pique again sets off on her own journey of discovery. Once more Morag hears the whistle of a train going west, this time carrying her daughter out to the prairies where her father's people belonged, and from which Morag had fled. Morag is left to get on with what is left of her life. Some of her questions have been answered; some, she suspects, will always remain, because they have no answers. But she has discovered her place in the scheme of things and accepts that we cannot see into the future.

In fact, this short section, coupled with the short introductory one, provide a prologue and an epilogue to the story as a whole. In the first chapter, entitled 'The River of Now and Then' we meet Morag on that morning when she learns that her daughter, Pique, has gone

off she knows not where. Morag finds herself drawn into her past, first through examination of those six old snapshots, all that she has from her earliest childhood, and then by means of the first of the Memorybank Movies. It is a moving comment on the paucity of those early memories that they fit within the compass of a shabby manilla envelope and are so brief in the telling. However, this opening section of the novel has a more important function to perform than that of providing entry into the history of Morag Gunn. Its title introduces us to a pervading theme of The Diviners - time seen as a river. This theme is not new; it has been used by many writers, who have also recognised its symbolic aptness. Morag finds herself drawn by some primal instinct to the river which she can watch in all seasons from her kitchen window. It forms the boundary on one side of her land, and each day she turns to it for a few moments before she begins to work.

This was what Morag looked at every day, the river flowing both ways, and yet it never lost its ancient power for her, and it never ceased to be new. (p.285)

In fact, the river flows throughout the book, for at the beginning of each chapter except the last, mention is made of it, and the novel ends as it begins, with a description of this river that 'seemed to be flowing both ways.' (p.453) Truly, the River of Now and Then. Some months have passed; lives have been changed; this river of no name remains the same. To Morag it represents the constant in a world of change. It was there long before she was born and will still be there long after she is dead, but for the time being the Cooper Place has become the Gunn Place and Morag has found her resting place, her growing-old place, on that river which has seen the generations come and go. '... I can bear to live here, until I die, and I couldn't



elsewhere.' (p.357) For Morag this is what time is all about - history, ancestors, continuity, life and death. During the summer she has looked back up the river of time into her own past and has come to recognise how each generation carries forward with it something from the generations that went before. She doesn't really remember what her own parents were like, 'Yet they're inside me, flowing unknown in my blood and moving unrecognized in my skull.' (p.19) Just like the river. Morag realises that she has done a good bit of living now too. A new generation, represented by Pique and her young neighbours, the Smiths, is pressing forward into life. She muses to herself, 'Time running out. Is that what is really going on, with me, now, with her? Pique, harbinger of my death, continuer of life.' (p.290)

In order to ensure that the reader is aware of the importance Morag places on the passing of time, Margaret Laurence deliberately shapes the novel itself so that its flow mimics the river which appears to flow both ways, for the narrative moves forward in time as well as backward into time past. This is a device she also used in The Stone Angel and A Bird in the House, without the symbolic river so necessary to this novel's theme. She makes Morag relate events to periods when she was a specific age. There is a very definite progress in time with frequent reference to Morag's age or to the passing of a specific number of years. We learn on the second page of the novel that Morag is forty-seven, and on the very first that Pique is eighteen. Such references to age as 'Not until I was six', 'Seven is much older than six.', 'She has scarcely spoken to him for two years', '"Brooke, I am twenty-eight years old..."', 'Three years, and

the novel is finished', 'At forty-four - an older writer?', '...realising that it is different now from ten years before' are everywhere. The same relentless repetition, in order to draw the reader's attention to some point she wishes to make, is used by the author in describing Morag in her relationship to the river.<sup>21</sup> This is an indication of how carefully she crafts her work, and how little she trusts her reader to get the point she is making.

For both the reader and the protagonist the years pass inexorably by to make up a lifetime. The strong emphasis on the seasons and the progression from month to month strengthens the sense of time passing. At the beginning of each chapter, before the Memorybank Movies begin, we are made aware of the changes going on in the outside world of plants and living creatures, as spring gives way to summer and then to autumn. The trees green over with leaf then the leaves change to gold and red and are gone. The swallows above the kitchen door raise their brood, teach them to fly, then suddenly one day they have disappeared. The most potent symbol of all, especially to a Canadian, is that of the Canada geese whose skeins fly south each autumn, returning north in the spring, thus marking the rhythm of the seasons.

The air was distinctly cold. Autumn nearly over. Winter soon to descend. Sitting on the dock, Morag became aware of an unmistakable sound overhead. Very far up, they flew in their V-formation, the few leaders out front, the flock sounding the deep long-drawn-out resonant raucous cry that no words could ever catch but which no one who every heard it could forget. A sound and a sight with such a splendour to it that the only true response was silence. When these birds left, the winter was about to happen. When they returned you would know it was spring. The Canada geese were flying south. (p.411)

There are many other themes developed in The Diviners. In this it differs radically from the other four novels, except possibly The

Fire-Dwellers, where we see Margaret Laurence first drawing the reader's attention to certain aspects of modern society which she thinks need examination. One of these themes is modern marriage. In the last book marriage is shown as an institution into which people can be pushed by social pressures, and which can appear to be the only career for a woman. Indeed, in The Diviners Morag rushes into marriage with Brooke when she is nineteen, partly because she wants to fit into the pattern of social convention which was denied her in Manawaka. Dr Brooke Skelton is a much better catch than either Vanessa MacLeod or Stacey Cameron could hope to find. This does not suggest that she did not love him. She did. The marriage failed as much because of his inability to accept her as a person in her own right rather than as one of his possessions, as because Morag had grown up in the ten years of their marriage. Both she and her close friend, Ella Gerson, rush into early marriage followed by divorce. A good many years later Ella finds a man to marry and be happy with. Perhaps one should not marry so young. Certainly Pique's generation do not seem so worried about the conventions as Morag was at her age. To them sharing a bed does not necessarily mean sharing a life together for all time. But Morag does not suggest that living without a helpmate is easy. She sometimes longs for 'someone to talk it over with. Someone to share the pain.' (p.364) Is the author suggesting that it is difficult for a woman writer to live an ordinary married life, because of the commitment she feels to her work? 'For many years, when I first started writing seriously, I felt enormous guilt about taking the time for writing away from my family. My generation was brought to believe you had to iron the sheets.'<sup>22</sup> Certainly she

makes the point in this novel that writing is an exacting, exhausting business which can absorb time and energy some husbands might feel should be spent in more useful pursuits like preparing meals or sewing on buttons. Is she a feminist? Not in the radical sense. However, Morag makes the observation that it seems rather unfair that every young man should expect to marry a virgin while exerting every effort to steal the virginity of any girl he goes out with, that men should prefer their women to be dumb in the sense of unintelligent, and that a husband should expect his wife to be faithful without considering it one of his obligations to her. She makes very little headway with the young men from the R.C.A.F. Air Training Station near Manawaka because she is not good at small talk like Stacey Cameron.

I want to be able to talk to boys the way they want to be talked to. Only I can't seem to get the trick of it. (p.181)

At college, she and Ella have few boyfriends for much the same reason. As Ella says, 'And why should I pretend to be brainless? I'm not brainless.' (p.182) Even Daniel McRaith, who has been Morag's lover for three years in London, balks at the idea of his wife, Bridie, sleeping with another man.

One of the other themes from The Fire-Dwellers which recurs in The Diviners is the imminence of the holocaust. The worry is not expressed in such exaggerated terms as when Stacey MacAindra thinks about the coming catastrophe, but Morag does call Pique's generation 'the children of the apocalypse.' (p.4) Moreover, she is keenly aware of the danger to nature of the side effects of twentieth century industrial society. She fears for her beloved river from pollution and talks of river-slaying. But the tone is less hysterical than that

of The Fire-Dwellers. Margaret Laurence would appear to suggest that because Morag lives in the country she can be more dispassionate. Stacey, trapped in the city, bombarded daily on all sides by doom and destruction in the media, is more paranoid. Morag has deliberately sought out and found a retreat, an 'island' where she can be away from all that. She has always found city life unsatisfactory. We do not get the impression that radio, television and newspapers play a significant part in her life. There is a pervading sense of silence and peace in the Gunn House.

In The Diviners we are introduced to a young couple, Alf A-Okay Smith and his wife Maudie, who typify those among the new generation who have deliberately chosen to return to the land. Such young people, usually well-educated, very earnest and completely dedicated to their belief in the Good Life, come to the rural community as refugees from what they consider the horrors of modern city life, bringing with them nothing but enthusiasm and determination. Through Morag, the author pokes gentle fun at them and their humourless filling of every moment of every day with worthy effort, and at their romantic view of the life they have adopted. No time with them for idleness or for river-watching. However, she does accept that they bring the worthwhile gift of love of the land, and she approves when Royland arranges for A-Okay to acquire a bit of practical knowledge about farming from one of the local farmers.

However dour and bad-tempered, and Charlie Greenhouse was certainly that, he could undoubtedly teach them things they couldn't learn from books. True, they wouldn't find him easy to get on with. Charlie hated trees, which he regarded as the natural enemy of man. He also appeared to hate the earth, but at least he knew enough not to fight it in impossible ways. Charlie reminded Morag of various prairie farmers - he wrestled the land like Jacob wrestling with the Angel of the Lord, until (if ever)

it blessed him... A-Okay and Dan would not have Charlie's outlook. They were different - they had known something of Babylon, that mighty city which dealt in gold and silver, and in the souls of men:... They came to the land in ignorance, perhaps expecting miracles which would not occur, but at least with caring, seeing it as a gift and not an affliction. (p.410)

The relationship between parent and child, which Margaret Laurence examined in The Fire-Dwellers, also appears as a theme in this novel. Morag deliberately chose to have a child and bring it up on her own. She suffers increasing pangs of guilt over this as Pique grows up and she begins to see that in fulfilling her own need to build a family, even an imperfect one, she had 'clobbered her with a hell of a situation to live with, although I never meant to.' (p.99) Consequently Pique's rejection of her mother, when it comes, goes well beyond the normal teen-age rebellion against parental authority. The author gives us a touching picture of Pique at seventeen, in hospital after an overdose of drugs, declaring in her anguish, "'Can't you see I despise you? ... You aren't my mother. I haven't got a mother.'" (p.99) Morag had thought that her love and care would be enough, and so they were, until the time came for Pique to face the world. Ironically, she had wanted to give Pique some of the things she had not had as a child, yet in choosing Jules Tonnerre as the child's father, she had made sure that her daughter would be cut off from her peers as Morag had been. Was it for different reasons, or for the same? Both found themselves beyond the pale of respectable society, whose rules they appeared to flout. Morag has learned over the years that she must be herself, whatever the cost; for her daughter the pain of being unacceptable is still urgent and destructive. The mother has to face the fact that she has made her daughter not only an outsider, but one of the dispossessed too, a

halfbreed belonging nowhere. Apart from the guilt Morag feels, she also discovers to her horror that she is jealous of her daughter now that she is a young woman - jealous of her youth, her beauty, her men, her unselfconsciousness about sex. Once recognised, she can accept it, as Stacey does with her ambivalent attitude to her beautiful young daughter, Kate, in The Fire-Dwellers. The author suggests that this alienation between the two generations is in the natural order of things and cannot be avoided.

They (the Smiths) believed, somewhat touchingly, that their enlightenment would mean that Tom (the young son) would be spared any sense of alienation towards them later on, in his adolescence. Morag had, once upon a time, held that belief herself. (p.54)

In a brief scene between Dan Scranton and Morag, the author records the universal sense of rebellion the young feel toward the way of life their parents often chart for them. Dan says "'I have to make my own place.'" (p.354) and although Morag understands what he is saying and agrees with him, she knows from her own experience that Dan "'can't throw him (his father) away entirely. He and a lot of others are there. Here." Morag reached out and touched the vein on Dan's wrist.' (p.354) We carry the past in our veins with us and cannot erase its influence on us or our future. Each generation is bound to the last by inescapable bonds.

There is yet another aspect of the gap between young and old which is dealt with for the first time in this novel, perhaps because it is a fairly recent phenomenon. This has to do with the attitude which certain of the older generation have toward the young, who appear to be so very different from them: the sense of fear that many older people experience in the presence of some of the young. Their untrammelled physicality seems threatening. Because Pique was a young

woman, hitchhiking, and carrying a guitar, she was automatically categorised as an undesirable to whom one could behave in nasty ways without fear of reproach. Sometimes young people don't need to act at all; the dislike and fear are just there, palpable. Pique says "'They hate kids hitching, some places. They'd really like you to be dead... They think they're sweet reasonableness, and it's you that's in the wrong, just by being, and not being like them, or looking like them, or wanting their kind of life. It's the anger you can feel, even if they don't lay a hand on you.'" (p.233) Redneck communities abhor those who are different.

Margaret Laurence returns over and over again to the theme of small town passion for respectability and conformity. In The Diviners it is a major background influence. As the adoptive daughter of Christie Logan, garbage collector, Morag suffered for years the jibes of her schoolmates, the pity of women like Mrs Cameron and Mrs McVitie, the condescension or overt dislike of many of her teachers, because she was not dressed as well as everyone else and came from such a dubious environment. Could anything good come out of Hill Street? As an adolescent she tried to copy the girls from the well-to-do families, hoping to become one of them, though she was never quite acceptable. Christie tried to teach Morag that it was all hypocrisy, pretension and lack of charity, but it is only years later that she is able to turn her back on this structure of rules and assumptions about proper behaviour and make her own rules. Then she can discard her early attempts to be fashionable - 'her glossy painted shell'. She learns to accept people for what they are; she ceases to worry about what people think of her. However, the old



patterns persist, even in the community of McConnell's Landing, as Pique so painfully reveals to her mother one day. "'What do you know of it? You've never been called a dirty halfbreed. You've never had somebody tell you your mother was crazy because she lived out here alone and wrote dirty books and had kooky people coming from the city to visit. Have you? Have you?'" (p.421) The same. Yet not the same. Different oddities, the same response. Jules tells Morag, when he turns up at the farm, "'Hell, nearly everybody in McConnell's Landing knows you, Morag. They think you're crazy as a bedbug.'" (p.424) Jules has had long years of practice in coping with this attitude in his career as a folk singer in the seedier clubs around the country. But neither she nor Jules care any longer. They have accepted that they will always be outsiders. Pique is still learning.

The role of the outsider features prominently in this novel. In fact, it is full of characters who do not fit any socially recognised pigeonhole - people like Christie Logan whose job places him among the untouchables, invisible in broad daylight on Main Street in Manawaka. Morag says at his death that "'He lived nearly all his life in this town, and everyone knew him to see him, and they called him Christie, but nobody knew him, to speak of, or even to speak to, much, if it comes to that.'" (p.398) Then there is Christie's simple, slatternly wife, Prin, so incongruously named Princess, who is overlooked in church on Sunday by the rest of the well-dressed Christians in the congregation. Outsiders, too, like the Tonnerre family, part French, part Cree Indian, métis, halfbreeds; dispossessed and disregarded. Then there are the Gersons, Polish Jewish refugees from Nazism in a gentile city like Winnipeg; Fan

Brady, another refugee, from the sticks, who has set herself beyond the bounds of respectability by becoming an artiste, a danseuse at a nightclub called the Figleaf. The A-Okay Smiths have chosen the role of outsiders in coming as they do from the city into a rural community. Pique is different, partly because of Morag, partly because of the tainted blood which flows in her veins, her inheritance from her father, Jules Tonnerre, wandering minstrel and a true man of no fixed abode. Margaret Laurence is fascinated by the plight of those she would call the dispossessed - the Highlanders who were forced off their crofts during the Clearances, the *métis* who were driven off their land by those same Highlanders, the Indians who were dispossessed by everyone of everything. All this, she feels, is a part of the history of her people. Morag, too, is an outsider, one who tried to cross the tracks into suburbia and found life there did not suit her. There was too much of Christie's teaching in her after all. Something in her requires her to remain an outsider - or set apart. To be set apart suggests being chosen for some special purpose. In Morag's case it was to be a writer, a wordsmith, a maker of fictions.

Reference is made earlier to the fact that Margaret Laurence, in this book, is describing what she believes it means to be a writer. Through her character, Morag, she works out her own conception of what it means to write novels, both in terms of the process of writing itself and of the contribution which the writer makes to society. First of all, through Morag's account of the creative impulse as she experiences it, the author sets out to involve the reader in the actual process of creation. So, although we are reading

a novel about a novelist, we are in a very real sense reading it over the novelist's shoulder as she commits it to paper. As to the social relevance of what is done, Morag sees writing as a special power, a grace with which one is blessed, which allows the writer to discover truths, to make them accessible to others, so these truths may bring spiritual refreshment to those who seek them. This power is embodied in Royland who can divine the presence of water deep below the earth's surface. Morag on the other hand must divine deep within herself in the substrata of her mind in order to locate universal truths which the reader can then draw up and use to nourish the soul. The writer's duty then becomes that of dredging up from Jung's collective unconscious what everyone knows to be true once it is presented. It is the writer's privilege to remind the reader of what he has known all along, deep down, but has either forgotten or refused to recognise.

Since The Diviners deals with the development of an artist, it becomes a *kunstlerroman* which begins when Morag, as a child, starts to write as a means of escape from the squalor around her, creating a fantasy world in which everything is beautiful. She discovers early that there is a deep need in her to set down stories and this grows stronger as she grows older. When she is in her 'teens, as a result of helpful criticism from her English teacher, Miss Melrose, she realises what her future must be. 'She has known for some time what she had to do, but never given the knowledge to any other person or thought that any person might suspect. Now it is as though a strong hand has been laid on her shoulders. Strong and friendly. But merciless.' (p.122) The die is cast; some inner force is driving her

towards becoming a writer. While working for a year as a journalist on the Manawaka Banner, she learns the skill of reporting real events, as well as making the money she needs to escape from the town she hates. Even in the fallow years during her marriage to Brooke she is absorbing knowledge about her craft through her reading. In the final analysis, she cannot deny her compulsion to write, any more than she can deny her urge towards motherhood. Margaret Laurence is suggesting that an author's books are like children, conceived within just as a child is. Morag's characters seem to grow out of her and possess her while she is writing. Early in her relationship with Brooke she discovers that 'not even for Dr. Skelton can she write a story which wasn't there to be written.' (p.190) Whilst writing her first book Spear of Innocence she tells us that 'she knows more about Lilac than Lilac knows about herself.' (p.225) Later, by her description of how she works, she reveals how painful and exhausting the process can be.

Morag usually stops writing about four, so she will have time to get outside the novel before Brooke arrives home. She does not always manage. Sometimes she forgets that time, outside, is passing. (p.229)

Odd - if you had a friend who had just aborted herself, causing chaos round and not only to herself, no one would be surprised if you felt upset, anxious, shaken. It is no different with fiction - more so, maybe, because Morag has felt Lilac's feelings. The blood is no less real for being invisible to the external eye. She wants to explain (to Brooke), but feels too tired. (p.230)

In these two passages the reader glimpses the very process of creation. Throughout the novel, we see the writer as a person who must write. She is driven by some inner compelling force. In a letter to G.H. Lewes, quoted in Margaret Lane's book The Brontë Story, Charlotte Brontë describes how the creative process works in her.

When authors write best, or, at least, when they write most fluently, an influence seems to waken in them, which becomes their master- which will have its own way - putting out of view all behests but its own, dictating certain words, and insisting on their being used, whether vehement or measured in their nature; new-moulding characters, giving unthought-of turns to incidents, rejecting carefully-elaborated old ideas, and suddenly creating and adopting new ones.<sup>23</sup>

It is hard work, beginning hardest of all. 'Getting started each morning was monstrous, an almost impossible exercise of will, in which finally the will was not enough, and it had to be begun on faith.' (p.169) Sometimes she looks 'at the pale blue empty lines like shelves on the page waiting to be stuffed with what?' (p.290) She speaks of the daily process of getting inside and then back outside of a novel, of the sense of emptiness when a book is finally completed. She describes the way in which the characters can take over and appear to live a life of their own. 'Jonah inhabits Morag's head, and talks in his own voice. In some ways she knows more about Coral, who is so uncertainly freed by Jonah's ultimate death, but it is Jonah himself who seems more likely to take on his own life in the fiction.' (p.366)

There is also the time problem - that of finding time, amongst all the other duties a woman seems to have to assume, to actually continue the work she is driven to do. 'How to get this novel written, in between or as well as everything else?' (p.366) To Graeme Gibson's question in an interview "Does being a novelist demand a particular kind of selfishness?", Margaret Laurence replied:

Not only selfishness, it demands a certain kind of unscrupulousness, if you're going to write at all. You have to create a situation in which you are able to be alone for part of the time each day when you're working. And to do this you can't necessarily be available, say for your children, sometimes even when they need you and you try and balance things. You don't always succeed.<sup>24</sup>

Virginia Woolf suggests in her essay 'A Room of One's Own' that what the woman novelist needs is one hundred pounds a year income and a room of her own, thus freeing her to get on with writing without the distractions of having to earn a living or attend to the needs of others. Margaret Laurence's experience is one shared by many women writers. Returning to Charlotte Brontë's experience, in her biography The Life of Charlotte Brontë Mrs Gaskell asserts:

Henceforward Charlotte Brontë's existence becomes divided into two parallel currents - her life as Currer Bell, the author; her life as Charlotte Brontë, the woman. There were separate duties belonging to each character - not opposing each other, not impossible, but difficult to be reconciled. When a man becomes an author, it is probably merely a change of employment to him. He takes a portion of that time which has hitherto been devoted to some other study or pursuit... But no other can take up the quiet, regular duties of the daughter, the wife or the mother, as well as she whom God has appointed to fill that particular place: a woman's principal work in life is hardly left to her own choice; nor can she drop the domestic charges devolving on her as an individual, for the exercise of the most splendid talents that were ever bestowed. And yet she must not shrink from the extra responsibility implied by the very fact of her possessing such talents. She must not hide her gift in a napkin: it was meant for the use and service of others. In an humble and faithful spirit must she labour to do what is not impossible, or God would not have set her to do it.<sup>25</sup>

Not quite the words Morag would have used, but the meaning is the same. Indeed, the words echo Mrs Gaskell's own experience, for she had a husband to look after and a household of girls to bring up to her own very high standards. The attitude of others to earning a living by writing can be a burden too. Maggie Tefler, Morag's first landlady in Vancouver, probably expresses many people's views. When she heard that Morag was a writer, all she could say was, "Well,... it must be nice to be able to earn a living just sitting there." (p.299) We have already been told of the attitude of the citizens of McConnell's Landing to Morag's profession. Aspiring writers want to

know the established writer's secret, but as Morag says to an early morning telephone inquiry, "'I worked like hell.... There is no secret.'" (p.24) To her, being a writer is work, hard work, the only work she can do, something even her perceptive old friend, Royland, did not at first understand. 'He got the word right now. Once he used to ask her if she was doing any writing these days. Until he learned that the only meaning the word 'work' had for her was writing, which was peculiar, considering that it was more of a free gift than work, when it was going well, and the only kind of work she enjoyed doing.' (p.98)

At the same time, Morag's attitude to her work is ambivalent. Sometimes she feels it is 'a daft profession. Wordsmith. Liar. Weaving fabrications. Yet, with typical ambiguity, convinced that fiction was more true than fact. Or that fact was in fact fiction.' (p.25) Yet just a few pages before, she makes the statement: 'If I hadn't been a writer, I might've been a first-rate mess at this point.' (p.4) Always, too, there is the lurking fear that she will one day cease being able to write, wondering 'how to keep the mini-fortress here going and what would happen to her when she could no longer write.' (p.25) Morag's fascination with the ability of Royland to divine streams of water hidden beneath the ground stems from the vague recognition that her work as a writer resembles his, except that she is occupied with divining or discovering the ultimate truth which lies below the surface of life itself. Royland does not know or understand why he has 'the gift'. His attitude is, "'I don't reckon I really need to understand it, I just gotta do it.'" (p.26) In a similar way Morag has just got to do what she does too. <sup>26</sup> But

why? and how? and for how long? One day Royland loses the power to divine. It simply leaves him. "'It's not so strange. People often lose it. I mean the divining, when they get older.'" (p.451) Then to Morag's amazement he points out that his art can be acquired by quite a few people, if they just "get over wanting to explain it." (p.452) Is this then the answer? 'She had known it all along, but not really known it. The gift, or portion of grace, or whatever it was, was finally withdraw, to be given to someone else.' (p.452) Royland thinks he can pass his power on to A-Okay Smith. Will Morag soon have to hand over to younger writers whom she sees coming along in her shadow? As we read the final pages of The Diviners they assume a special significance when we note that after it appeared in 1974, Margaret Laurence wrote no more novels. In fact, she stated that it was to be her last, and indeed it was.

