

University of Montana

## ScholarWorks at University of Montana

---

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &  
Professional Papers

Graduate School

---

1979

### Study of the theme of estrangement in the works of Anne Hebert

Theone J. Hewitt

*The University of Montana*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

**Let us know how access to this document benefits you.**

---

#### Recommended Citation

Hewitt, Theone J., "Study of the theme of estrangement in the works of Anne Hebert" (1979). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 3758.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/3758>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).

COPYRIGHT ACT OF 1976

THIS IS AN UNPUBLISHED MANUSCRIPT IN WHICH COPYRIGHT SUBSISTS. ANY FURTHER REPRINTING OF ITS CONTENTS MUST BE APPROVED BY THE AUTHOR.

MANSFIELD LIBRARY  
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA  
DATE: 1979



A STUDY OF THE THEME OF  
ESTRANGEMENT IN THE WORKS OF  
ANNE HÉBERT

By

Theone J. Hewitt

B.A., Concordia College, 1965

Presented in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1979

Approved by:

Maurice Cheney (Dr.)  
Chairman, Board of Examiners

R. C. Murray  
Dean, Graduate School

12-20-79  
Date

UMI Number: EP35402

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI EP35402

Published by ProQuest LLC (2012). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code



ProQuest LLC.  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

Hewitt, Theone J., M.A., December 14, 1979

French

A Study of the Theme of Estrangement in the Works of Anne Hébert  
(131 pp.)

*MCC*

Director: Dr. Maureen Cheney-Curnow

In the literary history of French Canada, Anne Hébert a contemporary French-Canadian writer, comes after the poet Saint-Denys Garneau (1943) and before the more recent writers of the peaceful revolution. Her works represent a break from the conservative religious society of French Canada. By questioning traditional values and by examining the role of the individual in a social system, Anne Hébert's works reflect contemporary issues and dilemmas which extend beyond the area of French Canada.

This thesis is an examination of the theme of estrangement in Hébert's works. The theme of estrangement, which is present in all of her works, accentuates aloofness and indifference towards living which leads to harsh and tragic results. A rejection of this sterile condition of existence becomes an affirmation of living in the present and an acknowledgement of future possibilities. In this thesis the primary emphasis is on her three novels: Les Chambres de bois, Kamouraska, and Les Enfants du sabbat; and her short story collection, Le Torrent. The secondary emphasis is on her three plays: Le Temps sauvage, La Mercière assassinée, and Les Invités au procès; and her collections of poetry. Chapter I provides an introduction to Anne Hébert, defines estrangement as it is used in this thesis and gives the plot summaries of each of her works. Chapter II describes the elements of estrangement as experienced in the spatial setting--the natural environment and the personal habitation. The temporal setting, emphasizing the magnetism of the past--an estrangement from the present--is discussed in Chapter III. Chapter IV examines the estrangement within the social setting. This chapter reveals how a society assumes the responsibility of determining those who will be accepted and those who will be rejected. In this way, the various classes of society estrange themselves from each other and become ineffectual. Finally Chapter V discusses the personal relationships of the individual characters and how these relationships, both family and non-family, become estranged. The ultimate form of estrangement in Anne Hébert's works is alienation from life--a culmination of all aspects of estrangement within the complete setting: spatio-temporal, social, and personal.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT . . . . . ii

Chapter

I. INTRODUCTION . . . . . 1

    Introduction to Anne Hébert . . . . . 1

    Definition of Estrangement . . . . . 5

    Plot summaries of Anne Hébert's works . . . . . 8

II. THE ESTRANGEMENT WITHIN THE SPATIAL SETTING . . . . . 21

III. THE ESTRANGEMENT WITHIN THE TEMPORAL SETTING . . . . . 54

IV. THE ESTRANGEMENT WITHIN THE SOCIAL SETTING . . . . . 71

V. THE ESTRANGEMENT WITHIN PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS . . . . . 98

CONCLUSION . . . . . 127

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . . 130

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION TO ANNE HÉBERT

A demand, a revolt, a wish for liberation through words what has writing been for Anne Hébert? This question was asked of her in an interview published in the December, 1978 issue of Québec français. Her response was that writing has been for her a need she does not want to deny and that it has always been a very strong desire.<sup>1</sup> From the date of her first publication, a collection of poems (Les Songes en équilibre, 1942), the literary prestige of this contemporary French-Canadian writer has steadily grown. Her poetry, short stories, novels, and plays attest to the versatility of her work. Through translations into several languages, the recognition of the work of Anne Hébert is international.

Anne Hébert was born in 1916, the eldest of four children, in Saint-Catherine-de-Frossambault near Quebec City. The influence exerted by her father, Maurice-Lang Hébert, himself a poet and literary critic, was considerable. Concerning the encouragement her father gave her with her writing Anne Hébert says:

Mon père; il était formidable. C'est si facile de décourager des enfants, de rire, par exemple. Il se promenait avec mes premiers poèmes dans un calepin dans sa poche et montrait ça aux amis.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Cécile Dubé, Maurice Emond, and Christian Vandendorpe, "Anne Hébert Entrevue," Quebec français, Décembre, 1978, p.33.

<sup>2</sup>Dubé, Emond, and Vandendorpe, p.34.



The formal education of Anne Hébert was completed in Quebec at the Collège Notre-Dame-de-Bellevue and at the Collège Merici. After the publication of her first collection of poems, for which she received the "Prix David," Hébert worked for Radio-Canada and also for the National Film Office as a script-writer and editor.

As a result of a scholarship sponsored by the Société royale de Canada, Hébert traveled to France for the first time in 1954. She lived alternately between France and Canada until 1965 when her mother died. She says of her native Quebec:

Il y a un noyau, quelque chose de très sûr qui ne change pas, qui ne bouge pas: toute mon expérience que j'ai eue de ce pays, les amis qui nous marquent le plus, notre enfance et notre jeunesse. J'ai été faite par ce pays-là.<sup>3</sup>

By 1979 Hébert was living in Paris, making periodic visits to Quebec.

This arrangement is due primarily to the fact that most of her works have been published in France. Editions de Seuil in Paris accepted for publication her novel Les Chambres de bois, begun in 1955; the short story collection Le Torrent and another collection of poems, Le Tombeau des rois, were published by Seuil.

In addition to the above mentioned works of Hébert, she has written two other novels. Kamouraska (1970) has been made into a film directed by Claude Jutra with Geneviève Bujold in the leading role of Elisabeth d'Aulnières; the third novel, Les Enfants du sabbat was published in 1975. A collection of her plays, Le Temps sauvage, La Mercière assassinée, and Les Invités au procès was published in 1968.

---

<sup>3</sup>Dubé, Emond, and Vandendorpe, p. 35.

Anne Hébert has received several literary prizes for her writing, including the "Prix de l'Académie française" in 1976; in 1978 she was once again awarded the "Prix David," this time for the entire assemblage of her work. In 1969 the University of Toronto granted her a doctorate honoris causa.

Because of an education which was more traditionally European than American, Hébert has a broad literary background. Her poetry reflects elements of symbolism associated with Verlaine, Rimbaud, and Baudelaire. The stark realism of her short stories and novels seems influenced by Zola and the school of naturalism. Man's isolation within a social structure and his need to establish an identity seems related to the philosophy of Camus.<sup>4</sup> In addition, her psychological penetration resembles that of Nathalie Sarraute and the new novel.

Anne Hébert n'a nullement l'intention de peindre les mœurs d'une société, d'ironiser sur des institutions, ou de décrire les usages d'une grande famille. Elle n'écrit pas non plus un roman de l'action pas plus qu'elle ne tente l'analyse d'un caractère dont les contours seraient si bien définis qu'on puisse en tirer un 'type' universel.<sup>5</sup>

The necessity of breaking the solitude and bringing to life the complete character of French-Canada has caused an expansion of the French-Canadian literary tradition which existed prior to Hébert. This prior tradition depicted the rural Canadian life as one of peaceful harmony with the land. This tradition is typified by Gabrielle Roy's La Petite poule d'eau. The family was the social center, unified by the religious practices of Catholicism. This tradition was disrupted

---

<sup>4</sup>Pierre Pagé, Anne Hébert (Montréal: Fides, 1965), p. 41.

<sup>5</sup>Pagé, p. 42.

and modified during the period of the two world wars. Writers like Saint-Denys-Garneau, a cousin of Hébert, Gabrielle Roy, and André Langevin began the break by their realistic portrayals of man's soul in conflict, extreme poverty in an industrial society, and the beginnings of fragmentation within the family unit--for example the decline in the patriarchal way of life.

Anne Hébert probes further into all aspects of the French-Canadian mentality, no matter how stark, how harsh, or how hostile her revelations may be. The sterility of religious traditions, the mysticism of rites and ceremonies, the passions of love and hate, the despairing survival, and the disunity of the family are revealed through the works of Hébert. Maurice Emond summarizes the content of Hébert's work by stating in his article, "Introduction à l'oeuvre d'Anne Hébert":

Lire Anne Hébert, c'est découvrir l'envers d'un monde enfin démasqué, traverser non sans péril la nuit et la mort et éprouver sept fois 'l'étau des os et la main sèche qui cherche le coeur pour le rompre.'<sup>6</sup>

Through the bold expression of Hébert, the external world, where both beauty and evil co-exist, exerts its powerful influence on the internal world of individuals. In their efforts to extract beauty from evil or the reverse, evil from beauty, Hébert creates these individuals and then exposes them to the core.

---

<sup>6</sup>Maurice Emond, "Introduction à l'oeuvre d'Anne Hébert," Québec français, Décembre 1978, p. 72.

## THE DEFINITION OF ESTRANGEMENT

Before analyzing the works of Anne Hébert in regard to the theme of estrangement--how it is manifested and possible solutions involved--a definition will first be established. This definition will be described so that it will be applicable to the four separate areas of estrangement which will be discussed at length in this thesis. These four areas are: first, the estrangement as identified by the spatial setting; second, the estrangement in the temporal setting; third, the estrangement within the social setting and finally, the estrangement as demonstrated in personal relationships.

Within the spatial setting estrangement is caused by isolation. This isolation is frequently seen by the literary framework of a small village in a secluded environment, or by a solitary garden, or by a cabin, farm, manor house, or a convent set apart from the main stream of activity. The climate, often described with wind, snow, cold and rain accentuates the harshness of isolation. In other instances this type of climate contrasts with stifling heat and suffocating humidity. The topography, from vast expanse of plains, to forested wilderness, to elevation of mountains, reasserts the starkness and severity of isolation. In dark rooms, within closed walls, behind thick draperies, the evidence of isolation is there.

The estrangement within the temporal setting is identified by a strong attachment to time. An attachment to childhood or to a single, past event, will be enough to estrange the individual from the present.

There is also an attempt to control time by establishing a suspended time--a time in limbo. This element of time, in many instances, is ordered and regulated by repetitious rites and ceremonies. These rites are linked to sterile traditions or mystical kinds of experiences which also lend to the element of estrangement within the temporal setting.

Isolation forces the third type of estrangement; separation from socially accepted norms. The outcast, the outsider, the exiled have been separated from the social community by their inability to rid themselves of certain offenses. These offenders, in the eyes of the conservative, religious society, are the illegitimate children, the unwed mothers, husbands and mistresses, and wives and lovers. The lack of social interaction due to extreme poverty, family disunity, a disassociation from religious values, physical abnormalities--lameness, deformity, deafness--rupture any ties with an accepted social and traditional environment. In some cases, this separation brings about the most severe form of estrangement, that of total alienation. Divorced from the traditional society, this alienation will be pushed to such an extreme that a completely alien social system is established.

Both the isolation in the spatio-temporal settings and the separation from the socially accepted norms, influence the fourth type of estrangement--that of individual relationships either in the family situations or in other personal associations. Emotional conflict, psychological stress, and physical abuse are aspects of these personal relationships. The estrangement is manifested most frequently by a repressive hostility which widens the gap of separation. When this

hostility surfaces, it is demonstrated by verbal savagery, physical cruelty and/or death. The lines of communication are brittle and easily broken, thus leaving the individuals vulnerable to attack. One of their main defenses is to remain in an uncommunicative state.

Isolation, separation, and alienation principally define the estrangement in the works of Anne Hébert. Solutions are not clearly defined, but possibilities are indicated. Several of the characters try to break from the hold of the past; this results in a form of liberation--an enduring liberation or a temporary one. In certain instances, a psychological metamorphosis takes place, a transformation of the individual through a spiritual release. Death will offer possible solutions to some individuals. Death may come as a result of a violent act of murder or it may be the result of natural causes. For a few individuals there is the attraction to suicide as a means by which they may resolve their personal dilemmas.

In discussing the theme of estrangement in reference to the four areas already described, the primary emphasis will be on the collection of short stories and the three novels of Anne Hébert. Secondary references will be made to her three plays and to her poetry. The plot summaries of her works follow in the last segment of this chapter.

THE PLOT SUMMARIES OF  
ANNE HÉBERT'S WORKS

Anne Hébert's first novel, Les Chambres de bois, describes an entangled relationship between Catherine, her husband, Michel, and his sister, Lia. Because of a depraved upbringing, Catherine is hoping that her marriage to Michel will revitalize her life. However, once settled in their Paris apartment, Catherine soon realizes that she is actually imprisoned. Although Michel provides her with all sorts of material luxuries, he detaches himself from her and the outside world. When his sister moves in with them, Catherine finds herself totally cut off from Michel and Lia and their unnatural relationship. Their bond of childhood fidelity, made long ago in the seigneurial manor house of their father, cannot be penetrated by Catherine. Stifled by this atmosphere, her physical condition in jeopardy, Catherine leaves Paris. While recuperating near the sea, she meets Bruno, a decent and sensitive man. Catherine returns to Paris, only to tell Michel and Lia of her decision to marry Bruno.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>Anne Hébert, Les Chambres de bois. (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1958).

The most widely translated novel of Anne Hébert, Kamouraska, is the story of one woman, Elisabeth d'Aulnières and her relationship with three different men. As a child she is raised by her widowed mother and her three spinster aunts. Instructed, advised, and disciplined by these three aunts, Elisabeth maintains a respected reputation. Her early marriage to Antoine Tassy, the squire of Kamouraska, marks the beginning of the decline of her reputation. Antoine is an adulterous, drunken brute, and for the sake of her health and safety, Elisabeth and her two small sons return to live with her mother and her aunts. While under the care of Dr. George Nelson, he and Elisabeth fall in love. Their passionate love affair prompts them to devise a way of killing Antoine. The doctor travels to Kamouraska, murders Antoine and returns to Elisabeth. His only recourse is to flee across the border to the United States, thus leaving Elisabeth alone to face the trial. Elisabeth is acquitted and is denied any communication from her lover. Her only reminder of him is the third son she bore. Several years later she marries a second time, becoming the respected wife of Jérôme Rolland and the mother of their eight children.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska. (Paris: Les Editions du Seuil, 1970).



The most recent work of Anne Hébert is the novel, Les Enfants du sabbat. Sister Julie of the Trinity finds herself in two distinctly different worlds. Although she is living within a convent, preparing herself for a life as a nun, she finds that she is mysteriously drawn through dreams and reflections to the other world on the mountain of "B." As children, Julie and her brother, Joseph, were witnesses to strange ceremonies and participants in bizarre sacrifices, sexual orgies, and incestuous relationships. These rituals were directed by their "demon" father, Adélard, and their "sorceress" mother, Philomène. Sister Julie is continually haunted by these memories to the point that her soul and body are demonically possessed. She is also tormented by the fact that Joseph, whom she loves passionately, has married. The entire convent is disrupted by Sister Julie's strange and frightening behavior. The mysterious pregnancy, birth, and death of Sister Julie's infant is the ultimate scandal of the convent. Sister Julie leaves the convent which has now been contaminated by evil.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat. (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975).

"Le Torrent," the initial story in the collection of short stories of the same title, concerns a young man, François, and his mother, Claudine. In the hostile environment of their isolated farm, François is completely subjugated and then dominated by Claudine. To gain back the respect of the people of the village from which Claudine was outcast, she decides that François will become a priest. François proves to be an excellent student but when he returns home he announces to Claudine that he is not going to continue his studies. As a result of this refusal, François is violently beaten by Claudine and he suffers from a complete loss of hearing. From this point, François develops a strange bond with a raging torrent and with a defiant horse, Perceval. Claudine is killed, trampled to death by Perceval after the horse is released by François. After a brief relationship with a woman he calls Amica, François, too, seeks a release from what his life has been. He returns to his communion with the torrent.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>Hébert, "Le Torrent," Le Torrent. (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1965).

Emilie, the principal character in "La Robe corail" is employed in the garment shop of Madame Grospou. For Emilie, knitting is her way of life. The excellence of her work brings to her the project of the coral dress which, in turn, brings about a change in her uneventful life. As the coral dress takes shape, fashioned and fitted to Emilie herself rather than to the customer who ordered it, Gabriel, a handsome, young worker from the lumber yard, has a brief infatuation for Emilie. He is drawn to her refreshing youthfulness, accented by the coral dress. Despite the brevity of their relationship, Emilie experiences a release from her former existence.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup>Hébert, "La Robe corail," Le Torrent. (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1965).

The springtime tranquility of a small village is interrupted by the devastation of war in the story, "Le Printemps de Catherine." As the enemy soldiers approach and the town empties itself of its inhabitants, Catherine, a young servant girl, welcomes the evacuation. Brutalized by her own deformed physical appearance and victimized by her dismal existence, her spirit is elated by her sudden freedom. Seeking refuge in a barn, she falls asleep in the hay and is later awakened by the arrival of a drunken soldier. In the darkness, the soldier is only aware of the responsive warmth of the girl lying beside him. To save herself from the humiliation he would undoubtedly cause her once he sees her in the daylight, Catherine murders the soldier while he sleeps.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup>Hébert, "Le Printemps de Catherine," Le Torrent. (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1965).

Inhabited by an elderly spinster, Stéphanie de Bichette, and her housekeeper, Géraldine, the house in "La Maison de l'esplanade" represents the strict adherence to past traditions established by the De Bichette family. As members of the family died and when one sister left for the convent, their bedrooms in the house were closed and the doors locked. Despite the daily visits of Charles, the brother of Stéphanie, to the house he and his wife hope to some day occupy, he is constantly reminded by the jangling of the keys that his room has already been sealed off. Disgracing his father by marrying someone beneath his social level, Charles knows that as long as Stéphanie is alive it is she who is overseer of the house. Furthermore, he is painfully aware that it is Géraldine who is keeper of the keys.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup>Hébert, "La Maison de l'esplanade," Le Torrent. (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1965).

In the short story, "Un Grand mariage," the story centers around Augustin Berthelot. After spending several years as a trapper in Northern Canada, Augustin works his way to a high social standing by becoming a successful furrier. He marries Marie-Louise, the daughter of a wealthy business man, but she demonstrates only a cold hostility towards him. The arrival in the city of the Métis Indian woman, Délia, with whom Augustin had lived while he was trapping in the North, changes the existence of Augustin. Refusing to return to the North, Délia reminds Augustin of his promise to marry her through Church ceremony. Délia eventually becomes a servant in the household of Augustin. Marie-Louise is soon aware of the intimate liaison her husband has with Délia but this arrangement is to her liking. As the mistress of Augustin, the only way Délia can cope with her guilt is to refuse to participate in the communion sacrament.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup>Hébert, "Un Grand mariage," Le Torrent. (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1965).

"La Mort de Stella" is the last story in the collection of short stories in Le Torrent. A widow with four children, Stella's last few hours of life are caught up in reflections and nightmares associated with the past. In sharing a life of extreme poverty with her husband Etienne Gauvin, who has already died, Stella had also been sharing his obsession with a forest fire. Etienne claimed that as a small boy he was severely burned in a forest fire and he continually related the same story. The account of this episode obsessed Etienne as he drifted into daydreams and drifted out of jobs. Stella assumed the burden of the fire by not spurning her husband as so many others had done. She suffers from that burden, but with her death she is released from it.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup>Hébert, "La Mort de Stella," Le Torrent. (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1965).

In the four act play, Le Temps sauvage, Agnès Joncas has decided to assume complete control of the upbringing of her five children by isolating them from any outside influences. Her husband, François, has also submitted himself to her domination. Two of the older children, Sébastien and Lucie, are becoming restless in this confinement. This restlessness is intensified by the arrival at their home of two people: Isabelle, a niece of Agnès who has come to live with them, and a new priest who calls on them. Both Isabelle and the priest become a threat to the family lifestyle which Agnès has created. The priest questions Agnès' control and Isabelle rebels against the control. With two of her children breaking away from her hold and with François attempting to reassert a more dignified role as husband and father, Agnès reluctantly loosens her grip. <sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup>Hébert, "Le Temps sauvage," Le Temps sauvage, théâtre. (Montréal: Editions HMH, Collection l'Arbre, 1967).



The play, La Mercière assassinée, was first presented on television by Radio-Canada in 1959. The play is about a Canadian journalist, Jean, who is vacationing in France. On the day of his arrival in a small village, an old woman, Adélaïde Menthe, had been found stabbed to death in her shop. Jean is intrigued by the affair and becomes involved in helping to solve the crime. He interviews a variety of people, including a marquise and her son, Olivier, who still occupy their old castle on the outskirts of the village. Through Jean's investigation, he discovers that Olivier is the assassin. Olivier reenacts an episode from the past when his sister, three of her friends, and himself mocked and humiliated Adélaïde, who was at that time working as a servant girl in the castle. Adélaïde never forgot their cruelty and sought revenge by killing each of the girls one by one. Their deaths had been explained as accidental but Olivier knew who was responsible for them. Knowing his death was to be next, Olivier murdered Adélaïde.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup>Hébert, "La Mercière assassinée," Le Temps sauvage, théâtre. (Montréal: Editions HMH, Collection l'Arbre, 1967).

