

Authorizing her Text: Margaret Laurence's Shift to Third-Person Narration

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MARGARET LAURENCE'S MANAWAKA novels are marked by an impulse toward self-examination and transformation in the lives of four female protagonists. They are cast in a fictive confessional form and, in each case, a solitary protagonist looks back over a lifetime or gives an account of a critical period in her life from the standpoint of the present. Each is motivated to tell her story to alleviate past and present suffering as well as anguish over a pervasive sense of isolation. Central to the confessional narrative is the self-scrutinizing consciousness, one that will "lay open" the memory, in the words of Saint Augustine, to order self-perception. Following the confessional model, Laurence's first two novels, *The Stone Angel* and *A Jest of God*, are written in the first person but the later two, *The Fire-Dwellers* and *The Diviners*, are not. The question as to why Laurence makes this shift in narrative voice has not, however, been adequately examined.¹

The middle two novels, which share intertextual elements including a synchronous time frame and the portrayal of sisters, lend themselves to a comparison of their one major technical difference, the shift in narrative voice. Both Rachel in *A Jest of God* and Stacey in *The Fire-Dwellers* go through the spiritual exercise of self-examination, which becomes the basis of the plot and character development. Stacey is not, however, the narrator, while Rachel is. Laurence explains that *The Fire-Dwellers* is "really a first-person narrative which happens to be written in the third person, for the narrative voice even here is essentially that of the main character," and Nora Foster Stovel, for instance, accepts the explanation, although she acknowledges that "Stacey is not the official narrator of her own experience that Rachel is" (126). However, to characterize this book as a first-person novel which happens to be in the third-person fails to recognize the ideological implications of this shift. As Laurence's technique within the conventions of confession evolves, her work demonstrates a definitive shift from first-person to third-person narration, and

she expands the form in such a way that even her third-person novels attain the immediacy of first-person narration by focalization through the eyes of the protagonist.² Both novels portray female experience from the point of view of the protagonist, but Laurence adapts the confessional form by adopting the third person for an ideological purpose: the authorization of the female voice.

Textual and structural similarities between *A Jest of God* and *The Fire-Dwellers* are nevertheless important to note because they demonstrate the centrality of the confessional genre to depicting individual experience. The Western literary traditions of confession and autobiography, which are closely related, can be traced to the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine of Hippo written in 397 A.D. (Scholes and Kellogg 216-17). This early example employs a first-person narrator, a sustained retrospective point of view to construct a life story, and a self-transformation, all of which have become characteristics of story development in confessional and autobiographical forms. Agreeing with Phillippe Lejeune, Judith Whitenack defines autobiography, including confessional autobiography, as "a continuous retrospective account of an individual's life, written by that individual" (41). Even writers of fiction have borrowed the conventions of confession, although the fictional narrator-protagonist cannot be identified with the author.

Peter Axthelm proposes the modern confessional novel as the inheritor of the religious confessional tradition and he offers a useful definition: "The confessional novel presents a hero, at some point in his life, examining his past as well as his innermost thoughts, in an effort to achieve . . . perception" (8). Based on this definition Axthelm identifies the first-person voice, a preoccupation with suffering, a testimonial rhetoric, the quest for self-perception, and a sustained retrospective view as characteristics of the confessional novel.³ Although confession deals primarily with questions of the self, it extends from the examination of one life to an examination of the broader social issues that affect that life; for example, Augustine reflects upon the world in which he lives and examines the effects of ideologies such as Manichaeism upon his life.

Confession, both religious and secular, shares many of the characteristics of autobiography; nevertheless, it can be distinguished from autobiography.⁴ The narrator, in particular, differs from the I-narrator of autobiography. Lejeune characterizes autobiography by the "pacte autobiographique" of the author's signature on the title page, which guarantees an authentic life story. But confessional narrative presents a dimension that goes beyond that of a life story: as Whitenack suggests, the distin-

guishing feature of confession could be called a “pacte confessionnel,” which “promises to reveal something that is not necessarily verifiable through recourse to the public record.” Confession also shows a more fundamental concern for exposing errors and weaknesses. It represents a “tearing away” of the “decent drapery” of the confessional persona’s public self” (Whitenack 42-43). Consequently, confessional fiction retains the narrating-I’s necessary revelation of secrets, including “secrets” about the narrator’s sociohistorical context.

