THE AMBIGUOUS NATURE OF FEMALE IDENTITY IN MARGARET LAURENCE

REDEFINING WOMAN'S WORTH:

THE AMBIGUOUS NATURE OF FEMALE IDENTITY

IN TWO NOVELS BY MARGARET LAURENCE

By

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ABSTRACT

The impulse to attain "wholeness", to create and sustain a coherent identity, is a central issue in Margaret Laurence's novels A Jest of God (1966) and The Fire-Dwellers (1969). This thesis will examine the immobilization and discontent that arise when women are unable to mediate between their personal desires and the social values that are imposed upon them. The two novels are unified by Laurence's contention that women must become agents of change rather than maintain a passive or responsive stance in their social roles. In keeping with her belief in the value of diversity, Laurence's novels "reject those aspects of female identity which society imposes on women, including conventional 'femininity', heterosexuality, wifehood, and motherhood" (Relke 37). This is not to suggest that Laurence advocates the abandonment of traditional roles. Rather, she focuses upon the paradox of identity formation in which the subject must both reject and rely upon institutionalized norms and mores. Only when women acknowledge the ambiguity that they feel towards their socially constructed roles will they be able to recognize and confront the power structures that impinge on their lives and restrict their emotional and intellectual expression.

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Chapter One

Writing in the Margins of the Female Gender Script

"Where is my home?" cried Nietzsche: "For it do I ask and seek, and have sought, but have not found it. O eternal everywhere, O eternal nowhere, O eternal in vain" (Lippman, 7). As Adrienne Rich, Carol Gilligan and several other scholars postulate, the female subject is engaged in a constant process of negotiation. This process includes harmonizing her intellectual and personal agendas in order to determine her destiny. Nietzsche aptly summarizes the state of confusion and disarray that women face throughout this process, for gender marginalization and prescriptive behavior make it difficult for women to feel at home within the world. Caught between varied and often contradictory expectations regarding their 'proper' role, women must find a balance between their history(ies) and their future. This desired balance entails retaining the insights of the forefathers, while recognizing the inevitability of changing mores. Margaret Laurence, a female author caught up in the tensions and flux of the early twentieth century, explores the ambiguity and ambivalence of the process of searching for one's identity. Her protagonists are forever at odds with themselves, tormented over their ability to forge their own path to autonomy and self-assuredness. This thesis is an interdisciplinary examination of gender roles in A Jest of God and The Fire-Dwellers combining psychology with some theology, biology and sociology. It will examine how the female body and intellect are imprinted and suspended in a nexus of cultural meanings, social identities, authoritative definitions, and limited agency. Although Foucault's theories will not preoccupy the majority of this paper, his theory that "the female body is portrayed as an imaginary site, always available to be inscribed. It is here

diversity can be constructed - - through scientific discourses, medical technologies, the popular media, and everyday common sense" is congruous with my theoretical approach (Fisher & Davis 24). Hence, in keeping with the sociological and psychological theories which postulate that the human mind is not a tabula rasa I will examine how the female, in particular, is imprinted by gender, society, religion and other diverse influences. Therefore, it is useful to understand, as Foucault argues, that it is "a dynamic of noncentralized forces..." which allows "dominant historical forms to attain their hegemony" (Fisher & Davis 305). He does not claim that social practices or the subjugation of the individual stem from "magisterial design or decree, but through multiple "processes, of different origin and scattered location," regulating and normalizing the most intimate and minute elements of the construction of time, space, desire, embodiment (Foucault 1979:138)" (Fisher & Davis 305).

Rachel and Stacey Cameron must contend with the stability and isolation of prescribed roles, or choose uncertainty and stigmatization in forging new paths and roles for themselves. Both sisters must reject biologically determinist views in order to facilitate the development of their identities as females. However, Rachel and Stacey face difficulty in challenging the dominant theories regarding female capacities and roles. Each sister must overcome social tendencies to equate narcissism with femininity, antisocial interest and thus immorality, insatiability and lack of self-control. In short, they must overcome the pervasive belief that women are a force or product of nature rather than culture.

Women must constantly struggle to negotiate between past and present attitudes towards their participation in society. For this reason, theorist Adrienne Rich suggests that many women struggle with the impulse to shy away from pursuing freedom even though this is what they seek. Having been socialized to defer to the opinions of others,

it is far easier for women to rely on someone else, particularly a man, to know the truth. Dependence has its benefits. If a man tells a woman what to do, she is absolved of responsibility for poor choices. With autonomy and power comes accountability, with freedom the difficulty of choice. Therefore, although Rachel and Stacey each desire autonomy, both seek comfort and direction from men and intimate relationships in order to find respite from the nagging voices within. Each sister gains insight through her sexual experiences and uses these insights to form her identity, however, the solace she seeks is ultimately unattainable. Rachel and Stacey desire an existence that allows them to live their lives 'naturally', meaning, without constraint. However, as each of the protagonists wrestles with her demons, she must also embrace them. "It is always difficult to put forth an alternative vision: our imaginations are limited by our historical circumstances, our very language is against us, calling up old meanings and associations" (Johnson and Kalven 189). Ironically, she finds in them much the same kind of support that the conformist enjoys. They provide her with an objective that enables her to know exactly what she thinks she wants to do. Her energies become focused through her indignation. In attacking idols, expectations and institutions, there is a kind of piety. In overthrowing the tyrant mother and society, a kind of loyalty, in ridiculing stupidities, the impression that she has conformed to conventional wisdom. Self-actualization, then, becomes possible not by overthrowing and denying the existence of oppressive norms and institutions, but by seeing beyond the dichotomies of mind versus body, reason versus emotion, subject versus object. Since polarized thinking leaves little room for individual complexity or diversity, Laurence embraces the validity of diverse and subjective thought. By illustrating the constructed nature of gender roles and their impact on relationships, she reveals the challenge of identity formation.

In Margaret Laurence's novels A Jest of God and The Fire-Dwellers, the female

protagonists Rachel and Stacey are ensnared within a whirlwind of expectations and negotiations concerning their identities. Although it can be argued, to an extent, that each chooses her own path and, therefore, ought to be very happy, Laurence demonstrates the presence of social forces that collaborate with individual circumstance to create each character's reality.[1] Looking back in history, it is evident that women's power has been culturally muted. Women's sexuality, meant to be used only for conception and childbirth, meant denying the presence and gratification of their sexual needs. As Carol Gilligan argues, "women's sexuality anchored them in passivity, in a receptive rather than an active stance" (Gilligan 68). Throughout the past decades women have contended with the possibility of developing a worldview based on the right of every person to determine his or her own destiny. It is important to remember, therefore, that Laurence's writings come out of the mid-twentieth century and address issues central to female 'progress' at the time. Hence, Laurence's insertions of Biblical references into her novels are intended to parody the deeply entrenched cultural meanings which largely determined the appropriate roles and attitudes for women and men. The Bible has far-reaching effects, and although neither Rachel nor Stacey actively participates in her religious heritage, it remains an integral aspect of their psyche, acting as a constant monitor for evaluating their behaviors and responses. Carol Meyers writes of the truth that many

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[1] It is important to note that the conception of power "does *not* entail that there are no dominant positions, social structures, or ideologies emerging from the play of forces; the fact that power is not held by any *one* does not mean that it is equally held by *all*. It is 'held' by no one; rather, people and groups are positioned differentially within it. This model is particularly useful to the analysis of male dominance and female subordination so much of which is reproduced 'voluntarily,' through our self-normalization to everyday habits of masculinity and femininity" (Fisher & Davis 305). This is to say, that although Laurence gives her characters agency, she draws attention to the fact that women may contribute to the perpetuation of their condition with or without knowledge of their contribution. However, this is not equivalent to producing and reproducing sexist culture. The subject continues to work within, across, and against social and cultural contexts.

contemporary women may overlook: "The early chapters of Genesis challenge our ability to be open-minded in dealing with biblical texts relevant to gender. Perhaps more than any other part of the Bible, those chapters have influenced western notions of gender identity and roles" (Meyers 72). Thus, while Rachel and Stacey desperately attempt to disavow their parents' beliefs, conventions, taboos, gods, priests, and fathers, they cannot fully succeed. The 'spiritual knowledge' which each denies a place in her life is also the pillar to which each clings in times of personal loss and need. The need to feel in control of their own lives leaves Rachel and Stacey hesitant to place their confidence in a patriarchal world view. The inevitable result of the sisters' ambiguous responses to religion is alienation. Without the benefit of faith Rachel and Stacey are left to find their own answers to the meaning of life. To deny God's role as arbitrator of human destiny is to rely on oneself, rather than on an external source, to explain the evils of the world and the injustices Rachel and Stacey face. Thus, Laurence reveals the fact that the Bible, in all its ancient wisdom, does not provide appropriate responses for women living in the current social world. As a result, Rachel and Stacey cannot find the solace they seek in its traditions.

Closely aligned with the mandates for femininity in the Bible is the tendency, for western females in particular, to identify with their bodies rather than their minds. Although Laurence's novels focus upon the workings of her protagonists' minds, the matters which occupy their thoughts for the most part are those which concern personal worth as determined by body image and the world of intimacy. Rachel and Stacey attempt to grasp a sense of identity by engaging in a "search for autonomy, [and by... gaining] control over the sources and objects of pleasure in order to shore up the possibilities for happiness against the risk of disappointment and loss" (Gilligan 46). However, while each gains the insight and validation she seeks for a time, each also

learns that freedom is not what it seems. The enchanting belief that life is governed only by personal will and pleasure is broken, and each is left feeling empty. Serenity of soul, thought to be found in fulfilling a 'creative' role (meaning the childbearing role for women), eludes them. 'Wholeness' of identity, if such a thing exists, requires some better organization of life than Laurence's characters attain through the pursuit of their casual ambitions, by satisfying their sexual hungers, or by simply accepting destiny as a tale in which one sensation is preceded and succeeded by another to no known end. Questions beget more questions, the old gods resurface, and faith in any absolute and knowable truth is abandoned. Although unable to fully identify with Biblical views of women, each remains alienated from both her body and mind, and is plagued by the imperative to associate her desire for sexual autonomy with sin.

Thus, in their struggle to negotiate between social and personal commitments, motherhood is but one of many choices which Laurence's female protagonists consider. Therefore, rather than focusing singly on the benefits or restrictions of the identity of the mother, Laurence illuminates the struggle to move beyond competing notions of individuality or collective identity as the only alternatives for women. Her novels reveal the deeply conflicted and ambiguous worlds of women who long to emerge from the restrictiveness of categorization. By including the mother, the spinster, and the lesbian, she effectively highlights the analogous experiences of alienation that all women face. Laurence defies the practice of stigmatization. Her sense of social conscience is revealed as she refrains from perpetuating stereotypes. She does not wish to punish individuals "...for being certain kinds of persons, [and] for [their] membership in a devalued category" (Schur 17). Laurence accomplishes her mission of exposing the difficulty of determining who and what a woman should be by demonstrating through Rachel and Stacey's dilemmas, that systematized ""inferiorization"...easily becomes self-fulfilling

and self-perpetuating (Schur 37). The need to overcome prescriptive thinking and behavior, then, becomes a central issue for each female in these two novels as she attempts to navigate her course. Laurence particularly focuses on the female protagonists in A Jest of God and Fire-Dwellers, and upon the various patterns of "withdrawal and defensiveness, passivity, in-group hostility and identification with the oppressors, as well as seriously impaired self-esteem" (Schur 39) each experiences. Rachel and Stacey are contradictory, divided beings that perceive their oppressors to be external and limited to specific circumstances, thereby making them identifiable. By placing the onus for repression on institutionalized mores and their friends and family, neither Rachel nor Stacey can free herself from their power. Laurence reveals that the oppression from which both Rachel and Stacey suffer presents itself most vehemently within their psyches. Although both sisters enjoy moments of insight and growth, each of the novels concentrates on their struggle to disentangle themselves from a web of self-defeating behavior and attitudes.

For the most part, A Jest of God and The Fire-Dwellers illustrate the ambivalence of a 'woman's world' in which "child-rearing, housekeeping, personal grooming, women's clubs, and so on..." supersede personal pursuits (Schur 42). This tendency to accept a certain amount of social segregation complicates Rachel and Stacey's ability to move into autonomous action. However, Laurence's protagonists are acutely aware of the inherent inadequacies of female roles, and so both speak and act out against them. Subjected to norms that often contradict one another, specifically in areas of personal fulfillment, (including sexual desire), Rachel and Stacey demonstrate vulnerability in their desperate efforts to manage their emotions. This is to say each sister is aware of the tendency to see females as emotional and incapable of managing their lives. Therefore, Rachel and Stacey are caught between the need to keep their internal turmoil a secret and their desire

to proclaim their presence. As a result, both must evoke, accommodate, or withhold feelings that do or do not afford them acceptance and fulfillment. More important for the purpose of this thesis, they must refute the presence of any sexual inclinations that step outside the expected unions of marriage and childbearing. Thus, as Adrienne Rich states, "The woman's body...is a field of contradictions: a space invested with power, and an acute vulnerability; a numinous figure and the incarnation of evil; a hoard of ambivalences, most of which...disqualify women..." from defining themselves or their culture (Rich 102).

Thus, Laurence effectively demonstrates what Joyce Nicholson identifies as a veritable dilemma for women: "For her is... the choice between being attractive, a socially successful person or a failure, between becoming what women are expected to be, a wife and a mother, or being considered peculiar, unsatisfied, unfulfilled" (Nicholson 27). Her novels explore the struggle to acquire and maintain an equilibrium between personal desire and social conditioning. Laurence illustrates the anti-social and self-destructive forms of behavior (including the tendency to interiorize) which are encountered when women are torn between these two restrictive and undesirable options. One means by which Laurence demonstrates the difficulties her female characters face in their specific social contexts, is through examining the manner in which society offers security and happiness based on the willingness of the female to conform. Should a woman be pretty enough, sweet enough, enough of everything socially desirable, she will be rewarded with a loving husband and children. And, of course, she will be completely fulfilled in these roles. Closely coupled with society's constant offers of pleasure in exchange for conformity, is the promise of guilt and despair should a woman step outside her domestic domain. The modern woman's freedom to do all things becomes the burden of having to do all things, including maintaining the sanctity of the home. Therefore, as

this thesis will examine, pleasure in its many forms, particularly outside conventional norms, is closely coupled with both personal and social sanctions. Hence, women are faced with layered, ambiguous messages. Even as they are told to develop the intellect and participate in the pleasures of the body, they are constantly reminded that to do so will remove them from socially beneficial circles. Thus, women's roles and freedoms are never far removed from political ideologies. Although the twentieth-century woman in Laurence's novels is tempted by the possibility of creating an autonomous self, she is subject to "...either/or" thinking: motherhood or individuation, motherhood or creativity, motherhood or freedom" (Rich 160).

Thus, Rachel and Stacey are neither victims nor victors. They are women engaging with their world, making choices, and moving beyond passive roles to active living. There are no easy solutions, no fixed identities to be had. Each character is caught in flux. Despite Rachel's education, she cannot take refuge in an ivory tower because characters like Calla will not subject themselves to the restrictions of normative thinking. Similarly, Stacey cannot make a religion of science like her husband. She is caught up in the 'religion of humanity'; the dailiness of chores and obligations obliterates her capacity to fathom an empathetic god or a better life. Thus, Laurence does not exchange one certainty for another. She does not dismantle histories and belief systems only to replace them with new ones. Conversely, she presents the life of men and women as she sees it. Life is full of restlessness and compulsions, forgotten goals and resurgent dreams. It is against the notion that there is any complete certainty to be found that she writes. She negotiates from the margins, "refusing master theories of gender..." and presents "...the category woman in all its alterity and difference" (Fisher & Davis 7).

