CHILDHOOD IN THE FICTION
OF W.O. MITCHELL

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By

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ABSTRACT

For W.O. Mitchell, childhood is more than a period of innocent happiness to be remembered nostalgically. In his fiction, he shows that it may actually be the most significant time in anyone's life because the assimilation of childhood experiences, attitudes, values and aspirations are critical to the complete development of the mature adult consciousness. Mitchell strongly believes that "life is a balancing act" as each individual searches for meaning in the world and a strong personal identity, in response to the influence of such powerful forces as nature and civilization, God and human nature, imagination and conformist instruction, social responsibility and self-interest. In approaching the challenges of life and art, Mitchell always insists on the "whole view", so the central concerns expressed in his fiction are moral and affirmative, reflecting an essentially humanistic and existentialist philosophy. In his novels, Mitchell uses the image of the child as an active image, a representation of human potency, and through its innocence, an expression of infinite possibility for mankind.

In this thesis, I examine Mitchell's fiction as part of a particular, historical, literary tradition concerning the use of the figure of the child and the emphasis on childhood experience. I also consider the value of modern psychological studies in appreciating Mitchell's art, and ways in which his vision is distinctively Canadian. The body of this paper deals with Who Has Seen the Wind (1947) and How I Spent My Summer Holidays (1981) as a basis for discussion of Mitchell's treatment of childhood throughout his work.

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I wish to dedicate this thesis to my family, especially my husband, Ian, with appreciation for their continued support.

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"Childhood in the Fiction of W.O. Mitchell"

Introduction

Throughout his forty-year writing career, W.O. Mitchell has produced several important works of fiction and drama, directing a charming sense of humour toward the serious investigation of universal issues within a distinctively Canadian milieu. His central concern is with the development of the individual's vital inner resources and consciousness in relation to other people, social orders and conventions, morality, nature and God. Mitchell's primarily moral vision is rooted in what he considers to be fundamental human values. A self-proclaimed "Existentialist,"[1] Mitchell consistently endorses his belief in mankind and in the dignity and potential of the individual in an ever-changing universe. Life itself should be celebrated, he insists, as each person aspires toward self-knowledge. The image of childhood is at the heart of Mitchell's interest, and the

figure of a child is a central character in all seven of his novels.

My thesis is that Mitchell uses the figure of the child in his fiction to establish a relation between childhood and adult consciousness in order to assert the importance of the development of the complete individual while stressing the continuity and unity of human experience. Throughout his fiction, Mitchell's concern with childhood is continuously adult. He advocates an awareness of the significance of the individual's early years to the total response of the mature sensibility. In depicting the development of individual child figures and their search for truth, Mitchell examines their relationship to fictional adult characters, to himself, as their adult creator, and to adult readers. He concludes that in art, as in life, the key is "being aware of balance ... there is no absolute victory or answer. You simply have to be a good balancer. A good balancer."[2]

Childhood is present in all of Mitchell's fiction but the following two chapters will focus on Who Has Seen the Wind (1947) and How I Spent My Summer Holidays (1981). I selected these two novels because the central character in each is a child whose personal development is most relevant thematically, whereas in Mitchell's other work, child figures are used primarily to complement the growth experience of adult characters. Who Has Seen the Wind and

How I Spent My Summer Holidays cover the childhood years of four to twelve, and some interesting comparisons can be made between the two central characters in terms of their individual growth, and Mitchell's artistic treatment of them. As these two novels were written over thirty years apart, the vision reflected in them regarding the significance of childhood to the adult sensibility is important to my discussion of the consistency of Mitchell's concerns throughout his career. For a more complete perspective, reference will be made, wherever appropriate, to the other five novels.

This introductory chapter serves to state my thesis argument clearly and to provide background information relevant to the ensuing examination of the two selected novels. Referring to critical articles about Mitchell's fiction, interviews with the author himself, and, of course, reference to Mitchell's own novels, I will discuss Mitchell's central concerns and the web of underlying tensions present in all his work. I will look at his use of autobiographical material and his changing philosophical position as it has affected his work, his application of humour, his interest in modern psychological studies, and his view of the significance of childhood to the creative experience. This discussion will begin by placing Mitchell's fiction involving the use of the theme of childhood within a particular, historical,

literary tradition. Then I will discuss Mitchell's distinctively Canadian perspective and the influence on him of his own experience of the prairie region. I will conclude this chapter with a look at Mitchell's fiction and the theme of childhood in the light of Mitchell's own justification for art.

Mitchell's use of the figure of the child, and his emphasis on the importance of childhood experience in his writing is examined as part of a tradition developed by such earlier writers as Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Dickens, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, and Mark Twain. In his study of this tradition in The Image of Childhood (1957), Peter Coveney points out that for these authors, "the child was a symbol of their concern with the individual humanity of Man in relation to the influences, most often the encroachments, of modern, industrial society upon it."[3] The particular cultural situations in which these writers found themselves impelled them towards a re-evaluation and discussion of religious sanctions, social values and the relation of the alienated artist or of any sensitive individual to his rapidly changing world.

In their art, these writers refuse to be overwhelmed by despair, but turn to the use of the figure of a child as a creative symbol. As Coveney explains further, this symbol is "a focal point of contact between the growing human consciousness and the 'experience' of an

alien world, about which they could concentrate their disquiet, and, importantly, their hopes for human salvation."[4] Like these literary predecessors, Mitchell's concern is focussed upon the impact of environment on the innocent child, particularly upon his fertile imagination. The theme of education by both the forces, or worlds of nature and civilization is dominant throughout Mitchell's work, and will be explored in detail in the chapters dealing with Who Has Seen the Wind and How I spent My Summer Holidays. It is worthwhile at this point, however, to explore the underlying tension Mitchell creates in his fiction by continuously pitting the forces of nature against those of society, impelling the child-figures to seek more realistic, balanced views of the world and to formulate a more complete sense of identity.

The world of nature evokes reverence and awe in all Mitchell's child characters. They also express a spontaneous, joyous appreciation of beauty and power, understanding themselves to be, somehow, very much a part of it. For example, in Jake and the Kid (1961), the Kid says,

> And when you lie on your belly at the bottom of Mac's coulée, you're in a world; she's your own world, and there's nobody else's there, and you can do what you want with her. You can look close at the heads on the wild oats all real feathery; you can look at the crocuses and they're purple, not out-and-out purple, but not blue either. If you look real close they got real small hairs like on a person's face close to a mirror.[5]

Mitchell's depiction of a child's attunement with nature indicates that he agrees with the English Romantic poets' concept of organicism. According to this concept, it is only through the imagination that one may seek to understand the cosmos in its organic wholeness as incorporating the physical, the mental or ideal and the divine elements in a continuous process.[6]

In exploring what they assumed was any child's ability to identify sympathetically with nature, the Romantic poets developed the image of an omnipotent and omnipresent consciousness which manifests itself through nature. In their poetry and in Mitchell's fiction, a child may accept this presence intuitively and through direct experience rather than as an abstract philosophy. Wordsworth, for example, considered his own experience as a child of feeling united and nurtured by Nature (written about for example, in "Ode: Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood"), evidence to justify his faith in this consciousness. He was not merely making an assumption based on philosophical idealism or anti-urban sentiment.[7] In <u>Who Has Seen the Wind</u> and <u>Jake and the Kid</u> there is much to indicate that, at least at the time he wrote those books, Mitchell also believed in an omnipotent force in the universe with which a child might be in tune, before reaching the level of "maturity" where rational thoughts could intrude.

Unlike some of the Romantics, however, Mitchell does not idealize nature in his fiction but portrays it realistically both in its creative potential and its destructive capabilities. Neither does Mitchell mean to personify or deify nature except where a character (usually a child) might interpret his experience of it in a personal or imaginative way. Mitchell uses images and symbols from the world of nature (such as the wind in Who Has Seen the Wind) to underscore his thematic emphasis. When a child in Mitchell's fiction reaches an acceptance of the fact that good and evil are ever present, and fundamental to the workings of nature (as to those of "civilized" mankind), that child has taken an important, and inevitably painful, step away from a completely innocent perspective.

Though Mitchell has claimed in recent years that he does not believe in immortality,[8] it is interesting to find evidence in his novels, of his appreciation of the Romantic concept of transcendentalism. Mitchell's work indicates a belief in the possibility, at least, of what David Perkins defines generally as "the existence of a timeless realm of being beyond the shifting sensory world of common experience."[9] Most of Mitchell's central characters are depicted as having in childhood, an intuitive connection with such a realm which is sustained through an instinctive appreciation of the world of

nature. A sense of nostalgia for the comfort and wonder of this realm later develops as the children mature, and are drawn into the social complexities of the adult world. The Indian girl, Victoria, in The Vanishing Point (1973), is perhaps the best example of Mitchell's portrayal of this experience. Mitchell does not, however, share the Romantic poets' nostalgia for an irrecoverable past, or for the security and innocence of childhood.

Mitchell never loses sight of the fact that although a child may feel almost instinctively drawn toward the natural world, he is, nevertheless, a social creature who must come to terms with the way of life and the values of his culture. Achieving the inner discipline required to balance a child's natural spontaneity is fundamental to his reaching a mature and satisfying view of the world. (As this process is central to Mitchell's vision of the importance of the development of the complete individual, and therefore to my thesis argument, it will warrant particularly close attention in the chapters focussing on Who Has Seen the Wind and How I Spent My Summer Holidays.)

The tension between discipline and spontaneity, or education and intuitive understanding is of prime importance to Mitchell who asserts that in his work as both writer and teacher, he is "concerned about the corruption of the living thing by the patterning and

forming mind."[10] In each novel, Mitchell creates eccentric figures who act to stimulate the child's intuitive understanding, such as Daddy Sherry in The Kite (1962) and Saint Sammy in Who Has Seen the Wind. These social misfits operate in apparent opposition to the duty-minded adults of the established social order, as Mitchell explores issues of morality and responsibility, formal education and organized religion, human emotions and relationships. In responding to a variety of characters the child learns to question the authority of others to regulate life, and subsequently to challenge the workings of his own conscience.

Most writers, academics and readers today are aware of the value of psychological studies as means to comprehend human behaviour and evaluate growth. A look at the ideas of some prominent psychologists and psychoanalysts who investigate child and adolescent development will further our understanding of Mitchell's intentions. Some of the most popular forms of therapy such as Freudian or Jungian analysis, are insight-oriented and involve delving into an individual's past in order to understand unresolved emotional conflicts which may then be treated. Peter Coveney notes that one of the main continuities between the great Romantics and psychoanalysis (and I would add W.O. Mitchell), is their aim to "integrate the human personality by surmounting

adult insensitivity to childhood."[11]

Mitchell studied psychology and philosophy while at university and was evidently intrigued by what he learned, especially of the theories of Jean Piaget, an eminent child psychologist.[12] Like Mitchell, Piaget is particularly interested in the child's search for a potentially peaceful world view. From a detached, scientific perspective, Piaget challenged the widely-held belief in childhood as an ideal state, suggesting rather, that it is a difficult process of self-determination marked by a terrible sense of vulnerability. In his analysis of the nature of conceptual development, Piaget attempted to investigate this search and to measure advancement according to distinct stages of growth through which he insisted that every child must pass.[13] In writing about childhood in his fiction, Mitchell adheres remarkably closely to various psychologists' observations, deviating from them infrequently, and then for deliberate artistic purposes. I shall therefore be taking a close look at the psychological development of the central child-figures in Who Has Seen the Wind and How I Spent My Summer Holidays.

While maintaining an interest in modern psychological findings, Mitchell insists that art is an illusion which must be carefully built upon a solid foundation of life -- mostly upon the artist's own

experience of life. He is quite emphatic that his writing is based upon what he has "found" within himself, in a part of his mind which he refers to as "this unconsciously absorbed, inexhaustible supply of a subconscious notebook."[14] Mitchell's own childhood experience, therefore, serves as the basis for his depiction of childhood in his fiction. He acknowledges, too, that his relationships with his own children and grandchildren are important to his mature perspective as an artist.[15] This development can be seen, for example, in Since Daisy Creek (1985) in the relationship he writes about between a middle-aged writer/professor and his independent grown-up daughter, as compared to the relationships explored in his early novels which focussed primarily on relationships between young father-figures and little boys. Though he starts from life, Mitchell says, "Then I distort and outrage and discard all kinds of autobiographical bits in order to conform to my thematic purpose ...."[16]

Mitchell maintains that to recreate an illusion of actuality is not enough to justify art. The value of his art, he believes, lies in the extent to which his reader must complete the creative process by attending to clues, carefully placed through the work. This constitutes another balancing act. Mitchell writes that "when the art experience happens between a creative artist and a creative partner, it is probably the closest a human can

ever come to truly crossing a bridge to another human."[17] It is interesting to note at this point, another similarity between Mitchell's approach to art, and that of some Romantic poets. In speaking of "Ode: Intimations of Immortality ...," Wordsworth writes, "A Reader who has not a vivid recollection of these feelings having existed in his mind cannot understand that poem."[18]

A knowledge of Mitchell's personal outlook and philosophy enriches our understanding of his depiction of the development of a positive self-identity, from childhood through to full maturity, in his various novels. His early philosophical position as is revealed in his first novel and his more recent convictions will be explored further in the following chapters, but some discussion at this point is valuable. As his own life has progressed, Mitchell has found himself reconsidering the basic philosophical premises about which he once felt strongly, and he has done some serious reevaluation which is reflected in his fiction. He says, "for years I thought of myself as a Platonist with Presbyterian overtones .... But, in later years, I've come to realize that in fact I am an Existentialist as an artist and as a person. And that Existentialism is a falling/balancing act with no absolutes."[19] In refusing to belong to any school of thought and repudiating the adequacy of any system of beliefs, Mitchell explores the significance of

freedom and personal responsibility, and the consequences of individual choices and decisions in life.

Mitchell does not specify which, if any Existential writers may have influenced his thinking. I have, therefore, chosen to define existentialism in a way which would seem appropriate to Mitchell's interest and the discussion in this paper, using the definition by Alan De Witt Button in The Authentic Child (1969). Button maintains that

> existentialism proclaims freedom, unfettered, often frightening freedom, and it is only in freedom that we can attain full humanity. There are no rules, no standards, no proscriptions or prescriptions in existentialism -- no generalities, no lists of should and should nots to guide a human life .... Existentialism holds that authenticity -- the condition of real-ness and full-functioning, of expanding sensitivity and awareness, of absorbed involvement in issues and work and people, of joy, and of love -- is based upon a proud awareness of oneself as a living, choosing, self-determining, unique individual. The authentic person, further, grants authenticity to other persons, and his relations with them are grounded in a firm and mutual respect. ... Existentialism is a state of mind, an attitude, and a value system, and it is accordingly unmeasurable and unquantifiable. Its highest value is humanist ....[20]

Our understanding of Mitchell's present philosophic position, in relation to Button's use of the term "humanist," may be furthered by Peter Faulkner's brief description in Humanism in the English Novel (1976), where he writes,

> Humanism is understood in its modern sense of an ethic which places human happiness as its central

> concern and is skeptical about the supernatural and transcendental .... Humanism is a philosophical position, not a matter of casual good will and its basis is the belief in human responsibility and human potentiality.[21]

Mitchell's existentialist approach to the inner, immediate experience of self-awareness naturally leads him to an investigation of the development of the child's impressionable mind, his imagination and spiritual inclinations. As a humanist, Mitchell is concerned with organized religion only as it is an agency of the environment which may be a restrictive influence on a child's emotions and imaginative responses.[22] This approach is particularly interesting in light of Northrop Frye's point that "Religion has been a major -- perhaps the major -- cultural force in Canada, at least down to the last generation or two."[23] Though he recognizes the value of civilization and its institutions beyond their restrictive tendencies, Mitchell believes that "one has to trust the intuitive, gut, heart response"; he concludes, "I still say 'yes' to man, but it's a qualified yes."[24]

Mitchell is dismayed by readers and critics who will not acknowledge or reflect on the serious intentions in his novels because of his pervasive use of humour.[25] Controversy most often rises over his use of laughable local anecdotes, farcical incidents, colourful colloquial language and other comic techniques. In Jake and the Kid, one of the characters is clearly speaking for the author

himself regarding the value of humour, particularly for prairie-dwellers, when he says:

> "This is hard country, I don't have to tell you that .... A man is a pretty small thing out on all this prairie. He is at the mercy of the elements. ... If a man can laugh at them he's won half the battle. When he exaggerates things he isn't lying really; it's a defence, the defence of exaggeration. He can either do that or squeal. ... People in this country aren't squealers."[26]

Clearly Mitchell believes that humour itself may be a primary source of strength for anyone and especially for a child, as it may enable him to discover the best attributes in both nature and society without being overwhelmed by despair.