The final play of the series, Les Invités au procès, is further identified as "un poème dramatique et radio-phonique." The setting for this play is the Inn of Salin, the father of two daughters, Aude and Ba, and of one son, Isman. Before the death of the children's mother, Saule, the Inn had been frequented by many visitors. Salin's ambitions to make his Inn a place of pilgrimage are unsuccessful and he resorts to making a pact with the man who calls himself the "voyageur." The "voyageur" represents a dark force who, by utilizing the perfume of a black flower, draws all classes of people to the Inn to confess their most evil wishes. These guests, reluctant to reveal their dark secrets, turn their condemnation on Salin. When Saule's body is found at the bottom of the garden pool, Salin is found guilty of killing her for being an unfaithful wife. Isman, incapable of taking on the sins of everyone, hangs himself. The beautiful Aude is rejected by her handsome but cowardly knight and only Ba, with her ugliness transformed by her mother's beauty in the depths of the pool, is capable of accepting life as it is.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup>Hébert, "Les Invités au procès," Le Temps sauvage, théâtre. (Montréal: Editions HMH, Collection l'Arbre, 1967).

Poetry was the first form of literary expression for Anne Hébert. The three major collections of her poetry mark three distinct stages in the development of her poetry. The first collection, Les Songes en équilibre, published in 1942, evokes a harmonious attachment of the poetess to the beauty and delicacy of nature--a confidence in the natural order of the world. The second collection, Le Tombeau des rois (1953), penetrates beyond the exterior world of nature and presents a symbolic journey from life to death. The journey is an exploration of the total human experience, pursuing it to its limits of sorrow, despair, silence, and death. Once the eternal link to death is acknowledged, there can be an acceptance of the invitation to life. The final collection, Mystère de la parole (1960), stresses the theme of the affirmation of life by denouncing the darkness of solitude. The poems of this collection emphasize the bond which man has established with the universe.<sup>19</sup>

The poetry of the collections, Le Tombeau des rois and Mystère de la parole, were published by Editions du Seuil in 1960 as one collection entitled Poèmes. In 1975 Musson Book Company published this collection translated into English by Alan Brown.

---

<sup>19</sup>Hébert, Poèmes. (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1960).

## CHAPTER II

### THE ESTRANGEMENT WITHIN THE SPATIAL SETTING

In order for characters and plot to be well defined, the framework of the spatial setting must be carefully structured. The spatial setting sets the atmosphere for character description and plot development, thus the strength of the story rests on the physical details which support it. Anne Hébert skillfully manages the integration of the external conditions; the elements of nature and habitation, with the internal expressions of her characters. Each of these two aspects of the spatial setting which are typically Canadian, will be discussed in depth in order to explain their relationship to the theme of estrangement in Anne Hébert's works.

The two most dominant features of the natural elements are climate and topography. The severity of the climatic conditions, mixed with the harsh variations of the topography, intensify the drama of certain events. On the other hand, there are beautiful and enchanting descriptions of nature which evoke a sense of secrecy or mystery which enhances the atmosphere of estrangement.

First, in regard to climate, it is interesting to note that the seasons of the year most frequently described in the works of Anne Hébert are summer, fall, and winter. Springtime is limited to one of her poems in particular, "Printemps sur une ville," and there are

references to the season of spring in a few of her short stories, especially in "Le Printemps de Catherine."

The summer season demonstrates its diversity of pleasant warmth or intense heat. This season is particularly emphasized in Les Chambres de bois and in the play Le Temps sauvage.

For Michel, in Les Chambres de bois, the sun represents light which he despises. He insists that Catherine keep the drapes drawn so he can withdraw into his cocoon. To avoid the light, he sleeps by day with each day slipping by unnoticed: "Les journées de Michel, moitié sombrées dans le sommeil, s'écoulaient sourdes et aveugles."<sup>1</sup> In this atmosphere Catherine, too, is forced to live without sunlight and finds herself sinking into the stale air of confinement while outside the activity of life continues. "Le monde emmêlait sa vie véhémence et tumultueuse."<sup>2</sup> Once she breaks away from this imprisonment, Catherine experiences the summer sun and relishes it. Far removed from Michel and his insistence on her remaining "pastel-colored," the sun turns Catherine "brown as bread." The sun's heat revitalizes Catherine's body and spirit, however Michel remains aloof and isolated from this source of warmth and vitality. Their estrangement is aggravated by the sun's presence or absence.

The sweltering and stifling heat of summer oppresses the existence of Agnès and her family in Le Temps sauvage. This summer heat accentuates the suffocation of several of the family members in their feelings of

---

<sup>1</sup>Anne Hébert, Les Chambres de bois (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1958), p. 70.

<sup>2</sup>Hébert, Les Chambres de bois, pp. 88-9.

isolation from the world. Agnès, herself, feels the weight of their restlessness through the unrelenting heat: "Ah, je déteste ces journées immobiles, blanches et crayeuses. Ce soleil invisible vous consume jusqu'aux os."<sup>3</sup> The magnetism of the summer heat is a threat to Agnès as she sees her children being pulled away from her. "Je voudrais que règnent à jamais l'hiver, la maison fermée et mon coeur seul en guise de feu."<sup>4</sup> This dry, blazing heat of summer ignites the estrangement between Agnès and her family.

The damp odor of dead, wet leaves in autumn contrasts with the warm colors and hues which the season also emanates. The expressions of vibrant or morose living in Les Chambres de bois, Kamouraska, Les Enfants du sabbat, and in the short story, "Un Grand mariage," are reinforced by the descriptive images of the season.

In both Les Chambres de bois and Kamouraska the hunting season is the period of the first encounters between Catherine and Michel as well as those of Elisabeth d'Aulnières and Antoine Tassy. As children, Catherine and Michel meet for the first time when Michel's father, the local seigneur, is out hunting. The estrangement among Michel's family is immediately obvious to Catherine as she notices that it is Lia, the little girl, who is carrying the gun over her shoulder while her brother, Michel, carries the heavy game bag filled with dead quail. Lia and her father seem to share the pleasure of hunting whereas Michel finds no enjoyment in the sport and remains miserably apart from them. "Une âcre

---

<sup>3</sup>Anne Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre (Montréal: Editions H. M. H., Collection l'Arbre, 1967), p. 66.

<sup>4</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, p. 70.

senteur de gibier souillé montait de l'enfant Michel comme la propre odeur de sa détresse."<sup>5</sup>

Several years later when Catherine once again meets Michel and their relationship develops, Catherine's destiny seems to be foretold by the manner in which Michel communicates with her. A written message, flattened between two leaves, is found on her doorstep. Catherine's Aunt Anita says, "J'ai cueilli deux feuilles mortes, parfaites, sur le seuil, dorées grandes comme la main, plates comme des fleurs d'eau."<sup>6</sup> The presence of these two beautiful, golden autumn leaves is an omen of estrangement for Catherine and Michel, because the beauty of the leaves is marked by death. So it is with the husband-wife relationship that Catherine and Michel later share. Catherine's golden dream gradually shrivels up like a dead leaf and she lives an isolated life with Michel which she describes as a living-death: "Une petite mort, Michel, ce n'est rien qu'une toute petite mort."<sup>7</sup>

A passion for hunting is what first draws Elisabeth d'Aulnières and Antoine Tassy together in the novel, Kamouraska. The autumn setting of early morning silence with both hunters and dogs lying in wait, is broken by the explosion of gun shots and falling birds. The personal relationship of Elisabeth and Antoine, even into their marriage, is one of prey and hunter. Antoine seeks out Elisabeth, catches his prey, brutalizes her, throws her aside, only to continue stalking others. This

---

<sup>5</sup>Hébert, Les Chambres de bois, p. 30.

<sup>6</sup>Hébert, Les Chambres de bois, p. 54.

<sup>7</sup>Hébert, Les Chambres de bois, p. 88.

sport of hunter versus prey is the trap of estrangement, set in the autumn death scenes, from which Elisabeth desperately struggles to escape.

L'automne, Kamouraska tout entier, est livré aux outardes, canards, sarcelles, bernaches, oies sauvages. Des milliers d'oiseaux sur des lieues de distance.<sup>8</sup>

Freedom or captivity, life or death, the hunter and the hunted provide the estrangement of contrast for Elisabeth and Antoine.

In Les Enfants du sabbat, the children, Julie and Joseph, find themselves existing on the very edge of the strange, mystical world their parents have created. Julie's initiation into the cult of blood sacrifices and incest established by her parents, takes place in the autumn, a season which generates both warmth and cold. "Je [Julie] vois le jour jaune et rouge à travers les interstices. C'est l'automne. J'ai froid."<sup>9</sup> With Julie, drawn into the private and privileged affairs of their parents Philomène and Adélarde and with Joseph still outside their sphere, this season signals the estrangement of sister and brother. The warmth of the childhood fidelity, at one time pledged to each other, has been extinguished by Julie's autumnal initiation.

Finally, in the story, "Un Grand mariage", the kinship that Augustin Berthelot has for the Far North is especially linked to the season of autumn. The picturesque beauty of this area which Anne Hébert poetically describes, reaffirms the strong hold it has on Augustin.

La violente lumière d'automne allumait de place en place les arbres colorés, à moitié dépouillés. L'odeur du sol

---

<sup>8</sup>Anne Hébert, Kamouraska (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970), p. 76.

<sup>9</sup>Anne Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975), pp. 66-7.



humide et des feuilles macérées montait tout alentour;  
Augustin retrouvait son âme sûre et efficace du Grand  
Nord.<sup>10</sup>

This time of year, the hunting, the return to the warmth of a wood fire are images with which Augustin has a pleasant association. As a business man, living in a big city, with a socially arranged marriage, Augustin has become estranged from the very life and time he loved the most.

Isolation becomes synonymous with the penetrating cold of winter, especially in the novel, Kamouraska. It is winter when Dr. George Nelson sets out on his lonely trek across the frozen, desolate land from Sorel to Kamouraska. "Sorel-Kamouraska, aller et retour, en dix jours. Quatre cent milles, en plein hiver sans changer de cheval."<sup>11</sup> His extraordinary black horse is persistently driven over the miles and miles of snow in order that the doctor can accomplish the task to which he and Elisabeth pledged themselves, that of killing Antoine Tassy.

Even though Elisabeth stays behind in Sorel, waiting, she experiences every mile the doctor travels, every town he passes through, the fatigue, and the piercing cold.

Depuis combien de jours et de nuits...Me voici livrée au froid de l'hiver, au silence de l'hiver, en même temps que mon amour. Lancée avec lui sur des routes de neige, jusqu'à la fin du monde. Je ne sais plus rien de toi, que ce froid mortel qui te dévore.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>Anne Hébert, Le Torrent (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1965), p. 133.

<sup>11</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 201.

<sup>12</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 195.

Dr. Nelson is, however, very much alone with his task. It is he who experiences the loneliness, the desolation, this trip of endurance with the numbing cold as a constant reminder of the cold-blooded murder he will commit.

La neige étale, à perte de vue, nivelant paysage, ville et village, homme et bête. Toute joie ou peine annulées. Tout projet étouffé dans sa source. Tandis que le froid complice s'insinue et propose sa paix mortelle. Pourvu que l'homme là-bas, entre tous sur la route de Kamouraska, ne laisse pas retomber les guides, un seul instant.<sup>13</sup>

The Canadian winter harshness in Les Enfants du sabbat emphasizes the estranged isolation of Julie and Joseph from their parents. With the heavy snow blocking the windows and doors of their cabin, the family is unable to get out. For one week most of the time is spent sleeping, all four of them sharing the body warmth within one sleeping bag until Adélarde sends them out saying, "Dehors, mes petits maudits!"<sup>14</sup>

The children, denied the warmth of the sleeping bag as well as the human warmth from their parents, are forced to run barefoot on the icy floor of the cabin in order to keep warm. Dressed only in flour sack chemises, they wait for the invitation to return to the warmth of the sleeping bag. The extremes from warmth to cold definitely affect the children's changeable feelings about their parents.

Les enfants passent de l'amour béant à la haine éperdue pour les maîtres du lit et du poêle, les seigneurs de la nourriture et de la famine, les dispensateurs souverains des caresses et des coups.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 198.

<sup>14</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, p. 85.

<sup>15</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, p. 86.

It is at this time, when their existence is so harshly subjected to the cold of winter, that the children turn to each other, forming a pact of fidelity "contre les puissances de la cabane et de l'hiver."<sup>16</sup> By a silent understanding of mutual consent, Joseph and Julie have estranged themselves from their parents Adélard et Philomène.

The poem, "Printemps sur la ville" in the collection of poems, Mystère de la parole presents a transition from winter to spring. The poem accentuates the destruction of winter by the arrival of spring, a destruction which is both sudden and violent:

Le jour charrie des neiges déchues, salies, moisies,  
ruinées

Le gel s'ouvre les veines, et le coeur de la terre se  
dégage parmi les sources bousculées.

L'hiver chavire et se déchire comme une mauvaise écaille,  
le monde est nu sous des lichens amers.<sup>17</sup>

In the short story, "Le Printemps de Catherine," the first sentence evokes a more delicate description of springtime. "Labours de printemps, semis de printemps, air, fleurs, oiseaux familiers."<sup>18</sup> This season of spring, with its exuberant portrayal of rebirth and revitalization, offers a spirit of hope to Catherine. This particular springtime, which releases itself from the hold of winter is the springtime in which Catherine is released from her bondage of servitude. For Catherine, this is her time of freedom, this is her first springtime.

Just as this season unveils its freshness and purity, so too Catherine, whose very name means "pure", welcomes a fresh beginning.

---

<sup>16</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, p. 87.

<sup>17</sup>Anne Hébert, Poèmes (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1960), p. 90

<sup>18</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 83.

For a very brief time Catherine experiences the ugliness of her shell being discarded when touched by the intimate gestures of her first man:

Pauvre lumière blafarde, dans ton rayonnement vient vers  
 toi le premier homme....Ses mains sont gauches et molles.  
 Son cerveau illuminé transfigure ton corps de paria.  
 Tu ne sais pas quelle princesse tu fus, le temps d'une  
 étincelle.<sup>19</sup>

The delicate beauty and new life of this springtime is however, invaded by violent ravaging and death. Along with the destruction, the enemy soldiers have brought the threat of captivity or death to the inhabitants of the village and to the surrounding area. They are now the victims and it is Catherine who is set free from her servitude in the tavern. Her springtime has estranged her from the springtime of the others. This springtime is for Catherine her time of survival, her time for victory, even if she must kill the young soldier before he sees her ugliness and destroys her springtime.

Spring beauty accented by harshness and violence is the setting of the short story as well as of the poem. Catherine's freedom and revitalization are experienced in the midst of death and violence and in order for her to protect her experience of rebirth, she must destroy. The last few lines of the poem, "Printemps sur la ville" emphasize the power which this season can exert as its rebirth also comes about through destruction:

Le sang des morts se mêle au sel, jonche la mer comme  
 des brassées de glaïeuls

Voici que la saison des eaux se retire; la ville se sèche  
 comme une grève, lèche ses malheurs au goût d'iode

---

<sup>19</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 100.

Le printemps brûle le long des façades grises, et les  
lèpres de pierre au soleil ont l'éclat splendide des  
dieux pelés et victorieux.<sup>20</sup>

In the final discussion of the climatic conditions of the spatial setting, brief reference will be made to three short stories from the collection Le Torrent. Aside from the climatic conditions as expressed through the seasons of the year, wind, rain, and temperature changes are evidences of further reinforcing feelings of estrangement in defining the characters.

Cut off from the world of sound by his deafness, François ("Le Torrent") identifies himself with nature. "La pluie, le vent, le trèfle, les feuilles sont devenus des éléments de ma vie. Des membres réels de mon corps."<sup>21</sup> The natural elements with which he feels compatible actually estrange him from his physical being. "Livré à la nature. Je me sens devenir un arbre ou une motte de terre."<sup>22</sup>

As soon as Stéphanie de Bichette ("La Maison de l'esplanade") leaves her house, the parasol she carries announces to everyone what the weather will be like that day. The lilac-colored parasol indicates a gloriously sunny day and the gray parasol is reserved for cloudy days. In the winter, or if it is raining, Stéphanie does not leave the house. Part of Stéphanie's eccentric behavior that sets her off from others has been manifested by the conditions of the weather and her symbolic representation of it.

---

<sup>20</sup>Hébert, Poèmes, p. 91.

<sup>21</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 35.

<sup>22</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 35.

In "La Mort de Stella" there is a cabin riddled with holes and subject to the force of the rain; this again emphasizes the vulnerability of Stella and her children. The steady pounding of the rain intensifies Stella's visions of the past: poverty, rejection, isolation, "De nouveau la nuit, l'abandon, la solitude de cette cabane transpercée de pluie."<sup>23</sup>

On her death bed, Stella's convulsive dreaming is accentuated by the downpour. In her dream of anger and frustration towards Etienne, her husband, she strikes out at him, beating on his chest in rhythm with the rain.

Il lui semblait que ses poings continuaient de taper, sans elle, comme des machines impossibles à arrêter, une fois mises en mouvement. Toc, toc, toc, les coups reprennent sur le toit maintenant, s'acharment. Quelle tempête!<sup>24</sup>

The common link between these three individuals, François, Stéphanie, and Stella is their isolation. The solitude, the aloneness, and the absence they experience is reinforced by the natural elements that surround and influence them.

In Anne Hébert's works the second dominant feature of the natural setting is the topography. Combined with the climate, the Canadian topography or the landscape accents the atmosphere of isolation.

In Albert LeGrand's article, "Anne Hébert: de l'exile au royaume," he cites Anne Hébert's personal commentary about her cousin, Saint-Denys-Gameau: "Il sait déjà qu'en ce paysage menacé par l'eau et la forêt, toute oeuvre à faire l'est contre d'étranges forces obscures."<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 198

<sup>24</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 201.

<sup>25</sup>Albert LeGrand, "Anne Hébert: de l'exile au royaume," Etudes Françaises 4 (1968): 13.

These "strange obscure forces," whether they are real or imaginary, surface more graphically against the descriptive background of the natural setting. In my analysis of the topography or landscape and their relationship to the theme of estrangement, I will discuss the importance of water, forested areas, mountains, and a garden.

Aside from a few of Anne Hébert's poems, the short story, "Le Torrent", most clearly shows the impact of water on the estranged life of a human being, François Perrault. Despair, repression and even the anger which cannot be overtly expressed because of the fear of reprisal from Claudine, these all well up inside François. The wild and tumultuous torrent of water provides a release for his pent-up emotions. This kinship with the torrent separates him from any other form of communication, especially after his deafness. It is now the torrent which dominates him. He gives himself over to this power, separating himself from his own existence.

Je ne possédais pas le monde, mais ceci se trouvait changé:  
une partie du monde me possédait. Le domaine d'eau, de  
montagnes et d'autres bas venait de poser sur moi sa touche  
souveraine.<sup>26</sup>

F. M. Macri, in his article "Anne Hébert Story and Poem," refers to this withdrawal into the realm of nature as instinctive. It is a form of protection for François, but at the same time, the torrent, in its domination over him, takes away his freedom. He is left in a turmoil, powerless, without purpose or direction.<sup>27</sup> It is at this point that François suffers from one of the most severe forms of estrangement: alienation from himself.

---

<sup>26</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 27.

<sup>27</sup>F. M. Macri, p. 12.

Another character who is possessed by the noise of waterfalls is Stella ("La Mort de Stella"). The reflections of her life, a life which has been both calm and harsh, are agitated by the noise of the falling water. These falls have their source on one side of an island where the water is alive and flowing, while on the other side of the island, the water is dark and stagnant. This explicit description of the water colors the emotion of Stella who is caught between living and dying. It is in this short passage that the "obscure forces" of the world are mentioned. "C'était un immense abandon aux forces obscures de ce monde."<sup>28</sup> Like François, Stella has no control over her situation and she resigns herself to the severity of isolation.

In almost all the works of Anne Hébert, there is reference to the Canadian forests, either their vast expanse or their more private seclusion. In either setting, the forest evokes several different aspects of estrangement. Besides the silence, solitude and isolation, the elements of privacy, secrecy and even mystery are present.

For Julie and Joseph, (Les Enfants du sabbat), their private meeting place is in the woods under the shelter of the huge pine trees. This is their sanctuary during the times when they are excluded from the affairs of Adélard and Philomène.

Les grands pins noirs près de la cabane, couleur de paille, aux fenêtres aveugles, ont l'air d'abriter un nid grisâtre, abandonné, tombé là exposé à tous les dangers de la mort en marche.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 177.

<sup>29</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, p. 70.



It is Joseph who knows all the safe hiding places in the forest and it is to the refuge of these hiding places that Joseph flees after he fails the initiation of incest with his mother. Enclosed within the obscurity of the forest, Joseph becomes the prey stalked by Philomène. "L'oeil de la sorcière fouille l'ombre où se cache le garçon. Sous le regard maternel, il poursuit sa quête chez les hommes."<sup>30</sup> The only recourse Joseph now has is to leave these secret places in the forest and separate himself once and for all from this cabin, and from this woman, both of which radiate malevolence toward him.

Sébastien, (Le Temps sauvage), has also found the forest to be a place of retreat. Free to roam the woods--hunting, fishing and trapping--Sébastien has become more aware of his own capabilities than have the other children. The restrictions placed upon the family by Agnès have been less of a burden to Sébastien because of this freedom in the woods. However, this very freedom becomes even more constrained when he does go back home. The fraternity with the forest freedom gradually separates him from the family circle, directed and dominated by Agnès. Sébastien's senses are acutely stirred by the powerful attraction of what is beyond the miniscule world Agnes manipulates.

Moi, la forêt d'ici, je la connais comme ma main. Depuis longtemps j'ai envie d'aller plus loin. Tu sais, comme lorsqu'on est tout petit et qu'on rêve d'atteindre la ligne d'horizon, de la sentir sous ses pieds, mais la ligne d'horizon bouge toujours et, la dernière terre est toujours à redécouvrir.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, p. 108.

<sup>31</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, p. 32.

No matter what the risks might be, Sébastien is determined to free himself from his mother's imposed estrangement from the world. He maintains that his life belongs to him and he has every intention of possessing it fully.

Thus, both Joseph and Sébastien have withdrawn to their forest refuges. They leave behind them lives confined to isolated cabins in the mountains and mothers who wish to control them.