Margaret Laurence's skill at characterisation has developed with each novel, although, until The Diviners, her male characters have not been as fully realised as the women, nor have they played such significant roles. Now, this is no longer so. In the present novel each of the five men who play the most important part in Morag's life has his own unique personality. The garrulous Christie and the laconic Royland are her shamans; Jules, Brooke and Daniel are her lovers; each in his own way is an outsider. Her shamans help her to discover the truth about life. Her lovers represent the different dominant strands in the history of the Canada she has come to realise has been her true love. French, Indian, English, Scottish - they existed in the mosaic of Canada's past. The present is for Canadians. Her pilgrimage to what she had always imagined to be her real home,



Sutherland in Scotland, is abortive, because, on a visit to the McRaith home in Crombruach, she finally discerns that "'it's not mine, except a long long way back. I always thought it was the land of my ancestors, but it is not.'" (p.391) Her real home is the land of her birth.<sup>27</sup> Will Pique's pilgrimage to Galloping Mountain to her father's people show her where she belongs? That knowledge may come earlier to her than to Morag because the land of her forefathers is more accessible. Nor had Jules' people usurped the land. It had belonged to them before Morag's forebears had settled on it.

The most important character in the book alongside Morag is Christie Logan, though a more unlikely hero it would be hard to find, if a hero is indeed what he is. Named Christie, short for Christian, belonging to Christ, he certainly was despised and rejected of men. A scrawny, scarecrow-like figure, one of the world's true originals, evil-smelling and foul-mouthed, he was the single most important and powerful influence in Morag's life. It was he who taught her to be tough and strong, to fight against the ridicule and insults of the folk of Manawaka. He also gave her her pride, through the stories he made up for her about her ancestors, and it was this sense of pride which made it possible to survive in those first dreadful years, until she acquired the strength to leave behind what she had come to think of as her shame. She became like Piper Gunn endowed with 'the gall of a thousand and the strength of conviction.' (p.49) Margaret Laurence does not flinch from making Morag come to feel ashamed of the environment she is required to inhabit, or to reject the insights Christie has tried to give her, or to hate him for what he is. But she makes Morag carry with her for the rest of her life a sense of

guilt based on the rejection she has exercised in turning her back on Christie and Prin, forever if possible. It is only on reflection over many years that she comes to realise the importance of what Christie has taught her without her being aware of it, and of its contribution to the choices she has made in her own life. The lessons that appearances do not matter, that the truth is not always easy to find, that life is not fair, that "you make your own chances in this world" (p.88) are only proved over a lifetime of searching and struggling. 'Christie knew things about inner truths that I am at last beginning to understand.' (p.418) she writes to Ella. Finally at his deathbed she is able to give him the one gift she had withheld for so long - love. She finds the words to say, "'Christie... you've been my father to me.'" (p.396) His last words are, "'Well - I'm blessed.'" (p.396)

Orphan, author, divorcee, mother; friend, lover; wordsmith; diviner, sojourner on this earth for a while, ancestor-to-be, Morag's story is that of one human being in search of the essential meaning of her life and of life itself. The blurb on the cover of the paperback edition of The Diviners speaks of the novel 'of an independent woman and her urgent need for love.' Morag does have a passionate need for love, but she is not just on a quest for that. The statement somehow trivialises what goes much deeper. She would like to command respect, something quite different. Moreover, Morag Gunn asks all the questions and wants all the answers. In physical appearance she is rather like Hagar (Currie) Shipley - tall, raven black hair, good features, beautiful in fact when young, though unaware of it. Daniel McRaith calls her Morag Dhu - black Morag,

Morag being the Gaelic word for Great. As a child she is very short-sighted, a fact she tries to hide because she considers that to wear glasses would provide just one more oddity for people to point at. Is this a symbolic myopia, too, to shut out the awfulness of her life? Does it suggest that we are all shortsighted where the effect of our actions on others is concerned? Certainly it was true in Morag's case. She deliberately refuses to recognise in herself the snobbery she has learned from the citizens of Manawaka, which makes her despise Christie and Prin. She is possessed by a certain wildness which she calls the Black Celt in her and which she tries to hide from others. One of her gifts from Christie is a terrible strength which she has developed through adversity and upon which she has had to call again and again throughout her lifetime. She is well aware that she possesses this strength and that she can and will go on in spite of everything. Even as a child she is always asking questions. Searching for answers, she never stops asking, "What means...?" Always she finds answers that satisfy her at the time, but always she needs to question them in the light of future events. She is fascinated by words and meanings, even as a very small child, hence her concept of herself later as a wordsmith. Apart from the strength she has within her, a strength which makes her fundamentally a very serious person indeed, she has a wry and sardonic sense of humour which enables her, as she grows older, to laugh at herself. Sometimes she uses the wisecrack to hide a hurt. Sometimes it simply brings her back to a sense of proportion, to counteract the demons of worry, guilt and fear which bedevil her. She expends a great deal of energy worrying, then worries about worrying, but she had a good stock of

common sense too. Not only that, she has a strong instinct for self-preservation. The pangs of guilt she suffers in retrospect, for what she regards as her deliberate rejection of Prin and Christie, over the pain she caused Brooke and over the burdens she has placed on Pique are real enough. Nevertheless, we know as indeed she does, that each action was a necessary part of her survival. She is often driven by a strongly passionate nature into relationships that result in disaster. Only with Dan McRaith is there a meeting of equals in a relationship which is based on mutual respect and ends in a lasting friendship. Her stiff-necked pride which she inherits, like Hagar, from her Scottish ancestors, prevents her from asking for help or love, and she is always amazed when it is given. The tension which she experiences within is rarely relieved, except perhaps through her writing. Indeed, it is by means of her writing that she works through to some of the answers she needs.

An evaluation of The Diviners must include some comment on the language found in the novel. Margaret Laurence believes that a character's mode of speech is an important means of revealing personality. Our language is very much a part of us as individuals. but it is also important in establishing in us a sense of identity with others who share the same history. In The Diviners Morag comments at length on the importance of language to a people, and the alienation which can result from being cut off from the ancestral speech.

The lost languages, forever lurking somewhere inside the ventricles of those who lost them. Jules, with two languages lost, retaining only broken fragments of both French and Cree, and yet speaking English as though forever it must be a foreign tongue to him. (p.244)

Thus Jules is identified as an outsider, not just because of his birth into a group of the dispossessed, but also because he does not speak the language as do those others who possess the land and the power.

Mrs Laurence also uses language as a pointer to the personality of her characters. She possesses a valuable sensitivity to the idiosyncracies of human speech. She is able to capture the rhythms of ordinary speech patterns and use them effectively to depict mood and feeling, or to identify individuals. Her vocabulary is enriched by the idiom of groups and classes of people from different backgrounds and periods. However, she does recognise her limitations.

I've listened to the speech of three generations - my grandparents, my parents and my own, and maybe I've even heard what some of it means. I can listen with great interest to the speech of a generation younger than mine, but I can't hear it accurately enough to set it down and I have no desire to try. That is specifically their business, not mine...<sup>28</sup>

This difficulty with the language of a new generation is referred to by Morag when commenting on her unease with the slang of Pique's age group and on Pique's amused toleration of her mother's efforts to use her idiom. The gap between the generations includes the inability to speak each other's language.

Of all the Laurence novels this one contains the most accurate recreation of the language of working class people as well as of a generation who do not to-day shrink from using a vocabulary which would previously have been considered scabrous. Some critics have found the realism a bit too much to take; others simply term it "earthy". Careful examination of how the author uses language shows that it is always done in a way which is true to the character or the situation. Christie Logan's language is pungent and coarse at times,

and certainly highly colloquial. Yet he has a natural eloquence which emerges in times of stress or when he is telling Morag the tales of Piper Gunn. Then his narrative acquires the dignity and passion, the rhythms and pointing, of the Gaelic storyteller. The reader is left with the question: "Which is the real Christie?" From what Prin says there is the suggestion that for Christie, the foul-mouthed clown of a dustman is a part which he chooses to play. As a child Morag speaks Christie's language because that is what she knows. Cleverly the author charts her growth to maturity through the changing of the vocabulary she uses. The greatest change takes place in those ten years while she is married to Brooke. The old language lies dormant with the old, secret life, until the day some weeks after she returns to Toronto from Prin's funeral in Manawaka. Suddenly from her lips flows a stream of the old language learned in those olden days -

Little one. Brooke, I am twenty-eight years old, and I am five feet eight inches tall, which has always seemed too bloody christly tall to me but there it is, and by judas priest and all the sodden saints in fucking Beulah Land, I am stuck with it and I do not mind like I did once, in fact the goddam reverse if you really want to know, for I've gone against it long enough and I'm no actress at heart, then, and that's the christly truth of it. (p.256)

This outburst symbolises her disaffection, her sense that her life, freed from all crudity, is unnatural and artificial.

Throughout the rest of the novel the author shows Morag as someone who indeed seems to speak many languages. She has the ability to take on and use the idiom of those about her. The mode of expression she uses in conversation with Fan Brady is completely different from that she uses when talking to Dan McRaith. As previously mentioned, when she is chatting with Pique she tries to use the idiom of her daughter's generation, though Pique finds some

of her expressions rather quaint. Christie's pungent language has become commonplace on the lips of the young in the seventies. In Morag's inner dialogue she tends to revert to some of the words and phrases inherited from her childhood. In descriptions of the out of doors, of natural surroundings, we still encounter the apt use of words we have come to associate with Margaret Laurence - her literary voice as it were. There are also those small felicities like 'a hearse for clowns' (p.17) to describe the Pearl's dilapidated car in which Morag was driven forever from her home. However, she has developed a new tendency in this novel, one which has dubious merit. We must ask ourselves now: who is speaking - Morag Gunn, or the author? On several occasions we are presented with a playing with words which seems rather too self-conscious. Such expressions as:

'the two-way battle of the mindfield, the minefield of the mind' (p.94) 'like clutches of cymbals, cliches of symbols' (p.286) 'the thing now was not to interfere, to enter fear' (p.96) 'nearby Jacques Tonnerre had his livingplace, his living place'. (p.448)

are irritating, obtrusive and do nothing except draw attention to themselves.

How much of Margaret Laurence is there in Morag Gunn, apart from that part of an author's self which must go into the creation of any character? There is no doubt that there are many biographical similarities. Morag Gunn is forty-seven in the novel as indeed Mrs Laurence would have been. Both spent their childhood in a small Manitoba town, though hardly in similar circumstances. Each began at an early age to set down stories and each spent some time as a journalist. Both of them escaped from their small town upbringing by way of college in Winnipeg. Each married young. Both are divorced, in each case because marriage interfered with what they had come to

acknowledge as their function, that of writer. Both spent some years in both Vancouver and London. They both had to cope with bringing up children on their own. Each has written an equal number of books. Each has found a permanent home at last in a rural or small town setting. But the novel is not autobiographical. Margaret Laurence acknowledges the similarities found in the book between herself and Morag, and says that she is writing autobiographical fiction, something she regards as a legitimate, indeed inevitable, tendency in any writer who hopes to recreate her own time, period and place.

Nothing I have written is directly autobiographical at all. The thing that is autobiographical is not the events, not the characters, but some of the underlying responses toward life, where you're really saying what you really felt about various human situations.<sup>29</sup>

Thus The Diviners in its exploration of what it means to be a writer is a declaration by Mrs Laurence of what she sees as her place in the scheme of things, both as an author and as a Canadian.

This is a sprawling rather untidy hovel, full of vitality, but somehow unsatisfactory. It is difficult to select any one theme or idea or character that is more significant than another. The author presents us with all her previous themes, and more besides. The result is unwieldy; the critic has difficulty in knowing where to begin. Still it draws the reader along inexorably. Since it is, also, a Manawakan novel, the ghosts and echoes from the other books give it a feeling of familiarity; it is as though, after some years away from your hometown, a friend sends you a copy of the local newspaper. You are able to catch up on the news of people you have not seen for a long time. Of course, the Manawaka Morag knew is vastly different from the town Vanessa, Rachel or Stacey would remember. This departure from the previous more sanitised life of respectable



Manawaka makes it possible to deal with themes which would otherwise be inappropriate. It is almost certain, for example, that the Tonnerres were virtually invisible to girls like Stacey and Rachel. Vanessa's contact with that family was forced upon her by a father who had considerably more respect for his fellow men than the rest of his fellow citizens. Vanessa does have a brief initiation to squalor when she visits the Shinwell home with her grandfather. Vanessa herself says of Harvey Shinwell that 'he was somebody who had always been round and whom I had never actually seen.' (A Bird in the House, p.160) Hagar, of all the Laurence women, alone shares at least some of Morag's experience, though her ostracism is self-imposed, and from this she escapes too late by means of money raised by selling possessions linked to a more respectable past.

The Diviners is a more ambitious novel than the previous ones because it deals with the fundamental dilemmas, not just of individuals, but of the human race, and of that chosen few like Christie Logan, Jules Tonnerre, and finally, Morag Gunn herself, who are given a deeper insight into the human condition. As Morag looks into the future she sees the marks made on it by the past. She has come to a time when what was happening in the present would alter the future, and when it has become necessary to examine the past. Now, Janus-like, she looks both ways along the river of time to what has gone before and what is yet to come. Yet all is one. There is only now, and it contains both past and future. As she watches, she waits for the silence, perhaps the silencing of her voice as a writer, inevitably the silence of death. So the book is both a valediction and a testimony. As the reader closes the book, there is no sound but silence.

## Footnotes: Chapter 6

1. John Moss, A Reader's Guide to the Canadian Novel, (Toronto, 1981), P. 162.
2. Patricia Morley, Margaret Laurence, (Boston, 1981), p.120.
3. Marion Engel, 'Steps to the Mythic', Journal of Canadian Studies, Vol. 13, (1978), p.103.
4. Clara Thomas, The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence, (Toronto, 1976), p.168
5. Clara Thomas, p.142.
6. Clara Thomas, p.189.
7. Margaret Laurence, Heart of a Stranger, 'A Place to Stand On' - Mrs Laurence uses this phrase, taken from a poem by Al Purdy, as the title of an essay on her work which appears in this collection of her short stories and essays. She places great emphasis on the idea of the pioneers, the ancestors, the forebears who carved out place in the wilderness in Canada's past, a place occupied in the present by her generation. cf Chapter on themes 'A Stranger with Thee' where this idea is developed.
8. Margaret Laurence, Interview with Michel Fabré, p.14, Transcript.
9. Clara Thomas, 'The Chariot of Ossian', Journal of Canadian Studies, Vol. 13, (1978), pp. 55-63, p.62.
10. Margaret Laurence, Heart of a Stranger, p.2.
11. W. L. Morton, 'Seeing an Unliterary Landscape', Mosaic, Vol. 3, (1970), pp. 1-10, p.9.

12. W. L. Morton, pp. 9-10.
13. Margaret Laurence, 'W. L. Morton: A personal Tribute,' Journal of Canadian Studies, Vol. 15, (1980-81), p.134.
14. P. H. Easingwood, 'Margaret Laurence, Manawaka, and the Edge of the Unknown', World Literature Written in English, 22, (1983), pp. 254-263. The author develops the idea of fiction and history as co-disciplines also in another paper, 'Margaret Laurence: Prairie Fiction and Prairie History'. In it he makes frequent reference to Margaret Laurence's Heart of a Stranger: two essays 'A Place to Stand on' and 'Where the World Began'. The former had appeared in Mosaic under the title 'Sources' in 1970, and it deals with a personal assessment of the contribution of her early years to her later writing. The latter essay, which appeared in 1971, when she was beginning The Fire-Dwellers, was by her own admission 'One means of working out a theme that appears in the novel, that is, the question of where one belongs and why, and the meaning to oneself of the ancestors, both the long-ago ones and those in remembered history.' (p.237)
15. Joan Coldwell, 'Hagar as Meg Merrilies, the Homeless Gypsy', Journal of Canadian Fiction, Vol. 27, (1980), pp. 92-100, p. 99.
16. Clara Thomas, The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence, p. 132.
17. Clara Thomas, p.138
18. Clara Thomas, p.132
19. Clara Thomas, p.169
20. Clara Thomas, p.139

21. Author's comment: Earlier in the chapter reference has been made to the frequency with which Margaret Laurence tells us that Morag is watching the river. These can be found on pages 108, 169, 214, and 349 in addition to the one quoted. Repeated references to age and time passing as mentioned here, point to one of her weaknesses. She does not seem to be able to trust the reader to draw the right conclusions. She is constantly nudging him alone in the desired direction. These repetitive devices illustrate how painstakingly she works on her writing to ensure that nothing escapes the reader's notice and how close she can come to overkill.
22. Margaret Laurence, Interview with Margaret Atwood: 'Face to Face', Macleans Magazine, (May, 1974), p.44.
23. Margaret Lane, The Brontë Story, (Glasgow, 1969), p.169.
24. Graeme Gibson, Interview with Margaret Laurence, Eleven Canadian Novelists, (Toronto, 1973), p.196.
25. Elizabeth Gaskell, The Life of Charlotte Brontë, (Hardmondsworth, 1975), p. 334.
26. Don Cameron, Interview with Margaret Laurence, Conversations with Canadian Novelists, (Toronto, 1973), p.110. Mrs Laurence uses almost these identical words: 'all I have to be able to do, God willing, is do it!'
27. Margaret Laurence, Heart of a Stranger. In the essay, 'Road from the Isles', pp. 158-172, Mrs Laurence describes her own Scottish heritage and works out its effect on her, resulting in preconceptions concerning her relationship to Scotland, which can only be dispelled by an actual visit to the Highlands. Her

choice of title, using the preposition 'from' rather than the 'to' we first think of makes the comment which sums up her experience. In the introduction to the essay, which was written in 1966, and later included in the collection in 1976, after The Diviners, had appeared, she said: '... this article now seems to me to be an early working-out, in non-fiction, of a theme I would later, in The Diviners, express in fiction, namely the feelings a person has when making the pilgrimage to the land of the ancestors... this, my first view of Scotland, was in some strange way also my first true understanding of where I belonged, namely the land where I was born.' (p.158)

28. Margaret Laurence, 'Ten Years' Sentences', Canadian Literature, Vol. 41, (1969), pp. 10-16, p.16.
29. Don Cameron, Interview with Margaret Laurence, Conversations with Canadian Novelists, p.106.

## A Stranger With Thee

To be at liberty to make choices and to make mistakes, to be oneself, this is to be free. The theme of freedom and personal fulfilment forms a strand which is woven into and binds together all of Margaret Laurence's writing.

She is engaged in an inquiry into the nature and basis of personal freedom in respect of its relevance to human happiness. The inquiry rests on a fascinating and critical notion: the issue of choice.<sup>1</sup>

She sees the individual's choices as limited by all manner of constraints, such as sex and genetic inheritance, which cannot be changed, and social custom reinforced by early religious teaching, which are almost as inalterable, since they form part of the substratum on which behaviour is based. However, the latter can be regarded differently from a distance, and in the light of experience. The struggle for freedom is a lonely, difficult one, partly because the individual must set aside the demands of others, which often contribute to his servitude, and because it is not easy to re-evaluate in-built attitudes or acquired prejudices. But the struggle to survive, while leading to the isolation of the individual, can be conducted with dignity and lead to personal integration. Since the straitjacket which each person must shuck off, in order to stretch himself to the limit, is applied in childhood, part of the act of survival must be to see the past for what it is. In a conversation with Don Cameron, Margaret Laurence has said that her books deal with

..the process of every human individual coming to terms with your past, with your childhood, with your parents, and getting to the

point where you can see yourself as a human individual no longer blaming the past, no longer having even to throw out all the past, but finding a way to live with your own past, which you have to do.<sup>2</sup>

We are who we have learned to be, and if we want to be ourselves, we must find out who we really are. We have to dare to be different. We have to be prepared to make fools of ourselves. We have to take risks. The choice is ours.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout her novels Margaret Laurence uses numerous symbols for the captivity of the individual in society and for the enslavement of the human soul. Hagar Shipley, who in fact bears the name of the biblical slave of the book of Genesis, is the stone angel, her natural fire so quenched by the frigid atmosphere in which she was reared that she is cold as marble. Grandfather Connor's Brick House is a fortress. Marriage and the family are kinds of prison to which Stacey and her sister Rachel are sentenced. The town of Manawaka is presented as the ultimate prison, not in the physical sense, because one can always leave, but because the values which have been acquired there in childhood make it difficult to be oneself. An upbringing in the Presbyterian, Calvinist or puritanical atmosphere of this typical small town places certain curbs on the individual which are stultifying, and very hard to combat - " ... when you are in a box, you are not sure what you think."<sup>4</sup>

This quotation from one of Mrs Laurence's African short stories indicates that the theme of personal freedom had interested her for some time before she began the Manawaka novels. Godman Pira, who makes this statement, is a dwarf imprisoned in a box by an African village priest who requires that he behave as an oracle. This points

to another aspect of slavery, that of being trapped within a set of moral codes which govern the individual's life. He must play out the role in which he has been cast; he must wear a mask which puts an acceptable face on things. This requires a stifling of the original temperament which can lead to distortion and unhappiness. Joy can only come from the fulfilment of those basic human needs with which each is born. Thus the struggle to escape from those 'inescapable bonds' becomes the battle fought in turn by each of the five Laurence protagonists in the Manawaka cycle.