Although the confessional and autobiographical forms privilege individual experience, as Sidonie Smith explains, “that conception of individuality may not motivate the most informed reading of women’s autobiographical texts” (12):

[Critics] have turned their attention to considering how the autobiographer’s identity as a woman within the symbolic order of patriarchy affects her relationship to generic possibilities — to the autobiographical impulse, to the structuring of content, to the reading and the writing of the self, to the authority of the voice and the situating of narrative perspective, to the problematic nature of representation itself. (Smith 17)

Relying on Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the “dialogic imagination,” she provides an alternative to the ideology of individualism that assumes an essential self rather than a fiction of the self. Smith discovers that the female autobiographer — and one may argue the female protagonist of a fictional autobiography — “grapples self-consciously with her identity as a woman in a patriarchal culture and with her problematic relationship to engendered figures of selfhood” (56). Although she is writing in a fictive confessional form, Laurence employs the same double-voiced structure, particularly in her later two novels.

A narrative communications model offers a point of departure for examining the double-voiced structure of *The Fire-Dwellers*. Narrative theorists such as Gerard Genette and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan identify several parties to the narrative situation, including the implied author and implied reader at the extradiegetic level, and the narrator and narratee at the intradiegetic level. The narrator in Laurence’s novel is a covert third-person narrator — that is, effaced or undramatized, presenting characters and events with minimal mediation (Prince 17). The narrator is also extradiegetic or outside the story, introducing characters, providing description, recording dialogue, and relating events. By convention, a covert, extradiegetic narrator is associated with figural narration. The covert

narratee is simply “the silent addressee of the narrator” (Rimmon-Kenan 104), who can be equated in this text with the implied reader (Martin 154). The protagonist’s voice is embedded in the figural narration, and she has several character-narratees who are dramatized in the text. Since Stacey’s voice is that of a confessional persona, these narratees become her “confessors” and each has a role in shaping the narrative.

Turning once again to the middle two novels, the texts are similar in their use of interior monologue; moreover, the voice of the protagonist is directed toward a series of intradiegetic character-narratees, and this series structures the plot. In the early chapters of *A Jest of God*, Rachel ventures opinions only silently: “I want only to go to Willard and tell him to listen, just to listen” (31-32). Silently, she can admit guilt: “*James — I’m sorry*” (59), and, silently, she longs for a genuine exchange of ideas with her mother: “I wonder what she believes, if anything” (46). Despite her reticence, her mind is far from silent and hers is not the only voice that registers in her consciousness. The maternal voice frequently enters her thoughts, telling her that to be self-revealing is a “disgrace” (49), that “women shouldn’t phone men” (137), and that virginity is “a woman’s most precious possession” (96). In Bakhtinian terms, one might note that in Rachel’s consciousness every thought is “internally dialogic”; whether her mind is filled with struggle or open to inspiration from outside itself, it is as if Rachel’s consciousness were casting a “continual sideways glance at another person” (Bakhtin 32).

Like Rachel’s, Stacey’s voice engages a series of intradiegetic character-narratees in her interior monologues. Throughout the first half of the novel she silently expresses a desire for meaningful communication, particularly with her husband and family: “Mac — let me explain. Let me tell you how it’s been with me.” (25) In her thoughts, she addresses her daughter in the same way: “Katie? Listen. Just let me explain. I can explain everything” (47). Stacey longs for dialogue that is honest and direct, recognizing intuitively the therapeutic potential of confession to purge guilt (Stelzig 27).

The turning point of both novels occurs when Rachel and Stacey enter into dialogue with Nick Kazlik and Luke Venturi, respectively, and their innermost thoughts and feelings are freely articulated in both the dialogue and interior monologue. Rachel does not readily overcome the sense of propriety in the maternal voice, but she does find Nick “easy to talk to” and she confides in him enough for him to recognize that “that polite voice” of hers is “deceptive” (106). Subsequently, Rachel begins to imagine Nick as the addressee of her interior monologue, and as such he becomes the cata-

lyst for her self-perception. This internal construct enables her to express ideas that she cannot otherwise articulate, even to herself: “I talk to him, when he is not here, and tell him everything I can think of” (144). Before meeting Nick, Rachel represses her sexuality, but with Nick’s encouragement she begins to think about the way his skin feels and “the hair that grows blackly down to your belly and around your sex” (121). Nevertheless, Rachel’s consciousness reveals her continuing sense of isolation. Dorrit Cohn comments in *Transparent Minds* on the use of interior monologue to underscore the mental anguish of the monologist:

[When] monologists address their inner discourse to one or more mind-haunting interlocutors All these make-believe communications underscore the pervasive loneliness of the monologist, whose only true interlocutor remains the ‘Imprisoned Self.’ (Cohn 245)

When Rachel’s relationship with Nick is severed, she retains “only guarded echoes of his voice” (160).