Mitchell is not the first, but one of many writers to have used humour to varying degrees of effect, within the context of serious social commentary. Charles Dickens, for example, uses the figure of a child within humourous contexts throughout his work, sharing Mitchell's enthusiasm for life and opposition to the forces of misery and death. Dickens, too, has been severely criticized for not exercising sufficient control in his use of humour and for drawing upon his own past to evoke nostalgia and maintain the interest of the reader.[27] Like Dickens, Mitchell uses humour to convey what he believes to be important messages, underscoring his central concerns which are both moral and affirmative.

Critical readers such as Warren Tallman and Judith

A. Ticehurst still insist that the "absurd" and "demonic" elements portrayed in Mitchell's fiction cannot be evaded or transformed by what they interpret as a "protective screen" of humour.[28] Humour is yet another tool for Mitchell in his attempt to balance good and evil forces, and in his use of it, he is not meaning to deny the pain and difficulty involved in mankind's search for peace and self-fulfillment. Mitchell greatly admires the work of Canadian humourist, Stephen Leacock who wrote:

> Humour in its highest reach touches the sublime: humour in its highest reach mingles with pathos: it voices sorrow for our human lot and reconciliation with it.[29]

Another critic, Robin Mathews, recognizes Mitchell, along with Leacock and Haliburton, as writing within a distinctively Canadian tradition, and remarks in his book, Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution "Canadian humourists have been serious moral philosophers who make virtue fight for its life."[30]

Mitchell's depiction of childhood and his concern with the full development of the individual should be studied not only alongside the works of writers from other periods who dealt extensively with such images and themes, but also from a specifically Canadian perspective. It is interesting, for example, to view Mitchell's presentation of childhood in light of a study by Deborah Seed entitled "The Child in the Contemporary Novel" (1974). Seed

examines "developmental novels" as a genre, from a sociological point of view, with attention to the child's quest for identity within Canada's multi-cultural social fabric. She writes, "We cannot perhaps find a more eloquent testimony to our cultural heterogeneity than in our literature, especially in the novels written about youth."[31]

Seed provides insight into some patterns and discrepancies in Canadian fiction, and notes that "the image of childhood in the majority of the novels dealing with youth is not one of pastoral innocence and bliss but one of sadness, solitude, even misery," and concludes that, "the influence of our Calvinist - Jansenist heritage still lingers on."[32] Mitchell is certainly aware of such an influence, yet he insists on rejoicing in human potential and dignity, and he affirms the necessity of each individual developing a personal moral code, rather than merely accepting inherited social or theological roles and values.

In another significant essay on childhood in Canadian literature, "Children of the Changing Wind" (1970), Ronald Sutherland reaches conclusions similar to Seed's. He comments that the shared attitudes of Canadian authors from different backgrounds in their treatment of the child's memory patterns and artistic qualities, parental behavior and national habits, provides another

"indication of the existence of a common Canadian mystique."[33]

At the end of The Bush Garden (1971), his collection of essays on the Canadian imagination, Northrop Frye presents similar findings. He says, "I keep coming back to the feeling that there does seem to be such a thing as an imaginative continuum, and that writers are conditioned in their attitudes by their predecessors, or by the cultural climate of their predecessors, whether there is conscious influence or not."[34] Mitchell's presentation of childhood is unmistakably coloured by his experience and understanding of what it means to grow up in Canada, specifically on the prairies. Mitchell believes that, "There must be both a cultural usable past and a personal usable past," so that Mitchell says, "A truly Canadian literature exists when our authors write from experience -- stained by this geography and by this point in time ."[35]

There has been much written specifically about Canadian "prairie literature." Eli Mandel remarks upon how frequently the child-figure is connected with the prairie landscape, his vision of innocence providing a "magical clarity" which evokes a powerful feeling of nostalgia in the reader "for the place that was."[36] Mandel concludes that "the images of prairie man are images of a search for home and therefore a search for the

self."[37] W.O. Mitchell's intentions are clearly linked with such images and in this way, his perspective on childhood has a distinctively Canadian quality.

Some dissension over Mitchell's artistic merit may be based upon his affirmation of a Canadian pastoral myth, although Frye finds evidence of this myth's influence upon those he considers to be Canada's best and most serious writers (including Gabrielle Roy, Frederick Phillip Grove and Hugh MacLennan). In The Bush Garden, Frye argues that "the nostalgia for a world of peace and protection with a spontaneous response to the nature around it, with a leisure and composure not to be found today, is particularly strong in Canada."[39] This vision of a social ideal lies, Frye finds, at "the heart of all social mythology," and is most commonly associated with childhood or with some earlier social condition -- pioneer life, the small town, the 'habitant' rooted to his land -- that can be identified with childhood."[40]

Although Mitchell bases his fiction within a specific locale and time period, he does not simply wish to be considered an entertainer or "a folksy old Foothills fart;"[41] he wishes, rather, to be thought of as a challenging writer. He says:

> To me the only justification for art is that this particular narrative, these particular people, shall articulate some transcending truth that transcends region and transcends a given time, and that it shall have meaning and significance that

transcends the actual in the world of many.[42] Mitchell proposes that the key to unravelling the mystery of life may lie within the individual, in a child-like quality which he describes as innocence. It is an art in itself to retain into adulthood, the sense of joy, even awe, the enthusiasm for life which children express so freely and unselfconsciously. In his fiction, Mitchell explores both this innocence of childhood and what he calls the "innocence of experience," or "the artist's innocence, a sort of inner balance between spontaneity and discipline which must never tip too far in either direction."[43]

Mitchell is clearly not advocating a regression to an earlier state of naïveté and irresponsibility, but he encourages delving deep within oneself in order to stimulate a child-like sense of wonder. Mitchell has searched within himself through his own psychological, philosophical and literary concerns, seeking truths to share with his readers as he, himself, grows. He now unabashedly proclaims his most important discoveries: "that love is not a diminishable quantity; ... and that innocence is the best human quality."[44] Mitchell hopes to challenge his readers, by such passionate convictions, to re-evaluate their own perspectives on life and the world.

My first chapter, "A Question of Innocence," focusses on Mitchell's first novel, Who Has Seen the Wind.

Here, Mitchell explores the potential and power of the individual by tracing the development of a boy from the age of four to pre-adolescence. The influence of the Romantic poets is clear in Mitchell's treatment of the child's relationship to nature, while response to the findings of modern psychologists balances the depiction of Brian O'Connal's growth toward maturity. Finding one's place in the world is the central theme as the child learns to assimilate the wisdom he grasps from both the social and natural forces working on his young life. His experience is countered by the simultaneous struggles of various adults in his community, and this tension adds another dimension to an already rich story.

"A Lost and Found Innocence," the second chapter, investigates Mitchell's exploration of many of the same themes more than thirty years later, in How I Spent My Summer Holidays. While the narrator of the novel is a middle-aged man, much of the story is told using the voice of the adolescent boy he was when the events related took place. In resolving some early experiences which culminated in his loss of childhood innocence, the protagonist learns the necessity of recognizing human accountability while seeking freedom of expression and thereby acquiring a more balanced view of the world.

Though Mitchell's moral vision shines through all his fiction, some interesting comparisons may be made

regarding his use of childhood, as he, himself, matures and develops into a more complete individual. In his most recent novels, as in his first, Mitchell continues to affirm the need to maintain an inner sense of balance, and a sense of joy and wonder in art as in life.

NOTES

[1] David O'Rourke, "An Interview with W.O. Mitchell," English Canadian Writers, No. 20, (Winter 1980-81), 153. Mitchell's philosophical position will be discussed further on pages 12 to 14 of this Introduction.

[2] O'Rourke, p. 156.

[3] Peter Coveney, The Image of Childhood, (Baltimore: Penguin Books Ltd., 1957), p. 339. The pronoun "he" will be used throughout this paper whenever referring to a child-figure, unless the particular figure in question is female.

[4] Coveney, pp. 339-340.

[5] W.O. Mitchell, Jake and the Kid, (1961; Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), p. 65.

[6] David Perkins, ed., English Romantic Writers, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1967), pp. 15-16.

[7] Perkins, p. 172.

[8] Robert Duncan, dir., prod. with Robert Owen, W.O. Mitchell: Novelist in Hiding, with W.O. Mitchell, National Film Board, January 1980.

[9] Perkins, p. 14.

[10] W.O. Mitchell, "Debts of Innocence," Saturday Night, XCI (March 1976), 37.

[11] Coveney, pp. 240-241.

[12] Michael Peterman, "W.O. Mitchell," Profiles in Canadian Literature 2, ed. Jeffrey M. Heath (Toronto: Dundern Press, 1980), p. 10.

[13] Arnold Gesell, M.D., Frances L. Ilg, M.D., and Louise Bates Ames, Ph.D., The Child From Five to Ten, Rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 418.

[14]David O'Rourke, "An Interview with W.O. Mitchell," English Canadian Writers, No. 20, (Winter 1980-81), 153.

[15]Duncan.

[16]O'Rourke, p. 152.

[17]Donald Cameron, "W.O. Mitchell: Sea Caves and Creative Partners," Conversations with Canadian Novelists, Part Two (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, (1973), p. 51.

[18]Perkins, p. 280.

[19]O'Rourke, p. 153.

[20]Alan De Witt Button, The Authentic Child (New York: Random House, 1969), pp. 10-11.

[21]Peter Faulkner, Humanism in the English Novel (London: Pemberton Publishing Co. Ltd., 1976), p. 1.

[22]While W.O. Mitchell makes frequent reference to his own strict, Presbyterian up-bringing, nowhere does he mention any positive effects it may have had on his sense of right and wrong, or his moral vision in general.

[23]Northrop Frye, The Bush Garden (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1971), p. 227.

[24]O'Rourke, p. 154.

[25]A good example of a source of such dismay may be found in Margaret Laurence's review of The Kite, "Holy Terror" [Canadian Literature, No. 15 (Winter 1963), pp. 76-77]. Laurence comments on the "familiar cracker-barrel philosophy" and suggests " the attempt to instill deep meaning seems both unfortunate and unnecessary."

[26]Mitchell, Jake and the Kid, pp. 100-101.

[27]Earle Davis effectively explores the various critical responses to Dickens' work in The Flint and the Flame [(Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1963], while Edward A. McCourt comments in The Canadian West in Fiction [(1949; Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1970), p. 105] that in Mitchell's fiction, "we may feel that the deliberate contriving of comic incidents conceived in the broadest slap-stick spirit and obviously intended to maintain 'reader interest' is not the work of a responsible artist."

[28]Warren Tallman, "Wolf in the Snow," Canadian Literature, 5 (Summer 1960), 11. Judith E. Ticehurst, "The Matter of Perception in the Fiction of W.O. Mitchell," M.A. Diss. Sir George William University, 1975, p. 9.

[29]Stephen Leacock, Humour and Humanity (London: Thornton Butterworth Ltd., 1937,) p. 232.

[30]Robin Mathews, Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution (Toronto: Steel Rail Educational Publishing, 1978), p. 110.

[31]Deborah Seed, "The Child in the Contemporary Novel," M.A. Diss., Université de Sherbrooke, 1974, p. 3.

[32]Seed, p. 163.

[33]Ronald Sutherland, "Children of the Changing Wind," Journal of Canadian Studies, V (November 1970), 4.

[34]Frye, p. 250.

[35]Eleanor Ward, "W.O. Mitchell: The Ideas of an Author on Communicating the Uncommunicable," University of Toronto Graduate I, 3 (April 1974), 3.

[36]Eli Mandel, "Images of Prairie Man," Another Time (Erin: Press Porcipic Ltd., 1977), p. 50.

[37]Mandel, p. 208.

[38]Frye, pp. 239-245.

[39]Frye, p. 239.

[40]Frye, p. 239.

[41]O'Rourke, p. 157.

[42]Cameron, p. 51.

[43]Mitchell, "Debts of Innocence," p. 37.

[44]Mitchell, "Debts of Innocence," p. 36.

Chapter I

"A Question of Innocence"

W.O. Mitchell's first novel, Who Has Seen the Wind, tells the unforgettably moving story of a young boy's attempts to come to an understanding of the realities of the world around him and the meaning of human existence. Mitchell uses his protagonist, Brian O'Connal, and other child-figures in this novel to emphasize to his adult readers, the significance of each individual's early experiences in the development of an inner sense of balance needed to form a strong personal identity and a healthy perspective on the world. Mitchell's focus is primarily upon the child's intellectual and imaginative, or spiritual, development, and the ways in which the budding consciousness may be nurtured or injured. While the story takes place within a specific locale, a small town on the Saskatchewan prairie, Mitchell's characters are in many ways universal, and his moral and thematic

concerns are timeless.

"When I wrote Who Has Seen the Wind, I didn't have an answer," confesses Mitchell, "It was just a question which is a perfectly fine reason for writing a novel."[1] Many philosophical and psychological issues are raised by various characters in this novel, and it is clearly the author's intention that his readers feel stimulated to act as 'creative partners' in the fiction, so that they may draw upon their own experience, comparatively, to discover whatever truths might be perceived as a result of the collaboration. While challenging his readers to become personally involved in the story, Mitchell also insists upon the need for a renewed sense of wonder in approaching the "ultimate meaning of the cycle of life"[2] which is Brian O'Connal's quest in Who Has Seen the Wind.

The novel is carefully constructed so that underlying the storyline is a network of tensions between, for example, the forces of love and malice, or good and evil, of civilized society and the world of nature, formal education and instinct or intuition, rationality and imagination, or the wisdom gained through experience and the innocence of childhood. Various motifs and symbols connect the work, such as encounters with birth and death, or the wind which represents a divine force, and the meadowlark which sings a message of hope at critical points in the characters' experience. Through the

juxtaposition of images and conversations, parallels and contrasts are also effectively made between the different concerns of the children and the adults.

Not only do these techniques work well artistically, to reveal character development, but also Mitchell hopes they may serve to remind the readers of their own alternatives in life, and to encourage a reevaluation of their personal perspectives. Throughout the novel, as Brian O'Connal struggles to understand the complex world around him and to find a functional place for himself within it, the readers are reminded of Mitchell's belief that there is no all-encompassing answer, but that the key to living a full life is to acquire and maintain a sense of balance.

Mitchell's emphasis on the importance of balance is extended to the very structure of the novel. *Who Has Seen the Wind* is divided into four separate sections, to depict the child protagonist at four stages of psychological growth: Brian at the age of four years, six to eight years, almost ten, and eleven years. This chapter will begin with a look at the novel from within a comparative literary context, then with a closer examination of the young protagonist's development through the four stages as he seeks a balance between the previously-mentioned tensions, growing more courageous, disciplined and self-reliant. Brian learns most through

his interaction with his parents and family, teachers and townspeople, free spirits and eccentrics, models and peers. He gradually learns appropriate means of creative self-expression, and is stimulated intuitively, spiritually, and intellectually until he discovers a reason for being in the challenge of simply living each day fully.

Brian's development as an individual and his search for meaning in the world will be examined from a comparative view of other literature dealing with the theme of childhood and then through a consideration of comments about this novel by some Canadian critics. In many ways, Brian can be aligned with children in Romantic poetry. Mitchell admits to having been influenced in the writing of this novel by William Wordsworth, whom he nonetheless criticises because he feels, "God wasted on him more perceptions...which he bitched up ...."[3] Who Has Seen the Wind does, however, reflect the vision of Wordsworth whose basic concerns were with the relationship between the living person and the environment, and who sought to express the simple joy of existence, best presented he believed through the natural spontaneity of children. It is particularly relevant to note allusions to, and comparable elements in Wordsworth's poem, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood"[4] as they relate to the central themes and

tensions of Who Has Seen the Wind.

Brian O'Connal is certainly as perceptive and responsive to nature as the boys depicted in Wordsworth's "Ode". He does not hesitate to walk out onto the prairie, alone for the first time, enjoying the unknown environment as an exhilarating experience both sensuously and spiritually (pp. 10-11). Though Mitchell does not idealize nature in the novel, Brian's appreciative response to it nonetheless parallels Wordsworth's recollection, when the poet writes:

> There was a time when meadow, grove
> and stream,
> The earth and every common sight,
> To me did seem
> Apparelled in celestial light
> The glory and the freshness of a dream.
> (ll. 1-5)

Following his early experience on the prairie, Brian comforts himself with memories of it when he feels lonely and frightened, and thereafter, he retreats to the prairie often, to reflect alone, away from the increasing pressures from his social environment.