Although this series of five interlocking fictions is central to this study, reference to her African writings is relevant because in them we find her earliest treatment of this theme of personal freedom. In discussing her writing with Don Cameron, Margaret Laurence points out that at first her African fiction seemed to be about political freedom. After all, she was in Ghana at the time when that country was preparing for independence, and she, as a Canadian, was very much aware that she came from a country where colonialism of a much more subtle kind had operated. Therefore, she felt she understood the dilemmas facing Ghanaians as they prepared to take on the responsibility of independence. Hope and fear jostle one another in the minds of those to be freed, creating a crisis of confidence which can be paralysing. Answering the question "What is a Ghanaian?" is just as fraught with difficulties as trying to explain what it means to be Canadian. However, when she re-examined her African stories she realised that they dealt with deeper issues than this; they pointed past political freedom to personal liberty. The dwarf, Godman Pira, who spent so many years in a box, epitomised any human



being who was "boxed in" by any or all of the constraints which society imposes. He is freed by Moses Adu, an educated African who happens to pass through the village where Godman is imprisoned by Faru, the priest. To his consternation he finds himself responsible for the ugly little fellow whom he has liberated, much against his better judgment. He tries to persuade Godman that he is not yet really free because he is still dependent upon his saviour. "There is more to freedom... than not living in a box," he says, to which Godman replies, "You would not think so if you had ever lived in a box."<sup>5</sup> Godman must learn to fend for himself, and in spite of his protest that he is not ready to do so, Moses insists. "No one is every ready... And you will not die."<sup>6</sup> A year later Moses goes to see Godman, who is now part of a circus sideshow. The dwarf has discovered through terrible experience that he can cope. "I have known the worst and the worst and the worst ... and yet I live. I fear and fear, and yet I live."<sup>7</sup> Margaret Laurence recognises that she is writing about freedom here

in terms of the individual coming to terms with his own past and with himself, accepting his limitations and going on from there, however terrified he may be.<sup>8</sup>

This is exactly the process which is revealed in the five books based on characters from the western Canadian town of Manawaka.

Although the author deals with the need for and the striving toward freedom of the spirit for each of her main fictional women, progress is not equal, nor is it easy. P. Easingwood believes. 'They are moving on the edge of the unknown, in the sense that they struggle to realize a hidden potential within themselves.'<sup>9</sup> Acquiring self-knowledge and reappraising the received wisdom, to find oneself

'a place to stand on'<sup>10</sup> is always slow, frequently painful. Hagar Shipley in The Stone Angel comes to know herself almost too late. As the daughter of one of Manawaka's most respected citizens, Jason Currie, pioneer and self-made man, she is early encouraged in the sin of pride. Her natural fiery wildness is never allowed to show itself. For the sake of proper appearances she becomes haughty, cold, and judgmental, blindly incapable of seeing herself or others for what they are. Her 'awful strength' (The Stone Angel, p.59) is a vice rather than a virtue. The author makes repeated use of literary devices to ensure that the reader realises how much Hagar is the prisoner of her nature and of her upbringing.

It would seem that Hagar's choices can hardly be deemed independent ones since her whole character is so narratively weighted in favour of the hereditary features of her situation, features which affect and even control her choices. Her character is to this extent part of her destiny.<sup>11</sup>

She scorns the stone angel which her father erected to his dead wife, yet she constantly refers to herself as frozen, unbending, blind. Not only has Jason Currie raised such a monument to the dead; he has helped to create another from the living. In fact a part of Hagar has been dead almost all her life. As she approaches death, the coldness that envelopes her takes on a symbolic dimension.

My bed is cold as winter, and now it seems to me that I am lying as the children used to do, on fields of snow, and they would spread their arms and sweep them down to their sides, and when they rose, there would be the outline of an angel with spread wings. The icy whiteness covers me, drifts over me, and I could drift to sleep in it, like someone caught in a blizzard, and freeze. (The Stone Angel, p.81).

Margaret Laurence enables the reader to recognise Hagar's blindness by looking out through Hagar's eyes. Because the reader is not Hagar, it is possible to appreciate how unperceptive she has been in her

dealings with Bram and her sons, seeing only what she wanted to see, never what her heart might perceive. This is particularly clearly illustrated by her reactions to the way her two sons behave. What she sees is a reflection of what she believes, or wants to believe. In scientific terms a mirror image is the reverse of the object reflected, and the author is fond of using the mirror as a device for suggesting the disparity between what is reality and what the character thinks. So Hagar comforts herself for her ugly, fat old body by imagining that

... if I were to walk carefully up to my room, approach the mirror softly, take it by surprise, I would see there again that Hagar with the shining hair, the dark-maned colt off to the training ring, the young ladies' academy in Toronto. (The Stone Angel, p.42)

This image of Hagar as she used to be makes us realise how much she hates being old and fat, and we see her as trapped inside this gross physical shape which becomes yet another symbol of the absence of spiritual freedom. She is a prisoner of the flesh, but worse than that, old age and infirmity have taken away her right to decide what is best for her. At ninety years of age freedom for Hagar is no longer possible, though a degree of self-knowledge is. Such insight is expressed by her in saying, 'I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out and shackled all I touched.' (The Stone Angel, p.292) However, she goes as indomitable as ever to the grave. She will most certainly take Dylan Thomas' advice and 'Rage, rage against the dying of the light.'<sup>12</sup>

The first step towards freedom is the recognition that it has been missing. Hagar takes that first step, and in creating her

Margaret Laurence is pointing to those forces in life which can be confining. However, Hagar is too old to benefit from her self-discovery and break out of her box. That is left to Rachel Cameron in A Jest of God. Through her the author asserts that one can move towards liberation, even if progress is slow and limited. By deciding to break out of the Manawaka trap, Rachel demonstrates that escape is possible, once the individual recognises what options are open and finds the courage to choose one. Vancouver may not offer her much more than Manawaka did. At least she will have asserted her independence. She, who so much feared to make a fool of herself, by doing that very thing acquires the ability to recognise that it does not really matter anyway. She has grown up. The author places Rachel in a trap within a trap. She lives in a town from which there would at first appear to be no escape, and she is reduced to perpetual childhood in her relationship with her mother. Even the family can become a prison, and in a small community where she is well known her every act is under scrutiny. No freedom here. The proper appearances so valued by Hagar must be observed by Rachel too. Through the first person narrative the reader is very much aware that what the mirror reveals of Rachel is no more the reality than in Hagar's case. Moreover Rachel's isolation is more complete and terrifying. The unwillingness to give oneself to others, or to touch them, turns Hagar into a marble statue. The same reserve nearly destroys Rachel's sanity. Mrs Laurence implies in both The Stone Angel and A Jest of God, indeed in all her novels, that this inability to show affection and experience passion is a limitation on the individual's development as a human being. In her brief sexual encounter with Nick

Kazlik Rachel learns to reach out to another human being, to touch and to feel. The pain this encounter eventually causes opens her eyes to the needs of others, and the fact that she deliberately chose to embark on the adventure, in spite of her fears, proves to her that she can make choices and live with her mistakes. Life need not be spent in a prison. Finally she sets off for a new start where 'I will be different. I will remain the same.' (A Jest of God, p.201) Thus she indicates her recognition of the fact that taking her old self into a new milieu will require adjustments but the Rachel who makes them will be working from the same basis as before. It will be up to her now. She will decide and she will survive.

In The Fire-Dwellers Stacey has already escaped from Manawaka in a bid for freedom. Now at thirty-nine she finds herself in a different trap - the family - where she is diminished by her role of wife and mother, and burdened by the demands which others make upon her. It is easy to imagine that Hagar would have been like Stacey had she been less warped and inhibited by her puritan upbringing. Stacey has the warmth and passion which Hagar so successfully quelled, as well as her vitality and energy. The young woman's indomitable spirit, coupled with her wry sense of humour, help her to survive, and to accept what she cannot change. Margaret Laurence actually refers to her as 'Hagar's spiritual granddaughter'.<sup>13</sup>

In this novel the author makes a further statement about the meaning of freedom. Sometimes to be free demands that the individual stop struggling against the inevitable and come to terms with life as it is, not as it might be or should be. Again we are made aware of the gulf which separates actuality from what is happening internally

for the main character. This makes possible a sharing of the progress from doubt through rebellion to acceptance, but never to resignation or submission. The reader is allowed to share in Stacey's insight at the end of the novel. 'Maybe the trivialities aren't so bad after all. They're something to focus on... Never mind. Give me another forty years, Lord, and I may mutate into a matriarch.' (The Fire-Dwellers, p.307-308) To see things more clearly can be liberating too. 'I was wrong to think of the trap as the four walls. It's the world. The truth is that I haven't been Stacey Cameron for one hell of a long time now.' (The Fire-Dwellers, p.303)

Seeing things more clearly in order to free oneself from the chains of the past is the aim of the older Vanessa MacLeod in the interconnected short stories of A Bird in the House. The author freely admits that, by re-living her early years spent in her grandfather's house in Neepawa as she wrote them, she was able to gain a proper perspective, so accepting the old man for what he was - a prisoner himself of his own intractable nature. The very qualities which had been required to make him a successful pioneer distorted him as a human being. Worse still, the values which he and his fellows, like Jason Currie, passed on to the next generation were irrelevant, even crippling. The technique used by the author in these stories allows the reader to participate in Vanessa's voyage towards reconciliation. The latter recounts a series of episodes, in chronological order, ostensibly as they happened to her at various ages, from ten to twenty. However, because it is really the older Vanessa who is speaking, the reader sees as she sees, and can interpret actions and events in a different way from the child.

Comments such as 'Sometimes a thing only hits you a long time afterwards' (A Bird in the House, p.51) or 'I did not know then' and 'I did not understand' link the older storyteller with the child who is shown as experiencing the events. As usual the author employs various symbols for the state of imprisonment as outlined in the book. At the very beginning of the first story the theme is spelled out when Daniel Connor's Brick House is compared to 'some crusader's embattled fortress in a heathen wilderness.' (p.1) Fortresses not only protect, they shut in. In a later story in the same collection the house is compared to Jericho, the walled city which the Israelites had to destroy. When the walls come tumbling down, people can get out as well as in.

Grandmother Connor possesses a canary in a cage, and an affinity is implied between them: she is trapped in a marriage which offers her little room to spread her wings. However both she and the canary have adapted to their condition. The canary can even be tempted to sing for her at times. Neither of them beats against the bars. When Vanessa asks her Grandmother if the canary is unhappy, 'she shook her head and said no, it had been there always and would not know what to do with itself outside.' (p.6) If we accept that parallel which is revealed later, we recognise that she, like Stacey, has learned to accommodate herself to what cannot be altered. The very title, A Bird in the House, signals entrapment.

One of the other stories is called 'The Mask of the Bear.' Grandfather Connor is the wearer of this mask, as Vanessa comes to understand years after she has left Manawaka and the Brick House.

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

It was a weird mask. The features were ugly yet powerful. The mouth was turned down in an expression of sullen rage. The eyes were empty sockets, revealing nothing. Yet as I looked they seemed to draw my own eyes towards them, until 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. (p.87)

Margaret Atwood sees this as suggesting 'a shell concealing a life to the point of extinction.'<sup>14</sup> The explicit use of the mask as a symbol of public image covering private face spells out a theory which is implicit in the other novels. Rachel Cameron actually refers to the outward impression she makes as a facade. Masks were once associated with the *commedia dell'arte*, a form of drama where the audience could identify the role the character was playing by the mask he wore.

Margaret Laurence's four Manawaka novels are concerned with the masks of women... and the bewildered real selves who peer through them at the world. In every case there is a concealed self, sustained by a flow of memory and inner monologue; there is a mask that is kept perpetually in place when one moves in the world; and the world is a place where beings confront each other and occasionally drop their masks and come together in freedom and love.<sup>15</sup>

Many of the members of Vanessa's family played out roles which were forced upon them by circumstance. Gradually she learns to look beyond the mask. There are other sides to the people around her - secret longings, unfulfilled dreams about which she had not the least suspicion. How could she have imagined, for example, that her father longed to be an explorer, or at least to escape from Manawaka to roam the world?

One of the external circumstances which made the fulfilling of dreams difficult in the years depicted in this book was the Great Depression, whose influence was compounded by the drought which affected the province year after year. They are like two malevolent



spirits insidiously perverting life for everyone. Many of the Laurence characters throughout the series have their hopes blighted and their chance for self-realisation ruined by lack of money and opportunity. Aunt Edna is trapped under her father's roof. Vanessa's cousin, Chris, is destroyed by the lack of choices and the need to learn 'to be a little tougher, and not let on, eh? It's necessary.' (p.148) It is only in retrospect that she appreciates the limitations which they placed on those older than herself. 'All his life choices had grown narrower and narrower.' (p.152) The ultimate release from Chris' box is into insanity. The young Vanessa escapes into a kind of freedom by going away to college; the older Vanessa acknowledges that she only partly succeeded in getting away: she has inevitably taken some of her bonds with her. Margaret Laurence, Vanessa's alter ego, confesses that the writing down of the stories was a necessary part of the journey towards spiritual equipoise.

In each of the four books dealt with up to this point, only a part of the trip has been described. In the fifth and last, The Diviners, the book and the journey are synonymous, for here we are following the fortunes of Morag Gunn, as she stumbles along the road to freedom. It is a kind of female Pilgrim's Progress. Clara Thomas describes it as a journey 'towards the complementary and intertwining of knowledge of self and knowledge of God.'<sup>16</sup> This seems a much more appropriate metaphor than that of an *Odyssey*, as suggested by W. Swayze,<sup>17</sup> since biblical imagery is much more likely to be used by Margaret Laurence than classical symbolism, because of her Presbyterian background in Canada. Moreover, any study of her use of symbols will reveal a marked leaning towards Old Testament story, and

she admits to a strong attraction to the Pentateuch with its record of the wanderings of the Jewish people in search of the Promised Land. She sees life as a journey, and her characters are often on the move in search of greater self-realisation. The train journey away from the present toward an unknown but hopeful future appears frequently in her novels, the train being a potent symbol of escape in the Canadian consciousness in the periods represented in her novels. Hagar, Stacey, Morag, and later Pique all enter a new phase of their lives by train. Of course she herself did a great deal of travelling before finding a resting place on the Otonabee River in Ontario, and later at Lakefield. Once this has happened the symbol of life as a journey is supplanted by that of life as a silently flowing stream bearing us from the past imperceptibly toward the future, but also pointing us back to what was - which has had such an influence on what was to be. 'Part of where you are is where you've been.'<sup>18</sup>

Morag herself refers to her search as a pilgrimage, and as she seeks self-knowledge she does a tremendous amount of physical journeying, more than any of the other women in the previous novels. But then, she achieves more integration than they do. In The Diviners we share with Morag the process by which she sifts through the baggage of the past, discarding what is irrelevant and choosing what she regards as 'wanted on voyage'. However, we also sense the author's recognition that she has already arrived at the destination toward which Morag is headed. Morag or Margaret, Margaret or Morag, which one is the traveller? Surely they both are. As Morag arrives at the freedom she seeks, limited though it may be, Margaret is saying, this is where she is at the moment. Then the two become one.

Morag Gunn is depicted as the prisoner of all the limiting factors the other four encounter: her own person, the repression and hypocrisy of Manawaka, marriage, family responsibilities, sex role-stereotyping, financial stringencies, twentieth century pressures. She alone is shown as surmounting them all in order to achieve adequate self-realisation and thereby enjoy a degree of contentment. The novel projects its Memorybank Movies like a television serial in which the struggle unfolds episode by episode. In this way we are able to see, first, where Morag is, and then how she got there step by painful step. She finds, like Christian in Pilgrim's Progress, that the way is fraught with difficulties. As has been mentioned before, the author makes use of Morag's physical wanderings to symbolise her spiritual journey towards freedom. Each advance made towards greater independence is paralleled by a physical move outward and onward to a new place. When Morag boards the train to leave Manawaka, as she thinks forever, she begins almost thirty years during which time she moves to Winnipeg, to Toronto, to Vancouver, to London, to McConnell's Landing. Each geographical location except the last provides her with a temporary resting place where she can grow a little wiser and see a bit more clearly as she advances towards self-discovery. Ironically, her two return visits to Manawaka, the place she most wanted to leave, each provide a moment of insight which is crucial to her struggle toward greater integration on returning to the outside world once more. As a result of her return for Prin's funeral, and then much later, for Christie's, she is granted the understanding to make radical changes in her life. After the first, she sets out on the search; after the

second, she finds it possible to stop and consolidate. When, in her middle years, she ceases her wanderings and settles in her own place at last, her daughter, now at the age when Morag began her journey, takes the train again, seeking to discover who she is amongst her father's people at Galloping Mountain. In this way the author points out that we all have the journey to make; undertaken in youth, if we are lucky, it is completed in the middle years.

Manawaka, as depicted so precisely in The Diviners, and in somewhat less detail in the other novels, is a place to leave, if you can. Yet, Margaret Laurence leaves us in no doubt as to the formative nature of the years her women have spent there. Its attitudes become an integral part of the character of each, and act as an inhibiting influence on each one as she tries to reach personal fulfilment. A town peopled by Jason Curries, Timothy Connors, and their descendants must inevitably leave its mark on the children born and growing up there. The town's attitudes are seen as an influence for ill unless one has the courage to assess them and put them to their proper use, turning vices into virtues once again. As a young girl growing up in Manawaka Morag had to accede to the standards set by the town's worthy citizens because that was the only way she knew to belong. Thereafter, thanks to her strength of character and her intelligence she is gradually able to make a re-assessment of them and to recognise the falseness and hypocrisy which they camouflaged. The self-appointed seer, Christie Logan, had told her that Manawaka's respected citizens wore masks, and played roles which were at variance with reality. All too often the rigid code by which they judged others and which they imposed on themselves stifled their

natural inclinations with disastrous, if secret, consequences. Christie, by choosing to be the nuisance collector and by marrying Prin, had set himself apart from these people and his isolation became Morag's. As a young person who desperately longed to be accepted, to escape from what Stacey calls 'the town's invisible stabbing' (The Fire-Dwellers, p.264) she found it hard to believe his opinion of their value. To her the done thing, as laid down by Manawakan society (and with it a particular stratum of Canadian society as a whole) was the key to respectability. This belief led her into marriage and a way of life which she found increasingly difficult to endure. She saw herself playing a part, behaving as was expected of the wife of a university professor, while suppressing an important side of her nature. The carefully dressed, well-groomed young woman was merely a cardboard cutout resembling the real Morag who had been reduced to leading a life which was sterile in every way. Even her literary creativity was diminished by the attitude of her husband, who had symbolised for her everything she had believed desirable in society and with whom she would presumably be able to deny that her Manawaka past had ever happened. She had supposed that the way to be free was to be like everyone else. However, she discovers that this is not enough for her. She must be free to be herself, so she rejects the role of wife and respectable middle class lady. Then she is required to assume other roles which turn out to be just as limiting to personal freedom as those she has rejected. Recklessly deciding to be a parent, she finds that new responsibilities carry new constraints. Being a writer makes demands which are at odds with those of being a mother; being a woman alone

has many drawbacks. Loneliness creates its own tensions which can lead to destructive relationships. Morag Gunn, who, like Piper Gunn, has 'the faith of the saints, and the heart of a child, and the gall of a thousand, and the strength of conviction' (The Diviners, p.85) fears and fears, and survives, discovering her own strengths and weaknesses along the way. The last chapter of The Diviners is filled with references to Morag's arrival at a state of self-knowledge, acceptance and peace, symbolised by the season of autumn with its suggestion of ripeness and mellowness, a maturity which is also the precursor of death. Decisions have been taken, choices have been made, mistakes have been recognised and life has gone on, until gradually she has reached some degree of individuation bringing with it that kind of grace which gives freedom of the spirit. When she sees Jules for the last time she reflects that 'Perhaps he, too, had found that although you needed to do battle, you didn't need to, every minute.' (p.444) When she realises how impossible it is to explain things to Pique, she can say, 'Accept it and let it go' (p.438) and as she and Pique part, to her daughter's worried query, "'You'll be okay?" she replies, "Of course, I am okay" and in a profound sense this was true.' (p.450) Morag is 'okay' because she had learned to be free and to survive.

In Morag Margaret Laurence portrays someone who is finally able to face up to and ultimately to overcome many of the factors which limit personal freedom. These factors act as sub-themes which are crucial to the main theme of fulfilment. They appear to a greater or lesser degree in each of the books. Two of the limiting factors appear to be marriage and the family.

There are few happy marriages in the Laurence novels. All too often the unions described seem designed, not for the mutual support and comfort of the partners, but for the restriction or confinement of one or both. Husbands and wives seem to live adjoining lives, going along parallel lines but rarely meeting. The two become parent and child, teacher and pupil, master and slave, finally warder and prisoner. Unconsciously marriage is used as an escape route. The participants seek a way of changing present circumstances, or filling a personal need, or two people simply marry because that is what people do. In the sixties few had Morag's strength of character, willing to become unmarried mother, divorcée, single parent, with all the social implications surrounding any one of these unrespectable categories. Hagar's marriage to Bram Shipley is an act of defiance aimed at her father, and during the twenty-four years they spend together she manages to destroy both Bram's self-respect and his natural gaiety. As Hagar says, '... we'd each married for those qualities we later found we wouldn't bear...' (The Stone Angel, p.79) and because of her greater strength hers was the more destructive influence. She does admit however that '... when a man and woman live in a house, sleep in a bed, have meals and children, you can't always part them by willing it so.' (p.167) Because Mr. and Mrs Cameron were unable to fill one another's needs, he took to the life of the solitary drinker; she withdrew into ladylike hypochondria. They were cut off from each other by more than the ceiling/floor which separated the living quarters from the undertaker's offices below. Grandmother Connor found herself married to a man who couldn't accept love. He in turn was bewildered by marriage to an angel. Jake Fogler,

like Brooke Skelton, wants his wife to himself, without children as rivals for her affection. Tess Fogler longs to be accepted as an intelligent being instead of a beautiful object to be admired. In symbolising the Fogler marriage the author uses the chilling example of one goldfish devouring its fellows. Tess opts for attempted suicide and mental breakdown as her escape route. Morag chooses a less desperate remedy for an unsatisfactory life.