The formidable expanse of the forest areas described in Kamouraska and also mentioned in "Un Grand mariage" portray the wilderness in its most natural and primitive state. Against this background, Dr. Nelson blends in well. His wild, savage ride through the wilderness in pursuit of Antoine Tassy brings about his most uncivilized act, that of murder. The stark and savage wilderness supports his act but once he returns to civilization he will become an outsider, estranged by his action.

This same idea of civilized versus uncivilized is also depicted in "Un Grand mariage". Délia, the Métis Indian woman from the wilderness area of the Great North, finds herself the outsider in the society identified as civilized. The codes and laws of the Canadian wilderness, she soon realizes, do not apply in the city. Délia, "la savagesse", the woman from the wilderness, endures the isolation of the city.

A raging forest fire which consumed thousands of acres of trees, is rekindled time and time again in the thoughts of Stella ("La Mort de Stella"). This fire, in which Etienne claims to have been trapped when just a boy, continues to consume his life. It spreads quickly, drawing in Stella and the children until all their lives are affected by the story of the fire. Etienne clings to this story, and takes

shelter in it whenever his manhood or personal integrity are put to question. By seeking solace in this obsession of a forest fire, Etienne sets himself apart from reality.

Untamed, within its enclosure of awesome trees, entangled brush and shrubs, the forest wilderness is a world set apart from civilization. Those who form a kinship with it, who seek its refuge, who penetrate its mysterious interior are those individuals who have identified with its isolation. To separate from its protection is a challenge for those who choose to move into the civilized culture (Sébastien, Délia), and for others who are forced to leave the forest security (Joseph, Dr. Nelson). This challenge of facing an existence of reality in a civilized world is difficult for those who have been estranged from it. Etienne Gauvin cannot give up his attachment.

The most severe form of estrangement, as was discussed in the introductory definition, is alienation. Within the physical setting, the mountain represents this alienation in two of the works of Anne Hébert; Le Temps sauvage and Les Enfants du sabbat.

Protection from the corrupted world of people is the basic premise on which Agnès has founded, nurtured, and controlled the home and lives of her family. The mountain on which they live elevates them from the corruption of the city and people below. The impenetrable mountain represents the impenetrable domaine that Agnès has established by forbidding the children to associate with anyone outside the family, and forbidding anyone to come to their home. When Lucie asks her mother why they are so far away from other people, Agnès emphatically replies,

C'est ma volonté de vous garder tous ici, dans la montagne, le plus longtemps possible, à l'abri du monde entier, dans une longue enfance sauvage et pure.<sup>32</sup>

The mountain serves as a reminder to everyone outside of Agnès' family that she has established her own society, alienated in time and place.

The mountain of "B" (Les Enfants du sabbat) represents the schism which has been made in the traditional concept of height and depth, light and darkness, goodness and evil. The idea of being drawn upward to the mountain, to the sky, to heaven and ultimately to God, has become reversed in Les Enfants du sabbat. The gods of the mountain are the "demon" Adélard and the "sorceress" Philomène. The mountain has become the realm of their cult, a completely alien world of demonic mysticism, sacrificial rites and insatiable orgies. All of this is energized by the powerful "bagosse," the illegal alcohol and the magical herbal ointments.

From the convent below, Sister Julie's mind is drawn back to her life on this mountain, to its magical consolation. It is from the mountain of "B" that Sister Julie receives her power. "[Elle] obtient toutes sortes de faveurs et qu'elle refait ses forces et son pouvoir."<sup>33</sup> The convent is invaded by a "strange obscure force," the alien, which even the power of exorcism cannot drive out.

In a review article of Les Enfants du sabbat, Kathy Mezei states, "'l'envers du monde' is not an alternative to existence or to an

---

<sup>32</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, p. 11.

<sup>33</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, p. 63.

affirmation of life, but an anti-existence."<sup>34</sup> The reversal of the world, the anti-existence, is synonymous to alienation from existence.

To conclude my analysis of the estrangement as emphasized by the topography or landscape setting, my last reference will be to the play, Les Invités au procès. The poignancy of the natural elements are fully utilized in Anne Hébert's description of Salin's garden. The garden blossoms out in red and black, the colors of the "voyageur", after Salin makes his pact with him. In the middle of the pond floats an immense black flower with a red center, its powerful perfume attracting those people from all levels of society who wish to confess their most evil desires. Beauty and evil come together in this garden; they co-exist. This garden "hors du monde" is a type of purgatory, a place in limbo where one must trace out the roots to the origin of evil. Suffering from this paradox of estrangement, the guests express their fear with piercing cries:

Nous sommes pris en ce jardin comme des naufragés sur un radeau...Nous sommes prisonniers des sortilèges...Nous sommes hors du monde...Les portes sont fermées et très hauts les murs du jardin...Nous voulons sortir du jardin! Nous voulons vivre!<sup>35</sup>

D. W. Russell, in his comments on Les Invités au procès, refers to the play as a parable about a society which has not yet been able to accept the dialectic nature of reality.<sup>36</sup> Not to acknowledge this

---

<sup>34</sup>Kathy Mezei, "Commands and Desires," Canadian Literature 70 (1976): 81.

<sup>35</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, pp. 178, 179ff.

<sup>36</sup>D. W. Russell, "Anne Hébert: Les Invités au procès," Canadian Literature 74 (1977): 32.

duality of good and evil co-existing, is to force the estrangement from reality.

Deeply rooted to the land and subjected to its diverse climate, the characters of Anne Hébert are closely aligned with the physical setting. She expresses this relationship in a poem entitled "Je suis la terre et l'eau."

Je suis la terre et l'eau, tu ne me passeras pas à gué,  
mon ami, mon ami

Je suis le puits et la soif, tu ne me traverseras pas sans  
péril, mon ami, mon ami

.....

Le malheur et l'espérance sous mon toit brûlent, durement  
noués, apprends ces vieilles noces étranges, mon ami,  
mon ami...<sup>37</sup>

The characters of Anne Hébert cannot be separated from the natural elements in their world. These natural elements form the essence of the physical structure which assist in developing the theme of estrangement, as Albert LeGrand says in his article, "Kamouraska, ou l'ange et la bête:"

Chez Anne Hébert, le paysage déborde largement la simple fonction de localisation. Il exerce de l'intérieur une étrange action osmotique sur le personnage. Il envoûte, magnétise et possède. Il trouble, méduse et pétrifie.<sup>38</sup>

With the profile of the natural elements and the explanation of their role in intensifying the theme of estrangement established, the localization will be extended to include the second aspect of the

---

<sup>37</sup>Hébert, Poèmes, p. 86.

<sup>38</sup>Albert LeGrand, "Kamouraska ou l'ange et la bête," Etudes Françaises 7 (1971): 135.

spatial setting: habitation. Situated within the physical elements of climate and topography, the habitation of the individual characters further accentuates the estrangement. The physical setting assumes a more personalized identification with the habitation description since the habitation is the personal space of the individual characters.

In my analysis of the habitation, I will first briefly discuss the collective habitation as represented by the city, the village and the convent; then in more detail, I will analyze the individual habitation. In both types of habitation, the estrangement is defined primarily by separation, aloofness and, in some instances, complete withdrawal.

"Images, sons, odeurs, visages. La vraie vie est dans la rue."<sup>39</sup> These words of Anne Hébert in speaking of Paris could very well be the words of Catherine (Les Chambres de bois). The vitality of the city of Paris is cut off from Catherine and is responsible for festering the pain of estrangement. By being insulated from the life of the city, Catherine's slow death continues. Separated from the city, Catherine slowly loses her grip on reality.

La rumeur de la ville, avec ses marchés criards d'odeurs, ses jours humides, ses pavés raboteux, ses grandes places éclatantes, ses paysages d'étain aux environs de l'eau et des ponts, ses voix humaines bien sonores, venait mourir pareille à une vague, sous les hautes fenêtres closes.<sup>40</sup>

The contrast of the environment of the Upper and Lower towns of Quebec City, one part of the city estranged from the other, symbolizes

---

<sup>39</sup>"Mon Coeur sauvage, je le dis en français," Les Nouvelles Littéraires, 20 janvier 1976, p. 22.

<sup>40</sup>Hébert, Les Chambres de bois, p. 81.

the two aspects of the conflicting existence of Augustin Berthelot ("Un Grand mariage"). In this particular story, the city, with its blending of wealth and poverty, forces its own type of estrangement on Augustin. As an affluent businessman conducting his affairs in all parts of the city, Augustin is constantly reminded of his childhood poverty in the Lower Town.

The demands of Augustin's social position and recollections of his origin are both brought together within this city where he finds himself estranged. With the arrival of Délia, his Métis woman, Augustin's reflections of his life in the Far North move him, and gradually he is captivated by the invasion of his bitter-sweet second life which had been so well hidden within him. He continues to perform his social obligations but returns to this second life within the boundaries of Délia's attic room.

For Agnès' family (Le Temps sauvage) the denial of contact with the city is a denial of contact with reality. To experience the city, according to Agnès, is to experience its corruptive influence.

La ville est mauvaise comme un champ d'herbe à puces.  
L'air qu'on y respire est pollué, l'eau qu'on y boit  
sent l'eau de javel, et les enfants s'étiolent là-bas  
comme des oiseaux en cage.<sup>41</sup>

Ironically, her children are the ones who seem to be wasting away in the protective cage designed by their mother.

Once Sébastien breaks out of this cage of estrangement and goes into the city, he soon discovers how unprepared he really is to cope with "la vraie vie." With his vulnerability challenged, he returns

---

<sup>41</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, p. 11.



to the mountain like a wounded bird, but vows to return to Montreal, to take up arms and to work to defend himself. At least in the city he will be able to exercise his freedom of choice, this freedom which had been denied him in the estranged society established by Agnès. Sébastien understands that his success is a question of a choice and of pushing himself to full extent of the ramifications of that choice.

Life in full bloom, roses and thorns, good and evil juxtaposed, distinguish Anne Hébert's characters' withdrawal from reality--whether it be forced (Catherine, Sébastien) or chosen (Augustin). The activity of the city represents life and not to recognize it, not to participate in it means a refusal or denial to live.

Apart from the openness of the city, the small rural Canadian village, on the other hand, represents a closed society, locked into its private and sometimes superstitious traditions. The village is a world set apart, its inhabitants wary of anyone or anything that penetrate it. To trespass or to invade the boundaries of the village is to enter into the privacy of its inhabitants. Their unique traditions, their secrets and mysteries peculiar to them, become subject to investigation or disapproval.

The small village invaded by enemy soldiers ("Le Printemps de Catherine") illustrates in a brutal way the impossibility of remaining estranged from what is real. No matter how much the villagers wish to cling to their past traditions, to close themselves up in the shelter of their privacy, they are forced into the open. As Anne Hébert

writes: "Tous ceux que le secret des sombres maisons de pierre abritait depuis des années, il leur faut aussi prendre la route."<sup>42</sup>

Their lives, so carefully arranged and regulated, are on display to the world. No one is exempt; even the mayor's home is opened up into full view for everyone. Detached and vulnerable, the villagers search for new ties to hold their lives together.

Chacun quitte sa geôle, sa cuirasse, son étui, ses habitudes, ses conventions, ses manies, ses meubles, sa maison, son jardin, sa terre, sa famille. Tous ces libérés en vrac sur la route, ils cherchent leurs liens.<sup>43</sup>

Their freedom is painful for them, for it means they must let go of an existence which estranged them from actuality and indeed they feel totally estranged from the new situation in which they find themselves.

A violent murder in a small village, even though the village is identified as one in France (La Mercière assassinée), further accentuates the atmosphere of estrangement in a village setting. The visiting journalist is greeted with hostility, suspicion, abruptness and aloofness when he arrives in the village. As he probes into the investigation of the murder of Adélaïde, he is amazed at the reaction of most of the villagers. They do not want to acknowledge this act of murder, not involve themselves in its investigation: "La ville dormait bien cachée derrière ses volets, comme si de rien n'était."<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 88.

<sup>43</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 93.

<sup>44</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, p. 96.

Deserted streets, empty sidewalks, locked shops, houses with closed shutters all bring Jean to the conclusion that this village "est fermée comme une prison."<sup>45</sup> The villagers, withdrawing into their homes, behind the closed shutters illustrates once again the refusal to participate in the real life, especially when their lives are invaded by the harsh reality of death.

Finally, the collective habitation in its most estranged form is the convent alienated from the rest of society (Les Enfants du sabbat). Enclosed behind thick walls, heavy wooden doors and barred windows, the sisters of the convent have withdrawn into their own society, independent and estranged from the rest of the world. This society has its own set of rules, its own disciplines, its own hierarchy, its own reasons for existing. The Mother Superior, Marie-Clothilde de la Croix, orders, supervises, regulates this society of women delegating both favors and reprimands at her own discretion.

The one element she cannot control is the individual desires of human nature which manifest themselves in a variety of ways: envy, greed, hostility.<sup>46</sup> The strict rule of keeping all windows closed is useless, for as Mother Superior says: "On ne sait jamais ce qui peut nous venir de l'extérieur, caché dans une poussière, dans une escarbille. Le démon est rusé, insidieux, comme un grain de sable."<sup>47</sup> In spite of the heavy doors, closed and barred windows, and thick walls, the

---

<sup>45</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, p. 104

<sup>46</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, pp. 124-5.

<sup>47</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, p. 14.

convent is invaded by evil. This evil is unleashed through the demonic possession of Sister Julie who cannot tolerate the estranged silent death of the convent life. "La vie du couvent se refermerait autour de moi, pareille à l'eau morte d'un étang."<sup>48</sup>

Sister Julie's demonic state is her means of fighting this silent sterility where the vow of total obedience deprives one of free will, personal choice and all initiative. She describes it saying: "La vie vient mourir ici, longues lames assourdies contre les marches de pierre."<sup>49</sup> Fasting, interminable praying, confessions and rosary recitations are not sufficient to release the convent from the grip of evil. Appeals are made to the outside world. "Aucune réponse. Le monde extérieur se tait. Le couvent semble abandonné des hommes et de Dieu."<sup>50</sup>

The collective habitation of city, village or convent settings functions as an integral part of the complete spatial setting for it defines more clearly the dilemma of passivity or activity, separation or integration, dying or living. As the personal space from city, village or convent narrows to a single dwelling place, whether it is a house, cabin or solitary room, the estrangement becomes even more acute.

For my analysis and discussion of the individual habitation, I have divided the individual habitation into three groups; first, the

---

<sup>48</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, p. 32.

<sup>49</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, p. 50.

<sup>50</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, p. 75.

individual habitation of the more affluent society, such as the seigneurial manor house, large estate or castle; second, the individual habitation of a more impoverished nature, such as the farmhouse or cabin; and finally, the single room, apartment or attic. Through this division of the various types of individual habitations, we see that the estrangement in Anne Hébert's works is not limited to one particular social class, but rather, it is present in all levels of the social structure. With the elements of isolation, solitude, and seclusion again established, the locale of these individual habitations will be analyzed in order to show the effect of estrangement on the individual characters.

The habitation of the more affluent society is illustrated in Kamouraska by the description of the large house in Sorel occupied by the three spinster aunts of Elisabeth, in that of the seigneurial manor house of Antoine Tassy and that of the house of Jérôme Rolland in Quebec. These three houses are all occupied by Elisabeth d'Aulnières during different periods of her life; and all three houses seem to emphasize the division of Elisabeth into three distinct characters. This division promotes her estrangement from herself as well as from others.

With her marriage to Antoine Tassy, the protective shell of her childhood is abruptly broken as she is taken to the remote Tassy manor house located far from Sorel. Antoine proves to be as wild and as changeable in mood as the region of Kamouraska. Whipped about by the never-ending wind of the endless landscape and seeing her life slipping into the shroud of the thick fog, Elisabeth feels totally alienated from this life of constant endurance.

Le vent. Le bruit des vagues se brisent sur les rochers. Les grandes marées d'automne. Le manoir s'avance en pleine mer, dans un brouillard épais, comme du lait. Les volets de bois craquent et se disloquent....Je crois que c'est la peur seule qui me tient en ce lieu.<sup>51</sup>

When her aunts arrive at Kamouraska they are shocked by the physical condition of their niece and take her back to Sorel. The house on Augusta street is Elisabeth's retreat from Antoine; however, once she is back in the protective custody of her aunts and in the house of her childhood, Elisabeth feels this confining space engulfing her:

Un certain temps de ma vie, réintégré comme une coquille vide. S'est refermé à nouveau sur moi. Un petit claquement sec d'huître. Je m'entraîne à vivre dans cet espace réduit. Je m'enracine dans la maison de la rue Augusta.... Je me meurs de langueur....J'ai dix-neuf ans.<sup>52</sup>

No matter which house Elisabeth occupies, the overwhelming feeling of confinement and estrangement from life smother her. Her desire to live is cut off by the over protection of her aunts, the fulfillment of the death wish for her husband Antoine, the denial of final happiness with Dr. Nelson, and then, as the wife of Jérôme Rolland, by her role as a model wife and mother. For Elisabeth the continual struggle in living within this confinement is like the actions of a person being buried alive.<sup>53</sup>

The manor house of Michel's and Lia's father, secluded deep in the woods, represents the withdrawn and mysterious childhood to which Michel tenaciously clings. The carefully guarded secrets of the manor house

---

<sup>51</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 89.

<sup>52</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 100.

<sup>53</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 250.

can only be penetrated by rumour: "C'est une maison ou les femmes règnent....Les femmes surtout sont méchantes et dorment dans les chambres les plus éloignées...."<sup>54</sup>

Not even Catherine, as Michel's wife, is able to penetrate all the silent mysteries of the separate world of Michel's childhood. He is as closed and silent as the house; "la maison de pierre...massive, avec ses fenêtres fermées, sans un filet de lumière."<sup>55</sup> The weight of this manor house and what it represents seems to crush Catherine's own existence. Vivid in her memory, this recollection of the house also holds her prisoner.<sup>56</sup>

In the short story, "La Maison de l'esplanade", the title itself implies the grandeur of the home of Stéphanie de Bichette.

Une maison de pierre de taille, datant du régime français.... une de ces maisons hautes, étroites avec un toit pointu garni de plusieurs rangées de lucarnes, dont les dernières perchées sont à peu près grosses comme des nids d'hirondelles.<sup>57</sup>

This description of the house could very well be the physical description of Stéphanie: old, tall, a long thin neck, her head crowned with an elaborate hairdo. Just as the house exemplifies past traditions, so too, it epitomizes Stéphanie's life. As an almost deserted island in the middle of the city, the house is separated from life and vitality. Stéphanie's estrangement from the world is demonstrated by the

---

<sup>54</sup>Hébert, Les Chambres de bois, p. 52.

<sup>55</sup>Hébert, Les Chambres de bois, p. 57.

<sup>56</sup>Hébert, Les Chambres de bois, p. 45.

<sup>57</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 107.

remote obscurity of her bedroom with its thick bed curtains, heavy draperies and closed shutters.

The second type of individual habitation is that of a more impoverished nature. This is most clearly demonstrated by the farmhouse setting in "Le Torrent" and the isolated cabins in "La Mort de Stella" and in Les Enfants du sabbat.

So remote is the farm of Claudine ("Le Torrent") that François feels the overwhelming desire to see the face of another human being. For the first twelve years of his life the only human faces he had seen were his mother's and his own face narcissistically reflected in the water.<sup>58</sup> The farmhouse, located far from communication with the outside world, surrounded by woods, fields, and streams, intensifies the displacement François experiences. The farmhouse, void of any human warmth, understanding or love, illustrates the emptiness, the loneliness, the austerity, the complete vacuum within François. F. M. Macri in his article, "Anne Hébert: Story and Poem," defines this interior movement into the very depths of repression as alienation.<sup>59</sup> Once again, the ultimate manifestation of estrangement appears.

The fragile and fading life of Stella ("La Mort de Stella") is sheltered in a fragile cabin described as a cardboard box. The poverty and insecurity Stella experienced in her life with Etienne are reflected by the unstable structure. The faded colors of the window and door frames symbolize the pale, faded, washed-out existence of Stella as the color and life drain out of her. The wooden planks of the floor

---

<sup>58</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 10.

<sup>59</sup>F. M. Macri, p. 14.



transform themselves into burning, crackling timber in the troubled dreams of Stella. Even at her death, she must endure the infamous fire, the fire which had obsessed Etienne.

"Perdue dans la montagne,"<sup>60</sup> the cabin of Adé'lard and Philomène conceals all the mysteries of their black masses (Les Enfants du sabbat). Powerful odors of tobacco smoke, rotten potatoes, the grease of salt pork mix with the smells of the fermenting alcohol ("bagosse") and the hallucinogenic ointment prepared from wild plants and herbs. These strange smells emanate from the cabin, their maleficence circulating through the air.

For Adé'lard and Philomène it is not a question of finding one particular cabin and settling into it. More important to them is finding a place, any place, where they can conduct their rituals, set up their still for making their potent drink and make contact with those people who are curious about their ceremonies and eager to participate in them. An abandoned sugar cabin, a forgotten hunting cabin, or a cabin lost somewhere on a mountain is all the habitation that is necessary for Adé'lard and Philomène. Abandoned, forgotten, lost; these terms not only describe the various cabins that they have occupied, but these words also identify the estranged, alien life that Adé'lard and Philomène have led. Once they become suspect in a certain area, they move on to their next cabin, dragging with them their children and their belongings: "Philomène et Adé'lard sont des squatter. Ils

---

<sup>60</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, p. 11.

viennent d'on ne sait où, voyagent à travers bois et portent leurs deux enfants sur leur dos, comme font des squaws."<sup>61</sup> This continual nomadic wandering of these displaced persons, moving from place to place, claiming no secure or permanent habitation, disassociates them from society.

To complete the discussion of the individual habitation, I will examine the estrangement as evidenced by the isolation, confinement, or even entombment within a single room, an apartment, or a cell. With the narrowing of the personal space, the estrangement of one individual from another is even more significant.

