

SPACE, SELF AND PLACE
IN
THE NOVELS OF SINCLAIR ROSS

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ABSTRACT:

This study is an examination of the concepts of space, place and self, as I have applied them, in the works of Sinclair Ross. Having defined the meaning of these concepts in the Introduction, I show in Chapter One why space becomes a void waiting to engulf the lives of Ross's characters. I also suggest that a dichotomy exists within the context of these concepts between the world of the male and the world of the female that affects the way Ross's characters respond to space. In Chapter Two, I argue that Ross does not allow his female characters to establish a sense of self and place that would enable them to deal with the surrounding space (with specific reference to Mrs. Bentley in As For Me and My House). In Chapter Three, I explain how the men in Ross's work succeed, or, in the case of Philip Bentley in As For Me and My House, do not succeed, to structure and shape the physical space surrounding them by means of their identity and sense of place in life. For the purpose of facilitating my documentation of Ross's novels and the short stories, I shall use the following parenthetical abbreviations to denote the titles of the works, once they have been cited in the text of the thesis:

As For Me and My House (AMMH), The Well (TW), Whir of Gold (WOG), Sawbones Memorial (SM), The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories (LN), and The Race and Other Stories by Sinclair Ross (TR).

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INTRODUCTION

How is anyone to interpret a landscape that is without sounds and devoid of anything concrete to catch the eye or stimulate the imagination?

-Laurence Ricou, Vertical Man/Horizontal World

The following chapters examine the concepts of space and place and the process of self-definition in the work (primarily the novels) of Sinclair Ross. The words space, place and self are vague and abstract, but they are functionally related terms which conjointly play an integral role in the growth and development of the individual. Once having defined these terms clearly, I hope to show how Ross organizes and depicts the space in which he places his characters and explain how this physical space does or does not develop into a mental and emotional statement of place for the male and female characters in his work.

The concept of space is an important factor in the work of a prairie realist like Ross, who portrays through the struggles and anxieties of his characters the problems encountered by those individuals who inhabit the vast, empty landscape of the Saskatchewan prairie. A product

himself of the prairie environment he uses as the setting for his works, Ross is aware of the dynamics of space on the prairie. Space is a concept that has been theorized about since Graeco-Roman times. However, in order to avoid becoming lost amidst the plethora of philosophic definitions of space, I look to Suzanne Langer for the meaning of the term "space". According to Langer, space is the shapeless, amorphous matter perceived by the human senses--"now seen, now felt, now realized as a factor in our moving and doing-- a limit to our hearing, a defiance to our reach" (72). Langer's definition goes back to the absolute theory of space propounded by Emmanuel Kant in the Critique of Pure Reason (1781). Kant defines space as "'a pure intuition,' 'the subjective condition of sensibility,'" that which "makes it 'possible that things should be outer to us'" (Kestner 16). Space is not an entity, but rather a limitless and vacuous force in the physical world which human beings feel compelled to organize, shape and articulate in order to come to terms with their place in it (Langer 21-22).

Ross's characters become isolated in and alienated by the vast emptiness of the external world. Initially, they are drawn to it, hoping to match its force with their own endurance and strength. They accept its presence, fortified, at first, by their own dreams and illusions about life. However, within the dust and drought of Ross's

Depression Era setting, these dreams remain unfulfilled and the lives of these characters sink bitterly with every year of defeat. "The austere beauty of the landscape" (TW 13) is lost on Ross's characters. When they turn and look out onto the land, its emptiness mocks them and becomes a reflection of their own empty and wasted dreams. The prairie becomes an adversary, threatening to engulf their puny lives. Its emptiness becomes a void that their minds project, a vacancy immeasurable on any "human scale" (TW 13). They become trapped, not by the land and its failure, but by their own inability to face the real anxieties and fears that lurk beneath their external facades. They use as an excuse their pride and duty to the land to keep them anchored atop such insignificant footholds in life. But as D.H. Lawrence states in Studies in Classic American Literature: "Men are only free when they are doing what the deepest self likes...the deepest, *whole* self of man, the self in wholeness, not idealistic halfness" (6-7). Ross's characters recognize that this wholeness which Lawrence speaks of is only a "measurable distance" away (TW 175). Yet it is that first "great grasshopper leap of [the] mind" (TW 175) that Ross's characters find impossible to make. For the next leap required of the mind holds the terror of "the black wet void that [lies] beyond" (TW 175). This thesis proposes to analyze this void and discover why it holds such terror for Ross's characters.

It is an exacting prairie against which Ross's characters find themselves helplessly pitted. The land offers no mercy, takes no sides and allows no reprieve from its severity. The struggle is lost more often than it is won. For Paul in "The Lamp at Noon", this realization comes too late for him to save his wife's sanity and ultimately his child's life:

Suddenly he emerged from the numbness; suddenly the fields before him struck his eyes to comprehension. They lay black, naked ... he had known since yesterday that not a blade would last the storm, still now, before the utter waste confronting him, he sickened and stood cold. Everything that had sheathed him a little from the realities of existence: vision and purpose, faith in the land, in the future, in himself--it was all rent now, stripped away. (LN 21-22)

The external environment in Ross's vision of things is cruel and demanding. It destroys crops and finances; but perhaps worse, it tortures its inhabitants and destroys their mental well-being.

Ross's desolate prairie landscape is, however, more than the catalyst in his characters' unproductive and sterile lives. The prairie space becomes a reflection or rather a projection of the empty lives these people have made for themselves. It thereby achieves, on another level of meaning, a symbolic importance. Laurence Ricou acknowledges Ross as:

the first writer in Canada to show a profound awareness of the metaphorical possibilities of the prairie landscape. More particularly, and hence the term 'internalization' is appropriate, Ross introduces the landscape as a metaphor for man's mind, his emotions, his soul perhaps, in a more thorough and subtle way than any previous writer. (82)

Space, in this context, is the open emptiness of the external world that lurks both physically and psychologically beyond the individual. For example, in "The Painted Door", "the frozen silence of the bitter fields and sun-chilled sky" (LN 102) mirrors Ann's own world, reflecting her mental and emotional condition. Ann's life in this desolate wasteland is silent, lonely and bitterly empty. Isolated from her husband John, (because he cannot comprehend her mental anguish and is therefore unable to alleviate her physical anxiety and loneliness) Ann watches her life becomes as barren and meaningless as the external world she envisions outside her window.

Ann finally discovers what she thinks is a release from the "outgrown, routine fidelity" (114) of her lonely life in her adulterous love-making with Steven. She grasps at "something vital, beckoning, meaningful" (110). The stormy elements outside the house parallel Ann's own physical and emotional state as they blow and rage "unleashed and unrestrained" (108) over the alien miles. All her pent-up anger and want temporarily relieved, Ann becomes tormented by her guilt throughout the stormy night.

Her mind, "distorted to a nightmare by the illogical and unadmitted dread of [her husband's] return" (115), projects a thousand terrors into the night. In her "fear, morbid and irrational" (115), Ann feels the "menace of the prairie" (TW 17) waiting to engulf her in "all [its] frozen wilderness, its heart of terror and invincibility" (115).

The "blistered lifelessness" (AMMH 90) that Mrs. Bentley recoils from in As For Me and My House is a product of more than just the dust and drought. It is a condition of the very lives of the people, which destroys for them their hopes of ever achieving fruitful futures for themselves. The many small town figures that populate Ross's works are as dry and lifeless as the atmosphere they inhabit. The small towns of Horizon and Upward, in As For Me and My House and Sawbones Memorial respectively, represent the social sterility that extends from the individual and engulfs all of Ross's characters. As Ricou validly points out: "Ross's typical man on the prairie is much more conscious of the implications of the emptiness around him than of the forces of nature pounding against him" (81). Ross's characters often blame the failure of their lives on the cruel and indifferent environment of the prairie; they become victims of circumstances rather than of their own inadequacies. They lack, however, the complete identity needed to deal with so vast an amount of space. The landscape becomes inimical to them because they are

unable to fill its vacancy. Ross's characters remain weak, circumscribed beings who, lacking a true sense of place and self, remain hidden behind their false fronts.

The concept of place plays an essential part in the overall quest for self-definition. As Margaret Laurence explains, "both personal identity and nationality begin with place and region" (Thomas 56). The concept of place is one that can be easily defined with reference to Ross, himself. Sinclair Ross has been classified by his critics as a regional novelist and a writer of prairie realism. Ross's vivid rendering of a Saskatchewan prairie landscape ridden by the dust and drought of the 1930's Depression in Canada does, indeed, place his work in this context. Roy Daniells in his 1957 introduction to Ross's first novel As For Me and My House begins with the claim that: "Analysis of the Canadian scheme of things must be regional or at least begin by being regional" (v). By placing the novel in its historical perspective and revealing the accuracy of Ross's portrayal of the Bentleys' life in the small prairie town of Horizon during the Depression, Daniells affirms the regional quality of Ross's writing.

In The Meeting of Time and Space, Canadian historian and literary critic George Woodcock provides a definition of regionalism that can be applied as a suitable analogue for the term "place" in this thesis. Place is:

the geographical feeling of locality, the historical feeling of a living community, the personal sense of ties to a place where one has been born or which one has passionately adopted. (9)

Although Ross himself is an expatriate, having left Canada and taken up residence for a number of years, first in Greece and later in Italy, his work has always maintained its regional orientation. Ross explains his loyalty to the Saskatchewan prairie in a letter published in Manitoba Mosaic, in which he expresses his feelings about the influence of Manitoba (where he wrote many of his stories) on his work:

If I have any claim to be considered a 'writer' it must be based on the stories in The Lamp at Noon and As For Me and My House, and they are, as you know, one hundred per cent Saskatchewan. True, I wrote them while in Winnipeg, but I was looking back, and drew on Manitoba not at all. If I had written them in London or Timbuctoo they would have come out exactly the same. ("On Looking Back" 94)

Part of the creative process for Ross involves his need "to feel Saskatchewan under [his] feet" (95). In "The Provincial Consciousness", Wallace Stegner praises a writer's fidelity to a specific place and experience:

Identity, the truest sense of self and tribe, the deepest loyalty to a place and way of life is inescapably local, and it is my faith that all the most serious art and literature come out of that seedbed even though the writer's experience goes far beyond it. Much of the felt life and observed character and place that give a novel body and authenticity, much of the unconsciously absorbed store of images and

ideas, comes ultimately from the shared experience of a community or region. There is a kind of provincialism, ... that encompasses the most profound things a writer has to say. (307)

Ross's careful depiction of the Saskatchewan prairie, the rolling expansive stretch of field and sky he paints with "a spirit of place" (Lawrence 3) reveals his intimate and personal connection to the landscape.

Ross's characters, on the other hand, do not possess an intrinsic sense of place. In Ross's work, place is a concept that his male and female characters apprehend differently. Initially, they are all displaced characters set against an empty background. They find it hard to feel at home anywhere, especially in the alienating vacancy of the prairie. It becomes for them a nebulous void waiting to engulf their lives. However, the men in Ross's novels (with the exception of Philip Bentley) eventually discover a sense of place in life by coming to terms with their own identity. By learning how to shape and structure the space around them in a manner compatible with their versions of self, they neutralize the threat of the void. Ross's women, in comparison, are not able to work towards and obtain a sense of self and place that would enable them to face and eventually conquer the awaiting void. The women in Ross's novels are relegated to that space which constitutes the house. Unlike Ross's male characters, they are unable to develop a way of being in the world that would free them

from the confines of this space and allow them to know themselves. As a result, the world around them remains an empty space, which they can neither fill nor escape.

Examples of characters in Canadian literature who define themselves according to a sense of place can be found in the works of Margaret Laurence, Ethel Wilson and Margaret Atwood. In my discussion of space and place in Chapter One, I should like to make a few brief comparisons between Ross's work and the novels Hetty Dorval by Wilson and The Diviners by Laurence, which are essentially novels of place and deal specifically with the quest for identity in a female. I should also like to make reference in Chapter Three to the work of Ernest Hemingway to further elucidate the concept of place and the idea of shaping and structuring physical space in terms of the male character.

Some critics, namely Gail Bowen, Roy Daniells and Sandra Djwa, regard Ross's works, especially his first novel As For Me and My House, as novels about the search for self. While this statement may be true of Ross's last three novels (which deal, I think, specifically with the quest for place and self-definition in Ross's male characters), the majority of his characters (Philip and Mrs. Bentley in particular) remain hidden behind their false fronts. They suffer from "the problem of self-identity in relation to others" (Djwa 77) and to themselves. In fact, Ross's characters lack any sort of true identity at all. In Self

and Others, R.D. Laing provides a definition of self that corresponds to my own use of the term: "One's self-identity is the story one tells one's self of who one is" (77). An individual who experiences self in this manner is, to use another term from Laing, an ontologically secure person or one who

experience[s] his own being as real, alive, whole; as differentiated from the rest of the world in ordinary circumstances so clearly that his identity and autonomy are never in question; as a continuum in time; as having an inner consistency, substantiality; genuineness; and worth; as spatially co-extensive with the body;....
(Divided Self 41-42)

Ross's characters are ontologically insecure in that they suffer from a disjunction between the inner self (which in the majority of his characters is a nebulous terrain manifest in the physical world by the void) and the outer personality (the provisional form of identity represented by the false front). Behind the contrived images of the preacher's wife, the artist and the self-sufficient gangster hide frightened and selfless individuals. Self-knowledge is the goal Ross's characters must work toward before they are able to discover a means of being in the world that would allow them to reject their façades. A projection of their own mental states, the external world signifies to Ross's characters their own state of being. As Laing explains, the inner self in an ontologically insecure person is a "vacuum". The external world becomes, in relation to this state of being, a terrifying void which threatens to

"implode" (Divided Self 45) upon such an individual's internal emptiness and engulf him/her in its vacuity.