Chapter Two
Female Anxieties and their Origins: Biblical and social mandates for women's roles

"'*The message is clear: obey the rules and there's nothing to fear from this God, this father*' " (Polster 1). The earliest known act of willful disobedience, Eve's pursuit of knowledge in Eden, has admitted her, and all women, "into the forbidden world of the knowledge of good and evil..." and has left them to challenge prevailing cultural norms (Polster 3). Margaret Laurence, in her novels A Jest of God and The Fire-Dwellers, explores the ambiguous spaces women occupy in relation to gender roles and how this ambiguity affects the formation of identity. In order to understand the social climate from which she writes, it is important, therefore, to assess the biblical and social 'roots' of Rachel and Stacey's thoughts and expectations. As both sisters come to understand, to question previously unquestioned mandates for female behavior displaces them from the accepted context for women. Mary Daly says it more succinctly:

> When God is male, the male is God. What the maleness of God does is legitimate not only the patriarchal society, but also the image of the patriarchal home in which the man is "king of the castle"; the woman is "wife," doing her domestic chores of rearing children, washing dishes, and getting meals; and the child is obedient. The really important issue in the patriarchal family, as in the patriarchal society and patriarchal church, is control.
>
> (Johnson 44)

Therefore, if women wish to alter the context in which they live, if they are to forge new avenues for thought and action, they must first gain a sense of location by learning about the experiences of their mothers and grandmothers and the reasons they supported traditionalism. Furthermore, it is necessary to acknowledge the strong influences of religion and culture that make departure from tradition difficult, if not unwelcome.

The amalgamation of repressive traditions and a sense of futility in effecting significant change for themselves leaves Rachel and Stacey in anxiety and depression. What Laurence reveals in her novels, then, is a female subject who is caught between the alternatives of adaptation or isolation, and more often than not, who feels she has no alternatives.

Closely aligned with the options of adaptation and isolation are the social and religious mores which are imposed upon Rachel and Stacey. However, while Laurence allows her characters to criticize much of what has been passed on to them through their society and ancestors, she consistently reminds the reader of the vital connection between the past and present. Both Stacey and Rachel hate the manipulations of their "long-suffering mother..." (FD 11). Stacey, in particular, is acutely aware that she perpetuates her mother's facade of perfection in front of her children despite her desire to rebel: "Funny thing, I never swear in front of my kids. This makes me feel I'm being a good example to them. Example of what? All the things I hate. Hate, but perpetuate" (9). It is because of Laurence's ability to depict both the internal and external struggles her protagonists' face that the reader is able to glimpse the magnitude of social and familial conditioning. Just as Stacey finds herself continuing to teach her parents' and society's standards to her children, Rachel feels powerless to resist being made to feel guilty over her lack of connection with a spiritual past which she finds irrelevant. However, she has been socialized to please and obey, and finds her ability to distinguish her life from her mother's very difficult. Both girls feel that resistance is futile, for, as Rollins postulates in Women's Minds Women's Bodies, "the self system is linked to the individual's reference persons and reference groups. The individual internalizes the norms of her or his reference groups"; thus, to an extent, they feel compelled to maintain membership through cooperation (Rollins 129). As Rachel comments in direct response to the issue

of spirituality, the most potent forms of normalization are covert: "She didn't reproach me, not openly. She only relayed comments. 'Reverend MacElfrish asked after you, dear. He said he hoped you were well. I suppose he thought you probably weren't, as he hasn't seen you.' I thought what was the point in upsetting her, so I went [to church]. And have done, ever since" (JG 45). As A Jest of God demonstrates, Rachel constantly hears the "echo of [her] mother's voice" and adjusts her feelings and responses to meet the expectations of those around her (10). Her best efforts to recognize and subdue the external forces which inhibit her ability to act on her personal and sexual desires are consistently frustrated by her ambivalence towards her own desires. Rachel both detests her dependence on her mother because it denies her control of her own life and she desires dependence on a man in marriage because she believes she will find stability and freedom.

Women's roles were rapidly changing at the time Laurence was writing her novels A Jest of God (1966) and The Fire-Dwellers (1969). Thus, while Rachel's 'success' in avoiding the prescribed roles of wife and mother through the pursuit of education gives her the appearance of autonomy and self-sufficiency, she remains conscious of her "helplessness" as a female (JG 34). Although she secures a profession of her choice, the stereotypes that govern the small town of Manawaka do not allow her to discover her personal potential. She is restricted to a "narrow range of traits, characteristics, and behaviors...that are maladaptive..." such as passivity, dependence and helplessness (Rollins 243). Rachel lives in a conflicted time, caught between tradition and advancement, old and new ideals. Unable to resist the imperative to be 'obedient' and less questioning, Rachel remains bound to tradition. At the same time, she stands outside tradition because of her inability to attract a husband. Similarly, Stacey transgresses the family's values by leaving Manawaka and by her lack of faith in the institutions which

afforded her ancestors so much security and purpose for living (FD 33). Although she is 'successful' in meeting gender expectations she does not enjoy the benefits of faith in God or see herself as the transmitter of values to her children, as past generations of women did. Stacey mistakenly assumes Rachel's compliance with familial practices to be an indicator of strength and a faith that she does not possess. Rachel, however, is similarly suspended between a need to acknowledge the reality of her questioning mind and the desire to sustain belief in a benevolent God. Her guilt is only surmounted by Stacey's, for Stacey feels particularly culpable for her lack of belief in a faith which she feels she must pass on to her children:

> -Not the Stations of the Cross. Not any more. Whose fault? Mine? Or is it maybe better this way? I haven't done well by them. I've failed them by failing to believe, myself. I pretend to it, but they are not deceived. Yet I am the one who wakens them on Sunday mornings and shoves them off churchwards. One more strand in the tapestry of phoniness. I want to tell them. What? That I mourn my disbelief? I don't tell them, though. I go along with the game. It's easier that way.
>
> (FD 68)

Both sisters, then, although separated by lifestyle and geography, find themselves resisting the mandates of society and the church, and yet continuing to adapt to them. Stacey's concern for her children's spiritual welfare stems from the deeply engrained belief system that has been passed down to her through her family. She is caught in a double bind. While she has found the God of her Presbyterian ancestors inadequate in helping her deal with her day-to-day circumstances, she remains bound by a worldview that polarizes human relations and behaviors. A 'good' mother teaches her children what and how to believe. A 'bad' mother experiences negative feelings about her children and her role as a mother. Caught between contradictory beliefs, Stacey loses confidence in

her ability to ascertain personal truth from inherited truth. She has displaced religious dictates onto domestic life. Although she sees the harm of her mother's narrow views and wishes she could take only what pieces of the Bible suit her and pass them on, she is aware that her religious and cultural heritage constantly reveals itself in her thinking. Although she initially fancies herself to be different from her mother, Stacey eventually notes, "Everything goes too far back to be traced. The roots vanish, because they don't end with Matthew, even if it were possible to trace them that far. They go back and back forever. Our father Adam." (FD 155). Unmasked, Stacey finds consciousness-raising to be a very unsettling experience, one that she often drowns in a glass of gin and tonic. Her realization that the roots of her identity reach too far back for her to dismantle or change single-handedly forces her to acknowledge the futility of her resistance. She becomes sensitized to her condition, and to the condition of her friends and daughters, at times to a point of complete and utter despair. As Stacey puts it, "Perhaps it isn't that the masks have been put on, one for each year like the circles that tell the age of a tree. Perhaps they've been gradually peeled off, and what's there underneath is the face that's always been there for me, the unspeaking eyes, the mouth for whom words were too difficult. *No. No. No.* I can't take that." (157). Thus, while Laurence creates characters that question the institutions and foundations of society, she is not unaware of the pitfalls associated with such questioning. Rachel and Stacey eliminate none of their anxieties through their self-analysis. They create further tensions, and answer no questions while raising more. The one question that repeatedly plagues the sisters and is never answered is "what could I have done differently?" (JG 18).

It is too reductive to simply equate identity with gender roles. In sociological theory, identity is derived through many sources. However, those who attain their identities by dependence on relationships with others, and learn that the locus of

control is outside themselves, are limited in their options. The most common way to 'achieve' a sense of peace about lost control is to place responsibility for life circumstances in the hands of "fate or luck", as demonstrated in the lives of such characters as Mrs. Kazlik or Matthew MacAindra who lead their lives according to unquestioning faith (241). The other is to resist social prescriptions for behavior, and take on the shame, fear, and self-blame of not being able to function within the existing social order. For those individuals who are unable to leave their destiny to faith, the result is often a loss of esteem. Because of the dichotomy between the private and public worlds of women, women must negotiate with a "divided judgement, a public assessment and a private assessment which are fundamentally at odds" (Gilligan16). Even as the Bible advocates the separation of women from the social sphere, this very same disengagement prevents them from initiating social change. Segregated from participating in the world at large, women become unable to trust in their ability to "act on their own perceptions...and thus...the problem of interpretation thus enters the stream of development itself" (Gilligan 49).

For this reason, Laurence's protagonists find themselves profoundly influenced by their socially-conditioned reasoning. Their desire to amalgamate past beliefs with present realities is largely unrealizable. In his book Labeling Women Deviant, sociologist Edwin M. Schur addresses the impact of social groups on the individual. He argues, "Today sociologists recognize that deviance-designating goes well beyond such publicly proscribed and formally processed wrongdoing. It includes as well the numerous informal processes of routine social interaction through which individuals may be personally discredited or placed 'in the wrong'" (Schur 3). Hence, in the discussion of female anxiety and its origins, it is necessary to ascertain the role that the church and its community play in the development of female identity. The Bible instructs men and

women about how to live, about how to relate to their world and to each other, and what roles each should fulfill. "A 'woman of valor' was one who 'worketh willingly with her hands...giveth food to her household...reacheth forth her hands to the needy...girdeth her loins and maketh strong her arms'" (Prov. 31). Conversely, the husband is "'known in the gates, when he sitteth with the elders of the land'" (Prov. 31). Thus, as manifested by the small community in which the girls are raised, woman's authority is aligned with matters personal and domestic, effective "only within a circle of intimates" (Polster 114). Furthermore, gender role socialization leads individuals to adopt personal values and goals which may impede their ability to be autonomous. As Carol Gilligan points out, "the capacity for autonomous thinking, clear decision-making, and responsible action are those associated with masculinity and considered undesirable as attributes of the feminine self. The stereotypes suggest a splitting of love and work that relegates expressive capacities to women while placing instrumental abilities in the masculine domain" (Rollins 93). Rachel and Stacey's attitudes are clearly "engendered by the Judeo-Christian tradition...[and] constitute powerful barriers..." which limit their ability to ferret out some sign of female eminence in their lives (Meyers 73). Despite their efforts to reshape their own lives and those of their households, they are, at the same time, being recreated and reshaped by both "inward trajectories and outward influences" (Meyers 187).

The most obvious display of social conditioning in The Fire-Dwellers is Stacey's need to convince God of the validity of her role as a female. Although she denies the presence of faith in her life she continues to fear God's judgement on her children for her disobedience to the gender script: "Stacey, how dare you complain about even one single solitary thing? Listen, God, I didn't mean it. Just don't let anything terrible happen to any of them, will you? I *know* everything is all right. I wasn't meaning to complain. I

never will again, I promise" (72-3). Stacey is unable to detach her self-esteem and identity from her role in raising children. Subjected to the scrutiny of her peers and society at large, she even feels inadequate for not being able to "bake bread" (75). However, as much as her concessions to values which she does not *think* she upholds bothers her, she feels her choices in life are limited, predestined, (in a sense), and begins to question her ability to determine her own identity:

> I'm weak-minded, that's my trouble. Anything to look agreeable. Don't rock the boat. Why can't I? Why am I unable to? Help me. Who? How strange if Bertha and Tess were thinking the exact same thing. We could unite. This could start an underground movement. The Bluejay Crescent Irregulars. I can see it all now. We're too damn complacent. No- - we're not complacent one bit. We're just scared. Of what? Making a scene? Finding out we're alone after all - - better not to test it out?
>
> (82-3)

Rachel and Stacey fear that resisting social norms will result in isolation. However, as Edwin Schur suggests, those same norms cause isolation and create subjects for whom "systematized 'inferiorization'...easily becomes self-fulfilling and self-perpetuating " (Schur 37). Despite Rachel and Stacey's awareness that they are caught up in polarized thinking, neither understands how to get past it, and fears the possibility that once the biblical and social mandates are overthrown, there will be nothing beyond what they have been taught, to cling to. "Does one have to choose between two realities?...If you think you contain two realities, perhaps you contain none" (JG 139).

It is precisely the struggle to navigate between two equally valid and powerful realities that allows Laurence's protagonists to be placed in the precarious position of being mistaken for unbalanced women. However, their complicated, intricate personalities further illustrate Laurence's views on those who interact with their world, and those who simply accept things as they are. Thus, the complexity of Rachel and

Stacey contrasts with the flatness and one-dimensionality of characters such as Mrs. Kazlik, the mother of Rachel's lover Nick, and Matthew MacAindra, Stacey's father-in-law. Mrs. Kazlik, as Rachel notes, is "solid. Physically and spiritually...completely inner-directed...[with] this marvelous belief in her own intuition" (JG151). The solid identity that Rachel admires in Mrs. Kazlik is immediately perceived to be rooted in her ability "to rely on faith..." rather than logic (154). Similarly, Stacey finds in Matthew the sort of unquestioning faith which brings the stability she longs for, yet the taboos and prescriptions which she detests: "I sometimes see us like moles, living in our underground burrows, with eyes that can't stand any light. Once I thought it was only people like Matthew and my mother who had that kind of weak eyes. Now I know it's me, as much" (151). Part of each sister's transformation hinges on her ability to move beyond how she sees others. The one-dimensionality which Rachel and Stacey perceive in Mrs. Kazlik and Matthew is shattered by later revelations of their troubled lives. Mrs. Kazlik is resilient in the face of ethnic adversity and a dominant husband who denies her the luxury of sentimentality. Matthew must contend with his own feelings of failure for not passing his faith on to his family and struggles to maintain his pride when he also finds himself needing care as his body ages.

However, rather than portraying these peripheral characters as admirable, Laurence reveals the destructiveness, albeit unintentional, that they inflict upon the succeeding generation. For example, Stacey finds herself tormented over her inability to communicate with her husband Mac. Her resulting anger with his father Matthew stems from the religious traditions that he has imposed upon his son, and which have helped to shape her children's upbringing. However, despite her ability to perceive social control, Stacey, like Rachel, feels helpless to overcome it. She must negotiate from the margins, and in her daily experiences "feel both free and enchained, capable of shaping [her] own

future and yet confronted by towering, seemingly impersonal, constraints" (Fisher & Davis 66). Laurence does not pit man against woman, however. She is careful to demonstrate the misery of Mac, Stacey's husband, in his job and the effects of both religious and gender roles upon him: "If he doesn't deal with everything alone, no help, then he thinks he's a total washout. Thanks, Matthew- - you passed that one on all right, but at least you had your Heavenly Father to strengthen your right arm or resolve, to put the steel reinforcing in your spine. Mac's only got himself" (234).

Determining one's own identity in the face of several possible and often contradictory options makes working out a coherent, consistent identity very difficult. Male dominance and female subordination are easily identified but nearly impossible to dismantle. As pointed out in Negotiating at the Margins, much of what an individual does, thinks or says, is "reproduced 'voluntarily,' through our self-normalization to everyday habits of masculinity and femininity" (Fisher and Davis 305). This theory of socialization is in keeping with the writings of Laurence, then, for both female and male characters in her novels perpetuate negative evaluations of themselves for not meeting social standards. They deny the power of institutions in their lives, and for the most part, are successful in outwardly defying belief. However, internally, they remain subject to the injunctions against "[shining] fully, [embracing] joy, and [permitting] ourselves to have too great a life" (Williamson 28). Constantly subject to a "chorus of disapproval...from friends to family to people who don't even know..." them, each protagonist is filled with feelings of anxiety and anger at their limited agency (Williamson 28). Furthermore, they mistakenly believe that they can alter their dissatisfaction with their lives by achieving what Rosalind Coward deems "the essential attributes of femininity" (Coward 16). As Coward sees it, dissatisfaction is created and coveted by society. Commercial industry benefits from women's dissatisfaction, for by

playing upon assumptions of female pleasure and desire, it can offer the antidotes. On the other hand, by perpetuating women's belief that they are deficient, society does not have to worry about resistance to male privilege:

> Female desire is courted with the promise of future perfection, by the lure of achieving ideals - - ideal legs, ideal hair, ideal homes, ideal sponge cakes, ideal relationships. The ideals on offer don't actually exist except as the end product of photographic techniques or as elaborate fantasies...Things may be bad, life may be difficult, relationships may be unsatisfying, you may be feeling unfulfilled, but there's always promise of improvement...Female dissatisfaction is constantly recast as desire, as desire for something more, as the perfect reworking of what has already gone before - - dissatisfaction displaced into desire for the ideal.
>
> (Coward 13)

Likewise, Rachel and Stacey face physical, psychic and emotional separation. They become caught up in a perpetual process of deconstruction even as they construct the very bases of their selves and identity. As stated in psychopathological theory, "women are socialized to be unassertive, dependent, passive, or helpless, all of which behaviors lead to depression rather than action under stress. Rising expectations of women's roles with little opportunity to meet these expectations [results] in distorted cognitions on the part of women" (Franks 89). As Rachel acknowledges, there are many layers to the dreams that one fabricates in order to cope with reality. The challenge, then, is to see beyond the desires that form the female imperative to adapt, and to find the strength to face the consequences when one does not. The Cameron sisters do not come to understand themselves until they accept the ambivalence they feel regarding their life paths.