Once the decision is made, Morag frees herself from Brooke as abruptly as if she were divesting herself of an old coat. It is significant that only in The Diviners does Margaret Laurence offer divorce as the solution to an unsatisfactory marriage among respectable people. When Julie Kazlik divorces Buckle this is seen as acceptable, partly because of his perversion, partly because they are not quite respectable anyway. After all, Julie is a Bohunk. In some way this probably reflects the general attitude held by the society in which the Laurence women live. The progressive change of stance outlined in the novels can be said to reflect opinion modified in her own experience. Neither the Shipleys nor the Camerons would have so much as contemplated divorce, though Hagar does go away and Niall Cameron joins the dead rather than consort with the living. Stacey at no time gets as far as thinking of divorce as the answer to her dilemma. She and Mac finally take a large enough step toward mutual understanding to enable them to remain together. There is never any suggestion that Stacey will actually leave, in spite of her dissatisfaction with things as they are. After all, Luke did ask her to go away with him. Rather, as Jung sees it,

Some higher or wider interest arose on the person's horizon, and



through this widening of his view, the insoluble problem lost its urgency. It was not solved logically in its own terms... It was not repressed and made unconscious, but merely appeared in a different light and so became different itself.<sup>19</sup>

Stacey's reassessment of her options falls into this category.

However, for Morag, the price she would have to pay by staying with Brooke is too high, so she cuts her losses and moves on in her search for a way of life which will allow her to develop her talents and discover her true identity, goals she sees as unachievable within her marriage. Margaret Laurence takes great pains to make sure that the reader is aware that the cost of this freedom is very high. For years Morag experiences the terrible loneliness of the solitary woman. At times she 'feels the aloneness to be unbearable... If only there were someone to talk it over with. Someone to share the pain.' (The Diviners, p.364).

In the same context Morag refers to 'the terrible vulnerability of parents, though, your life bound up so centrally with this other one.' (p.365) So, family relationships can place limits on personal freedom, too. Margaret Atwood describes the family as shown in Canadian fiction in very bleak terms.

If in England the family is a mansion you live in, and if in America it's a skin you shed, then in Canada it's a trap in which you're caught. The Canadian protagonist often feels just as trapped inside his family as his American counterpart; he feels the need for escape, but somehow he is unable to break away.<sup>20</sup>

This is certainly true of the Laurence heroines, and their creator depicts the family as being as much a battleground as a haven. Vanessa MacLeod is loved and protected by her mother and her Aunt

Edna but she leaves Manawaka with a deep hatred of her tyrannical grandfather, Timothy Connor. Hagar's blindness extends past her husband to her two sons, who are judged by a set of irrelevant standards which eventually destroy John. Marvin survives because he escapes. Stacey longs to be free from family responsibilities yet when she does get away she cannot rest until she is home again. On a rare visit to Manawaka she says,

I know they're quite okay, and safe, but I don't feel sure unless I'm there, and even then I never feel sure - I don't think I can explain - it's just something you feel about your own kids, and you can't help it. (A Jest of God, p.22)

At thirty-four years of age Rachel is treated like a child by her mother. She is in danger of suffocation. She in turn feels a terrible sense of responsibility to her ailing parent, who uses every guilt-making ploy to keep her daughter tied to her. Out of duty the daughter has undertaken to look after the mother; in so doing she has become trapped in a situation where subtle chains keep her duty-bound. Mac MacAindra instinctively feels that he has been a disappointment to his father, Matthew, who in his turn feels he has expected too much of his son, yet neither tells the other so. Thus we are shown people held together by blood ties who do not understand one another in the smallest degree; sometimes they do not appear to even like one another. Hagar despised her two brothers for being weak while she was so strong. Such ties can place heavy burdens upon children vis-à-vis their parents. Loyalty, pity, a sense of duty or guilt, all may keep them together in a joyless relationship. Ewen MacLeod, Vanessa's father, panders to his mother's delusions of grandeur partly out of pity, partly from a sense of guilt for what he

considers has been his part in the death of the favourite son, his younger brother Roderick. Nick Kazlik's Ukrainian parents wish him to step into his dead brother Steve's shoes and take over the family farm. His inability and unwillingness to fill a dead man's place cost both him and his parents much pain.

Within the family, the mother-daughter relationship is particularly carefully defined by Margaret Laurence. Somehow, it is suggested, a woman must be daughter first before she can be a mother.

Before the girl-child knows anything of the expectations of family and society, she knows she is a daughter of a mother. This relationship provides Laurence with a clear analogue to the on-going nature of the self - namely, the daughter who in turn becomes mother; as mother she still retains within herself her daughterhood and with it a strong sense of the past, while at the same time she sees the future in her daughter.<sup>21</sup>

In each of the novels except The Stone Angel the ties which bind the female generations are explored. Hagar is deprived, by her mother's death in childbirth, of an experience which might have made her a better parent. She so deplores what she regards as Mrs Currie's weakness that she rejects that part of her which is her mother. When asked to play the maternal role for brother Dan as he lies dying, she is quite unable to do so. On the other hand, Morag, though deprived of her real mother, did have a surrogate in Prin who at least gives her love and to whom she can give mothering in return at times. The three most fully realised mother-daughter pairs are Mrs. Cameron and Rachel, Stacey and Katie, and Morag and Pique. In each of these relationships there is an ambivalence which is natural and inevitable. Rachel Cameron longs to be a mother, yet her relationship with her own mother is unsatisfactory because she cannot bring herself to assert her strength over Mrs Cameron's weakness. Once she

can do this and say 'I am the mother now.', she is able to take control of her life and move forward. The parent-child inter-dependence is tinged with fear and resentment, for the young ones are a daily reminder of the mortality of the older generation. One will give way to another and a realisation of this fact of life is difficult to accept. Stacey finds herself resenting her daughter's youth and beauty. Still, she sees her fault and the inevitability of change. She says of Katie, 'One day she will have to take over as the mother.' (The Fire-Dwellers, p.273). When Morag surprises in herself jealousy at her daughter's sexuality, she is able to talk it out with her. But she is aware that Pique is the one who will one day stand in her place. 'Pique, harbinger of my death, continuer of life,' (The Diviners, p.290) she tells herself. Because she is a more integrated personality than the other Laurence women she is able to say this with equanimity. The interchange between parent and child as depicted in the later novels, The Fire-Dwellers and The Diviners, is a much freer one, embodying mutual respect and a more determined attempt at understanding on the part of the adults than that in the previous books. Stacey and Morag encourage the greater freedom of expression between the generations which has evolved since Grandfather Connor's time. The lines of communication are more open.

Margaret Laurence sees the inability of the individual to actually speak to another on anything but a superficial level as one of the prime causes of unsatisfactory relationships. Whether inhibited by pride, shame, fear or simply from a false sense of propriety, husbands, wives, parents, children, do not talk to one another about those things closest to their hearts. They cannot, or

dare not, say how they really feel. Sometimes what is said is not what is meant, but since people do not listen with their hearts they do not receive the real message. Rachel hears all sorts of hidden meanings in the words of others once her own ears, previously closed by her inward looking, are opened by her awakening through suffering. These are 'the gaps in understanding.' (The Diviners, p.447) Bram never discovers how great was Hagar's physical need of him because she never deigns to tell him. Stacey is astonished to learn of Mac's sense of failure, of the crippling feeling of responsibility which forces him to take up jobs he hates and even causes him to resent the birth of his younger son, Duncan, whom he sees as yet another burden. Telling always results in a deepening of understanding and a drawing closer together, if only for a while. All too often only in times of crisis does this self-revelation leading to mutual recognition seem possible. Even then the shutters are soon put up again. It is given to people like Morag to find a way, through their books, to say the things most of us dare not. One of the writer's functions is to say what ordinary people feel but cannot put into words. Mrs Laurence senses that

... human beings ought to be able, ought to be able to communicate and touch each other far more than they do, and this human loneliness and isolation, which obviously occurs, everywhere, seems part of man's tragedy.<sup>22</sup>

Her high regard for the writing of Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian dramatist and novelist stems from the affinity she feels with him because he places so much emphasis on the importance of inter-communication. With Achebe she feels 'that we must attempt to communicate, however imperfectly, if we are not to succumb to despair

or madness. The words that are spoken are rarely the words which are heard, but we must go on speaking.<sup>23</sup> The sound of a human voice is comforting and reassuring. In the dense Nigerian rain forest, individual garden plots are separated by screens of thick vegetation, so the men shout to one another from time to time to reassure themselves of the other's presence, an action she sees as a metaphor for man's need to know that someone is listening to his voice.

An additional barrier to communication between individuals is their inability or unwillingness to touch one another. Hagar cannot show her affection by so much as a hand placed on head or shoulder to tell son or husband how she feels. Marvin is equally incapable of physically demonstrating his love for his mother. Hagar's untouchability is epitomised in the stone angel. Rachel is locked within herself, unable to touch or say how she feels until she has her affair with Nick. Only in making love does she learn to touch and to feel physically, a touching which in turn seems to release her sufficiently to make it possible to reveal herself in words. Still, although sex releases some of Rachel's tensions and sets her free from some of her inhibitions, Nick and Rachel really remain strangers. Needs are filled, but the relationship demands too much of Nick and he retreats. Rachel wants more than he can give, so true reciprocity is not possible.

In the Manawaka novels sex is rarely described as a joyful experience. It appears as a selfish preoccupation where the emphasis is more on taking than on giving. At its worst it is a mere satisfying of animal need, as Morag discovers in her encounter with Chas; at its best it is a reaffirmation of commitment, as when Stacey

and Mac 'make love after all, but gently, as though consoling one another for everything that neither of them can help or alter.' (The Fire-Dwellers, p.307) In between it can become what Stacey describes as making hate, not love. Always there seems to be guilt and frustration lurking around the sexual experience, which somehow ought not to be pleasurable. Morag alone of the four adult women has the fewest sexual hang-ups, because she has not been subjected to the same genteel upbringing as the others, whose conditioning has been rather more Victorian. After a series of varied sexual unions, in her relationship with Daniel McRaith she learns, at last, how to give and receive love, rather than merely to suck secret pleasure from another. Finally, with Jules she learns that they can lie down together in each other's arms to give warmth and comfort, and not need to make love. Now Morag can give without needing to receive, except through the knowledge that the gift is needed. By implication this would appear to be the key to any relationship. Opening oneself to another, touching and being touched, giving and receiving, this is the ultimate and most difficult act of communication, and it needs no words. What is more, it appears to be easier for women than for men.

This introduces the whole theme of man face to face with woman in society. As Margaret Laurence sees it, the family is particularly confining for a woman, chiefly because this is regarded as her exclusive domain. This means that part of the female psyche can be stunted, because the demands of being wife and mother exclude any expansion in other directions. This is Stacey's dilemma, symbolised in her regular membership of night classes dealing with all manner of esoteric subjects, as long as they have no bearing on her daily

routine in the home. Society still operates in terms of stereotypes which make specific demands on each sex, to the detriment of both. Morag forces herself into the societal mould when she marries Brooke, and in so doing denies a part of her nature which must find expression if she is to become a whole person. The Diviners is the most specifically feminist of the Laurence novels, reflecting the author's own move towards a more positive stand on this issue. Through the problems which Morag faces when she refuses to acknowledge the validity of society's expectations for women, we see the way in which such a refusal can cause suffering and unhappiness. As an unmarried mother she is subjected to scorn and ostracism, even from other women. Her status without a man is an ambiguous one which isolates her amongst other so-called oddities like Fan Brady, and leaves her prey to men who regard her as fair game.

Throughout the Manawaka novels there is a gradual development of this theme - the role of the woman in society - which reaches across four generations. When Hagar's father was establishing himself as a founder of the town, the Biblical virtuous woman whose 'price is far above rubies'<sup>24</sup> was the model for the pioneer wife and mother: strong, capable, self-reliant, but subject always to her husband, and always at home beside him. Catharine Parr Traill, whom Morag addresses in mock-serious fashion, was such a pioneer wife in Canada's frontier days, and Morag draws an unfavourable comparison between herself and this paragon. When the conversations between the nineteenth century pioneer and her twentieth century spiritual descendant cease, it signifies Morag's acceptance that the standards set in those early days no longer apply.



I'm going to stop feeling guilty that I'll never be as hardworking or as knowledgeable or all-round terrific as you were... and yet in my way I've worked damn hard, and I haven't done all I would've liked to do, but I haven't folded up like a fan either... I'm about to quit worrying about being either an old or a new pioneer. (The Diviners p. 406)

In a very real sense, however, Morag was a pioneer - in making her own way on her own terms as a woman alone. She left Manawaka and its enclosed community to enter the wilderness of the modern world where she needed a great deal of her forebears' toughness in order to follow her chosen path, one which was comparatively new then and not very well signposted. Of course, in the eighties this seems rather less outrageous than it would have been regarded in the fifties and sixties when Morag adopted her unconventional stance. Margaret Laurence takes some trouble to reveal her, not as the immoral scarlet woman she might have been regarded in conventional circles, but as an ordinary human being seeking fulfilment through self rather than vicariously through husband and family. When she breaks the moral code it is because it will break her if she does not.

The female characters in the earlier books appear as very much at the mercy of the prevailing attitude of society to women. They are caught in the gender trap. Hagar's suggestion to her father that she become a teacher like Morag MacCulloch is met with scornful refusal. She feels that she is regarded as one more prized possession, a thing, to be used by her father for his own ends. Vanessa MacLeod's mother reveals to her daughter, as the latter prepares to go off to college, that 'I got the highest marks in the province in my last year. I guess I never told you. Your grandfather didn't believe in education for women then.' (A Bird in the House, p.203) This of

course reflected the attitude generally held at the time, that education would be wasted on a girl. After all, should not marriage be every woman's ultimate goal, so what did she need education for?

By the time we meet Rachel Cameron, teaching has become an acceptable career for a woman, but the social attitudes of Manawaka relegate her to spinsterhood because her education, coupled with her hidebound upbringing, make it impossible for her to find a suitable husband.<sup>25</sup> She feels superior to the men available in that small prairie town. Any other kind of relationship would be unthinkable. Calla's lesbian inclination must never be revealed because Manawakans would not know how to cope with such an aberration. Unmarried mothers are regarded as pariahs, especially if they opt to keep their babies. Single parent families like Morag Gunn's do not fit into the social framework at all. Puritanical concepts of the norm make it difficult to accommodate deviations like this. Stacey flees from the stifling atmosphere of Manawaka to take up one of the other socially acceptable careers for women, that of secretary. After all, a secretary serves a man: the traditional role. But this is only a prelude to marriage, which is regarded as the ultimate goal of every woman. She still follows the destiny which society has prescribed when she marries Mac, her Agamemnon amongst men. In The Fire-Dwellers Margaret Laurence is exploring the whole concept of woman as wife and mother as opposed to woman as person in her own right. In The Diviners the young Morag, at nineteen, resents the assumption that a woman's only chance of acceptance is in marriage, yet she sees no other way than to do what is expected.

She also resents the attitude she discerns in the young men she

meets at university. It is unwise for the clever young woman to allow her cleverness to show. Her function is to look good and make her man feel good. She must be especially careful not to appear to be smarter than he is. Although Morag knows this is unfair, she plays the game because she is too young and eager for acceptance to do otherwise. In so doing she submerges a part of her which is important to her survival. Because a woman's ultimate aim must be marriage, her prime role becomes that of pleasing a man. An important part of this pleasing or attracting is looking good. All four of the grown-up protagonists in the novels to a greater or lesser degree see the need to be physically attractive and well-dressed as prerequisites to being female. To be attractive to look at is to be womanly. The author refers frequently to her women's physical appearance, which, it seems, must always be judged against what the man would expect, or for its effectiveness in attracting a man. Each of them gives expression to her dissatisfaction with herself through her belief that she is physically unattractive and through her preoccupation with what she is wearing. In marriage the wife is depicted as an adjunct of her husband. At first Morag dresses to suit her status as Brooke's wife and this dressing up is used to symbolise her subversion of her Self to her husband's expectations. Later, when Brooke and his new wife visit Morag in Vancouver, she notes especially how perfectly this young woman projects the image best suited for the wife of the famous man Brooke has become. When Mac and Stacey go out together, she worries compulsively about what she looks like - will she let Mac down because her little black dress is too tight for her? In her preoccupation with her weight she also reflects

another of many women's chief concerns. Men like slim women, they are told, so women must be slim. The novels are full of illustrations of the way women unconsciously accept what society considers as proper appearances. In a tantalising side remark Hagar castigates Bram because he would never buy her a corset from the catalogue, thus becoming partly to blame for her present grossness. Rachel tortures herself over whether she is dressed appropriately for her evenings out with Nick, worried about the impression he may get of her from her choice of frock. Calla's lack of femininity is underlined by her complete lack of dress sense or apparent desire to look attractive. She is not valued for her good sense or her deep capacity for selfless love, qualities which would make her a good wife and mother, if only one could see past the shapeless, unharmonious garments she affects. It would appear that women never lose their preoccupation with their looks, because Hagar at ninety is still as vain as a peacock, with very definite views on how she should dress. When Murray Lees first appears she is immediately self-conscious about her outward appearance.

He stares at me and then I'm aware of myself.. my cotton dress bedraggled, my face dark streaked, my hair slipped out of its neat bun and hanging down like strands of grey mending wool. I put a hand up to straighten my hair. (The Stone Angel, p.220)

It has been suggested that the Laurence novels are tinged with feminist propaganda. She herself does not believe that novelists ought to be propagandists. However her books by implication do support the feminist view. It is true to say, though, that all she has done is to illuminate a situation which already exists, showing how current attitudes to women affect their lives. She describes

things as they are.<sup>26</sup> The revelation is progressive throughout the books, parallel with the changes of attitude which gradually take place in society in the three generations covered by the Manawaka series. The culmination comes in The Diviners where the dilemmas of women whether in Manawaka, Toronto, Vancouver, London or McConnell's Landing are all faced squarely and a stance is taken. In this regard this book can be seen as a more political novel than the others. Morag, being Morag, challenges the accepted pattern and succeeds where weaker vessels might fail, but even her success is only partial. The people at McConnell's Landing still regard her as an oddity and an outsider. The advance is as much typified in the fact that she doesn't care as in anything else. Her struggle to break away from the stereotype of the incredibly good, unfailingly capable and relentlessly hardworking paragon epitomised in her patron saint, Catherine Parr Traill, 'Oh lady of blessed memory,' (The Diviners, p.96) is a pattern for every woman in her quest for personal freedom.

Margaret Laurence attributes the tendency to value thrift, industry and proper appearance above all else to the influence of Scottish Presbyterian or Calvinist beliefs which she sees as conducive to intolerance, hypocrisy and the stifling of the free spirit. She has very little good to say about the established church as she sees it at work in the community. '... the novels present a world in which some of the outward representations of Christianity are meaningless empty forms without spirit.'<sup>27</sup> Its representatives appear ineffectual, even insincere. Hagar accuses Mr. Troy of being the tool of her daughter-in-law, Doris, and fails to recognise his basic goodness because of his bland exterior. Rachel views the

picture of Christ in the stained glass window at her mother's church with amused condescension, suggesting that this insipid creature bears no resemblance to the Christ of the New Testament. She contends, as does G.B. Shaw in his introduction to Androcles and the Lion, that if her mother and the rest of the congregation were actually required to live as Christ commanded them to do, they would be appalled. Rather they insist on interpreting the message in the 'comfortable words' one would find in the Prayer book. Stacey no longer finds the church relevant to her life, although she constantly addresses God in her inner monologue. Mac's minister father, Matthew, confesses to moments of grave doubt during his ministry in the established institution. Morag found the church in Manawaka was simply a middle class organisation for perpetuating the status quo. Its members were capable of snobbery and lack of charity in their treatment of Prin, whose simple soul was gradually shrivelled up in an atmosphere where she was treated either as reprehensible or invisible. The death of Vanessa's father makes her feel that the God she has been taught to worship is distant, indestructible, and totally indifferent to Man's suffering. In fact, this seems to be the general feeling held by each of the Manawaka women. Margaret Laurence is scathing in her treatment of the many pentecostal or revivalist movements which are a feature of North American society. In each novel there is some reference to one such group, where she describes their hysterical fervour and the ignorant acceptance of promises made by sincere but misguided gospel preachers. She sees these hothouse plants as filling a gap in people's lives which established religion has left empty, but the means is not necessary any more worthy. In A

Bird in the House, Noreen, the hired girl,

belonged to the Tabernacle of the Risen and Reborn, and she had got up to testify no less than seven times in the past two years, she told us. My mother, who could not imagine anyone's voluntarily making a spectacle of themselves, was profoundly shocked by this revelation. 'Don't worry,' my father soothed her. 'She's all right. She's just had a kind of dull life, that's all.' (A Bird in the House, p.98)

The Tabernacle fulfils the same function of providing some purpose, colour and human warmth in Calla Mackie's life. Murray F. Lees' description of his dealings with the Tabernacle, where at one time the service was 'better than Buck Rogers and Tom Mix rolled into one,' (The Stone Angel, p.226) both fascinates and repels Hagar with her no-nonsense Scottish background. Royland's revelation of his past as a circuit rider, 'one of your real rip snortin' Bible punchers,' (The Diviners, p.240) is presented as a disastrous episode from his past life which is best forgotten.

Margaret Laurence's attitude to the missionary influence she observed in Africa is also one of disapproval. She regrets their pulling down of the old gods and deplores the schizoid condition she feels it has created in contemporary Africans with their Western education. They find it difficult to reconcile their acquired religion and learning with the pull of the old ways. In her short story, 'The Merchant of Heaven', she describes the artist, Danso, as 'a little boy, in the evangel's meeting place, listening to the same sermons while the old gods of his people still trampled through the night forests of his mind.' (The Tomorrow-Tamer, p.60) Neither Father Lemon nor Matthew's missionary father in 'The Drummer of All The World' understood or even liked Africans. They wished to impose their values on a civilisation which they found repellent. Matthew

concludes that '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.' (The Tomorrow-Tamer, p.18)

It would be easy to conclude, therefore, that Margaret Laurence is atheistic, or at the very least, agnostic, in her beliefs. Yet this would be doing her a grave injustice.