Ross's characters, instead of struggling to fulfill some sort of "vision and purpose, faith in the land, in [themselves]" (LN 22) are ultimately without the resources needed to confront the fear that keeps them locked within their present bitter and futile struggles. As Henry Kreisel points out in "The Prairie: A State of Mind":

"...the knowledge of the vast space outside brings to the surface anxieties that have their roots elsewhere and thus sharpens and crystallizes a state of mind" (260). Ross's characters, specifically the Bentleys, Chris Rowe and Sonny McAlpine, desperately desire to escape the lives they have made for themselves. Not one of these characters is a whole person, in touch with his/her true self. Mrs. Bentley is a parasite who subsumes her own identity to Philip's well-being. Philip lives behind the false front of his religious calling and works at validating his identity by means of an artistic vocation that is not his own but rather one expropriated from his own idealized version of his father's life. Devoid of self, these characters can identify easily with the emptiness of the space surrounding them. It reflects their own inner condition and mirrors their own state of selflessness.

"'A man without a mask,'" explains Laing, "is indeed very rare....Everyone in some ways wears a mask, and there are many things we do not put ourselves in fully" (Divided Self 95). As long as Ross's characters remain disloyal to themselves and persist in the way of life they have locked themselves into, they will not be able to see the prairie as anything but a menace. The void remains an ever-present force, threatening to engulf their lives. They remain aliens in a "desert-like and sinister" (TW 13) space, dependent always on their masks for survival.

CHAPTER ONE

SPACE AND THE DISPLACED: DISCOVERING THE VOID.

The dust is so thick that the sky and earth are just a blur. You can scarcely see the elevators at the end of town. One step beyond, you think, and you'd go plunging into space.

-As For Me and My House.

Space is organized in Ross's works in such a manner as to aggravate the feelings of alienation and exposure his characters experience. For all their struggles with the land, the years of faith and endurance, the seeking of sustenance and life from a soil they have worked with their own hands, Ross's characters fail to belong to the landscape they inhabit. As Laurence Ricou points out: "The people of Horizon, as Mrs. Bentley describes them, mirror the physical environment's dry and featureless visage, and yet they are not at home in it" (82). The surrounding space is for them "terra incognita" (Wilson 92) or as Atwood's unnamed narrator in Surfacing initially defines it: "home ground, foreign territory" (11). Such a statement refers both

literally to the landscape before Atwood's narrator and, on another level, it points to her psychological state of mind as it does with Ross's characters. These characters know neither themselves nor the landscape they inhabit.

Atwood's protagonist, however, gradually comes to accept the island landscape on an emotional/psychological level as a place very much a part of herself and her past. She begins to identify with the physical space around her in a manner similar to that of Frankie Burnaby in Ethel Wilson's Hetty Dorval, which is also a novel of place. Through Frankie Burnaby and Hetty Dorval, Wilson reveals the importance of place in establishing one's identity in life. Frankie Burnaby is defined by her parents, her community, and the countryside of which she is very much a part. The people of the small town Lytton, especially the Burnabys with their ranch, are very attached to the land. Frankie states, "We all knew the familiar roads and country like the flat of our hands" (10). The surrounding countryside--the rivers, the hills and the sage-brush--are a part of the people of Lytton. The land shapes and determines their lives. Rather than isolating its inhabitants in its desolate solitude, the landscape gives them a sense of community and belonging. However, in As For Me and My House, Mrs. Bentley is unable to identify with the physical world. Her view of Horizon as "an island in the snow", "a rocky, treacherous island" (148) in which she lives, "an

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alien in its blistered lifelessness," (90) never alters. She realizes how easily her life could "[be] rubbed out by the wind, rubbed out or perhaps submerged in it, so that there's nothing left..." (43) like the many little events that make up her day.

The vertical position humans maintains on the horizontal stretch of space surrounding him is the problem of Ross's characters as Laurence Ricou identifies it. Space, in this regard, becomes negative. Ross's characters become displaced figures set against an empty background. Finding it impossible to identify with the space she inhabits, Mrs. Bentley is often alienated by the featureless contours of the prairie:

The earth where I stood was like a solitary rock in it. I cowered there with a sense of being unheeded, abandoned.

I've felt that way so many times in a wind, that it's rushing past me, away from me, that it's leaving me lost and isolated. (159-160)

Ross's characters often express a fear of simply "drop[ping] headlong into space" (LN 62) as if the horizontal stretch of land ahead of them may just open up and swallow them whole:

[Ellen] lit the lamp, then for a long time stood at the window motionless.... the cover of dust clouds made the farmyard seem an isolated acre, poised aloft above a sombre void. At each blast of wind it shook, as if to topple and spin hurtling with the dust-reel into space. (LN 13)

They feel neither at home in the flat spaces and far horizons of the prairie nor, as Mrs. Bentley experiences, in "the close black hills" (95) of the country woodland.

Attempting to escape the stifling atmosphere of the house and the equally claustrophobic effects of the town, Mrs. Bentley turns to this prairie space. But instead of receiving a sense of release, Mrs. Bentley feels overly exposed: "...I have a queer, helpless sense of being, lost miles out in the middle of it, flattened against a little peak of rock" (35). Chris Rowe, Ross's protagonist in The Well, experiences a similar reaction to the various types of space around him:

In its effects upon him the close, cupboard-like room was an inversion of the prairie. Driving along in the truck he had felt exposed, conspicuous. Here, he was trapped, a prisoner. (22)

The terror begins for Ross's characters when the surrounding space becomes a void, threatening to engulf anyone who enters its vacancy. Moreover, the small and narrow Main Street towns, full of small-minded people, hold neither comfort nor safety for Ross's figures:

I stopped and looked up Main Street once, the little false fronts pale and blank and ghostly in the corner light, the night encircling it so dense and wet that the hard-gray wheel packed earth, beginning now to glisten with the rain, was like a single ply of solid matter laid across a chasm. I hesitated a moment and went on dubiously, almost believing that when we reached the darkness we would topple off. (AMMH|31)

In her study Sinclair Ross, Lorraine McMullen explains this threat of space:

As in Ross's later novel The Well, space is on one level the unknown future. The Bentleys fear plunging into the unknown by leaving the little town and the safety of their lives here. On another level, space is for the agnostic Bentleys, that vast unknown beyond life itself. (64)

For Sonny McAlpine in Whir of Gold, the unknown is the "here-and-now...what it was, how it fitted into the terrain of [his] existence" (28). As a result of this fear, Ross's characters allow this space to dominate them and control their lives. Ross's figures, although they stand vertical on horizontal ground, fall short of assuming the position of "Man, the giant-conqueror" (Kreisel 256) of space and its challenges. Instead, they represent "man, the insignificant dwarf always threatened by defeat" from "the sheer, physical fact of the prairie" (Kreisel 256). By this equation, Kreisel reduces the problems of space to a state of mind. The void which Ross's characters project into the external world is a manifestation of an inner emptiness and a state of mind. When the congregation at Partridge Hill finds its voice dwarfed and its nerves frayed by the howling wind on the prairie, they must fidget and move about as if to try to "assure themselves of their existence and reality, to put the walls in place and brace them there" (AMMH 38).

Only Judith, who is able to become temporarily "Unaware of herself" (38) and her position within this space is able to meet the void on equal terms and ride the wind with her song.

II

Whether they live on rural farmsteads, or in the small Main Street communities of Horizon, Upward and Comet, or in the larger city centres such as Montreal, Ross's characters lack a centre of existence. In As For Me and My House, the Bentleys' life together is a series of unconnected and temporary stops in time. Mrs. Bentley drifts in time and space, following Philip from one Main Street town to the next, never really feeling at home anywhere. As Robert Kroetsch points out: "...Mrs. Bentley's in Horizon--a town that is space and place at once, somewhere and nowhere, always present and never to be reached" (80). Having never experienced a sense of community, the Bentleys cannot be expected to become a part of one:

There's of course the town, but I can't join in. I might feel different if it were our town, if we had come here years ago when it was just beginning, were part of its growth and struggle, if we owned one of the little false-fronted stores,

if we could share in the hopes and ambitions and disappointments of its people.

But we're detached, strangers, seeing it all objectively, and when you see it that way it's just bickering and petty and contemptible. (43)

Mrs. Bird labels Mrs. Bentley "an expatriate" (21). But Mrs. Bentley has never had a true homeland. She is a transient in life, clinging like "a fungus or parasite" (151) to her host--Philip--the only solid ground she knows.

Ross's figures are as isolated from one another as they are from themselves. They all feel, like the Reverend Grimble in Sawbones Memorial, that they "flutter on the margins of [each other's] lives" (77). There is no sense in Ross's works of his characters belonging to what D.H. Lawrence describes as "a living, organic, *believing* community, active in fulfilling some unfulfilled, perhaps unrealized purpose" (6). Ross's characters may come together to pray for rain in order to save their crops, but, as Doc Hunter points out in Sawbones Memorial, as soon as the situation has returned to normal the temporarily cooperative townspeople turn against each other and resume their petty, contemptible lives.

Ross's Main Street worlds are places that have little comfort and security to offer their townspeople. As Mrs. Bentley describes them: "They're sad little towns when a philosopher looks at them. Brave little mushroom heyday--new town, new world--false fronts and future, the way all

Main Streets grow--and then prolonged senility (96). They become "rocky, treacherous island[s]" (148) that require five lighthouses to make themselves noticed "against the black wetness" (5) of the prairie void. To Mrs. Bentley, Horizon's "little unilluminating glints" (5) signify nothing beyond the town's very negligibility and smallness.

For Frankie Burnaby in Hetty Dorval, the same view of "the dwindling lights of land" against the darkness of the night, serves as a reminder to Frankie that each glimmer "has a human significance in that place which it illuminates" (65). Like the townspeople in Ross's stories, the people of Lytton live on the margin of a larger society. The potential for alienation and lack of identity exists for Wilson's characters as well. Yet, through their spirit and identification with the land and with one another, Lytton stands as its own centre of existence for these people. In the marginalized environment of the hinterland space, structure and form become necessary for survival. Traditional codes of value and moral standards--the home, the family, the church, and the community--are required to give shape and meaning to this empty hinterland. Frankie explains:

I had no particular pride in the industry of my parents...Both Father and Mother set and maintained exacting standards where it would have been easy to be slipshod and lazy and soon engulfed ...[by] the everlasting always waiting encroachment of the sage-brush. (8)

Life in this desolate wilderness is hard and demands that one be hardworking in order to survive.

Ross's Main Street towns can also be described, as they are by Mrs. Bentley, as "self-sufficient little pocket[s] of existence, so smug, compact" (99). Yet somehow Ross's little towns have a desiccating effect on the people. They become so ingrown and confining that they close themselves off to any outside influences. Form and structure become imprisoning factors for Ross's figures. These communities become fishbowls that entrap them "like [specimen] in a jar of alcohol" (WOG 56). This form of societal imprisonment and the social sterility that results from it, parallel to some extent the problem of the individual who suffers from ontological insecurity:

the shut-up self, being isolated, is unable to be enriched by outer experience, and so the whole world comes to be more impoverished, until the individual may come to feel he is merely a vacuum.... (Laing, The Divided Self 75)

Both the community and the individual, closed off as they are from the forces of the outside world, create their own sterility and emptiness.

In Sawbones Memorial, Doc Hunter concludes that "Upward's a fish bowl" (107). He warns Benny to get out before Upward's narrow-minded and prejudiced attitude can turn upon Benny the way it has upon Maisie Bell. This image of the fishbowl or rather of contained water (which appears

throughout Ross's works) suggests the confinement suffered by Ross's characters. They become trapped in the space of the opaque glass enclosures they erect in order to protect themselves from the annihilating forces they project outside of their bowls. The need for a defense against this external space "hardens over [them] like glass" (AMMH 146) and every move they make becomes "furtive and restrained" (146). Moreover, they fall victim to the narrow-minded bigotry that breeds within the closed atmosphere of the container.

During the rainy season, Mrs. Bentley is constantly putting out buckets to catch the continuous drip of water that falls from the ceiling. Like the water in the bucket, Mrs. Bentley is contained by her role as the preacher's wife within the house and to a larger extent within the town. All of Mrs. Bentley's potentially creative energy is welled up. Unable to release it, Mrs. Bentley fails to nourish and rejuvenate the sterile lives she and her husband lead. Philip suffers, as Mrs. Bentley comes to realize, in a similar manner:

It's always been my way to comfort myself thinking that water finds its own level, that if there's anything great or good in a man it will eventually find its way out. But I've never taken hold of the thought and analyzed it before, never seen how false it really is. Water gets damned sometimes; and sometimes, seeking its level, it seeps away in dry, barren

earth. Just as he's seeping away among
the false fronts of these little towns.
(102)

The rain replenishes the parched land outside the house, but it does not seem to have any effect upon the lives of the people of Horizon. So compact and self-contained is Horizon that the people remain as dry and impotent as always.

By way of contrast, Ethel Wilson defines the concept of place and identity in Hetty Dorval as connections and roots with people and places. The Burnabys live on the outskirts of town, separated from Lytton by fifteen miles of sage-brush. However, they are not isolated from the town and its people. Frankie's life, like the nearby Thompson and Fraser Rivers, is a series of connections, carefully woven among the fabric of other people's lives in Lytton.

In As For Me and My House, the lives of Horizon's townspeople are separate and closed. The reader receives no sense of community spirit binding Horizon together and providing the townspeople with a safe place in which to live. Wilson's characters recognize that they live in a "glass gold fish bowl" (29). This image does not, however, suggest confinement for Wilson's characters the way it does for Ross's figures. To Frankie, the fish bowl represents a necessary structure and form. The bowl prevents the water and the fish from spilling out all over the place. But it does not prevent the assimilation and incorporation of the

external space surrounding Lytton. It provides the people of Lytton with the sense of security and belonging that they need to deal with the emptiness outside. Moreover, the bowl's glass is transparent, which allows someone looking in a clear view of the life inside. People's lives in Lytton are not closed off and hidden behind opaque glass walls the way they are in Ross's works.

Of course, the image of the goldfish bowl in Wilson's novel may also be interpreted as negatively as I have interpreted it in Ross's works. The potentially imprisoning quality of the small Main Street community is a theme that runs throughout Canadian Literature. Even Margaret Laurence seems to belittle the attitudes and way of life of the small town characters she presents in The Diviners. But no matter how much Morag Gunn wishes to escape Manawaka, she knows her roots are there. Manawaka is her home, the source of her identity and meaning in life. The Bentleys' rootless existence--both in the past and in the present--makes it clear that they are unable to identify their lives with any one place.