The problem of proper feminine behavior is exacerbated by rapidly changing

cultural norms coupled with traditional notions of acceptance and submission. Adrienne Rich summarizes the dilemma Rachel and Stacey face in forging their identities by pointing to the role mothers play in their daughter's socialization. She states what is clear to the reader in the case of Laurence's protagonists: "...daughters live in rage at their mothers for having accepted too readily and passively, whatever comes. A mother's victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman" (Rich 243). Rachel and Stacey experience the effects of their mother's traditional Presbyterian origin as tied to the larger, dominant cultural views of their community. Obsessed with maintaining the appearance of 'perfection', Mrs. Cameron keeps a perfect house, attends church, and covers up her husband's alcoholism. Her attitudes towards sex are revealed in her distaste for the naked body and the decrepit state of her contraceptive device, which smells "of decayed rubber and the musty sterility of antiseptics that went down the drain years ago" (JG 123). Furthermore, she passes on her resignation to the assigned roles for women by teaching her daughters to be "scared of not pleasing" from a young age (7). The result is the perpetuation of falseness. As an adult, Stacey finds herself wanting to maintain a perfect home and appearances. Still, she hears her mother's chastisement of her behavior, and recognizes the impossibility of meeting her expectations: "*Stacey, Stacey...* The soft persistent mew from upstairs, the voice that never tired of saying how others ought to be and never were" (21). Similarly, Rachel perceives herself to be "an anachronism" because she has not succeeded in securing a husband and family, values of utmost importance to her mother (123). Hence, each of the daughters perceives the workings of the larger community upon their mother and, consequently, upon themselves. In effect, Rachel and Stacey feel their needs have been traded for the needs of their ancestors and the community at large. The 'appropriate' tendency to be passive, accepting and to honor

the wishes of others before their own, leaves them isolated, alienated, and conflicted. Margaret Andersen, author of Mother was not a Person puts it succinctly by commenting that they, like many women, "prefer quiet slavery to hopeless rebellion" (Andersen 62).

Part of Rachel and Stacey's disillusionment stems from their expectations. For example, Stacey believes that she must stay young and beautiful forever, the perfect wife, lover, mother, and friend. As a twenty-three year old, she holds a romantic conception of marriage which pictures a husband and family as "the panacea for all life's ills, an idyllic state into which harassed men and women might withdraw from life's struggles to find solace and healing" (Andersen 63). As she discovers, however, relationships are enigmatic, and her reality cannot deliver the goods that her daydreams anticipate. Similarly, Rachel looks to marriage and relationships as her road to happiness and freedom. She faces the pain and reality of compromise and of wanting to please as she observes her students: "Interesting creatures, very young girls, often so anxious to please that they will tell lies without really knowing they're doing it. And yet I feel at home with them in a way I don't with the boys, who have begun to mock automatically even at this age" (JG 11). Rachel despises her inability to choose a destiny which will afford her freedom, and yet she, like the little girls she teaches, copies the dreams and ambitions of Snow White or movie doll-queens "straight from some ten-cent coloring book" (12). Her life becomes a "waking nightmare" (24), for the "shadow prince" of which she dreams eludes her (25). Caught between her desires and reality, expectations and disappointments, she no longer knows if she has the ability to perceive truth. Rachel describes herself as "a thin streak of a person" (35), "cold and detached from everything" (43).

Thus, the promises made by society to little girls, passed on from mothers to daughters, are most often unfulfilled. Rachel and Stacey experience firsthand the

contradiction between women's centrality and active role in creating society and their marginality in the meaning-giving process of interpretation and explanation. This is to say, while women possess the biological capacity to sustain the human race, little attention is paid to their opinions about how society ought to function. As a result, women pass on a received heritage to their audience, whether children or students, and communicate 'the truth' as they have been taught it. Although it can be assumed that Margaret Laurence does not equate biology with destiny, she demonstrates, as Freud does, that "reason is standpoint dependent" and "we see that which we are trained to see" (Johnson 62). As Mathew Martin states in "Dramas of Desire in Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God, The Fire-Dwellers,* and *The Diviners*",

> Laurence deconstructs, historicizes, and proposes alternatives to the Oedipus complex and its implications. In each novel, Laurence chooses a different location for the rearticulation of desire: Rachel reworks the structure of her desire in the personal sphere[and] Stacey stands on the thin line between public and private spheres and breaks out of her Oedipal cage by collapsing the opposition between the two.
>
> (Martin 58)

Therefore, while Freud organizes human action around phallocentric desire, Laurence once again stresses the importance of subjectivity, especially in the area of sexual desire. However, the two do agree that one's ability to reason is complexly formulated and prone to limitations. For the purpose of this analysis, Laurence points to Rachel and Stacey as victims of the scapegoating myth of the Fall which becomes "a pervasive victim-blaming ideology toward women" (Johnson 156). Although the time in which the novels are set evidenced significant countercultural trends against the Bible and Christian theology and practice, the realities of dichotomous thinking and 'appropriate' roles remain. "Mind versus nature and body, reason versus emotion and social commitment, subject versus object and objectivity versus subjectivity..." remain at the forefront of their reasoning

(Johnson 191). Religion, then, is an integral and integrative part of society rather than "a discrete cultural expression" (Meyers 22). However, Laurence does not postulate that it is solely responsible for identity, but posits it as a component of sociocultural identity. Although her works reject biological determinism or reductionism, she, like her protagonists, remains unable to suggest alternate theories about the foundations of patriarchy. As a result, she can only examine and criticize its effects upon the female psyche. Hence, her characters are conflicted, experience feelings of loss of control, and frequently find themselves isolated and depressed. Stacey's adaptation to the role of wife and mother clearly does not give her a stable and fulfilling identity any more than Rachel, who remains outside the role of wife. Both are extremely self-focused, and acutely aware of their derived identities. However, their daily actions are invaded by personal doubts and compromises which undermine their "ability to act on their own perceptions and thus their willingness to take responsibility for what they do" (Gilligan 49). The effects of socialization, then, reveal themselves most strikingly in Laurence's examination of Rachel and Stacey's "extreme internalization of institutionally mediated structures of desire" (Martin 60).

Therefore, Rachel and Stacey live in a perpetual state of cacophony. Their "self-talk...has an evaluative dimension as [they] pass judgement on [their] own activities and capabilities" (Faw 132). Rachel is perpetually performing for an audience, seeing herself from the outside and inside at once. She lives in fear of "the confident dismissal" (JG 61) of the townspeople's eyes is isolated by silence as there "isn't much to say about [herself], nothing that can be spoken" (JG 113). Rachel herself articulates the distorted perceptions that result from this isolation: "Something must be the matter with my way of viewing things. I have no middle view. Either I fix on a detail and see it as though it were magnified...or else the world recedes and becomes blurred, artificial, indefinite, an

abstract painting of a world" (91). Caught between wanting to be 'respectable' and needing to be seen as individuals and women, Rachel and Stacey become despondent and withdrawn. As Bowlby points out in Attachment and Loss, "appraising processes may or may not be felt..." and are 'ambiguous' due to the fact that they stem from 'unconscious feeling'" (Bowlby 31). This is to say, that despite Rachel and Stacey's desire to deny social prescriptions for their behavior, each appraises herself much the same as society would, for she has internalized its mores and expectations. Although Laurence does not favour an upheaval of all traditions, she demonstrates that any attempts to empower oneself as a female cannot be fully successful "*while leaving structural conditions unchanged*" (Kitzinger 43). Hence, while Laurence suggests that the individual can and must attempt to work upon herself, many of her problems are caused or exacerbated by her environment and efforts must be made to change the existing social order. Since decisions are always made within "a social and political context that weighs options in systematic ways - - some choices 'cost' more than others, and no choice is ever really 'free'" (Kitzinger 48).

Chapter Three
The 'abortive' female in A Jest of God: Social Conditioning versus Autonomy

Female sexuality, a central issue in Laurence's A Jest of God, is categorically assigned either an 'abortive' or 'creative' role by the community in which her protagonist Rachel lives. While Laurence reveals a vast amount of opposition to the unmarried, sexually active woman in her novel, she also takes great pains to illustrate and challenge this restrictive paradigm for appropriate sexual expression. Conversely, she offers Willard Siddley, Calla Mackie, and Nick Kazlik as a sort of 'unholy' trinity with which Rachel connects and finds a truer, deeper sense of her identity. In order to accomplish this task, Laurence reworks the traditional, Bible-based approach to female sexuality, and offers her reader a vast array of sexual 'misfits', who seek, and, to an extent, construct a space for themselves and their sexuality, which extends beyond the dichotomies of motherhood or spinsterhood. Much of the available literary criticism explores the Oedipal undercurrents in Laurence's novels and the way Freudian and Jungian theory inform her character and plot development. Mathew Martin is one such critic who pursues the Freudian presence in A Jest of God and The Fire-Dwellers. While his analysis is perceptive, he misses the irony with which Laurence approaches and subverts Freudian thinking. It is my contention, along with Angelika Maeser, that Laurence seeks to expose the process of autogenesis or self-creation as a "complex psychic interaction between the personal and collective aspects of history" (Maeser 151). Thus, in order to reclaim the fragments of her distinctly female identity, Rachel Cameron, Laurence's protagonist, must constantly renegotiate her female subjectivity, a process that

incorporates contradiction and alienation as unavoidable and valuable experiences.

"Sanctions against the expression of female sexuality for 'pleasure' rather than for reproduction..." have been an acute reality for women throughout all time (Lipshitz 2). Although Laurence clearly does not limit issues of female identity to sexuality, her novels suggest that sexuality is the catalyst for the multi-faceted oppression of women. Several articles deem her protagonist Rachel Cameron, a single young woman in her early thirties, as neurotic or even pathological because of her self-deprecating attitude and sexual phobias. However, what these critics fail to recognize is Laurence's anticipation of the reader's dislike for a woman who is clearly unable to cope with her 'roles'. It is precisely the tendency to quickly label and categorize against which she writes. As Elisabeth Potvin notes in "A Mystery at the Core of Life", "Laurence refused to be pigeonholed..." in either her writing techniques or her religious beliefs (Potvin 25). It is for this reason that she incorporates the reality of confusion and contradiction that is part of the evolution of determining one's own identity and destiny. By displaying the psyche of Rachel Cameron in all its contrariness, Laurence invites the reader to recognize the inevitable gap between what one intends to be, and what one truly is.

Rachel, for all her learning as a teacher, despairs quickly when old patterns and traditions, namely those surrounding marriage and sexuality, refuse to simply disappear. She comes to learn that, as a female, she cannot simply forge new patterns for living and male/female interaction. Rather, she must negotiate her role as a female within a "context of value ambiguity and structural contradictions" (McMahon 12). Set in the 1960s, A Jest of God focuses on the rapidly changing values of the time. The conformist

majority of the 1950s is caught between their values and those women who soon become the liberationist majority of the 1970s. It is, therefore, inaccurate to state, as Elisabeth Potvin does, that Rachel's transformation into full personhood stems directly from her ability to reject "the faith of the fathers" and destroy patriarchal values (JG 202). While Laurence does advocate a revision of established religious practices and attitudes, her novels investigate the layered and ambiguous effects of engrained traditions coupled with rapid moral revision. There is no simple choosing or throwing off of one identity to assume another.

As McMahon argues, "socialization, simplistically conceived as the internalization of the norms and values of a culture so as to provide a blueprint for living, [is] inadequate to explain the improvisational, creative, problematic, and negotiated nature of social interaction in general and the complexity of decisions facing women...in particular" (McMahon 15). Rachel, a character living in a time of great change in society, is caught between competing notions of what a woman *is* and what it is believed she *should be*. For Rachel, as other women in this period, it is a difficult business to separate out what is constant from what is historically changeable, and doubly difficult to pin down the origin of even those male/female differences that appear, on the average, to be fairly constant. While women of the fifties faced the problem of unoriginality and repression, they were sure of how they were expected to be. Rachel, on the other hand, must sift and judge the large issue of sex and gender without the benefit of a fixed representation of who she is supposed to be. Considering that the issue of appropriate female roles has been debated not only for decades but centuries, the task she faces of

interpretation and choice is not easily made. Although the social and sexual constraints that face her are less evident today, many of the expectations with which she struggles remain pertinent. Not all women recognize religion as a factor in their decision-making process. However, for a large number of women, the psychic constraints of religious mandates that categorize sexual behavior as abortive or creative remain real. Like Rachel, a woman may believe herself to be outside religious or normative thinking but believe that sexuality is best justified as a means to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28). Furthermore, while women have experienced increasing amounts of apparent emancipation, their "emotional slavery" has not been significantly diminished (West 95). Women still tend to perceive other women and themselves as selfless and nurturing, patient and demure . Thus, the issues Rachel faces as a female in the sixties are simply packaged differently today: "the pop songs still peddle the same old wares, the same self-deprecating attitudes, even if the language is hip and up-to-date" (West 95). The struggle to assume responsibility for one's own life, then, rests largely upon a woman's ability to resist both an overt and subconscious commitment to "amalgamate her inessential self to some higher being - - God or lover" in order to possess herself (West 96). This process, however, as Laurence demonstrates, is contradictory. It is through acknowledging and embracing the reality of tradition and religion, as well as the importance of the relative perspective of the individual, that her protagonists come to transcend black and white dichotomies in order to weave a colorful tapestry out of their experiences.

Although Laurence rejects biological determinism, her works offer the answer to

Freud's classic question, "What do women really want?"...[as] *everything*!- - the securities and comfort of the old, plus all the rights and benefits of the new" (West xi). In her role as teacher, Rachel Cameron enjoys the benefits of being single as well as the nurturing role of 'motherhood'. However, while she is 'successful' in her career, she believes herself to be incomplete due to her marital status. The 'comfortable' life she perceives her sister Stacey to have leaves her resentful, for Rachel is acutely aware of the sanctions against the "barren sister, the withered tree, the acidulous vessel under whose pale shadow we chill and whiten, ... the Spinster..." (Jeffreys 95). What she wants, is marriage and children. What she has, is isolation and dependence on an overbearing mother. Aware of the fact that she is a "social nemesis" , Rachel attempts to glean what respect she can from entering the realm of teaching (Jeffreys 95). This movement towards self-sufficiency that takes place before the beginning of the novel does not solidify Rachel's character, however. According to the psychological theory offered in Rollins' book Women's Minds Women's Bodies, teachers perpetuate institutionalized norms by communicating "*received knowledge*" (Rollins 72). According to this theory, women are socialized to place utmost value in helping people and supporting existing social systems. Hence, women largely dominate roles such as nurses and teachers because they are occupations that involve helping others. It is in this atmosphere of 'nurturance' that Rachel seeks, and to an extent finds, her ability to perform a 'creative' role in society.

Lacking children of her own, Rachel seeks validation through teaching. "Children...carry unique significance as validators not just of women's maternal

identities, but, by implication, of their characters as well" (McMahon 20). Thus, Rachel looks to her students for affirmation of her ability and desirability as a mother. It is for this reason that she fears James will discover her deep investment in his approval of her. She wonders "what might happen, if ever he or any of them discovered how I value him? It frightens me...James would be cruel, too, if he knew. He'd find some means of being scathing. He'd have to, out of some need to protect himself against me. That's what stings the most" (12). Thus, Rachel's fulfillment as a teacher is just as connected to her role as a 'creative' female as it is with being "the one with the power of picking any colored chalk out of the box and writing anything at all on the blackboard" (7). This 'power' derives from Rachel's ability to impart subjective and selective knowledge as a teacher. However, she is a teacher unable to teach with trite phrases and proverbs. She cannot pass on the secrets to success and happiness because she herself remains an outcast in the community and has not found these truths for herself. Rachel is troubled by her inability to break away from destructive practices and tendencies and by her unwillingness to enlighten her young girl students who are "often so anxious to please that they will tell lies without really knowing they're doing it" (11). Evidently, the results of gender prescriptions and social injunctions against unorthodox behavior bear their imprint on the youngest of students. However, Rachel is unable to free herself from the need to be validated as a nurturant female and cannot, as a result, provide an alternative to traditional approaches to learning and living. Instead, she looks to her students to validate her femaleness and her success at conforming to the appropriate nurturing role of women despite her awareness that it is destructive. Her desire to stop the debilitating

cycle does not prevent her from perpetuating it for her own needs. Thus, she sees her students as her "children" in order to appease her need to be loved and be seen as a 'creative' mother (8).