In his preface to "Ode: Intimations of Immortality ...," Wordsworth writes of a young child's capacity to perceive the world with "dreamlike vividness and splendour," and the "sense of the indomitableness of the spirit within." He admits this is not evidence, necessarily, of another state of being or transcendentalism, and that the idea may merely be "an

element in our instincts of immortality."[6] Yet Wordsworth claims to base much of his poetry, as does Mitchell his novels, on overwhelming experiences and feelings recalled from his own childhood. Wordsworth also relies on his readers to act as creative partners with him in order to appreciate his Ode, saying, "A reader who has not a vivid recollection of these feelings having existed in his mind cannot understand that poem."[7]

At the time in his life and career that he wrote Who Has Seen the Wind, Mitchell evidently shared the Romantic view of the imagination as the source of spiritual energy, and that one's innermost religious convictions are based on intuitive feelings. In the epigraph to this novel, Mitchell writes of "moments of fleeting vision," which he describes as "moments when an enquiring heart seeks finality, and the chain of darkness is broken." Such moments are reminiscent of the "moments of being"[8] which Virginia Woolf explores in her art, and of Wordsworth's wish, as Perkins notes, "to catch and hold up for contemplation, some particular image or scene,"[9] the memories of which all help to justify existence. Brian learns to recognize essential qualities of life during such moments when he experiences what he comes to call "the feeling."

Brian's "feeling" arises initially when he is at peace with himself and nature. As a four-year-old lying

under a hedge, he senses that "Every grass-blade, leaf and flower seemed to be breathing or perhaps whispering -- something to him -- something for him." (p. 58) A church bell tolling two years later deepens an "inarticulate yearning" which draws him out of doors where he is astounded by the perfection of the dew drops on the spirea leaf. This is a moment of transcendental vision of which, Mitchell writes that something is opening in the boy, "a growing elation of such fleeting delicacy and poignancy that he dared not turn his mind to it for fear that he might spoil it." (p. 104) Brian is then "filled with breathlessness and expectancy, as though he were going to be given something, as though he were about to find something." (p. 105)

It is soon after his first encounter with death, and when reunited with his beloved puppy, that Brian's initial "feeling" of wonder, comes to include "one of completion and culmination." (p. 58) The boy develops an eagerness to pursue this strange elation, finding that "many simple and unrelated things could cause the same feeling to lift up and up within him till he was sure that he could not contain it." (p. 120) Brian understandably has great difficulty in reconciling his vision of the source of such wonder as a God associated with the prairie, with what he is taught in school about the God who "punishes little boys who don't wash their hands and

then say that they did." (pp. 88-89) This is a good example of how the people of the town and the forces of nature in Who Has Seen the Wind offer quite different philosophical explanations or viewpoints for a receptive young mind to consider.

Another child, the Young Ben, comes to serve as a spiritual guide on Brian's quest. The Young Ben clearly represents the wild freedom of the prairie and the "natural" side of man, an alternative to a structured society, toward which Brian is instinctively drawn. As a literary figure, the Young Ben is reminiscent of the child Heathcliff in Wuthering Heights (1847) by Emily Brontë. Both boys are depicted as being in tune with the primal energy of the wild natural landscapes which they inhabit (the Young Ben with the Canadian prairie and Heathcliff with Britain's Yorkshire moors), and incapable of understanding or living according to established social codes. The Young Ben, however, is fair-haired, silent and associated with the wind (a spiritual connection in the novel), living in a world where he is free to be himself, not seriously threatened by meddling townspeople but able to interact as he wishes with sensitive, caring people like Digby and Brian who support his individuality. Heathcliff, on the other hand, is dark-haired, passionately angry and increasingly barbaric, almost demonic, motivated by revenge in a world where everyone

fails to understand everyone else and is unable to experience real love and creative vitality. Mitchell therefore expresses a much more positive world view than does Brontë, not only in his description of the Canadian wilderness environment, but through his portrayal of characters closely associated with it such as the Young Ben (or the native Indian girl Victoria in The Vanishing Point), and their interaction with other people.

From their first meeting the communication between the Young Ben and Brian is mostly unverbalized, yet the psychic or intuitive bond between the boys strengthens into what the author describes as "an extrasensory brothership." (p. 86) Though Brian sees the Young Ben occasionally outside school, Mitchell writes, "yet it seemed to him that at some time, he had known him intimately." (pp. 85-86) Wordsworth also explores the idea of a shared "prior state of existence" as a central theme in "Ode: Intimations of Immortality ...."[10] Wordsworth offers no more satisfactory explanation than does Mitchell, however, as to where this previous life or relationship took place, except to say "...we come/From God, who is our home...," (ll. 64-65) and that

> The homely Nurse [Earth] doth all she can
> To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man,
> Forget the glories he hath known,
> And that imperial palace whence he came.
> (ll. 81-84)

Brian and the Young Ben both experience difficulty

in adjusting to some social expectations, particularly school regulations which keep them away from the prairie. Wordsworth deals with the same situation in his ode, when he writes "Shades of the prison-house begin to close/Upon the growing Boy." (ll. 67-68) But while the Young Ben still "beholds the light and whence it flows," (l. 69) Brian begins to aspire to more worldly knowledge, acceding to the approval of influential adults. Mitchell depicts the school principal, Digby, as lamenting the socialization process in the school system that constrains a child, as he sees it, so that "every emotion, wish, action, was the resultant of two forces: what he felt and truly wanted, what he thought he should feel and ought to want." (p. 71)

Mitchell is perhaps more realistic than Wordsworth about the inevitable psychological development of a child into a fully functioning member of society. Wordsworth sees the child becoming an increasingly adept "Actor" until it is "As if his whole vocation/Were endless imitation." (ll. 106-107) Mitchell, through the character of Digby, emphasizes the importance of not merely imitating role models, but of developing rational thinking processes, to balance the human mind's instinctive tendencies and selfish inclinations. When Brian confides to Digby, at the end of the novel as Brian begins adolescence, that he no longer experiences his "feeling,"

Digby recognizes the expression on the boy's face as "maturity in spite of the formlessness of childish features, wisdom without years." (p. 290) Digby relates Brian's growth specifically to Wordsworth's poem when he thinks "Intimations of Immortality." (p. 290)

Another more recent work that deals with childhood and to which Who Has Seen the Wind is often critically compared, is Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. (1884) Twain's novel also has a young boy as its protagonist, and deals with fundamental issues of personal and social morality, responsibility and freedom. In A Literary History of Canada (1965), Hugo McPherson comments that

> Like Mark Twain looking back on his boyhood in Missouri, Mitchell sees the dark forces of his community as humourous or melodramatic figures; but though Brian's experience is frequently moving, it lacks the satirical bite of Huckleberry Finn.[11]

Mitchell's concern with social forces in Who Has Seen the Wind is not primarily for satirical purposes, but to reveal the influences they may have on a child's progress toward maturity. By the end of the novel, Brian begins to recognize the ironies inherent in his world, but without bitterness. Mitchell actually promotes community values, and Brian O'Connal enters fully into his community while developing a personal moral code, and still enjoying a strong attraction to nature.

Where Twain perfected the technique of naïve vision in the character of Huckleberry Finn, and sets his story in a pastoral mythicized world, Mitchell created a character capable of learning acceptance, acquiring a sense of relation in his world and becoming increasingly self-reliant, while also serving as a literary vehicle for exploring and confronting contemporary social and philosophical issues. Huckleberry Finn could be more closely compared to the Kid, the child-figure in Mitchell's Jake and the Kid, because by the end of the stories, neither boy seems to have matured much, and both are still very dependent on adults to take care of them. Where Huck focuses on his society's deficiencies and dreams of escape, however, the Kid enjoys a happier, more stable world, and his views of its shortcomings are, in the end, optimistic and purely entertaining.

Perhaps it is because Mitchell's fiction is so entertaining, even when dealing with serious issues, that it seems to have been enjoyed, and then dismissed by many as 'popular' literature, and has received remarkably little attention from Canadian critics. In his article "Children of the Changing Wind," Ronald Sutherland explores the work of other Canadian authors who adopt the technique of a child's point of view, such as Marie-Claire Blais, Morley Callaghan or Leonard Cohen, and notes that Mitchell differs from them because he avoids "using the

child simply to explain the deficiencies, terrors or aberrations of the adult."[12] Throughout his fiction, Mitchell insists on affirming the good in the world, and in rejoicing in human potential. Mitchell's child-figures are not sentimentalized, nor is their view of the world, as Mitchell uses them to emphasize the need to achieve an inner sense of balance in the face of both good and evil, and the importance to each individual of coming to terms with one's earliest experiences and perceptions. Michael A. Peterman suggests that Who Has Seen the Wind may be generally recognized as "classic,"[13] but it is difficult to place, seeming "at odds or out of phase with prevailing moods and ideas" and making many critics "uneasy in evaluating such emotional power in a novel."[14]

Mitchell's first novel is powerful not only because of the importance of the themes, the solid structure and readable writing style, but primarily because of the strength of the well-rounded, realistically portrayed characters. Brian O'Connal, in particular, is a very realistic child character. The credibility of this character may be largely attributed to the fact that Mitchell uses modern psychological studies as another frame of reference in his literary depiction of childhood. Though Mitchell understands the child's growth to be an uninterrupted continuum, for artistic purposes, he depicts Brian at approximate two-year intervals, through four

important periods in his childhood. Each section reflects the boy's psychological development and his orientation toward the world. Considered in terms of the eminent child psychologist Piaget's studies,[15] Brian's philosophic outlook develops through his early years, at a fairly normal pace.

When Brian is introduced, at four years of age, he is completely unpretentious, increasingly assertive and expansive, and just beginning to express an interest in people and places outside his comfortable and well-defined environment. Central to Brian's growing sense of himself as an individual and as a member of a social group, is his solid relationship with his parents. Gerald and Maggie O'Connal have created a home environment where the children are treated with gentle, but firm, authority and a great deal of affection. Mitchell writes that Gerald "was fond of his sons, with a consistently deep emotion that he knew made him helplessly indulgent; he had often blessed the vein of iron that enable his wife to deal with them more firmly." (pp. 34-35) While Maggie has high expectations of her boys, she does not deny their separate identities, only wishing that they will grow to be as wise and responsible as their father.

The importance of parental influence on a child's self-image and world view is emphasized in this novel through the example of the experiences of several child-

figures. Mariel Abercrombie appoints herself as the girls' leader in school by imitating nasty methods of manipulation learned from her domineering, judgmental and socially well-established mother. Old Wong, the Chinese immigrant, is unable to provide adequately for his children due to his listlessness after the death of his wife, and to unsubstantiated, racist rumours about him, which circulate through the town, adversely affecting his business. Tang and Vooie do not learn social skills from him which they desperately need to feel good about themselves, and to rise above the town's unwillingness to accept them socially. The Young Ben is another innocent child who is judged harshly by the townspeople because he appears to resemble his father so closely. The Ben and his wife have left their son so completely alone that his self-image and world view have been formed largely from his own direct experience of living freely on the prairie, and very little by active parental example.

That Gerald accepts that there is a strange bond between his son and the Young Ben, and he does not discourage their association, is another measure of the maturity and generosity of spirit he demonstrates as a father. A grandmother whose old-country, Scottish-Presbyterian values are deeply rooted adds another dimension to Brian's home experience, while his flamboyant Uncle Sean who is connected with the land inspires awe and

adoration in the children. Through Brian's personal relationships, Mitchell demonstrates that the most important factor contributing to the development of a child into a fulfilled individual is love.

In order for love to be given and received, there must be open lines of communication, and communication, Mitchell asserts, is fundamental to the growing imagination. Brian feels free to question his parents on any subject or to disagree with them, and they in turn, respect his young intelligence and try to respond in a positive, loving way. When Brian invents an all-powerful, fun-loving playmate based on a mixture of confused religious images and calls him Mr. R.W. God, B.V.D., his father suggests, "'It's sort of silly, isn't it?...You don't really talk to him do you?'" But the imaginative child holds firm. "Brian's dark eyes, steady on his father's face now, were disconcerting. They said that it was not silly, that he did see Him, that he did talk to Him." (p. 37) Gerald recognizes that his son is fantasizing because he is feeling somewhat lonely and neglected, and he immediately acts to solve both problems by providing Brian with a live, willing playmate, a puppy.

In beginning to express his independence at the age of four, Brian needs a lot of patience from the adults when he demonstrates that he can be rather demanding, and when provoked, resentful and vengeful. As the child has

no conception of any real pain or injustice based on memory, at this age, he indulges in some rather violent fantasies which merely indicate attempts to deal with his first sensations of loss and isolation. For example, when his parents are occupied with Brian's sick baby brother, Bobbie, Brian resents his grandmother telling him in no uncertain terms what to do. Brian decides "He would get Jake Harris, the town policeman after her. He hoped Jake would bring his policeman's knife and chop her into little pieces and cut her head off, for making him go outside to play." (p. 5) Squashing insects on the sidewalk is also a childish attempt to feel powerful when Brian really feels small and alone.

Brian's notable lack of fear in new situations, his intuitive capacity and trust in people exhibit his innocence, and interaction with his peers reveals further potentialities in him. Another measure of development is through the questions a child asks and his ability to understand the answers he receives, as well as his ability to articulate his own concerns. Raised in similar circumstances to Brian, Forbsie Hoffman joins his spontaneous, imaginative play, especially enjoying improvised chants and songs. The two boys, who are about the same age, seem to enjoy talking more than listening, and asking questions as much as receiving information, so even their initial conversation is remarkably

uncommunicative.

The boys seem to enjoy the rhythms and sounds of the words they speak, more than their meanings, and are more concerned with their own imaginative expression than with communication.[16] Brian is nonplussed when Forbsie introduces himself as "Benny Banana," and tries out the new sound sensations for his own pleasure. The conversation continues:

> "Do you know anything more?" asked Brian.
> "I'm hungry. Maybe if you was to ask, your Maw'd give us a piece."
> "The baby's going to heaven," explained Brian.
> "My Dad's a conductor," Forbsie said, "On the C.P.R. He has got silver buttons."
> "It's where God stays," said Brian, "heaven."
> "No it ain't," said Forbsie. He lifted his arm and pointed. "God lives right in town. Over there. I seen Him lots of times...He's all grapes and bloody. He carries around a lamb."
> Brian got up. "Let's go over to His place."
> (pp. 6-7)

In trying to avoid sentimentality, Mitchell makes the child's expression as realistic as possible, to reflect a particular psychological state. Piaget has observed how large a proportion of a child's language is egocentric, "partly because the child speaks only about himself," the psychologist says, "but chiefly because he does not attempt to place himself at the point of view of his hearer...nor to tell him anything."[17]

Brian's interest in several adults who are important to this story, is, at this age, mostly with regard to the manner in which they express themselves

rather than in what they are actually saying. The boy relates well to the minister, John Hislop, who is able to converse naturally with Brian by using short simple sentences and images. This man is soon rejected by the other townspeople for the very reasons that he is admired by Brian and Digby who have similarly gentle natures and inquiring minds. Brian's continued fascination with language eventually leads him to an understanding of different world views through exploring the various uses of language by other significant characters. Brian's Uncle Sean, for example, inspires "plain worship" (p. 16) in Brian's eyes at the age of four, but as the boy matures, he learns to recognize Sean's tall tales, blasphemy and volatile temper as a reflection of the many difficult years spent trying to earn a living as a prairie farmer through the dry years of the Depression.

Brian's deepening understanding of the workings of the universe, the presence of God and the dilemma of human existence comes not only from what he is told by adults and peers, but also more importantly, from what he experiences himself. Significant encounters with death bring the young boy into personal contact with this universal concern. While characters like his father, grandmother, Digby and the Young Ben offer alternative ways of assimilating the experience, only imagination or faith suggest answers to the meaning of origin and fate.

Brian is delighted with the miracle of the arrival of "blood-warm" baby pigeons in Forbsie's loft, and finds their origin no less amazing upon hearing a good explanation of it from his father. Gerald is patient with his young son's many questions and obvious need to express his hurt and attempt to understand the pigeon's death. "It happens to things," Gerald suggests, or "That's the way they end up."(p. 56) The boy's father follows up these simple explanations with an action in which Brian can participate, explaining, "That's what you do when things die. They call it 'burying'."(p.56)

Significantly, it is four-year-old Brian who gains a sense of relief when he makes the connection between the lifeless body being like prairie dirt and therefore being a part of the world of the Young Ben. An emotional, personal response to death at this age is unusual according to psychologists, but it serves a wider artistic function in the novel. Brian clearly relates the pigeon to his exiled puppy and it is out of loneliness and resentment at being given something only to have it taken away again, coupled with his forced confinement due to the weather, which evokes so much unhappiness in the child.

Brian's developing awareness can often be measured through the novel by a comparative look at the experiences some adults are having simultaneously to Brian's experiences. During the same storm, Hislop submits to "a

despondency deeper than any he had known in his life."(p. 47) In both Brian's and Hislop's efforts to seek comfort in their isolation and feeling of alienation, they experience both a sense of man's impotence and of the importance of retaining faith in something. Brian's earliest revelation of justice in the natural world involves an acceptance of his own carelessness or selfishness as a contributing factor in his misery and sense of loss. The boy's experience is countered by Hislop's moral defeat by the negative forces in the town who have been irresponsible and self-interested as was Brian with the bird. As Hislop's friend, Digby counsels him to learn to reconcile idealism and morality with the character of our human lot, insisting that, "You've got to be tough -- good and tough." (p. 53) In linking the boy's experience with the adults', Mitchell implies that the struggle to understand is continued throughout one's life and it is by a choice in outlook that one can survive and fight or retreat in despair. At different levels then, Hislop and Brian are learning to do the same thing, to balance a sense of wonder and a generosity of spirit with stoicism, and thinking and philosophizing with action.