In comparison, Frankie's identity and existence are firmly rooted in the soil of Lytton. As she moves forward in life beyond the confines of the fishbowl, Frankie's life branches out and intertwines with other people's lives. Like a river, it joins with smaller streams and larger rivers, collecting the silt from each one she passes through

and carrying it with her on her journey through life. As Frankie explains: "we impinge on each other, we touch, we glance, we press, we touch again, we cannot escape" (57).

In As For Me and My House, Mrs. Bentley and her husband Philip are unable to move forward. They desperately desire to escape the life of the Horizons. Yet, as Lorraine McMullen points out, their inability to deal with the awaiting void ensures that life remains for them a series of small Main Street towns (64). Although they leave Horizon in the end and journey to their secondhand bookstore in the city, their lives remain incomplete. For as E.A. McCourt points out, Ross's characters "are almost wholly static; we know as much of them in the first paragraph as we do in the last" (102). The Bentleys do not grow or change as individuals and, as a result, they remain limited and undeveloped characters. Mrs. Bentley is foolish to assume that the move to the city will create a new life for Philip and herself. As the portrayals of Sonny McAlpine and Chris Rowe attest, life in the big city can be as alienating and confining for an individual as life in a small Main Street town if he/she lacks a true identity and sense of place.

The lives of Ross's characters impinge and press upon one another as do the lives of Wilson's characters. The problem is, however, that none of Ross's characters touch or are touched deeply enough by people or place. The people of Horizon hold themselves aloof from each other. No

one really knows too much about the next person. Such knowledge or identification is impossible for Ross's characters because they all wear carefully constructed facades:

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; yet tonight again for all my indifference to what the people here may choose to think of me, it was an ordeal to walk out of the vestry and take my place at the organ. (AMMH 9)

These facades that Ross's characters rely upon are used for defensive purposes. They protect their wearers, from the "licks that rubbed in Main Street" (WOG 4):

Steady, taking my time: perhaps that was the answer. Forever scared--even jumpy, mean--I always give the impression of control. And no one seemed to see farther, to suspect what lay beyond. (WOG 91)

What lies beyond is often a selfless, undefined individual, who maintains the facade as a provisional form of identity, erected whenever the petty and contemptible attitudes of a Main Street become overwhelming. As with Wilson's character Hetty Dorval, it is difficult to tell how much of Ross's characters is "artful and how much was artless" (Wilson 66). Certainly this is the case with Mrs. Bentley, as indicated by the various arguments put forward by Ross's critics as to her reliability as a narrator. One can never tell when she is speaking through the mask or from behind it.

Ross's characters inhabit the same type of "ugly,

through the mirror world" (WOG 53) in which Atwood's characters struggle to survive in Surfacing. Atwood's Surfacing is about the protagonist's quest to regain her whole self and integrate the two worlds--those of the mind and the body--that have become divided within her. Following her ritualistic bathing in the lake around her island home, Atwood's protagonist cleanses herself of her "false body" (178), her reflection, that mirror image behind which her true self keeps hidden. She becomes completely integrated with the landscape around her (178). On the island, she creates for herself a space that puts her in touch with her identity and past life. The protagonist's refusal to look into the mirror signifies her denial of all the confining forces and false structures that trap Atwood's other characters:

I must stop being in the mirror. I look for the last time at my distorted glass face...reflection intruding between my eyes and vision. Not to see myself but to see. I reverse the mirror so it's towards the wall, it no longer traps me, Anna's soul closed in a gold compact.
(175)

In Ross's novel The Well, Chris Rowe must rid himself of his false body--the tough-skinned, self-sufficient image--he has created for himself before he can discover his place in life. The Chris Mackenzie who runs from his past finds it difficult to rid himself of his false

front. He has used it so long as "an instrument" (WOG 153) to get not only what he wants, but to protect his flimsy hold on life:

For on Boyle Street even thoughts had never been quite his own. There was always the need to think and do according to the expectations of the gang. Because he existed only in the reflections they gave back, he was at their mercy, even while he went among them, assured and slickly superior. But here he could relax, slip a little, and it concerned no one but himself. No mirrors, no reflections--it was almost freedom. (57)

Without the mask, he is helpless--a non-entity.

Sandra Djwa sees the outcome of Ross's stories, especially in his first novel As For Me and My House, as: "a kind of latter-day psychological puritanism in which salvation is redefined in relation to the discovery of the self and true grace is manifested by a new sense of direction" (49). Djwa sees Philip Bentley as a man truly directed by an "inner spirit", firmly guided by the true spirituality of his convictions. Ross's characters may be guided by their "inner-directed Presbyterian bones" (WOG 126) but in no way is the outcome a spiritually uplifting or psychologically regenerative one. They turn inward upon themselves because they are afraid to step outward. Ross's characters are all religious hypocrites. The false fronts of 'identity' they wear serve as well as self-crafted masks of religious faith and Christian belief that "bear witness to a potter's hand that never falters" (AMMH 5).

Philip Bentley in As For Me and My House and the Reverend Grimble in Sawbones Memorial recognize the hypocrisy of their small town congregations. As Reverend Grimble points out: "They need me only to serve their vanity, someone to say see what fine people we are, we pay a preacher and support a church, our children go to Sunday school" (77). Even Philip Bentley and Reverend Grimble acknowledge themselves to be "mealy-mouthed old sham[s] with bread-and-butter smile[s]" (SM 78). In the end Philip at least abandons his career in the ministry. But the Reverend Grimble is forced to continue: "For it's late--not far off fifty-five--to start out on the road selling sewing machines or encyclopedias" (78).

III

Vision, for Ross's characters, certainly is inner-directed. The false fronts of Philip Bentley's paintings in As For Me and My House do not look out onto the vast and potentially releasing space of the prairie: "they stare at each other across the street as into mirrors of themselves, absorbed in their own reflections" (69). Ross's characters turn away from the prairie because they feel overly exposed by its space. In order to protect themselves from these

feelings of exposure, they create an alternative space for themselves by which they avoid the external space beyond. They inhabit opaque glass fishbowl worlds and build little garrison towns. Northrop Frye defines the garrison as: "a closely-knit and beleaguered society, [whose] moral and social values are unquestionable" (Klinck 830). It is, to use John Moss's definition, a "closed community...devoted to resisting assimilation" (16). Ross's little Main Street towns become tiny fortresses that work to keep out the threatening space their occupants project into the external world.

This turning inwards has, however, a destructive effect upon Ross's characters. They have a limiting effect on one another that almost surpasses the negativity of their diminished environment. They become narrow-minded and petty bigots, who lead pitifully repressed and insular lives. In the course of time, the garrison's occupants develop a garrison mentality. Unable to see beyond the confines of their own world, they judge their own standards and values as superior to all others. They become closed-minded and mean-spirited individuals.

In Sawbones Memorial, Ross reveals his characters at their worst. The "Good Women" of Upward with their "Holier-than-Thou" attitudes are repressed and angry bigots. They make their homes "the model[s] of propriety and Christian rectitude," (60) places where they feel in control. They are, however, anything but Christian in their

treatment of each other. Anyone is liable to become the victim of the town's petty rumors and malicious gossip. The goal of these "Good Women" is to "make everyone over in their own image" (AMMH 5). Those individuals who refuse to fit in and be, as one of Upward's fine citizens requires, "real white, one of our own" (SM 58), are ostracized and mocked like the Chinamen, Charlie Wong and Wing Ling Ching, Maisie Bell, Big Anna and her son, "Nick the Hunky".

Mrs. Finley, in As For Me and My House, is perhaps Ross's finest example of a Main Street 'official':

There's at least one in every town,
austere, beyond reproach, a little grim
with the responsibility of self-assumed
leadership--inevitable as broken sidewalks
and rickety false fronts. She's an alert,
thin-voiced, thin-framed little woman, up
to her eyes in the task of managing the
town and making it over in her own image.
(5)

With such leadership, it is no wonder that the prognosis for these little Main Street towns remains one of "prolonged senility" (AMMH 96). Such is the outcome for an ingrown and constricted society. As the doctor's wife explains in As For Me and My House: "Provincial atmosphere--it suffocates" (21). In this stultifying and repressive environment any type of growth or progress is impeded. Often it is difficult to determine whether the dust and silt that blanket the world of these characters is a reality of the external world filtering in through the cracks or merely the outcome of their own empty and unproductive existences.

Mrs. Bentley, who "resigned [herself] to sanctimony years ago" (61) no longer tries to rebel against these conditions as she once did earlier in her marriage to Philip. Like the rest of the town, "The House of Bentley" wears a false front to hide the "tough, deep-rooted tangle" (61) of their lives behind its cover. In As For Me and My House, Mrs. Bird explains to Mrs. Bentley: "'...it's always a man's world [we] live in. The dominating male--you'll understand when you meet the doctor'" (21). Surely, Mrs. Bird exaggerates. For this can hardly be the case in Ross's Main Street towns, controlled as they are by the likes of the Mrs. Finleys in As For Me and My House and the Mrs. Harps of Sawbones Memorial. The men of these small town communities hold little if any authority in these female-dominated societies. They all seem to be, like Mr. Finley, "appropriately weak [men]" (AMMH 5). Philip Bentley is dominated by his wife. Mrs. Bentley treats Philip like a child, scolding him when he angers her and putting him in his place should he become irreverent. But as Mrs. Bentley herself ironically points out about Mr. Finley:

you can't help feeling what an achievement is his meekness. It's like a tight wire cage drawn over him, and words and gestures, indicative of a more expansive past, keep squeezing through it the same way that parts of the portly Mrs. Wenderby, this afternoon kept squeezing through the back and sides of Philip's study armchair. (5-6)

The important word in Mrs. Bentley statement is "expansive". Clearly, both Mr. Finley and Philip Bentley have been encaged by their marriages. Mrs. Bentley herself is willing to admit that it is she who keeps Philip in the church. And ultimately, it is she who decides his future for him at the end of the novel. Through his marriage to Mrs. Bentley, Philip loses the freedom and space he requires to develop his ability as an artist and as a whole person. (Mrs. Bentley's loss of freedom and what it implies for her shall be discussed in Chapter Two).

Male/female relationships in Ross's works are quite constrained. The women view their spouses as less than adequate providers. They demean their men and point out their failures to them. In response, the men close themselves off from their wives. They seem to become indifferent to the suffering of their women. Is it a wonder that the atmosphere and environment of Ross's works is so arid and sterile? His male and female characters are unable to reach out to one another because of the space, both psychological and literal, that stands between them:

I wish I could reach him, but it's like
the wilderness outside of night and sky
and prairie, with this one little spot of
Horizon hung up lost in its immensity.
He's as lost and alone. (AMMH 25)

Robert Kroetsch defines space according to gender:
"We conceive of external space as male, internal space as female. More precisely the penis: external, expandable,

expendable; the vagina: internal, eternal (73). Although Kroetsch's emphasis on Mrs. Bentley as muse raises some points of contention for Sandra Djwa (and for myself also), his concept of space is applicable to Ross's prairie environment. Sandra Djwa argues in her "Response" to Kroetsch's equation that space in As For Me and My House is "equally fearful to men and women" (87) and must therefore be without gender. Space is equally threatening to both Ross's male and female characters. However, in Ross's later novels, The Well, Whir of Gold, and Sawbones Memorial, the male figures come to terms with their own lives and conceptions of themselves. As a result, the land becomes less of a threatening presence. As shall be discussed later, this movement towards self-identity is achieved beyond the stifling influences of Ross's female figures and the confining limits of the marriage relationship.

The house and the Main Street communities in Ross's works correspond to the female as she is typified in his stories, while the space of the external world seems to correspond, not to Ross's male figures, but rather to the cowboy. Mrs. Bentley acknowledges this relationship:

And there's a cowboy once who waves as we pass, and whose solitary figure against the horizon gives the landscape for a moment vastness that we hadn't felt before. (92)

The Bentleys experience only the confining presence of space, especially as it corresponds to the spatial-relations of their marriage. A close examination of the patterns which occur in Ross's works will uncover the aptness of Kroetsch's gender equation of space. The earth in Ross's stories remains archetypically female as the expression "bitch-like earth" (LN 54) implies. But the genius loci in Ross's works appears to be without gender, although it is certainly more accomodating to Ross's male figures.

The women in Ross's stories are alienated by the physical space that surrounds them. The land reflects their own sterile and unproductive lives. Yet they are equally confined within the houses and small towns they set "to make over in their own images". As Mrs. Bentley states more than once and quite appropriately: "I HATE this house" (25). Once out on the prairie, however, these women find little release. They are driven back to the imprisoning and stifling space of the house and the town.

Unlike Frankie Burnaby and Hetty Dorval in Ethel Wilson's novel, Ross's female characters do not respond favourably to the spiritus loci of the prairie landscape. Although the landscape signifies different things for both Hetty and Frankie, they both experience a sense of freedom and release in its presence. Perhaps this is so because the spirit of the land in Wilson's work, as with Laurence's and Atwood's, seems to be a female presence. The genius loci in

these works signifies both freedom from society's constricting influence and connections with people and place. For Morag Gunn in Laurence's The Diviners, the spiritus loci is a creative force which provides Morag with the artistic stimulus required for her act of divination.

The men in Ross's stories also feel lost within the space of the external world. The space of the prairie is as threatening to them as the confines of the house. However, they are offered the chance to come to terms with the space of the prairie by accepting what Robert Kroetsch describes as "versions of self that keep [the female] at a distance--the male as orphan, as cowboy, as outlaw" (79). The choice most popular with Ross's male characters is the cowboy. The obvious presence of the horse and its symbolic importance in Ross's work points to this conclusion. In As For Me and My House, Paul Kirby explains:

"The horse is good for [a man]. Good for his self-respect. You can't ride a horse and feel altogether worthless, or be altogether convinced that society's little world is the last word." (36)

Ross's male characters (allowing for the exception of Philip Bentley, who shall be discussed in a later chapter) discover "a sense of place again in life" (LN 41) and a self-importance in the company of their horses within the vastness of the prairie space which is impossible under the critical glare of the eyes in a Main Street environment.