Silent Rooms, (which is the translated title of Les Chambres de bois), are the Paris apartment rooms shared by Michel and Catherine. The deaf, mute, wooden walls which surround Michel and Catherine intensify their silent existence. These rooms close in on Catherine, transform themselves into a cage in which she feels herself pacing about like "une bête captive."<sup>62</sup>

Michel's private corner, furnished with his narrow bed and his piano is blocked off from Catherine by a room divider. Later with Lia's arrival, a private campground is set up by the brother and sister in the middle of the apartment. Catherine is forced to retreat to her bedroom, unable to penetrate the personal space of Michel and Lia. This painful trap of confinement is an intolerable life of estrangement for Catherine. "Qui donc m'a conduite ici?"<sup>63</sup> The first line of

---

<sup>61</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, p. 84.

<sup>62</sup>Hébert, Les Chambres de bois, p. 72.

<sup>63</sup>Hébert, Poèmes, p. 39.

Anne Hébert's poem, "La Chambre fermée", could very well be Catherine's desperate question.

The Mother Superior's solution to the bizarre behavior of Sister Julie (Les Enfants du sabbat) is to lock Julie in a small cell, removed from the activity of the convent. Sister Julie is denied participation in the mass and its sacraments; however this confinement and this denial are the very things which strengthen Julie's contact with the demonic powers. Alone, in the imprisonment of her cell, her attachment to the mountain of "B" becomes even stronger.

The solitary room of Emilie ("La Robe corail"); the attic room delegated to Catherine, "La Puce" ("Le Printemps de Catherine"); the loft banishment of François (Le Temps sauvage); the attic storeroom of Délia ("Un Grand mariage"); the miniscule living quarters of Adélaïde (La Mercière assassinée); the De Bichette closed, tomb-like rooms ("La Maison de l'esplanade"); all of these individual habitations personalize and symbolize the estrangement of these characters, placing their sterile, static existences apart from others. F. M. Macri describes this existence as one of:

faded flowers, past memories, lost happiness, somber dwellings, closed rooms and houses, impenetrable windows and doors, dusty furniture, ashes, mirrors, hydrophobia, claustrophobia, claustrophilia, and finally, the ultimate irreducible dark space of the coffin and tomb.<sup>64</sup>

Entombment, the descent into the grave, is most expressly stated in Anne Hébert's poem, "Le Tombeau des rois." This descent represents the complete break, the final estrangement from living, for it is the

---

<sup>64</sup>F. M. Macri, p. 10.

absolute confinement, sealed off from life. As she writes, "Je descends vers les tombeaux des rois....aux chambres secrètes et rondes, là ou sont dressés les lits clos...."<sup>65</sup> Macri explains the descent into the grave or tomb by saying:

The grave as the dimension of death is absolute. It is both breathless and fathomless, like the gulf or the abyss; it is an unescapable enclosure. This image is used to project the condition of living-death.<sup>66</sup>

Through this examination of the habitation element of the spatial setting, the idea of the living-death image can be more firmly established. Living-death is an existence which is devoid of its vitality, it is an impotent existence shrinking back into its protective shell of habitation. This withdrawal is reinforced by the severity of the climatic conditions and the topographical aspects which contribute to the isolation and separation of the habitation, whether it be collective or individual. As the individuals withdraw into their alienated realm, they are further influenced by their own definitions and interpretations of time. The estrangement within the temporal setting is discussed in Chapter III.

---

<sup>65</sup>Hébert, Poèmes, pp. 59-60.

<sup>66</sup>F. M. Macri, p. 15.

## CHAPTER III

### THE ESTRANGEMENT WITHIN THE TEMPORAL SETTING

Whereas the spatial arrangement of the physical setting through climate, topography and habitation is qualified by precise reference to existing places: Montreal, Quebec, Paris, Southern France, the French-Canadian North--the time formation within the works of Anne Hébert is more amorphous. The complete framework in each of Anne Hébert's works is complemented by this articulate integration of the concrete and the abstract. The spatial setting assists in promoting the estrangement, directly affecting the characters, whereas the temporal setting is a manifestation of estrangement, frequently fabricated by the characters.

The temporal estrangement is shown principally in three ways, each of which will be studied in detail in this chapter. The first aspect of time is the attachment to the past, the second is the discipline to regulated time, and the third is the recognition of a suspended time. In all three of these aspects of the temporal setting, the estrangement is demonstrated by an avoidance of the present or an escape from reality.

Lost childhood and unforgettable or unforgiveable past events are the attachments which seize and hold several of Anne Hébert's characters. Reflections and dreams are the means by which this attachment to the past is formed. By the preconscious or subconscious workings of the mind, several of the individual characters move away

from reality, working their way back to the past. Involved with this isolated time in the past, the individuals drift away from the present. They are oblivious to the reality of the present. Dreams and reveries therefore become another type of estrangement.

An illustration of the effect of a lost childhood on an individual is in "Le Torrent." The first line of the short story identifies the state of existence of François. "J'étais un enfant dépossédé du monde.... Je n'ai pas eu d'enfance."<sup>1</sup> Without the memory of a childhood, without that link to his existence, François is incapable of knowing himself completely. The absence of childhood, coupled with his life of repression with his mother Claudine, marks the turbulent desperation of his existence. His fragile life is beaten and broken, the pieces scattered around him. Even as he attempts to piece it back together, there will always be one part of his life missing.

Childhood innocence, purity, and protection are what Michel (Les Chambres de bois) is desperately trying to reconstruct. This time of childhood will release him from the responsibility of participating in the present, in reality. "Michel parlait avec animation de la pureté de l'enfance retrouvée."<sup>2</sup> This childhood existence, which Michel and Lia attempt to recapture through their pact of fidelity, excludes Catherine. To recapture their childhood would mean recapturing the seigneurial manor of Michel's and Lia's father. The manor has been lost, taken over by someone else and thus their childhood is lost in a

---

<sup>1</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 78.

<sup>2</sup>Hébert, Les Chambres de bois, p. 119.

dream. This world is theirs alone, as Michel expressly states, "Le monde de l'enfance de l'infini loisir et de l'angoisse sauvage est à nous deux seuls."<sup>3</sup> Knowing that she is not part of the dreamworld of her husband and his sister, Catherine removes herself from its presence. Her release is finalized when she returns the wedding band to Michel, the gesture sealed with the words from a poem: "Une toute petite bague pour le songe."<sup>4</sup>

François tries to identify a childhood he never had, Michel tries to recapture a childhood he once had and Agnès (Le Temps sauvage) tries to create a pure, unadulterated childhood for her children. She wishes to lose them and herself in "une longue enfance sauvage et pure."<sup>5</sup>

The intimations of lost childhood are illustrated by the expressionless face of Emilie ("La Robe corail") on which neither youth nor maturity are reflected;<sup>6</sup> by Catherine, la Puce ("Le Printemps de Catherine") identified as "enfant trouvée;"<sup>7</sup> by Stéphanie de Bichette ("La Maison de l'esplanade") who went directly from the apparel of baby clothes to that of old age.<sup>8</sup> In each instance of lost childhood, these individuals are estranged from the continual experience of living.

Disengagement from the present is frequently projected by reflections and dreams which revolve around a unique past event. Through dreams

---

<sup>3</sup>Hébert, Les Chambres de bois, p. 120.

<sup>4</sup>Hébert, Les Chambres de bois, p. 190.

<sup>5</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, pp. 67-8.

<sup>7</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 94.

<sup>8</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, pp. 105-6

and reflections, the private, interior world allows the individual characters to separate themselves either from the confrontation of living or from a sterile existence.

In Grazia Merler's discussion of the place of dreams and reverie in the works of Anne Hébert, he says that the character unmask himself by recreating an inflexible, intimate reality, often hidden.<sup>9</sup> This intimate reality he later refers to as an "irréalité;" he states:

Le rêve et la rêverie, dans leurs différentes formes souvent se confondent et se fusionnent dans un univers qui tient davantage à la rêverie qu'au rêve. Dans cet univers d'irréalité matérielle et de surréalité physique, il y a différents niveaux de conscience.<sup>10</sup>

The movement from the external world to the internal is clearly seen through the reconstruction of the past of Elisabeth d'Aulnières (Kamouraska). The novel begins in the external world where Elisabeth is seated next to the death bed of her present husband, and it is at that place that the story ends. However, the entire life of Elisabeth is revealed through the inner world of her own monologue, reflection and dreaming. Her family, her adolescence, her first marriage, her children, her love affair, the murder of her first husband, and the trial are all disclosed through the mind of Elisabeth. The magnetism of the past draws her back to the crime of passion, the murder of Antoine, this violent past event which recaptures her time and time again.

Le temps retrouvé s'ouvre les veines. Ma folle jeunesse s'ajuste sur mes os. Mes pas dans les siens. Comme on

---

<sup>9</sup>Grazia Merler, "La Réalité dans la prose d'Anne Hébert," Ecrits du Canada français 33 (1971): 47.

<sup>10</sup>Merler, p. 49.



pose ses pieds dans ses propres pistes sur la grève mouillée. Le meurtre et la mort retraversés. Le fond du désespoir touché.<sup>11</sup>

Nightmarish dreams of fear, hatred and death--interlaced with ardent recollections of passion and love--are the ties which attach Elisabeth to the past, thus forcing an estrangement from the present. "Mais je suis forcée (dans tout mon être) à l'attention la plus stricte. Rien ne doit plus m'échapper. La vraie vie qui est sous le passé."<sup>12</sup>

The full potential of the magnetism of images, reflections, and recollections of the past gradually dominates the life of Sister Julie (Les Enfants du sabbat). Her religious vocation is interrupted by the call of the strange, obscure forces of her past and it is her past which eventually possesses her. "Elle en éprouve une impression d'abandon très grande. Dans une cabane, perdue dans la montagne, on a faim d'elle, plus que Dieu n'eut jamais faim de son âme."<sup>13</sup>

Invisible spirits and phantoms from the world of imagination seem to roam the convent, penetrating the lives of the convent sisters. The mysterious, unknown past of Sister Julie asserts its influence over the entire convent community, even the authority of the Mother Superior is threatened. The Mother Superior's private, repressed fear of the unknown surfaces from her past.

La supérieure des dames du Précieux-Sang vient de retrouver intacte la plus vieille terreur de son enfance lointaine: la certitude quasi absolue que le diable se trouve caché sous son lit et que, d'un moment à l'autre, il va la tirer par les pieds pour la dévorer.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 115.

<sup>12</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 104.

<sup>13</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, p. 61.

Isolated from the rest of the convent, Julie's communion with her past becomes even stronger, her absence even more profound.

Me voici au fond d'un puits. J'ai de quoi vivre et rêver....J'ai tout mon temps. Le lieu profond des rêves....L'au-delà est habité par des fantômes et des apparitions. L'immortalité de l'âme n'a pas d'autre origine.<sup>15</sup>

The division of the past and the present is less clear in Les Enfants du sabbat. The past and present seem to merge into a crucial time period. This merging, K. Mezei points out, "gives us a picture of the cause, the nature, and the necessity of the possession of Julie. It also attempts to diminish the division between past and present, demonic and godly, dream and reality."<sup>16</sup>

This merging of time is crucial, for if in the process of merging, the duality is improperly balanced or if there is a complete loss of the phenomenon of duality, the estrangement lapses into total alienation. Parallel to this is the distinctive functioning of the mind through its conscious, preconscious features. The intraaction of these two features provides for a healthy state. If, however, the past-dream world (preconscious) merges into present-reality (conscious), becoming one entity, without distinction, the alienation becomes absolute. This merging is especially evident in Les Enfants du sabbat when Sister Julie's dream-world of the past merges with the reality of her present convent life. She ultimately alienates herself from both. Michel, in Les Chambres de bois, also alienates himself from reality by allowing his past to completely dominate his life.

---

<sup>15</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, p. 93.

<sup>16</sup>Kathy Mezei, "Commands and Desires." p. 81.

Reflection and dreaming are also responsible for drawing Augustin ("Un Grand mariage") and Stella ("La Mort de Stella") back to their unforgettable pasts. The mention of an Indian woman and a date on a piece of paper are enough to draw Augustin back to his days spent in the Far North. He tries to control the images and sensations which begin to surface from deep within him, but their associations are too vibrant and persistent. He attempts to ignore "tout ce monde insaisissable, incohérent, inutile, délétère qui dormait en lui."<sup>17</sup> This past is not to be easily forgotten.

Besides his recollections of his past in the Far North, the pain of Augustin's childhood is renewed as his carriage takes him into the Lower Town of Quebec.

Augustin sentait un attendrissement sans borne s'emparer de lui, comme, si une veine douloureuse se rompait, livrant passage à toute une enfance abîmée. 'Ma maudite enfance me remonte à la gorge', se dit-il avec colère.<sup>18</sup>

Plagued by these images and thoughts of his past, Augustin feels the weight of their presence threatening his present life which is financially and socially secure. There is too much at stake for him to risk a scandal through a disclosure of his past and in this way the past he tries to repress comes back to haunt him.

Stella begs her daughter, "Empêche-moi de dormir. Je fais des rêves si effrayants,"<sup>19</sup> ("La Mort de Stella"). Stella is assailed by nightmares of the unforgettable fire which became the obsession of

---

<sup>17</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 144.

<sup>18</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 151.

<sup>19</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 187.

Etienne's life. Unable to release herself from this past imposed on her by her husband, her frail body suffers from the images of the scorching flames, and she feels an unquenchable thirst.

The opening of this past wound is painful, but as her memories come to life through her reflections and her disquieting dreams, Stella acknowledges the role of time: "Le temps n'est pas si étanche qu'il se rompt comme un sablier?"<sup>20</sup> The present no longer has any meaning for Stella; her alliance is with the past.

Two of Anne Hébert's plays, Le Temps sauvage and La Mercière Assassinée concern women who experienced the injustice of unforgivable past experiences. Humiliated and devastated by these experiences, these women carry the burdens of their past into the present.

Agnès (Le Temps sauvage) is tormented by the memory of her younger sister, Nathalie, whom she raised and cared for after the death of their mother. As a young woman, Nathalie, for her own amusement, seduced Agnès' fiancé. This painful betrayal by her sister is instrumental in nurturing the estranged family environment that Agnès eventually established. "Je n'ai toujours eu qu'une idée en tête: cette grande maison perdue à la campagne que je rêvais d'acheter et de remplir d'enfants sauvages et purs."<sup>21</sup>

Withdrawing from the corrupted and polluted atmosphere of the city responsible for tainting her sister, Agnès sets up the boundaries of her territory in her attempt to raise her children in a pure and undefiled state.

---

<sup>20</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 188.

<sup>21</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, p. 72.

Isabelle, Nathalie's daughter, comes to live with Agnès' family after the death of her mother. Her presence once again arouses the painful memories of Agnès' past--memories accentuated by the remarks of her husband: "Tu vois bien que le passé est proche, sensible et déchirant. La memoire est ouverte comme un coffre qui contiendrait des fantômes."<sup>22</sup> The protective shell which Agnès has tried to fabricate for herself and her family is invaded by the unforgettable past.

Subjected to malicious ridicule and humiliation by four young people, Adelaïde Menthe (La Mercière assassinée) carries this unforgivable event of her past into her adult life. The fervent attachment to this one past experience is responsible for the systematic, premeditated murders of revenge carried out by Adelaïde. The ultimate murder of Adelaïde herself becomes a real mystery since her secret was so carefully guarded and her life as a recluse so meticulously maintained.

In this analysis of the first aspect of the temporal setting, the preoccupation with the past initiates the estrangement from reality. The bonds which are formed with past events or the attachments to lost childhoods rupture any ties to the present. The association to the past is an association with distance and remoteness--seeds of estrangement.

An investigation of the second aspect of the temporal setting, the discipline to regulated time, will reveal the mechanical performances by certain individual characters who live out their lives but are totally estranged from the realities of others. Their motivation for living

---

<sup>22</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, p. 72.

is dictated by strict adherence to specific traditions, ceremonies, rites or duties. These individuals are like mechanical toys which, once they are wound up, are controlled by their repetitious actions.

The best illustration of one of these lifeless, mechanical creatures is Stéphanie de Bichette ("La Maison de l'esplanade"). Stéphanie maintains a strict observance of her ceremony of tradition--her whole life regulated by routine.

Une immuable routine soutenait et sustentait la vieillesse et innocente personne. La moindre fissure à cette extraordinaire construction, le moindre changement à cette discipline établie auraient suffi à rendre malade mademoiselle de Bichette.<sup>23</sup>

The continual and unchangeable routine firmly rooted in the life of Stéphanie has permitted her to carry out with precision the ceremony of tradition; no thinking and no comprehension are necessary. This mechanized existence of Stéphanie has become so unreal that she seems to be participating in a world of "des êtres surnaturels,"<sup>24</sup> her own appearance is "extra-terrestre."<sup>25</sup>

Le programme de la journée fonctionnait comme le mécanisme d'une bonne horloge suisse, et les rouages intérieurs de mademoiselle de Bichette correspondaient exactement à ce programme.<sup>26</sup>

The sterility of this lifestyle is stimulated only by the endless crocheting--the passage of time crocheted into each little doily that

---

<sup>23</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 106.

<sup>24</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 121.

<sup>25</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 121.

<sup>26</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 118.

falls from Stephanie's fingertips. "Stephanie connaissait tous les secrets de ce travail et cette science lui suffisait."<sup>27</sup>

Géraldine, Stéphanie's housekeeper, is very careful not to disrupt the order and the discipline of the ceremony. A disruption in the established order would cause a breakdown in the mechanism, the fragile contacts between her two realities--carriage rides and crocheting--would vanish. If Géraldine shows the slightest hesitation of indecision about the daily weather report, Stéphanie becomes most distraught. The life of Mademoiselle de Bichette must revolve around certainty, her performance must continue on cue.

The activities, of knitting, crocheting and embroidering are used in many of Anne Hébert's works to illustrate the unconscious passage of time in the lives of women. This activity, often performed automatically, initiates an almost trance-like or hypnotic state. Simply stated, this is the state of absence, one of the contributing causes of estrangement.

Knitting is Emilie's livelihood ("La Robe corail") but since it is the only thing she knows how to do, she finds it to be her only reason for living. To deprive her of her knitting would be to deprive Emilie of her reason to live. "Le jour s'asservit à son ouvrage. On dirait qu'elle le tricote en même temps que sa laine."<sup>28</sup> Emilie never looks back to wonder about the days she has already knit away, nor does she look forward. Knitting is a part of her being and to separate herself from her knitting would be to open herself to vulnerability.

---

<sup>27</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 114.

<sup>28</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 68.

For Catherine (Les Chambres de bois) her needlework is an outward demonstration of her captive life with Michel. The hours of silence are intricately worked into Catherine's embroidery, the colored threads bursting out into their vivid patterns and designs, thus demonstrating the only release Catherine has from her captive life with Michel.

D'autres fois, l'aiguille n'en finissait pas de tirer les fils de l'enfance retrouvée qu' elle repiquait aussitôt en petite points vifs et réguliers, de quoi parer l'immobilité du jour.<sup>29</sup>

The plotting of Antoine's murder (Kamouraska) is indelibly embroidered into the handwork of Elisabeth. As the pattern of the red flower takes shape, the murder of Antoine is simultaneously and methodically planned out with each stitch.<sup>30</sup> Elisabeth's preoccupation with this piece of handwork allows her to engage in a most proper activity approved by her aunts, while at the same time she is able to fabricate other violent designs.

Adélaïde ma soeur, vous avez vu comme la Petite Elisabeth met du rouge sur son métier? Ne trouvez-vous pas cela choquant? Ne peut-elle pas s'en tenir au modèle? Des teintes douces et passés....<sup>31</sup>

Elisabeth's handwork allows her to be both present and absent, to separate herself into two different people.

A final reference to the activity of knitting is made in order to identify the characteristic of resignation. Agnès' oldest daughter, Hélène, (Le Temps sauvage) has resigned herself to the lifestyle her mother has established. Unlike her brother, Sébastien, and her sister,

---

<sup>29</sup>Hébert, Les Chambres de bois, p. 84.

<sup>30</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 42.

<sup>31</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 43.



Lucie, H  l  ne does not question their mother's design, nor does she resist it. Lucie's pastime of reading and S  bastien's pastime of hunting, fishing, and trapping illustrate their silent resistance and rebellion to what Agnes has established. H  l  ne's pastime, on the other hand, is knitting and sewing, her silent resignation. S  bastien reproaches his sister for her complacency, "Et toi, H  l  ne, douce soeur, a  n  e, laisse un peu ta couture et fais un voeu."<sup>32</sup> Later, when Lucie asks her sister what she has to complain about H  l  ne replies, "Me plaindre, moi? Et de quoi veux-tu que je me plaigne? De rien, de rien, je t'assure. La vie est mal faite, c'est tout. Qu'y pouvons-nous faire?"<sup>33</sup> H  l  ne responds to her own question by using some money S  bastien has given her to buy more yarn and some new knitting needles.

Time which is regulated and delegated, as was previously mentioned in reference to "La Maison de l'esplanade", is also described in "Le Torrent." Claudine's maintenance of her farm and the control of her son are carried out with rigid precision. The whole operation takes on a mechanical nature similar to St  phanie de Bichette's lifestyle. However, rather than the strict adherence to the ceremony of tradition which St  phanie performs, Claudine's strict adherence is to self-mastery and control through disciplined duty. "Il faut se dompter jusqu'aux os....Tu m'entends Fran  ois? Je te dompterai bien, moi...."<sup>34</sup>

As with St  phanie, the order which has been established must not be interrupted, it must not break down. Claudine's accounts and records

---

<sup>32</sup>H  bert, Le Temps sauvage, th  atre, p. 20.

<sup>33</sup>H  bert, Le Temps sauvage, th  atre, p. 49.

<sup>34</sup>H  bert, Le Torrent, p. 9.

are accurate, her daily schedule precise, everything is accounted and controlled. Monday is the wash day, if it rains Claudine has an alternative plan, "battre François."<sup>35</sup> These repetitious, monotonous days stretch themselves out from sunrise to sunset with no possibility of interference by leisure or repose.