The effects of the security of Brian's world, the attention he receives from adults and peers, the order established within his home and the freedom he is allowed

to enable him to continue to develop fully as an individual, is clearly seen by the second section of Who Has Seen the Wind. At six years of age, Brian already reflects family traits. He holds his head "back and upright with a sureness that was also his grandmother's."(p. 64) He feels the same "rush of emotion" (p. 65) when his father speaks to him, as Gerald feels toward his son. And Brian's strong-willed mother complains, "He's so -- so -- damned independent." (p. 67) Brian is still delighted with life's simple pleasures, such as going to the open window for a moment, first thing after rising in the morning. He is now able to undertake simple chores himself, such as polishing the family's shoes, in which he also finds a sensuous pleasure.

As a four-year-old, Brian had been extremely energetic both physically and mentally, and though he still is, he now places some value on self-control. He tries to hide his excitement from his family on the first day of school, is impatient with his mother's tears, and, later that day, is capable of keeping "his dark gaze deliberately unflinching." (p. 70) Brian expresses himself in short, firm sentences which reflect his way of thinking and his early self-confidence: "He was going to school just as Artie Sherry did. He was old enough now. He would find out all about things. He would learn. He wouldn't get the strap." (pp. 64-65)

Brian is still fascinated with the sounds and rhythms of language, but his comprehension and his perception of adult situations are still limited by his innocence. In church, for example, Brian is delighted by the word 'holy', in the hymn being sung, savouring the sound in his mind.

> Holy, holy, holy, they sang. That meant unbelievably wonderful -- like his raindrop -- a holy holy holy drop lying holy on a leaf. It had a round sound: he could see Mrs. Abercrombie's small mouth round with it, a round little well, ready for her to blow a round holy bubble. (p. 108)

What Brian does not see is what the reader knows, and some of the adults in the congregation know about Mrs. Abercrombie -- the irony of this hyprocritical woman who is so destructive in others' lives, self-righteously singing praises to a loving and forgiving God. Nor does Brian sense the incongruity of the Ben, the Young Ben and the Wong family gathering to worship with the other townspeople under the ministry of the inflexible Reverend Powelly.

Brian enjoys the challenge of new experiences and is therefore eager to go to school to learn. From the first day, however, he has some difficulty with the many rules which limit his personal freedom. Though he is glad to be with other children too, Brian is still most strongly attracted to the Young Ben who also hates being

confined. From earlier days spent with the Young Ben on the prairie, Brian perceives that this silent boy lives according to values which his other friends should also learn to honour. The Young Ben exhibits a passion for life and a respect for the laws of nature which he actively fights to defend, as demonstrated in the incident concerning Art's cruelty to a gopher. (p. 124) Again, though normally the Young Ben does not pay attention in school, he responds immediately to Brian's vulnerability when victimized by their teacher. Here the Young Ben is gently protective and undeniably compassionate.

Like Brian's father, Digby is aware and respectful of Brian's relationship with the Young Ben, but knows that Brian must not become like him. Though Digby, because of his rationality and intelligence, is one of the few townspeople sympathetic to the Bens, he views them, nevertheless, from within an established social framework. The prairie boy is harshly judged by many who fear that he will become like his father, "drunken, irresponsible and utterly mindless...completely unaware of the demands of family or community." (p. 73) As his teacher, Digby is held largely responsible for the development of the Young Ben's mind, yet Digby is unwilling to regard the Young Ben in the same light as other boys. He recognizes that though this unusual child may be corruptible, at this point, the Young Ben must still be considered 'innocent'

whether by society's standards or by nature's laws.

An experienced teacher himself, W.O. Mitchell insists that "Meaning and value and reality and learning are not the products of an institutional machine alone, but of artist teachers within that institution."[18] The school teachers in Who Has Seen the Wind play very important roles in the lives of their young charges. Digby understands the futility of trying to educate a child like the Young Ben in a classroom situation and the delicacy required in dealing with as sensitive and precocious an individual as Brian O'Connal.

The school principal recognizes the value of intuition and loving concern. He speculates that the domineering and inflexible Miss MacDonald needs a course in "Child Mediumship" to be a more effective teacher. It takes a well-balanced woman like Maggie to show her up as merely pathetic, however, rather than evil, and motivated by resentment at the emptiness of her own life. Though Brian's next teacher, Ruth Thompson is more sensitive to the children's needs, it is Digby who continues to inspire Brian, appealing to his reason and intellect while respecting his innocence.

It is when Brian is six and cultivating his "feeling", that his developing ability is tested when he begins to discover the interrelatedness of life and death, the necessity and inevitability of the natural cycle. He

easily makes the connection between his "feeling" and his attraction to the Young Ben, even to the extent of accepting the prairie boy's act of mercy-killing as just. The sight of the gopher's decomposing body later, challenges Brian when his "feeling", which to this point is roused by life-enforcing incidents returns, this time, "fierce -- uncontrollably so, with wild and unbidden power, with a new, frightening quality." (p. 125) At this stage, Brian's reasoning abilities allow him only to conclude, "Prairie's awful." (p. 125)

Once again, Brian's broadening perception is complemented in the novel by the intellectual consideration of the adults. Brian's concern with the paradox of life and death, following the gopher's demise, parallels a discussion over the same issue between Digby and Milt Palmer who claims there are "two kindsa reality -- real an' what a fella figgers is real. They ain't a bit alike." (p. 135) Birth and death are real, the men agree, but the debatable issue is the value of thinking about it or the validity of thinking at all. Almost eight years old now, Brian is portrayed as being still motivated more by intuition and sensuous perception than by rational thoughts, so he neither pays attention to, nor enters into, the adults' debate, merely noting that Digby has a hole in his sock.

According to psychological studies, Brian, at the

age of eight, may still be considered more advanced than his peers, judging by his philosophic outlook and self-control.[19] He is beginning to use metaphor for understanding and identifying difficult levels of reality. His dawning skepticism suggests the emergence of independent critical thinking and increasing self-consciousness, preparing the way for the development of abstract reasoning and intellectual puzzling. Brian thinks, however, that he is different from the other boys because of his "feeling," and supposes that the inarticulate Young Ben could be "the only right confidant." (p. 165) Brian's increasingly realistic conception of the world is manifest in his strong interest in the mechanics of birth and death, yet his intuitive nature forces him to consider philosophical explanations for such realities.

Brian begins to analyze "the feeling" itself when he experiences it at such times as upon seeing the two-headed calf. While his friends debate the difficulties of going through life with two heads and the scientific rationale behind it, Brian is morally outraged, and is haunted by the memory. It is possible that Brian recognizes something of himself in the deformed animal and his need to reconcile two perspectives on the world, meanwhile empathizing with the calf's solitude and vulnerability. Brian's faith in the proceedings of nature

is also challenged in this disturbing encounter. When his beloved dog is killed soon after, Brian reveals a lack of wisdom and maturity in being unable to accept accidents and personal loss, indicated by his inability to articulate what happened. Nevertheless, Brian's talkative little four-year-old brother's presence at the burial reminds us of the great changes in Brian since the burial of the pigeon, while the Young Ben's unquestioning participation reinforces the bond between the boys.

From pursuing and analyzing "the feeling," it is a natural step for Brian to start thinking about the process itself. He is initially delighted with the novelty of thinking about thoughts and pictures "boxes inside of boxes inside of boxes inside of boxes." (p. 170) By the third section of the novel, however, when Brian is nearly ten, he is still unable to reconcile his feelings or spontaneous responses to his thoughts which have become "live and unpredictable things with hidden motivation of their own." (pp. 183-184) He tries to suppress unbidden, exclamatory thoughts, exhibiting increased self-control but, typical of his age, Brian tends to be short-tempered and impatient though generally good-natured. As Laurence Ricou remarks, "That the word 'damn' in his mind is the livest of 'thoughts' seems to emphasize the irony that as Mitchell moves toward confirming the power of feeling he must make Brian capable of abstract thinking beyond his

years."[20]

Brian's strong emotions seem to work to inhibit the development of rational thought patterns which would promote a balanced sense of justice and enable him to appreciate both man's moral code and laws of nature. Brian is lonelier and more confused than ever at this age, fighting the sense of futility he feels following his loss of innocence about procreation. He decides, "Nothing was any good. The feeling had nothing to do with anything. It wasn't any good." (p. 201) Though he still instinctively senses that the Young Ben could be the only one who would understand, he is too disconsolate to bother finding him.

Brian's increasingly rebellious attitude is unpremeditated and merely reflects his bewilderment at his increasing appreciation of the complexity of the world. When Brian defends the right of the runt pig to life, on Sean's farm, he is somehow aware that he is challenging man's interference in a natural process and part of the world to which he still feels intimately bound. Where he had felt powerless when confronted by the two-headed calf, he now finds a new sense of power growing within himself, through his ability to use language -- even if it begins as vigorous cursing. Brian's quiet admiration for Sean's fluency is over; he confronts his uncle in his own territory with his own weapons of words to get his way.

Brian's growing sense of personal power leads him to a greater sense of independence and an increased involvement in adults' lives, demonstrated by his matchmaking efforts between Annie and Ab.

Brian's experiences on Sean's farm lead him to develop an abiding passion for the land, and respect for other people and animals. Yet he is still an innocent child who wilfully runs away from one problem, only to find himself surrounded by different discomforts. And because he is a child, he takes each experience in his stride, always looking around for reason and truth. Shortly after his overwhelming experience of being alone on the prairie overnight, Brian's sense of complete self-awareness and appreciation of the fullness of life itself is challenged by a new feeling of unmitigated loss.

It is the death of a human being, one of the most important people in Brian's life, which propels the boy out of his egocentric way of thinking and beyond self-pity. Among the artificially decorated flowers and townspeople murmuring conventional platitudes in the house where his father's body lies, Brian feels "as though he had lost forever the privilege of inner spontaneity." (p. 233) He does not give in to the listlessness completely, however, but turns away from the house to the open prairie.

Brian finds comfort not in Mr. Powelly's "fine voice dipping and soaring in deliberate strophe," (p. 233)

but in the whispering wind. In the world of nature, he is able to consider the significance and inevitability of man's mortality, and gain an understanding of it:

> People were forever born; people forever died, and never were again...Winter came and spring and fall, then summer and winter again; the sun rose and set again, and everything that was once -- was again -- forever and forever. But for man, the prairie whispered -- never -- never.
> (p. 239)

A meadowlark sings, just as it sang on Brian's first morning on the prairie and as it sings at every critical point or moment of vision through the novel. For the first time, Brian really hears its song, its symbolic message of hope, of the continuance of joy and beauty in spite of pain. This enables him to move beyond the emptiness he felt at the loss of his own pet to a concern for others' well-being through a new, fuller sense of personal responsibility and compassion.

The loss of a parent through death or long-term separation and its effect on a child, is a recurrent theme in Mitchell's novels. Mitchell himself lost his father at the age of five and is evidently reworking his personal experience for broader thematic purposes. "Prairie children learn early, lessons of mortality,"[21] Mitchell says, and in his second novel, <u>The Kite</u>, he explores the results of a child's inability to resolve his early experience of such lessons. David Lang's emotional immaturity is related to the "sense of irreparable loss,

mortal loss too great for tears," which he felt as a small boy.[22] Self-realization and a new sense of inner balance are achieved when he once again has the opportunity to fly a kite, symbolic of the spirit of life, in the presence of a young boy and an old man who tells them, "Keep her up there. Keep her up there forever." (Kite p. 182) No longer feeling pursued by time, David gains an acceptance of his own mortality. He develops a new appreciation of honest human relationships and the value in living close to nature which he did not achieve as a child, as does Brian O'Connal.

In Who Has Seen the Wind, in the years following his father's death, Brian grows closer to the individual members of his family, particularly his grandmother. The old woman's simple acceptance of life's processes and nature's part therein, and faith in an omnipotent presence set an exceptional example for the young boy. In the last section of the novel, when Brian is eleven, Mitchell writes that "for all his gravity he was still a child." (p. 244) As Brian slips away from the innocence of childhood, he senses something special about his grandmother, the ineffable quality which Mitchell describes as the "innocence of experience."[23] Grandmother MacMurray may be said to have mastered the art of living and in her declining years, Mitchell writes, she "had come to meet [Brian] spiritually." (p. 244) Though Brian does

not openly share his "feeling" with her, they do discuss the "whys" of existence.

Regarding Brian's anxiety over the significance of the facts of life, the old woman advises the boy, "Wherever ye find anything worth a whoop, ye'll find the Lord's got a hand in it." (p. 165) Brian has trouble reconciling this philosophy with what he now knows about sexuality. He ponders the image of the clumsy bee with its "working legs bulging fat and covered with dusty yellow hairs" under whose weight the flower "nodded gently acquiescent." (p. 200) Initially frightened and embarrassed, Brian seems, however, to have accepted the reality of procreation as natural for humans as for animals, by the end of the novel. This is implied by the fact that the long hockey stockings upon which Brian has his heart set as a pre-adolescent are significantly "wasp-striped" and are being knitted for him, appropriately, by the last strength of his wise grandmother.

The idea that Brian and his grandmother have developed a mutual respect and shared philosophy is reinforced when Brian counters his mother's sensible attempts to preserve the old woman's health at the expense of her happiness. Brian chooses to spend time with her, provides her with something useful to do, making her feel needed and appreciated, and ironically grants her last request when he opens her window. One critic, Ken

Mitchell, argues that Brian is taking "an active part in ensuring that the process of creation and destruction goes on,"[24] though it may have been an unconscious decision. Ken Mitchell goes on to say that "this atavistic impulse represents his supreme awareness of the function of death and is justified as part of his search for ultimate meaning in the universe. This argument is highly questionable. Brian is "ill at ease" on this final visit seeing his grandmother lying in bed "filled with inexplicable sadness," (p. 283) but if Brian is even unconsciously associating her confinement with the earlier confinement of the Ben's owl or the Ben, himself, broken in a prison, he is not moved this time by what he had previously experienced as a "soul-burning compulsion that stirred within him an ineffable urge to tear the netting away." (p. 271) Actually, he tiptoes out solicitously and carries on with his own activities which do not indicate any ulterior motives in having merely opened a window.

While the old woman has the time to reminisce, she notes that "Beyond the emotional coloring that each [sensory fragment] had, they possessed no particular significance. Meaning was a tag that people tied to things, nothing more." (p. 97) Although Mrs. MacMurray dies before she can convey this wisdom to her grandson, her death is clearly linked with the philosophical discussion which is taking place simultaneously in the

shoemaker's shop. Brian has finally come of an age where he is able to consider his private experience within a wider perspective, in order to relate his "feeling" to Milt Palmer's question, "Who the hell's me?" (p. 284) Palmer understands what Brian means by his "feeling" and admits having lost it without discovering another satisfying means to self-realization.

The theologian William Barclay's depiction of man being an idea of God's or even inside of God, part of a whole, is cynically rejected by Palmer, but Brian grasps something which he might relate to his search. (p. 284) He is also reassured by Digby's assertion that not everything "has to figure out" but what he will be able to ascertain can be done "by feeling." (p. 287) Brian understands Barclay's explanation more fully after his grandmother's death as he is aware of her continued presence in his home and his mind, through memories and evidence of her influence.

Central to Brian's understanding of death and his own place within the natural cycle is the question of an omnipresent Being behind the powers of the universe. The idea of a God is one that fascinates Brian from an early age. Mitchell's depiction of the spiritual development of his child protagonist is sound according to modern psychologists' accounts of the development of normal children, though Brian is apparently rather exceptional

since his interest in God and religious matters remains strong through to adolescence.[25]

Brian's earliest information about God comes from his parents' teachings and his faith is clearly based upon Bible stories and pictures, prayers at bedtime and regular church attendance. Gesell and his associates note that because of the very young child's egocentric relationship to the cosmos, he "attributes purpose and feeling to the events of nature," and many spontaneous notions are likely to be "colored by animism."[26] Certainly, Brian's imagination leaps forward at Mrs. Hislop's intriguing description of God as someone he cannot see, hear, touch or smell called a "spirit." (p. 9) It is a natural progression to ask questions which are considered inappropriate by adults, then to attempt to understand God pictorially, and to idealize Him as a playmate.

