

TWO PRAIRIE TOWNS

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ABSTRACT

The disparate themes of W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind* and Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* are linked to the abnormal elements of wind and weather that scourges the towns and prairie regions of Saskatchewan during the depression years of the 1930's.

Both novels are set in towns having strongly entrenched Calvinistic backgrounds, where the ministers of the respective churches suffer the indignities heaped upon them by well-meaning, but sublimely ignorant groups of people who fill the ranks of the churches' auxiliaries. However, neither Ross nor Mitchell underestimate the importance of, and the need for lay people who volunteer their services to the church in the name of Christian charity. Ross's largely humorless novel emphasizes their weaknesses and faults in a forthright and direct manner. It also explores the nebulous area of communication that exists between Philip Bentley and his parishioners.

Mrs. Bentley's diary entries move from one tension-filled episode to another. The Bentley's domestic upheavals are temporarily alleviated by compromise on the part of Mrs. Bentley, at least that is what the reader is led to believe. Moreover, it would seem that each compromise by the minister's wife was induced with a built-in mechanism for more tension. Ross tells his story in such a manner, that as soon as one dramatic situation is resolved, another succeeds it. The overwrought sensibilities of the Bentleys are further exacerbated by the intermittent wind continually sounding its discordant obbligato as if in derision of the occupants of the manse which, ironically, is dedicated to the service of the Lord.

Mitchell imposes his own unique order upon *Who Has Seen the Wind*, one that bespeaks an intimate knowledge of town and prairie life in Saskatchewan. His altruistic portrayal of a boy and his dog is expanded to explore and depict the relationship existing between the denizens of a prairie town and its immediate environment. Threading the story line are the distinct themes of mortality and ecology, which, in some measure, affect and shape the mind of Brian O'Connell during his pre-pubescent years. On the lighter side, Mitchell infuses the novel with a rare and satiric perception of temporary and local conditions that govern the actions of his principal characters in their everyday lives and pursuits.

Much of *Who Has Seen the Wind* is inextricably bound up with the various objects of satire such as classes, literature, religion and small town bigotry. Mitchell balances the satiric thrust of his novel with a notable sense of altruism that finds expression in a caring sensitivity for the plight of humans and animals alike. That same sensitivity extends to the song of the meadow larks and the hum of the telephone wires which relay the message of the wind. The meadow larks are symbols of hope for the future, a future that Mitchell, guardedly and repeatedly, points to as being "from everlasting to everlasting".

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M.J.D.

Two Prairie Towns

Sinclair Ross's novel *As For Me and My House* and W. O. Mitchell's novel *Who Has Seen the Wind* share certain similarities. Both narratives are set in the prairie region of Saskatchewan, and both are linked to themes of wind, mortality and victimization. Of the two novels, Mitchell's affords a more intimately detailed description of life and character in a prairie town and its environs than does Ross's story of a beleaguered couple caught up in the toils of a small town ministerial posting.

Mitchell's nameless town is larger and seemingly more affluent than Ross's town of Horizon with its seven grain elevators to Horizon's five. It boasts a population of 1800 people, cement sidewalks, lawn sprinklers and a bank on First Street that is not false-fronted. Further evidence of the town's well-being is provided by the imposing structure of the "great, gray sandstone church: Knox Presbyterian - 1902." which also boasted a little brown manse for its minister, the Reverend John Hewlett Hislop, B.A., B.D..

The disparity between the church and the manse standing impervious to the passing "fervent whirlwind", is a studied reflection of opposites. The note of inequality posed by the two buildings is basic to Mitchell's novel which is set in the Depression years of the early 1930's. *Who Has Seen the Wind* is a morally engrossing story, a Bildungsroman,

A sensitive portrait of the development of a young boy from his fourth year to the beginning of maturity at twelve.¹

It is told from the point of view of an omniscient author who is privy to a small boy's inner thoughts and compulsions.

Brian Sean MacMurphy O'Connell, the principal character in the novel, moves from the circle of family and friends to a more involved experience of the external world when he goes to school for the first time. The rite of passage completed, ensuing events bring about

¹*The Oxford Companion to Canadian History and Literature.* p. 530.

the introduction of other characters who serve to add new and more interesting dimensions to the story. The bizarre antics of the Ben, the evangelism of Saint Sammy, and the stolid demeanors of Ab and Annie under the sufferance of a cursing Sean O'Connell, are cases in point. Samuel Roddan, writing in the *Canadian Forum* says

Mitchell has created one or two characters of whom I would like to have heard more. There is a hard drinking swearing Uncle Sean, for instance who occasionally becomes startingly alive and a queer religious chap called Saint Sammy who rattles off one of the best descriptions of the Creation I have come across in a long time.²

Roddan's selection of Uncle Sean and Saint Sammy as the two outstanding supporting characters in the novel has merit. However, his omission of the Bens is questionable. Their presence in the narrative is noteworthy for several reasons, one of which, is the comic relief afforded by the Ben's frantic attempts to keep his illicit still hidden from the town constable and the vengeful Mr. Powelly.

The basis for the inclusion of the Young Ben, on the other hand, rests mainly upon the boy's inherent moral qualities, and Brian's attraction to the ten year old youngster who, paradoxically, was starting his third year at school still in the first grade.

Brian never talked or whispered to the young Ben, ... yet as the term wore on, there grew a strengthening bond between them, an extrasensory brotherhood whose first empirical evidence came one morning early in January.³

That morning, because of an unintentional lie, Brian was compelled to undergo a humiliating form of punishment before his classmates which ended in his subsequent collapse. The young Ben's precipitate action in coming to the aid of the stricken boy was repeated later in the day when the still shaken victim of Miss MacDonald was slowly making his way homeward.

He was still faint and weak, and when he felt an arm slide around his waist, he welcomed it. ... The young Ben walked the rest of the way to Brian's house with him. He left Brian as silently as he had come to him.⁴

The Young Ben is one of Mitchell's more intriguing characters. Apart from his instinctual humanitarian concern, he represents a force for the ecological balance of animal life on the prairie. His actions with respect to the brutalized gopher and the burial of

²*Canadian Forum*, Vol. 27, 1947-48 AP5624, p. 22.

³W.O. Mitchell. *Who Has Seen the Wind*. p. 86.

⁴*ibid.* p. 91.

Brian's dog, confirm his oneness with the prairie. That special unity was sanctioned by Brian upon his first meeting with the Young Ben.

Brian was not startled; he simply accepted the boy's presence out here as he had accepted that of the gopher and the hawk and the dragonfly. 'This is your prairie,' Brian said."⁵

The indirect conferring of a proprietary interest in the prairie upon the Young Ben is in keeping with the elder Ben's drunken statement that, "Thuh goddam kid was borned growed-up."⁶ It is an acknowledgment of the Young Ben's prairie lore that assures him a place in the prairie's scheme of things; but not much else. Ironically, his future is as uncertain as that of the unlettered Uncle Sean.

In the course of the drought years Sean had changed from a bewildered man, watching dry winds lick up the topsoil from his land to a man with a message. He was the keeper of the Lord's Vineyard, literally.⁷

His message advocating strip farming and crop rotation to halt soil erosion falls upon deaf ears, notably those of Mr. Abercrombie the bank manager. Mitchell exhibits a fair grasp of farm husbandry, but he does not state clearly whether Sean's theory of soil conservation is based on instinct alone, or empirical evidence.

As For Me and My House, like *Who Has Seen the Wind*, is a regional novel that also has its setting in a small prairie town. Ross employs as his central character the minister's wife Mrs. Philip Bentley, who tells the story via the expedience of a diary. The journal is an exercise in subjectivity, with the narrator recounting her experiences, emotions, and memories, in simple, but direct language. So ably is it contrived, that, for the reader, a sympathetic view of Mrs. Bentley emerges early on in the journal, a view which is sustained throughout its length.

Life for the Bentleys in *Horizon* is a repetition of life in the towns that preceded it. Because of Philip's meager salary they often find themselves in straitened circumstances. Mrs. Bentley is quick to point out where the fault lies;

The real trouble is Philip himself. Not many of these little towns can afford a minister, and if a man is willing to take just what it's convenient for

⁵ibid. p. 11.

⁶ibid. p. 82.

⁷ibid. p. 18.

them to give him, he's going to be close to financial breaking — point all his life.⁸

Because Philip is willing to accept a salary which barely affords them a living, the Bentleys undergo economic and personal privation. The shabbiness of the parsonage is matched by the state of their clothing. Mrs. Bentley stoutly faces the town's social circles wearing a new one dollar and forty-five cent hat. She worries about having so little money with which to manage her household.

We're pinched already. They gave us fifteen dollars this week, ... I'm running bills already at the butcher shop and Dawson's store. Philip needs shoes and a hat.⁹

The statement is linked to the theme of penury that Mrs. Bentley constantly dwells upon in her journal entries. It is also a bid for sympathetic recognition. Her pious concern for Philip's well-being is belied by her earlier assertion that “the real trouble is Philip himself”. It is possible that the real trouble could be Mrs. Bentley herself. Her diary entries are too pat, too straightforward to be accepted at their face value. Certainly she is beset by economic problems. But the larger problem, it seems, is the growing spectre of alienation fostered by Philip's intransigence, that in itself is a force that threatens the stability of the Bentley marriage.

Roy Daniell's, in his introduction to Ross's novel *As For Me and My House*, tends to go along with the positive impression of herself that Mrs. Bentley conveys in her diary. His praise of her is like an apotheosis for sainthood. She is

The more candid, selfless, and receptive soul, struggling less overtly but seeing herself, her husband, and indeed the whole situation with exquisite and painful clarity. — ... In her the principle of self-sacrifice out of love and a desire for reconciliation shines in all its pristine Puritan beauty.¹⁰

Daniell's attributes angel-like qualities to Mrs. Bentley, but views Philip as something less than an angel. Too, he ascribes a certain nobility of spirit to Mrs. Bentley's character which, ironically, Philip lacks in his role as minister. Seemingly, it is Mrs. Bentley, not Philip, who bears the mantle of pristine “Puritan beauty” that symbolizes the Christian way. She assumes more than her share of the troubles imposed by Philip's new posting. That is what the diary is all about.

⁸Sinclair Ross. *As For Me and My House*. p. 9.

⁹ibid. p. 39.

¹⁰Roy Daniell's. Introduction, *As For Me and My House*. p. vii.

Sandra Djwa, in an article written for *Canadian Literature*, says that

Mrs. Bentley's struggle is often admirable because there is a stronger sense of discipline and the larger good in her sense of direction. There is no doubt that her motives are often self-interested, but it is a self-interest which acknowledges its own presence and which makes some attempt to modify itself.¹¹

Djwa posits a modified self-interest on the part of Mrs. Bentley. Given the tenor of the diary as a whole, it would seem that the verb "justify" would be more appropriate than "modify". The diary, in its entirety, is taken up with the additional theme of justification. Mrs. Bentley makes a strong case for herself at the outset of the diary when she says "I know that as wives go I'm a fairly good one."¹² Ironically, she meets with little success in her effort to convince Philip of his rightful place in the Church.

An Philip, because he feels he doesn't belong in the Church, wont insist on his salary. I try to tell him, sometimes, that he earns it, that he doesn't need to feel ashamed or look upon himself as a kind of parasite.¹³

In addition, her claim of being a fairly good wife is questionable in view of the varied false fronts she erects to mask her true personality.

Mrs. Bentley reserves the first mask especially for the townspeople of Horizon.

Three little false-fronted towns before this one have taught me to erect a false front of my own, live my own life, keep myself intact,¹⁴

Steve's arrival serves as an occasion for Mrs. Bentley to don another false front. The new mask is born of the apprehension concerning the problems arising from "the unexpected advent of a son"¹⁵ whose ethnic and religious background conflicts with that of the Bentleys. It camouflages her doubts and fears for the future. With a deep sense of misgiving she reflects upon the effect that the boy's coming has upon Philip.

His step for the first time in years had a ring. There was eagerness and vitality radiating from him to make me aware how young he still is, how

¹¹Sandra Djwa. "No Other Way". *Canadian Literature* No. 47, Winter, 1971. p. 59.