If she shows the Christian church in a bad light it is because it weighs on her characters, hinders their thrust toward life, and blocks them from the fulfilment which comes from diving trustingly into time's adventure.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, she is not anti-God at all, merely against Christianity's contemporary manifestation, as shown in the established churches such as the United Church of Canada with its Presbyterian/Methodist tradition. The early fervour which characterised those two churches in the nineteenth century has given way to the twentieth century emphasis on form. When Rachel suggests that

If the Reverend Mac Elfish should suddenly lose his mind and speak of God with anguish or joy, or out of some need should pray with fierce humility as though God had to be there, Mother would be shocked to the core. Luckily, it would never happen. (A Jest of God, p.41)

she is giving voice to the idea that the church in Manawaka in the sixties speaks to the head, not the heart. The author writes from the standpoint of one who has been reared in a Christian background, and her work reveals this in the frequent use of Biblical references and symbols. Most children of her generation would have a thorough grounding in the Bible which was at the centre of teaching, whether at home, at school or in church and Sunday School. Sandra Djwa refers to

... the cultural matrix of a small Canadian prairie town... where the religious imagination was as much part of existence as the



wind on the prairie, codified as it was in the patriarchal prairie family and permeating the whole social structure of the community which radiated out from church and family.<sup>29</sup>

Some critics make much of the classical parallels they find in her novels, but these are greatly out-weighed by her use of Biblical allusions as symbolic devices, or 'Biblical metaphors'.<sup>30</sup> This is not surprising in view of her background. Traditionally great emphasis was placed on the Old Testament with its God who was harsh and severe in his punishment of wrongdoing. No milksop travelling salesman type this, but a God of wrath and vengeance, of thunder and blinding light. This inclination towards the books of the Old Testament is evident throughout Margaret Laurence's writing. Her choice of Biblical names such as Hagar and Rachel to make a specific point about the women who bear these names is an obvious example of the use of her religious heritage. Moreover, she sees these women as presentday counterparts of their Old Testament namesakes, bearing in modern times the same sorrows - Hagar condemned to wander in the wilderness of pride, Rachel forever mourning her unborn children. Also she uses hymns and direct quotations from the Bible to make specific points. As Morag descends into the depths of depression after Christie's death, she thinks, 'Save me, O God, for the waters are come into my soul.'<sup>31</sup> This quotation has already appeared in The Fire-Dwellers where the Reverend M. MacAindra refers to it as one of his favourite texts, while at the same time revealing his own inner despair. Concepts given expression in 'Jerusalem the Golden' and 'All People that on Earth do Dwell' are used in The Diviners and The Stone Angel to help Morag and Hagar acquire important insights.

The women in the novels all share with their creator this

religious legacy from their childhood. Although none of them, in the accepted sense, is a believer, not one is able to free herself from the 'old mythology, the obscure psychological remnants, the conditioned emotional reflexes, of a Calvinist heritage.'<sup>32</sup> They may see the church as irrelevant in their lives, but they find it difficult to assert categorically that there is no God. For instance, in spite of Stacey's declaration that she is an atheist, she is still influenced by the heritage of a Christian upbringing, for she often expresses herself in the clichés of religion, and in times of crisis she discusses her problems with God in a kind of praying. In fact, to a greater or lesser degree, each of these women does this same thing in difficult times. The scornful way Hagar speaks to Him differs enormously from the way Rachel harangues Him, or Stacey mocks at herself for conversing with Someone in whom she does not believe, but they do it nonetheless. Margaret Laurence uses the conversations as a means of highlighting the nature of these women and also of emphasising their needs. They all share a common view of God as remote, vengeful, even malicious in the jokes he is prepared to play on humans. However, they all find it impossible to write him off completely, and each in the end achieves a modicum of spiritual grace or peace.

A chronological study of the novels reveals that each protagonist moves one step further along a spiritual continuum leading toward a truly gratifying form of religious assent. In The Diviners this goal is finally realised.<sup>33</sup>

This is a further example of the way in which Margaret Laurence develops each of her themes progressively through book after book to culminate in a kind of all-round acceptance, or state of grace, as

experienced by Morag. With her, the journey towards faith in the life force, in God, is at last complete; spiritual growth and integration are finally achieved. 'In Morag's mythology the Christian God becomes a symbol of the searching human spirit.'<sup>34</sup> Whereas Stacey mourns her disbelief, Morag rejoices in its reawakening. The God of vengeance which Hagar defies has gradually become the New Testament God of mercy and love, so much so that Morag is able to say, simply and sincerely, to Pique as she sets out on her own journey to self-discovery, 'Go with God.' (The Diviners, p.450)

Step by step, then, each one moving a little further forward, the Manawaka women advance towards a reawakening of faith. This can be seen to coincide with Margaret Laurence's own passage through agnosticism to a new kind of belief based on hope. In 1973 she said:

I don't have any feeling, personally, of loyalty to the traditional Christian religions, and I say religions advisedly. I think of myself as a kind of religious atheist, if you like, or religious agnostic, who knows? but I do not really believe that God is totally dead in our universe, you see. I don't know even what I mean by God, but I don't think, personally, that we do live in a universe which is as empty as we might think.<sup>35</sup>

In 1980, God was seen as 'the informing spirit of the universe' which is 'the mystery at the core of life.'<sup>36</sup> In 1981, 'God, though very often proclaimed dead, is also very much alive, in my opinion.'<sup>37</sup>

Finally, by August 1982, she was able to say

I call myself an unorthodox Christian. I was brought up in the United Church of Canada, and still attend. A lot of questions of faith have concerned me throughout my adult life. One thing I feel is terribly important: the social gospel. It is not enough to simply say, 'my religion saves my soul.' It is essential to go out in the world, to proclaim and to work against injustice.<sup>38</sup>

As she sees it, part of the process of rediscovering God involves a recognition of the Individual's place in the scheme of things, and an

acceptance of this position in relation to what has gone before and what is to come. Each of us must recognise that the place where we stand in the present is unique, yet mysteriously determined by what has gone before, which is beyond our influence. In The Diviners the symbolic River of Now and Then reveals its truth to Morag who, by allowing it to flow before her eyes as she relives her past, is enabled to recognise at last how she has arrived at Now, and to accept that as Time flows on, someday she will be replaced by others. She comes to terms with her ancestors and will become an ancestor herself. Her past proclaims itself in her veins and already it flows in her daughter's. With God's grace she is fulfilling her function.

Margaret Laurence regards the concept of being a part of history as very important for the individual. She considers that each of us needs a personal mythology based on the past. The dominant theme in The Diviners concerns this basic human need to belong, to be part of a proud tradition. Christie creates in Piper Gunn and his handsome wife ancestors in which Morag can take pride. From these stories she is able to draw the strength to carry on in a world where others devalue her. The pride of her ancestors made it possible for them to conquer the wilderness of Western Canada. Her wilderness was Manawaka and later the world, and she would do the same. Jules Tonnerre has a mythology also and it too helps him to survive in a hostile environment. What is more, the heroic deeds performed by the ancestors in Jules' and Morag's myths were made possible because those ancestors had a mythology too. On the other hand, Pique will have a different mythology which will include both Morag's and Jules'. Because Morag tried to divorce herself from her past, to deny

her ancestors, she suffered much heartache and disorientation. Only when she was able to feel at home with herself was she free to reassess her past and see its relevance to her and the present.

Margaret Laurence saw the same process in Africa where Africans had been encouraged by Western influences to turn their backs on the old ways. They were no longer secure in relation to their past yet did not feel at home in the present environment. Her African writing is infused with the recognition of the confusion suffered by so many Africans. She feels that it is up to the new generation of African writers to re-establish a proper appreciation of the past as it has contributed to the present. However, it is not only former black colonials who suffer from a sense of disorientation. She sees modern man in general as cut off from his roots and forced to live in an alien environment. We cannot feel at home with ourselves if we do not feel we belong. Morag and Jules were dispossessed in the community where they grew up. Neither belonged. Modern man is dispossessed in a different way. In a society where mobility and change are implicit and where the past is denigrated in favour of immediacy, man experiences a sense of rootlessness, cut off from the natural world and from his heritage. People like the A-Okay Smiths are attempting to redress the balance by re-establishing a harmony with nature. In a sense Morag achieves this harmony through her farm on the River of Now and Then. She has found a place with associations with the past, where she can observe the rhythm of the seasons through the birds, the plants and the River itself. As last she feels she belongs somewhere.

The search for belonging has taken half a lifetime. Thus Margaret

Laurence implies that it takes many years to understand the basic truths of life, and that learning comes from living. In The Diviners, her last novel and a kind of swan-song, she has chronicled one voyage of discovery where the central character has had to struggle against all those factors which militate against personal freedom, namely the factors which provide the themes for the author's writing and which she presents over and over again as barriers against the one basic necessity of life, self-realisation.

## Footnotes: Chapter 7

1. Margaret Tanaszi, Feminine Consciousness in Contemporary Canadian Fiction, (Leeds, 1977), p.182.
2. Don Cameron, Conversations with Canadian Novelists, 'The Black Celt Speaks of Freedom', (Toronto, 1973), p.98.
3. Nancy Bailey, 'Margaret Laurence, Carl Jung and the Manawakan Women', Studies in Canadian Literature, Vol. 2, (1977), pp. 306-321.

In this essay Nancy Bailey makes a very convincing case for her claim that Margaret Laurence's treatment of personal development in her protagonists, especially Morag Gunn, is Jungian in its content. 'The parallels between the phases of Jung's theory and of Laurence's fiction reveal the novelist as spiritually akin to the psychologist; her work has the scope and articulation of a complete cultural myth which lends itself appropriately to Jungian analysis - while at the same time pointing beyond Jung's ideas on female-male relations which were deeply conditioned by his own time.' (p.306) The implication is not that Margaret Laurence has any particular knowledge of Jung's theories or that she deliberately sets out to incorporate them in her work. The suggestion is that self-fulfilment (individuation), which is the underlying theme of all her fiction, is also central to Jung's view of mental health. The importance she gives to myth and ancestral past could also be said to parallel Jung's theory of the pull of the collective unconscious on the individual. There is no doubt that the claim can be easily justified. Such

assertions as are found in Jolande Jacobi's The Psychology of C.G. Jung, (7th edition, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1968) lend credence to this suggestion that the Laurence books, even if unconsciously, have Jungian overtones. 'We must pay dearly for it (the development of the personality) and the price is isolation and loneliness... Self-scrutiny and self-fulfilment are ... the absolute prerequisites for the assumption ... of the obligation to lend the best possible form and the greatest possible scope to the fulfilment of one's own individual life... .' (p.106) Who more than Morag struggles toward this end? 'The shadow (Jung's other side, dark brother) stands for the personal darkness personifying the contents of our psyche that have been rejected and repressed or less lived in the course of our conscious existence.' (p.112) Morag simply refers to the Black Celt in her nature. 'Exclusive self-reliance makes for spiritual pride, sterile brooding and isolation within one's own ego.' (p.107) How better to describe Hagar's intransigence or Rachel's morbid self-examination? Jacobi quotes Jung's words, 'The greatest and most important problems of life are all fundamentally insoluble. They can never be solved, but only outgrown... This outgrowing... revealed itself on further experience to be the raising of the level of consciousness.' (p.134) Stacey proves her mental health by her ability to accept insoluble problems and grow beyond them. Hagar's greatest problem is her inability to accept. 'I never got used to a blessed thing.' (The Stone Angel, p.164) Morag's words to Royland when he comments that the loss of the power to divine is



not a cause for mourning, 'I see that now.' (The Diviners, p.452) refer to more than just that truth. They imply an acknowledgement and acceptance of things as they are.

4. Margaret Laurence, 'Godman's Master', The Tomorrow - Tamer, (Toronto, 1970), p.146.
5. Margaret Laurence, 'Godman's Master', p.155.
6. Margaret Laurence, 'Godman's Master', p.155.
7. Margaret Laurence, 'Godman's Master', p.159.
8. Don Cameron, 'The Black Celt Speaks of Freedom', p.98.
9. P. Easingwood, 'Margaret Laurence, Manawaka and the Edge of the Unknown', World Literature Written in English, 22, (1983), pp. 254-63.
10. Margaret Laurence, Heart of a Stranger, (Toronto, 1980), title of introductory story, 'A Place to Stand On' from a poem, Roblin Mills, by Al Purdy.
11. Margaret Tanaszi, p.194.
12. Dylan Thomas, Do Not Go Gently into That Good Night, poem used as epigraph to the novel The Stone Angel.
13. Margaret Laurence, 'Ten Years' Sentences', Canadian Literature, 41, (1969), pp.10-16.
14. Margaret Atwood, Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature, (Toronto, 1972), p.140.
15. George Woodcock, 'The Human Elements: Margaret Laurence's Fiction', The Human Elements, Oberon Press, (1978), pp. 151-152.
16. Clara Thomas 'Pilgrims' Progress: Margaret Laurence and Hagar Shipley', Journal of Canadian Studies, Vol. 17, (1982), pp. 110-116, p.111.

17. W. Swayze, 'The Odyssey of Margaret Laurence', The English Quarterly, Vol. 3, (1970), pp. 7-17.
18. Margaret Atwood, Survival, p.12.
19. Jolande Jacobi, The Psychology of C.G. Jung, (London, 1968), p.134.
20. Margaret Atwood, Survival, pp. 131-132.
21. Nancy Bailey, 'Margaret Laurence, Carl Jung, and the Manawaka Women', p.307.
22. Don Cameron, 'The Black Celt Speaks of Freedom', p.105
23. Margaret Laurence, Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Novelists and Dramatists, 1952-1966, (London, 1968), p.125.
24. Book of Proverbs, Chap. 31, verse 10.
25. Judy Kearns, 'Rachel and Social Determinism: A Feminist Reading of A Jest of God', Journal of Canadian Fiction, Vol, 27, (1980), pp. 101-123.

In her essay, Judy Kearns deals in detail with the Manawaka ground rules which Rachel, as a woman, has to follow. She rightly points out that Rachel's problems arise as much, perhaps more, from social expectations for women as from personal inadequacy and suggests that many critics, especially the male of the species, have ignored this fact. 'The primary flaw in conventional reasoning about the novel are the assertion that Rachel's problems are all her own fault and the disregard for Laurence's subtle depiction of the coercive effect of social pressure.' (p.104) The assumption is that a woman will play the game required to get herself a man. She will behave and dress in ways which will attract the male. Rachel's creator shows her

comparing her own self-consciousness with the confidence in their femaleness that she senses in the young girls living out their destinies in and around Manawaka. Her problem is that she has never learned to play this game as her sister Stacey did. '... Rachel's account of life in Manawaka and her recollection of the forces which have shaped her adolescence and young womanhood make clear the coercive effect of pressure from a society which upholds a masculine value-system, and two of the factors indicating Rachel's strength at the end of A Jest of God are her symbolic movement away from that society and her ability to disregard the stereotypic vision which is inappropriate for the individual personality.' (p.106)

26. Sheila MacLeod, The Art of Starvation, (London, 1981). The author discusses the pressures placed on young women to aim for the image presented as socially preferable by the media, presumably as a reflection of what society thinks. She makes direct reference to the emphasis on slimming diets, something Margaret Laurence uses in her portrayal of Stacey of The Fire-Dwellers. One of Stacey's preoccupations is with her weight and with dieting. This is used to demonstrate her sense of inferiority when faced with the model which society holds up for her to follow, especially depicted in the young women who are employed in the Richalife promotion, almost like vestal virgins or priestesses of Health and Beauty. Margaret Atwood in The Edible Woman touches on the connection between food and a sense of helplessness in the face of social pressures to conform. Sheila MacLeod says: 'the adolescent girl is being told that she

should be independent, but not to the extent where she is going to antagonise men; that she must make full use of her intellectual resources, but not to the extent where they could interfere with her primary role as wife-and-mother; that she must be sexy and seductive, but still allow the man to take the dominant role, in case she may injure his male pride; and that the pursuit of domestic skills - such as cooking - is necessary not because they can themselves be creative pursuits, but because they are going to make some man so happy and comfortable that he will not contemplate leaving.' (p.165)

27. Sandra Djwa, 'Biblical Archetypes in Western Canadian Fiction', Western Canada: Past and Present, (Toronto, 1975), pp. 193-203, p.195.

28. Kenneth Russell, 'God and Church in the Fiction of Margaret Laurence', Studies in Religion, Vol. 7, (1978), pp. 435-446, p.446.

Russell states that his purpose in this study is to discuss in depth 'the religious dimensions of Margaret Laurence's work' beginning from 'the split between her appreciation of Christian tradition and her evaluation of the local churches in which it is embodied' and working systematically through each of her novels, concentrating 'on the narrative passages which deal explicitly with God and church. I have purposely left aside the analysis of her use of biblical metaphors and many other elements which are essential to her religious view of life.' (p.435) (My emphasis).

29. Sandra Djwa, 'Biblical Archetypes', p.197.

30. Sandra Djwa and David I. Jeffery, 'Biblical Hermeneutics and Family History in Contemporary Canadian Fiction: Wiebe and Laurence', Mosaic, Vol. II, (Winnipeg, 1978), pp. 87-106.  
These two writers deal in detail with the specific Biblical metaphors or symbols Margaret Laurence employs in the novels.
31. Psalms, Chap. 69 as found in The Diviners, p.143.
32. Melanie Mortlock, 'The Religion of Heritage: The Diviners as a Thematic Conclusion to the Manawaka Series', Journal of Canadian Fiction, Vol. 27, (1980), pp. 132-141, p. 132.
33. Melanie Mortlock, p.132.
34. Melanie Mortlock, p.138.
35. Don Cameron, 'The Black Celt speaks of Freedom', pp. 111-112.
36. Lois Wilson, 'Why Pick on Margaret?', United Church Observer, (1980), pp. 10-12.
37. Alan Twigg, ed., For Openers: Conversations with 24 Canadian Writers, (Madiera Park, B.C., 1981), p.267.
38. Allan M. Gould, 'Interview with Margaret Laurence', Chatelaine, Toronto, August, 1982, p.40.

Wordsmith At Work<sup>1</sup>

Early in The Diviners Morag refers to herself as a wordsmith. By her deliberate choice of this word to describe the writer's function she is evoking a sense of the hard work which goes into the craft of writing: the selecting and sifting, the shaping and reshaping of the material, the accepting or discarding of the finished product, indeed, the process undertaken by any craftsman working in any medium, be it gold or words. It is necessary, therefore, for us, in a study of Margaret Laurence's writing techniques, to acknowledge the seriousness with which she regards her vocation, and the no-nonsense approach she takes to her craft - to her work. This is not to say that she excludes inspiration or imagination in the process. In fact, she frequently refers to being taken over by the muse, of writing at her characters' behest, as though they controlled the pen. Since Morag Gunn is a writer, we would expect her to share her creator's ideas about this and indeed she refers to a 'half-lunatic sense of possession, of being possessed by the thing' (The Diviners p.259) and later comments:

Odd feeling. Someone else dictating the words. Untrue, of course, but that was how it felt, the characters speaking. Where was the character, and who? Never mind. Not Morag's concern. Possession or self-hypnosis - it made no difference. (p.404)

But after the white heat of creation, once the frenzy has gone, comes the painstaking process of re-writing. Since Margaret Laurence believes that no single word should be used unless it is necessary and relevant, this means ruthless pruning, re-evaluating, discarding, disciplining herself to use the precise number of words required to say precisely what she wants to say. In an interview with Graeme

Gibson she remarks that 'It doesn't matter how long a novel is - you still can't afford to waste words.'<sup>2</sup> The result is a series of novels where plot, and narrative, are worked and re-worked until the former is meticulously organised and the vocabulary honed to an ascetic sharpness. A certain amount of this organisation actually takes place before the novel is even written, as the Laurence stories have an exceedingly long gestation period, and it may take some years of false starts before the final form emerges. Some critics complain that the turn of events is too tidily organised and that there are signs of manipulation; some point to what they regard as purple passages. Certain descriptive paragraphs in The Stone Angel are singled out as being untypical of a woman such as Hagar Shipley. But we should remember that Hagar is not an uneducated farm girl. Indeed, none of the Laurence women are unintelligent or untutored. She has been given an expensive education at an eastern academy where she was certainly exposed to the romantic poetry of England at least, for she quotes Keats's Meg Merrilies when she finds herself living like a gypsy at Shadow Point. Her generation would without doubt be introduced to the nineteenth century English novelists, none of whom were noted for their spare prose. What is more, Hagar has an extremely sensuous nature in spite of her external coldness. This is expressed in her love of flowers, and in her fondness for clothing which is not only brightly coloured but also pleasing to touch. Margaret Laurence's reply to her critics was that

...even people who are relatively inarticulate, in their relationships with other people, are perfectly capable within themselves, of perceiving the world in more poetic terms (although I mistrust that expression) than their outer voices might indicate.

She concluded by saying:

If one is writing, as we all partly must do, out of the subconscious, then the voices of the characters must be trusted.<sup>3</sup>

However, although she allows her main characters to speak in their own voice - to use their own idiom - behind the character is the author, consciously or unconsciously contributing nuances through the use of literary devices like alliteration, simile, and metaphor. The characters may speak for themselves, but they do come out of her mind and this mind is furnished with certain basic literary equipment. It is hard to believe that her books would be better for the excision of every descriptive passage or use of symbol to guide the reader to the inner significance of idea and event.

To the criticism that there are signs of manipulation, her reply was that she was not a puppet-master; her characters dictated their own terms; she was in fact manipulated by them.

I take on, for the time I'm writing, the persona of the character, and I am trying to make a kind of direct connection with this person, not to manipulate them but to listen to them, to try and feel my way into their skull in such a way that I respond in the writing the way they would respond, which of course is naturally both me and not me: this is where it gets so peculiar, because it's aspects of myself, and yet it's not totally me, it's them as well. They exist in their own right.<sup>4</sup>

Becoming so completely involved in the life of a character as to lose oneself in it means that what happens will be determined by the creature itself. But the author must exercise some kind of overall control of the structure and development of the work to avoid meaningless chaos. Margaret Laurence likes symmetry in her work, so although she claims that the main characters take over and have their own way, this can only be partly true because of the evidence everywhere of a carefully worked shape for each of the novels.



Moreover, there is always a subsequent re-working 'to weed out repetitions, to tear out mercilessly any purple prose which may inadvertently have sprouted like a kind of poisonous toadstool growth.'<sup>5</sup> Observation shows literary intrusions, or poetic passages, appear less and less frequently, until in The Diviners they are reserved almost exclusively for the river which exercises Morag's interest so fully. She has eliminated 'the totally irrelevant and the fine oratorical writing which I have come to dislike more and more'<sup>6</sup> and moved a long way from the 'brilliant sensuality in set piece descriptions of great power and evocation'<sup>7</sup> found in the African short stories.