Young children typically believe their parents to be the omniscient forces in their lives, all-knowning, all-powerful and eternal. When for the first time Brian finds himself unable to call upon them at will and, at the same time, senses their worries and weakness he seeks an alternative source of comfort. Brian's memories of the pleasant sensation of the wind "ruffling his hair," (p. 8) and again, "warm and living" (p. 11) on the prairie, affect his glowing impression of the Young Ben and brings Brian comfort in his loneliness. Brian's experiences in

seeking evidence of God's existence are always underscored by the presence, often the influence of the wind. The symbol of the wind is a central device used by Mitchell throughout Who Has Seen the Wind as an integral thread interwoven thematically through the structure to unify the novel.

"This is the story of a boy and the wind" Mitchell states simply in the Preface. The wind is a fundamental feature of Brian's world, and it is appropriately depicted from the outset as a paradoxical, yet powerful force on the prairie and the town. The novel's title is, in fact, taken from a line in the poem by Christina Rossetti called "The Wind" (1872).[27] Rossetti explores the power of the wind as a spiritual force which causes nature to literally bow down before it, suggesting that it should be recognized as such whether or not it is actually seen or understood by humankind. In Mitchell's novel, the children are aware of the constant presence of the wind but few are interested in exploring its spiritual dimensions. When Brian, Fat and Art playfully recite a few lines from Rossetti's poem which they evidently learned in school, Fat laughs at Art's irreverent distortion of the last line, as he concludes that "Nobody gives a damn" (p. 187) about seeing the wind. Mitchell uses this particular episode in the third section of the novel, to show how Brian, who does not laugh at Art but

truly wants to 'see the wind', or grow spiritually, is developing differently from the other boys who are insecure conformists and who can be cruel and disparaging.

Brian comes to realize that his "feeling" is always "most exquisite upon the prairie or when the wind blew." (p. 120) When he spends the night alone on the prairie, however, the wind provokes a new terrible feeling of defencelessness in him which forces him out of his childish self-centredness to question his real place in the universe. Mitchell writes that Brian "was trying to hold together something within himself, that the wind demanded and was relentlessly leaching from him." (p. 229) Saint Sammy is a character who has yielded completely to the call of the wild prairie wind and consequently, has lost his sanity. Yet Brian senses that the old man has grasped some essential truth for which he rejects, and is in turn cast out by, society. In response to criticism of Saint Sammy, Grandma MacMurray affirms his spiritual condition by maintaining that "the Lord looks after his own." (p. 116)

Saint Sammy's energy and vibrant language are reminiscent of Brian's earliest imaginings of Mr. R.W. God B.V.D. (p. 32), and his later colourful cursing (p. 217), yet the child senses that in listening to this old man he is close to a powerful source of truth. Brian's ability to express the problem reveals his development to the

reader: "It wouldn't be so bad, Brian thought, if a person knew or even knew what it was that he wanted to know." (p. 194) Although by the novel's conclusion Brian is still attracted by the force of primal energy on the prairie, the beauty of nature now fills "his mind against his will," (p. 292) but does not inspire "the feeling." No longer is he the innocent who anticipated a return of "the feeling" in the locked church with the confusing portraits in stained glass.

The church in Who Has Seen the Wind, representing organized religion, is clearly associated with hypocrisy as it is presided over by the self-controlled and manipulating Reverend Powelly who fears the untamed energy which sparks heartfelt praise in Saint Sammy. The church may also represent man's incompetence in the administering of God's laws as it provokes more guilt over ideas of sin than it inspires joy and praise which come so naturally to a small child like Brian. Mitchell does, however, depict a few members of the community such as Ruth Thompson, Digby and Sean, who have achieved an inner sense of balance, so they believe in developing human potentialities and encouraging a personal sense of dignity in one another. These characters each take a moral stand against the hypocrisy of the town and are appropriately rewarded.

Having experienced an awful, unwarranted fear of

God, born of guilt over the truly petty matter of washing his hands, Brian is able to sense the wrongness of Powelly's interpretation of God's punishment of the Ben for running his still. This incident reveals Brian's growing ability to think for himself in taking a moral stand against conventional religious authority, in spite of the guilt he feels. Ronald Sutherland notes that in spite of the rapidly evolving society of Canada, the Puritan ethos, Jansenist in Quebec and Calvinist elsewhere still has a dramatic influence on Canadian authors. He concludes that Mitchell indicates in this novel "that a premature and distorted sense of guilt is still an important part of the experience of the child in twentieth-century Canada."[28] Mitchell's fiction also suggests that many Christian religious institutions fail to answer man's questions and needs.

In an M.A. thesis entitled "The Matter of Perception in the Fiction of W.O. Mitchell" (1975), Judith Ticehurst maintains that by the end of the novel Brian is just beginning to perceive his world through the eyes of a 'poet'. Yet, she writes, "in his eyes and in the eyes of the narrator, the world still appears to be restraining, divided, demonic and absurd."[29] Ticehurst has completely ignored the affirmation of beauty Mitchell stresses throughout the novel, and the value of innocence and purity of motive in approaching the meaning of life. In

his insistence upon a whole view, Mitchell presents a consideration of various issues at different levels yet with a gentle use of humour, putting birth and death, nature and society, evil and goodness or love into relation. Another critic, Robin Mathews, relates Brian's "quest for meaning in universal terms" to that of the Biblical Job of the Book of Job who also "is not so much answered or convinced by logic as he is overawed by the magnificence and wonder of the mystery."[30] On his last visit to the prairie, Brian cannot submit to despair because of the undeniable beauty before him and is forced to a positive resolution that "Some day, ... he would know; he would find out completely and for good. He would be satisfied." (p. 292)

Brian progresses through Who Has Seen the Wind by following "the feeling," only to find that it has led him beyond childhood innocence to a state of mind where such feelings can no longer return. As he approaches adolescence Brian retains a sense of the value of that feeling through his memory which will strengthen him as his quest continues. Brian has discovered the outer limits of mortality and a new awareness of life's possibilities based on self-reliance and his own dignity as an individual. In his new allegiance with Digby, Brian will have help in reconciling his perception and intuition with the abstract reasoning processes which are beginning

in his young mind, thereby achieving that all-important inner balance. In his decision to become a "dirt doctor" he seeks to reconcile his experience of the prairie and town in a productive and responsible way. Brian shows that he has gained the maturity to use more than one system of reference in approaching life, reason or science and intuition or religion. He is seeking a balance within himself and in his life's work, rather than an absolute answer to the meaning of man's existence. Brian recognizes that the value of life may be found along the way, in the search itself.

NOTES

[1]Patricia Barclay, "Regionalism and the Writer: A Talk with W.O. Mitchell," *Canadian Literature*, 14 (Autumn 1962), 55.

[2]W.O. Mitchell, *Who Has Seen the Wind*, (1947; Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), Preface. All further references to this work appear in the text, citing the page number.

[3]David O'Rourke, "An Interview with W.O. Mitchell," *English Candian Writers*, 20 (Winter 1980-81), 152.

[4]William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood," in *English Romantic Writers*, ed. David Perkins (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1967), p. 279. All further references to this poem appear in the text, citing the line number.

[5]Perkins, p. 14.

[6]Perkins, p. 279.

[7]Perkins, ed. p. 280.

[8]Jeanne Schulkind, ed., *Virginia Woolf Moments of Being* (London: Sussex University Press, 1976), p. 20.

[9]Perkins, ed., p. 172.

[10]Perkins, ed., p. 279.

[11]Hugo McPherson, "Chapter 36 Fiction (1940-1960)," *A Literary History of Canada*, gen. ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 711.

[12]Ronald Sutherland, "Children of the Changing Wind," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, V (November 1970), 4.

[13]Critic Dick Harrison considers the novel "the nearest we have [in Canada] to an enduring classic of prairie fiction," in Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1977), p. 155. Harrison also suggests that Who Has Seen The Wind may be "the nearest approach we have to a national classic," in his article, "Prairie Fiction: Life on the Bibliographical Frontier," Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada, XCII (1978), 19.

[14]Michael A. Peterman, "'The Good Game': The West in W.O. Mitchell's Who Has Seen The Wind and Wills Cather's My Antonia," Mosaic, XIV2 (1981), 94.

[15]Mitchell's interest in Jean Piaget's work is discussed on page 9 of the Introduction. A good introduction to Piaget and other psychologists' findings regarding early childhood may be found in the book by Arnold Gesell, M.D., Frances L. Ilg, M.D., and Louise Bates Ames, PhD., The Child From Five to Ten, Rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

[16]Laurence Ricou explores the development of a child's communication skills further in an excellent essay. Laurence Ricou, "Notes on Language and Learning in Who Has Seen The Wind," Canadian Children's Literature, 10 (1977-78), 16.

[17]Jean Piaget, The Language and Thought of the Child, 2nd ed. (1926; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1932), p. 9.

[18]W.O. Mitchell, "Debts of Innocence," Saturday Night, XCI (March 1976), 37.

[19]Gesell, p. 418.

[20]Ricou, p. 13.

[21]Robert Duncan, dir., prod. with Robert Owen, W.O. Mitchell: Novelist in Hiding, with W.O. Mitchell, National Film Board, January 1980.

[22]W.O. Mitchell, The Kite (1962; Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1983), p. 14. All further reference to this work appear in the text, citing Kite and the page number.

[23]Mitchell, "Debts of Innocence," p. 37.

[24]Ken Mitchell, "The Universality of W.O.

Mitchell's *Who Has Seen The Wind*," *Lakehead University Review*, IV (1971), 34.

[25]Gesell, p. 415.

[26]Gesell, p. 417.

[27]Christina Rossetti, "The Wind," in *The Oxford Book of Children's Verse*, ed. Iona and Peter Opie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 278.

[26]Gesell, p. 415.

[2]7Gesell, p. 417.

[28]Sutherland, p. 10.

[29]Judith E. Ticehurst, "The Matter of Perception in the Fiction of W.O. Mitchell," M.A. Diss. Sir George Williams University, 1975. p. 9.

[30]Robin Mathews, *Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution*? (Toronto: Steel Rail Educational Publishing, 1978), p. 111.

Chapter II

"A Lost and Found Innocence"

In his recent work, How I Spent My Summer Holidays (1981), W.O. Mitchell once again explores alternatives open to the individual seeking an inner sense of balance in order to form a complete identity and understanding of one's place in the world. While Mitchell's personal philosophy has changed and developed over time, in this novel, he is still affirming human dignity and potential, and questioning the authority of any person or institution which attempts to control or interfere with the progression of another's life.

How I Spent My Summer Holidays is widely considered something of a sequel to Who Has Seen the Wind, though Mitchell makes no mention of this. The two novels do reflect many of the same themes such as the importance of the development of the complete individual, of balancing the various forces of nature and society, and of

retaining a certain innocence, and a sense of joy throughout one's life. Most importantly, the central character in each novel is a child. While Brian O'Connal in Who Has Seen the Wind moves through a period of eight years to a pre-adolescent state, Hughie in How I Spent My Summer Holidays is portrayed over the course of the summer of his twelfth year. The effects of this particular summer on his early and later adult life are very important, but the personal growth Hughie experiences during those few months is remarkable.

While Brian and Hughie share similar interests in searching for meaning to human existence and balanced images of themselves, their perspectives are quite different. They are both sensitive and intelligent, and come from secure home environments and communities, yet Hughie is much more rebellious and antagonistic towards adults in particular. The value of modern psychological studies is inestimable when considering these two child-figures and Mitchell's artistic intentions. It is similarly important to view Hughie from within a literary critical context, as was Brian considered in the previous chapter. Further comparisons will be made between Brian and Hughie where relevant to the ensuing discussion in this chapter.

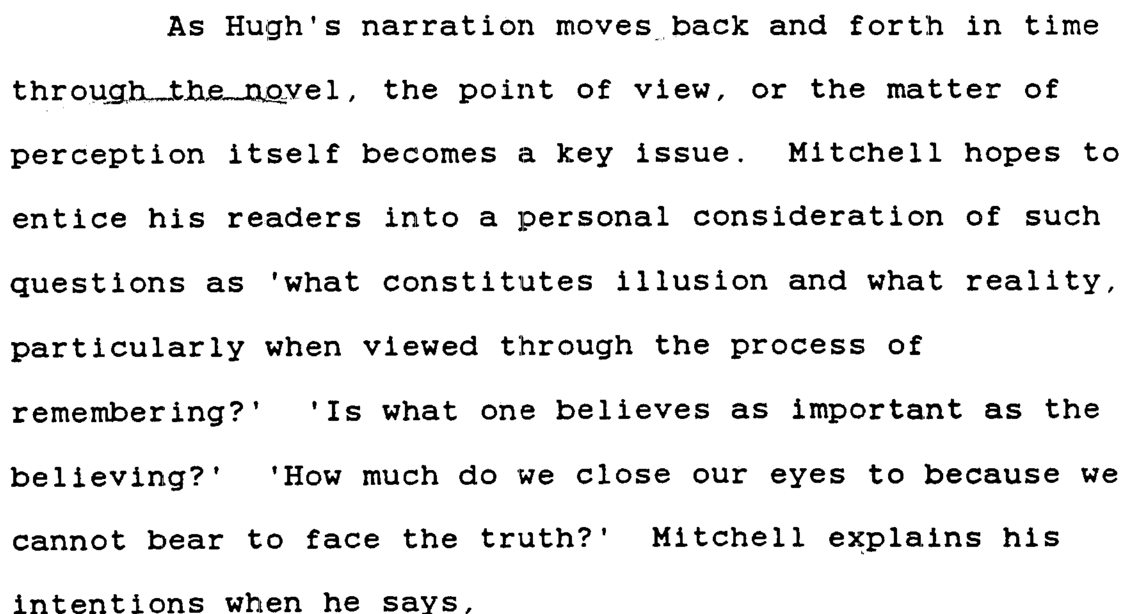
In How I Spent My Summer Holidays, Mitchell advocates the necessity of developing a renewed sense of

wonder and a strong sense of morality in approaching life in order to "Never settle for less."[1] He remembers his mentor, F.M. Salter advising him to fully understand exactly what he is trying to communicate through his art, but to never state it explicitly.[2] Asking the questions, Mitchell believes, is the artists' task. "If they start giving the answers," he says, "they get into closed systems and abstracts and this isn't life, and in the end that's what art has to be, life. And yet in asking these questions one of the broad things is that the writer either says Yes to man or he says No to man, and in a sense that's an answer."[3]

W.O. Mitchell has been consistent throughout his writing career in attempting not only to reconcile man to himself but also to affirm the potential in human relationships and thereby instill a sense of hope, even optimism in his readers. Margaret Atwood comments in Survival (1972), that as in other "growing up" novels in Canadian literature, the optimism of Who Has Seen the Wind is possible "only because the 'child' point of view stops this side of adulthood."[4] Yet Mitchell is successful in How I Spent My Summer Holidays in his difficult endeavor to present realistically the figure of a child whose voice is conditioned by the process of adult remembering. While working on this novel, Mitchell remarked that it would be his "darkest work to date,"[5] yet his outlook remains

undeniably optimistic.

How I Spent My Summer Holidays may be placed within the genre of the 'Bildungsroman' as a novel of 'education' in the broadest sense, more philosophical than a 'picaresque' novel.[6] While this work focuses on the narrator's childhood, however, the central theme concerns the reconciliation within the adult protagonist of elements of his past and present, involving an acceptance of personal responsibility which invites growth toward a deeper self-knowledge. The contradictory forces in nature and society including peers, parents, teachers and community members are explored to determine the impact the environment may have on the developing young consciousness. Motifs of war, insanity and freedom recur throughout the novel providing a framework within which Hugh's story unfolds.



As Hugh's narration moves back and forth in time through the novel, the point of view, or the matter of perception itself becomes a key issue. Mitchell hopes to entice his readers into a personal consideration of such questions as 'what constitutes illusion and what reality, particularly when viewed through the process of remembering?' 'Is what one believes as important as the believing?' 'How much do we close our eyes to because we cannot bear to face the truth?' Mitchell explains his intentions when he says,

> If the artist allows a creative partner to complete the art experience, that is where the real magic happens. The writer deals in provocative cues to character or to people; it's as though the writer mines his piece of art with triggers, and the explosion takes place within the creative partner. The reader, without knowing it, is subconsciously contributing to the character concept.[7]

Of all of Mitchell's fiction, How I Spent My Summer Holidays is the most demanding of 'creative partners' and probably the most satisfying for them.

