

MANAWAKA WOMEN

MANAWAKA WOMEN:  
A STUDY OF THE PERSONAL  
AND LITERARY DEVELOPMENT  
OF MARGARET LAURENCE AS  
REVEALED IN HER CANADIAN  
WORKS

By  
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SCOPE AND CONTENTS:

This thesis examines the general literary and personal development of Margaret Laurence as revealed in her Canadian works, The Stone Angel, A Jest of God, The Fire-Dwellers, and A Bird in the House. It focuses upon the principal female character in each work as she undergoes a voyage of self-discovery. These voyages, in turn, reflect the voyage of self-discovery Margaret Laurence herself underwent while writing these works.

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## INTRODUCTION

For the writer, one way of discovering oneself, of changing from the patterns of childhood and adolescence to those of adulthood, lies through the exploration inherent in the writing itself. In the case of a great many writers, this exploration at some point--and perhaps at all points--involves an attempt to understand one's background and one's past, even sometimes a more distant past which one has not personally experienced.<sup>1</sup>

This insight into the value of writing was not always understood by Margaret Laurence. Although the voyage of self-discovery had been the informing structural pattern in every major work by Mrs. Laurence, she herself was not always aware that the voyage pattern applied to her own life as well as to the lives of her fictional characters.

As a young and recently married woman on a voyage to the Somaliland desert where she would set up housekeeping for herself and her husband, Margaret Laurence, "unburdened by knowledge" and as "innocent . . . as a fledgling sparrow"<sup>2</sup>, truly believed she knew her own identity and in knowing it, was free. In this state of self-assurance, mixed with a touch of self-righteous indignation regarding the English "imperialists" whom she disliked intensely, Mrs. Laurence began to indulge her naturally compassionate interest in mankind by studying the language and life style of the native Africans with whom she would spend the next seven years of her life. This interest led to her unique

first publication, A Tree for Poverty. This small book, published by the government of the British Protectorate of Somaliland in 1954, contained translations of Somali poetry and folktales.

During her stay in Ghana, Margaret Laurence became increasingly aware of the Africans' ties with their past, their search for an identity in a world that was rapidly changing as a result of British withdrawal from Africa, their need for a religious fatalism which would teach them to unquestionably accept death, disease, and drought as well as flood, fright, and freedom, and most of all, their methods of coping with a life marked by isolation and separateness. This awareness gained expression in her two early works, This Side Jordan<sup>3</sup> and The Tomorrow-Tamer<sup>4</sup>, in which Mrs. Laurence introduces one of her major thematic concerns--the nature of freedom--through the metaphor of the emergence of the African state, Ghana. Her exploration of this theme however, did not focus upon the general effects of freedom on the masses but its particular effects upon the individual. It is Mrs. Laurence's belief that universal themes, such as the nature of freedom, can be approached "only through the particular"<sup>5</sup> and that:

The basic business of a novelist is to attempt to create living human individuals on the printed page.<sup>6</sup>

Thus the principal focus in each of these works is upon freedom as it affects the individual, for it is only "in moments of recognition of our own identity and our own responsibility, [that] we may be free, and in our freedom we may rejoice"<sup>7</sup>. The characters chosen to reflect this

theme ranged from an African schoolmaster, Nathaniel Amegbe, to Brother Amory Lemon, a proselytizer from an American mission known as the Angel of Philadelphia, and from a young African born (but British reared) schoolgirl, Ruth Quansah, to an exiled Italian barber and hairstylist known to his clientele only as Mr. Archipelago. In each case Mrs. Laurence's studies explored "the struggle of the individual to break free from the destructive influences of his or her past, whether religious, family or environmental".<sup>8</sup>

Besides her novel and her book of short stories, Margaret Laurence also wrote two works of non-fiction, a travel book called The Prophet's Camel Bell<sup>9</sup> and a later book of criticism on Nigerian literature called Long Drums and Cannons<sup>10</sup>. It is these works that mark the beginning of Margaret Laurence's awareness that she herself was on a voyage of self-discovery. According to Walter Swayze, The Prophet's Camel Bell is Margaret Laurence's Walden:

It is an honest, unpretentious, but deeply considered account of a voyage of self-discovery, of a widening of her views of life and death, freedom and fate, of an experience in which, in trying to understand the ironic contrasts between ideas and behaviour, between past and present, and all the complexities of life, she gained a deeper insight into the meaning of life.<sup>11</sup>

Margaret Laurence herself indicated this new awareness and understanding when she remarked:

I wanted . . . to show the process--the long gradual process of self-knowledge, a process which never ends and which for me began in Africa, for it really was Africa which taught me to look at myself.<sup>12</sup>

In looking at herself, Mrs. Laurence realized that she was not as free as she had once believed. Like those around her, she too had a past which she had to examine, evaluate, and accept.