¹²*As For me and My House*. p. 10.

¹³*ibid.* p. 9.

¹⁴*ibid.* p. 9.

¹⁵*ibid.*, p. 50-51.

handsome and broad-shouldered. Which if it lasts is going to make things harder still, I'm afraid, seeing that Steve hadn't rejuvenated me too.¹⁶

Despite her anxiety, Mrs. Bentley dutifully takes on the role of surrogate mother to Steve. The assumed function necessitates the added false front. She is compelled to put a good face on the matter for the sake of Philip, the townspeople and herself. In her new role as mother she is like an actress playing a part.

Ironically, and in keeping with the Christian tone of the narrative, Steve's coming can be seen as a parody of Christ's Nativity. The ingredients or contributing factors of analogy are in place, the Immaculate Conception, the barrenness of Mrs. Bentley, and the meanness of the lean-to shed behind the parsonage which, like the stable at Bethlehem stands exposed to the elements. Mrs. Ellingsworth, the archetypal good neighbor, substitutes for the Magi with her gift of a cot and mattress for the new arrival. Moreover, Mrs. Bentley's recounting of Philip's new-found buoyancy is suggestive of a latter-day renaissance. In effect, Philip is a parodical likeness of the crucified Christ figure and the legendary Phoenix, the symbolic representatives of immortality and resurrection.

Philip's subsequent concern for Steve's immediate welfare is disturbing for Mrs. Bentley who feels threatened by her husband's affection for the boy. She develops a love-hate relationship for Steve, thereby creating a second false front to complement the one she had previously assumed for him.

"I can't help it. I like Steve and at the same time I resent him. I grudge every minute he and Philip are alone together."¹⁷

She cannot share Philip's enthusiasm for the boy who serves as a reminder of "the boy of his own that I haven't given him". In effect she becomes a Janus figure. She shares other similarities with the two-faced sentinel god who presides over the entrances to Roman towns and houses. Like the Roman god who is represented as looking backward and forward, Mrs. Bentley looks backward in time to earlier hardships, and to a future with a bookstore as its centre of hope for her and Philip.

Steve is instrumental in compounding the growing alienation between the Bentleys.

¹⁶ibid. p. 50-51.

¹⁷ibid. p. 52.

The exclusive nature of the man-boy relationship between Philip and the boy contributes to Mrs. Bentley's anxiety.

"Philip and Steve went off to the country again this afternoon and left me at home."¹⁸

She has no special mask to don for the personal affront to her dignity and marital status, nor was she accustomed to "coming in second"¹⁹ in Philip's life. This latest rejection by Philip intensifies an already strained relationship in their marriage. For Mrs. Bentley it was a lacerating blow.

"But it broke when they drove away. I paced in and out of the little rooms, sobbed and paced again. then at last threw myself across the bed."²⁰

Philip's preference for Steve's company over her own was poor payment for her years of sustained effort to repair his prestige and self-confidence at the expense of her own.

Steve also becomes the centre of contention between the church board and the Bentleys because of his faith and origin. His presence in the manse initiates an alienating wedge between the members of the church board and the Bentleys. Mrs. Twill tells the minister and his wife that "if you really want a boy to adopt there are surely enough good Protestants".²¹ When Steve engages in another fight with the Finley twins, matters come to head.

"They've taken Steve away. Someone went to the trouble of sending word to an official of the Roman Catholic Church that he was living in a Protestant home. Two priests came for him on Thursday."²²

Steve becomes a helpless pawn, a victim of a centuries old traditional struggle between differing religious groups. The spectre of his imminent departure fails to resolve, in any way, the alienating differences that keep the Bentleys apart. Both realize that the loss of Steve affords them a common ground for discussion, and an opportunity to communicate in a meaningful way.

But as Mrs. Bentley remarks in her diary

¹⁸ibid. p. 63.

¹⁹ibid. p. 64.

²⁰ibid. p. 63.

²¹ibid. p. 55.

²²ibid. p. 115.

"Both of us wanting to speak ... We went outside and stood in the yard ... but inside we were trapped."²³

In effect, Mrs. Bentley is saying that she and Philip are victims of conflicting emotions, that they lack the power of simple communication and the moral insight that will enable them to extricate themselves from their dilemma. They squander an opportune moment for reconciliation. The moments in the yard end with a series of foolish admonitions to Steve's mare Minnie, and nothing is solved.

The physical distance that springs up between the Bentleys when they leave the mare's stall is suggestive of the closed study door, the wooden shoulder in and out of the bedroom, the clenched white lips, and the countless other barriers that Philip's scarred psyche erects against the conciliating efforts of his wife. Sandra Djwa's article in *Canadian Literature* states clearly that one facet of the couple's insurmountable problem is the paralyzing lack of communication between husband and wife. In one incisive paragraph Djwa is highly condemnatory of the minister turned-painter and his wife. The passage puts a new face on Mrs. Bentley's apparently self-effacing diary. It makes her a suspect figure.

The Bentleys also erect facades to hide from each other. He has attempted to mould himself into the ordered life which she considers practical and in so doing, is alienated from her, while she takes up the role of the hard-working woman of the manse, inwardly chafing but outwardly content with her husband's meager tokens of affection. ... Philip turns on his wife as the major instrument of his imprisonment, punishing her through the withdrawal of his love. The novel is orchestrated by Philip's withdrawals, and the closing of his study door which shuts out his wife while she, in turn, escapes into the night, the granaries, and the railroad tracks.²⁴

The outside wilderness of night, sky, and prairie, afford Mrs. Bentley a sanctuary that the town of Horizon cannot or will not offer her. At best her existence in the false-fronted town is subject to the same spiritual aridity and strained conditions that prevail in the manse with its suffocating atmosphere and ever present sexual tension.

The growing spirit of censure and alienation between the Bentleys and the church's parishioners receives added impetus after their summary adoption of Steve when his father deserts him. Throughout a period of formal calls upon members of the congregation, the Bentleys are compelled to defend the adoption of the boy. As usual, the main thrust of placating task falls to Mrs. Bentley. Djwa sees her as the "devil's advocate" for her ability

²³ibid. p. 116.

²⁴Sandra Djwa. "No Other Way", *Canadian Literature*, No. 47, Winter, 1971. p. 55.

to ward off a series of gratuitous comments from the church members, notably the ubiquitous Mrs. Finley and Mrs. Nicholson the station agent's wife.

So I parried them, cool and patient, piety to my finger tips. It was the devil quoting scripture maybe, but it worked. ... Today I was only putting our false front up again, enlarged this time for three, Philip, Steve and I. It's such a trim efficient little sign; it's such a tough, deep-rooted tangle that it hides.²⁵

It is obvious that there is more to Mrs. Bentley than her journal reveals. The allusion to herself as the devil quoting Scripture, and her candid admission of putting up another false front for the benefit of the parishioners, raises the question of her integrity. The false front for three is temporarily transformed into a sign that conceals a "tough, deep-rooted tangle". It complements the shingle that Philip puts up at the beginning of the novel. Both signs are deceptive, and both come down when the Bentleys prepare to leave Horizon.

Mrs. Bentley's sign is more than an implicit acknowledgement of the growing rift between the Bentleys and parishioners. It hints at a deep-seated psychological need by the narrator to discard the role playing that her position imposes upon her. She needs to do away with the mask of servile compliance that she forces upon herself in deference to the town's church functionaries. The enigma of the "deep-rooted tangle" that the sign concealed is not solved. No explanation for it is given. Nevertheless, the sign is a repetition of similar signs in other towns. It is indicative of the pathological mistrust that eventually serves to divide not only the Bentleys and their congregation in Horizon, but the Bentleys themselves.

The deep-rooted tangle that the sign masks could well be related to Mrs. Bentley's ambivalent feeling for Steve, whom she views as a threat to her steadily diminishing position in Philip's life. Ironically she says

And yet it's always to me Steve comes — to me, who instead of Philip's solemn almost selfless devotion, can give him only a twisted hybrid love. Half love, half bitterness. Love because at times he seems like the son of my own I've never had. Bitterness because he's taken Philip from me.²⁶

The oxymoronic tenor of this passage heightens the theme of alienation which is really the principal metaphor of the novel. In itself, the passage is a candid expression of conflicting emotions. Its disarming frankness is typical of much that Mrs. Bentley confides to her diary.

²⁵*As For Me and My House*. p. 61.

²⁶*ibid.* p. 111.

Her probing of small town prairie life as it affects the life of a minister and his family is adequately detailed in her diary in which she plays the dominant role of narrator, philosophizer, and psychologist. The repeated rationalizing of every slight inflicted upon her by her husband who was largely insensitive to her needs, is minimized to the point of compromise and conciliation.

Daniells commenting upon the central position of Mrs. Bentley in the novel, evinces a little more than a passing interest in its supporting characters. In his opinion, Steve, Judith and Paul, serve as nothing more than agents to reveal the character of the minister and his wife, whilst the "other inhabitants serve as convenient and appropriate chorus."²⁷ Paul is portrayed as a purveyor of etymological detail and intimate friend of the Bentleys. He shares their company, their board and two weeks of their vacation time.

Margaret Atwood in her book *Survival*, dismisses him as an echo of Philip's sterility, saying that

He treats English as though it were a dead language, he's obsessed with word derivation, and pays more attention to them than what people are saying.²⁸

Paul is seen only through the guarded viewpoint of the novel's narrator. She reveals very little of his personality other than his chief interest, apart from teaching and horse back riding, is the study of word derivation. Atwood's view of Paul as "an echo of Philip's sterility" is an indirect reference to Ross's failure to develop the philological cowboy as a virile character and serious rival for Mrs. Bentley's affections.

What Ross affords by way of romantic titillation apart from the Bentley's bedroom, is the brief moment that Mrs. Bentley and Paul spend on the bridge over the spring-flooded stream, and the incident of the lean-to shed where Mrs. Bentley, looking for Philip, finds him having sex with Judith.

The frequency of Paul's visits to the manse contributes to the growing disaffection and estrangement between the minister and his wife. The novel takes a new and significant

²⁷*Introduction*. Paul Daniells, p. vii.

²⁸Margaret Atwood. *Survival*. p. 185.

direction in pointing to the possibility of a romantic involvement between Mrs. Bentley and Paul. Ross inseminates the narrative with the germ of a second minor plot when Paul, helping Mrs. Bentley in her garden, seizes on the occasion to deliver a short, but suggestive lesson on word derivation.

You learn a lot from a philologist. Cupid, he says, has given us cupidity, Eros, erotic, Venus, venereal, and Aphrodite, aphrodisiac.²⁹

However, the learning process ends before it evolves into a more prurient discourse. The reader is left to speculate upon what else might have been said had Ross carried the social situation in the garden to a more detailed conclusion. As could be expected, Ross maintains the integrity of his narrator, her recounting of Paul's leading explanations of the legendary names with their evocative sexual connotations is delivered in a matter of fact tone.

Ross constantly skirts the issue of concupiscence and immorality, however much he alludes to it. The incident of the lean-to shed is handled deftly and with the utmost delicacy. The significance of the

frightened, soft, half-smothered little laugh, that I've laughed often with him too.³⁰

is not lost upon the reader. The short statement of discovery is an example of Ross's technique which enables him to insinuate himself into the mind of his narrator. In effect, he becomes "immersed in the internal recesses of her subjectivity."³¹ So well does Ross accomplish the deed, that nowhere in the novel can one discern an instance of authorial surfacing. The reader is ever minded of

The character we see self-revealed in the pages of an admirably constructed diary. For Ross has consciously constructed it after all;³²

Also "consciously constructed" with a view to some interesting parallels, is the garden episode wherein Mrs. Bentley and Paul clear away the accumulated dust from the beans. The parallel with the biblical garden of Eden is apparent. Paul, seeking to instruct Mrs. Bentley in word derivation, emulates the Satanic serpent by hunkering in the dust of the bean patch.

²⁹*As For Me and My House*. p. 76.

³⁰*ibid.* p. 123.