In this novel, the impetus for the protagonist's reviewing the circumstances of a period in his childhood rises from his need to interpret a disturbing dream. In spite of the illusory nature of dreams, they may be relied upon in fiction to supply images acting as cues for the reader which are relevant to the story and may indicate authorial intent, of which the characters are unaware. The recurrence of Hugh's dream in his middle-age clearly indicates some unresolved conflict or repression in him. The dream itself is never analyzed or referred to again during the narration except indirectly at the conclusion, when Hugh says, "Finally I may have sorted it out."[8] Mitchell seems to agree with Neo-Freudian theorist, Erik Erikson who teaches that personality development occurs throughout an individual's life, without his having to successfully pass through rigid stages, so that should an individual fail to solve a psychological conflict, it may be cleared up later.[9]

Hugh must rely on fragments of memories which he dredges up from his subconscious mind, to recreate a time and place and the person he was. In reworking the situation with a conscious and mature mind he is able to reach a more complete picture while providing the readers with 'cues' to further their own understanding. In his review of How I Spent My Summer Holidays for Maclean's magazine, Mark Abley wonders "whether this nostalgic string of boyhood escapades deserves to be called a novel," and comments that "some of the digressions are irritating rather than winning, that the book is slow to gather power, and that Mitchell hasn't entirely controlled his old weakness for melodrama."[10] These criticisms may be valid, but Mitchell's concern to evoke a personal response in his readers and not merely to entertain must be considered. As the narrator himself is searching for clues to understanding through various memories, it is not only inevitable but realistic that some should be more relevant than others.

Mitchell points out how early in his writing apprenticeship, he realized that "there could be no closed systems in art. Since it rests upon life," he says, "it is made up of contradiction, of dilemma, of not either/or but of both. The world of the many and the world of the one, the world of the specific and the world of the abstract, both are equally important to art."[11] Upon

returning to the scene of his boyhood, Hugh senses that his own story is really part of a much larger one. He feels that though the actual events may be unique to his experience, he may be justified in attributing epic dimensions to the world he knew as a child, and heroic qualities to the people who had inspired him. "It seems so long ago," Hugh remarks, "It is as though I am listening to my own voice coming to me not just from my own past but from much beyond that and from quite another world, the age of Jason or of Ulysses or of Aeneas." (p. 2) Hugh's inclination to mythologize this period can be attributed to his dawning realization of the early influence upon him of both natural and social forces.

The power of the Canadian wilderness in shaping the lives of those who come into contact with it is once again examined in <u>How I Spent My Summer Holidays</u>. Years after leaving the bleak Saskatchewan prairie, Hugh marvels in the discovery,

> Here was the melodramatic part of the earth's skin that had stained me during my litmus years, fixing my inner and outer perspective, dictating the terms of the fragile identity contract I would have with myself for the rest of my life. (p. 8)

In spite of the various changes which have occurred in the town, the prairie remains exactly as Hugh remembers it, inspiring the uncanny sensation of being "on a time return." (p. 5) In rediscovering his delight in familiar smells and sensations, Hugh realizes that what set his

world apart is not merely the outward changes incurred with the passing of time, but an innocence which is fundamentally linked to the close relationship he and the other children shared with nature.

Traces of a Romantic literary influence are still to be found in Mitchell's rather Edenic depiction of the prairie in How I Spent My Summer Holidays. The children's joy in such simple pleasures as searching for wild violets and crocuses or listening for the first meadowlark's song announcing the arrival of spring is indeed innocent, and certainly unusual in the modernized world which Hugh inhabits at the time of the narration. This sense of kinship with the animal and vegetable world is, as Northrop Frye points out, "Close to the centre of the pastoral myth...which is so prominent a part of the Canadian frontier."[12] Young Hughie, like Brian O'Connal or the Kid, is torn between yielding to the prairie's evocation of imaginative and instinctive tendencies or to the pressures of the civilized and conventional elements in his world.

Hugh's mature response to the prairie is based on more than nostalgia, serving to illustrate the contradictions in life which Mitchell wishes to explore in his art. In one interview, Mitchell confesses that he finds the prairies "unlovely" because he says, "they don't square with what man wants things to be."[13] While rising

primarily from sensuous appreciation, however, the children's response to nature in <u>How I Spent My Summer Holidays</u> has a spiritual dimension amounting to reverence. When Hughie and his new friend Peter whiten their naked bodies with alkali silt from the river and brandishing cattails, walk across the prairie, they stop laughing and speculating on the impression they will make on their friends. "We were invoking much more than that, though we did not know what," Hugh says, "...and remembering, decades later, I wondered why we had done it. I couldn't tell myself." (pp. 12, 13)

Mitchell acknowledges that "the prairie does create mystics," and that in spite of his rational, educated side, he says he includes himself among them. By "mystics" he means, "people who, without being aware of it, in some way are in tune with wind and grass and sky."[14] In <u>Vertical Man/Horizontal World</u>, Laurence Ricou explores the literary response to the dictates of the prairie, noting that, "the bond to the land, unarticulated, emotional, even spiritual, is also in a sense religious .... Infinitude, elemental simplicity, order and severity are all attributes which the land shares with the Deity."[15] Through his art, Mitchell indicates that if there is a God, he could believe in One who is alive in creation itself, approachable by man through contact with nature and therefore indifferent to

his social activities.[16]

Most important to their child world, Hugh knows, is the nearby river which the boys consider a gift, a "miracle" in the arid wilderness, yet accept simply as their own.(p. 4) Inviting in all seasons, the river forms a significant link for the boys between childhood, as their favourite place to play, sexuality, as the place where Hughie first masturbates and later watches naked women frolic, and spirituality, as a place which even the townspeople use for religious rituals. The extent to which Hugh's world has changed is illustrated by the fact that boys no longer "form a true pilgrimage" across the prairie to the Mental Hole, but swim in the modern, presumably sanitary swimming pool built in town by the establishment do-gooders, the Rotary Club.

Hugh remembers being disappointed, nevertheless, in the fact that "There was nothing frightening at all left on our great grass sea. In our prairie world," he comments, "only other boys were dangerous .... Or adults." (p. 43) The boys are at ease in their natural environment to the extent of wanting to create special places for themselves as a refuge from external problems. Hughie loves his root cellar and the local pool hall because they remind him of caves. When he and Peter finally dig one for themselves, Hughie refers to it as a "sanctuary" and feels "noble in secretly ministering to

someone he regards as a social outcast and warmed, thinking of him "curled up safely underground." (p. 75)

Although Hugh is stimulated by the memories evoked upon his return to the prairie and the river, he says, "I knew that I was trying to accomplish the unaccomplishable by searching out here .... I should have known I would find nothing that I could hold in my hands to examine and to wonder about and to label." (p. 13) With this realization, Hugh begins to sense a need to reevaluate his early social and psychological experiences beginning within himself and in important relationships. In order to add to our understanding of the young Hughie and his peers, and to Mitchell's artistic intentions in this novel, it is worthwhile to consider the findings of recent psychological studies.

The narrator describes the summer of 1924 as "a special summer of defiance" for himself and his best friend Peter Deane-Cooper. At twelve years of age, Hughie and his friends are entering the physical and psychological stage of growth known as adolescence which will take them from childhood to adulthood. Erik Erikson, who is well known for his studies of youth, believes that the most significant conflict every individual must face occurs during adolescence. "He must integrate all that he has previously experienced in order to develop a sense of ego identity. He must decide what he wants out of life,

what he believes in, and who he is. He must form his own identity."[17] Hugh certainly remembers that period in his life as being marked by a painful self-consciousness as he struggles to reconcile his own self-image with the way he believes others see him. There is a notable growth in the young boy as he is caught up in the traumatic events of that summer and is forced into reconsidering many things.

In The Psychology of Being Human (1974), Elton B. McNeil outlines several particular psychological tasks of adolescents. A top priority is achieving acceptance by and more mature relations with age mates of both sexes.[18] Though Hughie is clearly accepted as one of a distinct social group which includes Peter, Lobbidy, Musgrave, the Liar and Angus Hannah, he demonstrates an apparent need to continually reaffirm his status as one of them. The boys are still young enough, however, to be disdainful and blatantly derisive of their female counterparts, and merely curious about their bodies.

Adolescents are very conscious of their own developing physiques and strive not only to accept the changes within themselves, but to use their bodies effectively.[19] Hughie attempts to over compensate for his exceptionally small physical build by undertaking strenuous activities like following an excellent swimmer upriver or being the first to dive into a freezing river. He is aware of the intolerance of any weakness or

difference expressed by his peers so that his greatest fears at this stage are public humiliation and rejection.

Hughie has no qualms about using his weaker body to a different advantage, however, with his mother, boasting of his ability to scheme and manipulate her concern for his health to achieve his own ends. Once, when he is punished by being quarantined, he merely delights in the fact that he is well prepared to amuse himself privately. Hughie's growth toward maturity through this summer may be charted by examining the change in his attitude toward his friends, his parents and his own well-being.

Erikson notes that "Adolescents not only help one another temporarily through ... discomfort by forming cliques and stereotyping themselves, their ideals, and their enemies; they also insistently test each other's capacity for sustaining loyalties in the midst of inevitable conflicts of values."[20] Hughie is consequently thrilled to be chosen by Peter to dig a cave for just the two of them and suppresses the suspicion that he was asked only because none of the other boys is available, entering into the secrecy without misgivings and with a sacrificial spirit. Hughie's lack of a strong sense of his own individuality means that he allows himself to be drawn into potentially dangerous situations such as using dynamite and hiding a fugitive, which only deepen his

perpetual anxiety. The understanding which develops between Hughie and Peter is, however, such that on several occasions they find there is no need to discuss an issue because they know themselves to be of the same mind. This understanding is not intended to suggest a regression to the Romantic intuitive bond as formed between the much younger Brian O'Connal and Young Ben, but a conscious decision to unite in secrecy in order to sustain the feeling of adventure and intimacy. Just as they would like King Motherwell to visit the cave, for example, they do not want Musgrave anywhere near it. At an age when belonging, or at least feeling that you belong, is so important, to be ostracized can be devastating, and clearly, as in Musgrave's case, can have negative, long-term psychological effects.

Achieving a masculine or feminine social role is increasingly important to adolescents while they strive to acquire a set of values as a guide to socially responsible behavior.[21] In getting to know one of his peers well, Hughie is able to compare his own changing values and attitudes while the reader notes his development. Ultimately he is able to stand firm against Peter's opinion and risk losing a friend over a point of principle. Musgrave as a contrasting figure, and reminiscent of Forbsie in Who Has Seen the Wind, does not form lasting friendships which seems to affect his

inability to form a complete identity. Having accepted the values he is taught as a child without revising them according to personal experience, Musgrave continues to conspire against others, motivated by resentment and uncertainty over his own judgement.

The most powerful and potentially destructive agents of the environment in How I Spent My Summer Holidays are the social forces. The community in which Hughie lives may be regarded in many ways as typically Canadian. Small and isolated, surrounded by a physical frontier and separated from American and British cultural sources, it has, almost inevitably, developed what Frye provisionally calls a "garrison mentality."[22] "A garrison," Frye states, "is a closely knit and beleaguered society, and its moral and social values are unquestionable."[23]

Rather than being a unified community, however, Hugh remembers it as being populated by four distinct societies composed of the adults, the children, the participants at the brothel on the edge of town and the patients at the nearby Mental Hospital. Considering how interrelated these four societies were, the lack of understanding among them and the struggle for autonomy were so severe that, from the children's point of view, at least, they were considered factions at war. While the brothel and the hospital are relevant to the development

of the children's social identities, it is the adults as a group, which is considered the most threatening force in their young lives.

As in Who Has Seen the Wind and his other novels, Mitchell emphasizes the role of parents as being most important to the healthy development of the child, socially and psychologically. Hughie's parents provide a stable, respectable home environment where order and traditional values are upheld but where Hugh is permitted considerable freedom of movement which appears to be very similar to Brian O'Connal's home. Hugh states, nevertheless, "My major adversary in this on-going war was my own mother of course." (p. 89) Although the love in this parent-child relationship is undeniable, Hugh remembers that even when he was a young adult, she "still tended to come on too strong, right through neutral territory and into my own." (p. 171)

While his father is a firm disciplinarian, however, Hugh knows he is treated fairly and with respect. Though he seems to be dominated for the most part by his wife, Hugh remembers his father as being gentle, patient and self-assured. As a literary character, Hugh's father is comparable to Gerald O'Connal in Who Has Seen the Wind and Colin Dobbs in Since Daisy Creek (1984) in the unusually supportive roles they play in the lives of their children.

Achieving emotional independence from parents and other adults is another important psychological task for the adolescent, and one which may take years to accomplish. Paradoxically, the boys in How I Spent My Summer Holidays do not realize that in asserting their individuality, they are maturing and becoming more like the group against which they believe they are in opposition. "Although we knew that we must eventually fly up there to the adult world," Hugh remembers, "we knew very little of what they had planned for us, had no real intelligence of their strategy." (p. 86) Like Brian O'Connal at the end of Who Has Seen the Wind, Hughie and his friends have reached the stage of maturity where they can no longer be uninvolved spectators but must consciously participate in the adult world and in activities which they may not, as yet, fully understand.

In his review of the novel, Mark Abley expresses delight in the variety of characters present in How I Spent My Summer Holidays. He maintains that "It's a clear-sighted vision of Saskatchewan, one of Canada's least understood and most surprising provinces."[24] The adult figures in this novel are indeed remarkably rounded, in spite of Mitchell's being somewhat inhibited in their depiction because of the child protagonist's perspective. Where Mitchell tended in earlier fiction to stereotype or reduce his characters to caricatures, the adults in How I

Spent My Summer Holidays are threateningly realistic.

The children learn terrible truths about respected members of the community as Mitchell deals with such adult issues as alcoholism and perverse sexuality in the realistic context of day to day life in a small town. For example, while the meddling and hyprocritical Mrs. Abercrombie in Who Has Seen the Wind is recognizable as a stereotype and is disagreeable enough for her downfall to be expected and applauded, the comparable figure of Mrs. Judge Hannah in How I Spent My Summer Holidays somehow evokes a different response. Although the two women occupy prestigious positions in society, Mrs. Judge Hannah's secret drinking problem, as discovered by the young boy on a bright spring morning, reveals an aching loneliness and weakness in her which renders her pathetic, if not harmless. She finds strength in her religion and in heroic, warlike hymns such as "Dare to be a Daniel" and "Onward Christian Soldiers." (p. 88) Like Mrs. Abercrombie, Mrs. Judge Hannah is dangerous because she fears what she cannot control.

It is also interesting to note that the children fear women most among the leaders of the adults, partly for their influence over their husbands but most because of suspicious or intuitive natures attributed to them by the boys. While Hughie perceives his own mother as being "an eminent Victorian," (p. 89) skillful in the social

graces and the epitome of femininity, she is also "as tough as corset whalebone," (p. 93) manipulative and motivated by self-righteous convictions. Though the men in the community hold the positions of authority, few of them are willing to challenge the status quo and it is clearly the women who control the circumstances of daily living and rule the lives of the children.

The brothel on the edge of town represents a challenge to the façade of gentility perpetuated by the apparently respectable townspeople. Hugh describes Sadie Rossdance's three cottages as having had a "happy sound" (p. 5) comparable to that heard from the Holy Rollers' summer camp, and he remembers that society as one that "celebrated life." (p. 4) When he encounters the prostitutes naked at the river, he is both attracted and repelled. These women are simultaneously beautiful, unpretentious and childlike, yet they are vulgar, vindictive and self-centred. As they play together, Hughie perceives another side to womanhood which he relates to the fun he has had with his peers. He notes that "Sometimes out at the Mental hole what started out as reed-pipe fun turned mean and rotten," (p. 130) but he is amazed at the viciousness generated among these women. Significantly, Bella, the wife of Hughie's hero, King Motherwell, is not only a nasty fighter but an instigator.

Though Hughie is astonished at Bella's association

with Sadie's girls, the adult reader is reminded of the whorish decor of Bella's home, the manner in which she taunts her husband and King's frustrated outburst, "Why don't you do what other women do!" (p. 108) Hughie is increasingly aware of sexual innuendos in adult behavior without fully understanding their implications. Because of his innocence, Hughie is unable to consciously associate episodes such as the "fight" in the parlour between Mrs. Inspector Kydd and his mother, to the fight in the river between Bella and a prostitute. That these memories rise to the surface of his consciousness years later, however, indicates that they are, indeed, related. So the adult reader is not surprised, for example, at the development of an implicitly sexual alliance between Bella and Mrs. Inspector Kydd.

Hughie is fascinated by adult relationships and the various roles or "voices" people adopt as appropriate to a situation. This interest is not unusual in a young adolescent who is beginning to establish his own image of himself in relation to others. He is also beginning to associate sexuality with power and to recognize love as a real force in life. At twelve years old, however, Hughie and his friends are just beginning to conceive of themselves as sexual beings. Hughie is much more interested in older women than girls of his own age. He idealizes while rebelling against his own mother. He is,

therefore, confused by the behaviour of Bella and Mrs. Kydd, and with a childish, self-centred attitude, assumes that the two women are spying on his unlawful activities. Though Peter can offer no good reason, he somehow senses it would be best not to tell King about the story behind the pink dress. It is Hughie's naïve paranoia and wish to ingratiate himself with King by telling him which lead to the crisis of the novel: violence, death and insanity.