Rachel must contend with the valuing of her social capacity to bear and care for children, and yet resist seeing this capacity as definitive of what or who she is as a woman. Although Rachel's life is fraught with tension and doubt, Laurence does not present her as either a complete victim of her socialization, nor as weak because of her desire to mother. As a protagonist Rachel repeatedly demonstrates the frequent tensions in female identity, between a "need to claim the identity 'woman' and give it a "solid political meaning, and the need to tear down the very category 'woman' and dismantle its all-too-solid history" (McMahon 8). The history of social organization for the benefit of males rather than women creates an impersonalized and imposing atmosphere in which Rachel and Stacey must confront the landscape of their fears:

> The individualism and secularization of modern society has created a world in which it is increasingly difficult for people to feel at home and where public institutions now confront the individual as immensely powerful and alien. Thus, ironically, the same pressures that appear to threaten traditional family bonds and many women's commitments to children may also function to make family relationships and bonds with children more personally important than before. Relationships with significant others have become central to modern individuals' search for meaning - - a form of modern religion.
> (McMahon 2-3)

Rachel clearly uses her relationship with Nick as a substitute for religious sentiment. Nick allows her to feel the possibility of participation in the power of the very institutions that have excluded her. Despite her realization that Nick cannot "hold [her] so

reassuringly that nothing [will] ever go wrong again", Rachel continues to idealize their relationship by envisioning their marriage and children (99). Therefore, while the tendency to label women in terms of their marital and maternal status is viewed negatively by Laurence, Rachel demonstrates the personally contingent aspect of choice in roles. Although Rachel lives her life 'successfully' on her own, she is never quite able to overcome her belief that as a female, marriage and childbearing are taken for granted. Rachel is "addicted" to her fantasies of a loving home for herself and her husband (145). What she envisions is a partnership based on two complete individuals united by their mutuality and respect: "The house is not large, but that is all right. They do not need a large house, *both of them working* and *she not able to spend much time in housework.* The house is not in a city - - very far from that sharpness and coldness...He loves this place..." (145 italics mine). Therefore, despite critics' tendency to label Rachel as disconnected from reality, her daydreams reveal more than a desire for romance. Rachel displays progressive thinking in her envisioning of a marriage based on equality and shared freedom.

Motherhood becomes representative of love and acceptance, invested meaning, a validation of her sexual desire. Furthermore, it allows Rachel to avoid taking risks. Should she become pregnant outside marriage, she is immoral. However, should she be married and become pregnant, she fears no censorship or categorization other than that of mother. The temptation to let her decisions be made for her by a man is a very seductive temptation, for it easily masquerades as a virtue. Laurence focuses upon the dire effects of such an outlook, particularly in The Fire-Dwellers where Stacey settles for abnormal quietism as a way of avoiding the risk and potential isolation that might result from opposing her husband. Similarly, Rachel attempts to keep to herself her ambivalent feelings about the possibility of pregnancy from Nick. Given the right circumstances,

pregnancy would be eagerly anticipated. However, Rachel is aware of the temporary nature of the relationship: "What if it happens? When am I due? Not for another two weeks. That's the worst time, too, the most likely, right in the middle of the month. What if? That's crazy...What would I do though? What would become of me? Maybe - - No, he wouldn't...A life is too long for reproach" (102). Coupled with the realization that Nick does not desire a permanent relationship or children is Rachel's attempt to refute her fear that she may become like Sapphire Travis: "I don't have to concern myself yet for a while, surely. Thirty-four is still quite young..." (8). The deep yearning that Rachel expresses for marriage and children is closely aligned with her realization that she possesses sexual urges, urges which she believes can only be legitimated in the union of marriage. As a result, she lives a displaced life, a life with its deepest security found in the classroom.

Naturally, Rachel develops her identity within the context of her peers. Fascinated by the physicality and self-assuredness of males, she unwillingly develops an attraction to Willard Siddley. Laurence cleverly associates Rachel's awakening into sexual desire with Eve's transgression in the garden of Eden, for she depicts Willard as a "reptilian" creature, who "knows all about [her]" and is eager to facilitate her movement from innocence into experience (14). Initially, Rachel is unaware of the effect Willard's presence has upon her. She believes she is uncomfortable in his presence solely because of his misguided authority over her. However, her desire for freedom which includes sexual freedom "requires defiance of male authority figures, secular and divine" (Potvin 26). Willard's "spotted furry hands" both repulse and attract her, and she begins to question the ambiguity of her feelings (15). Aware of her uneasiness in his presence, Rachel becomes sensitive to Willard's vulnerability. As Angelika Maeser notes, he "creates and projects [his] own myth of meaning..." in order to sustain his belief that his

identity is congruent with accepted notions of wholeness (Maeser 152). Rachel is drawn to his vulnerability and begins to daydream about his personal life: "...his hands on the desk seem to be drawing my eyes. With them he touches his wife, and holds the strap to strike a child..." (50). Struck by guilt for her fascination with Willard, Rachel is disgusted by her sexual urges. She comments, "My own stare repulses me, and yet I'm reassured by it. However unacceptable it may be, to want to brush my fingertips across the furred knuckles of someone I don't even like, at least they're a man's" (50). Thus, Rachel's social conditioning begins to break down in the face of personal desire. Her transformation begins as dependence and subservience is countered by her desire for autonomy and personal satisfaction. However, Rachel considers her desires anomalous and deviant because they take her outside traditional gender divisions and awaken her to the possibility of nonprocreative sexual encounters.

"The woman, because she is living on the periphery of the power structures that determine her life, is able to have the ironic vision; she is the victim but also the potential rebel against the institutionalized humanity of her society" (Maeser 157). Having developed the alienated and disjointed presence of Rachel Cameron, Laurence introduces Calla, a woman who is able to subvert traditional female expectations. For example, Calla exudes femininity to the extreme in her brash use of color and artistic creativity. Her use of the color lilac symbolizes her identification with and appreciation of a world outside black and white thinking. It further points to her lesbian identity, for lilac was the color chosen to represent the homosexual movement at this juncture in history. As Diana Relke notes in her article "Pillar, Speaker, Mother: The Character of Calla in *A Jest of God*", "during the 1960s when *A Jest of God* was written, the color lavender was adopted by the gay liberation movement as symbolic of its struggle for recognition" (Relke 36). While Rachel is unable to break away from her stilted and stagnant existence and

imagines herself to be glued to "a gigantic ferris wheel...or wired, like paper, like a photograph, insubstantial, unable to anchor [herself]..." (25), Calla is brash and self-assured, able to speak "without apology" (137). The constructed nature of female identity and motherhood is demonstrated by her presence, for although she is female, Calla does not take heterosexual marriage or motherhood for granted. Rather, because her homosexuality is outside the accepted context for femininity, she sees motherhood as a gift rather than a right. However, she remains bound by the same stigma that haunts Rachel. As a nonmother and a single woman, her unbridled sexuality is a threat to the community. As a lesbian she is seen as an improperly sexualized woman, and leads an isolated life.

Laurence once again draws upon Biblical and symbolic meanings attached to the sexuality and purity of women. Her inclusion of a lesbian character named Calla whose wisdom and connection to spirituality are sincere, displays her desire to expand upon what the Bible would hold to be unorthodox sexuality. Calla's name conjures up images of purity and beauty, thereby forcing the reader to question judgments regarding the 'purity' of homosexual versus heterosexual behavior. Paradoxically, "Calla detests her name" (15). She has no regard for imposed meanings, nor for latent desires. As Rachel notes, "Nothing less lily-like could possibly be imagined. She's a sunflower, if anything, brash, strong, plain, and yet reaching up in some way" (15-6). Thus, Laurence posits Calla as an unremitting, defiant female who revolts against the biblical prescriptions for women to "learn in quietness and full submission..." and above all, to "be silent" (1 Tim. 2:11-12). Not only does Calla deny silence and submission, she belongs to a charismatic church where they "sing the hymns like jazz, and people rise to testify..." (16). By including Calla in her analysis of female identity, Laurence is able to demonstrate the tendency to place fixed meanings on people. She further demonstrates the limited

applications of Biblical truths by investing insight and wisdom into the novel's most 'ridiculous' and laughable character. In this manner, Calla manifests the impossibility of categorizing God's intentions and purpose by human standards: "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things - - and the things that are not - - to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him" (1 Cor. 1:27-29). While Rachel has been taught by her Presbyterian forbears to remain in control of her body and all her faculties at all times, Calla's participation in the Tabernacle not only gives but encourages her ability to celebrate and testify to the depth of her emotion and belief. Laurence once again draws upon the Bible to subvert accepted religious mandates for the silence of women.

> And in those last days it shall be, God declared, that I will *pour out my Spirit upon all flesh*, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams; yea, and on my manservants *and maidservants* in those days I will pour out my spirit; *and they shall prophesy*"
> (Acts 2:17-18 italics mine).

Unexposed to the possibility of unrestrained expression, Rachel finds Calla's ability to be forthright and uninhibited intrusive, for Calla wants to initiate Rachel into the ecstasy of unrestrained living. She stands in contrast to the stagnancy of Rachel's life and way of thinking about heterosexism and Biblical norms.

Laurence once again employs imagery to engage her reader's understanding of wisdom. Calla is described as a "wind-disheveled owl..." who is "comically earnest" (32). It is Calla's honesty, her raw emotion and connectedness to her own identity that repel Rachel. Once again, Rachel's social conditioning comes between herself and her need to reach out: "Mother thinks the whole thing is weird in the extreme, and as for

anyone speaking in a clarion voice about their beliefs - - it seems indecent to her, almost in the same class as what she calls foul language. Then I get embarrassed for Calla, and ashamed of being embarrassed, and would give anything to shut her up...or stop minding" (32). The tabernacle, with its invitation to be "*risen and reborn*" repudiates Rachel's understanding of spirituality as something beyond oneself, alien and unapproachable. Her discomfort with ecstatic utterances in the tabernacle is coupled with her recognition that communication between individuals in any language is difficult. God does not bring her peace, but confusion: "All I can visualize are the dimly remembered faithful of Corinth, each crying aloud his own words, no one hearing anyone else, no one able to know what anyone else was saying, unable even to know what they themselves were saying" (42). Rachel is clearly aware of her inability to understand herself or to connect with others; thus she does not find solace and peace in God or in the tabernacle as Calla does. Therefore, Rachel is angry when she is solicited into expression. Rachel's speaking in tongues initiates her into awareness, an awareness which she cannot yet accept. It is this moment, this breaking forth into voice, that signals her Dionysian release from the bonds of silence and alienation. "Chattering, crying, ululating, the forbidden transformed cryptically to nonsense, dragged from the crypt, stolen and shouted, the shuddering of it, the fear, the breaking , the release of grieving - -" all of these acts signal the emergence of her person, her awakening from the death-like, stagnant womb of her mother and her home (JG 43). Thus, Rachel is caught up in a sexual 'revolution' in all its complexity and ambiguity: "sexual satisfaction for women, but satisfaction proclaimed and defined mainly by men; the right to contraception and abortion, but only when necessary; active sexuality justified because it [is] healthy and potentially procreative; orgasm as a eugenic measure" (Kitzinger 52). She becomes aware of her "power", although it is "reformulated as an awareness, an affirmation, a

belief that [she] already [has] power, albeit power that the culture does not recognize" (Kitzinger 41).

Calla exudes vibrant sexuality. She is both spiritually and sexually mature, which makes her a representation of a cultural taboo. Furthermore, she is an impressive presence, has an audible voice, and does not perpetuate the ideal of the demure female. Throughout the novel she is a threat to Rachel, who approaches her sexuality as something that pervades her body almost in spite of her best efforts to deny it. Rachel's involuntary sexual desire is signalled in her efforts to deny her need for masturbation in order to sleep. "I didn't. I didn't. It was only to be able to sleep...Am I unbalanced? Or only laughable? That's worse, much worse." (25). Unable to legitimize her desires in a heterosexual relationship, Rachel is threatened by Calla's sexual advance as she fears she may have inadvertently communicated lesbian desire. Calla's sexual advance demands Rachel's movement from passivity into unapologetic emotion:

> My drawing away is sharp, violent. I feel violated, unclean, as though I would strike her dead if I had the means. She pulls away then, too, and looks at me with a kind of bewilderment, a pleading apology, not saying a word. How ludicrous she looks, kneeling there, her wide face, her hands clasped anxiously. My anger feels more than justified, and in some way this is a tremendous relief.
>
> (44)

Part of Rachel's disgust for Calla stems from the fact that, until this point, she has been able to feel superior to her. Calla's sexual invitation forces Rachel to acknowledge that her sexual and maternal bereavement is visible to others. As James King notes, Calla opens Rachel's curtains both literally and figuratively, thus forcing her to expose her hidden sexual impulses (March 12, 1997). As a result she is very angry and fearful, for apart from being single and childless, the only thing worse than being a spinster, in her mind, is being a lesbian. Rachel is upset by the notion that her sexual and spiritual needs

have been perceived by Calla. Furthermore, she is incensed by the realization that she has been mistaken for a lesbian. God becomes a "brutal joker" in her eyes, for the sexual connection she has sought has been offered in such an unexpected and unacceptable way (48). Rachel's construction of self is dependent on the accepted, normalized standards of femininity. Therefore, Calla's advance denies her the ability to think of herself as a specific kind of person. Her interest in matters sexual is inseparable from her interest in defining herself as a "normal" person. Rather than allowing Rachel entry into acceptance, Calla unwittingly initiates her into "the symbolic center of social anarchy and moral deviance" (Dean 36). She has both literally and figuratively identified Rachel as a "sterile, ...nonprocreative woman" in the eyes of society (Dean 39). Furthermore, she complicates Rachel's world by destroying conventional or traditional methods for understanding the female role. What she replaces them with is ambivalence, and conventional femininity is lost. Calla calls "into question the naturalness- - the proper place and different constitution - - of femininity itself" (Dean 42).

What must not go unnoticed, however, is how Laurence at once conjures up a favorable and yet pejorative image of Calla. She is "mannish, sexually aggressive, atavistic, and sterile" and as a lesbian, destroys the "line of demarcation" between the genders established by her contemporaries (Dean 44). If masculinity and femininity hinge on the assumption of heterosexuality, each loses its signifying power if blurred by homosexuality. Calla's overture confuses Rachel who has only drawn upon accepted cultural meanings of what it is to be a woman. Furthermore, from Rachel's perspective, Calla's presence signals a perceptible exclusion from heterosexual and familial responsibility. Laurence presumably intends Calla's sexuality to be seen as authentic self-expression in an inauthentic, repressive culture. However, Rachel remains subject to her mother's vision of sexuality in which "any assertive woman, but especially a sexually

assertive woman, is an unnatural and perverted woman" (Schwartz 139). Therefore, her sexuality must remain hidden in order to maintain some semblance of respectability. Contrary to Diana Relke who argues that "Calla's sublimation of her sexual desire is, in many ways, a triumph..." because she "avoids the fate of her unfortunate double, Sapphire Travis", Laurence encourages the reader to acknowledge Calla's attempts to express her sexuality (Relke 40). If "the main thing is for a woman to be successful in her gender" Calla's denial of her lesbian identity is, indeed, a triumph in that it allows her to maintain the benefits of public approval (Schwartz 185). However, Laurence clearly denies prescriptions for 'acceptable' behavior. Thus, Relke's assertion is reductive in its assertion that Laurence includes a lesbian character in order to show the benefits of "rechannelling, rather than repressing" sexual energy (Relke 40). Calla does not substitute spirituality for sexuality; rather, she combines the two in ecstatic expression.