³¹Jacques Maritain. *Creative Intuition In Art and Poetry*. p. 185.


³²William H. New. "Sinclair Ross's Ambivalent World", *Canadian Literature* No. 40, Spring, 1969. p. 27.

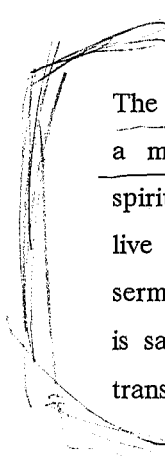
The bronco that Paul rides daily is named Harlequin after a character associated with the Commedia Dell'Arte, a masked comedy developed in sixteenth century Italy.

The horse's name is suggestive of yet another parallel that finds articulation in Ruggero Leoncavallo's opera *I Pagliacci*. Like Ross's novel, the opera also has a sub-plot, i.e. the Nedda-Silvio romance, and the play within a play within a play wherein Arlecchino (Harlequin) attempts to win over Columbina (Columbine) while her husband is absent.

Everything balances. There are three absent husbands, three suitors, and possibly three receptive women. However, the interposition of the adverb "possibly" is a direct reference to the narrator who, despite the primly proper and chaste course of her diary entries, still manages to convey a sense of the attendant miseries born of being sexually unfulfilled.

Djwa observes that

 We are told again and again that one or the other attempts to escape the claims of intimacy by pretending to be asleep when the other finally come to bed³³

 The growing alienation between the Bentleys is the result of their failure to communicate in a meaningful way. The withdrawal of Philip's love and affection is accompanied by a spiritual and social distancing that brings their union to a near intolerable impasse. They live in a house divided, a mocking facsimile of the one that Philip alludes to in his first sermon for each new town. The "we" in "As For Me and My House We Will Serve the Lord" is sapped of its original vigour and identity. The dryness of Philip's affection for his wife is transferred to her garden which is also a symbol of the aridity of their union.

Moreover, the tension spawned by the increasing alienation between the Bentleys is exacerbated rather than resolved by Philip's pointed remarks implying a degree of resentment over Paul's growing attention to Mrs. Bentley. Initially, Philip has asked

In a somewhat thin voice, had I been seeing Paul home. I remembered in time, though, pulled myself together tight and firm, and just said not, that El Greco and I had gone the other way.³⁴

³³Sandra Djaw. "No Other Way". *Canadian Literature* No. 47, Winter, 1971. p. 55.

³⁴*As For Me and My House*. p. 219

At this point in the novel, the story line takes on a new dimension in which the sharing of identical emotions plays a central part. The reader's interest is titillated by the minister's assumed petulance, and the thematic possibility of a reverse jealousy motif that could engulf the Bentleys.

Mrs. Bentley, already weathering a sea of domestic discord as well as the external elements of wind, dust and rain, is faced with a new and disturbing turn of affairs with Paul at its centre. Philip's bungled attempt to set up the heater in their living room initiates a dramatic confrontation between the couple.

Without looking at him I snapped that the heater would have to wait till we could get Paul tomorrow after school. ... He said. Why not get your mind off Paul, and remember you're a married woman?³⁵

The directness of Philip's terse reply implies a deep-rooted suspicion of his wife's fidelity. He views Paul's continual presence as a threat to his masculinity. Ironically, Mrs. Bentley does not doubt his maleness, but deplors the lack of it in the bedroom.

The last few weeks he's been careful to wait an hour or more, to be sure when he comes I'll be asleep.³⁶

Mrs. Bentley keeps Paul at arm's length throughout the novel. Apart from socially acceptable occasions, all that she offers him in the way of intimacy is the moment in her garden, and her company on the walk to the ravine and the railway bridge that spanned the spring-flooded stream. The walk with Paul to the ravine brings about her realization of his long restrained affection for her, and an insight into Philip's repeated insinuations of infidelity.

All the time I had thought it was only Philip, something he was trying to imagine. ... It seemed strange that I now should make another suffer who had suffered so much that way myself.³⁷

Mrs. Bentley's acknowledgment of Paul's plight is simple and direct. The belated admission of her contribution to Paul's suffering is carefully contrived for her diary which served her in the capacity of an articulating conscience and alter-ego. The revelation in itself is

³⁵ibid., p. 134.

³⁶ibid., p. 87.

³⁷ibid. p. 158.

suspect. None the less, the revelation in itself is suspect. For Mrs. Bentley, Paul becomes the symbol of an unrealized prospect.³⁸

At this point, Ross deftly interposes the inimical aspects of the brawling stream rushing under the bridge upon which Mrs. Bentley and the abject Paul are standing, their hands upon the railing barely inches apart.

The drifts on the bank of the ravine were so sodden and treacherous we didn't dare descend. From the railway bridge we watched the water rushing at the bottom in a frothy flood. ... an overhanging drift dropped in, shot off with the current crest upward like a sailboat, then stunned itself to pieces on the trestle of the bridge.³⁹

The heightened imagery of the stream in spring flood is pregnant with foreboding. The turmoil of the yellow flood is symbolic of the narrator's state of mind. More importantly, it is suggestive of the increased bleakness of her life with Philip should an infidelity on her part take place. Their already tenuous union could suffer a fate similar to that of the snow drift that annihilates itself upon the trestle of the bridge. The two souls on the bridge are powerless to act in a meaningful way. They leave things unsaid. They fail to communicate in a gratifying manner. Using the pretext of Philip's supper, Mrs. Bentley returns to the manse.

In retrospect, the narrator understates the situation on the bridge, embodying as it does, the disparateness of subtle shiftings of emotions, mixed motives and understanding. She is on more positive ground when she projects the morally illicit spectacle as enclosed in the fragility of a huge glass bubble.

There was a smooth, flawless silence, poised between the sky and the thawing fields like a glass bubble. The dull steady bellow of the water was at its base.⁴⁰

The simile involving the abstract intangibility of the "smooth flawless silence" and "the glass bubble," derives its defining force from the verb "poised" and the adjective "thawing." The couple standing on the bridge are poised in an aura of uncertainty. Any thought of more intimate proceedings are inhibited by the Cerberus — like warning bellow of the stream below.

³⁸ibid. p. 160.

³⁹ibid. p. 159.

⁴⁰ibid., p. 159

Mrs. Bentley denies Paul's masculinity, and later, with the experience of the bridge safely behind her, reflects upon what the school teacher has meant to her.

And I think of Paul, and wonder might it have been different if we had known each other earlier. Then the currents might have taken and fulfilled me. I might not still be nailed by them against a heedless wall.⁴¹

However, the substance of the musing, at most, is merely conjectural. Mrs. Bentley's carefully erected false front remains in place to serve as a barrier to further incursions of a similar nature. At this point in the novel, Ross abandons the sub-plot with its connotation of a romantic interest between the minister's wife and Paul who, in effect, is sacrificed on the altar of propriety by the high priestess of Horizon.

Mrs. Bentley, staring into a lamp with a moth-like fascination, reviews her past, and realized that her life with Philip had not been rewarding. The repetition of the wind and water imagery expressed in the "currents that might have taken and fulfilled me" is an indictment of Philip's inadequacy as a husband and provider. He represents the "heedless wall" that she is nailed to. Figuratively speaking, the "wall" becomes a cross to be borne by Mrs. Bentley.

E.K. Brown's reference to Paul's character in the novel is both ambiguous and ambivalent. he states that

The unity and tone is injured by the old fashioned way in which Paul, the third character in the novel is drawn. It is quite plausible that this country school-teacher should have fallen in love with words and deliver a comment on etymology in the course of every conversation. With Paul the unity of tone fails.⁴²

Brown's use of the term "old fashioned" is open to interpretation. Paul's part in the novel is studiously conceived as that of the humble and backward wooer. The fact that he owns and rides a spirited bronco that has a silly name, and dresses himself in the flamboyant garb affected by most leading characters in Western movies, does not make him old fashioned. It simply makes him dated. His posturing get-up suggests a hidden romantic nature seeking to escape the generally accepted bonds of conformity. He is a victim of the conventional demands of the society around him. As a symbol of romantic intrigue, he represents a major theme in the novel, one that touches on the ninth Commandment as given to Moses by God on Mount Sinai. Obviously he is attracted to Mrs. Bentley and seeks a more intimate

⁴¹ibid., p. 160.

⁴²E.K. Brown. *Canadian Forum*. Vol. 88. July, 1941, p. 124.

relationship with her. And like the Bentleys who, Djwa says, “erect facades to hide from each other,” Paul manoeuvres behind a false front that he erects to mask his passion for Mrs. Bentley.

Paul's relationship with the Bentleys, coupled with his possession of a riding horse, is responsible for the introduction of Steve and El Greco into the manse. The inclusion of the two prairie outcasts in the structure of the novel alleviates, in some measure, what Brown calls the “major danger of repetition.” They serve to inject a note of grim humour into the story-line which takes a new direction, if only temporarily. Steve's pugilistic ability, proved at the expense of the Finley twins, raises as many problems for the Bentleys as El Greco's forays against Mrs. Ellingsworth's hens. Ironically, the somber sad-eyed El Greco, symbol of fidelity, and the canine namesake of the great sixteenth century Spanish painter, takes up quarters with an artist of lesser ability until his demise by mischance.

Mrs. Bentley's terse account of the dog's untimely end, supports in part, Daniell's contention that “the rock-bottom strength of the plot is achieved at the cost of deliberate limitation.”

We've lost El Greco. Driven by hunger the coyotes lately have been coming right to the outskirts of the town, ... when they started howling again he answered ... I got frightened and opened the door for him. ... We've concluded that they lured him well away from town, then turned and made an end of him.⁴³

In the same vein, Brown's reference to Mrs. Bentley's concise style says that her “insistence in including only what is relevant is very firm.” Indeed, the entire novel is distinguished by the narrator's sparing use of words in her diary entries. Too, incidents that occur in and outside the norm of everyday experience are generally recorded unemotionally. Nevertheless, she has deep misgivings over the presences of Steve and Judith West. Djwa notes that

In the first cycle of the novel, she is threatened by Philip's affection for Steve and in the second by his affection for Judith.⁴⁴

Judith's role in the story is significant mainly because of her surreptitious relationship with the leading male character in the novel. She is the possessor of a strong contralto voice and is encouraged to sing in the choir because of her questionable social background.

⁴³*As For Me and My House*. p. 149.

⁴⁴Sandra Djwa. “No Other Way”. p. 59.

... because she needs a steady influence. In summer she's been heard singing off by herself up the railroad track as late as ten o'clock at night. Naturally people talk.⁴⁵

Judith exists in the story as a growing object of concern and distrust for Mrs. Bentley. Like Paul, she too is subject to the conventional demands of the society around her. But, unlike Paul who escapes the boredom of daily life in Horizon by retreating into a make-believe cowboy world, she is obsessed with the idea of leaving Horizon. The railway station, and the steaming locomotives are central to her aspirations. More than a source of fascination, they represent a means of flight from the barrenness of life in Horizon where, ironically, Judith's vision is defined by the horizon.

Judith's death shortly after the birth of her baby, serves to introduce the last and least significant of Ross's characters. She is, however, responsible for a final note of irony in the novel as it nears its close. Mrs. West, following a tearful flurry of explanations, voices her appreciation to Mrs. Bentley for the Bentleys' decision to adopt her daughter's baby.

You and your husband are good people. You're real Christians, and I'm glad you're taking the baby. I was hoping maybe she'd talk to you, so we could find out who it was and make him marry her — but maybe like this it's better.⁴⁶

One can imagine the nod of agreement on the part of Mrs. Bentley. Better for her that the voice which overrode the choir and the wind be stilled. better for her that Judith play the role of sacrificial lamb in expiation of her transgression.

For me it's easier this way. It's what I've secretly been hoping for all along. I'm glad she's gone — glad — for her sake as much as ours. What was there ahead of her now anyway? If I lost Philip what would there be ahead of me?⁴⁷

Mrs. Bentley's candid confession, devoid of compassion and remorse, can be viewed as a partial lowering of her carefully constructed false front. It diminishes the aura of her credibility as given off by her diary entries. It reveals a side of her personality which is a contradiction of "the supposedly Christian structure of the novel."⁴⁸

⁴⁵*As for Me and My House*, p. 11-12.