Whether we wish to deal with Margaret Laurence's themes or discuss her techniques, it is necessary to treat the five Manawaka books as a unit. Although they are bound together by their obvious common setting in Manawaka, their unity goes deeper than this, for they represent a progression both in the development of the dominant themes which occur in each, and in the steady increase in technical virtuosity which is evident. It is as though with each new novel, a new set of problems of form and voice must be met. Yet each advance is based on the consolidation of skills practised in the previous exercise. One set of problems solved, the question becomes: where to go from there? It is never a question of the simple repetition of what has worked before. In each successive book Margaret Laurence asks more of her reader, just as she does of herself. The Stone Angel and A Jest of God, in their different ways, require the reader to peer out at the world through the eyes of the main character, while simultaneously standing back to observe that character as she cannot see herself. A Bird in the House asks its reader to take part in a

literary experience involving a series of linked short stories written by a forty-year old woman as if she were a twenty-year-old recalling her reactions as a child to, and observations of, a claustrophobic family situation. The Fire-Dwellers makes even greater demands because it is written on several different levels, each visually differentiated on the page, but ebbing and flowing constantly between actuality, inner monologue, fantasy and memory. The author says that by the time she came to this book she was very much aware of the impact made by television and other visual media on society. 'My writing has always tended to be very visual... influenced by both films and T.V. in the sort of visual techniques that we use.'<sup>8</sup> Therefore, in this, her most structurally demanding novel, she attempted to imitate some of the audio-visual techniques of which she had become so aware, hence the varied typography, punctuation devices and indenting which have a visual impact, backed up by a variety of idiom to reflect the different levels of consciousness of Stacey MacAindra. Although in The Diviners there is a return to a more traditional form, at least visually, the use of photographs as triggers for memory, and the numerous Memorybank Movies indicate a continuing interest in modern visual media. When Patricia Morley refers to 'Laurence's interest in multimedia techniques (which) culminate in the record which accompanies The Diviners'<sup>9</sup>, she is simply pointing out how far Margaret Laurence is prepared to go in using modern developments in communication to complement her fiction. The record to which Mrs Morley refers contains the Jules/Piquette folk songs which appear in the novel, set to music. In the novel subtle demands are made; the reader must relate to an established woman writer who, while writing her final

novel, mentally replays the Memorybank Movies which tell her life story and at the same time play back the story she is writing. In fact, as readers, we share in a kind of story-telling devised by the author to best reflect the complexity of the process by which Morag Gunn comes to recognise what has been happening to her in the past forty-seven years - surviving the Manawaka experience by re-evaluating it and accepting that part of it which is irrevocably a part of her. It is a culmination for both Morag and Margaret Laurence. But then, which is which?

With some acerbity Margaret Laurence has stated that she detests the word style ('that odious word,' she calls it) when used to describe attributes of her writing, and insists herself on the words form and voice, which are consistent with her choice of wordsmith for the writer, suggesting as they do the shaping of the material, and the choosing of the appropriate language, something she practises with conviction. Certainly, her ear for the nuances of speech and the accuracy of her use of idiom ensure that her characters speak with the authentic voice of their age and time, capturing the turns of phrase of Canadians of four generations, from that of Hagar to that of Katie MacAindra and Pique Gunn.<sup>10</sup> This fidelity to the voices of her characters contributes to the truthfulness for which she is always striving in her books, and differentiates each character, by using a voice which is very much a part of her personality.

Hagar's turn of phrase is typical of her generation, of the grandparents whose rhythms of speech and idiom Margaret Laurence was able to recall with such ease in spite of the lapse of years. Rachel's voice differs in its quality from that of Stacey whose more open, more sardonic nature causes her to speak in a more brash and

slangy fashion than her prim schoolmistress sister. Vanessa's mother and her Aunt Edna share with the Cameron sisters these distinctive mannerisms, and it is never difficult to recognise which of the sisters is speaking. Edna's mere use of the word "kiddo" labelled her as belonging to a generation prior to Stacey's, whose language is the vernacular of the sixties. In The Diviners we have a real linguistic tour de force. Here we have many voices, spanning three generations and including several different racial backgrounds. Here too, as to a lesser degree we have in The Stone Angel, language or mode of speech is used as a way of pigeonholing people, of identifying their place in the social scale. We become aware of Morag's growing up as much from the alteration in the way she speaks as from any other indicator. In fact, Morag's change in public utterances becomes an integral part of her changing pattern of life, as she seeks to know herself. As a child she speaks with the voice of Christie, but this rough and ready profanity is gradually modified to comply with the norm as, in her teens, she strives to be accepted by the townsfolk. Christie Logan too alters his mode of expression to coincide with his change of function in the novel. When he is telling the stories of Piper Gunn he somehow articulates in the rhythms and language of the Scottish bards, setting aside his everyday coarseness and assuming the role of seer. He has taken on the role expected of the local garbage collector and in his everyday conversation he acts out the part of the foul-mouthed not-too-bright oddity who chooses to do a job no one else can countenance. Morag dimly recognises this when she refers to his as 'a clowny preacher' (p.39) while he tells her he is "'Only showing them what they thought they would be expecting to see, then, do you see?'" (p.38) He has become so immersed in the character

that it seems only red biddy can free him to take on the nobler tones of the bard, Ossian. When the author wishes us to understand how completely Morag has become alienated from Brooke Skelton, and with everything that life with him implies, she shows her reverting to the coarseness of expression she had learned from Christie. Once she has left Brooke and gone to Vancouver she never again speaks with the care, the precision associated with an educated person, but lapses into a more colloquial, slipshod mode of speech, more in tune with the ill-educated people with whom she must make her life. This casual attitude to everyday speech remains with her and typifies her rejection of the world's yardstick, in favour of what she feels is appropriate in the circumstances. Even a successful writer need not parade her articulacy. Of course, her attempts at using the slang of Pique's generation are met with pitying scorn. Like all parents she is hopelessly out-of-date. This is yet another instance of how true to life her writing is.

Each character's mode of speech is as much a part of her as her hair colouring, so 'what the writer has done is to make language subject as well as method in these books.'<sup>11</sup> Since each novel, whether narrated in the first person or the third, is wholly dominated by the central character, this person's voice gives the book its overall tone, as well as delineating the protagonist's nature. Margaret Laurence claims to feel 'safer when I can feel that the narrative voice I'm conveying is that of the main character.'<sup>12</sup> She chose the first person narrative for The Stone Angel, A Jest of God, and A Bird in the House not because she preferred this mode, but because she found that this was the only way she could tell Hagar's or Rachel's or Vanessa's story.<sup>13</sup> Each demanded to be told that way.

Even in The Fire-Dwellers a great deal of first person narrative is used because the internal monologue which Stacey constantly engages in forms a large part of the book. This combined use of the third person antiphonally with the first is a clever device to suggest Stacey's actual state of mind.<sup>14</sup> The public Stacey who uses the third person is only the outer shell of the real person who is constantly commenting to the reader in her own voice about what is happening to her other self.<sup>15</sup> Although The Diviners is narrated in the third person, it is very much a solo performance where the reader is still asked to look at things through Morag's eyes, because we are watching with her a playback of old movies of her life. We are seeing what she sees, but also what she has chosen to let us see. Morag is looking at herself as a third person would, in order to assess the process of self-discovery. It is in this sense that the language of all the novels is very much subject<sup>16</sup>, as well as method. In 'Time and the Narrative Voice' Mrs. Laurence states that her 'narrative.... is essentially that of the main character... oriented almost totally towards an individual character.'<sup>17</sup>

Because the novels are either written in the first person, or heavily weighted in favour of the one central character, her readers have to work hard at them. For example, things cannot be taken at face value. Because they are looking through the eyes of unhappy women, especially in The Stone Angel, A Jest of God and The Fire-Dwellers, they are invited to become intimately involved, yet must at the same time distance themselves from what is said to look for what is hidden behind the words. Hagar's vision is only partial, clouded as it is by her prejudices, so the reader must not trust her judgment. Rachel's vision of the way things are is equally

unreliable. She sees life through a distorting mirror such as you find at the fair; the distortion is the result of her crippled emotional state. Stacey's view is more reliable, but she stands too close to the mirror and sees everything at too close range. This gives the novels a certain introverted quality. The reader is required to be so intimately linked to the protagonist that identification can be painful. Since it is not possible to remain aloof, reading the books is not a restful process. One experiences impatience with Hagar for her obduracy. We long to shout at her, "For goodness' sake, woman, can't you SEE?" Rachel's near-hysterical mental flagellation makes us want to tell her to pull herself together and stop being so negative, whereas towards Stacey we feel a sense of amused tolerance coupled with the wish that she would count her blessings. Morag does enlist our sympathies more because we see more clearly what she is fighting and we admire her strength. All this simply proves how involved the reader inevitably becomes, and one of the author's great achievements is her ability to make her readers accept these people, and continue to want to read about them in spite of the irritation, impatience, frustration or disgust: whatever emotions the stories evoke. The reader never loses interest; never gives the characters up as a bad job. Here lies the magic - we continue to want to know what happens to quite unheroic, unattractive people who engage our emotions - we feel impatience and anger, but also pity and admiration. We surely do not always like them, but we come to love them, in the biblical sense, as our neighbours. We accept them for what they are, with the recognition that they are mortals caught up in a struggle to escape from a web of influences beyond their control. They have become real human beings. This is

Margaret Laurence's triumph. The books do have an overwhelmingly female bias, which, if one dare say it, means that women will inevitably get more from reading them, simply because they can go that extra step further in identifying with much of what the Manawaka women experience.

Because the novels lean so heavily inward to the central character, the minor characters are generally not so well conceived, though there are exceptions. The more interesting of these seem to be oddities like Fan Brady or Uncle Dan Connor. The male characters on the whole are never fully realised, possibly for the very reason that they are depicted as they appear to the women. They are always slightly out of focus. Since we must look at the world through Hagar's eyes, we must see Bram, Marvin, John, Jason Currie as she sees them, although at the same time we know, when we stand back for a moment, that her vision is clouded. When we meet Morag, the last of the Manawaka women, we are presented with a more perceptive person, so situations are less ambivalent. We come to know Brooke Skelton better than we do Bram Shipley, but as he is a mere accessory to Morag's fact, his demons are not our concern. Part of Margaret Laurence's technique is to say to her readers, "Of course, this man is not like that, quite, but you must not be diverted. This is not his story." Therefore, although these characters are important to the story, they are required to remain on the periphery. One type of male character which recurs in the novels is the confessor figure, the Jungian archetype, the shaman, to whom the central female character can turn and to whom she can reveal the dark secrets in the mind's caves. Murray F. Lees, the rather ineffectual insurance salesman, accepts the father-confessor role and makes it possible for Hagar to



face up to the part she played in the death of her son and the destruction of her husband; by talking to Hector Jonas, the undertaker, Rachel finally frees herself from the misconceptions she had held about her father; Royland, that old-man-of-the-sea figure of The Diviners, is helper, confessor and philosopher, whose seemingly magic power to divine water draws Morag and him together in mutual admiration. Luke Venturi performs a similar function for Stacey, though the shaman is now the handsome prince rescuing the mermaid in distress. It is through her encounter with him that she is able to recognise at least some of the things she does not want. This tendency to use men as symbols, or as expendable characters who only function because of the needs of the female protagonists, extends to the treatment of Morag's lovers; Brooke, Jules and Dan - each has a representative role to play. Even Jules who turns up spasmodically throughout the book does not develop into a full-blooded person in his own right. All three have been given the role of outsider, each representative of a group beyond the closed Presbyterian community in which Morag grew up. Brooke is one of the imperialists who turned Canada into a colonial nation, which is more or less what he tries to do to his wife. Jules personifies that group of rank outsiders, the Métis, at the other end of the social scale, with whom Morag can identify, because she too is an outsider. Dan McRaith, as a Scot, reminds her of those Scottish ancestors who were dispossessed and came to Canada as exiles from their native land. There they displaced the Métis, as indeed Dan replaces Jules in Morag's life, at least for a time. Dan too is an exile - fleeing to London from Crombruch to escape his wife and all-too-numerous children.

Apart from the protagonists Margaret Laurence seems to enjoy

portraying what can best be described as grotesques. In delineating them she shows an overblown exuberance such as is found in Dickens' descriptions of his more colourful secondary characters. Calla, Buckle's mother, the Polygram lady, or Fan Brady, they all culminate in the exotic Christie and his improbable wife, Prin. Many of these exaggerated women are grossly fat, like Mrs Reilly in the hospital bed opposite Hagar's - 'lethargic as a giant slug' (The Stone Angel, p.281). Passing from the grotesque, we come to caricature as seen in Thor Thorlaksson, pseudonym for runny-nosed Vernon Winkler. We feel that the author has experienced a certain wicked pleasure in presenting us with this god-like product of commercial packaging.

Thor and the Richalife sales promotion which he masterminds are pure parody. This type of humour is found only in The Fire-Dwellers where the author has taken a critical look at modern consumerism. Is this an intrusion into the book in any way? One of the pressures to which Stacey is exposed is that of the selling industry, that facet of twentieth century society which batters away at women in particular, wooing them through newspapers, magazines, radio and television, as well as through the direct sell described in the book. Stacey feels she is being brainwashed and does her best to resist the blandishments thrust at her. With her quick tongue she pokes fun at them, and is ashamed of herself for accepting some of the false premises upon which selling is based. The author backs her up by making the whole process look ridiculous, on the basis that one of the most effective ways of weakening the influence of something you dislike is to laugh at it. The Polygram Party, the hairdressing salon, the supermarket, Thor's Richalife reception, and the sales promotion - they are all described in careful detail in mock serious

vein. Indeed they almost topple over into farce. This serio-comic tone is not found in any of the other books of the collection, except to some degree in The Diviners. The treatment of the A-Okay Smiths hints of amused tolerance tinged with admiration, and the conversations with Catherine Parr Traill have humourous undertones. Humour is not a major feature of Margaret Laurence's books. What there is is not comic but ironic, what is termed black comedy. The characters incline towards self-deprecation, laughing wryly at themselves, but find little to laugh about. This mocking tone, which in the case of Stacey or Aunt Edna finds expression in the wisecrack, is typically Canadian. In romantic pictures the clown is depicted with a tear on his cheek. The wisecrack we hear in the novels is used to cover up the pain and bewilderment behind the glib joke. For example, Vanessa becomes unexpectedly and uncomfortably aware of the pain behind the mask when she overhears her aunt's secret racking tears after Jimmy Lorimer's departure.

In discussing the rather gloomy atmosphere which pervades her books, Margaret Laurence refers to her 'Presbyterian attitude to life. I don't think that any of my fiction is all that cheery.'<sup>18</sup>

All the novels are permeated with ironies, large and small, cruel jokes, apparently played by some malevolent fate, and jests of God.<sup>19</sup>

What sadistic joker arranged for a special train to run along the tracks to Manawaka just as John and Arlene are trying to cross the railway bridge over the Wachakwa River valley? Cruellest twist of all - it is a train bringing relief for the area from the very Depression which was having such a destructive effect on the two young people's lives. What malign force willed it that a respectable spinster of thirty-four should have to come to terms with being

unmarried and pregnant, only to learn ultimately that she is not carrying a child, but a benign tumour? The ultimate irony, in social terms, is the one which inhabits each novel; each of the Scots Presbyterian women gains release or redemption through someone from one of the other ethnic groups in Canada, generally regarded as inferior by their Scottish neighbours. One of Hagar's two acts of spontaneous love is towards a young Chinese girl. Rachel's Nick comes from the Ukrainian community which her mother patronises. Stacey's brief encounter with Luke Venturi gives her a glimpse of Italian family life. What would have happened to Morag if she had not met Jules Tonnerre, Métis troubadour and archetypal outsider, just at the time when she was ready to leave Brooke? In Jules she finds someone who accepts her as she is and never tries to change her, as indeed he never wishes to change himself. Their invisible bonds are strong, but unconfining, and last all his lifetime. Finally, there is the irony of life itself, where reality and fantasy often overlap so closely that it is difficult to distinguish one from the other, yet it is only through doing so that the characters can achieve their full potential, and survive in spite of the jests of God.

Just as Margaret Laurence uses the term "jests of God" to symbolise life's ironies, especially in the first two Manawaka novels, so her work is full of other symbols or metaphors employed as devices to ensure the reader's awareness of the hidden meanings implicit in her work. Indeed, the symbolism is so specific as to suggest that she does not trust her readers to understand these nuances unless they are patently obvious. She not only shows us, she tells us. Linda Hutcheon suggests, in an essay on the use of imagery in The Stone Angel and Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman, that the

latter leaves more to the reader's imagination because she is a poet, and 'A good poet has to trust her reader with images; she has no choice.'<sup>20</sup> On the other hand Margaret Laurence takes no chances. Hagar Shipley tells us she is the stone angel. In fact, each of the titles is in itself symbolic of that novel's significant theme.

One specific and important symbol is that of the large house, representing, as it does, the success of its owner as well as a substantial protection against the outside, the wilderness, so desired by the pioneers. In Manawaka people are judged by the houses they inhabit. Dick Harrison, in his study of Canadian prairie literature, refers to the fact that

the house becomes one of the most prominent symbols, representing man's first cultural and imaginative assertion, as well as his most immediate defence against his environment... The house... is often the embodiment of a larger dream.<sup>21</sup>

He points to 'the great brick houses of Margaret Laurence's Manawaka, for example, with their ponderous imported traditions.'<sup>22</sup> Mrs Laurence is merely reporting a typical Canadian phenomenon which had in fact been recorded by earlier Canadian novelists.<sup>23</sup> Of course, the large house erected as a monument by the successful man is a universal symbol. The projection of that house as a fortress is rather more Canadian in origin. Faced with the miles of unmapped, untamed wilderness encountered in the new world, the pioneers' big houses and little towns ringed them round in some semblance of safety against the fearful prospect of forbidding natural landscape. Margaret Laurence uses this idea of wilderness or wildness symbolically, too, especially in The Stone Angel, where the external wilderness is a symbol of the wildness of man's inner nature. The need to tame both destroys human beings. Hagar tells us that pride

was her wilderness, and the book is full of references to deserts, Pharaoh and Egyptians, Indians with their greasy air outside the town, and wild flowers having to be beaten back at the cemetery's edge. Some of these have Biblical connotations, and indeed, this is another Laurencian literary device - the use of Biblical imagery to make a point.

Two symbolic objects have a specific and unusual function. A plaid pin which Hagar Shipley received from her father as a link with her family connections in Scotland, and which she hands on to her son, John, as her heir, turns up later in the hands of Jules Tonnerre who had inherited it from his father Lazarus, to whom John Shipley traded it for what he called a jackknife. Also, there is a hunting knife later traded by John Shipley for a packet of cigarettes from Christie Logan. Christie gives the knife to Morag. Thus the author links her first Manawaka novel, The Stone Angel, with her last, The Diviners, but she also links together two Canadian historical facts, that of Scottish immigration to the West with the Métis, half-breeds or bois-brûlés whom they eventually displaced. The two objects so carelessly traded by youngsters come to symbolise the whole history of two peoples, whose representatives, Morag and Jules, restore to them their historical importance. In a scene just prior to Jules's death, he and Morag return these two talismans, each to its proper owner. Jules receives back the knife his father had owned and Morag receives the brooch which came from the land which had provided so many of the early settlers, including her own people. The two traditions will be united when Pique, who already shares the blood of two races, inherits these symbols too.

The river as a metaphor for time, appearing in The Diviners, is a

common enough device. Some of the other metaphors in the novels include caves as representations of the hidden places in man's mind, mirrors behind which are hidden images other than those reflected, birds such as gulls which typify the free-flying human spirit, the bird in the house frantically seeking freedom like its human counterpart, or loons, typical of the natural order which is threatened by the advance of civilisation. The sea becomes a kind of primordial womb into which one can be sucked, or a fathomless grave where one returns to the source from which life has sprung. The Cameron Funeral Home is a sort of nether world, a purgatory, a repository for souls, to which Rachel dare not descend. The list is endless, and this device of symbolism is probably one of the most popular with our author. There is even the symbolic use of personal names, from the Biblical Hagar wandering in the wilderness or Rachel weeping for her children to Christie, the Christian martyr of Manawaka, or Morag, the Black Celt, the Morgan-le-Fay whose skill was divination.<sup>24</sup>

The most important of all symbols is the town of Manawaka itself. Out of it the novels grow and from it the characters never totally escape, at least in spiritual terms. Many writers have chosen to use one locale for a series of novels.<sup>25</sup> Not all of them make use of this specific location in quite the same way, because Manawaka is not only a physical place, it represents also a state of mind. As such, each of the Laurence women has absorbed certain attitudes from which she can never be totally free. In physical terms Manawaka becomes, to the novels' readers, a specific and identifiable place with real streets and stores and resident families who move in and out of the lives of the five women with varying impact. No one novel reveals all

there is to know about the town. Together, the five books tell us a great deal. This gradual revelation creates a need to read on, and provides unity to the series, making each a part of the whole. Picking out and identifying minor characters, or relating them to their families, becomes an enjoyable by-product of the main task of the reader, to follow the life of one woman as she takes steps towards self-discovery. What fun to note that Jimmy Lorimer, Aunt Edna's former manfriend in A Bird in the House, originated from McConnell's Landing where Morag Gunn finally settles in The Diviners! Manawaka becomes so specifically identifiable that we feel that, if we were to go to such a town today, we would still be able to buy jelly doughnuts at Parsons' Bakery or meet Simon Pearl, Lawyer, coming out of his office. Margaret Laurence's efforts to create a real world have been so successful that readers tend to forget that it is not a specific place, but an amalgam of many similar small towns which could be found in many parts of Canada. It is a prairie town because she grew up in such a place; small towns with the same aura could be found all across Canada. What she succeeds in doing is to lend Manawaka actuality as well as typicality.

Some critics have made a great deal of the fact that Manawaka is a Western Canadian town, and have tried to tie Mrs Laurence in with those Canadian authors who have written what they call prairie fiction. This is not strictly accurate. The details which appear in her description of Manawaka are taken from the Manitoba town of Neepawa where she actually lived, it is true. But she uses these details because they were what she knew, not because they were specifically typical of Western Canada. On her own admission 'people were more important than the physical presence of the place.'<sup>26</sup> The



details are realistic enough, but a reader who has grown up in any small Canadian town should have no difficulty in recognising features of his own town in Manawaka, even if he should come from Ontario. After all, the cultural landscape is what interests the author most, and that tends to be the same in any small settlement permeated by Scots Presbyterian or Calvinist or Methodist attitudes.