The Mental Hospital is a constant reminder to the community of the consequences suffered by those who are emotionally maladjusted, incapable of dealing with reality or integrating themselves into society. Hughie explains, "Even though we thought of insanity as a dreadful magic trick that had been played on some, we said that such people 'went' or had 'gone' crazy. Somehow love was involved ...." (p. 45) Plagued by anxiety, Hughie is intrigued by the causes of insanity and fearful of joining the patients with whom he sympathizes. It is interesting that initially, King is hesitant to discuss the issue, but suggests that loneliness and fear, or the realization of one's essential worthlessness may be primary factors. "Bein a human," King insists, is reason enough, and those who do not succumb are "Just goddam lucky!" (p. 59)

The ideas and values of Kingsley Spurgeon Motherwell directly contrast with those espoused by the school principal, Mr. Mackey. The reader is reminded of

the author's emphasis on the importance of the role of teachers. Both characters are concerned with encouraging the children with whom they come in contact to acquire values as a guide to responsible behaviour. The attitudes and methods of each man, however, evoke quite different responses in the children. Mr. Mackey is reminiscent of Dickens' Mr. Gradgrind of Hard Times (1854), and of the art teacher Mr. Mackey in a more recent work, Mitchell's The Vanishing Point, all of whom take punitive measures against children who dare to express their creativity or individuality.

According to Mr. Mackey in How I Spent My Summer Holidays, "consequences were something to be 'suffered'," Hugh remembers. He says, "our lives had been mined with them so that all pleasures must be followed by an explosion of unpleasant consequences." (p. 6) Mr. Mackey's set of values are based upon an exaggerated sense of obligation which he regularly inflicts on the young minds, repressing their youthful enthusiasm by the power of instilling fear and guilt. As the psychologist McNeil points out, it is important for the adolescent to develop intellectual skills and concepts necessary for civic competence,[25] but Mitchell would add that it is equally important to maintain a sense of curiosity and joy in daily existence.[26] The adult Hugh recognizes his former teacher's demoralizing intentions, realizing that to

Mackey's mind, "Ascending this Aristotelian obligation ladder purified us, by refining us of all child matter." (p. 6)

Having heard the "ant-and-grasshopper speech" (p. 6) and "The Old Steeplejack and the Young Steeplejack speech" (p. 142) so many times over the years, it is almost inevitable that Hughie and his friends question their own value in relation to society and each other apart from what they know from personal experience, so that they subsequently ally themselves against adults as an opposing force. Hughie is fortunate, however, among his peers, in having a father who advises him, "Don't eat that, Elmer," (p. 171) and who patiently helps to restore his self-esteem. Hugh remembers that "When we walked over the prairie we often looked down, for like the badger and the weasel and the skunk and the coyote and the gopher, we were earth creatures." (p. 7) In heeding the instruction, therefore, to "look upwards in whatever we did [and] ... For the rest of our lives," (p. 143) the children would be denying an essential part of themselves which the leaders of society did not honour, in order to conform.

More important to Hughie than the approval of his peers or any other adults is the attention he receives from King Motherwell. Erikson writes, "If the earliest stage bequeathed to the identity crisis an important need for trust in oneself and in others, then clearly the

adolescent looks most fervently for men and ideas to have *faith* in, which also means men and ideas in whose service it would seem worth while to prove oneself trustworthy."[27] King seems to be everything a young boy dreams of becoming himself, a 'hero' in every sense of the word. King's independence, self-assurance and athletic physique inspire Hughie to believe he could do just about anything, "But only if he felt like it." (p. 20) In being approachable to the boys without condescending, King affirms their status as individuals and approves their creative energy.

King's most positive influence on the boys is to encourage them to think for themselves and to strive to achieve whatever they set out to do. In formulating his own identity and values, King evidently reached the understanding that compliance to social demands does not necessarily entail conformity. When King suggests an alternative perspective on the ant-and-grasshopper speech, Hughie realizes happily, "King Motherwell just about cancelled Mr. Mackey out." (p. 7) King's drinking and occasionally aggressive manner reveal a loneliness and frustration, so that the reader senses that much of his advice is built on bitter personal experience which he would like to see the boys spared. At various points through the narration, Hugh reminds us of just how much King's approval meant to him at that particularly difficult period in his young life.

In order to enable his readers to gain a comfortable understanding of the characters, their relationships and motivations, and to reach satisfying answers to the issues raised by the end of the fiction, Mitchell utilizes central motifs of war, insanity and freedom. The adult Hugh perceives himself as an epic storyteller surveying an ancient battlefield upon which various forces clashed continually. Not only were there natural and social tensions, but also individuals fighting aspects of themselves.

Early in the story, Hugh establishes King Motherwell as a heroic figure, not only to him, personally, but also as a man honoured and decorated for his part in World War I. As a child, however, Hughie is most impressed by the fact that "King had always moved through our world. He was both boy and adult." (p. 32) In spite of his ability to communicate with and be accepted by the various factions, like a true tragic hero, King is ultimately destroyed by something within himself.

Through the figures of King and Bill the sheepherder, both of whom are veterans, war is associated in the novel with insanity. King's empathy for the escaped prisoner rises from more than the recognition of a shared past. Hughie notices that though Bill never speaks, his eyes sometimes reveal an internal desperation. "Not that they were seeking help," he says, "but they were

dreadfully preoccupied with survival." (p. 77) Hugh also remembers that at times, the expression in King's eyes could have "something the same effect as a magnifying glass condensing down the light to a white dot that burns," (p. 107) Hughie senses at times, that King's attention was directed inside himself, as though he had "wandered off into another country ... and when he did come back to you, it was as though he was not aware that he had left you." (pp. 107-108) The child explains this as an effect of having lived among Indians while the adult reader is prepared to recognize the possibility of the boy's hero being or becoming mentally unbalanced.

Hughie and King also share an artistic sensibility, what Mitchell describes as having "a certain special sort of awareness, so that in fact they are potential artists, life artists."[28] Like Daddy Sherry in The Kite or Jake Trumper in Jake and the Kid, King is able to cast aside the conventional adult perspectives and inhibitions to appreciate the process of living itself,joyfully and spontaneously. The educated reader may recognize King's general philosophical position as that of an existential humanist.[29] "I have never known anyone who made me laugh as much as King did," (p. 26) Hugh comments. Hughie is also interested in King's denunciation of organized religion as being restrictive and self-righteously judgmental.

In the same small prairie town there are Baptist, Anglican, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Methodist and "Holy Roller" churches. Each of Hughie's friends attends a different one though there are few apparent differences between them and their negative effects on the children are appalling. At no point in the story does anyone speak of having gained any understanding of the promise of God's love, which is the central message of Christianity. The few Biblical allusions Hughie makes are all taken from the Old Testament which does not, of course, include Jesus' teachings. Rather than expressing any interest in what is being taught at Sunday school, Hughie despises, yet fears, his hypocritical teacher and attends regularly mainly to acquire more socially prestigious badges.

Much of the anxiety Hughie feels during the summer of 1924 rises from an excessive fear of punishment by a vengeful God upon and via His earthly congregation. Hughie is particularly moved by King's outburst against people who establish a code of behavior according to their choice of religious denomination, then expect everyone to live according to it. "There has been too much thou-shalt-notting going on all through all the centuries of man," King protests, "and all of this thou-shalt-notting has got to stop .... I shalt not -- that's all right -- but no more of this 'Thou shalt not'." (p. 23) Mitchell evidently intends his readers to reflect on the powerful

influence that organized religion may have on the developing mind, by drawing attention to the effects on specific youngsters in the novel How I Spent My Summer Holidays.

Austin Musgrave seems to be the most adversely affected by the negative teachings of his church, yet as a child, Hughie considers him "quite knowledgeable and unfortunately credible." (p. 11) Because he cannot enjoy the activities of his friends such as going to movies, dances or a circus, and for reasons which he cannot explain even to his own satisfaction, Musgrave amuses himself by knowing more than the others about worldly matters. In responding to the concept of a vindictive, omnipotent deity, the boy delights in criticising the attitudes and activities of others, hopefully to provoke feelings of guilt and inadequacy upon which he may prey. Hughie cannot decide whether Musgrave is neutral and a reliable source of information about adults or "a double agent not to be trusted at all." (p. 86)

Irma Van Wort is another well-indoctrinated child capable of repeating pious phrases and happily condemning others. While Hughie cannot help but feel threatened by her, he comments, "the way she was so superior all the time just put your teeth on edge." (p. 53) Hughie is impressed by the sincerity and joy in the Holy Rollers' worship, yet notes that many of them evidently do not wish

it to be known that they are of this religious persuasion.

In spite of his own doubts, Hughie affirms his religious convictions through private prayers at bedtime and in critical situations, through desperate, hurried appeals which might amount to no more than repeating, "Please, God -- please, God!" (p. 128) Such moments of vision as Brian O'Connal enjoyed which indicate a sense of the presence of God, inspiring what he called "the feeling," are not a part of Hughie's experience. Neither has Hughie developed the more mature, Christian concept of a personal relationship with God, based on faith. That Hughie wants very much to believe is evident in his intense anger over the distortion of truth by the Holy Rollers who so easily accept what they think they see, or want to see as a divine miracle. The child's faith in the teachings and good sense of his elders is severely tried in the episode involving the wandering Mental patient who is mistaken for Jesus Christ.

In <u>How I Spent My Summer Holidays</u>, Mitchell depicts organized religion as yet another means by which people may join forces for reasons of personal and social security. Without forthrightly denouncing Christianity, Mitchell points out the inherent weaknesses of its leaders and the negative effects it may have on the individual and the community. While religion may be seen to form the basis of most societies, Mitchell's fiction argues that

responsibility to oneself and support for each other apart from any dogma is essential to the full development of each individual.

The events of the summer of 1924, Hugh writes, "accelerated the irreversible corruption of my innocence," (p. 4) and his own, active involvement necessarily forces him into a consideration of his personal accountability. Until this point in his young life, Hughie battles typically adolescent anxieties within himself over such things as arithmetic tests, fear of the dark or abuse by other boys, feelings which are largely stimulated by an active imagination. He knows he may retreat from any uncomfortable situation at any time, to the security of his home. Frye notes that in Canadian towns with a garrison mentality, "The real terror comes when the individual feels himself becoming an individual, pulling away from the group, losing the sense of driving power that the group gives him, aware of a conflict within himself far subtler than the struggle of morality against evil."[30] This may be the case, for Hughie.

During the summer of his twelfth year, Hughie is also moving past the psychological stage of "moral realism," outlined by Piaget as a time when a child accepts rules as they are given, to "autonomous morality," when a child understands that rules may be modified to fit particular situations.[31] Hughie tries to convince himself

that he and his friends are justified in helping Bill, even undertaking a "self-less mission," (p. 75) yet the anxiety he feels develops into a sense of foreboding and he must acknowledge having made a serious mistake. Again the young boy is challenged to reconsider his point of view and motives, and to reflect on the wisdom of acting outside acceptable social mores.

King Motherwell and his wife, Bella, exist on the fringes of society and share a low opinion of many social standards. While King has a set of values which lend meaning to his own life, however, Bella is dangerous to all with whom she comes in contact because of her complete lack of standards and undisguised amorality. While Hughie is aware of Bella's self-centredness and the ensuing marital problems, through eavesdropping, the worst effect she has on Hughie is when she mocks and degrades her husband in front of him. Hughie does not comment on his own response to the arguments he witnesses but later reveals that as a young man, he prefers the company of women who will have casual sex with him, to that of women with any of whom he might develop a serious, binding relationship.

While King advocates personal freedom, early in his friendship with Hughie, the older man advises him, "Don't ever do anything you can't undo." (p. 22) Responsibility to oneself and respect for the dignity and

advancement of others are central to the humanist philosophy, yet King's warning echoes throughout the novel. The narrator comments, "It was astonishing to me to learn that summer how truth is so well rooted in actuality." (p. 106) Complete honesty in all situations and relationships is fundamental to the development of freedom in thought and movement and therefore to personal growth. Much of the guilt Hughie feels rises out of "the fabric of lies, pretence, and dissemblance" (p. 105) which he is forced to weave as a protective screen for himself against the consequences of discovery. The longer the deception continues, the more uncomfortable and restricted Hughie's life becomes, until he yearns for release.

Hughie's initial response upon finding the body in the cave is to wonder at the justice of his being the one to make the discovery. Faced with the realization of a horror greater than anything his imagination could conceive, described as "the ultimate corruption of human death," (p. 139) Hughie tries to return to the security of innocence which he took for granted before the events of the summer. His father comforts him in his anguish but compels him to acknowledge his own part as well as the liability of Peter and King. In repeatedly asking 'why,' Hughie's father does not judge and condemn, but helps his son understand the real responsibility that attends freedom of choice and movement, what a privilege freedom

is and how it must be valued and protected.

In Humanism in the English Novel (1975), Peter Faulkner notes that at the centre of humanism lies "the sense of the interrelation of judgement, responsibility and selfhood."[32] King Motherwell and Hugh's father are not dissimilar in that like Mitchell, they both say 'yes' to man. Their philosophy is essentially humanistic, but differs in their respectively active and passive responses to the challenges of life.[33] King is understandably a more attractive companion for a restless adolescent than a conscientious businessman, so it is not until years later that Hugh fully appreciates his father. The psychologist, McNeil, makes an interesting statement with which Mitchell would likely agree:

> The humanist approach to children begins with the assumption that all human beings are born authentic and become corrupt or inauthentic in the give and take of parent-child relationships. If parents love the child, listen to him, respect his human dignity, commiserate with him, and guide him, he will be free to be himself -- free to choose rather than simply react to threat and pressure.[34]

After his death, Hugh realizes how positive an influence his father was in his life, because, he says, "I did not have to defend my interior from my father." (p. 171)

Hughie's immediate love for King and his own innocence blind him to the fact that his hero's judgement, responsibility and self-hood are not harmoniously integrated. Though King's qualities are appreciable and

his intentions for the most part, well-meaning, the lack of balance between his reason and passion leaves him untrustworthy. King is even aware that he is losing his mind after his wife's death and announces that the "Wendigo"[35] is probably in him. (p. 159) There is an indication in this, that there may be much unresolved conflict in King's past to leave him so distraught, and Mitchell reminds us in an interview, of his belief that "the identity contract each of us holds with his self is fragile."[36] However justified Bella's murder may seem, it is not only an act of rage but also of judgement and condemnation which goes against King's ultimate values. His guilt induces the sense of worthlessness he once warned Hughie of, and which eventually provokes the ultimate act of despair, his suicide.

Hughie's love for King deepens into compassion, yet he can finally acknowledge "what I have refused to know all these years." (p. 177) Hugh finds he is still able to accept King for who he was, even knowing the truth. Having been "haunted" by King's spirit in whom he has continued to believe, he has never been free of guilt, disappointment and loneliness. Reconciliation is possible, within Hughie's mind, at least, with forgiveness for each other's imperfections. King's final gift of the promised little blue-winged teal decoy indicates that he harbours no ill-will toward Hughie but acknowledges a

special understanding that will extend over time and separation.

The larger social dimensions of How I Spent My Summer Holidays come into focus at the end of the novel, confirming Hugh's sense that his own story is part of a greater one. As always, Mitchell insists on the 'whole view,' so Hugh must also come to terms with the resentment he has carried with him toward the community which affected him so deeply. Erikson maintains that people often have a "basic sense of doubt in whatever one has left behind," a doubt which is easily associated with a sense of shame, and "has much to do with a consciousness of having a front and a back."[37] Though Mitchell leaves the interpretation of Hugh's dream to the reader, Erikson's explanation of the associations people may carry unconsciously, presents an interesting possibility. "The 'behind' is the small being's dark continent," Erikson explains, "an area of the body which can be magically dominated and effectively invaded by those who would attack one's power of autonomy and who would designate as evil those products of the bowels which were felt to be all right when they were being passed."[38]

Certainly, Hugh's sense of autonomy was threatened during the period he remembers, and his righteous adolescent indignation has soured to the point where he sees himself and all of his friends as "victims." (p. 177)

Musgrave's obsession with bodily cleanliness indicates some imbalance in his perspective, but he directs his own sense of inadequacy outwards and onto other people whom he ostensibly is treating, as a successful therapist. Hugh has not changed in his habit of being overwhelmed by anxiety in any situation. This anxiety indicates a lack of internal balance, the key issue in the novel and what Hugh must resolve to feel complete. The reader is thereby encouraged to search his own past for keys to his present motivations.

"To whatever abyss ultimate concerns may lead individual men," Erikson states, "man as a psychosocial creature will face, toward the end of his life, a new edition of an identity crisis which we may state in the words 'I am what survives of me'."[39] While some readers may complain, as does Paul Roberts in his review of How I Spent My Summer Holidays, that in this novel Mitchell has set a "discordant note" and exhibits a "lack of control,"[40] it may also be argued that Mitchell is exploring the contradictions in life and the world more deeply, and hopes to entice his 'creative partners' into joining him. In coming to terms with the boy he truly was, and accepting the people in his community for who they were, however fallible, Hugh is able to forgive, and to let go of the bitterness he has felt for so long. He has finally found an inner sense of balance and the way to

peace and joy in his world again.