⁴⁶*ibid.*, p. 161.

⁴⁷*ibid.*, p. 162.

⁴⁸Sandra Djwa. "No Other Way", p. 56.

Judith's death, like that of the Lawson boy and El Greco, comes about through mischance. Her demise complements the deterministic trend of the novel. Ross portrays her as a stronger character than Philip. She is the resolute one whose dream of escaping the confines of Horizon is symbolized by a train roaring off into the beyond. Philip, who displays very little initiative, bases his hopes for the future upon the acquisition of a larger church in another town. Mrs. Bentley sets the deterministic tone of the novel at the beginning, saying that Philip

... tries to be so sane and rational, yet all the time keeps on believing that there's a will stronger than his own deliberately pitted against him.⁴⁹

There is a like deterministic situation in the circumstances surrounding the interment of the Lawson boy in the desolation of the prairie cemetery. Mrs. Lawson objects to the site of her son's last resting place, but she can no more stay the burial than her husband can will a decent crop from his parched fields.

... When the service was over ... Mrs. Lawson started crying again that she didn't want anyone belonging to her left in such a place. Mr. Lawson staring across the parched fields remarks bitterly "We aren't gong to get even our seed this year. Maybe he's not missing such a lot."⁵⁰

A major theme in most novels is the portrayal of a soul in conflict. Philip Bentley is just such a soul, an itinerant minister who indulges in the hypocrisy of paying mere lip-service to the faith that he is bound to uphold. Like the false-fronted stores on Horizon's Main Street, Philip Bentley also maintains a deceptive facade, one that keeps him in a constant turmoil of secret guilt and rage. Spiritually wounded, he is victimized by an inner compulsion that drives him relentlessly and repeatedly to the sanctuary of his study where he finds some measure of relief from his anger and frustration in painting.

His art is symbolic of his pent up emotions. It serves as a "disclosure and manifestation, unintentional as it may be, of the human Self."⁵¹ Mrs. Bentley tells of discovering a sketch of a "trim, white, neat-gabled little schoolhouse" standing lonely and defiant on the wind-swept prairie. The sketch emphasizes Philip's emotions. The surroundings depict a grotesque desert-like representation of fantastic pits, and drifting sands that threaten to engulf the schoolhouse, just as the town of Horizon is seemingly to be swallowed up by the unrelenting wind-blown dust. The drawing is an angry defiant

⁴⁹*As For Me and My House*. p. 17.

⁵⁰*ibid.*, p. 109.

⁵¹Jacques Maritain. *Creative Intuition In Art and Poetry*. p. 29.

expression, a mute articulation of an unwilling man of the cloth who cannot offer comfort to his congregation. He equates art with religion.

Religion and art ... are almost the same thing anyway. Just different ways of taking a man out of himself, bringing him to the emotional pitch that we call ecstasy or rapture. They're both a rejection of the world for one that's illusory, yet somehow more important.⁵²

The heretical tone of the passage with its implication of the illusoriness of religion is indicative of Philip's growing spiritual apathy. It denies the validity of his text for the sermon "that he always uses for his first Sunday" in a new parish — *As For Me and My House We Will Serve the Lord*. Djwa, dwelling briefly on the subject of the novel's title in relation to Philip's creed, says that

Soon it becomes clear that Philip does not believe the Christianity that he preaches.⁵³

He does not confess his faith with the same zeal that he puts into his painting. In the same vein, his lack of faith is mirrored in his drawings which are devoid of hope and reflect despair.

Mrs. Bentley's descriptions of Philip's drawings may or may not have merit. They hinge on the level of artistic erudition that Ross grants or can afford his principal protagonist. Her explanation of Philip's sketch of a congregation "as he sees it head-on from the pulpit," is striking.

Seven faces in the first row — ugly, wretched faces, big mouthed, mean-eyed-alike, yet each with a sharp, aggressive individuality — the caricature of a pew, and the likenesses of seven people⁵⁴

The sketch, if the narrator is to be believed, is an expression of creative subjectivity in art which gives a distorted prominence to the subject. It mirrors the torment of spirit in conflict with itself. It is what Djwa calls a "drawing of self-analysis." Philip looks behind the collective mask of the congregation and sees his own hypocritical image, albeit more coarsely defined. The drawing is an unconscious confession of his dishonesty, it partially confirms a statement by Maritain that painters "confess themselves in their canvas".⁵⁵ Philip's disenchantment with the church is reflected in the distortion and sense of defeatism

⁵²*As For Me and My House*. p. 112.

⁵³Sandra Djwa, "No Other Way", p. 57.

⁵⁴*As For Me and My House*. p. 17.

⁵⁵Jacques Maritain. *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*. p. 96.

that informs the drawing. It, like all his drawings, is an emblem of himself “his entrapment, and his sense of failure”.⁵⁶ In effect, the drawing is a statement of identity.

Atwood's description of Philip Bentley in *Survival* is terse and cynical. In plain but purposeful language she emasculates the failed prairie minister and artist.

A warped artist (as his name suggests) he was poor, he entered the Church to make money, ... Mrs. Bentley came along and he married her, ... He is unable to act or even love.⁵⁷

The severity of Atwood's criticism asserts the premise that Ross's novel is set against the background of one man's rage and impotence, whose meager responses to his wife's conciliating overtures reflect a frustrated mind. Her attitude toward Philip smacks of a diffident nature. It is consonant with her penchant for diminishing the male character, especially in some of her novels, notably *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, *Dancing Girls* and *Other Stories*.

In *Surfacing*, for example, Atwood characterizes two outstanding but differing examples of the male species, particularly in their relationships to the women that they are coupled with. She dehumanizes Joe, her live-in lover with his “peasant hands” and appearance of bestiality.

...he's like the buffalo on the U.S. nickel, shaggy and blunt-snouted, with small clenched eyes and the defiant but insane look of a species once dominant, now threatened with extinction.⁵⁸

David is portrayed as Anna's browbeating husband. Their union, because it does not move with reference to grace, is meaningless. They are not averse to seeking sexual gratification with others. Their characters serve to reinforce the theme of moral laxity that informs much of the novel.

Still, Philip's censurable conduct is a vital part of the story line. Daniells states that

The reason for the effectiveness of Philip as a character in spite of his limited range of responses and the stiffness of his general mechanism is that

⁵⁶(The text for this note was missing)

⁵⁷Margaret Atwood. *Survival*. p. 185.

⁵⁸Margaret Atwood. *Surfacing*. p. 8.

he is beautifully complementary to his wife's character and it might be said that the two of them make up a simple more complex character.⁵⁹

This may be so. But Mrs. Bentley remains the more ambiguous of the two leading characters in Ross's *As For Me and My House*, and oddly enough, the easier of the two to come to terms with. Philip's role is that of a tortured Protestant minister in a Protestant town. His presence in the community of Horizon is a contradiction of his will. The artist within him is repressed for the sake of his clerical calling. His drawings, almost all of them rehashes of the town's false-fronted Main Street, symbolizes his failure as a creative artist. Atwood says that

The pictures are emblems of himself, his entrapment and sense of failure. Nothing works for him: his marriage is lifeless ... he hates his work and himself, there's no one with whom he can communicate.⁶⁰

His sermons, though solidly based on the Scriptures, lack the ring of heart-felt sincerity. He is unable to get the gospel message across to his parishioners because he does not believe in what he is saying. His faith in himself is akin to his faith in his ability as an artist. In both disciplines he is searching for roots, both of which are nebulous to say the least. The sermon he delivers at the funeral of the Lawson boy is hollow, and bereft of due compassion. It fails in its attempt to offer spiritual comfort for the boy's family. That he possesses a wounded sensibility is evinced by the frequency of precipitate "white, tight lipped withdrawals to the sanctuary of his study where he spends the better part of his time drawing. Djwa, rivalling Atwood in the bluntness of her opinion of the minister, says that

Philip Bentley, aware that his new role as minister is hypocritical, is tortured by his own dishonesty.⁶¹

Behind the barrier of the false front that Philip erects lies the soul of a false prophet crying in the wilderness of Horizon. He is aware that the divinely inspired message of "The word of God as revealed in Holy Writ – Christ Crucified – salvation through his Grace – those are the things that Philip stands for", just wont wash with the parishioners of Horizon and Partridge Hill.

Philip's despair is mirrored in his Main Street drawings, one of which is marked by the weirdly morbid aspect of its night imagery.

⁵⁹Roy Daniells. Introduction to *As For Me and My House*, p. vii.

⁶⁰Margaret Atwood. *Survival*. p. 185.

⁶¹Sandra Djwa, *Canadian Literature*. No. 47, Winter, 1971. p. 54.

The solitary street lamp pitted feebly and uselessly against the overhanging darkness. A little false-fronted store, still and blank and white — another — another — in retreating, steplike sequence, a stairway into the night. The insolent patch of the store is unabashed by the loom of darkness over it. The dark windows are like sockets of unlidded eyes, letting more of the night gape through. Farthest on is a single figure, bent low, hurrying almost away. One second more and the street will be deserted.⁶²

The imagery of the false-fronted stores serving as a stairway into the night is heightened by the graphic portrayal of the single figure hurrying away in such a manner as to slip from the frame of the viewer's eye. The false-fronted stores “still and blank and white” are figurative representatives of Philip, who, like them is hopelessly and despairingly rooted in the “one little spot of Horizon hung up in the wilderness of night, sky and prairie.” The stairway into the night is symbolic of the railway line that came out of the unknown and went into it again. A biblical imaging is reflected in the futility of the lone street lamp's struggle against the encroaching darkness.

Metaphorically, the street lamp can be seen as the light of God's word as proclaimed by St. John in the last Gospel. It signifies Philip's failure as an ordained minister of his church, and upholder of that light, to effectively carry out God's mandate as it is expressed in the Bible. “Go into the whole world and preach the gospel to every living creature”⁶³ The “loom of darkness” over the grotesque animistic horror projected by the unblinking windows, augments the spectral aspects of the drawing. The device of the animistic windows is repeated later in the novel when Mrs. Bentley is obliged to have Paul accompany her on the walk to the ravine.

There was such a strained helpless look in his eyes that suddenly I felt all the windows accusing me.⁶⁴

The eeriness of the first of the Main Street sketches is marked by the absence of the wind's visual effects. Apart from the scurrying figure, movement is expressed by the abstract impression of the stairway into the sky.

Philip's later Main Street drawings generally depict the immensity of the wind's power. As usual, the rhetorical ability of Ross's narrator raises the level of their artistic

⁶²*As For Me and My House*. p. 17.

⁶³Mark. 16-15.

⁶⁴*As For Me and My House*. p. 158.

power to generate more than a passing interest in the marauding prairie winds. Her description of one drawing in particular serves as a case in point.

you feel the wind, its drive and bluster, the way it sets itself against the town. The false fronts that other times stand up so flat and vacant are buckled down in desperation for their lives. They lean a little forward, better to hold their ground against the onslaught of the wind. Some of them cower before the flail of dust and sand. Some of them wince as if the strain were torture.⁶⁵

The passage is a vivid, absorbing depiction of a scourging prairie wind working its will upon everything standing before it. The enormity of the wind's power is brought forcibly to bear upon the reader. Also, the striking metaphor embodied in the phrase "the flail of dust and sand" is redolent of a line from Shelley's assonant self-celebrating poem *The Cloud*. To wit, "I wield the flail of the lashing hail." Too, the over-all theme of the wind's power elicits an illuminating phrase from Djwa who says that the wind "establishes the emotional landscape of Horizon."⁶⁶

Djwa's comment that Philip's drawings are exercises in self-analysis are partly justified on the basis of the sketch that he drew of Joe Lawson shortly after the death of his son Peter. Ross posits an affinity of sorts between the two men, which is pointedly alluded to by the narrator on three separate occasions wherein she refers to the prairie farmer as

The man who reminds me of Philip — the man who looks like Philip — the man who looks like Philip, more like him than usual, for his face was haggard as Philip's usually is.⁶⁷

Actually, what the look-alikes share in common are the deaths of their sons and their fragmented hopes for the future. Philip's drawing of Lawson with its accent on the subject's hands "such big, disillusioned, steadfast hands, so faithful to the earth and seasons that betray them"⁶⁸ relate the farmer to the abject figure of Edwin Markham's *The Man with the Hoe*.

Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans upon his hoe and gazes on the

⁶⁵ibid., p. 43.

⁶⁶Sandra Djwa. "No Other Way". p. 60.

⁶⁷*As For Me and My House*. p. p. 37, 54, 83.

⁶⁸ibid., p. 139.

ground, the emptiness of ages in his face. And on his back the burden of the world.⁶⁹

The face of Markham's figure registering "the emptiness of ages" is similar to Lawson's despairing face as he stands beside the desolation of his son's grave and "stares across the hot burned fields.

However, what is important here is not the drawing itself, nor the possibility of multiple analogies to be drawn from it, but the masterful explication of the sketch by Ross's speaking voice. Of greater moment, is the effect that the sketch has upon Mrs. Bentley.

One of those strong, passionate little things that crop out of him every now and then with such insight and pity that you turn away silent, somehow purged of yourself.⁷⁰

She is implying that Philip, who consistently fails to communicate orally, is occasionally able to express himself more forcefully through the medium of his art. The sketch of Joe Lawson evinces a special kind of benevolence and care that is not self-serving. Moreover, it brings about a catharsis for Mrs. Bentley

Another of Philip's Main Street drawings centers on a "broken old horse, legs set stolid, head down and dull spent," that despite its somnolence and decrepit appearance, still manages to convey a hidden source of energy that obviated the need to justify its existence.

But still you feel it belongs to the earth, the earth it stands on, the prairie that continues where the town breaks off.⁷¹

In an over-all critical appraisal of the drawing, Mrs. Bentley asserts that "The town shouldn't be there. It stands up so insolent and smug and assertive."⁷² She voices her objection to the disfiguring meanness of the false-fronted stores that mirror each other across the Main Street. Their presence is a direct affront to the integrity of the "tired old hulk" hitched to a buggy in front of a store.

The narrator's impulse to alter the drawing, combined with Philip's attempts to retouch some aspects of his work is a sign of Philip's inability to manifest in his art what

⁶⁹Edwin Markham. "The Man With the Hoe". *The Pocket Book of Verse*. Pocket Books Inc., New York, 1940. p. 303.

⁷⁰*As For Me and My House*. p. 139.

⁷¹*As For Me and My House*. p. 69.

⁷²*ibid.*, p. 69.

he grasps internally. "Philip himself could feel that there was something wrong, but he didn't know what." Philip, lover of horses,⁷³ is unable to infuse the facing false-fronted stores with that mystical aura of hope and renewal that springs from the flow, rhythm, and sense of cycle that the solitary old horse is invested with. The central image that emerges here is one of good and bad polarities. The evil direction is posed in the contrasting arrogance of the town's "upstart mean complacency." Its false-fronted stores are unconscious projections of the artist's rage and frustration. They symbolize the bigotry and hypocrisy that prevails in small town social hierarchies. As "mirrors of themselves absorbed in their own reflections", they insinuate the denizens of Horizon who, in the novel, are ably represented by the unholy trinity of Mrs. Bird, Mrs. Twill, and the pugnacious Mrs. Finley.

Ross's facility for striking imagery is not reserved solely for Main Street sketches. It is expansive and wide-ranging. There are many examples of figurative description that exploit the "bare essentials of a landscape, sky and earth," such as this one.

The dust clouds behind the town kept darkening and thinning and swaying, a furtive tirelessness about the way they wavered and merged with one another that reminded me of northern lights in winter. ... The little town cowered close to earth as if to hide itself. The elevators stood up passive, stoical. All round me ran a hurrying little whisper through the grass.⁷⁴

There is a Wordsworthian sense of animism in the demeanor of the town, in the dust clouds, the whispers in the grass, and the indifference of the elevators.

During the Bentley's two week vacation at a ranch somewhere near the Alberta foothills, the peripatetic narrator is walking along a river bank at night. She feels "a queer sense of something cold and fearful, something inanimate, yet aware of us." She alludes to the stillness of the hills and the unheeding way they sleep. The river slipping by is indifferent to her presence.

We shrink from our insignificance. The stillness and solitude — we think a force or presence into it — even a hostile presence, deliberate, aligned against us — for we dare not admit an indifferent wilderness where we may have no meaning at all.⁷⁵

The passage, by virtue of its course of thought and tendency to admit of an animistic

⁷³ibid., p. 69.

⁷⁴*As For Me and My House*. p. 59.

⁷⁵ibid., p. 100.

presence, is definitely Wordsworthian in character. The tenor of Mrs. Bentley's "hostile presence" is illustrated in these lines from Wordsworth's *The Prelude*.

I heard among the solitary hills
Low breathings coming after me, and sounds
Of undistinguishable motion, steps
Almost as silent as the turf they trod.⁷⁶

Mrs. Bentley's diary entry portrays a sublime aspect of nature. It captures the sense of awe and wonder associated with hills, rivers, and spaces remote from populous centres. With the possible exception of Douglas LePan's *A Country Without a Mythology*, the concepts of "a hostile presence" and "an indifferent wilderness" are rarely touched on in Canadian literature. LePan's poem treats of Nature as a demon lurking in a harsh land where reality gives way to unreality. Where the stranger finds

Not a sign, no emblem in the sky
Or boughs to friend him as he goes; for who
Will stop where, clumsily contrived, daubed
with war paint, teeters some lust-red manitou.⁷⁷

Just as sublime, but in a different context is Mrs. Bentley's description of a train passing over the bridge, under which she and Philip are sitting.

... we heard a distant whistle-blade, then a single point of sound, like one drop of water in a whole sky. It dilated, spread. The sky and silence began imperceptibly to fill with it. We steeled ourselves a little, feeling the pounding onrush in the trestle of the bridge. it quickened, gathered, shook the earth, then swept in an iron roar above us, thundering and dark.⁷⁸

The first impression to be gathered from the nature of the train's passing is of violent movement and extreme urgency. The second impression is of Ross's ability to convey a sense of sublime power in prose.

Mrs. Bentley remarks that a train still makes Philip wince. Ironically, Steve leaves Horizon in the company of two priests who were sent to escort him to a distant city orphanage. Travelling by railway, which Daniells calls "an understood lifeline to the outer world," Steve, in moving from a small prairie town to a large urban centre, undergoes a genuine rite of passage. Moreover, as John Moss sees it,

⁷⁶William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book First (1805) (W.W> Norton and Company, 1979) p. 46. ll. 329-32.

⁷⁷Douglas LePan. *A Country Without a Mythology*. Canadian Anthology. W. J. Gage Limited. Toronto, 1966.

⁷⁸*As For Me and My House*. p. 29.

The train provides compensatory excitement for the loss of a precarious stability that he knew as the surrogate son in a union strained intolerably by his presence.⁷⁹

There is more irony in the fact that Steve, whom Philip had regarded as a Pegasus figure, boards a train for the two day journey to the city.⁸⁰

For Philip, the railway signified the recurring image of a train roaring away to the world that lay beyond the confining atmosphere of towns like Horizon. Mrs. Bentley, as if in exculpation of his customary moody retreats to the refuge of his study, writes in her diary, "It was the train today, reminding him again of the outside world he hasn't reached."⁸¹ For the Bentleys, the railway tracks and the train are bound up in a dream based on the projected savings of a thousand dollars that would establish them as entrepreneurs in the bookstore business. Judith, bent on leaving Horizon to seek more rewarding employment elsewhere, confesses to the strange fascination that trains have for her.

It always excited me, the glare of the headlight, the way the engine swept in steaming and important, the smokey, oily smell, on the farm, you know, we don't see trains very often.⁸²

Judith's excitement over the engine's entrance into town, coupled with her jaunts "up the railroad track," suggests an underlying current of sexual significance.

Moss's interpretation of Judith's fascination for trains takes a different track. He intimates an insidious, immoral purpose as the basis for the choir girl's nightly jaunts up the railway tracks and visits to the station.

For Judith the trains offer tangible, physical, almost sexual, excitement. Her visceral responses to them stirs a lust that reaches completion only in the lean-to tryst with Philip while Mrs. Bentley lies sick in the bedroom.⁸³

Moss's anatomy of Judith, though brutally frank, has merit. From the outset of their first meeting, Philip and Judith establish a mutual liking for each other. They share similar physical and emotional qualities and desires. She is represented as the "white faced slip of a girl" with a strong desire to slip the restraining bonds of prairie and small town life. Philip

⁷⁹John Moss. *Patterns of Isolation*. p. 159.

⁸⁰*As For Me and My House*. p. 53.

⁸¹ibid., p. 33.

⁸²ibid., p. 33.

⁸³John Moss. *Patterns of Isolation*. p. 159.

is the white, tight-lipped victim of a situation that he desperately tries to escape through the medium of his art.

Lorraine McMullen asserts that "Philip and Judith are alike in other ways besides their sensitivity and whiteness." Both see trains as


Symbols of escape into a larger world, a world of opportunity. Like both the Bentleys, Judith's longing for a different life sets her apart from the townspeople. Her music also indicates that, like the Bentleys, she too is an artist.⁸⁴

McMullen enlarges on Daniells' statement that Judith, among others, is no more than an agent to reveal the character of the Bentleys to the reader. She describes Judith and Paul as "the two outsiders" who

provide complicating factors in the Bentleys' lives and initiate events which lead the Bentleys out of their own hypocrisy and out of the repressed, hypocritical world of the small prairie town.⁸⁵

Judith's role as a complicating factor in the Bentleys' lives overshadows the less complex parts played by Paul and Steve in the novel. Although their presence makes a signal contribution to the alienating web of discord that threatens the harmony of the Bentley household, it is Ross's prairie heroine who emerges as the central figure in the Bentley's growing estrangement.

Judith serves as the archetypal sacrifice of the proverbial sinner caught in adultery. Ross abandons her to her fate on the altar of propriety. The white-faced slip of a girl who was not a coward for the things she wanted, dared, and was scorched like the moths hovering over the flame of the lamps in the manse. She exhibits strength of character and will, equal to her voice which overrides the power of the prairie wind. Her admission to Mrs. Bentley that she was not a coward for the things she wanted is straightforward and guileless. Of the two women it is Mrs. Bentley who is the dissembler.

 Masks for the dissimulating characters, appropriate to the situations at hand, abound in the novel. Ken Mitchell envisions a number of masks in the story

So that its purpose could be seen as a search for the true identity behind

⁸⁴Lorraine McMullen. *Sinclair Ross* (Twayne Publishers Boston: 1979). p. 71.

⁸⁵*ibid.*, p. 70.

them. Mrs. Bentley's diary, of course, is simply another mask, and we must look behind it – not at it – to understand her character.⁸⁶

Mrs. Bentley's character, in as much as Ross allows the reader to perceive it, emerges from the various social situations, both conventional and unconventional that impinge upon her life with Philip. Mitchell, like Moss, questions the narrator's credibility. He seeks to remove her from the pedestal that Daniells erects to her in his introduction to the novel. In all earnestness he says

We must forsake all credence in Mrs. Bentley as a reliable or honest narrator. Like nearly every first-person narrator conceived in fiction, she hides many truths from herself and from the readers ... she suppresses information and evades self-evident conclusions.⁸⁷

In bolstering his case against Mrs. Bentley, Mitchell forthrightly states that the conventional view is "that Philip Bentley is a misunderstood hero-artist and his wife a nagging bitch."⁸⁸

Moss's portrayal of Ross's "character and narrating consciousness" finds expression in a withering barrage of negativity.