The realm of the cowboy is a world far beyond the reach of Ross's women. This fact suggests, perhaps, one reason why Ross's male characters turn to it for escape from the belittling and sterile environment they associate with the house. Harry's remarks in Sawbones Memorial make it quite clear that Doc Hunter prefers the stable environment and the horses to the company of his wife:

"Away back, Dan, not just once but plenty of times, he's brought the team around to the stable after a call,...And we'd drink, maybe play poker a while. Didn't want to go home, hated it, and no place else to go. He'd let her think he was still away on call." (97)

Ross provides an excellent contrast to the doctor's wife in the character of Big Anna, who, curiously enough, is described as possessing the attributes of a horse: "Like a horse, a Doukhobar, you could have hitched her up and plowed. Even through her skirt the pump--pump power. Head up and striding..." (139). Doc Hunter's preference for the world of the stable makes it seem only natural that he should feel more sexually inclined towards Big Anna rather than towards his own sexually frigid wife. This is not to imply, however, that Ross's female figures are solely responsible for the sterility of their lives. They simply are not offered the option and alternative to change their lives that the men in Ross's work are given. "Just as [Philip Bentley] can find no terms under which he may act as

self" (Tallman 15), neither can these women. They are forced to continue with their dismal lots in life because for them there is "No Other Way".

CHAPTER TWO

FALSE FRONTS AND THE UNFULFILLED.

To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allocated and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under tutelage within such a limited space.

-John Berger, Ways of Seeing

In her introduction to The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories, Margaret Laurence notes: "Ross never takes sides, and this is one admirable quality of his writing. Blame is not assigned. Men and women suffer equally. The tragedy is not that they suffer, but that they suffer alone" (11). Laurence's statement follows her brief account of the outcome of Ann's infidelity in the short story "The Painted Door". Ann's one act of "rebellion" against "the increment of codes and loyalties" (LN 114) which structure her life results in her husband's death--his deliberate and "appallingly unanswerable reproach to her" (Laurence 11). Whatever sense of freedom and completion Ann discovers with the achievement of "her real, unfettered self" (114) is forever destroyed by the "sense of guilt" and "mental suffering" that her husband's suicide leaves for her.

Certainly, Laurence is correct; the men and women in Ross's stories suffer equally. Ross does not take sides when the issue of assigning the blame arises. For who is really at fault for the deterioration of human relationships that comes as a result of years of unrewarded struggle and of bitterly disillusioned dreams? Yet somehow, perhaps somewhere in the back of the reader's mind, Ann is held responsible for her husband's death. Ann's realization of her husband's honesty and goodness during the night creates a sympathy for the man, who in his greatest anguish, walks out into the night with the knowledge that it will certainly mean his death. And ultimately for Ann, the guilt she suffers as a result of her actions is enough to ensure that she pays with a lifetime sentence for her act of "rebellion".

If Ross does not take sides or assign blame to either gender, then why have so many of his critics chosen to take sides against Mrs. Bentley in As For Me and My House? Professor Daniell's initial evaluation of Mrs. Bentley as being "pure gold and wholly credible" (vii) began a barrage of criticism against Mrs. Bentley and in the support of her husband, Philip. Wilfred Cude's condemnation of Mrs. Bentley is perhaps the harshest. In the article "'Turn It Upside Down': The Right Perspective on As For Me and My House", Cude offers an analysis of the "House of Bentley" as seen from Philip's point of view. He brings to

the fore all of Mrs. Bentley's hypocrisies, misconceptions and manipulations. Cude's argument is a denunciation of Mrs. Bentley and her every action:

To put the matter in colloquial terms, Mrs. Bentley has the Sadim (or reverse Midas) touch: everything she touches turns to garbage. This point is established through the fate of her garden, a project which she begins as an assertion of her own individuality.... When she creates, she inadvertently destroys her creation. The same suggestion is made at the beginning of the work, with the brief reference to the stillborn Bentley baby: and the same suggestion is articulated by Mrs. Bentley at the end of the work, with her comments on the meaning of El Greco's death. ("Beyond Mrs. Bentley" 11)

In "No Other Way", Sandra Djwa assesses Mrs. Bentley and her "self-interested" motives in the same manner:

There are also suggestions throughout the text that Mrs. Bentley has been raising up her own images, in particular that of Philip, the sensitive and impressionable artist who must be mothered along in the direction which she best sees fit. She does not come to see how wrong she has been in her wilful attempt to structure her husband's life until after her encounter with the prairie wilderness and Philip's raging attempts to catch the strength of the land on canvas. (59)

John Dooley is one of the only critics of As For Me and My House to respond sympathetically, and in a manner that tends to move the efforts at criticism in the direction of one of Paul Denham's suggested approaches to the novel: "...as a proto-feminist study of what happens to a woman who surrenders her identity to a man's creativity..." (117).

Dooley analyzes Mrs. Bentley's situation as a problem of moral failure that stems from one person's decision to sacrifice her individuality to that of another person. In Dooley's view, Mrs. Bentley's is a "nobler kind of error than her husband's":

He went wrong by compromising his integrity to enter the church, and thus entering on a career of hypocrisy. She went wrong, not by marrying, but by surrendering her own independence and putting all her faith in husband and marriage. (41)

The following discussion of the women in Ross's works, specifically Mrs. Bentley in As For Me and My House, follows closely along the lines of Dooley's analysis of the Bentleys' marriage (but avoids, I hope, Dooley's overly sympathetic view of Mrs. Bentley). Whether her error is noble or not, Mrs. Bentley has no choice but to make it. She does not assert her individuality, but instead yields her identity to her husband. As she explains: "Submitting to him that way, yielding my identity--*it seemed what life was intended for*" (16 emphasis added). If Mrs. Bentley tries both wilfully and wrongfully to structure her husband's life, it is because she has lost all control over her own. Mrs. Bentley's need to organize and structure her husband's existence must be viewed as her attempt to come to terms with the annihilating space that surrounds her. Perhaps Ross's critics should find less fault with Mrs. Bentley for

"inadvertently destroy[ing] her creation" and place more emphasis on the fact that the garden is probably the only creative step she is able to make toward asserting her own individuality.

The women who populate the diminished worlds of Ross's Main Street towns and the dried-up farmsteads lived at one time more satisfying and contented lives. Having experienced "the little vanities of life" (LN 15) in youth, these women envision for themselves equally fruitful futures. Clearly, Mrs. Bentley's observation about Mr. Finley's once expansive past applies to the women in Ross's stories as well. Ellen in "The Lamp at Noon" had been a teacher before her marriage to Paul. Eleanor in the short story "Not By Rain Alone" came from a "family of well-off farmers", who expected for Eleanor "a man able to assure her comfort and security " (LN 55). Once married, however, these women wither like the crops they hopelessly tend, growing mean-spirited and bitter. They watch their dreams die as easily and as senselessly as the moth that flutters too closely to the lamp's flame. Fingers turn to wood, existence becomes moldy and parasitic, and "all the instincts and resources of...femininity" (LN 110) fall into dormancy.

For the women in Ross's work, the mental anguish and the emotional sterility go unrelieved. The only option open to them is the continued struggle with their present

situations. As Paul reminds Ellen in "The Lamp at Noon": "You're a farmer's wife now. It doesn't matter what you used to be, or how you were brought up." (LN 18). To comply with Ellen's plea that they return to town and accept the help of her parents would be, for Paul, the admission of his failure and a blow to his sense of manhood. As a result, Ellen and all of the other "caged" women in Ross's stories fall victims to the choices they once made: "[They] looked forward to no future...had no faith or dream with which to make the dust and poverty less real" ("The Lamp at Noon", LN 20).

The men have their "instincts and loyalty to the land" to provide them with hope and the promise of "release from a harsh familiar world" (LN 22,19) once in the "comforting and assuring" presence of their horses. For the women, however, no escape is offered. For them, it is a "useless, wearying struggle, making [them] harsh and sour and old, and always ending just where it had begun" (TR 24). The house and the small Main Street towns become the limits of their worlds. The natural desolation of the physical space outside their houses and the social sterility of the Main Street atmosphere become extensions of these women's lives and characters. They waste away in the dust and drought, creating, as a result of their own emptiness and sterility, the cages in which they find themselves trapped:

But again the reality sneered. She had fought and nagged too much ever to hope for that. It was not her fault--[he] had made her what she was--but that was neither here nor there. No matter who was to blame, her bed was made now, and she would have to get used to it. ("No Other Way", TR 33)

II

The marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Bentley is an emotional tug-of-war and struggle for dominance. Both characters have been assessed by Ross's critics as individual failures.

* Both Philip and Mrs. Bentley sublimate their natural artistic talents and live lives which cripple and distort their characters. In order to survive from day to day, the Bentleys must maintain the false fronts they have created for themselves. But, as Mrs. Bentley signals quite early in the course of the novel: "We're getting on--thirty-six and thirty-four. Getting to the place, I'm afraid, where it's not enough to put a false front up and live our lives behind it" (16). Some of Ross's critics see the ending of the novel (the promise of a new life in the child and of success with the secondhand bookstore in the city) as a positive and progressive movement for the Bentleys' marriage. Throughout

the novel, Mrs. Bentley works to create a new space for herself and Philip outside the boundaries of the confining house. Yet if this is true, why has there been so much uncertainty expressed about Mrs. Bentley's closing line: "That's right, Philip. I want it so" (165)?

The very nature of the Bentleys' struggle, both against each other and with the society in which they live, leaves no room for the destruction of the false fronts or for the acceptance of their individual selves. Mrs. Bentley's diary offers a vision of her life with Philip which (as numerous critical interpretations will attest) is as "distorted" as the pictures Philip paints. Critics have pegged Mrs. Bentley as an unreliable narrator, whose misinterpretations of other characters and events stem from her own misguided intentions. She twists and distorts the truth as artfully as she manipulates her husband.

Mrs. Bentley is a hypocrite and a manipulator. But I prefer to regard her as a consciously ironic narrator rather than an unreliable one. If she is lying to anyone, it is to herself. She is writing the diary for herself. However, I think that Mrs. Bentley is very much aware of her words and actions. If she is a bitter and manipulative housewife, it is because she realizes at what cost to herself her marriage to Philip has been. Mrs. Bentley's lies and manipulations are necessary to her own survival. They give her the assurance her marriage to Philip fails to

provide. If Mrs. Bentley has, as Sandra Djwa asserts, "been raising up her own images", "trying to possess [Philip], to absorb his life into [her own]" (AMMH 64), it is because "her whole life is posited on her husband" (Djwa 59). And if Philip refuses to be a success then Mrs. Bentley is a failure along with him:

I told him about my old clothes, our ugly furniture, these dark, dingy-smelling little rooms. My voice was nearly a shout; the sound of it goaded me on. [I said that when I married him I didn't know it was going to mean Horizons all my life. [I had ambitions once too--and it was to be something more than the wife of a half-starved country preacher. (26-27)]

When Philip's adultery with Judith offers Mrs. Bentley a chance at escape, "a right to be free" (123) from the stultifying horizons of their marriage, she realizes that she "can't be free". Without Philip, Mrs. Bentley would "dry and wither" like a "fungus or parasite" (151). She has yielded her identity to Philip. She is trapped like a fly in a block of ice, caught like a drip in a pail of water. These images of contained water serve to remind the reader of Mrs. Bentley's state of imprisonment and sterility: "My fingers are wooden. Something's gone dead. That's what he's done to me, and there are times I can nearly hate him for it" (151).

Mrs. Bentley's attitude towards and treatment of her husband suggest that she does, indeed, hate Philip. In her role as the preacher's wife, Mrs. Bentley comes across as a

strong-willed and independent woman. Like the other small town wives in Ross's stories, she dominates and overrides her husband. With every possible chance, she denies Philip his independence, authority and self-sufficiency. Hence, the irony in Mrs. Bentley's question: "What woman doesn't like being exasperated with a man and finding that he pays no heed, pitting herself against him, finding him too strong for her" (20)?

The problem is that Ross's men are not strong enough. They bend too easily as the surname Bentley suggests. Mrs. Bentley makes Philip very aware of his failure as a male. In some way, it seems to point out to Mrs. Bentley her failure as a woman. Whenever Philip is unable to take care of the typically male jobs of the household, Mrs. Bentley's "Why can't you take hold and do things like other men?" reminds Philip of his inadequacies. She also lets Philip know of the way in which his failure has affected her life: "I threw it all at him. I told him that when I married him I didn't know it was to be a four-roomed shack in Horizon. I called him a hypocrite again, and a poor contemptible coward" (86). Mrs. Bentley plays the role she has assumed with marriage to the best of her ability.

What, however, is the person like beneath the facade of the preacher's wife? Mrs. Bentley's need to maintain the false front signals to Ross's readers an underlying vulnerability and uncertainty which she cannot

allow herself to expose to the cutting jibes of Horizon's small town propriety and pettiness or to Philip's insulting and careless slamming of the study door. As a member of the town's "Good Women" and as the preacher's wife, Mrs. Bentley is expected to think and behave in a certain manner. With marriage, Mrs. Bentley's social identity is "conferred" upon her by the social norms of the small Main Street town (Laing, Self and Others 78). According to her diary, Mrs. Bentley is not comfortable with this role, although she plays it to the best of her ability. In fact, she loses her self-sufficiency altogether and becomes dependent on the role. As a result, she objectifies her "self" and lives behind the false front. Her subjective self, the one she needs to divine if she is ever to be a self-acting individual, comes through in her writing--the diary. (Mrs. Bentley's failure to develop herself through her writing shall be discussed later in the chapter.)

Mrs. Bentley recognizes how important it is for her to hold her marriage together: "If I lost Philip what would there be ahead of me" (162)? She knows all too well what awaits her. This awareness explains her fear of the empty landscape that lurks outside the confines of the house and the town. The prairie's voided emptiness evinces for Mrs. Bentley what she is outside of her marriage. The emptiness which surrounds her is a reminder of her own inner condition:

I must still keep on reaching out, trying to possess him, to make myself matter. I must, for I've left myself nothing else. I haven't been like him. I've reserved no retreat, no world of my own. I've whittled myself hollow that I might enclose and hold him, and when he shakes me off I'm just a shell. Ever since the day he let me see I was less to him than Steve I've been trying to find and live my own life again, but it's empty, unreal. (75)

This knowledge leaves Mrs. Bentley insecure and isolated. She becomes weak and contemptible because with a man like Philip she realizes that a woman cannot afford any "rights or pride" and must take him "anyway".