A similarly pivotal change occurs halfway through *The Fire-Dwellers*. In the sixth of ten chapters, Stacey discovers in Luke someone to whom she can speak her mind. This shift is accompanied by a shift in plot. In the first half of the novel Stacey is predominantly alone with her worries that a catastrophe may befall her family, but when Mac accuses her of infidelity, she faces a series of crises: her affair with Luke, Mac’s conflict with Thor, Buckle’s death, Matthew’s fall, Tess’s suicide attempt, and Duncan’s near-drowning. Stacey’s interior monologues continue as they did in the first half of the novel but, beginning with Luke, a series of character-narratees also arises out of these events to engage her, not just in the interior monologue, but also in the dialogue.

Luke’s question, “What’s the bad news?” (164), draws out her first spoken confession. Luke’s assumption that everyone has “bad news” to tell invites self-disclosure: “Like it’s the secret of the confessional? Oh baby. You’re unbelievable” (166). He assures her that she is “not alone” in possessing an anguished mind (165). Stacey speaks of her fear for her children: “I sometimes think in the end it’s me who’s hurting them the most, after all” (180). Luke’s words carry the power of absolution, performing the therapeutic function of purging her guilt. Stacey’s relationship with Luke comes to an end, but by increasing her self-perception, their dialogue encourages Stacey to directly engage with other character-narratees. Katie, for example, absolves Stacey of her guilt for leaving Jen with a neighbour who is mentally unstable: “No — it wasn’t your fault. You didn’t know” (191). Next, Stacey enters into a frank discussion with

Mac by revealing that she did not sleep with Buckle, and Mac also absolves her: "I believe you now" (219).

In the same way, Rachel makes progress in her dialogue with Hector Jonas. He clarifies Rachel's memory of her father by confirming that Niall Cameron lived the withdrawn life of an alcoholic, but he remarks, "I would bet he had the kind of life he wanted most" (131). This insight is an epiphany for Rachel: "If my father had wanted otherwise, it would have been otherwise.... Did he ever try to alter [his life]? Did I, with mine?" (131). Realizing the immutable emptiness of her own life, Rachel overcomes a sense of propriety to accept Hector's "plump, well-meaning arm across my shoulders" (133).

The dialogues with Nick and Hector prepare Rachel to accept the vulnerability of self-disclosure. She is then ready to build on these experiences and to open up dialogue with perhaps the most important narratee, Calla Mackie. "Brash" and "strong," she openly disregards appearances and subverts the stereotypical image of the spinster that Rachel fears will define her identity. Rachel turns to Calla in a crisis because Calla encourages full self-disclosure: "I'll listen, whatever it is" (181). Calla becomes a mother figure who differs from Mrs. Cameron:

[Calla's] love for Rachel makes her more sensitive to Rachel's emotional and psychological immaturity than is Mrs. Cameron, who puts 'appearances' and her own needs before the welfare of her daughter. Calla's feeling for Rachel goes beyond the limits of comradeship.... It is Calla who consistently worries that Rachel works too hard, that she does not socialize enough, and that she judges herself too harshly. (Relke 41)

Calla's words even enter Rachel's interior monologue when she comforts herself: "Rachel, hush. Hush, child. Steady. It's all right. It's going to be all right" (183, 43). Calla unwittingly diagnoses Rachel's problem: "We hold ourselves too tightly these days, that's the trouble" (33). After a surgical removal of the tumor which Rachel had mistaken for a pregnancy, Rachel speaks aloud, not in confusion, but with ecstatic joy, "I am the mother now" (191), signaling her successful negotiation of the "imperatives of paternal and maternal fictions that characterize women's storytelling" (Smith 52). By the novel's close, Rachel's voice constructs a new self; she is "able to act, to predict, to leave home, to do something with words" (Powell 34). In Vancouver she hopes to engage an even more effective character-narratee than Calla, for she is convinced that Stacey might be "the only person I could talk to" (174).