She has a waspish sense of humour and little of proportion. She is at times oppressively vicious but always vulnerable. Her intractable faith in her own inadequacies amounts at times to arrogance. ... She is most ingenious when least trying to be so, most the dissembler when she claims candour. ... Her periodic submission to the meanness of spirit that perhaps confirms her humanity, undermines her authority as a moral arbiter.⁸⁹

Conversely, Daniells takes the opposite and more positive view of Mrs. Bentley. His eulogy in her praise is excessive to the point of effusiveness. He sees her as

The more candid, selfless, and receptive soul, struggling less overtly but seeing herself, her husband, and indeed the whole situation with exquisite and painful clarity. ... In her the principle of self-sacrifice out of love and a desire for reconciliation shines in all its pristine purity.⁹⁰

Daniells has grounds for his argument extolling Mrs. Bentley. In the main, her diary projects

⁸⁶Ken Mitchell. *Sinclair Ross a Reader's Guide* Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan: Thunder Creek Publishing Co-operative Limited, 1981. p. 30.

⁸⁷ibid., p. 28.

⁸⁸ibid., p. 28.

⁸⁹John Moss. *Patterns of Isolation*. 150.

⁹⁰Roy Daniells. Introduction to *As For Me and My House*. p. vii.

a sense of disarming honesty. The topics central to the diary entries relate only what is signified to her, and are generally followed by a self-serving explication. Djwa asserts that

There is no doubt that her motives are often self-interested, but it is a self-interest which acknowledges its own presence and which makes some attempt to modify itself.⁹¹

So vividly does she reconstruct the events that she confides to her diary, that it has been suggested, somewhat facetiously, that the story was as much her's as Ross's. McMullen, in her article, partially substantiates the intimation, saying, "As the author himself admits, Mrs. Bentley becomes more central than her creator had anticipated."⁹² She is gifted with a singularly laconic style of expression and a searching intelligence that she continually employs in search for answers to her domestic and social problems. As a fictional creation she stands as a tribute to Ross's ingenuity. However, what is at issue in the novel, apart from the narrator's integrity in the role of a "self-revealed character, is Ross's aim in the ambivalent portrayal of Mrs. Bentley. New asks "which view of his character does he want us to accept"?⁹³ He then alludes to an ambivalence that emerges

... out of a carefully constructed web of viewpoints. Mrs. Bentley's and ours, pitted ironically against each other so that we come to appreciate not only the depth and complexity of the narrator and her situation, but also the control in which Ross artistically holds his words.⁹⁴

New begins his brief review of Ross's novel with an allusion to Mrs. Bentley as a manipulating woman. He ends it on the same note, albeit cautiously.

That she and Philip ultimately do leave to try to set up the bookstore is perhaps cause, therefore, for us to see her as a failure, continuing as the manipulator she has been before.⁹⁵

In sharp contrast to Mrs. Bentley is the motherly figure of Maggie O'Connell in W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind*. In her the principal qualities of love and devotion are self-evident. She is the archetypal materfamilias, secure in the protective safety of her home and family. She is not the manipulator that Ross's heroine is, but she possesses the same firmness of purpose, plus a greater tenacity of spirit. Her confrontation with Brian's teacher over the matter of his humiliating embarrassment in front of his class, is one of the

⁹¹Sandra Djwa. *No Other Way*. p. 59.

⁹²Lorraine McMullen. *Sinclair Ross*. p. 58.

⁹³W.H. New. "Sinclair Ross's Ambivalent World". *Canadian Literature*, No. 40, Spring, 1969.

⁹⁴ibid.

⁹⁵ibid., p. 31.

few positive moments that Mitchell grants his lesser prairie heroine. Her role in the novel is slightly better than that of the stock static character that neither develops nor changes. Rarely does she surface to dominate the story line. On two occasions, marked by their touching quality, she is called upon by the author to exemplify the ideal caring mother.

The first instance of maternal care occurs during the early morning of Brian's first day of school.

There was a strange tightness in his mother's face; a look of concern in her brown eyes ... His mother went over to him quickly and bent down. He kissed her and felt her arm tighten on his shoulder. When he straightened up and felt that his cheek was damp, he was impatient with her.⁹⁶

The second instance revolves around the unhappy choice of a pair of bob-skates, instead of single tube skates for Brian's Christmas present, an oversight that the boy's mother was quick to discern and correct.

Although the character of Maggie O'Connal is not permitted to expand in a meaningful way, her insight is allowed a certain development, but only in relation to her immediate family and the blaspheming Uncle Sean. His lurid description of the erosive powers of the prairie winds during the drouth years of the early 1930's, sets the tone for the novel.

Jist look at her — creased an'pocked an'cracked — no grass to hold the topsoil down! ... black clouds a dust blacker than all yer greedy souls — lifted up an' travelin' — travelin' clear to Jesus!⁹⁷

Mitchell initiates the central theme of aridity at the outset of the novel with is description of cattle standing “listlessly beside the dried up slough beds which hold no water for them.” He emphasizes the river's alkali-edged banks which bear irrefutable testimony to the severity of the drop in its water level, and to the parched state of the area adjoining the nameless town. The image of the sluggish river forging a path toward the distant town reflects the languidness of the cattle. The wind also has a measured movement,

gentle at first, barely stroking the long grasses and giving them life; later, a long hot gusting that would lift the black topsoil and pile it in barrow pits along the roads.⁹⁸

⁹⁶W.O. Mitchell. *Who Has Seen the Wind*. p. 66.

⁹⁷ibid., p. 18.

⁹⁸ibid., p. 3.

Mitchell's precipitate introduction takes a mere five short paragraphs to establish the preliminary organizing images of the town and its prairie milieu. The negative aspects that color the opening paragraphs of the novel are offset by the calculated use of numerous positive images. Mitchell introduces the reader to a prairie landscape shimmering under the June sun, a gentle wind, and silver willows perfuming the air with their honey smell. The imagery is further enhanced by the startling, unexpected appearance of "lawn sprinklers sparkling in the sun." The action of the sprinklers contrasts sharply with the slow movement of the river. They represent the townsmen's only hope for halting the encroachment of the prairie's ever-spreading tan. The brightness of their aspect lends the prairie town a certain grace of well-being, an amenity that is sadly lacking in Ross' beleaguered town of Horizon.

From the point of view of omniscience, Mitchell, throughout his episodic novel, parallels the negative and positive aspects of external nature with those of the human souls or psyches that are caught up in the story of Brian O'Connell. *Who Has Seen the Wind* recounts the moving story of a boy whose tender years from the age of four to twelve are filled with a continuing source of wonder. It is more than an account of a boy and a dog, his first skates, and the trauma of early days at school. Samuel Roddan asserts that,

Who Has Seen the Wind is infinitely better than a lot of our novels. It is an attempt to present through the mind and feeling of a young boy on the Saskatchewan prairie what the author calls in his preface 'the ultimate meaning of the cycle of life.'⁹⁹

Brian's first inkling of the meaning of the life cycle occurs when he discovers that the baby pigeon he had taken from the Hoffman barn had died. Gerald O'Connell could offer no reasonable explanation for the death of the feathered creature other than, "It happens to things, that's the way they end up." The distinction is made between things and humans as though only things die by mischance.

The two-headed calf was a thing, as was the savaged prairie gopher, whose merciful end was effected by the Young Ben but, ironically, was denied the dignity of a return to the earth that had nurtured it. The abandoned carcass was rediscovered by Brian and his brother during one of their walks on the prairie.

The tailless gopher lay upon an ant pile, strangely still with the black bits of ants active over it. A cloud of flies lifted from it, dispersed, then came together again as at a command. ... It was difficult to believe that this

⁹⁹Samuel Roddan, *Canadian Forum*, Volume 27 (1947-48), AP 5624, 22.

thing had once been a gopher that ran and squeaked over the prairie. It was difficult to believe that this was anything but dirt.¹⁰⁰

The shock of the discovery brings an unconscionable force to bear upon the six year old boy whose mind is swept by memories evoked by the decomposing body of the gopher. At this point, Mitchell abandons the ordinary level of descriptive language in order to give adequate voice to the sense of impending terror that threatens to engulf the boy.

In his mind there loomed vaguely fearful images of a still and brooding spirit, a quiescent power unsmiling from everlasting to everlasting to which the coming and passing of the prairie's creatures was but incidental.¹⁰¹

The central metaphor of the passage derives from the sublime indifference of the brooding spirit, and the deliberately entrenched Wordsworthian intimations. It identifies a contrived analogous bond between Brian and the young Wordsworth. Both were guilty of breaching the Seventh Commandment, and both experienced the mystical presence of external retributive forces. Wordsworth numbered among his depredating forays, the plundering of nests and the actual theft of another's property.

... and the bird which was the captive of another's toils became my prey; and when the deed was done I heard among the solitary hills low breathings coming after me, and sounds of undistinguishable motion, steps almost as silent as the turf they trod.¹⁰²

The external happenings among the hills constitute a metaphor for Wordsworth's guilty conscience. For Brian, the images of the infinitely indifferent brooding spirit would seem to be indicative of a Christian deistic presence rather than the *genius loci* of the area.

Atwood's article in *Survival* dealing with animal victims states "that the animal as victim is a persistent image in Canadian literature."¹⁰³ Mitchell's novel sustains Atwood's view. It is replete with animal victims, though not all of them are victims in the sense of the wanton cruelty inflicted upon the hapless gopher. Jappy, like Steve's El Greco was a victim of mischance. The dog's death and subsequent burial out on the prairie with the help of the Young Ben reinforces the strange boy's proprietary right to the prairie. "This is your prairie" Brian had once told the meanly garbed boy who would later share with him the task of burying Jappy beyond the reach of predators.

¹⁰⁰W.O. Mitchell, *Who Has Seen the Wind*, p. 125.

¹⁰¹*ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁰²William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* 1805. Book First, ll. 326-332.

¹⁰³Margaret Atwood, *Survival*, p. 79.

The Young Ben turned away; he came back stooping under the weight of a rock. Brian joined him and together they carried enough rocks to cover the heap of loose dirt. ... The Young Ben said 'Kiyoots can't git him now'.¹⁰⁴

The Young Ben's terse statement echoes a similarly expressed sentiment by the Symbolist T.S. Eliot in the first part of his poem *The Wasteland* entitled *The Burial of the Dead*.

Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend
to men, or with his nails he'll dig it up again¹⁰⁵

Eliot's lines are near-copies of the two lines that form part of a song sung by the distracted Cornelia in John Webster's English Renaissance drama *The White Devil*.

But keep the wolf far thence, that's foe to men,
for with his nails he'll dig them up again.¹⁰⁶

The two-head bull calf and Saint Sammy's cow, "Lot's wife ... Lot knew her an' she was with calf an' she died" are also victims of mischance. They were subject to that special law of Nature which, according to Darwin, assured the survival of only the fittest. However, Nature had no hand in the mass extinction of the one hundred and twenty three rabbits that had proliferated from a single pair given to Fat Hoffman at Easter. They were the victims of human volition and a need to abate a growing nuisance.

Another animal victim is the runt of the litter in Sean O'Connell's pig pen, whose future has been predetermined by an immutable law of animal husbandry. Mitchell's humorous delineation of Sean's plans for the piglet with the twistless tail takes on Chekhovian proportions by virtue of the strange manner he customarily employs when giving instructions to his hired hand

Sean never spoke to Ab directly; he addressed all requests and observations to the air in front of himself, to the floor, to the wall, on one occasion to a newborn calf, on another to a manure fork leaning against the barn. Ab was expected to hear but in no way to shatter the illusion that he did not exist. Ab was the "He" in Sean's conversation.¹⁰⁷

Mitchell matches Chekhov in the satiric presentation of humans larger than life, but he does it much more humorously and with greater compassion.

¹⁰⁴W.O. Mitchell, *Who Has Seen the Wind*, p. 177.

¹⁰⁵T.S. Eliot. *The Wasteland*. Part 1 The Burial of the Dead.

¹⁰⁶John Webster, *the White Devil*, ACT V. IV. 1.1. 103-104.

¹⁰⁷W.O. Mitchell, *Who Has Seen the Wind*, p. 215.