Along with Stéphanie and Claudine, these two mechanized creatures dedicated to their rituals, mention should be made of Adélaïde Menthe (La Mercière assassinée). This old recluse has maintained such a well-established routine, "elle tenait boutique du matin au soir, ouvrait toujours à la même heure, fermait à la même heure....,"<sup>36</sup> that no one suspects that this order could be disrupted in any way. However, behind the facade of her established ritual, Adélaïde carries out her sinister program of vengeance.

To conclude this analysis of the second aspect of the temporal setting, the discipline to regulated time, the question of consequence will be addressed. What would happen if this regulated time were disrupted, if there were interference with the established order, if the mechanism were to break down? The disruption or interference is enough to cause Stéphanie de Bichette to become ill and for Claudine, it would mean committing a transgression against her own established order.

This question of consequence is most clearly shown in the short story, "Le Printemps de Catherine." The villagers, who have always

---

<sup>35</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 10.

<sup>36</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, p. 92.

observed very faithfully the traditional rituals of spring--ploughing, sowing, planting--see these rites disrupted and replaced by a season of pillaging. They desperately try not to acknowledge the annihilation of their routine, their established orderly lives. Their hands, accustomed to working in the fields or to spring housecleaning, now rest idle;

Il y en a parmi nous qui ferment les yeux, qui s'obstinent à ne pas croire à autre chose qu'aux gestes de la vie quotidienne, comme si ces pauvres gestes gardaient encore quelque pouvoir pour conjurer l'ordre nouveau qui s'avance. On s'entête à retenir de force ce qui est révolu.<sup>37</sup>

The ties to their routine, to their past, to their order have been severed. Their distraught lives are now subjected to the burdens of freedom and how to relate to it. Most assuredly, the response to their dilemma is their demonstration of fear of the unknown--a state of estrangement from living.

The third and final aspect of the temporal setting is what I have called suspended time--the strict divisions of past, present, and future eliminated. This suspended time is beyond the control of the individual characters, as Grazia Merler defines it in his article, "La Réalité dans la prose d'Anne Hébert;" "Ils restent immobiles, solitaires, figés dans le temps, dans une sorte de dimension épique."<sup>38</sup> This suspended time is time which flows together, a time in limbo which has no limits, no existence, and no essence. This merging of time was discussed earlier in reference to Les Enfants du sabbat.

Lost childhood, attachments to the past through memories, dreams, and reflections, repetitious routines and ceremonies are the beginning

---

<sup>37</sup> Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 85.

<sup>38</sup> Merler, p. 49.

stages of this amorphous period of time. They are contributing time features which, if pushed to the extreme, result in suspension of time.

After Claudine's death, François falls victim to this suspended time. He has no point of contact and no control over it, thus he is carried away by it. "Je n'ai pas de point de repère. Aucune horloge ne marque mes heures. Aucun calendrier ne compte mes années. Je suis dissous dans le temps."<sup>39</sup>

Suspended time is further defined in "La Robe corail" as a time which can vanish as quickly as it appears, "comme des vapeurs blanches que perce le soleil."<sup>40</sup> Emilie's brief and intimate relationship with Gabriel is reflected in fleeting, intangible, sensations of time:

Les instants ont des couleurs, des parfums, des  
touchers, des lumières, mais ils n'ont pas de contour,  
ils sont sans limite, flottants comme des brumes....  
Instants sans contour qu'on croyait tenir.<sup>41</sup>

The most articulate definition of this suspended time is expressed in Le Temps sauvage through the words of Agnès:

La plus grande réussite de ce monde, ce serait de  
demeurer parfaitement secret à tous et à soi-même.  
Plus de question, plus de réponse, une longue saison,  
sans âge, ni raison, ni responsabilité, une espèce  
de temps sauvage, hors du temps et de la conscience.<sup>42</sup>

This "temps sauvage" is out of reach for Agnès despite her efforts to seize it. "Le temps sauvage" is not to be controlled, it is completely untamed and alien. Agnès wishes to capture "le temps sauvage," Emilie

---

<sup>39</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 34.

<sup>40</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 76.

<sup>41</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, pp. 76-7.

<sup>42</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, pp. 48-9.

has sensed its presence, Sister Julie has experienced its force, but only François has known its wild, uncontained spirit.

The analysis of the arrangement of the temporal setting in the works of Anne Hébert has been through an examination of its three components: the attachment to the past, the discipline to a regulated time, and the recognition of a suspended time. Preoccupation is the key word which links these components of the temporal setting to estrangement. The preoccupation with a lost childhood, the preoccupation with the past through memories, dreams, and reflections, and the preoccupation with a performance of ceremony, rite or duty; all of these serve to estrange the individual characters from reality. Reality withdrawn behind the facades of inflexible past experiences or rigid, monotonous ceremonies becomes an irreality. If this irreality collapses and is penetrated by suspended time; (Les Enfants du sabbat, "Le Printemps de Catherine", "Le Torrent"), the final thrust of estrangement is alienation from life.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ESTRANGEMENT WITHIN THE SOCIAL SETTING

The background for the works of Anne Hébert spans approximately one century. The social setting for Kamouraska is that of 1839 and Les Enfants du sabbat is set in the social milieu of 1944 Quebec. As a result of the influence from the spatio-temporal setting, the social setting in Anne Hébert's works is most unique. Because of French-Canada's geographical position with its vast areas of isolation and remoteness, the passage of time is more aligned to the past than it is to the present and even less to the future. Due to language differences, the privateness of family life and the dominance of Roman Catholic traditions, there was a lack of assimilation of the French-Canadians into the mainstream of activity and exchange with the other Canadian provinces. The traditional social climate of French-Canada remained virtually unchanged for many years.

Historically speaking, the basic structure of the French-Canadian society was a carry-over of the French social system under the Old Regime in France. Although this social system was much less elaborate and not as rigidly divided as the one in France, nevertheless, it was organized around the social classes of the "seigneur", the clergy, and the "habitant." With the weakening of the seigneurial system in French-Canada, the Roman Catholic clergy assumed more and more control over the French-Canadian culture, not only spiritually, but educationally

and socially as well. The chapter on French-Canada in the book, La Francophonie, gives a resumé of this situation:

L'institution de base restait, hier encore, la paroisse. Le prestige du curé, dans les campagnes, tenait à la fois à son sacerdoce, à son instruction par rapport au milieu villageois, à la nature paternelle ou paternaliste de son autorité.<sup>1</sup>

The fidelity to the land was reflected in its rural population; it did not start to decline until the industrialization and urbanization movements during the years of the two World Wars. According to the statistics from Collier's Encyclopedia; in 1871 the population of the province was 77.18 percent rural: in 1961 74.4 percent urban.<sup>2</sup>

This rural society had as its center the patriarchal family unit. With the father as the head of the household, the religious bond was further strengthened by the conformity to the theocratic tradition of God, the Father, as head of His Church. In Henry Cohen's discussion of the male-female roles in this traditional social climate, he states that the elements of the woman's role were passive and non-rational while man--as the Apollonian figure--furnished the energy, the intelligence and the will of the nation.<sup>3</sup> This traditional social system is frequently reversed in the works of Anne Hébert.

In this chapter the theme of estrangement will be examined in the light of this traditional social setting. The first part of this

---

<sup>1</sup>Auguste Viatte, La Francophonie (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1969), p. 50.

<sup>2</sup>Collier's Encyclopedia, 1966, s.v. "Quebec," by W. Menzies Whitelaw, John Irwin Cooper and Jean Bruchési.

<sup>3</sup>Henry Cohen, "Le Rôle du mythe dans Kamouraska," Présence Francophone 12 (1976): 106.

chapter will concern certain individual characters and how they became estranged from this traditional social milieu, both rural and urban. The second part of this chapter will concern the estrangement of the traditional social structure as a whole, as seen through family disunity and discord and through the inefficacy and disintegration of the religious community.

Physical defects, unusual or abnormal behavior, and certain offenses, which in the eyes of the traditional society will neither be tolerated nor accepted, are the elements which promote the estrangement of certain individuals. The result of these individuals becoming separated from society in one way or another identifies them as outsiders, outcasts, or the exiled. Their emotional reaction to their situation is demonstrated in a variety of ways: anger, resignation, frustration, silence, hostility.

In order to analyze the social estrangement of some of the major characters, I have divided them into three categories: outsiders, outcasts, and the exiled. Each of these groups will be defined and discussed separately in the first part of this chapter.

The outsiders are those individuals who are on the fringes of society. They may participate in some way in the activity of the society, but because of physical imperfections or because of unusual or anomalous behavior, they have become estranged from the complete social community. The outsider is defined then as "not belonging". Two young girls, Emilie and Catherine; two old maids, Stéphanie de Bichette and Adélaïde Menthe; and a Métis Indian, Délia, belong to this group of the outsider.

Emilie's social setting is her work situation in Madame Grospou's garment shop. She remains separate from the ten other girls who are also



employed in the shop and share chatter about lipstick, silk stockings, short dresses and infatuations: "A part celles-là, il y a la petite Emilie dont la présence tenue et silencieuse ne se remarque même pas."<sup>4</sup> Her expressionless face and empty eyes give no clue as to who she is, from where she came, or what her life had been. Apart and outside the group, Emilie's only communication is through the common, continual clicking sound of her knitting needles.

Madame Grospou only sees Emilie as a tool who turns out exceptional work. She openly acknowledges this later when she says to Emilie, "Tricôtez! Vous êtes au monde pour cela!"<sup>5</sup>

The girls in the shop are curiously astonished when they learn of Emilie's relationship with Gabriel. Emilie's weak defenses are no match for their pursuing questions, their outbursts of laughter and their cutting remarks. The girls chide her saying: "Depuis le temps qu'on te croyait nitouche, t'en es une belle tout de même."<sup>6</sup>

The nickname "la Puce," given to Catherine by those who frequent the tavern where she is a servant, immediately sets her apart as an outsider. ("Le Printemps de Catherine") As a servant girl she is subjected to the usual debasement, but she must also endure the additional ridicule caused by her physical deformity: ("Sers-nous, avorton."<sup>7</sup>; "sale petite bête", 'insecte', 'enfant trouvée'....., 'microbe'.....tête

---

<sup>4</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 67.

<sup>5</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 78.

<sup>6</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 78.

<sup>7</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 91.

et les yeux du poisson'")<sup>8</sup> as well as the constant degrading reminder that she is "une fille du vice."<sup>9</sup>

Stripped of its self-respect and self-confidence, Catherine's deformed body becomes even more bent under the daily brunt of her servility, her fear and her fatigue. Catherine's repressed hostility bursts forth with the springtime liberation from her servitude. As the young novice from the convent is carried off as a part of the spoils of war, her screaming reminds Catherine of the mocking laughter of other women to which she had been subjected. Her reaction is, "Qu'une paye pour les autres! C'est justice!"<sup>10</sup>

The curious habits of Stéphanie de Bichette, her elaborately styled hairdo, the parasols she carries and the formidable house into which she retreats, mark the old maid as an outsider. The townspeople had even speculated that Stéphanie's house was haunted and their speculations are reinforced each time they witness her carriage rides: "L'étrange équipage qui tranchait, dans la lumière du matin, de toute son apparence fantômique!....une espèce de petite momie en robe cendre et lilas...."<sup>11</sup>

Stéphanie's only social contacts are with the same few visitors who are as old as she. They are offered sour dandelion wine, hard biscuits, and sparse and meaningless conversation. Their presence is barely acknowledged by Stéphanie, her interminable doily making is her communication.

---

<sup>8</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 94.

<sup>9</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 94.

<sup>10</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 99.

<sup>11</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, pp. 116-7.

The final character who belongs to this group of the outsider is Délia ("Un Grand mariage"). Her identification as the Métis Indian woman, as the "sauvagesse,"<sup>12</sup> is the initial mark against her which sets her apart. Délia's stubborn determination to assume her role as the wife of Augustin cannot be altered either by Augustin or the family priest. As an outsider she cannot belong to the high society within this alien city, but she is able to penetrate its barriers.

L'attitude d'Augustin, l'inattaquable réalité de son mariage avec Mademoiselle de Lachévrotière, le respect quasi superstitieux de Délia pour tout engagement consacré par l'Eglise ne lui laisserent bientôt pour seule défense que cette résolution désespérée qu'elle avait prise de ne point perdre Augustin de vue....<sup>13</sup>

This outsider is eventually taken into Augustin's household, fulfilling the dual role of personal maid to his legitimate wife and personal mistress to Augustin. By resigning herself to this marginal arrangement, Délia sees her role as an outsider beginning to take on the nuance of outcast.

A certain offense or scandal made public results in the rejection of certain individuals from the social community. These are the outcasts who have been discarded, their acts for the most part reprehensible. Their exclusion forces an existence of estrangement. The individuals whom I have placed in the category of the outcast are Charles de Bichette, Claudine Perrault, Stella and Etienne Gauvin and George Nelson.

---

<sup>12</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 143.

<sup>13</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 165-6.

The offense of Charles de Bichette ("La Maison de l'esplanade") is not one of the more serious offenses, but due to the public knowledge of his exclusion from his father's legacy, Charles is considered an outcast. Disgracing the family by marrying a seamstress from the Lower Town in Quebec, Charles has been denied any inheritance rights. His major obstacle is not Stéphanie, but rather her housekeeper, Géraldine.

Géraldine avait hérité de la colère du père contre le fils; et, fidèle à cette colère, comme à une promesse sacrée elle rappelait sans cesse à Charles quelle malédiction pesait sur lui.<sup>14</sup>

As far as Géraldine is concerned the role of Charles as an outcast is not enough. By locking the door to his former bedroom, Géraldine refuses to recognize the very existence of Charles and she thus considers him as a dead member of the family.

"Compter un prêtre parmi les siens c'était, pour une famille, une ascension."<sup>15</sup> This is the pretext by which Claudine Perrault ("Le Torrent") feels she can vindicate herself from her position as an outcast from the village. Her unwavering determination to mold her illegitimate son's life into that of a priest is the means by which Claudine will gain back her respect in this small French-Canadian town. This is her ultimate goal and all her efforts are dedicated to that goal, no matter how brutal or how harsh the tactics.

François, je retournerai au village, la tête haute.  
Tous s'inclineront devant moi. J'aurai vaincu!  
Vaincre!...Tu seras prêtre! Le respect! Le respect,  
quelle victoire sur eux tous!<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 122.

<sup>15</sup>Viatte, La Francophonie, p. 47.

<sup>16</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, pp. 17-18.

The ugliness of the world, its imperfections, and its injustices will meet the two defenses with which Claudine has armed herself; mastery over herself and her son in the role of a priest.

In a personal interview Anne Hébert was asked if Claudine was wishing to somehow replace the role of the priest through her son becoming a priest. Anne Hébert's reply was,

Non, elle voulait, surtout, en ayant un fils prêtre, se débarrasser de sa culpabilité, se rétablir socialement, avoir une place sociale importante. Alors un prêtre c'est important; pour elle qui avait été ravalée, humiliée, c'était comme une sorte de revanche d'avoir un fils prêtre; ça lui donnait un statut dans la société.<sup>17</sup>

Broken dishes, discarded furniture and worn out clothes are among the few possessions Etienne and Stella Gauvin have collected from others. These objects define the Gauvins' existence: broken, rejected, cast aside. Hindered by a limp, small in stature, Etienne was rejected from the military service. His personal moments of glory came from his account of the fire but too often his integrity was challenged. Eventually, he became an outcast from society, unable to keep a job, dragging his family from one place to the next.

Because of Etienne's and Stella's transient life of extreme poverty and their unashamed acceptance of their fate, the villagers become suspicious of them.

On chercha la raison cachée, la tare secrète, la cause profonde d'un aussi grand dénuement... On essaya d'éveiller la culpabilité chez eux. On s'efforça d'imaginer le péché originel dans l'âme de cet homme et cette femme.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup>Dubé, Emond, and Vandendorpe, "Anne Hébert Entrevue," p. 33.

<sup>18</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, pp. 199-200.

The village priest is asked by a prominent villager to assume the responsibility of learning the answer to the riddle. Before even questioning the couple, the priest deduces that the reason for their impoverished life is that their marriage was not sanctioned by the Church.<sup>19</sup> The proof of the marriage does exist, but once again Etienne's instinctive defense to protect his respectability causes him to retreat to the fire. He tells the priest the marriage certificate was lost in the fire. Etienne's original sin, his original transgression against the community, against his wife and family, against himself is the evil of the fire out of control.

The most serious of all the offenses committed is that of murder. The conspiracy to commit murder is methodically planned by Elisabeth, her maid Aurélie and George Nelson (Kamouraska). When Aurélie's attempts to poison Antoine fail, the task of Antoine's murder falls to Dr. Nelson. Already marked as an outsider, Dr. Nelson's murder of Antoine seals his fate as an outcast.

Even as children sent off to Canada by their parents, George Nelson, his brother and his sister became outcasts. Their father, a staunch loyalist, insisted that this would be the only way for his children to escape the polluted atmosphere resulting from the American independence.<sup>20</sup>

The initiation into a foreign culture, language, and religion is a painful one. As a schoolboy, George is set apart from his classmates by their malicious taunting, "Tous les protestants sont des damnés,

---

<sup>19</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 200.

<sup>20</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 128.

sont des damnés!"<sup>21</sup> George's sister becomes a nun, his brother a priest and George a doctor--all respected positions, safe positions for them in this alien country.

Despite his knowledge of French, his conversion to Catholicism, his dedicated work as a doctor, George Nelson is still under the cautious scrutiny of the superstitious rural French-Canadian community which he serves. Is one to trust a foreigner with no family ties, originally a Protestant, one who lives alone in a small cabin out on the deserted landscape?

Vois combattez le mal, la maladie et les sorcières,  
avec un passion égale. D'où vient donc, qu'en dépit de  
votre bonté, on ne vous aime guère dans la région?  
On vous craint, docteur Nelson.<sup>22</sup>

This fear of Dr. Nelson goes much deeper than his protestantism or his language. There is an intuitive fear that Dr. Nelson is harboring something hidden deep within him. Fear of the unknown and fear of the outsider nourish suspicions about Dr. Nelson.

Hidden away within Dr. Nelson's memory is his painful dispossession by his father. This earlier dispossession becomes a link to his future one, sealed by his murder of Antoine Tassy. George Nelson is an outcast from his adopted country and from his own country. "Etranger partout à jamais."<sup>23</sup> Twice an outcast, he now lives in the shadow of the exiled.

Those who are exiled are those who have become completely alienated from the traditional social community. This alienation is the result

---

<sup>21</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 125.

<sup>22</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 128.

<sup>23</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 248.

of either a forced or voluntary banishment. Divorced from the traditional social milieu, the exiled develop their own lifestyles. The individual characters whom I have identified as the exiled are François, Michel and Lia, and Adélarde and Philomène. Of these, François is the only one who is in a forced exile, the others chose to exile themselves from the established social community.

"Nous étions toujours seuls."<sup>24</sup> These words of François reflect the exile that he has always known. This exile follows him even into his years at school, the iron hand of Claudine still controlling him. Instead of allowing him to participate with the other boys in their recreation periods, Claudine arranges for François to spend this time working for a farmer. Claudine has done her work well in subjugating François, for even if he were allowed to participate, his exile has been so complete that he would not know how to relate to the others. He comments: "Je ne savais ni jouer ni rire et je me sentais de trop."<sup>25</sup>

This exile of loneliness and emptiness is intensified in the social setting of the school as François is made even more painfully aware of his state of existence. He is incapable of relating to anyone and faithful to Claudine's instruction, he is always on his guard for any humane gesture.

L'air sauvage et renfermé, j'observais mes camarades.  
Je repoussais leurs avances timides ou railleuses.  
Bientôt le vide se fit autour du nouvel élève.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 10.

<sup>25</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 21.

<sup>26</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 20.



Dedication to his studies, excellent grades, prizes awarded to him, are not sufficient to fill the gaping hole of his exile: "Je ne cessais pas d'être un étranger."<sup>27</sup>

François' refusal to continue the plan laid out for him by his mother costs him the loss of his hearing. His exile is now complete, a banishment to a world without sound. François allows his body and spirit to become totally possessed by nature. His life is lived and expressed through the convulsive rage of the torrent and the uncompromising defiance of the horse Perceval that tramples his mother to death.

After Claudine's death, a new adjustment must be made in his life of exile, the adjustment to freedom. The weight of his freedom is too much for François to bear, he had been subjugated and subservient too long. "Je ne serai jamais un homme libre. J'ai voulu m'affranchir trop tard."<sup>28</sup> His freedom is choked by the ever-present iron hand of Claudine, even after her death.

Michel and Lia (Les Chambres de bois) choose their exile and design it to fit their needs--the need to avoid confrontation with life, the need to avoid its hardships and grief. They cling to each other in this endeavor, their exile supported by their pact of fidelity as children.

Michel's disenchantment with Catherine and his enchantment with his sister draw him into his exiled world. Rejected by her lover who possessed her and who now possess the seigneurial manor, formerly owned by the family of Michel and Lia, Lia is also drawn into the world of the

---

<sup>27</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 22.

<sup>28</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 34.

exiled. Michel invites Lia to join him in tracing back their steps to their childhood in order to renew their pact. This pact represents their safe and sound time together which they wish to reconstruct.

Kathy Mezei refers to this relationship of Michel and Lia in her article, "Anne Hébert, A Pattern Repeated:"

By attempting to make time stand still, by further and further narrowing their space of habitation, Michel and Lia hope to avoid pain by avoiding experience.<sup>29</sup>

Lia is not as faithful to the exiled world as Michel. She goes off on her escapades from time to time, only to return to Michel's apartment encampment of books, dirty glasses and overflowing ashtrays. Michel feels assured that Lia will never desert him completely, their childhood pact is too strong. To reassure himself he says to Catherine, "Un jour, je le crois, elle redeviendra pure comme ses os. Nous referons le pacte d'enfance et nul n'aura accès jusqu'à nous."<sup>30</sup> Not only do Michel and Lia live in exile; it is an exile exclusively their own.