Both novels dramatize the self-scrutinizing consciousness of the protagonist as she “lays open” her memory and progresses toward self-perception, since her “autobiography” is understood to be a process through which the protagonist “struggles to shape an ‘identity’ out of amorphous subjectivity” (Smith 5). Furthermore, in addition to their “multi-voicedness,” both novels demonstrate a principle of construction that Bakhtin identifies as characteristic of confessional fiction: the “intersection” of “rejoinders in the open dialogue by rejoinders in the heroes’ internal dialogue” (Bakhtin 264). Perhaps most importantly, in both novels, and indeed in all of the Manawaka texts, the confessional narrative is highly mimetic in that it “aims at a psychological reproduction of mental processes” (Scholes and Kellogg 14). Both protagonists grapple with “engendered figures of selfhood,” but Rachel’s isolation derives largely from her personal anxiety, while Stacey’s derives from her social position as a suburban housewife and mother of four. Perhaps this distinction can illuminate the question as to why one novel is cast in the first person while the other is in the third person.

The authority of the intradiegetic, first-person narrator is a mimetic authority: Laurence’s choice of the first person emphasizes the perceptions of the narrator, as Leona Gom and others have observed.⁵ In *A Jest of God*, the immediacy of the narrative voice, heightened by the present tense of the monologue and dialogue, creates the impression of a direct entrance into Rachel’s experience. The focalization of the narrative from the perspective of the female narrator asserts a woman-centred point of view, and the confessional form becomes an effective means of portraying the complexities of female consciousness. Rachel’s narrative is a self-representation based on the authority of her experience and perceptions, but she frequently defers to the cultural fictions that dictate the behaviour of unmarried women as they are reflected in the maternal voice with which she struggles.⁶ The subject under examination is, therefore, not just the consciousness of the protagonist, but also the society that shapes that consciousness.

Consequently, the confessional form, as Laurence employs it, becomes a narrative strategy for embedding ideological messages about the relationship between cultural fictions of identity and women’s self-representation. In this respect, Laurence is writing in a literary tradition in that begins with *Jane Eyre*, establishing “a tradition of fictional autobiography by women in a way that, as Elaine Showalter says, was ‘felt to have been revolutionary,’” and it extends into the twentieth century (Lanser 188).⁷ Furthermore, in its ideology *A Jest of God* resembles feminist writ-

ing of the 1960s. Elizabeth Wilson argues that the goal of this writing was to give voice to female experience:

The women's movement erupted as a politics of experience, and what seemed important then . . . was for women to 'find a voice' and to testify to an experience that had been lost, silenced or never even allowed to emerge into consciousness. (27)

Perhaps the most significant ideological aspect of the narrative voice is, however, the identifications it encourages at the extradiegetic level between the narrator, implied author, and implied reader. Diana Brydon elucidates Laurence's depiction of the Manawaka women as "socially constituted by a specific discourse: that of small-town Puritanical Anglo-Scots Canada," and her strategy is to "give ordinary women their voices" in an effort to "reach out to their readers to establish a sense of community" (202-03). Such identifications are typical strategies of women writers to "manage reader response toward the female protagonist who occupies their work's ideological platform" (Gardiner 349). Similarly, Coral Ann Howells recognizes that autobiographical fiction, and by extension confessional fiction, is a staple in women's fiction as a form that is "sufficiently expansive to contain wider social and political issues beyond self-scrutiny" (93).

In this tradition of women's fiction, the inside view of first-person narration generates sympathy for the point of view of the narrator because the reader finds herself or himself located within the narrator's consciousness. Laurence borrows the confessional form to create sympathy for her protagonist through whose eyes the reader views the societal representation, as she embeds a feminist ideology to challenge a patriarchal culture.⁸ It is important to her narrative strategy that the reader identify with the narrator's experience, which is integral to the production of meaning for it "entails the possibility that we may formulate ourselves and so discover what had previously seemed to elude our consciousness" (Iser 68). The strategy is sound whether the real reader is male or female; a female reader may share the narrator's discovery of autonomy, and by viewing social issues from a female perspective a male reader may find himself apprehending an unfamiliar experience. In either case, the reader becomes receptive to the text's ideology because he or she is the only addressee to hear the entire confession.⁹