For all of the control Mrs. Bentley seems to exert within the marriage, she certainly goes to great lengths to demean herself to Philip. She carries around an image of herself as the "frumpy plain one", who is unable to compete against the other women of the town, "who rouge a little, have their hair marcelled, wear smart, mail-order catalogue clothes" (7). Or perhaps, it is Philip who makes her feel this way: "'It's nobody's fault but your own that you aren't more presentable in the morning'" (26).

Mrs. Bentley remains set apart from the women of Horizon, yet she cannot seem to rid herself of their influence: "For I've never gotten along with women very well. Till I met Philip I was always impatient of what seemed their little rivalries and infatuations, and ever since I've been afraid" (77). She is afraid not only of the

threat they hold to her marriage, but of the effect these "small-town Philistines" have had on her own life:

I find myself a little the same way too at times. I speak or laugh, and suddenly in my voice catch a hint of the benediction.. It just means, I suppose, that all these years the Horizons have been working their will on me. My heresy, perhaps, is less than I sometimes think. (93)

They are as sterile and repressed as the atmosphere they inhabit. She knows how well they have gone to work on her. Hence, Mrs. Bentley's hatred for the house: "I can't make it respond to me, or bring it to life" (25). What little artistic/creative ability she has left, for even the piano seems repressed and chilled in the atmosphere of the house, she uses as a defense against these imposing influences: "Tomorrow I must play the piano again, play it and hammer it and charge it to the town's annihilation" (13).

Mrs. Bentley's "instinct for expansive living" (108) probably stems from the life she led and the success she might have had prior to her marriage to Philip: "I'm a failure too, a smalltown preacher's wife instead of what I so faithfully set out to be" (16). What little of her past Mrs. Bentley reveals to the reader intimates that she feels she could have been a successful artist, "but he came and the piano took second place" (16).

Before she made Philip Bentley the centre of her world, the very meaning for her existence, Mrs. Bentley's ambitions for herself had made her "self-sufficient". Even the possible success of reaching Europe awaited her if she had only taken the "opportunity to work and develop [herself]" (16). Instead, she subsumes her identity to that of her husband and her marriage. She gives up her identity as a self-sufficient individual. About Philip's failure, Mrs. Bentley explains: "He lost the career he wanted, but he retained himself" (160). Mrs. Bentley also lost the career she wanted. She "made a compromise once" (180), but failed to retain herself in the bargain. The choice having been made, Mrs. Bentley needs to make her life with Philip a success in order to fill the gap left by the emptiness caused by the loss of her artistic goals. If Mrs. Bentley cannot make her garden grow, it is because she has lost all of her creative energy. If she seems spiteful and vindictive in her treatment of Philip she has just cause. As Warren Tallman explains in the article "Wolf in the Snow"(Part One): "When creative power is thwarted, destructive power emerges" (16). Mrs. Bentley's statement about her place and significance in Philip's life and career applies equally well to herself: "It's hard to feel yourself a hindrance, to stand back watching a whole life go to waste" (33).

Mrs. Bentley's reference to her childhood friendship with Percy Glenn, the artist who managed to live out Mrs. Bentley's dreams of making it abroad, suggests the type of relationship Mrs. Bentley had expected to achieve through marriage to Philip:

...we managed to become fairly good friends. Later we played duets together, and helped each other studying harmony and counterpoint. Once when he gave a recital I accompanied him, and for my part of the program played Debussy's Gardens in the Rain. (77)

Take careful notice in this statement of the words "harmony and counterpoint". The two childhood friends worked together in a manner that suggests, if not equality, then unity--as complementary sides of a unified partnership. The Bentleys' relationship is rather a tug-of-war, the clash of dissonance and discord. Even when they team up together in an alliance against the town over the matter of Steve's adoption, one side works against the other and neither side gains the advantage.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Bentley's "masculine attitude to music" (150) was not encouraged or taken as anything more than an entertaining way to pass an afternoon "over tea and sponge cake" with the Ladies' Aid. In the course of time, only Percy Glenn became the successful musician. Mrs. Bentley was left behind to play for "the world of matrons and respectability" (48). Is it any wonder Philip winces and sets about pacing over Mrs. Bentley's choice of musical

repertoire: "Handel's Largo....because it was good for a man" (8), "something in the style of very bad Liszt" and "brisk, lifey marching pieces to suit a boy, Chopin waltzes and mazurkas" (69)? Naomi Schor points out in Reading in Detail that "the woman artist is doubly condemned to produce inferior works of art...The law of the genre is that women are by nature mimetic, incapable of creating significant works of art in nonrepresentational art forms--notably music" (17). Mrs. Bentley can imitate the sounds of bells (34). However, her music lacks a creative energy of its own, which foredooms her to an "artistic life" that is "genteel and amateurish" (32-33).

Marriage for Mrs. Bentley has been a less than equal opportunity:

Philip married me because I made myself important to him, consoled him when he was despondent, stroked his vanity. I meant well. You do mean well when you keep on like that three years, slighted and repulsed. (64)

It is only with Steve's arrival that Mrs. Bentley feels her place in Philip's life to have diminished. But Philip's treatment of Mrs. Bentley makes it all too clear to the reader where she has always stood in his life:

For right from the beginning I knew that with Philip it was the only way. Women weren't necessary or important to him as to most men....To have him notice me, speak to me as if I really mattered in his life, after twelve years with him

that's all I want or need. It arranges
my world for me, strengthens and quickens
it, makes it immune to all other worlds.
(64)

She readily admits her assumed role in their relationship as a pseudo-mother to Philip: "broodless old woman that I am, I get impatient being just his wife and start in trying to mother him too" (4). As mother and wife, she is relegated to the role of waitress (like Philip's mother before her and the majority of the other women in Ross's works) as the many descriptions of their meal-time habits point out. She remains an "outsider", finally aware of "how little it can amount to wanting a woman at night, putting up with her in the daytime" (10). Yet, she carries on "self-effacing and restrained" with the hope that if "she loves [Philip] patiently and devotedly enough she can eventually make him love her too" (64).

So successful has Mrs. Bentley been at being "self-effacing and restrained", she has managed to erase her own identity completely. As a result, Mrs. Bentley must now live her life through Philip's life. Once she loses her role as the preacher's wife, her existence is over because she no longer has an identity of her own. Perhaps, this is why Ross never deems it important to tell the reader Mrs. Bentley's first name. She is like the landscape

outside her house--empty and indistinct. She has lost all concept of who she was before her marriage to Philip. Even in her diary, Mrs. Bentley offers Ross's readers little information about her past life and identity.

III

In Chapter One, I described Mrs. Bentley as being "contained"--by her marriage, within the house, and on a larger scale, by the strictures of the small Main Street town. Philip Bentley's choice of first sermon seems appropriate in this context. As the title, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" indicates, the house is Philip's and the Lord they all serve is Philip Bentley. In this respect, the house becomes a prison for Mrs. Bentley. As the symbol of her entrapment in the marriage, Mrs. Bentley's response to the house seems justified:

I hate it all, every room. Some part of me is in protest. I can't relax, can't accept it as home. There's something lurking in the shadows, something that doesn't approve of me, that won't let me straighten my shoulders. Even the familiar old furniture...has taken sides against me with the house. I hate it too. (25)

And we well know what that something is lurking in the shadows--Philip, himself.

This concept of containment in As For Me and My House is comparable to that discussed by Carl Jung in "Marriage as a Psychological Relationship":

The one who is contained feels [him/her] self to be living entirely within the confines of [his/her] marriage; [his/her] attitude to the marriage partner is undivided; outside the marriage there exist no essential obligations and no binding interests. (Campbell 170)

I refer here to Jung's theories because they establish the basis of the marriage relationship as a spatial one. Jung explains marriage as a psychological relationship based on each partner's own concept of [his/her] self. The more complex personality in the marriage is thereby the house of many rooms--the container in which the more simpler personality becomes housed (170-171). The above definition of the "contained" partner supplied by Jung is quite applicable to Mrs. Bentley's position in her own marriage. Jung goes on to explain how "the more the contained clings, the more the container feels shut out of the relationship" (191). The container "tends to spy out windows" (171) or, in Philip Bentley's case, to shut himself away within a space created for himself in the house as he feels himself becoming less able to respond to the needs of the contained partner. This statement would explain, perhaps, Philip's desperate need to shut himself safely within the house, yet maintain, at the same time, his own separate space from that of Mrs.

Bentley. Likewise, Mrs. Bentley feels an urgency to escape the confines of the house, but once out on the prairie, quickly returns to the security which the house offers to her.

Philip Bentley exhibits all of the classic symptoms credited to "the container", according to Jung's definition. He is a complex personality, psychologically and emotionally fragmented and disoriented by his desire to be an artist (so emulating his own idealized version of his father) and by his duty to the church. Philip seeks, as Mrs. Bentley's constant concern about her own intellectual and spiritual capacity confirms, someone in whom he would find "all the subtleties and complexities that would complement and correspond to his own facets" (Campbell 170). Frustrated by Mrs. Bentley's simpler nature and desires--her "little way of sympathy and devotion" (AMMH 150)--Philip longs for "the unity and undividedness" (Campbell 170) he lacks both in himself and within the limits of the marriage relationship. And here I direct you to Mrs. Bentley's comments on Philip's attempt to "pierce this workaday reality of ours" (101) and discover an alternative world for himself. Such transcendental aspirations would explain Philip's obsession with form and design in his artwork over the "detailism" (Schor 11) and emotion aligned with Mrs. Bentley. (This area of study in Philip's character will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three).

Philip's search for inner unity also explains, perhaps, his extra-marital relationship with Judith West. Judith's ability to become "unaware of herself" (38) allows her to penetrate the barrier of this workaday reality and scale the wind with her song. Philip senses in her that spirit and vitality he needs to achieve self-integration. Moreover, Judith is a farmgirl, a status which automatically sets her apart from the townspeople. She is frowned upon by the "Good Women" of Horizon. The position these women take against Judith disassociates her from the house and links her with the external space of the prairie. Mrs. Bentley's description of Judith as meek and mild also sets up an appropriate contrast between Judith and the aggressive and emasculating preacher's wife. Judith is less of a threat to Philip's manhood and creativity. Possibly Philip sees Judith as less of a threat to his personal space. Philip's experience with Mrs. Bentley and Judith is similar to that of Chris Rowe in The Well. Chris recognizes that Sylvia's need to possess him weakens his own chances at self-possession. In response, Chris turns to Elsie Grover seeking in her "someone with whom he could play the role of the aggressive male again, who would restore his threatened equilibrium" (144).

However, Philip's relations with Judith only aggravate the sense of insecurity Mrs. Bentley has come to feel as a result of Philip's ever-increasing insistence on

shutting her out of his study and his life. Mrs. Bentley's problem is, to apply Jung's theory, that her disappointment with the marriage, neither "drives her in on herself" (Campbell 170), nor forces her to confront Philip with his indiscretion (that is until it is too late). [In the end, she does not accept her failure, although she may recognize it. But rather she makes every effort to ensure that her relationship remains exactly the same as before the confrontation. Mrs. Bentley misses the chance to discover that, to use Jung's phraseology, "the security [she] was so desperately seeking in [Philip] is to be found in herself" (172).

Philip also misses the chance to achieve a sense of self-integration by seeking it outside of his own self and in his relations with another individual. If he had allowed "the powers that strive for unity, all healthy desire for selfhood" (Campbell 172) to come together within himself and resist the disintegration he was experiencing as a result of his hypocrisy, Philip may have come to terms with his identity. And perhaps, Mrs. Bentley is more intelligent than she gives herself credit for. Despite the threat that she perceives other women to hold to her marriage, she befriends Judith West. Conceivably, Mrs. Bentley's actions here are made with self-preservation in mind and are, thus, less self-destructive to her position in the marriage than they seem to be. Like Philip, Mrs.

Bentley recognizes the spirit and vitality in Judith and Philip's attraction to her, causing the reader to view Mrs. Bentley's persistence in inviting Judith back to the house to spend time with her and Philip as rather suspicious. Thus, under the guise of friendship, Mrs. Bentley is apparently only manipulating Judith for her own purposes. Sensing as she does the steps Philip has made thus far towards self-integration through his painting--"Philip's been changing of late, growing harder, more self-assertive" (113)--Mrs. Bentley uses Judith as the appropriate block to his growing self-awareness. Within this context, Judith becomes merely a means to an end for Mrs. Bentley, just as Philip's vocation in the church was for him. This would explain Mrs. Bentley's insensitive remarks towards Judith's death: "For me it's easier this way. It's what I've been hoping for all along. I'm glad she's gone--glad for her sake as much as ours" (162). Obviously, Mrs. Bentley's insecurities have made her a tad more Machiavellian than Philip could ever be. The above analysis of the Bentley's marriage in terms of Jung's theory of the psychology of marriage offers one explanation for the Bentleys' failure at self-knowledge and identity. Moreover, it establishes a stronger foundation on which to base my analysis of Mrs. Bentley's failure at self-knowledge.

As For Me and My House takes the form of Mrs. Bentley's diary. From beginning to end, the events of the novels are filtered through Mrs. Bentley's thoughts and perceptions. As stated earlier, the end of Ross's novel has raised many points of contention for Ross's critics. Some critics interpret the novel and its form--the diary--as an account of Mrs. Bentley's growth and development as a person. Thus, they see the ending as a positive step into the future. Others (myself included) interpret Mrs. Bentley's final statement as a reassertion of the same futile cycle. Both Philip and his wife are thereby static characters, who neither grow nor change. The process of coming to terms with one's identity is not evident in Mrs. Bentley's writing. The act of writing, for Mrs. Bentley, is not a self-validating or self-fulfilling process in which she works at divining her own personal truths. R.D. Laing states that "...there is a sense in which a person 'keeps himself alive' by his acts; each act can be a new beginning, a new birth, a re-creating of oneself, a self-fulfilling" (Self and Others 108). An example of this re-creating of the self is evident in Margaret Laurence's The Diviners. Writing is the technique by which Morag Gunn defines herself and comes to terms with her place in life. Writing is the means used by Morag to build a space for herself. Laurence's novel becomes, in this sense, Morag's account of her own past experiences. From deep within the "submerged

caves" (23) of her memory, Morag dredges up the past, shaping and inventing various interpretations of her life, in her quest for self-integration. Morag's need to recreate and re-examine the past is her way of dealing with life in the present and a means of preparing herself to meet the future. The sections marked "Memory Bank Movie" are interspersed throughout the text and offer to Morag's reader (since she is doing the writing) an account of her past as she interprets it from her present-day adult perspective. Such a technique allows the reader to see the unfolding of Morag's life and follow the course of growth and change that Morag has pursued up to the point of her writing. More importantly, it is an on-going process that does not end with the completion of Morag's novel. Morag is a writer and as long as she continues to create she will continue to work at divining her identity.