Laurence further posits Calla as an alternative to the notion that only a maternal woman can fulfill a nurturing role. Rachel's friendship with Calla exposes her to the possibility of maintaining a healthy and nurturing relation to children, despite the fact that they are not biologically her own. Calla calls her students "her kids" yet knows how to feel "only a rough amused affection and irritation towards any or all of them, equally" (8). She is able to do so because she does not base her identity on her career nor on outside approval. She does not feel powerless, and so she does not cling to the notion of motherhood as her destiny. She denies the shame that entraps Rachel, and embraces her feelings. As a result, Calla is an integral part of Rachel's sexual and spiritual maturation.

The transformation that begins to take place in Rachel is facilitated (but not dependent upon) her entry into sexuality. At thirty-four she remains a virgin, and longs to know the love of a man. Once again, social norms are at work in Rachel's thinking, for even in her fantasies, she will "only [allow] this sexual message to be transmitted in

contexts where it will be received responsibly, that is, in heterosexual, potentially permanent situations" (Coward 42). As several articles on A Jest of God suggest, Laurence's inclusion of Rachel's intricate and wildly sensual dreams serves to demonstrate the repressed nature of her desire (Martin, Legendre). It is only in her dreams that the perfect man appears: the man who can fit her needs while fulfilling his proper social role by pursuing marriage. Rachel's discussions with her mother further reinforce her social conditioning, for her mother makes it clear that any behavior which is perceived to transgress acceptable standards becomes town gossip. As Mrs. Cameron notes, Cassie Stewart is the talk of the town and a disgrace *to her mother* because she is pregnant out of wedlock, worse still, with twins: "The girl isn't married and no one even in prospect..." she laments, "What a heartbreak for her mother" (64). It is clear that in Mrs. Cameron's view, a girl's first concern when confronted with a moral decision should be to preserve not only her own integrity, but especially her family's. She consoles herself, and at the same time sends a clear message to Rachel regarding 'appropriate' sexual behavior, by expressing relief at the fact that she "never had a moment's worry with either of her daughters." (64).

With this in mind, Rachel is wary upon reuniting with her old schoolmate Nick Kazlik. She has learned appropriate attitudes and social responses from watching other people, specifically females, and profits from their experiences. Thus, she immediately begins to assess Nick's intentions and calls upon old labels given to his family by the town to lessen his worth and her personal interest in his presence: "Nestor Kazlik's son. The milkman's son. It's as though I've thought in Mother's voice" (70). Although Rachel is aware of her desire to connect with a man, she finds it difficult to assert herself, even in her thoughts. She lacks autonomy and remains absorbed by her fears of how she appears to others. However, Laurence does not present Rachel as a mere reflection of her

upbringing nor of the narrow-minded community in which she is raised. Laurence demonstrates the complexity of Rachel's slow progress into an autonomous woman who thinks for herself, even though she instinctively repeats old patterns. Rachel reminds herself that "the Scots knew how to be almightier than anyone but God. She was brought up that way, and my father too, and I, but by the time it reached me, the backbone had been splintered considerably" (71). Thus, when Nick asks Rachel out on a date, she is able to respond positively. This does not mean, however, that she does not immediately anticipate and assess his intentions. She is very careful to project a 'respectable' image so as not to reveal her hidden 'spinster' passions. She also asks 'permission' of a sort from her mother to go on the date. However, despite her best efforts to restrain herself from becoming involved with Nick, his touch clearly awakens her desire. Unlike Calla's unsolicited advances, Nick's require Rachel to assume the responsibility and liberation of choice. As she has been unable to vocalize her desire outside dreams up to this point, Rachel is reluctant to become accountable for her actions and finds herself rationalizing away her responsibility: "I am - - as though undecided. But it's unreal anyway. If it isn't happening, one might as well do what one wants..." (78). However, it is an important step for Rachel, as she struggles to accept and embrace her right as a female to love and desire another person. For this reason, she is surprised when Nick pulls away from their embrace, and is angered when she senses his amusement at her sexual responsiveness: "I resent his surprise, if it is that...I can want, too...why do people assume it's so different for men?" (78) Rachel's ability to see the duplicitous nature of desire is awakened by Nick's surprise. She experiences firsthand the reality of a sexual double standard in which men see women as objects of desire and may engage their sexuality as they please while women, although they are trained to foster men's desire, must remain virginal and act as the gatekeepers of morality.

"Sexuality...[is] one of the primary ways in which we define our intelligibility, our identity, our experience - - both private and public- - of who we are" (Dean xiii-xiv). Hence, Rachel's awakening into desire does not facilitate her immediate liberation from the proprieties and burdens that fetter her. Rachel is clearly distressed by her inability to express her sexual desire openly, and frets about the effect it may have on Nick's pursuit of the relationship. Her preconceived notions of a man's insatiable sexual desires are evidenced in her carefully thought out fantasies: "He's probably taking out some teenager now. Someone pretty, and obliging. A girl who is able to do everything easily" (85). Once again, Rachel is caught in the bind of dichotomous thinking and responds in confusion. Her ambivalent position with regard to sexuality and autonomy is clear. Despite her desire to rid herself of her virginity and enter into a consensual sexual relationship, she remains bound to the notion that premarital sexuality represents moral deviance.

Laurence by no means simply equates Rachel's acknowledgment of her desire or her movement into sexuality with autonomy or a solid identity. It is merely one step along the way. However, she does criticize the myth of a binary opposition between purity and impurity. As the reader is repeatedly brought to see, Rachel lives in a state of corporeal fragmentation. She is caught up in a process of mourning for a lost world in which her mother's values are unquestionable. Her mourning becomes to her mind a testimony to the naturalness or 'truth' of the foundations on which social order once rested. However, as signaled by Rachel's alienation from the young teenage girls at the Regal cafe, Rachel is not able to inhabit the 'modern' world either. Thus, she must constantly negotiate between conflicting realities. While the new commitment to female equality allows her to actively teach in the community, social expectations and conservative mores exclude her from indulging in sexual freedom because of her marital,

non-creative status. Hence, she attempts to deny her desire, believing she can will it to stop. "I'm not worked up in the slightest" she tells herself (88). Her insecurity about her desirability as a woman further conjures up repressive intentions, for she begins to fear that she may somehow remain outside "normal" heterosexual thought: "Could a person be Calla's way, without knowing it, only it might be obvious to a man, say, or at least sensed, and then he wouldn't - - no that's impossible" (89). Rachel must deny any connection to Calla and cling to the notion that she and Nick are meant to be together, because their sexual union corroborates her belief that she is autonomous and can participate in a heterosexual marriage. She herself is aware that she *needs* their relationship to fulfill certain expectations in order to overcome self-doubt. "Why do I want to go so quickly, to get to know what he really feels?" (91) she queries. Thus, as Susan Lipshitz states in her book Tearing the Veil, "sanctions against the expression of female sexuality for 'pleasure' rather than for reproduction occur at the levels of fantasy and the unconscious as well as in the social organization of legitimate inheritance through the family, law, etc." (2). In order to justify the sexual liaison Rachel knows will ensue, she must first prove to herself that all is in order with Nick's intentions.

Rachel's sexual desire eventually takes over. However, it is closely followed by her desire for autonomy. She expresses envy at Nick's freedom and his resistance to the harsh standards of the community (93). She admires his ability "to speak out..." and to express emotion, for in her family, "you didn't get emotional. It was frowned upon" (94). Rachel's realization that she lacks autonomy is simultaneous with her realization that she has a punishing and self-hating relationship with herself and her body. As she and Nick become passionate, she hears her mother's "archaic simper voice, cautioning [her] sixteen-years' self," that virginity is "*A woman's most precious possession*" (96). Although Rachel defies her mother's instruction, she must admit to herself that she is

"neither one way or another, not buying her view but unable to act on [her] own" (96). Her inability to engage in casual sex with Nick does not stem from her age or situation, but from her inability to decide whether she is able to accept her status as an adult and her responsibility to handle the consequences of her decision.

Although Rachel's initiation into autonomy is advanced by her relationship with Nick, Laurence reminds us of the limits of agency by repeatedly illustrating that our actions "remain embedded in a nexus of normalizing power and the social realities of domination and subordination" (Fisher & Davis 17). Hence, although Rachel's actions and verbal resistance to her mother signal her willingness to confront and discursively penetrate social norms, she continues to reproduce the behavior she abhors, and as such, finds herself frustrated. Even in the process of sexual intercourse, she finds herself unable to deny her conscience: "I can't help this shuddering that is not desire, that's something I don't understand. I don't want to be this way. It's only my muscles, my skin, my nerves severed from myself, nothing to do with what I want to be. Forgive me. Forgive me" (97-8). Laurence leaves Rachel's pleading for absolution ambiguous, hence opening up the possibility for a number of interpretations. But whether Rachel is asking for God's forgiveness, Nick's or her own, she is clearly unable to rid herself of the belief that sex is for love, and vice versa. Nick's reassurance to her that he does not think she's "a tramp" is hardly a help (98). It only serves to further underline the nature of their relationship. "I can't look at him, can't speak of it like this. Not yet. Give me a little time. I'll get used to it, this practicality, these necessities, this coldness. Why should this hurt? What do I expect? To have him say he loves me? That he'll never say" (99). Evidently, Rachel's sense of propriety breaks into her consciousness and denounces the casual nature of the relationship. Its testimony is clear: Rachel needs to be seen as a virtuous woman.

After several sexual encounters with Nick, Rachel takes responsibility for the fact that she has engaged in intercourse and intends to continue to do so. Yet she cannot simply go to the nearest drug store and purchase the necessary contraceptive items, for she will face social stigma for being an unmarried, sexually deviant woman. Consequently, she ventures into her mother's dresser to escape social censure, and finds "a red tube like catheter, a bag like a rubber udder...undoubtedly, some antique contraption" (101). Although the idea of using her mother's decaying birth control device appalls her Rachel has few options. As she notes, she cannot go elsewhere: "Dr. Raven has known me since I was a child. I can't see myself going to him. It's out of the question. Or going to the Manawaka Pharmacy, where everybody knows me" (102).

Despite the revulsion Rachel feels at the coldness and practicality of her sexual relationship with Nick, her sexual agenda of marriage and children gives her the impetus to not only pursue but also fiercely protect her right to autonomy. As Judy Kearns argues in her article,

> The stereotypic fantasies of courtship and marriage...are not primarily the product of a frustrated spinster's distorted view of reality (and thus a grotesque vision for which she must bear responsibility) but instead the results of the images of contented womanhood which Rachel has absorbed along with her mother's advice about the economics of relationships between the sexes.
>
> (Kearns 110)

As is evidenced throughout the entire novel, Mrs. Cameron controls Rachel through guilt and manipulation. However, having accepted her status as an adult and the possibility of release from her stagnant home, Rachel begins to demonstrate will and intention.

Although her mother uses every tactic to keep Rachel from going out with Nick, Rachel exhibits a "newfound ruthlessness..." from which she "won't turn back" (107).

Rachel has not abandoned her old ways of thinking; however, she actively resists the urge to resort to ready compliance at any cost to herself. That same evening, after she makes love with Nick, she states, "I have changed" (109). Her sexual curiosity has given her a greater ability to know herself and see herself from another's point of view. Her transformation is positive, for while she also considers herself from the outside at the beginning, she imagines the gazes of others to be critical and deprecating. At this point in the novel she has gone beyond her former way of thinking to enjoying herself and her body. Her desire to fulfill a 'creative' role, however, remains: "*Give me my children*" (154).

Thus Rachel begins to move beyond the role of 'moral' slave. She achieves what Stella Browne calls the ultimate realization for women; to "admit [her] joy and gratitude for the beauty and pleasure of sex" (Jeffreys 52). Laurence does not suggest that Rachel can or does completely renegotiate the terms of her existence, or successfully overthrow the conventions that bind her. She does, however, demonstrate that Rachel's entry into sexual activity is simultaneous with her self-awareness as it allows her to connect with her hidden desires. As Rachel finds, moments of clarity and insight are not always positive, but nonetheless empowering. For example, she must acknowledge that "Nick couldn't make himself care about something, if he didn't. Nor about someone either." (118). On the other hand, however, Rachel takes responsibility for her role in the relationship and sees the internal barriers that she erects: "I don't care who knows", she tries to convince herself, "I do, though. That's the trouble. If it's concealed and surreptitious, it's I who make it so" (115). Having acknowledged the truth of her plight, Rachel is free to pursue her future in a new way, for she gains a sense that "through her own actions she can bring about desired events in her life" (Rollins 242). This realization frees her from the manacles of depression and self-doubt that plague her throughout her

life. She herself recognizes, "I've felt a damn sight better since I stopped considering my health. That's interesting. I *have* stopped. I didn't know" (121).

Although Rachel emerges from the death-like womb[2] of her home, she remains an 'abortive' or nonprocreative woman by the standards of her society. However, Rachel is partially successful in anchoring herself by the end of the novel. To the extent that she becomes aware of the expectations that have driven her behavior and sustain her misery, Rachel is able to become autonomous. She stops apologizing for who she is, but more important, stops punishing herself for her status as a woman. As Adrienne Rich points out, women must learn to refute terms like ""barren" or "childless" [which] are used to negate any further identity" (Rich foreword). Thus, Rachel's acceptance of the reality that she is not carrying a child but a benign tumor allows her to come to terms with the prospect of losing access to both the "symbolic and concrete social experiences available to those in a society who become pregnant and give birth" (McMahon 82-3). Having ceased to blame herself for her inability to comply with the identity of motherhood and all its implications, Rachel re-evaluates her life. She is able to see that she, like her father, is able to "do what [she wants] most, even though [she] might not have known it..." before (206). Although what comes of her relationship and 'pregnancy' isn't what she bargains for, Rachel finds solace in her newly formed and evolving identity. Her

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[2] Laurence presents the atmosphere in which Rachel lives as a stagnant womb. In this atmosphere of perpetual death (signified by the presence of the funeral parlor) she is suspended between life and death. Those who are living in the Cameron house are constantly associated with death. The father spends most of his life with corpses and remains a strong presence after his death (20), Mrs. Cameron uses funerals for her entertainment (86), and Rachel dreams of death as a release from life (65). Furthermore, when Rachel imagines the possibility of a fetus living within her, she is sure that "a thing like that- to grow a child inside one's structure and have it born alive...could [never] happen" for her (124). It is only at the novel's end that Rachel can enter the funeral parlor and cease to be tormented by death. It is by accepting death that she overcomes its power.

acceptance of the long process towards self-actualization allows her to reunite with her community, including Calla, Willard, and Hector. By overcoming her fear of cultural taboos and labels, she is able to transcend her former ways of thinking and develop a plan for her future.

Rachel's realization that the community of Manawaka believes her to have had an abortion makes her decision to leave the small town appropriate. Although she resists labels but is still affected by them, she decides to let the community flounder in their gossip and believe what they will, for their inability to see beyond her 'creative' or 'abortive' role as a female is an issue she has personally overcome (207). Thus, by refusing to defend herself against the presumptions of the community, Rachel illustrates her willingness to break the bonds of tradition that prevent her from walking towards her future. Rachel also embraces the ambiguous feelings she has towards her Presbyterian and Scottish heritage, but more important, towards her role as a nurturing female. She fulfills a 'creative' 'motherly' role for her "elderly child", and ceases to see herself as a fragmented object for others' consumption (208). Having come to terms with her loss and the need to reach beyond her community's limited ways of thinking, she embraces the future in waking dreams:

> Where I'm going, anything may happen. Nothing may happen. Maybe I will marry a middle-aged widower, or a longshoreman, or a cattle-hoof-trimmer, or a barrister, or a thief. And have my children in time. Or maybe not...It may be that my children will always be temporary, never to be held. But so are everyone's.
>
> (208-9)

Although Rachel continues to seek sexual and social fulfillment within a marital context, she ceases to restrict her possibilities for relationships by labeling certain people acceptable and others unacceptable. Having realized the depth of Calla's friendship and wisdom, she acknowledges, "What is so terrible about fools? I should be honored to be

of that company" (205). She even enjoys the possibility that she too may become eccentric , finding pleasure in herself and the laughter of children (209). Finally, she accepts the ambiguity of her identity, and no longer finds its uncertainty appalling, but sees it as a means of developing herself. "I will be different" she concedes, but "I will remain the same. I will still go parchment-faced with embarrassment,...I will be lonely..., I will grow too orderly,...I will be afraid" (209). However, she will also survive, maintain a salient personal and social identity, and pursue love. In short, Rachel Cameron finds the ability to be intimate and ironically detached, to embrace and yet reassess the past. She must "disentangle a network of temporal pressures from personal and ancestral pasts, from family and inheritance, from historical and legendary traditions" (Kertzer 267). By disengaging, Rachel is able to enjoy the paradoxical nature of her humanity. She is, as Adrienne Rich celebrates, "a woman giving birth to [herself]. Such an image implies a process which is painful, chosen, purposive: the creation of the new" (Rich 157).