In one sense, however, first-person narration diminishes the authority of the narrative voice. Susan Lanser demonstrates that throughout the history of the novel, successful women writers have been restricted pri-

marily to the use of the “personal voice” for expressing opinion and social critique, and she ascribes “personal voice” to “narrators who are self-consciously telling their own stories” (18).¹⁰ At the same time, however, “personal voice” becomes the vehicle for public expression in the guise of fiction, “a calculated response to alienation and censorship” (12). Personal voice corresponds to the social phenomenon of “women’s place” in the private and domestic sphere rather than the public sphere; therefore, the personal voice of the female character becomes an accepted literary convention. Lanser also notes the widespread development of fiction that is formally indistinguishable from autobiography, beginning in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and extending into the twentieth century, as these novels maintain the illusion of the narrative as a private discourse (48). Because social critique may be limited to the thought or dialogue of a character, the personal voice generally has less discursive authority than a third-person narrator: “a personal narrator claims only the validity of one person’s right to interpret her own experience” (18).

In contrast, third-person narration lends authority to the text because the values and reflections expressed are not presented merely as the singular opinion of a fictional character: since extradiegetic narrators “exist outside narrative time (indeed, ‘outside’ fiction) and are not ‘humanized’ by events, they conventionally carry an authority superior to that conferred on characters, even on narrating characters” (Lanser 16). *The Fire-Dwellers* therefore demonstrates a shift from a first-person, fictive confessional form, which is well established and widely accepted among women writers, to a third-person form. This shift may reflect a corresponding sociohistorical shift brought about by the women’s movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Whether or not this shift in Laurence’s work is intentional is impossible to determine, but it certainly represents a greater claim to discursive authority.

In *The Fire-Dwellers*, both at its conclusion and frequently throughout the text, the extradiegetic, third-person narrator creates sympathy for the protagonist because the story’s telling is generally consonant with Stacey’s perspective. The narrator’s voice is dissonant, however, in providing a broader perspective of the character than she can provide of herself. In the interior monologue Stacey is often confronted with two selves. One is the public self and the other is the private self that appears in all confessional narrative; these two selves correspond to the protagonist’s own public voice and private voice (Spender 115). Stacey’s public voice is frequently self-condemning, as it is after an afternoon of indulgence in drinking gin and dancing to old records:

Remorse — overdose of same. I'm not fit to be in charge of kids, that's the plain truth. God, accept my apologies herewith. He won't. Would you, in His place? No. Come on, be practical. Dinner . . . Oh Stacey, this is madness . . . Come on, bitch. Another cup of coffee. (126)

Aligned with social norms and mores, her public voice is depicted as being invested with the moral authority to pass judgment. Her public voice pronounces Stacey an unfit mother and a “bitch.” In contrast, Stacey’s private voice expresses only confusion about a perceived duplicity: “These lies will be the death of me sooner than later, if they haven’t already been. What goes on inside isn’t ever the same as what goes on outside. It’s a disease I’ve picked up somewhere” (34). Her awareness of two selves is reflected in Stacey’s fear that “this is madness.” Although this split subjectivity is in some respects normative, the confessional narrative generates a discourse which may help stabilize the divided identity of a character (Lanser 27).

In contrast, the third-person narrator offers no evidence of madness in Stacey’s behaviour. In a detached, reportorial tone the narrator summarizes the solitary and rather banal comings and goings of a suburban housewife. Stacey checks on the children, sits in the living room, sings to herself, enters the kitchen, makes herself coffee and a sandwich. Even the description of her drinking and burning her hand appears in the same value-free style:

Twelve-thirty. Stacey takes the empty bottle into the kitchen and places it behind three bottles of wine and a bottle of vinegar. She takes the frying pan down from its hook and puts it on the stove . . . She reaches for the frying pan, stumbles, puts out a hand to balance herself. The hand lands on the edge of the electrical scarlet circle. (129-30)

It is Stacey’s voice, not the narrator’s, which interprets the event as evidence of her incompetence: “I can’t cope” (130). The narrator reports only Stacey’s application of a dressing and her retiring for the night, suggesting only Mac’s absence as a cause for Stacey’s anxious state of mind: “Mac is at a conference and will probably not be home until midnight” (127). The narrator implies that Stacey’s isolation is the cause of her distress, reflecting not a personal deficiency but rather a social one. The dissonance between the narrator’s and Stacey’s portrayal of the same event — between representations at the intradiegetic and extradiegetic levels — subtly indicates that Stacey is in error in interpreting her problems as personal shortcomings rather than cultural deficiencies.