In As For Me and My House, Mrs. Bentley is not able to define herself by either a sense of place or by her past. She defines her life by the present or rather by her life with her husband. Mrs. Bentley's memories of herself extend back only as far as the twelve years of her life with Philip. Beyond this point, she offers Ross's readers virtually nothing about her life before Philip, except that she once had ambitions to be a pianist. The readers of Mrs. Bentley's diary do not receive any sense of her having either an emotional or psychological connection or

identification with a community or place in her past. And, as the pages of the diary reveal, she does not achieve a sense of belonging or of place as a result of her marriage to Philip Bentley.

Although, Mrs. Bentley's diary can be seen as her attempt to create an alternative space (other than that of the house) for herself, the focus of her writing is not on herself or her past. This is understandable since she is writing about Philip and her relationship with him within the context of the marriage. She recreates a version of Philip's past to try to account for his actions in the present. As I have already established, inside the boundaries of the marriage relationship, Mrs. Bentley is a parasite without a life or identity of her own. The diary is Mrs. Bentley's ultimate expression of her isolation and alienation. Written for herself alone, Mrs. Bentley's diary cannot be viewed as her attempt to communicate or share her feelings. Thus, the question about Mrs. Bentley's reliability as a narrator becomes irrelevant. Ross's choice of the form of his novel undercuts this criticism. Mrs. Bentley is not narrating a story with the purpose of communicating ideas to Ross's readers. Mrs. Bentley's diary is just that--her record of her personal experiences and observations about the events in her life.

The diary is not Mrs. Bentley's attempt to communicate to anyone beyond herself. For this reason, it becomes the ultimate form of what Joseph Kestner terms "epistolary isolation" (35). As an expression of this type of isolation, Mrs. Bentley's diary is an appropriate symbol for her containment and alienation. Kestner explains in The Spatiality of The Novel that "the epistolary novel in particular exploits the concept of one isolated individual at a certain location reacting to another individual" (33). The epistolary form—"the novel of point" emphasizes and exacerbates the isolation of the individual (34). If we view the diary as Mrs. Bentley's attempt to set up an alternative space for herself beyond the confines of the house, we must consider her efforts a failure. Her writing cannot be viewed as is Morag Gunn's as a form of psychological and emotional catharsis, necessary to both self-knowledge and self-preservation. Ross's readers never receive a composite picture of Mrs. Bentley's life from her writing. We see it as it appears in the present. Although she includes in her diary bits and pieces about Philip's past, she carefully avoids writing about her own. She seems more concerned as always with Philip's search for identity. She builds a box around herself rather than using her writing as a means of expanding her concept of her self.

The epistolary form of the novel is equivalent, according to Kestner, to the point in Euclidean geometry. Kestner's statement that "the 'plane' of society is the field on which such a 'point' is isolated" (33) recalls for me Ricou's geometric equation of spatial relations in Vertical Man/Horizontal World. The importance of Kestner's point equation is that it emphasizes not only Mrs. Bentley's isolation but her fixed version of herself. The thoughts and events written by Mrs. Bentley do not radiate out from the point in a manner that would suggest growth or change. Instead, they seem to revolve around the point. Within the context of the diary, Mrs. Bentley's life does not extend beyond the point of her marriage. She is trapped just as much by time (as her fear of the future and avoidance of the past suggest) as she is by space. Mrs. Bentley cuts herself off from her past, thereby severing any links between her present-day self and the self-sufficient young woman of her past. What little she does mention about herself prior to her marriage remains "in fragments, pieced together" (29) by the reader. Mrs. Bentley's actions in the present (the sublimation of her own identity to Philip's) make it only too clear what the future will be like for her. The missing parts of Mrs. Bentley's life will probably remain as indistinct and fragmentary as in the present. Unable to

come to terms with her own identity, Mrs. Bentley certainly cannot hope to solve the problems of the future by rationalizing away her position in the marriage and Philip's feelings and attitudes towards herself.

Mrs. Bentley's character does not grow or progress by the end of the novel. She is trapped in a way of life that will not allow her to change. She can only hope to change Philip's lifestyle (his character is static), and in doing so, alter her own status within the boundaries of the marriage. She exchanges one role for another. As the wife of a secondhand bookstore keeper, Mrs. Bentley realizes that she will "go on needing Philip just as much as ever" (157). But at least she has the prospect of teaching to look forward to, and perhaps even a recital--small recompense considering all she has lost as an individual through marriage. And of course, she will have Philip's illegitimate child to use against him should he realize that "[he] would be better without [his wife]" (160). Mrs. Bentley is correct about the outcome of their year in *Horizon*: "what a wide wheel it's run" (164). The false fronts were blown down but they were not destroyed. The cycle remains intact to revolve again. It is Mrs. Bentley who returns Philip's manhood to him when she offers him the pipe and gives him her permission to smoke in her house.

CHAPTER THREE

ACTUALIZING SPACE: CONQUERING THE VOID

'I was telling her about you and she says
she's never had a cowboy.'
-Charlie, Whir of Gold.

Male space in Ross's novels is a self-created domain. The men in Ross's work define and organize the space surrounding them much in the same way as the painter arranges and articulates space on the canvas. However, where the painter takes "actual spatial datum" and transforms it to create a "virtual" space on the canvas surface (Langer 80), Ross's men (with the exception of Philip Bentley) construct an actual space for themselves within the material world by incorporating the physical environment into their concept of self. They work at and create for themselves a sense of identity and place in life which provides them with a means of structuring and integrating with the space around them. Philip Bentley attempts through the medium of his artistic creation, to look into the void and structure and shape it so as to give it a "life and form" (AMMH 112) acceptable to his own

experience of reality. His failure at actualizing space, however, is linked to his artistic vocation and aesthetic position. To apply Langer's description of Cézanne to Philip Bentley: "Virtual space was his mind's habitat" (78).

Virtual space, in the context of the plastic arts in which Langer uses it, is not experiential space (which is a non-entity perceived by the human senses). As Langer explains, "the space in which we live and act is not what is treated in art at all" (72). Virtual space "has no continuity with the space in which we live" (72). It is a "perceptual" or purely visual space articulated in the plastic arts. It is a projected image, "entirely self-contained and independent" (72). Philip structures and shapes space in his paintings. But this virtual entity is a "self-contained, self-sufficient, perceptual space" (95) that the artist is unable to incorporate into his own concept of self. Philip fails in his struggle to come to terms with the physical space he inhabits by attempting to deal with the "common-sense world around him" (AMMH 112) through the medium of his artistic vocation. He seeks a solution to his problems of alienation (both from himself and the world around him) and inner emptiness through a type of escapism that provides him with a rationale for not facing the problems at hand directly, unlike the other male figures in Ross's works.

To further explicate this idea of actualizing space and to elaborate on my suggestion that the male figures in Ross's novels are able to come to terms with their environment by constructing new spatial relations for themselves, I refer here to Hemingway's short story "Big Two-Hearted River". (It only seems fair, since I made reference to the works of female writers in previous chapters, to turn now to the work of another male writer as a point of comparison for this chapter.) The concept of place plays an important role in all of Hemingway's works. Hemingway's characters experience a loss of community which results in their isolation from society. The inability of these characters to communicate and identify with the people and space around them leads to their marginalization in society. In "Big Two-Hearted River", which deals with the concept of place or setting as a means of self-preservation, the idea of shaping space and constructing a place for one's self is made explicit. A victim of the social disintegration and upheaval brought on by WWI, Nick Adams is unable to come to terms with life in post-war society. He is a lost and dislocated figure, seeking shelter from a world that has become "burned over" (211). Through his retreat into nature, Nick escapes the world to fish alone on the river. Until he can find a 'good' place to camp, Nick is unable to regain the security that will restore his sense of self. At just the right spot in the woods, Nick begins

to shape and incorporate the space around him into his safe place. The careful attention Nick gives to constructing his campsite in the woods--the concentrated effort he makes at selecting just the right place to make camp and the meticulous detail he ascribes to his creation--signifies his need to forge a safe place for himself within the alienating space of the external world. Within his campsite along the river, fishing in the hot sun, Nick becomes one with his environment. By finding a place "to be", Nick achieves completion.

The women in Ross's novels are not able to come to terms with space in this manner. They are unable to assimilate themselves into the space around them. They remain displaced figures set against an empty background. However, like Hemingway's character, the men in Ross's works are able to integrate with the landscape around them by creating new spatial relations for themselves. They attain "a sort of continuity with the emptiness around [them]" (Langer 88) similar to that of the sculpted figure discussed by Langer. The self-contained space they create for themselves becomes "a complement of the empty space that it absolutely commands" (Langer 88). As Langer states with regard to the sculpted figure: "The void enfolds it and the enfolding space has vital form as a continuation of the figure" (88). The realm of the cowboy is a world in which the men in Ross's stories are able to feel in control of both their surroundings and their destinies:

Alone with himself and his horse [the cowboy] cuts a fine figure. He is the measure of the universe. He foresees a great many encounters with life, and in them all acquits himself a little more than creditably. He is fearless, resourceful, a bit of a brag. His horse never contradicts ("Cornet at Night", Lamp at Noon 40).

In As For Me and My House, Philip Bentley is an artist whose many Main Street sketches and landscape paintings reveal his efforts to organize and shape the space he inhabits. Philip's attempt at self-examination comes not through his vocation as a minister of God, but rather through his artistic endeavours to reach that level of "aesthetic excitement" (80) that would ultimately bring him to self-knowledge. But as Mrs. Bentley explains with regard to Philip's attempts to look into the void: "he understands it only vaguely. He tries to solve it, give it expression, and doesn't quite succeed" (101). Philip's failure to create a place where he can be at peace with himself and the world around him comes as a result of his inability to know himself. The success of Philip's future as an artist under the guise of a used bookstore keeper is therefore dubious. Unlike Ross's other male figures, Philip Bentley cannot escape the stifling confines of the house. He resigns himself to his failure at selfhood and as a result "submits at last to the inevitable, to [the house]" (120).

As Gail Bowen asserts, "the life of one Ross character can often shed light on the life of another" (46). Various patterns occur throughout Ross's stories which reveal all his male characters to be products of the same mold. Ross's male protagonists, as one critic so aptly points out, even resemble one another in stature and character. Many of them are all terribly unmanned by their relationships with their women folk. A brief comparison between Philip Bentley and the later male protagonists in Ross's work will uncover the reasons for Philip's failure to become a cowboy and free himself from the emasculating space of the female. Philip Bentley "is distrustful not only of [Mrs. Bentley] but of all [her] kind" (33). To Sonny McAlpine, Mad becomes "an enemy who can destroy his dream of self" (Bowen, 41) with her desire to make him "a right one". Chris Rowe in The Well shrinks from Sylvia's "big and domineering" presence and resents her efforts "to draw [him] in and possess [him] as well" (225). Doc Hunter avoids his wife at all costs. Yet curiously enough, they each feel a strange sort of filial obligation to mothers whom they dislike, as the image "a fly in the ear, too deep for match or pin" (Whir, 3) implies. The mixed emotions that these men have for their mothers may stem, however, from the lack of a strong male presence in their lives. Myrna Kotash points out that Ross's male figures are looking for a place where "[they] can retreat to vent [their] rage and disillusionment without the fear of emasculation" (36) that

the world of the female holds for them. As a result, each one of these characters is searching for a place in life where he can come to terms with his identity. Like Nick Adams, the men in Ross's stories must create a "safe" place for themselves by learning to structure and shape the space surrounding them.

Such is the place which Chris Rowe discovers for himself on Larson's farm in The Well. Initially, Ross's reader is confronted with a frightened and insecure young man, living off "his illusions of strength and importance" (2) and hiding behind his tough, self-sufficient gangster image. In order to survive in the rough-and-tumble Boyle Street environment, Chris constructs and lives according to an image of himself that protects him from the Darwinian ("survival of the fittest") attitude that prevails on Boyle Street. He learns to "outwit, score, defeat, survive" (53) on the streets of Montreal by never allowing himself either to trust anyone or drop his guard and reveal his hand as empty for a single moment. Chris's foolhardy actions, by which he attempts to impress Rickie with a show of his manhood and bravery, force him to flee Boyle Street. His decision to consider only the possibility of "the escape side of his future" (253) unknowingly commits him to a cross-country journey to "the other side" and the impending terrors of "the unthinkable and unknown" (253).

If we consider The Well a novel about Chris Rowe's quest for identity, we must then describe Whir of Gold as a novel about Sonny McAlpine's attempt to maintain his sense of self. As stated earlier, Sonny McAlpine initially has a consummate understanding of his place in life that provides him with the concept of self he needs to survive in the unfamiliar and alienating environment of Montreal. Sonny responds to the world of his childhood in a manner similar to that of Frankie Burnaby and Morag Gunn. He is very much aware of the strictures that the small town environment places on the individual, especially the artist. In order to expand his musical horizons and pursue his dream of becoming a successful musician, Sonny knows that he must escape from the confining atmosphere of the farm and the small Main Street town. Yet, he realizes that he "could do worse than go back to it" (6). Furthermore, he is very conscious of how much of that world he carries with him to the city. When the "crowds and anonymity" (11) of Montreal threaten Sonny's hold on life, he too, like Morag Gunn, need only search "the submerged caves" (Laurence 23) of his memory to re-establish his inner balance: "I was still Sonny McAlpine. I still had purpose, identity....Within myself, though, I was still intact. Damage temporary" (53). Although Sonny travels a great distance from the farmstead of his youth, he cannot seem to rid himself of his mother's

presence. She becomes Sonny's alter ego, that "voice nattering about decency and self-respect, about amounting to something" (127).