Chapter Four
The 'creative' female in The Fire-Dwellers: The viability of maintaining autonomy within the institutions of Marriage and Motherhood

"You are thoroughly dispensable except for bearing children. Your youth is the measure of your worth, and your age is the measure of your worthlessness. The world as it is has very little use for your womanhood. Do not look to the world for your sustenance or for your identity as a woman because you will not find them there" (Williamson 21). Margaret Laurence demonstrates the inherent contradictions and ambiguities confronted by the female subject in her daily roles and activities and explores the psychological effects of devaluation.

In her novel The Fire-Dwellers, Laurence focuses on the plight of Stacey MacAindra, a woman struggling to find her individual path to autonomy within the institutions of marriage and motherhood. Expectations of traditional motherhood and liberationist movements collide and contend for primacy in her life, making any clear path to 'successful' femininity indecipherable. Bombarded by institutionalized mores, tenuous relationships and conflicting desires, Stacey develops many neuroses that prevent her from actively engaging in life. She is burdened by competing responsibilities that include overcoming social expectations of the 'good' mother, and is persecuted by personal doubts over her success at simply being Stacey, a woman. Unable to get the input she needs from family and friends, Stacey reaches out to Buckle Fennick and Luke. Her experiences with these men enable her to regain a sense of her former sexual autonomy as she searches for sexual reciprocity. Furthermore, each relationship forces her to acknowledge the depth of her desire for intimacy. Although she ultimately returns to her role as a wife and mother, Stacey learns a simple yet fundamental truth: "I was wrong to think of the trap as the four walls. It's the world. The truth is that I haven't been Stacey Cameron from one hell of a long time now. Although in some ways I'll always be

her, because that's how I started out." (276).

It is readily apparent that, despite the fulfillment of her dream of being a wife and mother, Stacey has a fragmented identity which results in what psychologists call "a constant process of contestation" (Fisher & Davis 62). From the outset of the novel Stacey demonstrates a lack of confidence in her abilities as a woman due to a lack of external resources and experiences. Education for women in decades past has been seen primarily as a means by which to meet or attract a suitable marriage partner, or, as in the case of Rachel, an alternative for finding a job should a female fail to marry. The double message Stacey receives, therefore, (get educated, but be prepared to give it up once married) results in isolation and low self-esteem, as well as a diminished capacity to gain autonomy. Stacey clearly adapts to this mode of thinking as a young woman. She drops out of school at an early age to get married and sees going back as "fees wasted" (8). School should not interfere with her 'more important' duties of motherhood.

Convinced that she is incapable of gaining autonomy through taking courses like "Mythology and Modern Man" Stacey begins to focus on her physical appearance (8). Her preoccupation with her body image is important, for it demonstrates that "the female body [is] the site of gender's dirty work: The female body is revealed as a task, an object in need of transformation" (Schwartz 186). Although Stacey refutes norms for femininity and the limited nature of traditional roles, she continues to reproduce the cultural and ideological values of her era: "Everything would be all right if only I was...beautiful. Okay, that's asking too much. Let's say if I took off ten or so pounds...I wish I lived in some country where broad-beamed women were fashionable" (8). The ambiguous relation women have to their bodies is evidenced by Stacey's recognition that expecting to look like a stereotypical model is unrealistic. However, she remains bound to cultural standards of beauty and chooses to beautify herself, which is "particularly problematic,

particularly self-deconstructing, since this focus on the surface calls into question the existence of an underlying self" (Schwartz 186). Stacey is aware of the constant war that she fights. However, awareness is not enough to effect change. Having lost faith in her ability to change herself or her circumstances, she constantly looks to the future for the possibilities it may hold. "Everything will be all right when the kids are older" she consoles herself (8). "I'll be more free" (8). However, Stacey is stuck in her patterns. She continues to see herself as a "fat slob" who, if she could only "get up off [her] ass and get going" would see and be seen differently (8). Thus, Stacey displays her "alignment with a feminist critique of beauty at one moment, while in the next defending her own right to alter her body..." (Fisher & Davis 42). Laurence works with layered ambiguities, for in pursuing her right to alter herself, Stacey both conforms to social norms and draws on her right to autonomy.

Stacey is rarely consistent and draws upon contradictory discourses. She is constantly explaining and justifying her existence and actions to others in an attempt to validate her choices. Acutely aware of the liberal sexual revolution among the young, Stacey longs to participate in their freedom and lack of regard for social sanctions. However, while free love is acceptable for "languid long-legged girls" she knows that she, as a married, middle-aged woman, stands outside their visions of 'ideal' sexuality (70).

> Why did I have the persistent nasty suspicion that that generality and generosity would most likely stop just short of me? I wanted to explain myself. I still do. Wait, you! Let me tell you. I'm not what I may appear to be. Or if I am, it's happened imperceptibly, like eating what the kids leave on their plates and discovering ten years later the solid roll of lard now oddly living there under your own skin. I didn't used to be. Once I was different.
>
> (70)

Trapped by external and internal definitions of her role in society, Stacey becomes withdrawn. She holds a burden of inferiority due to her inability to relate to either the restrictive definitions of the older generation, or the liberal ones of the new.

Thus, the notion of women's ambiguous relation to their environment is played out in The Fire-Dwellers. Stacey's journey to autonomy is signaled by her awareness of labels and categories and her distance from each of them. She is neither the mother "with young untired [face who] smiles proudly and successfully from the pages of the Polyglam booklets" (84), nor "*a mermaid, a whore,* [or] *a tigress*" like she wishes to be (15). Stacey feels she is "one-dimensional," unable to say anything worth listening to, and incapable of performing anything noteworthy (77). However, Stacey will not accept her present status and denies the validity of the idea of a fixed representation of femininity to which all women must subscribe. She demonstrates agency by attempting to work out what psychologists point to as the ultimate goal of the individual: "a coherent, consistent identity in the context of several possible and often contradictory options" (Fisher & Davis 176). She insists on moving beyond how things *should* be to how they really are. By doing so, she learns the importance of her own subjectivity. Stacey learns to negotiate between her experiences, personal and social meanings, and the inherent ambiguity of life as a woman. She states, "I stand in relation to my life both as child and parent, never quite finished with the old battles, never able to arbitrate properly the new, able to look both ways, but whichever way I look, God, it looks pretty confusing to me" (46). As J.M. Kertzer argues in "Margaret Laurence (1926-87)", the novel illustrates Stacey's journey to identity as "a kind of pilgrim's progress from a state of desolate exile towards regeneration and revelation, from banishment...towards glory"(Kertzer 265).

Around the turn of the century, pioneer sociologist Emile Durkheim observed that "the regulations imposed on the woman by marriage are always more stringent...she loses

more and gains less [than her husband] from the institution" (VanLeeuwen 180). Hence Stacey's perceived loss of autonomy and self-esteem is valid rather than evidence of her personal failure to cope. Her ambivalence towards marriage comes from her indoctrination with the idea that happiness can or should be found in devoting her life to her husband and children. However, while marriage provides her with the stability she desires, "the silences" that pervaded her parents' marriage infiltrate her own, leaving her confused and hurt (44). Although she attempts to speak to Mac and voice her thoughts and desires to him, he seems only to notice her insubordination to his will and direction. For example, upon taking a position in sales with Richalife, Mac enrolls the family in the program without consulting Stacey. He presents her with the pills that *she* is to ensure are taken by the children every morning, and becomes angry when she questions his motives: "'You can't mount a real campaign unless you've got a hard core of support. If somebody can't even be bothered to give them to his own family...well...you are making things damn difficult, Stacey. I hope you're enjoying it'" (74). Incensed by what he perceives to be a lack of support on Stacey's part, Mac feels completely justified in overriding her concerns and questions. Furthermore, he attacks her ability to be a 'good' wife and mother by focusing on her misuse of agency. As communication patterns between the couple go from bad to worse, Mac, in an effort to sustain his own sense of purpose and identity, spends his evenings "closeted in his study..." (74) "the place where he can shut himself away, amid his business files and racing car magazines and *Playboy*, away from the yammering of his wife and young" (60). Although this lack of interaction perpetuates Stacey's feelings of isolation and loneliness, she feels compelled to provide Mac with comfort and reassurance when his identity is in question. "'You're only forty-three" she reminds him, "You're a damn good salesman. There have never been any complaints about you, that I know of...You don't need to be afraid'" (75). However,

instead of receiving appreciation for her display of sympathy and concern, Stacey is chastised for her inability to perceive Mac's dilemma and his need for space. Mac's retort that he wants to be left alone, a familiar request, leaves Stacey blaming herself for the fragile state of the marriage. "I will anything." she concedes (30). "I will turn myself inside out. I will dance on the head of a pin. I will yodel from the top of the nearest dogwood tree. I will promise anything, for peace. Then I'll curse myself for it, and I'll curse you, too" (30). As compliant as Stacey tries to be, she is aware of her inability to deny her personal needs and desires. She becomes sick "at heart" because her identity is wrapped up in being a successful wife (76). Caught in what she believes to be a loveless marriage, Stacey must look inside herself and outside her marriage in order to understand how to validate her existence.

Stacey clearly has sexual experiences as a young woman (72); however, this does not lessen her sense of loss at living a life without intimacy and sexual reciprocity. Despite her desire and willingness to marry a man she believes is equivalent to Agamemnon, Stacey does not anticipate marriage to mean a loss of sexual expression and autonomy. Stacey's experiences teach her that she is not to initiate sex but respond to her husband. Mac "draws her between his legs..." when *he* "is not too tired", and Stacey complies as sexuality on his terms is better than no sex at all (30). This method of relating, however, leaves Stacey unable to communicate her sexual needs to Mac. She resorts to fantasy, like her sister Rachel, in order to fulfill personal needs which marriage has not provided.

> Timber Lake, sixteen years ago, had hardly any cottages. Jungles of blackberry bushes and salmonberry. Spruce trees darkly still in the sun, and the water so unsullied that you could see the grey-gold minnows flickering. You know something, Mac? *What?* I like everything about you. *That's good, honey. I like everything*

about you, too.

(37-8)

Stacey's need to connect to Mac and rekindle the young love they shared is an integral part of her identity, and a source of her mourning. Although her socialization has taught her to accept disenchantment and estrangement as an inevitable part of life and marriage, she asserts her cause to mourn, and her inability to maintain facades. Plagued by "too much mental baggage..." Stacey cannot keep "things [from] spilling out of the suitcases, taking [her] by surprise, bewildering [her] as she stands on the platform" (38). Her tendency to see herself as unsuccessful due to her inability to maintain the silence of past generations of women signals a cruel disorder, one which Mary Stuart VanLeeuwen addresses in her book Gender and Grace. Unlike their male counterparts, she argues, women are encouraged, even rewarded for complacency and silence. "They even give each other medals for exhibiting the most advanced symptoms..." of the "illness" of muted living (90). For example, Stacey feigns interest in Tess Fogler's shopping purchases and idealizes her ability to live on "pineapple and cottage cheese salads" (78). Because Tess's life appears perfect from the outside, Stacey is unaware of her destructive nature and disturbed existence. Similarly, Bertha Garvey is described by Stacey as "big and capable" while Laurence repeatedly demonstrates her inability to maintain a healthy self-image due to her husband's constant badgering and reminders that she "never went beyond grade school" (78-9). Although Stacey perceives the underlying unhappiness in her friends' lives, she remains a passive onlooker on their miseries. Stacey, like many women before her, has bought into the romanticized notion of the traditional family, and is, at least, partially responsible for the incurred results: "I see the dead faces in a mocking procession, looking at me, looking again, shrugging, saying *There's stability for you.* Do I deserve this? Yes, and goddammit, *not yes.*" (11).

Research psychology works from a mechanistic model of human functioning in which it is believed that humans are a combination of biological and social forces. Counseling psychology tends to encourage people to see themselves as authors of their own freedom, with little regard for social or biological constraints. Laurence is not a psychologist, and, therefore, she cannot be accused of favoring either approach. However, her novel provides an intricate picture of female psychology and tends to support the view that women are authors of their own freedom, within limits. Stacey comments to herself,

> Okay, Dad. Here's looking at you. You couldn't cope either. I never even felt all that sorry for you, way back when. Nor for her. I only thought people ought to be strong and loving and not make a mess of their lives and they ought to rear kids with whom it would be possible to talk because one would be so goddam comprehending and would win them over like nothing on earth, and I would sure know how to do it all. So I married a guy who was confident and (in those days or so it seemed) outgoing and full of laughs and free of doubts, fond of watching football and telling low jokes and knowing just where he was going, yessir, very different from you, Dad. Now I don't know.
> (157)

Laurence's work focuses on the human subject as a product of both alterable and unalterable circumstances, partially able to transcend both, and yet never able to find any fixed conclusions. The novel demonstrates "development through conflict [and] portrays the "human individual" who is inherently paradoxical, amazingly strong yet often weak, the source of both wonder and pity"(Kertzer 268). Stacey queries, "Who is this you", thereby aptly expressing the difficulty of pinning down one's identity (158-9).

Stacey's recognition that she cannot obey "the immutable law" of responsibility that accompanies marriage and motherhood is clear (161). "I'm bloody sick of trying to cope," she admits. "I don't want to be a good wife and mother" (161). Thus, Stacey

exhibits the difficulty of casting off social expectations. As disgruntled as she is with her lack of voice and power, she sees no other alternatives for her life. She becomes despondent to the point where she states, "I live alone in a house full of people where everything is always always all right" (156). Stacey knows that her sister Rachel desires the lifestyle she has, and so she feels guilty for complaining about her life. Therefore, Stacey accepts the inevitability of her fragmented existence: "What goes on inside isn't ever the same as what goes on outside. It's a disease I've picked up somewhere" (34). Despite her disgust with the "lies" required of her, Stacey feels unable to resist the isolation and ambiguity she feels as a wife and mother (34). "What difference does it make?" she asks (45). "I know it's a worthwhile job to bring up four kids. You don't need to propagandize me; I'm converted. But...the kids don't belong to me. They belong to themselves...[I'm only] Mac's wife or the kids' mother" (89).

Although Stacey has a lively and intelligent mind, her role as a housewife relegates her to the world of the trivial and mundane. Her 'rewards' include having tea with Tess Fogler, hosting tupperware parties, and being seen as a beneficial appendage to her husband and his work. Subsumed by her daily activities, Stacey must rely on the traditions that have absorbed her identity, in order to feel she has an identity. For example, Stacey takes her daughter Jen along with her to the hairdresser's, grocery shopping, and anywhere else possible. With a child along, she is never expected to stay long, converse much, in short to be anything but a mother. She recognizes the detrimental effect this has on her esteem and ability to face the world as an autonomous adult: "It's easier to face the world with one of them along. Then I know who I'm supposed to be" (90). Her disillusionment builds to resentment, resentment over the freedom she has exchanged for what she once believed was the path to happiness and stability. Her responses to the children's needs become ambivalent as a result: "Buzz off,

you little buggers, you don't understand. No - - I didn't mean that. I meant it. I was myself before any of you were born. (Don't listen in, God - - this is none of your business) (125).

Stacey constantly questions her personal identity. She longs to affirm that her behavior, thoughts and feelings are part of the normative package. She also tests how far she can stray outside social limits without jeopardizing her status as a "true" woman. This is particularly evidenced in Stacey's sexual ventures and in her desire to be seen as other than a dowdy mother and wife. Freudian psychologists agree that sexual desire is one of the main engines that drive human development. However, they argue that the alteration between fascination and embarrassment with one's body stems from the mental conflict that parents and the rest of society set up between individuals' natural inclinations to fulfill their desire and the pressure to delay gratification for the sake of social order. A social-learning theorist avoids the Freudian language of mental conflict, but would agree that social rewards, punishments and role models lead individuals to avoid sexual talk and exploration in one family or indulge openly in another. Rather than adopting either one of these theories, Laurence approaches the issue of sexuality from a mixture of psychological and theological theories.