Anne Hébert's poem, "Vie de Château" parallels very well the exiled dream world of Michel and Lia. This world is their lost château, stripped of all its furnishings except for the mirrors reflecting their images. Their reflections captivate each other, aware that death is ever present. Michel and Lia's incestuous love in an exile of living-death is intimated in the entrapment of their reflected images, their love a slow, bitter shiver.

---

<sup>29</sup>Kathy Mezei, "Anne Hébert: A Pattern Repeated," Canadian Literature 72 (1977): 35.

<sup>30</sup>Hébert, Les Chambres de bois, p. 189.

C'est un chateau d'ancêtres  
 Sans table ni feu  
 Ni poussière ni tapis

L'enchantement pervers de ces lieux  
 Est tout dans ses miroirs polis.

La seule occupation possible ici  
 Consiste à se mirer jour et nuit.

Jette ton image aux fontaines dures  
 Ta plus dure image sans ombre ni couleur.

Vois, ces glaces sont profondes  
 Comme des armoires  
 Toujours quelque mort y habite sous le tain  
 Et couvre aussitôt ton reflet  
 Se colle à toi comme une algue

S'ajuste à toi, mince et nu,  
 Et simule l'amour en un lent frisson amer.<sup>31</sup>

"L'envers du monde" has become a voluntary exile for Adélard et Philomène. They have willingly exiled themselves from the established social community in order to promote their own religious and social system. Their black sabbath celebrations are hosted by the high priest and priestess of demonology and sorcery. The religion they profess is one of total release, the deliverance of the captive spirit.<sup>32</sup>

Drugs, illegal alcohol, animal sacrifices, and three day orgies are the means by which the captive spirit is released. The best participants are those who seek a new world which is more enticing and exciting than the world of misery and death in which they live.<sup>33</sup>

Les meilleurs convives, les plus avides de fête,  
 gens de désir et de privation, ayant croupi

---

<sup>31</sup>Hébert, Poèmes, p. 54.

<sup>32</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, p. 38.

<sup>33</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, p. 39.

dans l'humiliation du chômage, viennent de la ville.<sup>34</sup>

The ultimate ceremony is the initiation into incest. Julie completes her initiation with her father, Adélard, however, Joseph fails the initiation of incest with his mother and Philomène's power begins to diminish. She blames the village below, the source of corruption, for her son's betrayal. It is now Julie's duty to continue what her parents have established and her goal is to find Joseph and establish the continuation of the "l'envers du monde".

The full encounter of the spirit and the flesh is unleashed in Les Enfants du sabbat. The question becomes, is the spirit released through the flesh or is the flesh released through the spirit? Many of the villagers come to the mountain of "B" motivated by their need to experience the liberation of their spirit through the flesh. Naked, their clothes of confinement (belts, ties, corsets, brassieres, shoes) are heaped in a pile as the villagers come to participate in the activities of the flesh--giving release to their spirits. As Adélard says, "La plupart des genses [sic.] ont un besoin effrayant de fete!"<sup>35</sup>

Joseph leaves the mountain of "B" seeking refuge in the village as well as release from the only world he has known, the world of the flesh. His life of the flesh must be exorcised by that of the spirit. Joseph becomes enraptured with the beauty of the religious ceremonies as he allows himself to participate in the world of genuflexions, signs of the cross, rosaries, Latin, Gregorian chants. "Il se promet d'être du

---

<sup>34</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, p. 35.

<sup>35</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, p. 34.

côté des bons et jure d'entraîner sa soeur avec lui sur la route étroite."<sup>36</sup>

Joseph promises to follow the straight and narrow, his sister at his side. Julie promises Adélard to continue the inverse world, aided by Joseph. The encounter of the brother and sister is the symbolic encounter of the spirit and the flesh.

The final question is, which one, the world of the flesh or the world of the spirit, is in exile? Those who are truly exiled can best be defined by the definition Agnès (Le Temps sauvage) gives of herself and her voluntary exile.

Depuis si longtemps j'ai choisi d'être confondue au mystère de ce monde. J'ai préféré demeurer ignorante et noire, enfouie dans ma grande nuit maternelle.<sup>37</sup>

The outsiders, the outcasts, the exiled have keenly experienced the callous and gnawing estrangement from the traditional social community through disorientation, disinheritance and dispossession. The traditional social organization attempts to insulate itself from those who do not conform. In these attempts to insulate, the sterile social system itself becomes estranged. Drawing back into its shell, evading the mystery of the world, it buries itself in the darkness of ignorance.

In the second part of this chapter I will examine the role of the traditional social community and how the estrangement has manifested itself from within. The definition of the traditional French-Canadian social system was given in the beginning of this chapter. In Anne Hébert's works the estrangement in this social setting is seen in the

---

<sup>36</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, p. 152.

<sup>37</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, p. 70.

weakening and disintegration of the seigneurial class, the inefficacy of the Church and the disunity in the family structure.

The land-holding nobility, the seigneurial class, was incapable of maintaining any kind of firm authority and thus the seigneurial system eventually came to an end. This seigneurial class is referred to in two of Anne Hébert's novels, Kamouraska and Les Chambres de bois and in the short story "Un Grand mariage."

"Très bon parti. Vieille famille. Deux cent cinquante arpents de terre et de bois."<sup>38</sup> These are the only qualifications Elisabeth's three aunts and her mother find necessary in order to approve the marriage of Elisabeth to Antoine Tassy, squire at Kamouraska. For Antoine, his marriage is only a passing fancy, an arrangement of convenience which does not alter his pattern of living in any way. Women are used and abused by him, his wild, impulsive affairs continuing even after his marriage. Antoine's crude manners, his unpredictable depressive states of morbidity alternating with sudden fits of anger, his drinking and carousing, bring Elisabeth to the full reality of the kind of man she is married to. Elisabeth's mother-in-law advises her to ignore Antoine's behavior and abuse, resign herself to life as it is at the Kamouraska manor. Happiness? What is that? Antoine's mother simply says, "Ceux qui vous disent que la vie est belle ne font pas autrement. Mettez-vous bien cela dans la tête et vous serez heureuse."<sup>39</sup>

As Henry Cohen points out in his discussion on the role of myth in Kamouraska, Antoine Tassy embodies the antithesis of the traditional

---

<sup>38</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 68.

<sup>39</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, pp. 78-9

portrayal of the respected seigneur, capable of material gain through honest effort and natural ability.<sup>40</sup> Antoine's pleasure comes by inflicting pain. "... il finit par détruire l'équilibre de la nature en nature en chassant non pas pour se nourrir, mais pour le plaisir de tuer sa proie."<sup>41</sup> Cohen calls Antoine Tassy the most vile representative of the Old Regime who reveals the decadence of the dream of the New World civilization.<sup>42</sup>

The violation and abuse of hunting and fishing rights by the local seigneur is bitterly talked about by Catherine's uncle (Les Chambres de bois). Not only does the local seigneur destroy his prey, but the dead animals are left to rot. Young girls also fall victim to the seigneur's abuse and the neglected lady of the manor house is resigned to her perpetual idleness and her husband's perpetual love affairs.

The children, Michel and Lia, become the objects of their mother's hostility, hostility expressed through silent rejection or demonstrated by physical cruelty. The servant woman, Aline, later discloses to Catherine what her life had been like working under masters who lacked any grandeur.

Mon coeur a eu bien du mal....Le premier seigneur m'a prise à treize ans. Il m'a mise à travailler tout le jour sous sa femme qui me haït. Toutes les nuits, il m'éveille et me prend. La maison est profonde comme un coffre; nul ne sait ce qui s'y passe.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup>Cohen, p. 105.

<sup>41</sup>Cohen, p. 105.

<sup>42</sup>Cohen, p. 105.

<sup>43</sup>Hébert, Les Chambres de bois, p. 175.

The women of the manor houses from one generation to the next became scornful, not only of the men to whom they were married but also of life itself. They became fixed images behind the windows, scratching and engraving their names on the window panes as a demonstration of their haughty idleness.<sup>44</sup> This becomes for them a mark of their lost identity-- a mark of estrangement.

This act of defiance is performed by Marie-Louise de Lachevrotière, wife of Augustin Berthelot ("Un Grand mariage"). She takes off her wedding ring and engraves her name on the glass of the window with the solitaire. Her name takes its place among the other women's names which had been appearing there over generations. The list of the engraved names represents the long hours of idleness, days filled with nothingness.

When asked by Augustin what she had been doing all day while he was occupied with the affairs of his father-in-law's manor, Marie-Louise replies, "Rien." Augustin weighs this remark with the recollection of two other women, his mother and Délia, whose hands were witness to their days filled with hard work. "Au plus profond de son coeur Augustin éprouvait l'injustice de la vie...."<sup>45</sup>

The husband-wife-Métis mistress triangle was not uncommon in the seigneurial class and the relationship of Augustin, Marie-Louise and Délia was no exception. As long as Marie-Louise retained her social position, Augustin was free to carry on his discreet but acceptable liaison with Délia. Although Henry Cohen's analysis of this type of arrangement in this traditional social milieu is primarily directed to

---

<sup>44</sup>Albert LeGrand, "Kamouraska ou l'ange et la bête," p. 122.

<sup>45</sup>Hebert, Le Torrent, p. 137.



Kamouraska, his remarks identify well the marriage and family life among many of those of the seigneurial class.

L'amour périt sous peu, que ce soit dans le mariage ou dans l'adultère; là où la liberté de l'individu s'exprime, il n'y a que du libertinage le plus vicieux; le mariage prétendu, ciment de l'édifice social, n'est rien d'autre qu'une trêve entre deux bourreaux; il en est de même en ce qui concerne la vie de famille; le bonheur est un idéal irréalisable.<sup>46</sup>

With the weakening of the seigneurial class, the Church was able to assume more and more control over the complete social community. Not only did the clergy direct the religious affairs, but its activity was also channeled into education, business and especially into family life. As its power and control increased, the Church became an unchallenged dictatorial force. Without any challenge to its authority and influence, the Church reached a secure position, a position ripe for stagnation. In its stagnation, the sterile traditions of the Church became inert, inefficient and ineffectual. It became alienated from the activity of life, closing its doors on reality.

In René Lacôte's book on Anne Hébert he emphasizes that it was precisely this stifling dictatorship by the clergy which brought about a decisive denouncement of it. Those responsible for this denouncement were those of the generation to which Anne Hébert belongs. "C'est, en vérité, l'âme canadienne française qu'elle a saisie...."<sup>47</sup> states Lacôte.

Through Anne Hébert's works this revolt against the traditional Catholic control can be seen. In Chapter III of this study, "The Estrangement Within the Temporal Setting," the attachment to the past

---

<sup>46</sup>Cohen, p. 104.

<sup>47</sup>René Lacôte, Anne Hébert (Paris: Seghers, 1969), p. 12.

strongly aligns itself with the role of the Church and its refusal to relinquish out-dated traditions and privileges. The discipline of order and regulated time, as was discussed in Chapter III, emphasizes the refusal of the Church to modify in any way its rites and ceremonies. The element of suspended time, also described in Chapter III, is in direct relationship to the Church, its desire to stop time and rest secure with its authority. This was a refusal to recognize the movement of time from past to present to future--a denial of life on this earth.

Confined within this habitation of oppressing solitude, life became static. Repressed needs and desires had to be communicated in some way, this silence had to be disrupted. The recitation of prayers, chants, novenas, rosaries and the habitual gestures of genuflection and signs of the cross were not enough to give release to these needs and desires. Thus we see in Anne Hébert's Les Enfants du sabbat the ultimate challenge to an inflexible system. The Church is called forth to answer this challenge, only to find its defenses impotent due to stagnation.

The vows of silence, the repression of free will, the acceptance of total obedience, in sum, the entire convent life is challenged by Sister Julie's presence (Les Enfants du sabbat). The order and the control which had been rigidly regimented are now disrupted by the presence of unknown, obscure forces. The Mother Superior's attempts to isolate and seclude the convent from the dark forces outside the convent walls are to no avail. The safe and secure position of the Mother Superior is replaced by her apprehension and her fear of the

unknown. She becomes exasperated in her attempts to control the life of Sister Julie in the same way that she controls the lives of the other nuns. By flaunting her own power through her sorcery, Sister Julie watches the diminishing of the Mother Superior's authority and of her ability to maintain order, control and submission in the convent. As Julie's power increases, as the confrontation becomes more and more intense between the spirit and the flesh, the Mother Superior experiences a disorientation within her established realm and a vulnerability to an alien force now housed within the convent.

Hidden desires and secret thoughts, repressed in the minds of the Sisters of the Precious Blood, surface more easily and are expressed more frequently as the world of the spirit collides with the world of the flesh. By delegating rewards and punishments, Julie assumes this responsibility and privilege once enjoyed by the Mother Superior. Peace of mind is enjoyed by very few in the convent. Sheltered within the convent walls, veiled by their vows of obedience and their lives masked by ceremonial piety, the inner lives of these nuns experience conflict and turmoil by not being allowed to express or demonstrate their natural human emotions. Sister Julie's power allows for such release.

The privileged positions of Mother Superior, the first confessor, Father Migneault, the second confessor, Father Léo-Z Flageole, and finally that of the Grand Exorcist all become subject to the handicaps of their own weaknesses and inability to restore faith and order. Their leadership becomes impotent, their traditional rituals become sterile and ineffective. The ruinous financial affairs of the convent

result in further instability as the spiritual life in the convent flounders in endless, meaningless fasting, prayers and recitations.

Father Migneault leaves the convent and later hangs himself once he recognizes his state of nothingness, brought to light by Sister Julie.

Moqué au centre de son être, réduit à sa plus stricte vérité de prêcheur ridicule et d'homme très ordinaire, aumônier d'un couvent très ordinaire, l'abbé Migneault se vit tel qu'il était. Il ne put supporter cette vue et n'osa plus préparer aucun sermon.<sup>48</sup>

The replacement for Father Migneault is Léo-Z Flageole. Father Flageole is hopeful of ridding the convent of its possession of evil and is confident that his many years of past experience in detecting Satan's work will earn for him long-awaited recognition.

Que soeur Julie de la Trinité soit prise en flagrant délit d'ébriété diabolique, aux yeux de tous, et je serai enfin justifié d'exister. Je pourrai enfin exercer, au grand jour, mon véritable ministère, celui dont je rêve depuis mon entrée au séminaire; pratiquer un exorcisme, en grande pompe, selon le rituel de la province de Québec.<sup>49</sup>

Father Flageole, however, is subjected to a severe attack of asthma which leaves him almost completely incapacitated and he must make a plea for help from outside the convent.

When the Grand Exorcist arrives with full intent of quickly carrying out his duty of exorcism, he too, succumbs to his own personal weakness of relishing pomp, ceremony and beautiful vestments. His duty as the Grand Exorcist is interrupted by temptation from Sister Julie--her offering of all the glorious trappings of privileged rank--which he accepts.

---

<sup>48</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, p. 53.

<sup>49</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, p. 131.

Tel qu'en lui-meme, puéril, frivole et vaniteux, soeur Julie changea le grand exorciste jusqu'au matin. Il se prélassa parmi les beaux costumes, les caressa, les revêtit. En grande pompe il parada devant sa glace.<sup>50</sup>

By emphasizing the role of the clergy in Les Enfants du sabbat we have seen its members become subject to human frailties, frailties which were not to be demonstrated because of their privileged positions. Pierre Pagé refers to this privileged position of the clergy in his book, Anne Hébert. The clergy elevated itself out of reach from the common man who was viewed as the fallen angel, condemned to live in his body.<sup>51</sup>

Dans une telle société, on voyait dans les prêtres des privilégiés qui échappaient, au moins partiellement, à la condition charnelle, et on leur accordait un prestige absolu. 'Eux seuls possédaient la vérité' et leur 'infaillibilité' prenait très vite le ton d'une domination blessant.<sup>52</sup>

Les Enfants du sabbat especially demonstrates the diminishing of self-confidence among the clergy and the awareness of their inefficacy in their relationships with individuals. By attempting to elevate themselves, by setting themselves apart from the real world, these priests and nuns estranged themselves from the very society which was seeking their guidance and direction.

In the beginning of this chapter the traditional family unit of the French-Canadian society was defined. This unit in both the rural and urban settings was well-ordered and defined by the influence of the Church. The father, as the head of the household, was the material

---

<sup>50</sup>Hébert, Les Enfants du sabbat, p. 172.

<sup>51</sup>Pierre Pagé, Anne Hébert (Montréal: Fides, 1965), p. 83.

<sup>52</sup>Pagé, pp. 83-4.

provider, the breaker of bread, the dominant figure. The idealized mother's role was a passive one or as Cohen describes it "la partie âme."<sup>53</sup> Her legitimate mode of existence was only to fulfill her role as the source of faith, of kindness and meekness, and of intuition.<sup>54</sup>

In the works of Anne Hébert the traditional male-female roles within the family structure drastically change. In Maurice Emond's analysis of Anne Hébert's works he states, "C'est la femme qui domine dans l'oeuvre d'Anne Hébert. Devant elle l'homme ne sait que se plaindre et souffrir...."<sup>55</sup> This can be seen in the short story "Le Torrent" for it is Claudine who is in control and François, her son who suffers abuse. In Le Temps sauvage Agnès is the head of the household and her husband, François is subjected to her domination.

The role of the father within the family diminishes and is weakened ("La Mort de Stella," Le Temps sauvage) or the father is absent from the family unit ("Le Torrent," Kamouraska). If the mother is absent, the father is not able to give any leadership to the family, on the contrary, he tries to close himself off from his family or use them to his own advantage. The absence of the mother is seen in Catherine's upbringing (Les Chambres de bois) and in the household of Salin (Les Invités au procès). Only in Les Enfants du sabbat does the father, Adélard, maintain a dominant role, however his power is shared with his wife, Philomène.

---

<sup>53</sup>Cohen, p. 106.

<sup>54</sup>Cohen, p. 106

<sup>55</sup>Maurice Emond, "Introduction à l'oeuvre d'Anne Hébert," p. 39.

Within the family structure, sibling relationships are often bound by established habit, yet estranged as a result of a family's behavior (Stéphanie and Charles, Lia and Michel, Julie and Joseph). Two of the short stories, "Le Printemps de Catherine" and "La Robe corail" accentuate the absence of any family ties.

Identifying the estrangement of the outsiders, the outcasts and the exiled in the traditional social setting has led to an examination of the estrangement within the social setting. The estrangement which is demonstrated by certain individuals of the various levels of the social milieu--the seigneurial class, the clergy and the family--is an exterior conformity. To maintain a healthy functioning of the complete social milieu there must be worthwhile contributions from each level of society, each one presenting honest and open expression. If one element of the complete social system estranges itself, the result is inefficacy in the working order and a gradual disunity of the total social organization.

The discussion of the family unit as a segment of the social community has been included in this chapter in order to illustrate the decline of the traditional French-Canadian family structure as shown in some of the works of Anne Hébert. The individuals in the works of Anne Hébert break with the traditional ties of the established family unit and disclose what is behind the façade. In not conforming to the description of the role of this traditional family structure, Anne Hébert's female characters have had to be the ones to demonstrate this rupture. In Denis Bouchard's article, "Anne Hébert et 'la solitude rompue'," the feminine role versus the masculine one is explicitly stated.

Des femelles de plus en plus coriaces se partagent les écrits. Leur révolte est méthodique, au-delà de toute culpabilité, sauvagement calme. On dirait que l'homme a sombré dans sa drogue d'aliénation et que la femme va l'en racheter en exerçant contre lui un pouvoir aveugle et diabolique....Ces femmes veulent sauver le monde par l'infamie.<sup>56</sup>

This role reversal within most of Anne Hebert's works promotes the theme of estrangement not only within the complete social setting but in the personal relationships as well. These individual relationships, both within and outside the family unit, will be examined in the next chapter.

---

<sup>56</sup>Denis Bouchard, "Anne Hébert et 'la solitude rompue': Tentative de démythification d'un des lieux communs de notre littérature," Etudes Françaises 13 (1977): 169.



## CHAPTER V

### THE ESTRANGEMENT WITHIN PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Character, image or plot, around what does the structure of Anne Hébert's works revolve? Her answer to this question was, "C'est autour de personnages."<sup>1</sup> Anne Hébert readily acknowledges that news items about real people and real situations have been instrumental in the conception of characters in some of her works. For example, an incident of a young seminary student who killed his mother prompted the writing of "Le Torrent". Anne Hébert said of this incident,

L'affaire avait été rapidement enterré, il n'y avait pas eu de procès. J'ai été attirée par ce drame parce que c'était resté inachevé. Je me suis demandé pourquoi c'était arrivé et j'ai pensé que c'avait dû être une vocation forcée.<sup>2</sup>

The novel, Kamouraska, was inspired by a reference to a true story of a woman's husband being murdered by a doctor in the town of Sorel in Quebec in 1839. The doctor was suspected of being the woman's lover.<sup>3</sup> There was another true story about a nun suffering from severe headaches because she could not tolerate her wimple. It was said that this was a sign she was being tempted by the devil.<sup>4</sup> The story provided some background for Les Enfants du sabbat.

---

<sup>1</sup>Dubé, Emond, and Vandendorpe, "Anne Hébert Entrevue." p. 34.

<sup>2</sup>Page, p. 34.

<sup>3</sup>Maurice Emond, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup>Dubé, Emond, and Vandendorpe, p. 33.

The realism of Anne Hébert's works is a result of a thorough observation of the external world of her individual characters and a deep penetration into their interior worlds. This penetration is both intuitive and imaginative for her characters reveal themselves principally through the emotions they express. In Grazia Merler's discussion of the realism in Anne Hébert's works he emphasizes,

De même les personnages ne sont pas symboliques, ils ne représentent pas des types humains, ils sont leur propre expression de crainte, d'indignation, de passion, de douleur. L'oeuvre entière, en un sens, devient cette expression, ce chant ou ce cri.<sup>5</sup>

The personalities of Anne Hébert's characters are not strictly defined. She does not arbitrarily label them as good, bad, harmonious, or dissident. The characters reveal themselves through their emotional actions and reactions in the relationships they have with other individuals. These relationships form the nucleus of the works of Anne Hébert. The estrangement already designed by the spatio-temporal settings as well as that of the social setting becomes entangled in the web of estrangement within the personal relationships. It is in this realm that the individual characters either confront or deny their states of existence.