The nature of satire varies whether it be in the poetic or narrative form. Mitchell handles the literary mode with utmost skill, especially in his portrayal of the two disparate prairie inhabitants, Saint Sammy and the Ben. Saint Sammy, the Ben and his family were peripheral to Mitchell's nameless prairie town, explicitly, they were outside its social pale. The ascetic prairie dweller, Saint Sammy, is not accorded any commerce with the town or its people, except at his place or residence in Haggerty's Coulee. Like the Bens he is an integral part of the novel's story line. Moss refers to him as

An entirely distinct presence. Saint Sammy, the mad hermit-sage in his piano-box hovel, with his collection of underwear labels, talks directly to his Lord. ... a Lord who maintains a pact with his chosen prophet, Saint Sammy.¹⁰⁸

The character of Saint Sammy is a rollicking parody of the biblical John the Baptist a voice crying out to the prairie wilderness. Jehovah's hired man takes unspeakable liberties with the first two chapters of Genesis having to do with the creation of the world.

To start with He give a flip to the fly-wheela thought, an' there was heaven an' earth an' Him plumb in the middle. She had no shape ner nothin' on her.¹⁰⁹

Saint Sammy, apart from rattling off what Roddan calls "one of the best descriptions of the Creation I have come across in a long time,"¹¹⁰ talks to God. His communion with the Lord who was concealed in a smoking funnel of wind-swept black topsoil, echoes the biblical tale of Moses who led his people out of Egypt and gave them the Law on Mount Sinai.

Be you not downcast, fer I have prepared a place fer you. Take with you Miriam an' Immaculate Holstein an' also them Clydes. Go you to Magnus Petersen, ... He will give ontuh you his south eighty fer pasture, an' there you will live to the end of your days when I shall take you up in the twinkling of an eye.¹¹¹

Sammy sees God's hand in the devastating drouth that turned the prairie into a wasteland for the carnal sins of the townspeople. He parodies the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah when he invokes the wrath of the Almighty upon the town.

¹⁰⁸John Moss, *Patterns of Isolation*, p. 242.

¹⁰⁹W. O. Mitchell, *Who Has Seen the Wind*, p. 192.

¹¹⁰Samuel Roddan, *Canadian Forum*, Volume 27.

¹¹¹W. O. Mitchell, *Who Has Seen the Wind*, p. 256.

He shook his fists at the buildings dwarfed on the horizon. 'He shall rain
ontuh them fire an' brimstone – down on the bare-ass adultresses'.¹¹²

Mitchell's command of the satiric genre is ably demonstrated in the portrayal of the Ben whose frenetic attempts to conceal his illicit still from the local authorities and the iron-willed Reverend Powelly constitutes the only resemblance to a plot inherent in the novel. His encroachments upon the story line are such that his activities touch upon most of the principal characters in the town, living and dead. He was an amorally social creature whose gregariousness was exercised mostly in the convivial confines of the Royal Hotel Beer Parlor. He was

A spare, gray bird of a man, surrounded always by the sour-sweet aroma of
brew tanged with a gallop of manure and spiced with natural leaf tobacco.
The Ben had about as much moral conscience as the prairie wind that lifted
over the edge of the prairie world to sing mortality to every living thing.

The Ben is not a negative figure, but truly an engaged character, if only because of his rascally immoral life style. His character, in the main, is dynamic, he grows, changes, and takes on added comic dimensions as the story moves ahead.

It has been said that Mitchell "anchors the wind to Brian and the natural world."¹¹³ The assertion also holds true for the Ben who, seemingly, is incessantly anchored to the ordure of the barnyard, the locale of his still, and the Royal Hotel's beer parlor. The Ben establishment in Haggerty's Coulee reflects his attitude toward things in general.

... with its weather-grayed sheds, its shock walls piled with dirt for
warmth's sake, its yard given to unbelievable piles of manure steaming in the
fall sun ... in the yard a-tremble with midges dancing, humming with the
lazy monotone of flies on the manure heaps."¹¹⁴

The terseness and the pointed realism of Mitchell's description of the Ben farmyard is typical of the tight literary discipline that infuses the entire novel. Moreover, the quoted passage above is a graphic portrayal of one aspect of the life style of the lower social classes during the depression years of the early 1930's.

The resourceful Ben is the central figure of comic relief in the novel as opposed to the warm humour associated with Sean O'Connell, his helpers, Annie and Ab, and some of the

¹¹²ibid., p. 192.

¹¹³Seminar, McMaster University, Tues. Oct. 1, 1985 (Dr. Hyman).

¹¹⁴W. O. Mitchell, *Who Has Seen the Wind*, pp. 80-81.

lesser characters. The comic ghost episode engineered for the benefit of the prairie Bacchanal has a startling climax.

What followed took Joe Pivott and Allie Gatenby by surprise., They knew that the Ben was superstitious, but they were not prepared for his response. He raised his nail-kegs of fists and shouted ... 'C'mon yuh buggers – botha yuh! I berried yuh this mornin – I'm a-gonna berry yuh agin tunight!"¹¹⁵

The episode borrows something of the protracted humour and flavour of Robert Burns' *Tam O'Shanter*, but Mitchell's humour is fresher, more spontaneous and earthier when the occasion demands. Like Burns he is the consummate detailer of human relationships in a parochial setting.

Mitchell manipulates an unfortunate turn of events into a humorous situation that involves the still, the church, and Mr. Powelly. When the janitor of the Presbyterian church dies unexpectedly, the Ben "went straightway to Mr. Powelly with a moving desire to make personal confession of his faith." Mr. Powelly kills two birds with one stone, as it were. He accepts the Ben into the congregation, and at the same time he appoints him as the new janitor.

A week later the Ben moved his still into the basement of the church. There is a delicious sense of ironic humour attached to the novel idea of an illicit still being afforded sanctuary in a house of worship. Even more so to the incongruity of the Ben family's newly acquired status of church goers which blows up in their faces, figuratively speaking, when the still explodes during a Sunday service.

Mitchell's sketch of Ben's court trial is a satiric romp in which he lampoons the "sublimely ignorant" Judge Mortimer. Mitchell limns the incompetence and comedic aspects of a person invested with the authority to administer justice in a small town Canadian law court.

The judge ... had left his Criminal Code book at home and was now pawing through his desk papers, looking for it. He uncovered a spring mail-order catalogue and realized then that he had brought it by mistake. ... He look up to the Ben, leaned forward and said: 'Ninety dollars an' costs'.¹¹⁶

The Ben's subsequent incarceration is the basis for an interesting analogy that touches upon the tragedy of all creatures held against their will. Mitchell presents two victims of

¹¹⁵ibid., p. 84.

¹¹⁶ibid., pp. 251-2.

involuntary restraint in the figures of the Ben and the trapped gray owl. He captures the mood of man and bird as they strive to cope with their enforced isolation. The caged owl's shoulders were "weaving tirelessly from side to side in a frantically uneasy glide born of restraint." The Ben, on the other hand, despite the commodiousness of his cell and the food sent in from the Bluebird Cafe, exhibited all the tendencies of a caged animal.

He moved like all caged things – from the bed to the chair, from the chair to the table, ... from the table in a twitching turn to the bed again, to the chair, to the table, to the bed again and again and again.¹¹⁷

The immobilizing restraint endured by the Ben is shared in part by the Young Ben. He is a victim of the local civic ordinance compelling school attendance by children until they had attained their fifteenth year. "School act says he can't leave until he's fifteen" said Mr. Thornborn whose wife was the chairman of the school board. The Young Ben

could not read; he did not write, either in a scribbler or at his desk or with chalk at the board. He sat always with his narrow, gray eyes distant, one arm over the back of his seat as he stared out the school window to the prairie...¹¹⁸

His subsequent release from school coincides with the release of the trapped owl.

Mitchell makes a statement for the ecological balance of nature in the freeing of the owl. The illiterate Ben, despite his scanty and ill-practiced knowledge of farm husbandry, derives a measure of insight from his own imprisonment that is reinforced by a limited apperception of the Young Ben's new found freedom from the oppression of the classroom.

Finally the Young Ben said he'd better be getting home for the chores. The cows had to be milked. The owl had to be fed. Low along the prairie sky the dying sunshine lingered, faintly blushing the length of a lone, gray cloud there. The Ben looked at it a moment. 'Let that there goddam owl go.'¹¹⁹

The gray cloud, floating free and uninhibited in the splendour of the prairie sunset, brings the amoral Ben to the realization that he was imprisoned justly, the owl unjustly. And to realize also that granting the bird its freedom would be as judicious as the act by Mr. Digby that terminated the Young Ben's schooling.

Sean O'Connell is Mitchell's representative symbol of the Saskatchewan prairie farmer. He too is a victim of the economic ills that beset the country during the depression years

¹¹⁷ibid., p. 253.

¹¹⁸ibid., p. 85.

¹¹⁹ibid., pp. 268-9.

when the prairie provinces were doubly victimized by prolonged drouths and cruel winters. Sean typifies man's insignificance in the face of an unrelenting Nature and what Djwa calls an "indifferent sun that scorches the summer wheat." When the much need rain comes too late to be effective, he curses helplessly.

Sean, with his weathered hat sodden and his fierce red mustaches dripping, stared down at the crop soaked with moisture that had come too late to do it any good. 'Goddam them!' he cried. 'Goddam their souls as green and hard as God's little green apples! Goddam their goddam souls!'¹²⁰

Sean's difficulties in coming to terms with the harshness of the land is paralleled by his experience with Mr. Abercrombie, the unfeeling, autocratic bank manager to whom he had applied for a loan.

Mitchell seizes the occasion to make a pointedly sardonic social commentary.

Mr. Abercrombie sat in a square leather chair behind a broad desk Sean O'Connal ... sat on an inadequate wooden chair before the desk.¹²¹

The elaboration of the disparity between the two chairs in the bank manager's office portend the outcome of Sean's request for a loan. Abercrombie's refusal of the loan is based upon empirical evidence.

A – you can offer no security. B – you owe the bank more than you can hope to repay. C – it is not practical.¹²²

The precipitate nature and climactic ending of the office encounter typifies much of Mitchell's writing in the novel. His prose is not overly cumbered with observed detail and human documentation as in the style of Henry James.

There are three other exceptional examples of the terse, climactic style employed by Mitchell. The first involves the death of Brian's father, and the manner in which the news is imparted to the runaway boy by Ab. "Yer Paw," he said. ... Yer Paw down to Rochester-he went an' died."¹²³ The second example relates the imprisoned Ben's sudden decision to release the gray owl languishing in its chicken coop. "Let that there goddam owl go."¹²⁴

¹²⁰ibid., p. 55.

¹²¹ibid., p. 78.

¹²²ibid., p. 78.

¹²³ibid., p. 230.

¹²⁴ibid., p. 269.

The third instance is born of Saint Sammy's presagement of dire punishment to be visited on Bent Candy for his insidious attempt to gain possession of Sammy's ten Clydesdales. The Baptist farmer had held the threat of eviction over the prairie hermit.

Mr. Candy stood where his new red barn had been. ... No stick stood. In the strewn wreckage not even the foundation outline was discernable. The barn might have been put through a threshing machine and exhaled through the blower. Certainly the Lord's vengeance had been enough to give a gopher the heartburn. ... Candy turned to Saint Sammy; ... He said: —“You kin stay.”¹²⁵

Undeniably, Mitchell's compassion for creature victims of circumstance is one of the major themes in his richly satiric novel. Satire depends largely on temporary or local conditions, its purpose is mainly to identify the gap between the real and the ideal. Mitchell's intuitive handling of the genre in *Who Has Seen the Wind* reflects a typical Canadian sense of humour, and a better than average grasp of human psychology. His format for addressing the problems of the Canadian prairies in the depression years, centered as it is upon the early maturing of young boy, is more effective than the strident crusading novels of James Garner, Irene Baird and Frederick Philip Grove, to mention but a few.

High on the list of persecutors is Mrs. Abercrombie, a well developed character that grows with the story while retaining her image of an intolerant force for evil in the town.