Laurence uses the Bible as a starting point for much of her exploration, twisting its meanings and playing upon the reader's ability to both recognize and go beyond the fixed meanings which society has attached to it. The Bible, for instance, is clear in its mandates for monogamous sexuality within the context of marriage. The following is found in 1 Corinthians 7:

> It is good for a man not to marry. But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife's body does not belong

> to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. I say this as a concession, not as a command.
>
> (1 Cor. 7:1-7)

According to these dictates, Stacey is clearly responsible for guarding and maintaining her sexuality for the purposes of her husband. Although she refutes belief in Biblical sanctions, she is aware that they are an integral part of her everyday reality. Hence, her desire to express her sexuality within a context other than her marriage causes immediate concern and necessitates her withdrawal from open expression of her thoughts.

Caught up in the drudgery of daily life, Mac and Stacey experience a lull in their sexual relationship, a lull that Stacey perceives as rejection and which leaves her sexually frustrated. As she contemplates the condition of her marriage, her thoughts inevitably turn to her sexual appetite. "I want him. Right now, this minute." she says of her husband Mac (22). Then, "No, I don't. I want some other man, someone I've never been with. Only Mac for sixteen years. What are other men like?" (22). Stacey initially acknowledges her need for a vibrant sexual life in the accepted context of desire for her husband. However, she quickly recognizes that the Biblical mandate for monogamy is difficult, if not impossible, for either herself or Mac to abide by:

> It's just as bad for him, maybe worse...neither of us is supposed to feel this way. Except that I know he does. I wonder if he knows I do? Sometimes I think I'd like to hold an entire army between my legs. I think of all the men I'll never make love with, and I regret it as though it were the approach of my own death. I'm not monogamous by nature. And yet I am. I can't imagine myself as anyone else's woman, for keeps.
>
> (22)

Once again, the ambivalence Stacey feels towards her role as a wife and, more

importantly, towards her role as an autonomous female is made clear. The concept of the nuclear, heterosexual family originates from Biblical times and hinges on the subordination of the wife to the husband. Stacey lives in a time when questioning of past traditions and beliefs is increasing, and, thus, she is caught in a 'middle position'. This is to say, Stacey is able to gain *access* to contradictory value systems but does not *belong* to one or the other. While her conceptions of what marriage should be like are in flux, "The *idea* of marriage and its potential are still powerful. It is a sacred script, one [she has] trouble rejecting because it is so central a part of [her] socialization and adult expectations" (Schur 60). Stacey does not cease to love her husband or her children because of her sexual desire. However, she risks her ability to belong to the categories of mother and wife if she steps out of clearly defined boundaries.

In Labeling Women Deviant, Edwin Schur identifies a woman as a being who "identifies and is identified as one whose sexuality exists for someone else, who is socially male. Women's sexuality is the capacity to arouse desire in that someone" (Schur 110-11). Recalling the biblical passage of 1 Corinthians 7:1-7, Schur's psychological approach criticizes the Biblical mandates by which a woman's sexuality is carefully sanctioned. The ambiguity rests in this: cultural encouragement of sexual behavior is widespread, yet the consequence of such behavior is stigmatization. Thus, despite the 'sexual revolution' that Stacey observes among the young, she, like most women, remains vulnerable to imposed categories and labels concerning her sexual behavior. Try as she may to relegate her passions to Mac, Stacey finds herself unable to reconcile her role as a wife and mother with her need to express herself sexually. Confronted by a magazine article that reveals her mindset and foreshadows her journey into illicit sexuality, Stacey is amused and troubled by the notion that women can easily stray outside their marriages but, being virtuous, choose not to:

> "It's ridiculous. It's untrue", she comments.
> That article -- "I'm almost Ready for an Affair,"
> which turned out to mean she wasn't at all, ending
> in an old-fashioned sunburst of joy, Epithalamium
> Twenty years After, virtuous while conveying the
> impression that dozens of virile men would be
> eager to oblige if she weren't. She was probably
> like me -- the only guys she knew were her husband's
> friends.
>
> (49)

Several concepts are signaled in Stacey's thinking. For one, she remains bound to the notion that a married woman cannot and does not have various sexual opportunities. Furthermore, the notion that a married woman with children would be found sexually enticing amuses her, and even more so, the notion that if such an opportunity were ever to arise, the woman would turn it down.

Stacey's transformation to autonomy begins to present itself as she contemplates the ambivalence she feels towards her marriage and sexual desire. By confronting and acknowledging social restrictions she becomes aware of her own position with regard to appropriate sexuality. She demonstrates her position outside the accepted norms by worrying that she *does* conform to the accepted standards rather than worrying that she does not. For this reason, she is highly protective of her thoughts and worries lest the facade she upholds be revealed: "No wonder I'm afraid of having an anesthetic or undergoing hypnosis. What if I talked? I'm a freak. Or maybe I'm not, but how can you tell?" (94). However, Stacey finds herself increasingly frustrated by the sexless state of her marriage and the lack of intimacy between herself and Mac. Side by side in bed, Stacey perceives Mac's emotional distance by his physical distance: "You'll fall out of bed in a minute, Mac, if you're not careful. What do you think it would do -- pollute you, if you touched me?" (113).

Despite her discontent, Stacey cannot find the courage nor the impetus to change

herself or the marriage. She feels abandoned and helpless, and drowns her emotions in gin and tonic. Acutely aware of her commitment to the marriage and the impossibility of any other alternative, she resigns herself to the truth that she will not leave Mac "whatever he [does] or [is] like" (114). This defeated attitude leaves her "bargaining power...at an all-time low" (110). "How could you walk out on him, Stacey...? You couldn't, sweetheart, and don't you forget it. You haven't got a nickel of your own. This is what they mean by emancipation... I see it, God, but don't expect me to like it" (114). Free to choose her life, but lacking the freedom to build it on her own, Stacey continues to interact with Mac in familiar ways. The habitual dailiness of their tasks is reminiscent of the monotony of their bedroom where every interlude is played out like a familiar chord in a symphony: "Stacey rises to him, her legs linked around his, and cries out as she always does without knowing it. He comes in pain-pleasure silence as almost always, telling her only through veins and muscles and skin that he is with her" (114). Laurence demonstrates the cold and detached nature of their sexuality in order to demonstrate the lack of love and intimacy in the marriage. Emotional connection is replaced by physical need.

The effects of Stacey's division between mind and body manifest themselves both in her waking and sleeping. She constantly complains of the trivialities that are supposed to amuse her and expresses longing for real interaction and respect in her relationships. Although she withholds her needs, they begin to reveal themselves in terrifying nightmares:

> *Smell of moss, wet branches, mellowly rotten leaves. It is very difficult to walk through. The wild brambles stretch out their fish hooks to tear at exposed skin... She has to continue, bring what she is carrying with her...The severed head spills only blood, nothing else... The head she has been carrying is of course none but hers.* (115)

In her daily battles to engage in social interaction, Stacey is constantly reminded of her 'place' and that she will be put back into it, should she venture out. She is entangled in a web of pervasive stigmatizing on the one hand, and low status acquisition by remaining in her present role on the other. Consequently, she feels "liable to lose either way" (Schur 12). Constantly monitored in her actions by both herself and others, Stacey's outbursts of frustration and anger are dismissed as evidence of her emotionalism and the tendency for women to lack sufficient self-control to handle life efficiently. Caught between being seen as responsible for her family's emotional and physical welfare and treated as though she is not capable of performing the same, Stacey's ambivalence toward her life is fueled further by the fact that she is denied sexual fulfillment.

Buckle Fennick, Mac's friend, initiates Stacey's movement into sexual expression outside marriage, albeit dysfunctionally. Buckle is everything that Mac is not. While Mac is conservative and stable, Buckle is dynamic and openly sexual. Stacey, like Rachel, finds herself repulsed by her fascination with his sexuality, and attempts to disparage Buckle in her mind. She notes, Buckle's "jeans are always too tight and they bulge where his sex is, and it embarrasses me and infuriates me that it does, yet I always look, as he damn well knows and laughs at, one of the many unspoken small malices between us in our years of competition for Mac" (48). Lynn Atwater, author of The Extramarital Connection summarizes the dilemma women like Stacey face. She notes,

> Women [say] that marriage fills that need for predictability and security which we all have, but that very stability then causes the desire for variety, change and risk-taking to emerge. Furthermore, there seems to be a tendency for marriage to become routinized by the burden of role responsibilities which paradoxically helps to create the stability we all desire. It is apparently extremely difficult to build in the variety we crave and the stability we need within the same relationship. (Atwater 74)

The ambivalence Stacey experiences between her desire to maintain a stable home and know that she and her children have a predictable lifestyle is at odds with her desire to liberate herself by sexually experiencing a variety of men. However, the choice to step outside the bounds of marriage in order to fulfill sexual need is highly punishable. To leave a marriage is to take responsibility for failing to keep the family together, raise children alone, and assume all financial burdens. Stacey is aware of this danger; therefore, she decides to revel in Buckle's sexuality through her gaze rather than touch.

Buckle Fennick has no regard for social mandates nor for sexual restrictions. His open, even flagrant sexuality stands in complete opposition to the traditional sexual script for women which includes "passivity, lack of autonomy, family-oriented expressions of sexuality, and sexuality as service to others" (Atwater 140). Therefore, Stacey is attracted to Buckle as much for what he is not, as for what he can provide. Unlike her husband and children, Buckle does not treat Stacey like she's "prehistoric" (124). Around him she remembers that she is "Stacey Cameron..." who still loves "to dance" (124).

Nevertheless, Stacey's ambivalent feelings about the negative value of extramarital sex are still present even though she has reached a point where she thinks she is personally justified in performing the act. Therefore, when Buckle arrives at her house and asks Stacey to go for a ride, she is hesitant to be alone with him. During their journey, she begins to fantasize about a sexual liaison in which "he is poised above her -- hard, ready, taut..." (141). Stacey is not able to complete the fantasy sequence due to her ambivalence towards her sexual feelings. She is confused by the fact that she can desire a man she has no emotional connection with, a man whom she even dislikes. However, her trepidation is laid aside upon reaching their destination. As Stacey leaves the truck, she notices men looking at her like "a whore or something" (143). Rather than finding this upsetting, however, Stacey is incredulous at the fact that she is being seen as an

autonomous woman, sexually free, without the labels of wife and mother. "They don't know what I am. They only see a woman in slacks and a sweater, in the cab of Buckle's truck. My, my. Doesn't that seem strange. Do I mind? Am I offended? Hell, no. I'm delighted" (143). Having acknowledged her desirability, Stacey begins to justify her sexual urges in the name of self-fulfillment. This emphasis on her personal rights contrasts sharply with the traditional model of women's sexuality. Although she feels "reproached" by the appearance of children's clothes in the store window below Buckle's apartment, Stacey enters his home, fully aware of her willingness to engage in a sexual act (144).

"Innocence outgrown is not villainy. It is a necessary and inevitable step into maturity" (Polster 86). Stacey's naive belief that Buckle intends to 'fulfill' her in any way is soon dispelled. Upon entering his apartment she is forced to acknowledge his callousness as he mocks his mother and proceeds to make sexual overtures in the room where she sits. Despite Stacey's disgust with Buckle as a person, she quickly becomes aroused at the thought of an illicit, spontaneous sexual liaison. "She holds herself in hiatus, waiting. Waiting for the clue, the instructions that she will follow. She can feel his shoulder bones under her fingers although she has not touched him. She can almost feel his sex in her" (146-7). Her fear of exposure and disrespect to Buckle's mother is quickly overcome in the face of her desire. She "moves slowly towards him, not with the slowness of caution but the opposite. Then, as she is about to place her hands on him, his acute rasping voice. Okay that's it don't touch me" (147).

Hence, despite Stacey's intention of shaping the quality of the extramarital interaction to her own needs, her ability to express herself sexually is quickly squelched by Buckle. Buckle is a parasite. He perceives Stacey's sexual and emotional needs and feeds off them cruelly. "What he is doing...only concerns himself, his sex open and erect

in his hands. But although he retreats from her presence, he watches her, needing to see some image in eyes, some witness to the agony of his pleasure. You won't get it Julie didn't like it when I did it this way all she ever wanted was to take it you're not getting it see" (147). Having used his friendship with Stacey to gain her trust, Buckle has made his superior position clear. He as the male is able to gain his sexual satisfaction without the aid of a woman. By throwing two coins at Stacey, he parallels her sexual promiscuity with his mother's prostitution and denies her any form of dignity.

Any satisfaction that Stacey expects to come out of her interlude with Buckle is denied. She is confronted by Mac, whose "eyes [bear] some nearly unbearable pain" after Buckle phones to tell him of their liaison (148). Stacey quickly realizes Buckle has maliciously told Mac that she initiated a sexual liaison between them. When confronted, she can only deny the act with "outraged virtue in her own voice"(148). Having proclaimed her innocence, Stacey struggles to justify herself inwardly: "...No, I didn't do any such thing. But I would've, if Buckle had. No, damn it, I wouldn't. I wouldn't. I don't even like Buckle. Even at that moment I didn't like him. I would've stopped" (148). Unable to convince herself that she has done anything wrong, Stacey withholds her story from Mac, because being honest about the emotions she feels towards him and the family feels like a sin to her, perhaps even more than sexual infidelity. It means renouncing the role of the good girl and ceasing to be the good wife and mother. It also means expressing anger and requires her to "set aside the bowl [she] has used to beg for approval and praise" (Polster 164).

Despite her best efforts to evade Mac's questions and avoid his "face...misshapen with a private grief" Stacey does not go unpunished (149). Her question, "would [it] be the absolute end of the world even if it had happened?" sparks rage in Mac, who immediately reminds Stacey of his ownership over her body: "I won't have anybody else

touching you see" (149). Mac's disgust is twofold. His wife and friend have betrayed him, but more important, his wife sees the betrayal as an achievement that gives her a sense of independence and autonomy. Stacey's refusal to apologize and maintain compliance opens their marriage up to scrutiny and threatens *his* self-esteem. Incensed by the notion that his wife desires another person (despite his own intentions with his secretary), Mac "makes hate with her" in bed that night, "his hands clenched around her collarbones and on her throat until she is able to bring herself to speak the release. *It doesn't hurt. You can't hurt me*" (150). Thus, despite the multiple negative results of her actions, Stacey experiences a transformation. She begins to resist Mac, Buckle or any man who attempts to use authority to dominate and hurt her.

Stacey's emancipation begins as she participates in the outpouring of her own spirit. Having moved beyond rigidly restrictive mandates, she begins to assume leadership in mixed gatherings and attempts to knock down the barriers between herself and those around her. Her principal transformation is signaled by her confrontation of Mac regarding her supposed affair with Buckle and her assertion that she is not his property. "Even if it did happen, is that the only important thing? Is that all that interests you about me? Not me, or even going to bed with me, but just making sure that I don't ever glance in any other direction?" (154). Her 'prophecy' of the marriage's destruction and of her own desire accelerates her determination to forge her own path and, consequently, infuriates Mac to the point of verbal and physical aggression.

Having decided that intimacy is possible only outside her marriage, Stacey continues to leave herself open to the possibility of an affair despite her knowledge of the possible consequences. The tension and strain of living under scrutiny leaves her insensitive to her family's needs and forces her to consider her own first. Therefore, she heads into the country, a radical departure from her usually compliant self, to find solace

and space. Although she is discontented with her marriage, her attitude towards it remains ambivalent. "Does he hate me? If so, how long? Where did it start?...How did Mac get to be that way? How did I get to be this way? I can't figure it. But God knows we don't ever make much of a stab at figuring it. What's the matter with us that we can't talk?...How come we feel it's indecent?" (155). Stacey's questions belie her belief that the course she and Mac have pursued until this point is unalterable. However, she is aware that something must give, and not necessarily her own needs. She is caught in a double bind of being unhappy and yet feeling incapable of making or envisioning the changes that might lead to a resolution, because doing so risks disapproval or rejection. Furthermore, despite her frustrations, any departure from custom is unwelcome. She begins to envision Mac marrying Delores Appleton (155) and attempts to convince herself that she does not care who he might marry if he left her. However, she is quick to remind herself of her role as a mother, and chastises herself for failing to consider her responsibility in raising her children (156). Her pleas to God resume as circumstances feel beyond her control. She is angered by the automatic reprisals which she imagines God makes and which are so engrained that they quickly monopolize her thoughts:

> Listen here, God, don't talk to me like that. You have no right. *You* try bringing up four kids. Don't tell me you've brought up countless millions because I don't buy that. We've brought up our own selves and precious little help we've had from you. If you're there. Which probably you aren't, although I'm never totally convinced one way or another. So next time you send somebody down here, get It born as a her with seven young or a him with a large family and a rotten boss, eh? Then we'll see how the inspirational bit goes. God, pay no attention. I'm nuts. I'm not myself. (156)

Stacey is angered by her need to gain sustenance from a God she doesn't necessarily believe in, but more so, by the incongruities between Biblical mandates for appropriate

behavior and life circumstances. She defies trite religious answers to her problems by pointing out the validity of her subjective experience, and challenges God to take on her yoke if she is supposed to take on His. Stacey's recognition that her restrictions are both self-imposed and reinforced by social thinking leads her to accept the fact that a solution or rescue from her unhappy circumstances is not to be found outside herself.