The first part of this chapter will concern the personal relationships within the family, the second part will examine other personal relationships. Two basic questions will be addressed in this chapter; first, how is estrangement manifested in these personal relationships and second, are there possible solutions to the estrangement dilemma for certain individual characters.

---

<sup>5</sup>Merler, p. 54.

The underlying components of estrangement within both types of personal relationships are basically: absence of love, absence of authentic communication, and absence of vitality. An accepted definition of love (kindness, warmth, affection) should be extended to include the appreciation and enjoyment of another's companionship. The absence of this kind of love is an absence of placing any value on the life of another human being. By authentic communication I mean a sensitive and positive exchange of words and gestures which express something meaningful. The absence of this authentic communication promotes indifference, lethargy, and repression. Vitality is the energy, the animation which produces the power to endure, to continue. The absence of vitality leads to a mechanized or bland existence, to a stagnation which contributes to an existence of living-death.

With the absence of these three elements: love, authentic communication, and vitality, the characters of Anne Hébert resort to other demonstrations of their emotions. Within the personal relationships these demonstrations take the form of physical abuse, psychological trauma, hostile silence or verbal animosity. Retaliation in the same negative manner or resignation may be the only solutions for some of the characters, but for others there is an attempt to solve their dilemma of estrangement in another way.

In my study of the estrangement within personal relationships in the family setting I will first discuss the parent-offspring relationships. Secondly, I will examine what I have labeled the triangle relationships. These relationships involve a husband-wife relationship, or in one instance a brother-sister relationship. In each of these

relationships there is the promotion of estrangement by a third party, not necessarily a family member.

The maternal domaine that Claudine has established for her son, François ("Le Torrent") is void of understanding, compassion or love. According to Claudine these are weaknesses of the flesh which must be repressed. Claudine's method of overcoming these weaknesses has been to develop and maintain strict self-control and self-discipline. François is subjected to this rigorous program of hard work and physical abuse when he is just a small child. His destiny becomes linked to that of Claudine.

Dans la suite j'ai compris qu'elle agissait ainsi par discipline: 'pour se dompter elle-même', et aussi certainement pour m'impressionner davantage en établissant son emprise le plus profondément possible sur moi.<sup>6</sup>

Claudine's repetitive instruction to François is that the world is not beautiful, it is not to be touched, it must be renounced. To rise above the ugliness of the world one must be in full possession of oneself; instinctive pleasures must be denied. If François allows his emotions to take control, Claudine calls him a crybaby and a weakling. The only communication François receives from his mother is through the daily lessons she teaches--through reprimands and through punishments. Other than this, François knows only the icy silence of his mother.

L'heure des leçons terminée, un mutisme total envahissait à nouveau le visage de ma mère. Sa bouche se fermait durement, hermétiquement, comme tenue par un verrou tiré de l'intérieur.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 8.

This harsh countenance of Claudine reinforces the fear and anguish of a small child who is unable to penetrate the exterior of this iron woman.

Son menton impératif, calme sa bouche tourmentée, malgré l'attitude que le silence essayait de lui imposer, son corsage noir, cuirasse sans nulle place tendre où put se blottir la tête d'un enfant; et voilà l'univers maternel dans lequel j'ai appris, si tôt, la durété et le refus.<sup>8</sup>

Twice François defies the rigid control of Claudine. The first time is at the age of twelve, when he has an overwhelming desire to see another human being. Ironically the first person he meets exemplifies the ugly world Claudine had always described. François stumbles over a man lying in a ditch, covered with mud.

Sur sa peau et ses vêtements alternaient la boue sèche et la boue fraîche. Ses cheveux longs se confondaient avec sa barbe, sa moustache et ses énormes sourcils....Mon Dieu, quelle face faite de poils hérissés....Je vis la bouche....avec des dents jaunes."<sup>9</sup>

Overwhelmed by the man's ugliness and stench, and frightened by this vivid personification of Claudine's teaching, François tries to flee. The boy is released from the man's grip only when Claudine appears. Through the brief exchange of words between the man and Claudine, the intimation is there that this man could be the father of François.

Un beau petit gars....oui, ben beau....Te retrouver ici!.... Tout le monde te pensait défunte....La grande Claudine, si avenante, autrefois....<sup>10</sup>

The second time François defies his mother is when, as a young man, he refuses to continue his seminary studies. This refusal is the

---

<sup>8</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, pp. 13-14.

<sup>10</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 15.

ultimate break in any kind of relationship between François and Claudine. It represents François' denial of his mother's long awaited salvation. He refuses to take on this responsibility; he refuses to be a continuation of his mother. The result is a violent beating of François, the blows being struck by a heavy ring of keys, the symbol of Claudine's control lashing out at François. Claudine's salvation through François is denied and consequently François is denied contact with the sounds of the external world. François is now totally deaf because of the vindictive punishment by Claudine. The estrangement between two family members is so absolute, the rupture is so complete that François and Claudine are totally alienated from each other.

With no acknowledgement of his parentage, François now forms a bond with two forces which become extensions of his being: the proud and defiant horse, Perceval, and the wild freedom of the torrent. Their uncontrollable spirits captivate François. Their power is so profoundly felt by François, their energy so uniquely experienced, that François' deafness is no hindrance. In Pierre Pagé's analysis of the symbolic nature of the torrent he states, "L'aliénation dont il est victime est si radicale, si complète, qu'un symbole humain ne saurait l'exprimer."<sup>11</sup>

François watches Claudine's attempts to break the spirit of the horse, to subjugate him the same way she subjugated François. To give the horse his freedom would be for François a symbolic release once and for all from Claudine. Her death, however, does not free François. The estranged relationship of Claudine and François was so deeply rooted

---

<sup>11</sup>Page, p. 36.

that François cannot sort out his confused identity. As Pierre Pagé expresses in his reference to François' existence after Claudine's death:

La mort de sa mère n'a pas libéré François et, plus tragiquement qu'avant, il est seul, prisonnier de lui-même. C'est dans son âme qui vit désormais Claudine Perrault.<sup>12</sup>

For François, a possible solution to this tragic dilemma seems to be the avoidance of solitude. It is at this point that he tries to establish a relationship with Amica. This relationship will be examined in the last part of this chapter.

Elisabeth d'Aulnières (Kamouraska) never knew her father; he died before she was born, his widowed wife only seventeen years old. The black mourning veils and her mother's seclusion begin an early relationship of estrangement for Elisabeth and her mother.

Costumée en grand-mère, malgré ses dix-sept ans, robe noire, bonnet blanc, col et poignets de lingerie fine, elle entreprend de vieillir et de désoler. Jour et nuit. Sans quitter sa chambre.<sup>13</sup>

Madame d'Aulnières refuses to return to the family home despite the persistent prodding of her three spinster sisters. To return would mean giving up her honorable status as a married woman, thus identifying herself as a spinster with her older sisters. Finally, disgusted with incompetent housekeepers and tired of her sisters' reprimands about how she is neglecting the welfare of her child, Madame d'Aulnières gives in to them. She returns to what she calls the family cloister.

---

<sup>12</sup>Pagé, p. 40.

<sup>13</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 52.

"Ma mère s'abandonne, corps et biens, à la direction rassurante de ses soeurs aînées."<sup>14</sup>

Adélaïde, Luce-Gertrude, and Angélique, the three aunts, become the substitute mothers for Elisabeth. Their sterile existences become filled with the responsibilities of Elisabeth's upbringing: her religious training, her instruction in the social graces, and the rest of her education. Their delight is in seeing to Elisabeth's every need, protecting her, spoiling her, and experiencing each event of Elisabeth's life as if it was their own.

Les trois petites Lanouette s'abîment dans un rêve fou, non dépourvu d'angoisse. Comme si elles devaient elles-mêmes s'engager incessamment dans une mutation charnelle, extravagante et libertine.<sup>15</sup>

Elisabeth's mother, on the other hand, retreats further and further into her private seclusion, remaining out of touch with her daughter's life. Elisabeth's mother has accepted her station in life; a widow resigned to her seclusion and her solitude. This cannot be shared with anyone, not even her own daughter. Her private world of widowhood is her reason, if not her excuse, for remaining aloof from her daughter, especially when Elisabeth's marriage to Antoine is shattered. The aunts, attentive to the account of Elisabeth's miserable life at Kamouraska, condemn Antoine through their prayers, rosaries, and novenas. Elisabeth's mother simply comments that it is too bad Elisabeth gave birth to two sons instead of to a daughter. Her sisters agree.

---

<sup>14</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 54.

<sup>15</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 60.



Les trois petites Lanouette soupirent écho.  
Regrettent aussi que la dynastie des femmes seules  
ne se perpétue pas éternellement, dans la maison  
de la rue Augusta.<sup>16</sup>

One of the last references to Elisabeth's mother illustrates the indifference she has to what is taking place around her--Elisabeth's miserable life with Antoine, Elisabeth's love affair with George Nelson.

Ma mère sort de sa retraite. Jette un oeil éteint sur sa fille. Se plaint de la chaleur. Continue son monologue intérieur d'un air ennuyé....Ma mère s'ennuie. Elle ajuste son châle sur ses épaules et sort de la pièce.<sup>17</sup>

With this abrupt departure from the room and by turning her back on Elisabeth and her personal crisis, Madame d'Aulnières makes the final break with her daughter. During Elisabeth's trial, her aunts come to her defense, her three "fairy godmothers" who risk their souls to save the family name,<sup>18</sup> but Elisabeth's mother has nothing to say. There are no words of defense, no words of advice or consolation from her mother. There are not even any words of reprimand from this woman who continues her silent, estranged resignation from her daughter.

In Le Temps sauvage, François Joncas has become the outcast father even within his own family home. His wife Agnès has assumed complete control of the household by relegating her husband to the attic loft. As far as Agnès is concerned, François' final contribution to the family was ten years previous when their last child was born. Sébastien, the only son, refers to his mother's role as that of a queen:

---

<sup>16</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 98.

<sup>17</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 161.

<sup>18</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 43.

Agnès se tient au centre de sa demeure, comme une reine....C'est un faux bourdon que la reine a relégué là-haut depuis la naissance de Capucine. Il ne descend que rarement.<sup>19</sup>

François is waiting impatiently for a letter, hoping he will have confirmation to a teaching post. This employment status would be sufficient to restore his dignity as a man. As it is, he suffers the anxiety of his removal from the position as head of the household. His daily disappointments of no letter received, his annoying rheumatism, the restlessness of the children, the antagonism between him and Agnès, all make Francois very embittered with life. "Ah! la vie est maudite! Et je n'ai jamais rien fait de bien!"<sup>20</sup>

In Pierre Pagé's study, Anne Hébert, he refers to the role of François in this family environment:

François, au seuil de la vieillesse, représente l'ultime degré d'aliénation toujours soumis à la fatalité des événements, sans cesse dans l'attente d'un malheur qui viendrait confirmer sa culpabilité.<sup>21</sup>

Francois' premonitions of misfortune are his way of never being content with his guilt, his desertion of manhood. By allowing Agnès to usurp his position as the head of the household, François has assumed a living-death. There is no vitality to his existence, he has no real identity. He defines this kind of life as one of the greatest games invented by man.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, p. 41.

<sup>20</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup>Pagé, p. 79

<sup>22</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, p. 35.

The identity of Agnès, however, is most complete, even complex. Not only does Sébastien define his mother's role as that of a queen, he indicates that she is absolute in all domains and introduces her to the village priest by saying:

La robe noire de ce royaume c'est elle. Le prêtre et le démon, c'est elle; le pain et le vin, le juge absolu, le coeur et le tête, c'est elle, elle, elle seule!<sup>23</sup>

In order for Agnès to realize the full potential of her womanhood, she had to separate herself from society, a society which recognized maternity as the only respectable position for a woman. Pagé explains that the dominating role Agnès assumes in her family is simply a consequence of her alienation from this society.<sup>24</sup>

Although he and Agnès have an estranged relationship, François does not hesitate to speak his mind when he questions his wife's motives in isolating her children from life:

Crois-tu donc qu'on puisse impunément lâcher des enfants dans la montagne comme des chèvres sans que la barbarie les reprenne peu à peu?<sup>25</sup>

Two of the older children, Sébastien and Lucie, have already developed an insatiable desire to know more about life, to discover it, to experience it, to go way beyond the boundaries of their mother's domaine. When Lucie says she wants to study, learn and understand everything she possibly can, her mother retorts, "Il n'y a rien à comprendre."<sup>26</sup> For

---

<sup>23</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, p. 25.

<sup>24</sup>Pagé, p. 83.

<sup>25</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, p. 15.

<sup>26</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, p. 12.

Lucie to remain ignorant in this exiled existence is to be like the mole who digs his furrow, his eyes filled with sand.<sup>27</sup> Sébastien's goal is to go into the city and make his own way as an artist. Even though he knows he will be breaking away from the secure circle of his mother's territory and this will put him in a vulnerable position, Sébastien has a persistent craving for an adventure with life. "Je goûte ma vie comme du sel."<sup>28</sup>

The division and disunity within the Joncas' family becomes even more disruptive with the arrival of Agnès' niece, Isabelle. Isabelle's life in the city had adapted to that of her mother's--unsettled and whimsical. Isabelle says of her mother, who has just recently died, "Elle changeait d'homme comme on change de chemise."<sup>29</sup> Neglected by her mother and pampered or abused by her mother's friends, Isabelle says she had a life of pretending. She knows all about life, but she has never really lived. Now as a member of Agnès' household Isabelle feels her life is even more suffocated. She exclaims with desperation:

J'existe soudain si fort dans mon coeur que je ne puis plus me taire. Ma vie éclate dans mes veines et il faut que je le dise. Je suis fatiguée de me taire....<sup>30</sup>

Agnès blames Isabelle for the disintegration of her family unit, for her children breaking away, for her husband's renewed vitality. François tells his wife that she is to blame for what has happened, with

---

<sup>27</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, p. 13.

<sup>28</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, p. 19.

<sup>29</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, p. 57.

<sup>30</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, p. 68.

her children. "Tu les as enfermés dans l'ignorance et le silence. Et voici que les questions et les réponses éclatent de tous côtés."<sup>31</sup> He insists that Agnès admit just once that he saved her from her despair and death, that he, as the father of her children, was responsible for her escape from her past. Agnès does admit this to François but he doesn't hear her. The letter denying his teaching position sends him back to his attic loft, out of hearing distance to Agnès' confession: "Un jour c'est vrai, toi, François mon mari, tu m'as sauvée du désespoir et de la mort....Ecoute. Maintenant, ou jamais....ou il sera trop tard."<sup>32</sup>

Even though Sébastien, Lucie and Isabelle break away from Agnès and her domaine had been threatened by the short-term aggressiveness of her husband, Agnès is not willing to give up what she has established.

Qui pourra empêcher que je me reprenne en main, à la source de ma vie? Rétablir l'ordre saccagé par les fuyards. Organiser à nouveau une forte saison sans fièvre ni évasion. Etre ma maîtresse absolue. Calfeutrer les portes et les fenêtres. Reprendre les clefs du monde dans un petit anneau passé à ma ceinture.<sup>33</sup>

Agnès' authority has been challenged, the silence has been broken. Lucie, Sébastien, and Isabelle will have their opportunities to explore life more fully and establish their identities more completely. They are no longer estranged from life, they are instead estranged from the world of Agnès.

In each of these families described we have seen the role of the mother as the head of the household. Their roles have been presented in

---

<sup>31</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, p. 70

<sup>32</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, pp. 74-75.

<sup>33</sup>Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, théâtre, p. 78.

different ways by Anne Hébert. Claudine's cruel, regimented control over her son is in contrast to Madame d'Aulnières' passivity and indifference to her daughter. Agnès' demonstration of an over-protective, authoritative environment denies her children their rights to grow up and experience life. Each of these women have one fundamental characteristic in common: a self-centered preservation, whether it be accomplished in a dominant way (Claudine, Agnès) or in a passive way (Madame d'Aulnières).

In each of the families described the father is absent by death (Kamouraska), by not being acknowledged ("Le Torrent"), or by being ignored (Le Temps sauvage). The estranged relationships of the parents and children are frequently accentuated by the absence of sensitivity, the warmth of human compassion, and love.

The triangle relationships are the second aspect of the family relationships which will be analyzed in regard to the presence of estrangement. The husband-wife relationships of Antoine and Elisabeth (Kamouraska), Augustin and Marie-Louise ("Un Grand mariage"), and Michel and Catherine (Les Chambres de bois) will be examined, each relationship with a third party influence of a lover (George Nelson), a mistress (Délia) or a sister (Lia). One brother-sister relationship will be briefly discussed; Stéphanie de Bichette and her brother, Charles with the influence of the housekeeper, Géraldine ("La Maison de l'esplanade").

Elisabeth, her husband Antoine and her lover George Nelson (Kamouraska) form the first triangle relationship. The mark of estrangement is present from the first part of the novel for it is from the respectable position as Madame Rolland that the story of herself as Elisabeth d'Aulnières

unfolds. From this position she can set herself apart, experience her past, but then return to her secure, position as Madame Rolland.

This triangle relationship revolves around life, death and love. Elisabeth tries desperately to hold on to life as she becomes a victim of Antoine's physical abuse and his public flaunting of life, indulging in his pleasures. Antoine's wild escapades lead him to his morbid pre-occupation with self-destruction, to precise plans for suicide. The estrangement between husband and wife is already seeded by Elisabeth's need to survive and Antoine's preoccupation with death.

Me tuer. Je vais me tuer. Il faut que je me tue. Tue  
sais bien qu'il le faut. Il n'y a que cela à faire.  
Me tuer. Elisabeth, je vais me tuer.<sup>34</sup>

Antoine, haunted by his own wish for death, encroaches on his prey, attempting to draw Elisabeth into his trap of death.

Viens donc avec moi. Cette corde est assez grande  
pour deux, Elisabeth, ma femme. Les liens du mariage,  
c'est ça. Une grosse corde bien attachée pour s'étouffer  
ensemble. Tu as promis pour le meilleur et pour le  
pire. Viens donc.<sup>35</sup>

Elisabeth's desperate struggle for survival is continually stifled by Antoine's demonic and degrading behavior. "Je suis Elisabeth d'Aulnières, épouse d'Antoine Tassy. Je meurs de langueur. J'attends que l'on vienne me délivrer. J'ai dix-neuf ans."<sup>36</sup> Elisabeth is delivered from this agonizing relationship with her husband. Her disjointed life and her delicate health are both carefully attended to by

---

<sup>34</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 86.

<sup>35</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 87.

<sup>36</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 100.

Dr. George Nelson. Elisabeth's wounded and fragile life is revitalized by love, the love that George and Elisabeth passionately share. This is an affirmation of life for Elisabeth as she allows herself to be enveloped by the powerful vitality of her love for George Nelson. This passionate love becomes colored by a variety of definitions and emotions as the triangle relationship of husband-wife-lover becomes more strained. Elisabeth defines this love by saying, "L'amour meurtrier. L'amour infâme. L'amour funeste. Amour. Amour. Unique vie de ce monde. La folie de l'amour."<sup>37</sup>

The destiny of these three people is linked even before Elisabeth meets Antoine Tassy. Antoine and George had been schoolmates as children and it is ironic that their destinies are brought together through their relationships with Elisabeth. Their fate is brought to its climax with George's murder of Antoine: "Tout cela une affaire d'homme. Un règlement de comptes entre hommes."<sup>38</sup>

Elisabeth's life, rejuvenated by a brief interlude of love, is once again allied with death. The death-wish for Antoine is carried out by her lover and as a result, the relationship that Elisabeth and George shared becomes estranged. The solution to their triangle relationship was to rid themselves of Antoine, but in doing so, Antoine's death devalues their love and their lives. Elisabeth does not want to be responsible for the tragedy, and George Nelson feels that his life has been ruined by this "damned" woman.<sup>39</sup> Elisabeth's solution is to marry respectably.

---

<sup>37</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 11.

<sup>38</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 233.

<sup>39</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 233.



"Devenir Mme Rolland à jamais. M'exclure de ce jeu de mort, entre Antoine et toi. Innocente! Innocente! Je suis innocente!"<sup>40</sup>

The complete drama of these three people is presented before one spectator, Madame Rolland. By viewing this tragedy of her own life through introspection and reflection, Madame Rolland has tried to pull together the division of her person, bringing herself to the reality of one identity: her present one, wife of Jérôme Rolland. Her dying husband is a very fragile link to this identity. Henry Cohen in his article, "Le RÔle du mythe dan Kamouraska," defines the character of Elisabeth:

Le personnage d'Elisabeth représente un fort refus du stéréotype insipide de la femme québécoise qui serait synonyme de sainteté, de patience, de régénération et de rédemption dans un pays rude et défavorable, Entourée de vieilles filles hypocrites imbues de catholicisme officiel, restreinte par les qu'en-dira-t'on d'une société conformiste, et victime d'un bovarysme profond, cette héroïne cherche en vain se soulager de la douleur, dans l'amour et dans le mal.<sup>41</sup>

The estranged triangle relationship in "Un Grand mariage" is best shown by the contrasting descriptions of the two women, Marie-Louise and Délia: a pale, delicate complexion, heavily starched petticoats, idle, white hands, cold hostility, a respected social position and a Church approved marriage identify Marie-Louise, in contrast, a firm, brown body, poor simple attire, coarse, strong hands, the unenvied position as a Métis Indian, a common law marriage, and a courageous determination to live identify Délia.

---

<sup>40</sup>Hébert, Kamouraska, p. 248.

<sup>41</sup>Cohen, p. 106.

Augustin's need to maintain a financially secure social position and his need to retreat to the past images of his life as a trapper in the Far North, present a life of conflict for him. To resolve this conflict, he allows these two contrasting worlds to come together under one roof. The exterior structure of his life is supported by his marital agreement with Marie-Louise, his inner emotions are sustained and satisfied by his relationship with Délia.