Notes

[1] W.O. Mitchell, The Kite (1962; Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1983), pp. 209-210. This phrase represents an attitude toward life expressed by various characters in several of Mitchell's novels.

[2] Donald Cameron, "W.O. Mitchell: Sea Caves and Creative Partners," Conversations with Canadian Novelists, Part Two (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1973), p. 59.

[3] Cameron, p. 61.

[4] Margaret Atwood, Survival (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1972), p. 142.

[5] Don Tuckey, "That 'Riot' of a Man, Author Bill Mitchell Plans to Keep Growing," The Calgary Herald, 7 May 1979, p. A7.

[6] Margaret Drabble, ed., The Oxford Companion to English Literature, 5th ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 100.

[7] Cameron, p. 53.

[8] W.O. Mitchell, How I Spent My Summer Holidays (1981; Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), p. 178. All further references to this work appear in the text citing the page number.

[9] Elton B. McNeil, ed., The Psychology of Being Human (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 96.

[10] Mark Abley, "The Inquiring Heart of a Prairie Childhood," rev. of How I Spent My Summer Holidays, by W.O. Mitchell, Maclean's, 94 (2 Nov. 1981), 66.

[11] Cameron, p. 52.

[12] Northrop Frye, The Bush Garden (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1971), p. 240.

[13] Cameron, p. 56.

[14] Cameron, p. 61.

[15] Laurence Ricou, Vertical Man/Horizontal World (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1973), p. 7.

[16] Mary A'Court explores the philosophy of W.O. Mitchell and the extent to which he is a believer in God and man. Mary A'Court, "The Faiths of Four Men: Emerson: The Peaceful One of Concord, Mitchell: The Boy of Crocus, Melville: The Wanderer of Nantucket, And Ross: The Bittern of the Dust Bowl," M.A. Diss., University of Toronto, 1966.

[17] McNeil, p. 97.

[18] McNeil, p. 148.

[19] McNeil, p. 148.

[20] Erik Erikson, Identity Youth and Crisis (New York: Norton and Company Inc., 1968), p. 133.

[21] McNeil, p. 148.

[22] Frye, p. 225.

[23] Frye, p. 226.

[24] Abley, p. 66.

[25] McNeil, p. 410.

[26] W.O. Mitchell, "Debts of Innocence," Saturday Night, XCI (March 1976), 37.

[27] Erikson, pp. 128-129.

[28] Cameron, p. 59.

[29] Introduction, page 19, for the definition of humanistic existentialism to which I adhere in this dissertation.

[30] Frye, p. 226.

[31] McNeil, p. 163.

[32] Peter Faulkner, Humanism in the English Novel (London: Pemberton Publishing Co. Ltd., 1976), p. 189.

[33] Faulkner effectively explores the depiction of active and passive responses to life by characters in Angus Wilson's The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot (1958). Faulkner p. 189.

[34] McNeil, p. 151.

[35] Carole Carpenter defines 'windigo' [or 'wendigo'] in The Canadian Encyclopedia, ed. James H. Marsh (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers Ltd., 1985), p. 1948. "Windigo, the spirit believed by the Algonquian to take possession of vulnerable persons and cause them to engage in various antisocial behaviors, most notably cannibalism.... The resultant psychosis is well-documented and the subject of medical and psychological research."

[36] Mitchell, "Debts of Innocence," p. 36.

[37] Erikson, p. 112.

[38] Erikson, p. 112.

[39] Erikson, p. 141.

[40] Paul Roberts, "Mitchell in Limbo," rev. of How I Spent My Summer Holidays, Saturday Night, 96 (Nov. 1981), 76.

Conclusion

The child in the fiction of W.O. Mitchell is not merely a figure of Romantic idealism, but serves as a vehicle for the author to explore and confront contemporary social and philosophical issues which relate to his quest to understand human meaning in universal terms. Whether Mitchell is writing light-hearted, anecdotal stories or a novel with epic dimensions, childhood features as the most significant period in an individual's life. As his career progresses, Mitchell's depiction of childhood reflects his changing, maturing perspective, conveying his deep sense of morality through the immediate experience of his characters rather than through abstract theorizing.

Mitchell respects the child's vision and his complicated nature, acknowledging his struggles for self-determination to be real and potentially traumatic. "When you were a kid," Mitchell demands, "Did you ever stop to think most of the time you were scared of something?"[1] Growth follows the desire for self-knowledge in Mitchell's characters whether they are children, or adults who must

come to terms with the far-reaching influence of their early environments. Mitchell understands that an awareness of one's incompleteness which may be rooted in early anxieties could induce a crippling self-consciousness and instill a deep sense of loneliness and isolation. Yet he maintains that the truth about oneself can only be found through sharing oneself with other people.

Mitchell remarks, "Erich Fromm is right, I think, when he says consciousness of self is the phenomenon which separates man from the living whole, that self-consciousness cuts him off from all about him."[2] Mitchell adds, "That's been a constant theme in my work: man's separateness, and the need to rejoin the living whole, to build bridges from the self to the other, is practically life's central problem."[3] Mitchell hopes to entice his readers into an active involvement with his characters as 'creative partners,' and thereby to encourage them to face their own fears and regrets through a comparative re-evaluation of their personal experiences. The child, with his natural dignity and essential innocence, serves as a constant reminder in Mitchell's novels, of where and how we must begin.

Mitchell's pursuit of truth emphasizes mutual human responsibility and is supported by his conviction that it is not as much circumstances as one's personal

response to them which is significant to the development of the complete person. "To believe in oneself and in one's decisions is important," writes Alan De Witt Button. "It is, indeed," he says, "vital to an authentic life. It comes from the experience of making free choices: the greater the experience, the stronger the ultimate belief and self-confidence."[4] The various protagonists in Mitchell's fiction constantly find themselves in situations which challenge them to reconsider their images of themselves, points of view and values.

Mitchell's fictional world is skillfully created to emphasize the pervasive presence of good and evil in it through his structuring each novel with various complementary tensions. "And so what you're faced with in life, or illusions of life, is balancing -- there's no either/or," Mitchell explains. "There are no total victories; there are no total defeats. You end up accepting that life involves dilemma, contradiction, and no absolutes or simplicities."[5] In each of Mitchell's novels the central characters must reach a satisfying balance between such powerful forces as nature and civilization, God and humanity, imaginative youth and conforming maturity, society and the individual.

All of Mitchell's fiction is set in Canada's western provinces and his characters are strongly influenced by their early contact with the prairie.

Laurence Ricou recognizes the persistence of the theme of solitude in Canadian prairie fiction and suggests that "Vertical man in a horizontal world is necessarily a solitary figure; the fiction of the Canadian prairies is the record of man conquering his geographical solitude, and, by extension, his other solitudes, not so much physically as through imaginative understanding."[6] Mitchell credits children with having least difficulty in contending with a physical environment which some adults find psychologically terrifying.

In "The Liar Hunter" from Jake and the Kid, the Kid is able to articulate the impression which eludes an educated adult, by simply stating that "Prairie's scarey,"[7] and that man at the mercy of the elements is as defenceless as a "Fly on a platter."[8] Mitchell acknowledges a child's inclination to feel a spiritual connection or, at least, an emotional involvement with elements of the natural world which affect him personally. Brian O'Connal and the Kid both seek comfort in the sound of the wind, for example, and the Indian children in The Vanishing Point enjoy ritualistic dances which affirm their bond with the land.

Mitchell's child-figures often identify themselves with nature in opposition to civilization because they instinctively distrust the rules and regulations imposed on their personal freedom by society. Through the

presence of figures like the Young Ben in Who Has Seen the Wind and Old Esau in The Vanishing Point, we know that Mitchell does not advocate a complete rejection of civilization in favour of living in the wilderness. He only rejects those elements which may suppress man's natural instincts. He does not go as far as Mark Twain who roundly denounced civilization as a "shabby poor thing and full of cruelties, vanities, arrogancies, meanness and hypocrisies,"[9] yet who found no realistic alternatives to it. While Mitchell advocates an awareness of humanity's connection with nature which is associated with childhood, as his literary career progresses, Mitchell places less emphasis on the direct impact of the land and more on the significance of social relationships in the development of the authentic person.

Mitchell's fiction allows for the possibility of the existence of divinity in nature, but suggests that communication with such a source is difficult because of man's desire to define and contain God. Mitchell writes forcefully against organized religion which he depicts in his novels as having negative effects on the awakening consciousness. "I think the ultimate outrage done by man to man in history has been done with closed moral systems," Mitchell argued recently.[10] Ironically, while he blatantly disregards the Biblical message of Christianity while condemning its human application or

expression through the churches, Mitchell nevertheless affirms the power of love as the answer for this world, which is the basis for all of Jesus' teachings.

Mitchell elaborates in an interview, "We come down to the fact that one has to, more than one does, trust the intuitive, gut, empathetic response of love...I'm really saying that technology, religion, mysticism, myth won't work, but will work -- I'm embarrassed by saying it -- but what will work is love. Which covers a lot of things."[11] Human love, (not a dependence on dogmas or otherworldly elements but a genuine, responsible concern for one another) is a central theme in Mitchell's fiction and fundamental to his depiction of childhood.

Mitchell's stories revolve primarily around human relationships within society, families, and between individuals. Whether they are children, young adults or middle-aged people, Mitchell's central characters all experience different crises of self-identity, most of which are resolved through sharing with others. In each of Mitchell's novels there is always at least one adult figure whose experience or perspective serves to contrast with that of the child protagonist, and with each character being indispensable to the other's development. Dick Harrison describes this as "a method of pinpointing reality by triangulation, the younger and older consciousness at work on an experience -- possibly even

the younger and the older Mitchell ...."[12] The relationship between Digby and Brian in Who Has Seen the Wind, or Dobbs and his daughter in Since Daisy Creek are particularly effective examples of this technique.

Mitchell is especially concerned with the responsibility of educational institutions and teachers as powerful, formative influences on the receptive young minds of their charges. His view of education is that it should be as much protective as instructive, that the child's sensitivity should be fostered and cultivated for what it might become. Mitchell effectively portrays alternative and unconventional guides for the children in his novels, men who encourage spontaneity and creativity such as Daddy Sherry in The Kite, King Motherwell in How I Spent My Summer Holidays, or Ken Lyon in Ladybug, Ladybug... (1988).

In his fiction, Mitchell also explores the various ways people attempt to manipulate or control others, socially or psychologically, into conforming to the expectations of the community. He emphasizes that freedom may be largely a matter of choice based on personal responsibility but that it is the individual's early environment which determines whether or not he will have the faith in himself to live according to his own convictions. Mitchell maintains that,

For artists, indeed for all humans, living is a

> matter of balance between the world of the many and the world of the one, the world of the wild horses of passion and appetite and reason, the caprice of childhood and the discipline of experience. Pulling off the trick of living is one hell of a difficult, acrobatic feat...it cannot be performed well by amateurs.[13]

Mitchell encourages the development of an appreciation for the fullness of experience which includes having a sense of humour, for achieving personal flexibility but within the framework of social accountability.

W.O. Mitchell's attention to the innocence of children and the innocence of experience in his art is reminiscent of the vision of the poet, William Blake, who explored what he described as "the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul" in his Songs of Innocence and Experience.[14] Mitchell acknowledges, in fact, "I could not begin to estimate the influence Blake has had on me."[15] In the poem "Holy Thursday,"[16] from Songs of Innocence, Blake appears to be rejoicing in the picture of seeing rows of underprivileged children singing in church, but is actually satirically challenging his society's authoritarian self-righteousness and religious hypocrisy in its treatment of innocent children. Mitchell shares Blake's point of view and explores similar issues in a contemporary Canadian setting in The Vanishing Point and How I Spent My Summer Holidays. Mitchell's fiction may also be thematically linked with Blake's poem "The Echoing Green"[17] which advocates that to keep a sense of the joy

and wonder of childhood through years of experience into old age, is most important to achieving inner peace in a complex world. While Mitchell's characters may not gain full understanding, the insights they reach strengthen them to continue in their search for human meaning in the universe and for their place within it.

With Mitchell's insistence on the 'whole view' proclaimed throughout his fiction, the author's work inevitably builds on itself. Because of the close resemblance between some of the characters and small towns in different novels, critics like Edward McCourt find them unconvincing and stereotyped.[18] Michael Hornansky points out, however, that "They are Mitchell types, which is something else. The fact that we recognize them," he says, "... is testimony to Mitchell's invention, not his power of reconstruction. He has created a country and made us citizens of it."[19] Mitchell is unabashed in his own defence, declaring, "I'm the great rerun king...If you're confident about what you're doing and if you can remain objective about your work, it's pretty good being a rerun king."[20]

In a review of How I Spent My Summer Holidays, Mark Abley comments on the fact that "occasionally the breezy style seems at odds with an underlying bleakness," and notes that "In the end, the title is deliberately deceptive."[21] Paul Roberts, another reviewer, is

surprised by the lack of sentimentality in Mitchell's presentation of this childhood world and rightly notes that, "There were always dark undertones in Mitchell's characters (the brutal intransigence of Daddy Sherry in The Kite, the empty boastfulness of Jake), but our forebodings were never justifiable."[22] In his three most recent novels, Mitchell does, indeed, make an interesting departure stylistically and thematically from his better known earlier works, yet he still portrays a world where man's suffering and despair may be overcome by self-knowledge and love.

In The Bush Garden, Northrop Frye writes,

> Moral earnestness and the posing of serious problems are by no means excluded from popular literature any more than serious literature is excused form the necessity of being entertaining. The difference is in the position of the reader's mind at the end, in whether he is being encouraged to remain within his habitual social responses or whether he is being prodded into making the steep and lonely climb into the imaginative world.[23]

While such works as Jake and the Kid and The Kite may be classified as sentimental, popular literature, Mitchell's intentions throughout his career have never been to merely entertain and, in fact, his later works have been quite demanding of their 'creative partners', in fusing morality with drama.

Though aware of natural and mortal limitations, Mitchell's central characters are life-affirming. They exhibit a vitality and potential which promise hope for

the future while expressing an appreciation for the quality of the present. The figure of a child reappears consistently through Mitchell's fiction establishing the relation between childhood and adult consciousness. Mitchell emphasizes the importance of childhood in the development of the complete human being and is successful in his major aim of promoting the dignity of the individual and of mankind.

Notes

[1] Don Tuckey, "That 'Riot' of a Man, Author Bill Mitchell Plans to Keep Growing," The Calgary Herald, 7 May 1979, A7.

[2] W.O. Mitchell, "Some of Today's Developers Have the Sensitivity of Fascist Book Burners", Heritage Canada (Dec. 1980), 29.

[3] Mitchell, p. 29.

[4] Alan De Witt Button, The Authentic Child (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 60.

[5] David O'Rourke, "An Interview with W.O. Mitchell", English Canadian Writers, No. 20 (Winter 1980-81), 153.

[6] Laurence Ricou, Vertical Man/Horizontal World (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1973), p. 6.

[7] W.O. Mitchell, Jake and the Kid (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1961), p. 92.

[8] Mitchell, Jake, p. 100.

[9] Peter Coveney, The Image of Childhood (Baltimore: Penguin Books Ltd., 1957), p. 220.

[10] Sid Adilman, "Author is Not 'All Sweetness and Light'", Saturday Star, 4 Nov. 1984, p. G.2.

[11] O'Rourke, p. 156.

[12] Dick Harrison, Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1977), p. 175.

[13] W.O. Mitchell, "Debts of Innocence", Saturday Night, XCI (March 1976), 37.

[14] David Perkins, ed., English Romantic Writers (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1967), p. 50.

[15] O'Rourke, p. 152.

[16] William Blake, "Holy Thursday", in English Romantic Writers, ed. Perkins, p. 54.

[17] William Blake, "The Echoing Green", in English Romantic Writers, ed. Perkins, p. 50.

[18] Edward A. McCourt, "William O. Mitchell", The Canadian West in Fiction (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1949), p. 108.

[19] Michael Hornansky, "Countries of the Mind", Tamarack Review, No. 26 (Winter 1963), 68.

[20] Sid Adilman, "Prairie Novelist at 62 Works Harder Than Ever", Toronto Daily Star, 25 Sept. 1976, p. H.3.

[21] Mark Abley, "The Inquiring Heart of a Prairie Childhood", rev. of How I Spent My Summer Holidays, by W.O. Mitchell, Macleans, 94 (2 Nov. 1981), 66.

[22] Paul Roberts, "Mitchell in Limbo", rev. of How I Spent My Summer Holidays, by W.O. Mitchell, Saturday Night, 96 (Nov. 1981), 76.

[23] Northrop Frye, The Bush Garden (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1971), p. 136.

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