As such, Stacey is faced with the complications of autonomy and desire. "The evidence suggests that we are sexual schizophrenics. We say one thing and do another. We are still emotionally attached to the traditional beliefs of sexual exclusivity, while we live with the needs and desires provoked by contemporary values which hold sexual expression to be a new frontier" (Atwater 16). Thus, Stacey's movement into an extramarital affair with twenty-four year old Luke is couched in ambivalence. In keeping with Atwater's theory of sexual schizophrenia, Stacey loses none of her 'ideals' while engaging in a sexual relationship with Luke; however, she feels entitled to the security and the sense of belonging that he gives her. Luke, a young artist and liberal thinker, represents the freedom that Stacey needs at this particular juncture in her life. His youth, his ability to appreciate nature and love of serenity enable her to believe that she can relive certain aspects of her life when she is in his presence. As the two begin to build their friendship, Luke's candor and compassion surprise her: "'Go ahead and bawl.'" he says, "'No shame in that. You're not alone'" (165). Luke reaches out to Stacey in her need and contributes to the intellectual and emotional growth she craves. Their conversations range from Luke's adventures and writing, to Stacey's feelings of inadequacy and boredom as a mother. With Luke she is an equal, a woman interacting with a man on the same plane.

Luke's insight into Stacey's deeply hidden hurts is remarkable. His comment, "'Who held you down? Was it for too long?'" demonstrates his ability to perceive the

depth of her fears and experiences (166). It also awakens her to the possibility of self-determination. Lastly, Stacey finds herself drawn to Luke because of his desire to know her in a meaningful way. She enjoys the "mutuality of the expressiveness,...[and] the getting instead of giving of emotional support" which he offers (Atwater 63). Having acted as "an emotional bloodbank" in which she has consistently donated and her family withdrawn, Stacey is elated by the prospect of "situationally or temporarily..." receiving an emotional transfusion (Atwater 63). Lastly, Luke Venturi offers Stacey a chance to connect her mind and body, to experience the joining of her deepest emotional needs with her physical desires. His invitation to "come out. From wherever you're hiding..." is exactly what she needs; someone who can perceive the contradictions in her identity when she herself cannot (167).

Stacey's entry into intimacy with Luke does not bring about her emancipation from guilt and fear. She must still contend with the fear of social disapproval. Lynn Atwater writes of the dilemma facing women having affairs: "A sexual script that has been taught for centuries...is not so easily or quickly changed in a decade or two. There is a tendency for new behavior and thoughts to emerge gradually and only in certain groups of the population first, generally those who are younger, urban, and better educated" (Atwater 108). Luke provides Stacey with an integral outlet for her pent up emotional and physical frustrations. His presence banishes any need for facades or evasion, and his advice reinforces her need to be her own person. For example, Luke comments that Stacey is largely to blame for her feelings of defeat. He comments, "'You keep on communicating your own awfulness to yourself, and nothing changes. You just go on in the same old groove'" (177). Thus, while Luke expresses empathy for Stacey's plight, he will not allow her to make excuses for it. In this manner, Luke operates on a therapeutic level as well as on a sexual one.

Additionally, Luke sees Stacey as a woman, not as the sum of her roles of wife and mother. He does not evaluate her attractiveness by stereotypical standards of female beauty, nor does he show any regard for her age. His acceptance is key to Stacey's ability to accept herself. Luke allows Stacey to step outside conventional roles and age norms, and questions her frankly on the urgency of her desire to break free from her previous life. Furthermore, he does not need to know her opinions of his work and his thoughts, thus signaling to Stacey that "mostly it's okay just to *be*" (185). "Delusions of purpose" as he calls them, are the individual's way of validating their existence (185). In Luke's view, "we don't have to mean anything" (185). Laurence's own conflicted views on the question of identity are signaled in this passage. Stacey is seeking autonomy and identity outside male definitions of women's roles, yet ironically, she gains her greatest sense of acceptance and identity from a man. Once again, Laurence points to the ambivalence experienced by women who must both rely on and subvert male approval.

Stacey's transformation, then, is signaled most drastically by her ability to relinquish excessive inquiry into whether or not her actions are justified. Although she is initially worried at the thought that Luke might perceive her sexual responsiveness as making her "a whore", she quickly dismisses this thought as her own and not his:

> Stacey, ease up. Not so fast. Now I see what the trouble is. I've grown unaccustomed to the ritual of the preliminaries...I've only gone to bed with one man for a hell of a long time, when the by-play was necessary. Rein in, Stacey, or Luke will think you're a whore. Well, he'll be wrong, then. Whores don't want it that much.
>
> (185-6)

Stacey's ability to refute her own stereotyped thinking and reason from another's point of view enables her to engage with herself in a new way. She has, by her own admission, stepped "out of touch with the rules" (185). Strangely, it is by stepping outside the rules

that Stacey comes to appreciate what she has. As she begins to remove her clothes, Stacey is aware of her altered body (186). She is also mindful of the way in which Mac has watched her change and has stayed by her. Despite the problems in their marriage, Stacey is forced to acknowledge the inevitability of familiarity in any daily relationship. She realizes she has been unfair to Mac, that each is guilty of trying to change the other in order to fit social 'molds' (189). St. Paul's admonition that it is "better to marry than burn..." does not adequately address her dilemma, for she is "married *and* [burns]" (193).

Thus Laurence's The Fire-Dwellers seeks to dispel myths on many levels. Rather than positing one truth against another, Laurence points out the fallacy of belief in one fixed truth, and suggests that truth is best determined in a subjective manner, by the individual. Buckle's hedonist world ends in tragedy, but so does Matthew MacAindra's conventional world. There are no guarantees that any one lifestyle or belief system will provide a stable home or identity. This is not to suggest, however, that Laurence sees no use for structure or tradition. She merely explores the possibilities of free thought and action, allowing the ambiguities and questions that accompany them to reveal themselves. Hence, her novel does not conclude with a neatly packaged moral message. It ends, as it starts, with ambivalence. When asked to go north by Luke, Stacey is "appalled and shaken by the suggestion of choice" (209). Ironically, by giving her the autonomy she seeks, Luke forces Stacey to choose her lifestyle and breaks the illusion that she can maintain both her marriage and their relationship. Faced by the prospect of remaining with Luke or choosing her husband and children, Stacey must confront her destiny and whether or not her role in the family is an integral part of her identity. In this context, "Stacey all at once recognizes the parallel lines which if they go on being parallel cannot ever meet" (182). She and Luke can never be.

Mac and Stacey's marriage is far from perfect. However, because of the choices

she encounters as a result of her extramarital affair, Stacey takes a 'new self' back into her marriage. Laurence signals Stacey's altered psyche by her dream near the novel's end.

> *The place is a prison but not totally so. It must be an island, surely, some place where people are free to walk around but nobody can get away...There is a ladder leading up to each sleeping plateau, and when she and Mac are safely on top, they pull up the rope ladder after them. The children are not here. They are in another place, grown and free, nothing to worry about for her at this moment.*
>
> (236)

Laurence does not offer a neatly packaged fairy tale where everything works out exactly as Stacey wishes. Despite Stacey's procreative role of wife and mother, she is as disillusioned and unhappy as the 'abortive' Rachel. The shared experience of the Cameron sisters is evidenced as Stacey longs for her sister, and Rachel (in A Jest of God), moves to be closer to Stacey:

> I'd like to talk to somebody. Somebody who wouldn't refuse really to look at me, whatever I was like. I'd like to talk to my sister. I'd like to write to her. I'd like to tell her how I feel about everything. No. She'd think I was crazy, probably. She's too sensible ever to do this sort of thing, like today, or like with Luke and all that. She'd think I must be mad, not to be perfectly happy, with four healthy kids and a good man.
>
> (FD 252)

Evidently, the Cameron sisters have more in common than either perceives. Despite different choices they've made, each must come to terms with the inevitability of struggle and conflict along life's path. Unlike their mother who faced her future with certainty and humble expectations, Rachel and Stacey are caught in a whirlwind of obligations and responsibilities. Their ability to do it all (meaning occupying varied roles) takes away the option of not doing it all.

Stacey, like other women who stray outside their maternal roles, gains a "sense of

learning, self-recognition, and self-discovery...as a consequence of [her] new sexual behavior" (Atwater 47). By following her personal desires into her first sexual encounter with Buckle and then her affair with Luke, she discovers a self that contrasts sharply with the one she knows herself to be in marriage, her socially approved relationship. The traditional role of wife, with its emphasis on subjugation of one's personal desires and rights to the welfare of others, is not conducive to the growth of a positive personal identity. Stacey's affair with Luke helps her to attain the autonomy she cannot have in her marriage, especially in the expressive and sexual areas; it is evident that this increased autonomy has a positive impact on her identity. Stacey comes to terms with who she is and what path she has *chosen* in life. As Jamie Scott argues in "Fantasy, Nostalgia and the Courage to Be in Margaret Laurence's *The Fire-Dwellers*", Stacey dispels "imaginative dependence upon Luke, rather than revealing her infidelity..." in order to "involve herself fully in genuine responsibility"(Scott 95). "It would be nice if we were different people but we are not different people." she notes, "We are ourselves and we are sure as hell not going to undergo some total transformation at this point" (263-4). Although the picture of the aging married couple is not Stacey's vision of an ideal destiny or identity, she has learned to trust in her resolve. "I can't stand it. I cannot. I can't take it" she laments. "Yeh, I can though. By God, I can, if I set my mind to it" (264).

Stacey decides to deal with her unreciprocated longing for intimacy with Mac by leaving her state of nostalgia about their premarital days behind. The fantasies she concocts only underline the social assumptions that she has internalized. There is no perfect man, marriage or children. Thus, she decides to "quit worrying" and get on with the business of life (272). "I used to think there would be a blinding flash of light some day, and then I would be wise and calm and would know how to cope with everything

and my kids would rise up and call me blessed. Now I see that whatever I'm like, I'm pretty well stuck with it for life. Hell of a revelation that turned out to be" (272). The novel ends as it begins, with Stacey in the bedroom contemplating the "scattered photographs" and the "wedding picture" in which she is "almost beautiful although not knowing it then, [and] Mac [is] hopeful confident lean" (278). Having accepted her ambiguous feelings regarding her roles of wife and mother, Stacey comes to terms with the limitations she and Mac have, yet acknowledges the potential of the relationship. "Alienation in confrontation with chaos is transformed into a communion of sympathy over mutual suffering" (Scott 96). The novel ends with reconciliation, based on shared experiences of hurt and disappointment rather than a blueprint for marital bliss. Having gained a sense of her place and her importance as an individual, Stacey "moves towards [Mac] and he holds her. They make love after all, but gently, as though consoling one another for everything that neither of them can help nor alter" (279).

Conclusion
Moving Beyond Dichotomous Female Roles

Woman's journey to identity differs from the traditional male quest because it must begin with a greater struggle to separate herself from the intense pull of home and family. Although Rachel and Stacey remain uncertain of the future by the end of their respective novels, Laurence suggests that each has evolved into an independent person who chooses the way she will be involved in her relationships and what her contribution to them will be. Whereas Rachel and Stacey initially believe women's roles to be stringently limited and, therefore, undesirable, they eventually come to realize that they must engage in a continuous struggle to negotiate between subject positions. Thus, as much as Laurence criticizes the hierarchy of values attached to women's roles, she ironically demonstrates how women must invest some identities with greater legitimacy than others in order to choose their individual path. The ambiguities and complexities of this process are outlined as her protagonists attempt to interpret the politics of identity and struggle to resist *invoked* hierarchies which limit women's worth. What is clear by the end of each novel is that despite what Rachel and Stacey wish to believe of themselves, they are always within the society they criticize, and, therefore, incapable of entirely dismissing the effects of socialization.

Hence, Laurence implies that women are capable of discerning their own beliefs and identities insofar as they are able to combine the emblematic beliefs of their culture with a personal critique and interpretation of them. Both Rachel and Stacey must accept

the limitations that are a part of their lives such as an overbearing, traditional mother and ambiguous feelings about their roles as women. Rachel comes to terms with unrequited love and the lack of stability that she believes can be found in marriage. Stacey, on the other hand, overcomes her desire to flee the city and the responsibilities of marriage and accepts the importance of her role in the family. The 'texts' of their lives, and Laurence's in turn, become plurisignant. This is to say, Rachel and Stacey recognize and to an extent embrace, through necessity, a mode of understanding which incorporates multiple generations and multiple presences. In essence, each overcomes dichotomous thinking by combining and creating a discourse of her own, based on personal experiences and beliefs. In this way, Laurence suggests that while the nature of society may not be quickly altered, women are responsible for calling attention to the contrary aspects of ideology in order to disable fixed definitions of their roles. Change is made possible by acknowledging a textual language that is translucent and in flux and, therefore, open to interpretation. To regard oneself as the active agent in making changes is to improvise a departure from inadequate routines. Maintaining respect for precedents is essential. But allowing definitions and categories to immobilize the multifaceted abilities of women is not.

All things being considered, Laurence's aim is not to equate sexual freedom with the liberation of women and the bettering of society. Although she confronts ideological systems and attempts to illustrate their effects upon both men and women, Laurence does not appeal to biology in order to justify a particular set of gender roles for either men or women. Instead, she concludes that freedom and moral responsibility are matters that

place the individual in a serious and accountable position. Her inclusion of Biblical allusion and tradition is effective in showing how men are prone to turn dominion into domination and women to turn sociability into social enmeshment of an unhealthy sort. Thus, when women's sexuality is acknowledged it should not be misleadingly represented as the main path to full female liberation. Instead, Laurence illustrates the need to get rid of power and dependence, to share uniquely female experiences with other women, and to change the political and social environment. As Edwin Schur suggests, "Until women collectively acquire an equal share in the power to develop and impose labels, the controlling of women through an imputation of spoiled identity will persist"(Schur 235).

Therefore, Laurence's novels require readers to acknowledge the ambiguity of their own thinking and position. The goal of overthrowing sexual roles may be impossible as well as undesirable. After all, there is no guarantee that what will replace them will be any better. Perhaps the goal of liberation can never be quite granted. "While we reject our present social roles, other roles and games will probably succeed them, though we cannot imagine their forms" (Andersen 116). Laurence does not offer women visions of a different society or a new set of rules to live by. Rather than solely focusing on the presence of social mandates she points to self-determination as a precondition for self-fulfilment. Once women make a shift in their consciousness from denial to acceptance of personal power, they will perceive "a largeness of possibility, a scope for original thought and activism, [and] above all a new sense of mutual aims and sharing among women" (Rich 205).

How, then, do women overcome dichotomous thinking and create an alternative space for themselves? According to Laurence, they do so by relinquishing moral dichotomies and replacing them with "a feeling for the complexity and multifaceted character of real people and real situations"(Gilligan 21). Consequently, the tension in women's lives is necessary, even beneficial for the development of identity. As Carol Gilligan notes, identity development does not mean a dismissal of tradition and meaning but an awareness of the disparity between what is meant to be and what is. "What women then enunciate is not a new morality, but a morality disentangled from the constraints that formerly confused its perception and impeded its articulation"(Gilligan 95). And so Laurence values freedom over limitations, diversity over conformity, and discovery over prejudice. She articulates the truth of women's lives by demonstrating how life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another circle can be drawn; that every end is a beginning.

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