She was active in Church work, the Red Cross, Daughters of the Empire, the Eastern Star, the library board, the local relief committee ... Through these committees she picked her way with a deliberation that brooked no contradiction.¹²⁶

Mitchell sketches an autocratic outline of a bank manager's wife who, on the whole, possesses a decent grasp of the English language, more so than the characters of Mr. Neally, the town mayor, and Judge Mortimer whose ignorance is indicated by their sloppy management of the vernacular. To make his satiric thrust more incisive, Mitchell resorts to the literary device of malapropism. “What we need is an up-and-coming man in the church” said Mrs. Abercrombie, “a man who will take time by the fetlock.” This was followed by the savaging of a lovely line from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. “The quality of mercy” Mrs. Abercrombie explained, “is not strange”¹²⁷

¹²⁵ibid., p. 264.

¹²⁶ibid., p. 44.

¹²⁷ibid., p. 44.

Mr. Neally's linguistic failings contradict the grandiose tone of the sign gracing the outside of his barbershop that said, "Your Tonsorial Requirements Looked After." When Miss Thompson enters his shop he greets her, saying, "An' how's the demigong today." His response to her request for the town council to come to the aid of the Wong family is typically bureaucratic and ignorant.

They're Chinese an' them folks got their own way to take care of the indigement. They got tongs ain't they.¹²⁸

Like the tobacco-spitting Judge Mortimer, he is sublimely ignorant. He is emblematic of the small-minded illiterates that crowd the seats of power and influence in every body of elected or appointed representatives of the people.

In his depiction of the Abercrombies, Mortimer and Neally, Mitchell infuses an air of subtle wit that blunts the satiric thrust of his criticism. However, his sharpest and most devastating barbs are reserved for Mr. Powelly the vengeful minister of the Presbyterian church. There is little of humour or comic irony in the confrontation between the minister and Mr. Digby the school principal, over the Young Ben's theft of a rifle from Harris's Hardware store. The dialogue between the two men is an exercise in authorial pedantry in which Digby rebuts the minister's insistence that the Young Ben be sent to a reform school. In addition to the biblical passage from Ezekiel with its implication of children being made to suffer for the sins of the fathers, Digby is afforded the luxury of further exercising of "his natural talent for dialectic which had been neglected much since his old friend Hislop had left the town."¹²⁹

Digby is morally constrained to discover for himself what Powelly's views were for humanity and the good of mankind.

Is your's the Utilitarian viewpoint — the greatest happiness for the greatest number? Is it Stoic-the-smallest? do you follow Plato? Aristotle? What side of the fence are you on? The empirical? The ideal? Do you perhaps sit on the top of it as a dualist?

Ironically, the philosophers named, and the works of the others alluded to, namely, Bentham, Zeno, Locke, Berkeley, Hobbes and Descartes, are juxtaposed with Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. Mitchell posits Powelly's unrelenting stand as a horror born of the need

¹²⁸ibid., p. 142.

¹²⁹ibid., p. 132.

for vengeance by the man of the cloth. The minister's singular action in the case of the Bens is a repudiation of his calling, moreover, it is alienating.

A limited sense of alienation exists in Mitchell's droll exposition of Sean's hired hands, Annie and Ab. It provides a special insight into the character of Ab, who, though willing to dispatch the runt pig without a second thought, entertains an uncommon fondness for the myopic Annie and Noreen the asthmatic Holstein. Annie's metamorphosis, via the good offices of Brian, is the result of a trip to the city for corrective glasses. In doing so, she removes herself from the runt category, and Ab's interest in her wanes until Brian's insightful discovery.

The world was a funny place ... Ab was fussy about Noreen, the snuffiest cow in the herd, ... Before Annie's eyes had been straightened he had ... Brian knew then. He ran to the house to tell Annie.¹³⁰

Ab's ingrained altruism is violated by Annie's change for the better. Annie, in a sense, is equated with the snuffy Holstein for whom Sean had not actively sought a cure.

When Annie and Ab are blessed with the birth of twin daughters, Sean views Annie's fertility as a contradiction of the land's sterility "Never thought he had it in him" he said. "Twill be the only seed to yield a crop around this goddam place this year."¹³¹ The theme of sterility is paralleled in Ross' *As For Me and My House*, but under different circumstances. The despairing Joe Lawson, as he stands beside the uncovered grave of his son, looking across it to the hot burned fields, says "We aren't going to get even our seed this year. Maybe he's not missing such a lot."¹³² Apart from their thematic linkage, the two vignettes posed above, are typical of the disparate moods that infuse the two novels under discussion.

There is a masked difference also in the use of prairie imagery involving Nature in all its forms. Both Mitchell and Ross establish early intimations of the predominating atmosphere or tone of their novels. Mitchell's prairie, bleakly introduced as "the least common denominator of Nature, the skeleton requirements simply of land and sky," blossoms into a land where meadow larks reign supreme, butterflies go pelting past, and the gopher sits "amid his city's grained heaps and squeaks a question at the wind." A heightened

¹³⁰ibid., p. 222.

¹³¹ibid., p. 267.

¹³²Sinclair Ross, *As For Me and My House*, p. 109.

lyricism attends much of the descriptive passages in *Who Has Seen the Wind*. Mitchell's acuity of vision and deep sensibility of the workings of Nature is evidenced in a description of a prairie sunset.

Shadows lengthen; the sunlight fades from cloud to cloud, kindling their torn edges as it dies from softness to softness down the prairie sky. A lone farmhouse window briefly blazes; the prairie bathes in mellower, yellow light, and the sinking sun becomes a low and golden glowing on the prairie's edge.¹³³

The passage provides faint but distinct echoes of Tennyson's dramatic monologue *Tithonus* in lines (32-42). It is a striking depiction of a sunset on the Saskatchewan prairie that is blessed with an aura of near-lacerating lyricism such as is generally encountered in the poetic discipline. Like the chronological structure of the novel, it features a sense of movement that avoids the precipitate nature of the overall pattern of the story's sudden chapter-ending climaxes. More importantly, it reinforces the overriding theme of benign warmth and righteousness that informs the novel throughout.

There is little of benignity and warmth in Ross's narrative of alienation, misdirected ambitions and failed hopes. The elements of Nature as recorded in Mrs. Bentley's subjective journal pose more of the sublime than the beautiful. The negative aspect of the awe-inspiring wind is a recurring theme in the diary. The importance of the wind motif is projected at the outset of the novel when Mrs. Bentley recounts her first experience of it in Horizon

It's an immense night out there, wheeling and windy. ... The town seems huddled together, cowering on a high, tiny perch, afraid to move lest it topple into the wind. ... Above in the high cold night, the wind goes swinging past, indifferent, liplessly mournful. It frightens me, makes me feel lost, dropped on this little perch of town and abandoned.¹³⁴

Ross's wind is a direct emissary of Nature that works its will heedless of that Divine Providence which seemingly lends an ear to the weird, prayerful exhortations of Mitchell's eremitical Saint Sammy who shares his life with his Clydesdales.

Again, the preacher's wife confides in her journal that

It's the most nerve wracking wind I've ever listened to. ... Sometimes it's

¹³³*Who Has Seen the Wind*, p. 59.

¹³⁴*As For Me and My House*, p. 5.

blustering and rough, sometimes silent and sustained. Sometimes it's wind, sometimes frightened hands that shake the doors and windows.¹³⁵

The animistic projection of the "wind's frightened hands" is ironically suggestive of the external presence of disturbed souls seeking sanctuary in a haven that has nothing substantial to offer in the Christian discipline of salvation through Christ. The Bentley manse is a house divided.

Ross's gloomy themes of alienation and disillusion are set against a prairie background that exacerbates the existing tensions in the Bentley household. Mrs. Bentley, if she is telling the truth, is forced to contend with a psychological misfit. Such is the power of love! Philip Bentley is a caricature of a husband, a worse than average handy man about the house, a failed minister and painter who lacks faith in his creative ability. He is caught up in the despair of an enforced poverty that is his lot as an itinerant prairie minister. Lacking the emotional stability to cope with his wife's periodic and sometimes petulant outbursts that reflect his shortcomings, he retreats to the refuge of his study, his painting and, not improbably, the libidinous thoughts of Judith West.

Djwa identifies his character as that of a "hypocritical minister tortured by the awareness of his own dishonesty," who forsakes the Christian way indicated by the title of the novel. That he strays perceptibly from the Christian way is exemplified by his total lack of recourse as a suppliant to the God whose message of salvation he is sworn to preach and uphold. Ross, through his narrator, steers clear of anything remotely Augustinian. Such a proceeding would be in conflict with the Puritan ethos of the novel. In one of her early diary entries, Mrs. Bentley reveals that Philip

... keeps on believing that there's a will stronger than his own deliberately pitted against him. ... there persists this conviction of a supreme being interested in him, opposed to him...¹³⁶

Almost in the same breath she contradicts Philip's supposition, saying, "His guilt is that emphatically he does not believe. His disbelief amounts to an achievement."¹³⁷

¹³⁵ibid., p. 39.

¹³⁶ibid., p. 17.

¹³⁷ibid., p. 18.

Ross brings his novel to a close after his central characters experience a purgation of sorts that facilitates a compromise and an exit from Horizon with a son born out of wedlock. The Bentley's arrangement for their immediate future away from Horizon is the ultimate compromise. It can be perceived as a concession on the part of Mrs. Bentley, whose diary entries are studied affirmations of herself as they move constantly from predicament to some kind of resolution. Ironically, the convenient adjustment of the Bentley's differences has nothing to do with what Djwa calls "the Christian structure of the novel." Ross's story ending is not based on Christian expectations. The Bentley's future is defined by a bookstore and their newly adopted child who will bear his father's name because the manipulative Mrs. Bentley wants it so.

Mitchell's ending involves conflicting tones of Wordsworthian nostalgia and mortality. His sensitivity to the wonders embodied in the milieu of the Saskatchewan prairie remains as fresh and unflagging as it is at the outset of the novel. One cannot fail to grasp the import of the following lines that indicate the passage of time.

As clouds' slow shadows melt across the prairie's face, more nights slip darkness over. Light then dark, then light again. Day then night, then day again. A meadow lark sings and it is spring. And summer comes. A year is done. Another comes and it is done.¹³⁸

The themes of nostalgia and mortality are intensified in the final three paragraphs of the novel. The first of which, a one sentence three line structure, is highly representative of Mitchell's penchant for poetic expression. The passage,

Where spindling poplars lift their dusty leaves and wild sunflowers stare, the gravestones stand amid the prairie grasses.¹³⁹

has the lilting cadence of a Lampman whose poem *Heat* opens with a similar line denoting place or locality. The poet of the countryside describing an area somewhere in Ontario in octosyllabic lines says

"From plains that reel to southward, dim,
the road runs by me white and bare;"

The second last paragraph, reflecting the burial theme of the first, recalls the interment of Brian's dog Jappy and lends itself to a macabre but applicable analogy. Mitchell

¹³⁸ibid., p. 293.

¹³⁹ibid., p. 293.

parallels the silent depredations of an ant against those of Eliot's sea currents picking the bones of Phlebas the drowned Phoenician in whispers.¹⁴⁰

The wind motif is taken up again in the final paragraph. Like an insidious messenger from the cave of Aelous it transforms itself into a destructive maelstrom. It spins over the prairie on a macrocosmic pilgrimage as opposed to the microcosmic character of the ant's journey "down the backbone spools of a dog's skeletal remains."¹⁴¹ Mitchell, like Ross, poses the wind as a unifying structure in his story of a boy who, experiencing at first hand the ephemeral nature of living things, struggles within himself to grasp the meaning of life and death. The novel with its strong visual image of Brian O'Connell is as close to conventional romantic realism as it can get. Very little of it is dramatized to an unacceptable level. The heightened characters of Saint Sammy and the Ben are not wholly believable. They contribute in large measure to the humour, irony, and satiric wit that abounds in the novel. However, the illusion of reality in relation to the character of Saint Sammy is marred by the absurdity of the piano box which serves as his abode the year around.

¹⁴⁰T. S. Eliot. *The Wasteland. Part IV Death By Water.*

¹⁴¹W. O. Mitchell. *Who Has Seen the Wind*, p. 293.

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