Sonny's flashbacks to the past, especially to his adventures with his horse, reveal his strong sense of place. As in all of Ross's stories, the horse and the image of the cowboy play an essential part in Whir of Gold:

Back on the prairie, riding Isabel ... I had been so sure of where I was going, what I would find....And now a room on Ste. Famille Street. If you could only wipe the glass and see: blob- faced foetus of a dream run out before its time....
(26)

On the farm, "where people are exposed, comparatively simple" (120), Sonny had felt "known, needed, talked about" (79). He had felt in command of his environment. When the forces of dissolution become too strong for Sonny, he need only think back to the past to find for himself a shelter or safe place where he can take refuge from the unknown space of the "here-and-now". The implications of the word "exposed" in this quotation relate back to my explanation of the transparency of the goldfish bowl in Hetty Dorval. The word "exposed", in this context, connotes a sense of openness and familiarity. However, in the anonymity of the city, Sonny experiences a different type of exposure; he feels "exposed and furtive in the bright, whirling lights" (9). "Exposed" in this sense seems to suggest the feeling of being stripped bare, divested of all of one's defences.

Chris Rowe experiences the same type of feeling on the prairie. Having lived for so long behind his facade of tough self-sufficiency, he feels exposed by the vastness of the prairie landscape. The wide open space of the prairies, which for Chris becomes a nebulous void significant of the unknown future, renders the tough gangster image insufficient beyond the territorial limits of the Boyle Street ghetto. However, once he is able to drop his defences and trust people, Chris manages to become a part of the world around him. On Larson's farm, identity and self-worth take on a whole different meaning for him. He discovers that in order to fit in to the world of horses and farmhands, where "there [are] no required attitudes" (56), he must learn to trust others and work towards something other than his own advantage. On the farm, Chris discovers in Larson the father figure his life has always lacked. Larson becomes someone Chris can lean on and in whose presence he can "relax and trust". Life on the farm becomes "a kind of therapy" (53) which enables Chris to "drop his guard" and achieve "a feeling of place and acceptance" (47) in life without having to buy or fight for it. As Chris begins to "mentally settle in" to the space around him and "the farm itself [begins] to take shape in his mind" (56), he allows the person behind the facade to emerge with a "new kind of self-sufficiency" (57).

Sonny McAlpine's failure to make a success of himself in the city begins to wear down his defences. He begins to feel himself becoming a part of the world around him, blending into the "dissonance and drift" once alien to him. Sonny's "prairie common sense and caution" (126) have not prepared him to deal with the assault of these threatening forces. His openness and naiveté make him the perfect victim for an operator like Charlie. A cowboy from the country is no match for a gangster in the city. In The Well, Chris Rowe must learn to rid himself of his false front in order to discover his sense of place. Sonny begins to construct an image for himself with which to fend off the forces of dissolution and maintain his sense of self. Mad, who is originally attracted to Sonny's innocence, easily recognizes the changes occurring in him. She tries to protect Sonny from the negative influences of Charlie by reminding Sonny of who he really is: "'You don't mean it. You're not to pretend....Tough and hard like that...Like you didn't care. It's not you anymore'" (153). Sonny too realizes that he is only playing a part. As he explains:

I had come a long way and I was going a lot farther. You did what you could, put you feet where there was firm footing. The ground varied, smooth and rocky, bog and sand. The feet were always yours.
(127)

A part of Sonny's identity remains intact. His sense of self and place runs too deep to be dissolved that quickly. Charlie is correct when he explains why Sonny can never go

home: "...all of this time, whether you know it or not, you've been growing,...you're the growing kind" (106). Sonny may have had a momentary setback as a result of his experiences in the city. But as Mad explains in the end: "you can do low and terrible things sometimes and yet not be low and terrible yourself..." (194-195). Like Morag Gunn in The Diviners, Sonny learns from his mistakes and misadventures. He does not have to go home to maintain his identity. As long as Sonny has his clarinet and the desire to make music, he will continue to divine his sense of self and place in the world.

Chris's conversion to a new and fuller concept of being in the context of the cowboy is, perhaps, the most specific in Ross's works. The importance of a male's relationship to his horse is made quite explicit by Ross in this text:

The horses were part of it [Chris's growth and change]. They were responsive and affectionate. They looked to and sometimes needed him, imposed a sense of responsibility. In return he was safe with them, could trust them. (54)

Chris achieves a new-found sense of self-worth and pride through his relationship with the horses on Larson's farm. As he begins to feel at home on the farm, he comes to consider himself as a viable part of the landscape around him. Chris's success with the horses becomes the true test of his courage and manhood. Initially, he is unsure of his ability to work with and control the horses. Quite soon,

however, Chris is able to envision himself astride Minnie and this newly conceived picture pleases him. He displays the same sort of histrionic dash while on a horse that Paul acts out for Mrs. Bentley in As For Me and My House:

For himself, he chose silver-studded chaps, dark blue shirt and scarlet bandanna. Minnie served him briefly; then he rode a hot-eyed, jet black stallion that no one else had ever dared to ride. Fierce, untamed--to mount him was to provide a spectacle of outlaw fury and consummate horsemanship. Watching him, even Rickie sometimes blushed. (52)

He is drawn to the strength and virility of the stallion North and finds the horse a fitting challenge to his own mastery and skill. And where he at first is only able to conceive of Minnie as "a bloated belly that blocked his vision" (210), Chris soon comes to regard the mare as an integral "part of the farm community, the essence of its growth and strength" (210). After he assists in the birth of Minnie's foal, Chris comes to feel the same respect for her that he has had all along for North.

Unfortunately, the women in Chris's life are not afforded the same respect that the female horse receives from him. Chris's feelings for Elsie Grover and his revulsion towards Larson's wife, Sylvia, are better understood if placed within the context of the man/horse relationship. Although sexually desirable to Chris, Sylvia threatens his manhood and equilibrium. In comparison, Elsie is "someone with whom he could play the role of aggressive male again, who would restore his threatened

equilibrium" (144). Chris regards his relationship with Elsie in a manner similar to that of the studhorse North and the mares upon which North imposes himself:

The comparison amused and pleased him. It also touched a deeper level and gave him a sense of mastery, of right, such as he would not have derived from mere consent....It was just that the primitive simplicity of her submission impressed him as an acknowledgement, a recognition of his due. That was what he had come for, to be yielded to and restored. (148)

As Myrna Kotash explains: "the relationship of boy to female horse represent[s] an ideal balance of authority and submission, wilfulness and obedience, each to the other" (36).

Is it a wonder that Chris prefers the outdoors and the stable world to the house? The negative image of the house is carried over in this novel from As For Me and My House and increased. Female space becomes more than merely confining for Chris Rowe; it becomes a destructive force as well. Mrs. Bentley psychologically castrates her husband; Sylvia murders hers. The house is Sylvia's domain, the space she rules over in exchange for her physical submission to Larson. When Chris discovers Sylvia's intentions to murder Larson, and implicate himself in the whole ordeal by blackmailing him into helping her, his image of Sylvia as a domineering and threatening force increases. The well, which Sylvia plans to use as a place of disposal for Larson's body, also becomes an image of confinement for Chris. Like the false front, it symbolizes his imprisonment

in a way of life he realizes he must ultimately reject before he can achieve self-completion.

Chris is unable to sympathize with Sylvia or with her position in her marriage to Larson:

...unconsciously he was on Larson's side. He couldn't help feeling that if she meant only one thing to Larson it was because in everything else she had failed him. By instinct he was on the man's side anyway. (164)

Sylvia's demands on Chris place a pressure on him to revert to his old false image of self--"to start in again to play tough and hard" (225). Ironically, he is not able to understand the humiliations Sylvia has suffered at Larson's hand, even though he knows what it is like to be bought and used as a tool for someone else's advantage. Chris is given the opportunity on the farm to turn his life around and to work towards constructing an identity for himself that is acceptable to his concept of self-worth. Sylvia's marriage to Larson provides her with an escape from the small town restaurant where she worked as a waitress. It does not, however, provide her with the chance to come to terms with her own identity and allow her to achieve a sense of place in life. Her position is ostensibly as futile and humiliating as Mrs. Bentley's. She is confined to the house and to her role as Larson's wife. She remains a waitress, destined to live out her life according to the terms of her marriage to Larson. (Seen in this context then, Sylvia's plan to murder Larson, no matter how despicable, can only be

viewed as her one move towards self-assertion and independence. It becomes the only option available to her.)

Chris's efforts at subduing and finally conquering the will of the dominating female at the end of The Well only make his own growth towards selfhood more conceivable. As Mad does with Sonny in Whir of Gold, Sylvia threatens Chris's "dream of self". Bowen's comments about Sonny's rejection of Mad at the end of Whir of Gold apply just as well to Chris's rejection of Sylvia:

For the reader who comes to Whir of Gold with the memory of the Bentleys fresh, Sonny's refusal to crawl into Mad's safe and loving world is both clean and courageous. (46)

Mad attempts to create, through her efforts at domestic simplicity, the house which she requires for self-completion. She imposes herself on Sonny and invades his space (the apartment hideaway) with her own dreams and desires. Mad's intentions toward Sonny are, however, somewhat less aggressive than Sylvia's are for Chris and less psychologically damaging than Mrs. Bentley's are for Philip. By turning himself in and accepting the possible consequences of his role in Larson's death, Chris escapes from Sylvia's imprisoning and debilitating influence. He finally breaks the spell under which he has been living--"of what he was, always had been, always must be, a doom of Boyle Street cheapness and frustration" (256). He acts for himself, in his own best interest. Chris's decision to "take the rope rather than [Sylvia]" (256) is his ultimate rejection

of the house. Philip Bentley turns away from the void and back to the house; Chris accepts the challenge of the void, "leap[s] and make[s] his landing" (256).

In As For Me and My House, Mrs. Bentley explains: "We all change and grow. We don't just happen as we are. We come by way of yesterday" (135). Nowhere is this idea better expressed than in Ross's last novel which focuses mainly on the events of the past to convey a sense of completion in the present. Sawbones Memorial is not about the quest for identity or the search for place. As Lorraine McMullen points out, "there is no psychological progression of character" (6) in this novel. Ross's protagonist is not struggling to define himself or come to terms with the space around him. As Gail Bowen points out, "the Doc Hunter of Sawbones Memorial has found and accepted his place in the 'mud-bottomed Here and Now'" (47). As a result, the sense of transience and disjunction which pervades Ross's earlier works is not evident in this final novel.

Nevertheless, the concept of place is articulated most effectively by Ross in his last work. In earlier works, Ross made his reader very aware of the illimitable qualities of space on the Saskatchewan prairie and its threat to an individual's sense of self by surrounding his characters and often losing them in its immensity. In Sawbones Memorial, however, space is not defined as an external force moving inward upon and encompassing the individual. The vast emptiness of the open prairie is not a

significant issue in this novel. As McMullen points out:

...the movement of the novel is centrifugal, beginning at the centre and circling out, expanding to encompass the entire community, past, present, and future. The pivot is 'Sawbones' Hunter who has been a participant in the lives of all the townspeople and yet like most of Ross's central characters, has always remained to some extent an outsider. ("Introduction" 9)

The spatial metaphor Ross uses here differs considerably from the one used in As For Me and My House. Time, in Sawbones Memorial, moves outward into space like the rings of water that emanate from a point in the centre. In As For Me and My House, the Bentleys are trapped in both time and space. Time moves in a cyclical, repetitive fashion, leaving the Bentleys adrift in space. The reminiscences and memories expressed by the guests at Doc's party carry the readers into the past and allow them to see the unfolding of the important events in Doc's life. These memories serve as the foundation of Doc's life and identity. They enlarge the readers' understanding of Doc's present-day character and validate Mrs. Bentley's claim that "We all come by way of yesterday" (135). Mrs. Bentley's thoughts and actions are contradictory, however, to her belief in the importance of the past. She cuts herself off from her past, thereby stifling the process of her development as an individual and hindering her movement into the future.

In Sawbones Memorial, the events of the entire novel take place in one room. The novel opens in media res at the

party and closes in the same room at the new Hunter Memorial Hospital. The limitations of space are evident in that the entire novel is set in one place--the new hospital. The characters are given a very circumscribed area of space in which to express themselves. Yet unlike in As For Me and My House, these boundaries are not confining. The memories of the past, combined with the impending security of the future extend the boundaries of this space. Moreover, the image of the house and the domineering female is significantly absent in Doc Hunter's life, except as a mere memory. What becomes important in this context is the central position which Doc Hunter maintains in the novel. The space we enter as readers clearly belongs to Doc Hunter. Although Ross does not introduce the reader to the doctor's direct thoughts (by way of interior monologue) until the last few pages of the novel, the reader is very much aware of the man's commanding presence. He is not threatened by the petty commentary and bickering of the "Good Women" of Upward. Doc is so secure in his own way of being and identity that he can stand up to these women and show them for what they really are. Thus, the central position Doc maintains in the novel, and to a larger extent in the lives of the citizens of Upward, indicates how well he has assumed his place in life. Doc's presence fills the pages of the novel and overflows into the emptiness beyond. Perhaps the best way this novel suggests Doc Hunter's sense of place is its constant reference to the past. Any understanding of the doctor that the reader

achieves comes by way of the past--the reminiscences and memories expressed by Doc and his guests at the party. Clearly Doc's security and satisfaction in the present come from his acceptance of the past. The reader is enveloped by this space and comes from the novel with a final understanding (if we compare it to the rest of Ross's work) of the importance and impact of space and place on an individual's identity. The future does not lurk beyond for Doc like an ominous, black void because his act of divining himself is complete. Moreover, the sense of futility some readers experience at the end of As For Me and My House is significantly absent at the end of Sawbones Memorial. The sense of an ending is clearly expressed by Doc's retirement and departure from Upward. And a fresh beginning is signalled, not simply a continuation of the old cycle, by Nick's return to Upward to begin his own life and medical practice.

Doc Hunter realizes his place in life and way of being in the world by allowing himself to recognize and accept life's "mud-bottomed little Here and Now" (132). Doc's illusions about what life should have been like were dispelled long ago. He successfully "meets life on its own terms" (AMMH 94) and with the casual resignation that Philip Bentley can only claim to have. Philip's statement that "'If a man's a victim of circumstances he deserves to be'" (119) justifies the defeatist posturing he uses towards the end of the novel to rationalize his failure both as an

artist and an individual. Philip's desire to "[bring himself] to the emotional pitch that we call ecstasy or rapture" (AMMH 112) through the medium of his artistic vocation is his rejection of the "common-sense world around him" (112). As his pretensions about painting and art reveal, Philip is an idealist--albeit one who is "unable to get above reality" (53). His later attitude of casual resignation is, therefore, a false and untenable position.