In avoiding an emphasis on the Western-ness of the setting she differs from other authors, with whom she has been compared. Sinclair Ross, whose As For Me And My House she read with a sense of revelation, portrays there the endless expanse of open country which is the prairie as a hostile place, a cause of spiritual sterility in people who are overwhelmed by its size and its sameness and its inevitability. Brian Sean MacMurray O'Connell of W.O. Mitchell's Who Has Seen The Wind? is very much aware of the prairie which surrounds the unnamed town where he grows up. While still a small boy he declares, on one occasion, "'Prairie's awful"... and in his mind there loomed vaguely fearful images of a still and brooding spirit, a quiescent power unsmiling from everlasting to everlasting to which the coming and passing of the prairie's creatures was but incidental."<sup>27</sup> As part of his growing-up he learns to accept the prairie as a symbol of life itself, a visible constant which outlasts all of man's puny efforts to tame it, and a place which one day will reveal to him the secret of life. In her novels of pioneer days in the Nebraskan prairies the American novelist, Willa Cather, to whom Margaret Laurence has been linked by Clara Thomas,<sup>28</sup> treats the prairie as a palpable force experienced by all those who go to live on it. At the beginning of O Pioneers her narrator says

The great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the

little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes. It was from facing this vast hardness that the boy's mouth had become so bitter; because he felt that men were too weak to make any mark here, that the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness.<sup>29</sup>

Margaret Laurence does not see the Western prairie as malevolent, or timeless, or resistant to man's efforts to tame it; it is simply the backdrop to the human drama which happens to go on in a small Manitoba town.

This does not mean that her descriptions are not precise or that we do not get a real sense of place, as evoked in

I took my bike and went beyond Manawaka riding aimlessly along the gravel highway. It was late summer and the wheat had changed colour, but instead of being high and bronzed in the fields, it was stunted and dessicated for there had been no rain again this year. But in the bluff where I stopped and crawled under the barbed wire fence and lay stretched out on the grass, the plentiful poplar leaves were turning to a luminous yellow and shone like church windows in the sun. I put my head down very close to the earth and looked at what was going on there. Grasshoppers with enormous eyes ticked and twitched around me, as though the dry air were perfect for their purposes. A ladybird laboured mightily to climb a blade of grass, fell off, and started all over again, seeming to be unaware that she possessed wings and could have flown up. (A Bird in the House, pp.58-59)

This passage is realistic, not symbolic, except possibly for the ladybird. It has no emotional undertones. It has an interest apart from its descriptive nature, however. References to Vanessa leaving the town to play in the country round about are infrequent. This tends to suggest a place which turns its back on the open country around it - a sort of defensive gesture in keeping with the picture of the settlement as a protection against the wilderness beyond.

Descriptive passages such as this appear progressively less frequently as we move from first to last of the novels, until in The Diviners lengthy descriptions of physical surroundings are reserved for picturing the river in all its variety. An interesting exception

to this is the author's deliberately detailed depiction of the squalid homes of the poor on the wrong side of the tracks, including the Shipley kitchen 'reeking and stale'. (The Stone Angel p.51) Later Hagar returns to find that

The house had that rancid smell that comes from unwashed dishes and sour floors and food left sitting on the table. The kitchen was a shambles. You could have scratched your initials in the dark grease that coated the oilcloth on the table. A loaf of bread sat there with the butcher knife stuck into it like a spear. A dish of stewed saskatoons, the berries hard and small, was being attended by a court of flies. On a larded piece of salt pork a mammoth matriarchal fly was labouring obscenely to squeeze out of herself her white and clustered eggs. (The Stone Angel, p.170)

Later, in two short paragraphs in 'The Half Husky' from A Bird in the House we are given a more precise idea of the special appearance and smell of the kitchen in Ada Shinwell's house beside the C.P.R. tracks in Manawaka than we actually get of the same room in the Brick House. This is in part explained by the fact that Vanessa would recall very clearly every detail of a place so very different from that to which she is accustomed. However, the author is doing something more specific here. By highlighting the squalor of these surroundings she is emphasising the gulf between the lives of people like the Curries or the Connors and the Shipleys or the Shinwells. To the upright citizens of Manawaka these were the obvious signs that such people were feckless or downright lazy. They were simply physical manifestations of lack of moral fibre. This somewhat enthusiastic emphasis on dirt and evil smells culminates in the graphic descriptions of the Logan house whose physical horrors were only slightly less repellent than Christie's place of work, the Nuisance Grounds. This ability on the author's part to make the stomach turn and the skin crawl contrasts with an equal facility in describing a

scene of natural beauty.

Margaret Laurence excels in the re-creation of the visual image. This skill has developed through the novels until in The Diviners we find her practising her art with economy and few unnecessary literary devices. This is in sharp contrast to the detailed, highly sensuous and extravagant descriptions we find in her African stories. The lush Ghanaian landscape seemed to call forth an equally lush prose evoking the sights, sounds and smells of a foreign place. There are numerous descriptive passages in The Stone Angel where Hagar appears to favour farmyard similes. Doris is like a calving cow; Hagar is like an old mare. Dancing is spinning like tumbleweed. Rachel has her own range of similes to describe herself and others. She is like a papier mâché doll jerked by a drunken puppet master. Her hands are large and too thin like empty gloves. Calla's hair is like a shetland pony's over her forehead. However, the frequency with which literary devices, whether simile, metaphor or alliteration, are used is gradually reduced until in the last novel they have disappeared almost completely, replaced by straightforward, accurate and uncontrived description of natural surroundings. Sadly, one small self-conscious trick has emerged - one that involves a deliberate play on words which can be very irritating and certainly draws attention to itself. The fascination with the word and with meaning has resulted in occasional artificial turns of phrase which interrupt the flow of the prose and add nothing. These nervous tics occur throughout the book and are to be deplored. Such a contrivance as 'clutches of cymbals. Clichés of symbols' (The Diviners, p.286).<sup>35</sup> adds nothing to the passage in which it lurks, ready to leap out at the unsuspecting reader, drawing attention to itself with unsubtle

gaucherie. Such plays on words cannot even be passed off as jokes since they usually occur in Morag's most reflective moments. The author's aim of suggesting the wordsmith conjuring up phrases, playing with words, is not in this case justified. Words have become playthings, not tools. They are used purely for their own sake, as in a puzzle, divorced from their descriptive or cognitive function.

Language determines tone, the choice of narrator determines stance, the choice of time or tense establishes the distance between reader and event. Margaret Laurence's novels are time-obsessed in more ways than one. Time as history is a dominant theme in the Manawaka cycle. The importance of discovering our place in the sequence of life's progress is stressed continually. However, time is also used as a structural device in the stories. The present tense is used throughout A Jest of God to emphasise the immediacy of the events and to ensure that the reader can share Rachel's experiences as well as her reflections at the very moment when they occur. This has a very powerful effect since complete identification with her is demanded. The effect in The Stone Angel is less personal as the main story, that which Hagar tells about her past life, is in the past tense, though the day-to-day events she experiences in the last few weeks of her life are recounted in the present tense, so we have the feeling of time being short and of life very rapidly ebbing away. This creates a sense of urgency which is missing in the passages told in the past tense. In them there is time to think about and reflect on what is over and done with, to look at events, not just live them. Since Hagar is anxious to escape the fate of being relegated to a nursing home, she is very much aware of time running out. The use of the present tense accentuates this. We would expect the stories in A

Bird in the House to be told in the past tense, as indeed they are, because they are a retrospective view of Vanessa's childhood. They are history. The form which The Fire-Dwellers takes again requires a combination of past and present time. That part of the story which forms the framework refers to the day-to-day happenings in the MacAindra household, as they occur. Rather like a play, it unfolds before the reader on the page there and then. We are sharing in Stacey's life as she lives it. But in the secret recesses of her mind other things are going on. She is remembering things past and commenting on things present, as they take place - past and present jostling for attention. This play-script plus the voices off create a sense of confusion and immediacy, enabling us to share Stacey's mental state. In The Diviners the present becomes the past; the past is related as the present. By using the past tense for those parts of the story which refer to actuality, the author manages to suggest that the Morag who is now forty-seven years old has lived long enough and hard enough to have gained a kind of equilibrium. Her past is retold in the present tense because the reader must relive it step by step with Morag in order to appreciate why Morag is as she is. In The Fire-Dwellers we are watching a play; The Diviners unfolds as a serial, episode by episode, like a television series. We watch an episode, then return to everyday life. In the four true novels the actual period of time lived through by the main character encompasses a mere few months in the year which marks a turning point in a life - spring through summer into autumn. And in the case of Rachel, Stacey and Morag the future is all-important. Stacey asks herself 'Will it (the city) return to-morrow?' (The Fire-Dwellers, p.308) Rachel knows that she 'will be different, will remain the same'. (A Jest of God,

p.201) Morag suggests that we 'look ahead into the past, and back into the future, until the silence.' (The Diviners, p.453). Theme and technique have coalesced, as indeed past and present have led us to the future.

Finally, attention must be drawn to the author's use of epigraph, nursery rhyme, hymn, poem, song or Biblical quotation. Writers frequently use quotations at the beginning of a book to say something supplemental to the message of the book itself. Margaret Laurence uses two separate quotations from Carl Sandburg's poem Losers as well as one from Dylan Thomas and a final one from Al Purdy's Roblin Mills Circa 1842 which contains her favourite phrase 'a place to stand on'. However this use of epigraph is extended into the novels themselves where quoted verse or line is an important adjunct to the unfolding of the story. The nursery rhymes sung by the little girls in the school playground at the very beginning of A Jest of God tell us a great deal about Rachel far more succinctly than explicit statement. Rachel would like to be "Queen of the Golden City" or a Spanish dancer who can "get out of this town". There are fragments from hymns also, highlighting Rachel's reaction to the religion she subscribes to on Sunday. Mrs Laurence confesses to a love of many of the traditional hymns, even if she detests what the words imply and admits she has a love-hate relationship with "Onward, Christian Soldiers." A tag from a juke-box song in the Parthenon Café underlines Rachel's dilemma when she is trying to decide what to do about her supposed pregnancy.

Where you're goin', girl,  
The road ain't long...(A Jest of God, p.164)

There's irony in using both

The grave's a fine and private place.  
But none, I think do there embrace. (A Jest of God, p.90)

when Nick and Rachel are about to make love and

What is woman that you forsake her  
To the claws of the grey old angel-maker. (A Jest of God, p.116)

when Rachel is planning to use her mother's antiquated douche in a belated effort at contraception. All these are pertinent and appropriate in the circumstances. Another nursery rhyme, 'Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home' occurs repeatedly in The Fire-Dwellers as a paradigm for Stacey's sense of responsibility for her children. Old-time country and western songs recall Manawaka and childhood to both Morag and Stacey. Elva Jardine in the hospital ward with Hagar Shipley pigeonholes herself in her proper generation by her choice of song. Hagar recalls Keats's poem Meg Merrilies when she finds herself alone in the forest by the sea at Shadow Point. And a childhood version of "If I had the wings of an angel" springs to mind when she is visiting the Silverthreads Nursing Home. (The Stone Angel, p.106) Margaret Laurence obviously finds a verse from Psalm 69 particularly meaningful for she uses it twice, once to reveal Matthew MacAindra's hidden despair in The Dine-Dwellers and again to accentuate the black Celtic depression which settles over Morag after Christie's death. 'Save me O God, for the waters are come in unto my soul.' (The Diviners, p.413) There are many other songs, poems, stories quoted, all recognisably part of the culture of Morag's generation. Even a list of wild flowers becomes a sort of poem at one point. And of course, there are the Catherine Parr Traill conversations, with direct quotations, as well as an imaginary dialogue between her and Morag. Christie's stories have mythic tone and there is a quotation from Ossian with which to compare them. Finally, The Diviners differs



from the other novels in containing original folk songs written by Margaret Laurence herself. These are the songs which Jules and, later, Piquette sing to celebrate their family's history in all its sadness and despair. These ballads give the author the opportunity to make a statement about the Métis and the injustices which they have suffered at the hands of their fellow Canadians. Hymns, again part of a Christian background, a few lines from a Christmas poem by Hilaire Belloc, national anthems, heraldic mottos, all the cultural impedimenta of a lifetime - the author gives us them all, in this her most ambitious novel.

The final innovation of writing her own ballads which say what she wants them to say and contribute to the story directly bespeaks the distance she has travelled since first putting down that memorable opening description of the cemetery on the hill above Manawaka. Her form has become more varied with each novel, her voice more authentic, her writing more spare, her stance more political and her intention more specific. She knows what she wants to say and she is more adventurous in the way she says it. She has practised her craft until it has become art.

## Footnotes: Chapter 8

1. What follows is a general discussion of Mrs Laurence's techniques, ranging over the five books, and bringing together in one chapter the numerous variations on these. More specific account is taken of the methods she uses in her fiction, and more detailed discussion of them is to be found in the chapters dealing with the individual works.
2. Graeme Gibson, Eleven Canadian Novelists, (Toronto, 1973), p.259.
3. Margaret Laurence, 'Gadgetry or Growing: Form and Voice in the Novel', text of a speech by Mrs Laurence delivered at the University of Toronto, 1969.  
  
In this very useful dissertation she discusses her methods of work and describes the process by which she arrived at the particular form of her first four novels, beginning with This Side Jordan. She allows us to share the rationale for her choice of way by which the story will develop. p.57.
4. Donald Cameron, 'The Black Celt Speaks of Freedom', Conversations with Canadian Novelists, (Toronto, 1973), pp. 102-103)
5. Margaret Laurence, 'Gadgetry or Growing', p.57.
6. Margaret Laurence, 'Ten Years' Sentences', Canadian Literature, Vol.41, (1969), p.11.
7. Clara Thomas, 'The Novels of Margaret Laurence', Studies in the Novel, Vol.2, (1972), pp. 154-164,

8. Graeme Gibson, Eleven Canadian Novelists, p.186.
9. Patricia Morley, Margaret Laurence, (Boston, 1981), p.98.
10. Author's comment: In an interview with Mrs Laurence, Hilda Kirkwood refers to her 'well-tuned ear', her 'ear for dialogue'. (Interview for Canadian Forum, 1980, p.15) Mrs. Laurence concurs by admitting to 'an ear for the ways in which people speak, for idiom - the modes of everyday speech... it's a kind of instinctive feeling for the way the human voice actually sounds and the individuation of it.' (p.16) William New believes that 'Perhaps more than any other writer of her time she seemed to have mastered the rhythms and cadences of the Canadian speaking voice.' (Introduction to Margaret Laurence, Toronto, p.1) Susan Read sums up:

She (Mrs Laurence) has a fine ear for conversation, and through the nuances of idiom, the tonal variations that exist between young and old, native and non-native, and the vocabulary differences between educated and uneducated, she keeps her characters sharply apart. She rarely fumbles, for she is a genuine artist in the handling of words. There is little padding. Each word - even each sound - has its place in the overall pattern. (Susan Read, 'The Maze of Life: the Work of Margaret Laurence', Canadian Literature, Vol. 27, (1966), pp. 5-14, p.14)

11. Susan Read, 'The Maze of Life', p.10.
12. Hilda Kirkwood, Interview for Canadian Forum, p.16.
13. Leone Gom, 'Margaret Laurence and the First Person', Dalhousie Review, 55, (1975), pp. 235-251.

This essay deals in some detail with Mrs Laurence's use of the first person in her first novels, defending this use against specific criticisms voiced by others, and suggesting the advantages the method proves to have. She also discusses the

idea of the use of the mirror-image and of double vision. This is applied especially to Stacey and Hagar where what was is not what is now. In Rachel the vision she has of herself is faulty - the narrator is untrustworthy, so the reader must be aware of this and make his own judgments. The point is made, too, that Morag is a more trustworthy narrator than the others. 'The use of mirror-image, then, is perhaps Laurence's most successful use of subjective narration, presenting both objective physical details and the character's own emotional reaction to what she sees.' (pp. 244-245) The gulf between the true vision of the reader and the false one of Rachel and Hagar results in irony. With Stacey, to a degree, and with Morag certainly, the irony is there also, but it is noted by the women themselves, who actually contribute to it by their own observations. '... whether the view through each of the characters' 'I' of her fallible self is predominantly intentional (as it is with Morag), unintentional (as it is with Hagar), or some combination of both (as it is with Rachel, Stacey and Vanessa), the reader is always able both to see her as she sees herself, and to see her with some degree of objectivity.' (p.249).

14. Margaret Atwood, The Edible Woman, Toronto, 1969.

A similar device is used by Margaret Atwood in her first novel. In order to highlight the period of disorientation which Marian McAlpin suffers in the middle of the book, the emphasis switches from first person to third person narrative, thus enabling the reader to share in Marian's sense of alienation as she tries to discover why she feels more like a product than a person. She

stands back, outside herself, and looks at herself as a stranger.

15. Peter Easingwood, 'Margaret Laurence, Manawaka, and the Edge of the Unknown,' University of Dundee, 1983(?), p.8.

Easingwood refers to this method of using inner monologue to reveal what is going on as moving 'on the edge of the unknown' - risking things taking on an unexpected direction, surprising both reader and author.

16. Author's comment: In 1976, again in 1978, and yet again about three years ago, some parents at Peterborough High School tried to have The Diviners removed from the reading list in the literature course because they believed it to be obscene. In their opinion the language was offensive. Of course, this apparent obscenity is necessary if the characters are to be true to life. Although in each case Mrs. Laurence's integrity was upheld and the book remained in the course, she was deeply hurt by what she felt was a misunderstanding of her intentions.

17. Margaret Laurence, 'Time and the Narrative Voice', The Narrative Voice, (Toronto, 1972), p.157.

18. Donald Cameron, Conversations with Canadian Novelists, p.100.

19. Patricia Morley, Margaret Laurence, p.95.

'The title (A Jest of God), rich in ambiguities, relates to an image pattern of fools, clowns, jesters. The silent dead in Cameron's first floor wear clown masks. Mrs Cameron and her bridge-playing friends have clown voices. Rachel continually sees her tall, awkward body as clown-like, grotesque. Nick's father was Nestor the Jester to the local children when he

delivered milk; senile, and mourning his dead son, Nestor's plight suggests the black joke of a cruel deity.'

20. Linda Hutcheon, 'Atwood and Laurence: Poet and Novelist', Studies in Canadian Literature, Vol 3, (1970), p.256.

21. Dick Harrison, Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction, (Edmonton, 1977), p.131.

22. Dick Harrison, Unnamed Country, p.136.

23. Author's comment: These writers include Robert Stead who in his novel Grain, published in 1926, refers to the Stakes' new house in faintly humorous terms, suggesting that 'a new and comparatively pretentious house in a prairie district is a social factor of as great importance as a new bride.' (p.85) This house was also the visible sign of Jackson and Susie Stakes' eventual prosperity after years of grinding poverty in a sod hut. Willa Cather's pioneers in her books O Pioneers and My Antonia also acquire large houses as pointers to their success after years of industrious effort.

24. George Woodcock, 'The Human Elements', The World of Canadian Writing, (Vancouver, 1980), p.60.

In this essay, which appeared first in The Human Elements, (Ed. D. Helwig, Pub. Oberon Press, Ottawa, 1978), Woodcock develops an interesting theory that each of the four novels, The Stone Angel, A Jest of God, The Fire-Dwellers, and The Diviners, has a heroine who represents one of the four elements of Empedocles' Theory of the Universe: Hagar - Earth; Rachel - Air; Stacey - Fire; Morag - Water. He makes a valid and convincing case for his proposal and brings a new awareness of the symbolism found

throughout the four books.

25. Author's comment: This use of a common locale for several novels is a device used by many writers such as Sinclair Lewis in the United States, Arnold Bennett in the Potteries in England, and of course, several Canadian novelists such as Robertson Davies and Humourist Stephen Leacock. The reader becomes as familiar with the territory as the characters and this adds a further dimension to the enjoyment of the individual novels.
26. Margaret Laurence, 'Sources', Mosaic, Vol. 3, (1970), pp. 80-81.
27. W. O. Mitchell, Who Has Seen the Wind?, (Edinburgh, 1980), p. 129.
28. Clara Thomas, 'Proud Lineage: Willa Cather and Margaret Laurence', Canadian Review of American Studies, II, (1971), pp. 1, 3-12.
29. Willa Cather, O Pioneers, (London, 1983), p.15.

## The Last Word?

If we accept that Margaret Laurence's work is art, we must go from there to ask if it is great art. Thus we must define what we mean by great art. In the final analysis great art is that which speaks to any generation in any country in any age. Its greatness lies in its durability, in its truthfulness both to its own time and for all time. It cannot simply be art for art's sake because the artist, to be great, must want to communicate to others who are not artists. How well this is done is the measure of greatness. Margaret Laurence certainly wants to communicate. Is she therefore one of the greats?

In order to assess her fiction we must place it in the context of the Canadian scene into which it was launched. By the time Margaret Laurence's first Manawaka novel appeared in 1964, the literary scene in Canada had undergone a revolution. Prior to the Second World War the comparatively few Canadian writers of either poetry or fiction tended to look beyond their own country, first to Britain, then to America, for their models. Moreover, their readership came from these two foreign countries, as comparatively few Canadians read works by Canadian Writers. The English curricula in schools rarely included writing by native authors and the eyes of the literary world looked to the Old Country, the Motherland, for its criteria. The truly literate formed small inbred cliques in the larger centres of population, particularly those which were near universities. The rest of Canada was a cultural vacuum.



The nationalism which affected so many emergent nations in the years after 1945 also found expression in Canada. Her contribution to the war effort in matériel and manpower had been considerable; 42,000 killed or missing out of a population of eleven and a half million was a heavy sacrifice for a country so far removed from that Old World which had seemed determined to destroy itself and which had been saved at last by the efforts of the New. Canadians felt justified in being proud to be Canadian. Britain after the war was tired, impoverished and weakened. She no longer seemed the great protector; the sun had finally set on the Empire. Canadians began to look to their own devices, to stop gazing over their shoulders to Britain for direction; they no longer experienced the need to apologise for being what they were. This new self-confidence showed itself in all kinds of ways, particularly in the cultural field. When a nation can begin to take pride in its own culture, it has come of age. A new flag to replace the Union Jack was adopted in 1965. Ten years later 'God Save the Queen' ceased to be the national anthem, replaced by 'O Canada'. The hugely successful Expo '67, staged to coincide with the centennial celebration of one hundred years of Confederation, demonstrated the country's new sense of self, as did the decision to invite the 1976 Olympic Games to come to Montreal.

In order to examine what was needed to encourage cultural growth and independence, in 1949 the Federal Government under Prime Minister St. Laurent appointed a Royal Commission on National Development in the arts, letters and sciences, under the chairmanship of Vincent Massey, later to become Canada's first native-born Governor-General.

The Commissioning document stated that 'it is desirable that the Canadian people should know as much as possible about their country, its history and traditions; and about their national life and common achievements; that it is in the national interest to give encouragement to institutions which express national feeling, promote common understanding and add to the variety and richness of Canadian life, rural as well as urban.'<sup>1</sup> The very fact that such a Commission was deemed necessary indicated just how little Canadians in the past had valued their Canadianness. To the Commission's question, 'Is it true, then, that we are a people without a literature?', one reply received stated: 'The unpalatable truth is that to-day in Canada there exists no body of creative writing which reflects adequately, or with more than limited insight, the nature of the Canadian people, and the historic forces which have made them what they are.'<sup>2</sup> The Canadian Writers' Committee was equally damning: 'As an agricultural and industrial nation Canada ranks high in the world. But as a cultural nation exploring the human mind and soul she stands low. She has excused herself because of the size of her population, her youth and the battle she has had wresting the country from nature. Those last two excuses are no longer valid, the first never was.'<sup>3</sup>

Out of the Commission's report came the recommendation for the setting up of a Canada Council to function along the lines of the British Arts Council, with the specific remit to support with government funds all those areas of the arts and sciences that it saw fit. This was implemented in 1957, and Margaret Laurence was later to benefit from its award system.