The primary purpose of the extradiegetic narrator is to adequately present the consciousness of Stacey and the confessional process of self-transformation. Because the third-person narrator has full access to Stacey's consciousness and to knowledge of the fictional world, the narrator's account is more authoritative than a first-person account might be. For example, the limitations of a supposedly powerful maternal identity are reinforced by Stacey's dreams. She has apocalyptic nightmares in which she envisions herself as ultimately incapable of protecting her children from catastrophe: "They know she can hear their voices. They do not know why she cannot come to them" (25). The nightmares reveal an unconscious anxiety about her ability to care for her children. This nightmare is cast, not in quoted monologue, but in psycho-narration, the language of the narrator, who is able to communicate an unconscious fear, which Stacey is not fully able to articulate, until she relates the story of the gun which she keeps secretly hidden in case she should ever need to put her children out of their misery. The presentation of these nightmares at the extradiegetic level by the third-person narrator is addressed, not to a character-narratee, but to the implied reader. Stacey's fantasies are also cast in the third person:

Out there in unknown houses are people who live without lies, and who touch each other. One day she will discover them, pierce through to them. Then everything will be all right, and she will live in the light of the morning. (79, original emphasis)

The use of the gender-specific pronoun "she" instead of "I" indicates the generalizing possibilities of her experience. This problem may not be specific to the individual character, but rather typical for women of the novel's sociohistorical context. As a result, Laurence's employment of an authoritative, third-person narrator becomes a rhetorical strategy to convince the reader of the accuracy of the fictional representation, and the implied reader ultimately becomes Stacey's chief confessor. This strategy is particularly effective in a gendered confession.

The novel presents not only a woman, but a particularly powerless woman. As a housewife, who by her own admission could be "better educated" (8), Stacey has little authority to offer a social critique of the sociohistorical, extrafictional world. In fact, at times Stacey appears to be unaware of the social forces that shape her own subjectivity. The third-person narrator authoritatively represents the split subjectivity that results from gender roles. The narrative subtly exposes the social injustice of burdening a woman with the sole responsibility of childcare but with

little social support. Although the institution of marriage provides Stacey with financial support, Mac's emotional support and daily assistance are limited. Furthermore, Stacey is torn between her roles as mother and sexual object, as demonstrated by her critical self-inspections in the mirror, excursions to the beauty salon, and furtive lovemaking at Luke's cabin, while she reproaches herself for leaving her child with her eldest daughter or a neighbour. The ideological message that these identities cause her split subjectivity is implicit throughout the narrator's representation, so that the message is reinforced not only by the personal voice of one character, but also by the public voice of an authoritative, third-person narrator.

The Fire-Dwellers is told through two voices: Stacey's and the narrator's. Each voice corresponds to different narratees at the intradiegetic and extradiegetic levels. Stacey's voice is represented primarily through interior monologue and external dialogue and the discourse is directed at a series of character-narratees, such as Mac, Katie, Luke, herself, and even God. Throughout the novel, the embedding of Stacey's voice within the text of the third-person narrator allows the narrating voice to address the implied reader directly. This authoritative voice provides a sociohistorical perspective and a subtle feminist ideology that are significant to the reader's interpretation of the protagonist's experience.

The use of a third-person narrator is an important modification of the confessional form which Laurence develops only in the later two novels of the Manawaka cycle. The voices of the protagonist and the narrator are mutually reinforcing, because each is important in establishing the reliability of the teller and the tale. The intradiegetic voice of Stacey, like Rachel's, offers the mimetic authority that is usually associated with first-person narration: the immediacy of her conscious experience holds up a mirror to the isolated life of suburban women in North American culture of the 1960s. At the same time, the extradiegetic, third-person narrator offers the authority that is conventionally associated with the omniscient narrator. This double-voiced structure reinforces the authenticity of the confessional narrative and, ultimately, the female testimony that is addressed directly to the reader.