As Mrs. Bentley recognizes, "a man's tragedy is himself, not the events that overtake him" (94). She becomes all too aware (as was demonstrated in Chapter Two) that she staged her own downfall in life, thereby losing all claims to the world of the aesthetic ideal, when she denied her musical aspirations and accepted instead her social role in the material world as Philip's wife. With marriage, Mrs. Bentley gives up her only chance at escaping the artistic constraints of the real world. Unlike her husband however, Mrs. Bentley comes to accept life for what it is. By erecting a false front, Mrs. Bentley discovers a way of dealing with and protecting herself from the hypocrisy and superficiality of a Main Street world. The mask allows her to "stand apart, [and] look on the Horizons with [a] detachment" (16) that her husband is unable to muster.

Philip also compromises the artist in himself and destroys his chances at ever achieving the aesthetic sublime when he surrenders his creativity to the hypocrisy of his religious vocation and to the responsibilities of his

marriage, in order that he and his wife may exist in the material world. Realist that she claims to be, Mrs. Bentley's recognition of the illusory desires in Philip makes it easy for her to account for his failure:

Life has proved bitter and deceptive to
Philip because of the artist in him,
because he has kept seeking a beauty and
significance that isn't life's to give....
(94)

Barricading himself in his study with "the door closed significantly" (12) against Mrs. Bentley and the realities of the external world, Philip attempts to come to terms with life by constructing a space of his own in which to live. His need to structure and shape the physical space he inhabits by way of an abstract conceptualization of that space on canvas is his attempt to "speak graphically of [the] conflicts between this world and some other" (Cude, "'Turn It Upside Down'" 470). The juxtaposition of the vast and empty space of the prairie with the cramped and limiting space of the Main Street community is the subject of the majority of Philip's paintings. In the early paintings, space is a force that moves in on these Main Street gatherings from beyond the edges of the canvas. It becomes an external force pressing down upon the houses and their false fronts, which seem crowded together in an effort to keep this force at bay and block the wind's pressure on them:

It's a little street again tonight, ...
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....Some of
them wince as if the strain were torture.
(43)

Later in the novel, Philip turns from the Main Street scene to painting particular individuals and scenes of the prairie populated only by horses and cattle. The details become sparse, and blank spaces dominate the canvas. In these later works, space becomes less an external force pushing inward on the houses and figures in the paintings. Instead, the subjects of these paintings seem to dominate the space on the canvas. These later works seem to suggest that Philip has become more in control of his environment and feels less physically threatened from outside: "The really hard part is the picture turned out. The hills and rivers and driftwood logs again ... with the same strength and fatalism, the same unflinching insight" (102). Philip's endlessly repetitive series of Main Street sketches reveal, however, that he remains tied down by the falsity of his position, and is unable to break through to that other "potential, unknown" world (29). It is not reality, however, which defeats Philip. He defeats himself through his struggle to abdicate the real world by a means of escape that "can only remind him of his failure, of the man he tried to be" (25). As an examination of the opposing artistic stances in As For Me and My House will reveal, it is "the discrepancy between the man and the little niche that holds him" (4) that results in Philip Bentley's failure

to "be", either ideally or actually.

Ross's polarization of Philip and Mrs. Bentley into two fundamentally opposed artistic positions is not done, I think, without intent. Ryszard Dubanski, who notes a "patterning of a poetics of painting in the novel" (93), considers the "dialogue on art...a necessary extra perspective which helps to establish a 'true picture'" (88) for the reader. Ross has not only set husband against wife and house against horse in this novel, he has placed the aesthetic theory of one school of art against that of another, thereby adding another level of tension to the relationship between male and female. Naomi Schor makes a number of interesting points in her discussion of Joshua Reynolds' Discourses on Art (in a chapter quite appropriately entitled "Gender") which offers a possible explanation for Ross's polarizing of the two aesthetic stances (idealism and abstract form versus realism and formless detail) in his novel. Schor examines the logic of Reynolds' discourse aimed as it is against the "detailism" (11) or rather "'the servile copying of nature in its infinite particularity'" found in the work of a second-rate artist in comparison to the superior form of mimesis, accomplished by the Genius, which "refers for its truth to the sensations of the mind" over the eye (12). Schor points out that although Reynolds never explicitly links details and femininity in the discourse, his use of "a metaphoric grounded in metaphysics" (16) is an implicit reinscription

of "the sexual stereotypes of Western philosophy which has, since its origins, mapped gender onto the form-matter paradigm" (16). By this equation, maleness is linked to abstract form and femaleness is linked to formless matter. As Schor explains:

Reynolds' strictures against detailism fall into two distinct groups...the quantitative arguments (those according to the Ideal), [and]...the qualitative (those according to the Sublime)...Reynolds argues that because of their material contingency details are incompatible with the ideal;...[and] because of their tendency to proliferation, details subvert the Sublime. (15)

If Reynolds implies that the detailism he associates with the aesthetics of realism is feminine, he makes explicit in the discourse his association of the sublime--"the more manly, noble, dignified manner" (20)--with the virility of the masculine aesthetic. With reference to the two main schools of Italian painting, Schor points out that the polarization of art history along the lines of sexual difference is a characteristic inherent in the study of aesthetics. Moreover, she refers to Svetlana Alper's findings in her study of the Dutch school of painters that "the exclusion of Dutch Art from the great tradition of art history is accountable to a covert association of Dutch with the feminine" (20). Applied to Ross's novel, Schor's theories help to elucidate for the readers of As For Me and My House the reasons behind Philip's aversion to Mrs. Bentley's artistic persuasions.

Mrs. Bentley's claims to being a "realist" along with her flair for details; her inclination towards the music of Debussy and Franz Liszt--"the self-indulgent child of Romanticism" (Cude, "'Turn It Upside Down'" 469)--; and the obvious implications behind her reference to El Greco's sudden transformation into a "blue blood", deserving of the title "Romney or Gainsborough" should alert the careful reader to Ross's association of Mrs. Bentley with a specific school of painters and a certain aesthetic theory in art. The superficial "detailism" in the art of Gainsborough and Romney places them in that school of artists greatly influenced by the early Dutch painters, such as Rubens and Rembrandt, who captured and recreated with realistic detail the "courtly, old-world elegance" (105) of upper class society in their paintings.

By realism, I mean in the most basic artistic sense, simply that type of painting termed trompe-l'oeil which treats subjects and scenes from everyday life with the strictest of detail. The aesthetics of realism valorize (according to Schor's understanding of Reynolds' discourse) the "*peculiarities of particular objects*" (12), encourage "the patient piling on of details" (18) and strive for an effect based on "sensuality over reason" (18) by assaulting the senses with a profusion of ornamentation. "Detailism" is a trait which Reynolds clearly associates with the feminine aesthetic. Some critics see a discrepancy between Mrs. Bentley's outward stance as a realist and her

unacknowledged tendency towards romanticism. The divergence should be seen as a reinforcement of the feminine aesthetic in the novel and not an inconsistency in Mrs. Bentley's character. An explanation for Mrs. Bentley's tendency towards both realism and romanticism can be found also with reference to Reynold's discourse. By associating detail with the feminine aesthetic, Reynolds is able to equate Romanticism, which in the field of painting and in the work of musicians such as Debussy and Liszt also "embrace[s] particularization" (24), with the feminine aesthetic. Although realism and romanticism differ in most theoretical aspects, they are both categorized as belonging to the feminine aesthetic, according to Reynolds, because of their penchant for detail.

Mrs. Bentley's tendency towards "detailism" is evident both in her own writing and in her appreciation of Philip's realistic rendering of his subject-matter rather than his abstract sketches of the prairie landscape. This concern for detail explains, perhaps, the reasons for Mrs. Bentley's failure to achieve a composite picture of Philip's life. She pays too little attention to the underlying pattern of the whole and focuses too closely on the specifics--the "fragments, pieced together through the fifteen years [she has] known him" (29). Dubanski labels Mrs. Bentley a "dilettante", whose "very naive and superficial criticism" (88) of Philip's artwork only emphasizes her inclination toward an art based strictly on

feeling.

In keeping with Reynolds' definition, the aesthetics of idealism is, in comparison, a masculine one which aims at achieving the Sublime through careful attention to the "perfect uniformity and proportion" (19) of the whole. Unlike his wife, Philip endorses an intellectual response to art which aligns him with the "uncompromising formalism" and "inner vision" (Dubanski 93) of El Greco and the Mannerists. He is concerned with the form and design of a painting, not with the sentiment it evokes. Dubanski defines form as "an abstract concept apprehending the principles of inner relatedness and unity" (92). What this implies in an ontological sense is that an artist must have a concept of his own inner unity and wholeness before he can successfully render form in a work of art. A man like Philip, obsessed as he is with finding a solution to his own sense of inner fragmentation and disjunction, would therefore find the "struggle to fulfill himself" (25) by means of an aesthetic position based on such principles to be an unsuccessful one. He strives to achieve the "sublime" through his efforts at artistic creativity. His endeavours, however, are futile.

Ryszard Dubanski claims, and rightly so, that Philip begins to break out of his artistic paralysis at a certain point in the novel (90). He begins "moving, deeper into the landscape and himself, giving shape and meaning to both" (92). Philip's paintings become "distorted, intensified, alive with a thin, cold, bitter life" (AMMH 17) that bears

witness to his struggle towards self-knowledge and wholeness. Philip's experiences on the ranch beyond the strictures of the small Main Street town bring him closer to reaching that level of aesthetic excitement which he struggles towards. As his painting of the logs reveals, Philip manages to become temporarily "unaware of himself" and is absorbed into the vastness of the prairie expanse. Somewhere along the line, however, Philip's effort at self-validation and completion are frustrated and checked. Mrs. Bentley senses an inner vitality in Philip and is often moved by "the strength and fatalism" (102) in his work. Her comment--"as always with his drawings it's what you feel, not what you see"(101)-- makes it clear, however, that she does not understand the meaning behind their abstract and exiguous conceptualization. Nevertheless, she does recognize that Philip's near, yet still unsuccessful rendering of the ideal are a "good sign" (128) or rather a warning to her that he may some day break through the barrier.

Philip's artistic headway is undercut, however, by the feelings of inadequacy and impotency that he suffers in the presence of the cowboys: "Philip isn't showing up to advantage here. He can't make the cowboys forget he's a preacher..." (93). As Mrs. Bentley so cruelly reminds Philip: "'You don't know the first thing about a horse. You're likely to be taken in" (65). The cowboys are unable to accept Philip as one of their own the

way they are willing to accept Steven, whom Mrs. Bentley describes as "an attractive boy, fearless with a horse" (93). After the ordeal on the ranch, when it is determined that Philip will never be a horseman, he paints the portrait of the buckskin stallion for Laura. Producing an exact replica of the horse by focusing on detail rather than form, Philip concedes his emasculation and defeat to Mrs. Bentley and Laura. (It is not insignificant either that the horses in Philip's earlier paintings exhibit a submission and defeat similar to Philip's, tied as they are by the reins. Paul's gift of the easel to Philip--'It's a Dutch word...Means a little ass" (104) seems to force home all the above points.)

The "good likeness" of the portrait to the real horse is a rather spiritless and superficial rendering of the subject in comparison to the "string of galloping broncos" (128) which Philip sketches after his liaison with Judith. The oil painting of Laura's horse pleases Mrs. Bentley; she seems to like his work better when he "stops to copy". The sketch of the galloping broncos, "done with such a light, deft touch that you can feel *space* and air and *freedom*," (128 emphasis added) serves a reminder to Mrs. Bentley of Philip's efforts at self-assertion. The painting is Philip's way of flaunting to Mrs. Bentley his ability at playing "studhorse" should he so desire.

However, Philip's success in one manner is his failure in another. His affair with Judith only manages to

provide Mrs. Bentley with another means of keeping Philip locked in the house. Although Philip's act of rebellion with Judith may be viewed as his attempt at self-assertion and independence, it fails, in the end, to provide him with the freedom he needs to discover his place and way of being in the world. Ironically, by asserting his masculinity, Philip only manages to diminish his position in the marriage and firmly places himself in Mrs. Bentley's keeping. He is unable to discover, whether it is through his painting or his relations with other people, a way of being in the world that would free him from his entrapment. Mrs. Bentley's statement at the end of the novel is, thereby, an insinuation of Philip's defeat and a reassertion of her position within the confines of the marriage relationship. The repetitive nature of the Bentleys' past experiences suggest that the "wide wheel" (164) will surely run its course again. If so, Judith's baby--the other Philip--is certain to become a replica of his father, like the Philip before him.

CONCLUSION

The concept of space plays an integral role in the novels of a prairie realist such as Sinclair Ross. As this thesis demonstrates, the empty and limitless stretch of land on the prairie is a potentially alienating and isolating force for those individuals who inhabit its reaches. Without a consummate understanding of one's identity and place in life, this space in the physical world can be a destructive force. Ross's novels, divided as they are between the worlds of the male and the female, reveal how threatening this space can be to either gender if that individual lacks a sense of inner completion and means of self-validation, such as a sense of place. An individual, who experiences "being" as a disjunction between the true inner self and the false front (that is worn for defensive purposes) projects a void into the external world that is a manifestation of his/her own inner emptiness.

⊗ For the women in Ross's works, the void is ever-present in their lives. They are unable to discover a way of being in the world that would allow them to come to terms with the void. They lack a complete and integrated identity that would afford them with a place in life and allow them to incorporate themselves into the space surrounding them. They remain trapped in the house. Their world does not

extend beyond the boundaries of these female domiciles. On the other hand, the male figures in Ross's novels (excluding Philip Bentley) manage to avoid the stultifying effects of the house by escaping to the realm of the cowboy. They are able to forge an identity for themselves that enables them to deal with the space of the external world. They learn to organize and shape physical space, incorporating their own concepts of self and place with the external environment. Only Philip Bentley, whose experience of life is couched in the ideal and whose rendering of space is a "virtual" rather than an actual one, is unable to create a significant place in life for himself. He fails "to be", as a horseman, as an artist and as a self-acting individual, thus sentencing himself to a lifetime imprisonment in the house and in the hands of Mrs. Bentley.

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