La jeune femme, fit ses conditions sur un tel ton de menace, qu'Augustin demeura persuadé qu'elle était au courant de tout et que cela l'arrangeait de se débarrasser de certaines corvées, au profit de sa servante.<sup>42</sup>

Augustin seems to enjoy the best of these two worlds, however, Délia's open and honest refusal to participate in the communion sacrament with the rest of the Berthelot household is a constant, humiliating reminder to Augustin that he betrayed a promise. Délia's refusal of the communion sacrament is her one remaining attachment to her own pride and personal dignity.

In Pierre Pagé's book of Anne Hébert, he comments on the story "Un Grand mariage" and refers to specific remarks made by Anne Hébert herself:

Pour parler de l'homme humilié, pour peindre la pauvreté et l'injustice, Anne Hébert trouve des accents forts et l'on sent que c'est là presque une cause qu'elle assume. Devant ses personnages, elle n'est plus impartiale. Elle a choisi: 'Je suis du côté de la métisse. Je n'ai pu faire autrement.'<sup>43</sup>

As the eldest daughter in her family, Catherine (Les Chambres de bois) was responsible for her three younger sisters; this becomes more

---

<sup>42</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 169.

<sup>43</sup>Pagé, p. 60.

demanding after the death of their mother. Catherine's father retreated into his solitude, barely making any contact with his family. Catherine's wishful thinking and daydreaming were a means of escape from the harsh reality of her life among coarse, working class people.

Elle désira donner asile au rêve et devint lointaine  
pleine de défi et de mystère comme que flaire un prince  
barbare en secret."<sup>44</sup>

The "barbarian prince" becomes real when Catherine meets once again, by chance, the young man from the manor house. Even now as a young seigneur, Michel's life seems mysterious and secretive to Catherine, but she is attracted to him and he pursues their relationship because of his own melancholy and loneliness. His sister and her lover have taken over the manor house, driving Michel away. Out of fear of being alone, Michel convinces Catherine to marry him and move with him to his Paris apartment.

Although Catherine loves Michel she soon realizes that he does not love her, he only wishes to possess her, trying to keep her as isolated from life as he is. Catherine is not allowed to leave the apartment to go shopping or even to do household chores. Her existence becomes similar to that portrayed in the still-life paintings Michel paints. "Je veux te peindre en camaïeu toute blanche, sans odeur, fade et fraîche comme la neige, tranquille comme l'eau dans un verre."<sup>45</sup>

Michel's promises of returning to the manor house and reclaiming what is rightfully his, become lost in this dream world he has created

---

<sup>44</sup>Hébert, Les Chambres de bois, p. 37.

<sup>45</sup>Hébert, Les Chambres de bois, p. 83.

with his only communication demonstrated through his painting and his frustrated piano playing. Michel's feelings about Catherine are expressed by one frightening statement, "Elle est si belle, cette femme, que je voudrais la noyer."<sup>46</sup>

In Kathy Mezei's discussion of this relationship of Michel and Catherine in her article, "Anne Hébert: A Pattern Repeated," she points out that this incapacity to live is closely aligned to the inability to love. She goes on to say that love in the novel is either a violent or desperate act, resolved in a tragic way, or at best, two people make a calm and sensible agreement.<sup>47</sup>

When Michel's sister Lia suddenly arrives and decides to stay with her brother and Catherine, Catherine's presence becomes identified with the furnishings of the apartment. Michel and Lia lose themselves in their own time and place with no acknowledgement of Catherine. "Michel et Lia semblaient vouloir instituer contre les saisons une espèce de temps à eux, immobile, antérieur."<sup>48</sup> As Catherine watches them pass their time together playing solitaire she imagines that this is how exiled kings and queens spent their days of banishment. Michel and Lia have become exiled from their manor house but they can easily establish their kingdom in exile as long as they remain faithful to each other. Their time together is stormy and unpredictable but their bond of childhood is strong.

---

<sup>46</sup>Hébert, Les Chambres de bois, p. 93.

<sup>47</sup>Kathy Mezei, "Anne Hébert: A Pattern Repeated," p. 36.

<sup>48</sup>Hébert, Les Chambres de bois, p. 103.

Les parts étaient faites, une fois pour toutes, claires et nettes entre Catherine et Lia; 'Marthe et Marie' pensait Lia. 'L'innocente fait le ménage; son corps humilié ignore l'amour. La honte de Michel est sur elle. Et moi, Lia, je suis l'honneur et la plus haute vie de Michel.'<sup>49</sup>

Catherine's unbearable existence is suffered alone, her life wasting away. Her pale death mask is attractive to Michel for he sees Catherine slipping into his own immobile existence. Catherine's will to live is an overwhelming effort to deny her love for Michel. "L'amour perdu de Michel lui remontait soudain au coeur. Catherine luttait pour sa vie contre l'étrange amour de cet homme."<sup>50</sup>

Catherine makes contact with life and its mysterious spirit when she leaves the suffocating stagnation of the Paris apartment to recuperate by the sea. She experiences the strength and vitality of the sea, the forces of life revitalizing her broken spirit and her ailing body. The estranged triangle relationship is in her past, recognized now as a distant, shapeless dream. Her new life welcomes Bruno and the love he wishes to share with Catherine. The relationship between Bruno and Catherine is described by Pierre Pagé as a new union of the flesh and the spirit. "Catherine et Bruno symbolisent l'acceptation du monde charnel par l'amour et la volonté de vivre la condition humaine."<sup>51</sup>

In Les Chambres de bois the two worlds of dream and reality come into view. Catherine has accepted the forces of life, while Michel and Lia have denied them. The estranged triangle relationship has reached its limits by the alienation of dream from reality.

---

<sup>49</sup>Hébert, Les Chambres de bois, p. 120.

<sup>50</sup>Hébert, Les Chambres de bois, p. 142.

<sup>51</sup>Pagé, p. 56.

The house facing the Esplanade represents the past and the established traditions associated with it ("La Maison de l'esplanade"). This house is the focal point of the triangle relationship of Stéphanie de Bichette, her brother Charles and her housekeeper, Géraldine. The estranged brother-sister relationship of Charles and Stéphanie is linked to the house by her faithful adherence to the family traditions of the past and by his unfaithfulness in breaking with past family traditions. Stéphanie has thus inherited the house and has become its possessor, while Charles has become the disinherited, the dispossessed.

Charles makes a daily visit to his sister's house, not only to enjoy one good meal, but also to see if there is any indication of physical weakness with his sister. The visits are always the same: no communication whatsoever, simply a gloomy, morbid silence hovering over them.

Ainsi les soirs, dans un complet silence, sans un seul mot échangé, entre le frère et la soeur, le temps s'écoulait jusqu'à ce que la vieille horloge sonnât dix heures.<sup>52</sup>

The same question always comes to Charles' mind as he observes the ghost-like appearance of his sister, "Quel fil mystérieux retentait Stéphanie sur la terre?"<sup>53</sup>

Stéphanie's death, however, would not facilitate Charles' plan that he and his wife occupy the house. The other person who has carefully and meticulously performed the ceremonious duties and who has remained faithful to the De Bichette traditions of the past, is Géraldine. Géraldine has already sealed the fate of Charles and does not hesitate to subtly remind him that his room has been locked.

---

<sup>52</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 123.

<sup>53</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 122.

Charles entendit tinter le trousseau de clefs dans le corridor, entre la salle et l'escalier de la cuisine. Charles frissonna; il savait bien quelles clefs Géraldine portait ainsi à la ceinture....Cela lui pinça étrangement le coeur de penser que la clef de sa propre chambre voisinait avec celles des chambres mortes, et il eut peur.<sup>54</sup>

Géraldine has her own designs for becoming the sole possessor of the house and she is not about to jeopardize her position. She is waiting for the day when she can lock the last room, place each one in its final and eternal order and thus be relieved of her duties.

Cela signifiait pour Géraldine le couronnement supreme de l'oeuvre pleinement accomplie et la réalisation de son destin de femme de chambre.<sup>55</sup>

Géraldine is the one who has taken command of the house, the one who orders and regulates the time within its walls. Charles senses her power and knows that he must acknowledge it.

Géraldine suivait tous les mouvement de Charles d'un regard hautain et triomphant. Les bras croisés sur sa forte poitrine, elle se croyait peut-être, l'air vengeur et impressionnant de la statue du commandeur? <sup>56</sup>

The estrangement between Stéphanie and Charles is continually being promoted by Géraldine and Charles begins to wonder from where her power of control has come. "Dans quel 'no man's land' la vieille sorcière avait-elle fait un pacte avec Monsieur de Bichette et Satan lui-même?"<sup>57</sup>

The only solution to this dilemma of Charles is to wait, but he is aware that Géraldine is also waiting.

---

<sup>54</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 122.

<sup>55</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 109.

<sup>56</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 119.

<sup>57</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 122.

The triangle relationships which have been examined emphasize the personal estrangement between individuals. By the active presence of a third party the emotional turmoil and conflict becomes even more evident, the individual relationships even more strained. The presence of the third party intensifies the painful estranged relationships of husbands and wives (Antoine and Elisabeth, Michel and Catherine, and Augustin and Marie-Louise) and interferes with a brother-sister relationship (Charles and Stéphanie). These relationships are the most difficult ones as two individuals seem to force a separation from the third individual, and the solution to these relationships is difficult to determine. Death for one of the three (Antoine) is desired, planned for, and then accomplished. In other instances the solution is resignation to existing situations (Délia, Charles). The most successful solution to the triangle relationship is to break from it completely, to liberate oneself from the pain and conflict imposed and to seek a total transformation in a way of living. To disassociate oneself from a triangle relationship is to be released from the destructive influence of two other individuals. This is the solution of Catherine (Les Chambres de bois) as she breaks away from Michel and Lia and in so doing she has reestablished her own personal identity, an identity no longer molded and manipulated by two other people.

The final part of this chapter will concern the estrangement within personal relationships which are not family related. These estranged relationships demonstrate the same aspects as the other relationships already described: absence of love, absence of authentic communication, and absence of vitality. The three relationships which will be discussed



are those involving François and Amica ("Le Torrent"), Gabriel and Emilie ("La Robe corail") and Catherine and the soldier ("Le Printemps de Catherine").

Possession of a woman is for François a solution to his disoriented life after the death of his mother ("Le Torrent"). By avoiding solitude and by seeking the companionship of another human being, François feels he will be more capable of identifying who he really is. François and Amica are estranged from the very beginning for François pays money for this woman, just as one would pay for a piece of merchandise. Not even knowing her real name, he calls her by the name he chooses--one denoting friendship. Instead of feeling secure in his position as the possessor of this woman, François feels vulnerable in her presence. His deafness prohibits any meaningful conversation with Amica and he feels that his private existence is threatened by her. The presence of Amica becomes a daily torture for François for he becomes obsessed with the idea that Amica can penetrate his thoughts and his past. His interior world is exposed to an outsider, to a stranger with whom he cannot relate and his personal anguish becomes even more severe.

Je n'ai plus d'abri intérieur. Le sacrilège est commis.  
 Le saccage de mon être le plus secret est accompli.  
 Je suis nu, dehors, devant cette fille en pillage pour  
 le compte de la police. Elle en saura, même plus long  
 qu'il n'est nécessaire à un rapport judiciaire. Elle  
 pénétrera mon tourment.<sup>58</sup>

After ransacking the house, Amica leaves and once again François finds himself alone. Confronted with total solitude, François renews his attachment to the torrent. The torrent presents its two sides:

---

<sup>58</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 57.

life--its unknown mysteries and turbulencies, and death--a deep abyss of ultimate destruction. As François leans far out over the edge of the torrent, it is certain that the attraction of both life and death are present. The story ends with François fully aware of his painful existence. He has the choice of suicide or a new adventure that he senses could be an acceptance of life. "Je veux me perdre en mon aventure, ma seule et épouvantable richesse."<sup>59</sup> The question of whether or not François commits suicide is commented on in F. M. Macri's article, "Anne Hébert: Story and Poem:"

Liberation of the Self depends on confrontation with death. To be initiated into life, one must die, literally or symbolically, in order to be reanimated. François' end allows him to experience the unknown, and therefore his new adventure could possibly be a new beginning.<sup>60</sup>

In two of Anne Hébert's short stories, "La Robe corail" and "Le printemps de Catherine", the first experiences of brief intimate relationships for two girls, Emilie and Catherine, bring about significant changes in their estranged existences void of vitality. When Gabriel first sees Emilie in the coral dress she is knitting, he is attracted by this fashioning of a dress which reveals at the same time the girl's youthful freshness and purity. For Emile, Gabriel is like the archangel of the Annunciation, announcing to her that her life is more than time being knitted away. "Avant, elle n'avait fait attention à rien, et voici que la digue est rompue, la vie reprend ses droits."<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 63.

<sup>60</sup>F. M. Macri, p. 16.

<sup>61</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 71.

For the first time in her life Emilie has the desire to see herself, to view her reflection in a mirror and know her identity. Colored by new emotions never before experienced, her face no longer expresses a vague emptiness. At the moment the coral dress is completed, Gabriel's desire to possess this young woman is also fulfilled. No words are spoken, their gestures of affection are exchanged in the silence of the forest. As quickly as Gabriel appeared in Emilie's life, he suddenly disappeared. The mysterious magic of a few intimate hours has disappeared and so too has the magical hope knitted into the coral dress. In unraveling the stitches of the dress, Emilie understands that it is her own life which is being released from her former existence. The brief relationship with Gabriel; the sudden aloofness and abrupt departure after tender moments of intimacy, was painful for Emilie. "Mais une fois qu'on a commencé de vivre, ça n'en finit plus."<sup>62</sup> Despite this painful relationship with Gabriel, Emilie has become more aware of the possibilities of living apart from monotonous days knitted away and time unaccounted. She understands that life is an intricate pattern of diverse experiences designed by the emotions of tenderness, disenchantment and expectation. "Emilie garde encore intactes en elle l'attente, et la foi au miracle."<sup>63</sup>

Catherine's release by her masters from her servitude also releases her from the identity they had imposed on her ("Le Printemps de Catherine"). This springtime for Catherine is a springtime of discovery, the discovery

---

<sup>62</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 79.

<sup>63</sup>Hébert, Le Torrent, p. 80.

of freedom, the discovery of herself. "Le cadre est à terre. Je suis sortie de mon cadre, image enfin nue et seule. O l'image que je suis!"<sup>64</sup>

Her first intimate relationship with a man brings her back to the harsh reality of her inescapable ugliness and deformity that have caused her to be estranged from others. Darkness and the soldier's drunkenness obscure the physical appearance of Catherine. The intimacy of a few hours with a stranger ends with her murder of the soldier. She could not bear any renewed scorn or humiliation and thus the knife is plunged into the throat of the soldier, bringing a swift and sudden end to their relationship. Catherine's desperate act to protect herself results in a complete alienation for herself from purity and innocence. "Dans cet oeil bleu qui se fige pour toujours, un instant elle a vu luire je ne sais quelle enfance, jardin d'où elle demeure à tout jamais chassée."<sup>65</sup>

The estrangement within and caused by each of these three intimate relationships described is manifested by their brevity, the emotional upheaval involved and an uncommitted fragile attachment between two people. The love that is demonstrated is an act of possession. These intimate relationships are painful experiences, especially for novices like François, Emilie, and Catherine, for once they have become separated from the ones who have possessed them, they are again forced to confront their solitude and the decision must now be made as to how they will choose to live.

In all the personal relationships described: the parent-offspring relationships, the triangle relationships and the brief, intimate

---

<sup>64</sup>Hebert, Le Torrent, p. 95.

<sup>65</sup>Hebert, Le Torrent, p. 101.

relationships, the elements identified in the beginning of this chapter are all absent--love, authentic communication and vitality. Individuals are used, abused, possessed, dispossessed, and even destroyed in their personal relationships with others. Without love, without respect for another's life and its worth, and without the presence of vitality to strengthen and promote a healthy relationship, the estrangement takes root and is nurtured, frequently resulting in total rejection--complete alienation.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has been an examination of the theme of estrangement in the works of Anne Hébert. This theme has been analyzed in the four separate areas of the spatial setting, the temporal setting, the social setting and in the personal relationships of the individual characters. The solitude, isolation and harshness of the physical and social environments, together with the rigid adherence to past time promote the indifference and hostility within the personal relationships. The end result of this is the final stage of estrangement--an estrangement from living. This incapacity to live or the avoidance of living, as described in the works of Anne Hebert, must be confronted.

Those who fail to confront the continual experience of living are those who draw themselves into a private world created by them and uniquely for them. They estrange themselves from other people by avoiding contact with them, by ignoring them, by showing indifference to them or by abusing them. Those who have set themselves apart have locked themselves into an immobile, interior world of fears, superstitions, insecurities and taboos. This interior world cannot be penetrated once these walls of defense have become barriers.

Anne Hébert describes without reserve the alienation of these individual characters in order to emphasize the necessity of breaking the solitude and casting aside the hard shell of confinement and isolation. Only then may one fully accept life and all its offerings.

The struggle for life must be a complete revolt against an over-riding attachment to the past and against a sterile and static condition of living. Total liberation can only be acknowledged if one has experienced the depths of despair, anguish, and even death--most often a symbolic death. In this revolt against living-death, one must suffer before one can claim an affirmation to life. As Anne Hebert stated in one of her presentations on poetry:

Notre pays est à l'âge des premiers jours du monde. La vie ici est à découvrir et à nommer; ce visage obscur que nous avons, ce coeur silencieux qui est le nôtre, tous ces paysages d'avant l'homme, qui attendent d'être habités et possédés par nous, et cette parole confuse qui s'ébauche dans la nuit, tout cela appelle le jour et la lumière....Et moi, je crois à la vertu de la poésie, je crois au salut de toute parole juste, vécue et exprimée. Je crois à la solitude rompue comme du pain par la poésie.<sup>1</sup>

Anne Hebert initiates a challenge to her fellow French-Canadians to accept life as it presents itself--its beauty and its ugliness--and to no longer acknowledge the idea of existing in a world as if one is not there. This is the despairing lament of François in Le Temps sauvage:

Ah! les curés ont bien raison: 'La vraie vie est ailleurs.'  
'Etre au monde comme n'y étant point.' Et voici que toute absence sera magnifiée par les anges durant l'éternité.<sup>2</sup>

To become absent from reality is to become estranged from life. An existence deprived of its vitality and spirit becomes an empty shell of living-death. This estrangement from life can only be eliminated by man establishing a bond between himself and the forces of life. He must allow himself to experience its mysteries and express to others what he

---

<sup>1</sup>Anne Hébert, Poèmes, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup>Anne Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, p. 21.

thinks and feels about them. Man can thus break the solitude as one would break bread.

Anne Hébert has accepted the responsibility of breaking the solitude through her literary expression. The vitality of her vocabulary, the diversity of her style and the richness of her imagination are the characteristics which provide the energy and the force needed to break the solitude. Anne Hébert's literary success as a well-known contemporary writer is due to her poignant and effective use of language--the tool necessary to confront a resignation to solitude.



SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Amprimoz, Alexandre. "Four Writers and Today's Quebec." Tamarack Review, 70 (1977): 72-80.
- Bouchard, Denis. "Anne Hébert et 'La Mystère de la Parole': Un Essai d'anti-biographie." Revue du Pacifique: Etudes de la littérature française, 3 (1977): 67-81.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Anne Hébert et la solitude rompue: Tentative de démythification d'un des lieux communs de notre littérature." Etudes Françaises, 13 (1977): 163-79.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Les Enfants du sabbat d'Anne Hébert: l'enveloppe des mythes." Voix et Images, 1:3 (Avril 1976): 374-85.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Une Lecture d'Anne Hébert. Montréal: Hurtubise, 1977.
- Cohen, Henry. "Le Rôle du mythe dans Kamouraska d'Anne Hébert." Présence Francophone, 12 (1976): 103-11.
- Collier's Encyclopedia, 1966, s.v. "Quebec," by W. Menzies Whitelaw, John Irwin Cooper and Jean Bruckesi.
- Downes, G. V. "Hebert in English." Canadian Literature, 71 (1976): 87-9.
- Dubé, Cécile; Maurice Emond; and Christian Vandendorpe. "Dossier: Anne Hébert," Québec Français, 32 Décembre 1978, pp. 33-41.
- Francoeur, Louis. "Le Monologue intérieur narratif." Etudes Littéraires, (1976): 341-65.
- Hébert, Anne. Les Chambres de bois. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1958.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Les Enfants du sabbat. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Kamouraska. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Poèmes. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1960.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Les Songes en équilibre: poèmes. Montréal: Editions de l'Arbre, 1942.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Le Temps sauvage, théâtre. Montréal: Editions HMH, Collection l'Arbre, 1967.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Le Torrent. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1965.

- LaCôte, René. Anne Hébert. Paris: Seghers, 1969.
- LeGrand, Albert. "Anne Hébert: de l'exile au royaume." Etudes Françaises 4 (1968): 5-29.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Kamouraska, ou l'ange et la bête." Etudes Françaises 7 (1971): 119-43.
- Macri, F. M. "Anne Hébert: Story and Poem." Canadian Literature, 58 (1973): 9-18.
- Marta, Janet. "Déchiffrage du code biblique dans les Poèmes d'Anne Hébert." Présence Francophone, 16 (1978): 123-30.
- Merler, Gazier. "La Réalité dans la prose d'Anne Hébert." Ecrits du Canada Français, 33 (1971): 45-83.
- Mezei, Kathy. "Anne Hébert, a Pattern Repeated." Canadian Literature, 72 (1977): 29-40.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Commands and Desires: Les Enfants du sabbat." Canadian Literature, 70 (1976): 79-81.
- "Mon Coeur sauvage, je le dis en français." Les Nouvelles Littéraires 2517, 29 janvier 1976, p. 22.
- Pagé, Pierre. Anne Hébert. Montréal: Fides, 1965.
- Russell, D. W. "Anne Hébert: Les Invités au procès." Canadian Literature 74 (1977): 30-9.
- Tougas, Gérard. Histoire de la Littérature Canadienne-Française. Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1967.
- Viatte, Auguste. La Francophonie. Paris: Librairie Larousse: 1969.