The confessional impulse toward self-examination and self-perception is evident in all four of the Manawaka novels. While each protagonist struggles to overcome an anguished sense of isolation, the novels also focus on the sociohistorical forces that shape female subjectivity, particularly engendered figures of selfhood such as the dutiful daughter and spinster, or the wife and mother. The conflicts that Laurence's protagonists encounter are representative of female conflict within the socially con-

structed power relationships and institutions of a patriarchal culture: Hagar is in conflict with her father, husband and sons, who restrict her personal autonomy; Rachel overcomes her fear of stereotypes of unmarried women; Stacey is frustrated by the isolation and responsibility of a suburban housewife; and Morag rejects a debilitating marriage and resists the psychological and economic pressures that accompany her status as a single mother and writer. In each case, female experience is represented in relation to the pressures of a patriarchal society which restrict female autonomy: the resultant conflict shapes the protagonist's life story.

As Lanser rightly contends, the narrative voice becomes the site of resistance; female voice, in particular, is a "site of ideological tension made visible in textual practices" (29, 6). In all four novels, characterization and the confessional form exhibit representational and rhetorical strategies that are designed to convince the reader of the confession's authenticity, including the embedded ideology. In *The Fire-Dwellers* and *The Diviners*, the use of the third-person narrator establishes the speaking subject not only as a fictional but also as a "historical presence" (Lanser 41), so that the ideological conflict is presented as authoritative and reliable. As Lanser points out, narrative technique serves an ideological as well as semantic purpose: "Narration entails social relationships and thus involves far more than the technical imperatives for getting a story told" (4). The achievement of Laurence's work is the successful adaptation of the confessional form to represent female subjectivity in order to register criticism of restrictive, cultural fictions of female identity. Ultimately, the critique of patriarchy is the "secret" which all her confessional personae confide. Laurence extends the conventions of the fictive confessional narrative by employing the third-person narrator, which becomes part of a narrating strategy to persuade the reader of the validity of her representation of female experience. The authority of the narrating voice reinforces and expands the self-representation of the female protagonist — in effect, authorizing her confession.

NOTES

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the "Margaret Laurence and Her Times" conference at the University of Manitoba in October, 1997. For his many insightful suggestions, I would like to thank Dr. Ray Mise at the University of Regina.

² Many critics have noted this effect without identifying its ideological purpose. Leona Gom, for example, notes that Laurence's choice of the first person emphasizes the perceptions of the narrator. Similarly, Barbara Hehner comments that "we feel that we are sharing [the protagonists'] struggles" (47).

³ For a more complete discussion of the characteristics of confession in Saint Augustine, see Judith Whitenack. There is no one paradigm of confession which is generally agreed upon. In attempting to determine whether there is a paradigm that might be applicable to Laurence's work, I have used Axthelm's definition as a point of departure, drawing upon others as necessary. Our ideas of confession may need modification to deal with present writers, particularly in the case of women's confessions.

⁴ For a comprehensive overview, see James Olney. For further discussion of the genre and of Hagar as a first-person confessional narrator, refer to my article "The Stone Angel as a Feminine Confessional Novel."

⁵ See note 2 (above). Hildegard Kuester goes on to analyze the novels' similarities in narrative structure, effectively demonstrating that to Laurence "form was a paramount means of communicating her ideas in a manner that would actually reach her readers" (193). My concurrence with this viewpoint will become clear later in the essay.

⁶ Barbara Powell argues that the maternal voice is the source of Rachel's linguistic confusion: "This pleasant voice, learned by Rachel at her mother's knee and reinforced by the ladies of Manawaka, features repression and rationalization. It is deferential, and is marked by the use of linguistic patterns that question, minimize, judge and negate" (23).

⁷ I am simply drawing attention here to the relatively recent appearance of the female speaking subject as presented by a female author. I am not attempting to engage in a discussion of a panhistorical "women's language" or "female form," or even to suggest that women necessarily write differently from men. I am indebted to Susan Lanser's discussion of female voice (3-24).

⁸ I am in agreement with Susan Lanser, who writes, "Because literary form has a far more uncertain relation to social history than does representational content, even a fully materialist poetics would be hard-pressed to establish definitive correspondences between social ideology and narrative form. I have nonetheless considered it fruitful to venture speculations about causal relationships that others may be able to establish or refute" (23).

⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin writes, "All ideological creative acts are conceived and perceived as possible expressions of a single consciousness"; in fact, "a unity of viewpoint must weld into one both the most formal elements of style and the most abstract philosophical deductions" (82-83).

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion, see Lanser 3-24 and 25-41.

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