Now began an astonishing upsurge of participation in and patronage of the arts. Corps de ballet, opera companies, symphony orchestras, theatre groups were formed; no self-respecting city was without its new museum, art gallery, concert hall and theatre. The National Library was established; Canadian television programmes began to appear. In 1976 Canada's literary Leavis, Northrop Frye, referred to 'the colossal verbal explosion that has taken place in Canada since 1960.'<sup>4</sup> Mrs Laurence contributed to this explosion, becoming one of a group of Canadian authors who found they could actually make a living from their writing. New publishing houses, having no financial or editorial connections with either the United States or Great Britain, sprang up to cater for the increasing number of writers seeking publication and for the growing Canadian readership for Canadian literature. Literary journals such as George Woodcock's Canadian Literature, the first magazine entirely devoted to Canadian writers and writing, appeared and were fed by a growing band of scholarly and discerning critics.

Margaret Laurence shared, through her writing, in the national coming of age which was marked by the massive increase in cultural activity during the sixties and seventies. Canadian novels written by Canadian novelists and published in Canada were finding a larger and larger native reading public. Writers no longer sought to model themselves on American or British novelists; they no longer needed to write with the foreign reader in mind. John Moss, in establishing a position for Margaret Laurence among Canadian novelists, declares that 'she came to embody the force and quality of the literary

revolution that swept through Canada in the sixties, proclaiming with absolute vigour our new found maturity.'<sup>5</sup> Her first novel set in Manawaka, The Stone Angel, was both acclaimed by the critics and avidly read by her fellow Canadians. Here was a novel firmly set in an authentic Canadian background, which dealt with ordinary characters, easily recognised by her Canadian readers. 'The novel treats Canadian experiences as the valid continuation of a larger world... Canada is taken for granted, a valid realm of existence.'<sup>6</sup> Margaret Laurence addresses her feelings to the universal reader. She is Canadian without trying. To Canadian readers Hagar Shipley was everyone's grandmother. Neither this novel, nor the ones that followed in the next ten years, romanticised setting or characters. Their very ordinariness, their reality, and the integrity with which they are set on the page, made them accessible to a wide range of readers, not just an inner circle of connoisseurs. This accessibility and authenticity were to make her the dominant literary figure of a generation of Canadians who had shared her history. Her novels were essentially Canadian, but they had no nationalistic axe to grind. The reader was left in no doubt that here was a Canadian experience, but an experience that was universal as well. It is Clara Thomas's opinion that 'Writers must work out of their own roots in place and time... any literature must, first of all, be in this sense regional or local and must reach the universal through first being local.'<sup>7</sup> Margaret Laurence reinforced this statement by asserting that

'the main concern of a writer remains that of somehow creating the individual on the printed page, of catching the tones and accents of human speech, of setting down the conflicts of people

who are as real to him as himself. If he does this well, and as truthfully as he can, his writing may sometimes reach beyond any national boundary.<sup>8</sup>

John Moss puts the emphasis, at least for Canadians, as follows:

Novels are neither documents nor messages, but visions of reality from fixed perspectives. The writer's vision committed to paper is a static form though worlds crumble and centuries pass, until perceived in the mind of a reader, when it becomes a bond between their sensibilities, the common creation of their shared imagination. The time and place of a novel's origin are made accessible in the vision that contains them. For us in Canada, this is of unique consequence, for the time and place to which we most need access are here and now. The Canadian novel can give us these at least, the dimensions of our experience of ourselves.<sup>9</sup>

Although Margaret Laurence's work is not overtly nationalistic, in her lifetime she repeatedly emphasised the importance to any country of having a literature of its own, and the duty of the writer to help his fellow citizens to see themselves in relation to their culture, to understand something of their own history, and to possess their own mythology. In this she is supported by Margaret Atwood who believes that authors are transmitters of their culture. Her experience of living in the emergent Africa had awakened in her an awareness that people who had been colonised by Europeans seemed bewildered and confused, unsure of themselves in relation to the old ways, yet uncomfortable with the new. She was convinced that one of the duties of a writer was to give his people a sense of themselves, and in an essay entitled 'Ivory Tower or Grassroots?'<sup>10</sup> she stated her belief that she, as a Canadian writer, had a responsibility identical to that of men like Chinua Achebe. Indeed she referred to herself as a Third World writer. Canada suffered no less than Nigeria or Ghana did from colonialism. The Canadian, no less than the Nigerian, needs to discover who he is. He can only do this if he can

find a sense of place, the place to stand on to which she so frequently referred. This process of self-discovery applies to writers too. She firmly maintained that writers must cease to look to the British literary scene.

I really do not think that as Canadians we have a great deal to learn from British fiction, in which I sense a widespread weariness, repetition and even triviality. We would do better to go our own ways now and to make our own discoveries, just as African writers are making theirs.<sup>11</sup>

Writers must establish their own identity before they can help their readers to discover who they are.

As a writer Margaret Laurence had to explore what it meant to be a woman in the Canadian environment in which she spent her early years. So, though she denied that she wrote feminist novels, the mere fact that her books deal with women in society at a particular period gives them feminist undertones. They are not feminist treatises, yet they do speak for women because the problems the protagonists face are in large part the problems of all women. Indeed part of the difficulty each faces is the fact that she is a woman, dominated and frustrated by the received attitudes of society to women. What is more, the solution to each problem is determined in the main by the heroine's ability to see beyond accepted female norms in order to gain personal fulfilment. Progressively through the novels, as the author examines the life of each heroine in turn, she identifies the factors which diminish the female, until in The Diviners Morag and her creator were both able to achieve a degree of independence leading to self-determination - at a price.

Margaret Laurence's relevance to Canadian readers has never been

in doubt. Her books are still widely read; her work has been extensively analysed and commented upon by every notable Canadian critic. Manawaka has its place in the folk lore of Canadian literature with Hugh Garner's *Cabbagetown*, Robertson Davies' *Salterton*, and of course, Alice Munro's *Jubilee*.<sup>12</sup> After The Diviners appeared in 1974 she did not produce another novel, a fact which every critic picked up and commented upon, and which corroborates her own feeling that she might have said all she had to say. The silence to which she referred on the last page of this novel has become a reality. Of course writers have felt this before and have found new sources of inspiration. Occasionally rumours would circulate that a new Laurence novel~~s~~ was on the way. There were reports too of writer's block, that paralysis of creativity all novelists must dread above all else. The years between 1974 and 1987 were devoted to furthering the many causes which she supported, such as the feminist and peace movements. She was particularly interested in and encouraging to the young Canadian writers she saw coming along behind her. The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature describes her as a 'creative godmother to an entire generation.'<sup>13</sup> a statement she would have happily accepted as a fitting epitaph. Her death in January, 1987, from lung cancer, removed all hope that any new novel would appear. However, though no more work will appear, the Manawaka cycle has already gained her a distinguished and lasting place among Canadian writers.

Hugh MacLennan has said:

... most fiction, even the kind considered successful, has the

Life span of one season's leaves. A novel must be exceptionally good to live as long as the average cat. It must approach greatness to last for a generation. If it survives beyond that time it possesses some quality so indefinable that neither the author nor contemporary critic recognises it when the book is new.<sup>14</sup>

Where does the work of Margaret Laurence stand in this projection?

Not surprisingly, reading the Canadian critics suggests that when dealing with her, we are referring to a literary giant of international importance. Indeed George Woodcock has been tempted to turn her into a Canadian Tolstoy. Of course, there are some dissenting voices among the chorus of adulation raised by most critics, who refer to her work as brilliant, the greatest, etc. In a patronising, rather snide review of The Diviners for The Citizen of Ottawa, M.B. Thompson regards her as 'decently mediocre', 'ordinary', 'not a very good one (author); not a very bad one'.<sup>15</sup> But Mr Thompson is certainly in the minority in Canada, although it must be said that there was more adverse criticism for this, her last novel, than for earlier work.

In Britain there has been no great rush to read or review her novels. Mazo de La Roche's cycle of sixteen Jalna novels and L.M. Montgomery's Anne of Green Gables can still be found on the shelves in English libraries.<sup>16</sup> Their continued popularity owes nothing to their literary merit. They simply reinforce the British preconceptions of what it must be like to be a Canadian living in Canada. The books tell romantic stories set in idyllic rustic surroundings. Woodcock refers to de La Roche's writing as 'a kind of international lady-novelism in which the setting was Canadian in a



peculiar and distorted way.'<sup>17</sup> The characters' behaviour owes more to their British heritage than to their colonial environment. Mrs Laurence's novels seem to be too realistic for the British taste. Her British publishers, obviously prejudging her negative impact on the great British reading public, do not appear to have felt much need to give her work the 'hype' treatment so often resorted to these days in the book trade. This means that the Manawaka novels received a minimum of attention in the critical press, relegated as they were to one or two column inches from some anonymous reviewer under such headings as The Observer's 'Novels in Brief', where the impression given is of a competent enough performance. This treatment suggests that she is a literary nobody, an also-ran in the literary stakes. The attitude of the critics seems to suggest surprise that a Canadian writes at all.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps there is a touch of Dr Johnson's feeling about preaching women and dogs walking on their hind legs - 'you are surprised to find it done at all.' Of course, the adulation of the Canadian critics is overblown and supernationalistic; that of the British reviewers damns with faint praise and smacks of patronising colonialism. The truth lies somewhere in between. The Laurence novels, if not great, are as good as much of the fiction coming to-day from the pens of those authors, including Iris Murdoch and Margaret Drabble, who are the darlings of the British literary establishment. Margaret Laurence's characters are not taken from the ranks of the perverse or the uncommitted, but from the multitude of ordinary human beings who get on with quite ordinary lives in far from ordinary circumstances. This could be a recipe for boredom but

it is not. She herself said that her aim was to show the extraordinariness of very ordinary people. She wanted to put into words what all of us feel, but most of us dare not say. Her novels provide no escapism, no opportunities for flights of fancy, no comfort for minimal thinkers. Her skill lies in being able to lift the mundane lives of five Canadian women, young and old, out of local or national boundaries into the realm of universal human experience. Her themes are not new. They are dealt with over and over again by writers who are trying to depict reality. The fact that the themes are not new does not mean that they are unimportant. Rather, the fact that they are so universally dealt with suggests that they are universally true. The novels happen to have a Canadian setting, and the characters use a Canadian idiom, because their creator was drawing on what she knew best; they speak to the heart of the world because she is able to portray the universality which so often lies at the centre of particularity. This is confirmed by the fact that her novels have been translated into many languages and are appreciated in places as far apart as Stockholm and Nagasaki, Istanbul and Caracas.<sup>19</sup>

To give George Woodcock his due, when he compares Mrs Laurence to Tolstoy, he makes the point that if we consider her work 'in such terms as a writer's relevance to his time and place, the versatility of his perception, the breadth of his understanding, the imaginative power with which he personifies and gives symbolic form to the collective life he interprets and in which he takes part'<sup>20</sup> then the comparison seems less impulsive than at first would appear. However,

there is a difference of stature in the characters which reflects the stature of the author. In Tolstoy or Thomas Hardy the characters are larger than life in the sense that their creators suggest that they, like Odysseus, have attracted the attention of the gods. The very ordinariness of the Laurence characters is illustrated by the fact that they are not at all sure that God, or the gods, even see what is going on. If He see the little sparrow fall, He seems to leave it at that. The heroines of the novels of George Eliot or the Brontë sisters suffer on a more dramatic scale from the same social pressures as Hagar or Morag, Rachel or Stacey, but in no sense could the former, as could the latter, be likened to the woman next door. This verisimilitude is both a strength and a weakness. To a generation of Canadian readers contemporary with the Laurence women the novels have a relevance which Margaret Atwood's woman can never have. The latter's characters are well-educated, middle-class city dwellers who never stop complaining over their fate, never make a meaningful decision, are incapable of action, egocentric, insecure, brittle products of the affluent post-Christian twentieth century society. Perhaps this is why the younger novelist's books seem to appeal to young British women urban dwellers. Their Canadianness is not obtrusive; their counterparts can be found in any city in the Western World in the eighties.<sup>21</sup> Margaret Laurence's women are tougher, but less exotic; they are more likeable and at the same time more pitiable. More recognisable to those who are committed, at the same time their voice is undeniably Canadian, small town and of another generation.

In many novels, once the story is ended, we are finished with it. It has no impact on our lives. It has not added to our understanding of the human dilemma. Its characters have not joined our group of friends as people we think about in moments of quiet reflection. Margaret Laurence's main characters become people we know or have known; her secondary characters are people into whose lives we have tantalising glimpses and about whom we would like to know more. What happened to Marvin during those years between leaving Manawaka and re-entering Hagar's life in Vancouver? Why was Mrs Cameron as she was? And Willard? and Calla? What kind of life did Nick make for himself? and Luke Venturi? Where is Fan Brady now? The author plays games with her readers too. She asks them to spot the reference from another book, enjoy with her a hidden joke, recognise in one book characters lurking in the background in another. This creates a richness which rewards re-reading and establishes a special bond between author and reader. The stories are carefully worked until they seemed honed to the bone. Above all they have an authenticity which sets them apart from much contemporary fiction. Good fiction should illuminate human experience. The reader ought to see, in the hero's struggles, his own twists and turns along the way, drawing comfort from sharing his personal revelation with another. Virginia Woolf, in discussing experience as described in the novel, states: 'When one so exposes it (experience) and sees it come to life, one exclaims in rapture, "But this is what I have always felt and known and desired."' <sup>22</sup> So often Margaret Laurence mentions events or describes reactions which the reader perceives at once as familiar to

his own life and experience, experience which he thought was peculiar to himself. Suddenly it is revealed that this was typical, rather, of a common time in a common place as a result of a common indoctrination, and the unique expands until it becomes the universal. Hagar marvels when she says: 'There's no one like me in this world.'<sup>23</sup> This is the paradox; she is unique, yet her experiences are universal. In the novel The Mountain and the Valley, the author, Ernest Buckler describes how his hero, David Canaan, feels after he has read Forster's novels: 'It gave him such a lyric feeling to recognize the absolute truth of what the author said about whatever people he dealt with.'<sup>24</sup> In the same way, Margaret Laurence speaks to a whole generation and what she says rings true.<sup>25</sup>

## Footnotes: Chapter 9

1. Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, Massey Report, (Ottawa, 1951), p.xvii.
2. Massey Report, p.222.
3. Massey Report, p.224.
4. Carl Klinck, ed., Literary History of Canada, 2nd Edition, Volume III, (Toronto, 1976), p.318.
5. John Moss, A Reader's Guide to the Canadian Novel, (Toronto, 1981), p.155.
6. John Moss, Patterns of Isolation, (Toronto, 1974), p.228.
7. Clara Thomas, 'The Chariot of Ossian', Journal of Canadian Studies, Vol. 13, (1978), p.56.
8. Margaret Laurence, Long Drums and Cannons, (London, 1968), Preface, p.10.
9. John Moss, Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel, (Toronto, 1977), Preface, p.5.
10. Margaret Laurence, 'Ivory Tower or Grassroots? The Novelist as Socio-Political Being', A Political Art, (Vancouver, 1978), p.17.
11. Margaret Laurence, 'Ivory Tower or Grassroots?' p.19.
12. Author's comment: The following quotation from Frank Davey's book From There to Here, A Guide to English Canadian Literature Since 1960, Our Nature - Our Voices, Vol. II, (Erin, Ont., 1974), pp. 201-204, refers to the way in which Jubilee has become a town of the literary landscape. This could just as

easily have been written about Manawaka. 'She (Alice Munro) chronicles that familiar Canadian conflict between the talented, sensitive adolescent and a rigid, self-limiting society.' However, Davey goes on to make a further comment which could not be true with reference to Margaret Laurence and her treatment of such an adolescent (Morag Gunn). '... unlike many other treatments of this conflict, Munro displays no rage, hostility or even indignation toward the protestant ethic. Instead, her dominant attitudes are astonishment and compassion - astonishment at the lengths to which a small town goes to deny to its inhabitants joy and creativity, and compassion for those thus robbed and maimed'. p.201

13. Wm. Toye, Ed., Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature, (Oxford, 1983), p.579: Margaret Laurence makes Morag of The Diviners speak of the responsibility she feels to encourage the young writers who are coming up behind her. Mrs Laurence herself was always very keen to give moral support to young Canadians trying to make writing their career. In an essay on Ethel Wilson, found in Volume VI of the series Canadian Writers and Their Works, (ECW Press, Downsview, Ont., 1983 ff, Eds. Robert Lecker, Jack David, Ellen Quigley), she is quoted on page 192 as saying:

I remember once, years ago, when I was a young writer... in Vancouver, severely doubting my own calling and yet in some final sense never doubting it, Ethel Wilson read a story of mine... She was kind enough to write.. to say that she had liked it, and why. That meant a great deal to me. Later she invited me to her apartment... and from then on I visited her from time to time and grew to love and admire her just as I had long loved and admired her writing. She once said to me, ... "There is a fountain in you. It will well up." That was not only the most encouraging thing that had ever been said to me; it was also like a kind of responsibility,

a trust. I owe her such a lot. I have since felt that the only way I could in some way repay her was to pass on some kind of encouragement or help, wherever I could, to writers younger than I. That seems to me to be the message that I get from her. (Letter dated 13 April, 1977).

14. Hugh MacLennan, 'Where is my Potted Palm?', Canadian Novelists and the Novel, Eds. Douglas Daymond and Leslie Monkman, (Ottawa, 1981), pp. 186-189, p.187.
15. M.B. Thompson, Review of The Diviners, The Citizen, Ottawa, Sept. 7, 1974.
16. Author's comment: An inspection of our Cleveland County Library in Stockton revealed that there were still six or seven copies of titles by Mazo de La Roche but nothing by Mrs Laurence. An inquiry to Beaconsfield Library (this is the larger community some two or three miles from Penn where Mrs Laurence lived while in England) revealed that there were none of her books on the shelves and the librarian was unaware that she had lived locally. She did say that the library had had the Laurence books in the past. Mrs Gardner, the librarian, also said: 'Both Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro are popular writers here and I have several of their books in stock and often have requests for them'.
17. George Woodcock, 'Possessing the Land: Notes on Canadian Fiction', The World of Canadian Writing, (Vancouver, 1980), p.29.
18. Author's comment: A Review by Simon Hoggart of Robertson Davies' latest novel What's Bred in the Bone which actually made the short list for the Booker Prize has the following statement to make regarding the status of Canadian literature in England,



In the United States and Canada, which is Davies home, the book's publication in November was the cause of much fanfare. There were long, and extremely favourable, reviews in the important literary journals and Davies rated a full page in both Time and Newsweek. The novel had sold more than 50,000 in hardback by the New Year. Davies is now in that privileged band of serious writers who are also world best-sellers.

Except, that is, in Britain, where - apart from vigorous missionary work by Anthony Burgess - Davies remains almost entirely unknown. There's plenty of word-of-mouth praise, the kind publishers call 'cult', but the reviewers have paid only polite and even patronising courtesies. A good notice in The (London) Times of his last novel The Rebel Angels began with the snotty air with which the British still infuriate their former colonies: 'To speak of a good Canadian novel sounds like the beginning of a bad joke.'

It would appear that, twelve years on, not a great deal of change has taken place from the time when Mrs Laurence's last book appeared in 1974.

19. Author's comment: In March 1983 I became aware, to my astonishment, that a production called 'The Women of Margaret Laurence' was coming to the Arts Centre in Darlington. Worst of all, I couldn't go because the Royal Shakespeare Company's season was on in Newcastle and I was booked to go. Nonetheless, I wrote to the director of the Arts Centre and was informed that an actress called Norma Edwards from Hillcrest Productions was making a tour of Scandinavia and England under the auspices of the Canadian High Commission. I was intrigued to know how the novels of Margaret Laurence could interest Scandinavian readers, so Canada House provided me with some useful addresses. I wrote to several of the contacts suggested and had some most interesting replies. John Carlsen at the University of Aarhus in Denmark was full of praise for the Manawaka books which he said

were most popular among his students. Reasons why she is liked were 'She is never obscure or highbrow; she expresses herself with the ease and simplicity of a great writer. Her work exudes honesty and moral responsibility. Her characters are recognisable human beings with human problems - they are not only Canadians but members of the human race.' Lars Hartveit of the University of Bergen, Norway, replied to say that his students 'were all fascinated by her and I have never had such rewarding seminars.' In some ways the novels deal with similar themes to those of Knut Hamsun whose novels of life in Norwegian small towns suggest that people living there suffer from the same social hypocrisy as they do in Manawaka. I contacted Norma Edwards who portrayed the Laurence women in her one-woman show and she was most forthcoming about how the production came about, how Mrs Laurence reacted to it, and what she thought personally of the novels. Her letters were friendly and informative, and very encouraging.

20. George Woodcock, 'The Human Elements: Margaret Laurence's Fiction', The Human Elements, Ed. David Helwig, (Oberon Press, 1978) pp. 134-161, p.135. Wm. New, writing about Canadian fiction in The Literary History of Canada finds that in Mrs Laurence's work are 'Intermingled hope and despair, laughter and pathos, uncertainty, irony and compassionate feeling - the mixture emphasising Laurence's understanding of the emotional heights and depths which rack and govern people's lives and of the often petty everyday events against which they struggle and which, paradoxically, give them the will to persist.' pp. 266-267.

21. Author's comment: It is good to know that at last Margaret Laurence's books are going to appear in the Virago series along with Margaret Atwood whose books have appeared in their list for some time. Her inclusion is long overdue.
22. Virginia Woolf, A Room with a View, Three Guineas, (London, 1984), p.67, (first pub. 1938).
23. Margaret Laurence, The Stone Angel, (Toronto, 1968), p.250.
24. Ernest Buckler, The Mountain and the Valley, (Toronto, 1961), p.244.
25. Margaret Laurence, In an interview with Alan Twigg in For Openers: Conversations with 24 Canadian Writers, (Madiera Park, B.C., 1981), Mrs Laurence said:

...I feel extremely fortunate to have spoken to three generations; the generation before me, my own generation and the next one. People say to me sometimes: do you expect your books will be around for a hundred and fifty years? I don't know and I don't care. I feel I've been lucky in being able to speak to a number of people in those three generations.

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