Besides beginning to look at herself, Mrs. Laurence also began to look at her writing. By the time she had completed the last of her African works, Long Drums and Cannons, she had also made a start on what will be referred to as her Canadian works, the first two of them being entitled The Stone Angel and A Jest of God. Thus the pattern, which became more obvious as she completed her other works, was beginning to appear. Through her study of Nigerian writers, Mrs. Laurence saw that they were

. . . drawing upon their cultural past and relating it to the present, seeking links with the ancestors and the old gods in order to discover who they themselves were.<sup>13</sup>

This Nigerian voyage of self-discovery, achieved by the creative act of writing, strangely reflected what had been happening to Margaret Laurence in her own writing:

Oddly enough, it was only several years ago, when I began doing some research into contemporary Nigerian writing and its background, that I began to see how much my own writing had followed the same pattern--the attempt to assimilate the past, partly in order to be freed from it, partly in order to try to understand myself and perhaps those of my generation through seeing where we had come from.<sup>14</sup>

In reviewing all her African works Mrs. Laurence also came to some other conclusions. The first was that the African works (as

opposed to the Canadian works) definitely bore "the unmistakeable mark of someone who is young and full of faith" since in her conclusions, especially the one in This Side Jordan, "victory for the side of the angels [was] all but assured"<sup>15</sup>. In a slightly less flippant statement, Margaret Laurence suggests a possible reason, other than her youth, for such optimism:

This Side Jordan and the two other books I wrote which were set in Africa, The Prophet's Camel Bell and The Tomorrow-Tamer, were written out of the milieu of a rapidly ending colonialism and the emerging independence of African countries. They are not entirely hopeful books, nor do they, I think, ignore some of the inevitable casualties of social change, both African and European, but they do reflect the predominantly optimistic outlook of many Africans and many western liberals in the late 1950's and early 1960's.<sup>16</sup>

The second conclusion she came to was that, for herself, it was not possible to speak as truthfully in factual writing as it was in fiction.<sup>17</sup> Although The Prophet's Camel Bell was an attempt to show the gradual process of self-knowledge, in its manuscript version (according to her publisher) it made Margaret Laurence "sound like the white man's burden in Africa" because of the over abundance of "apologetic passages"<sup>18</sup>. These passages were reduced and the book published, but when Margaret Laurence came to deal with her own Canadian past, she avoided the non-fictional forms of writing.

The third, but no less important conclusion, about herself and her writing, was that despite her willingness to befriend the Africans and her diligent efforts to get at the heart of their prob-

lens through a close study of many aspects of their culture, Margaret Laurence was, and always would be, an outsider in Africa. Although her relationship with the continent was like a "seven years' love affair", it could never be more than that--"it could never become the close involvement of family"<sup>19</sup>. She could convey African speech with accuracy and authenticity rarely achieved by an alien, but she could not get inside the characters to convey their private thoughts and feelings. As a result of the recognition of this limitation, Margaret Laurence wrote:

I could really only write about people whom I knew from the inside, my own people who came out of the same . . . background as myself--Scots Presbyterian in a Canadian prairie town.<sup>20</sup>

Although her African works had taught Margaret Laurence a good deal about both her writing and herself, they only marked the first step of her voyage into other identities and, more importantly, into her own identity. Her liberation from the intense provincialism of Manitoba required a larger and greater step. It required that Mrs. Laurence revisit her native home, both physically and fictionally. If she was to change "from the patterns of childhood and adolescence [characterized by optimism and faith] to the patterns of adulthood"<sup>21</sup>, she must return to her past and examine and evaluate it. Only through doing this did Margaret Laurence believe she could be free.

To effect this change, Mrs. Laurence wrote a series of works set in Canada: <sup>22</sup>The Stone Angel, <sup>23</sup>A Jest of God, <sup>24</sup>The Fire-Dwellers, <sup>25</sup>and A Bird in the House. Each of these works takes as its chief

protagonist a female character who was born and raised in the fictional town of Manawaka, Manitoba. Although Manawaka is an invented name it does have a close relationship with Margaret Laurence's past as she herself has indicated:

. . . it [the name] was one which had been in my mind since I was about seventeen or eighteen, when I first began to think about writing something set in a prairie town. Manawaka is not my home town of Neepawa-- it has elements of Neepawa, especially in some of the descriptions of places, such as the cemetery on the hill or the Wachakwa valley through which ran the small brown river which was the river of my childhood. In almost every way, however, Manawaka is not so much any one prairie town as an amalgam of many prairie towns. Most of all, I like to think, it is simply itself, a town of the mind, my own private world, as Graham Greene says, which one hopes ultimately will somehow relate to the outer world which we all share.<sup>26</sup>

In her "own private world", Margaret Laurence attempted, at first timidly but then with more force, to journey down the road of self-discovery. Although she knew she must deal with her "own place of belonging", she was extremely nervous about the outcome:

I did not consciously choose any particular time in history, or any particular characters. . . . Later, though, I recognized that in some way not at all consciously understood by me at the time, I had had to begin approaching my background and my past through my grandparents' generation, the generation of pioneers of Scots Presbyterian origin, who had been among the first to people the town I called Manawaka. This was where my roots began. Other past generations of my father's family had lived in Scotland, but for me, my people's real past--my own real past--was not connected with Scotland . . .<sup>27</sup>

Thus the heroine of her first Canadian novel, The Stone Angel, is

the indomitable, ninety year old Hagar Shipley who, in the last two weeks of her life, embarks upon a physical and spiritual voyage of discovery which leads to a clearer understanding of herself and her past. By the act of writing about Hagar and her past, Mrs. Laurence began to understand more about her own background which was so intricately involved with people like Hagar. Mrs. Laurence's second heroine, Rachel Cameron, is weak and submissive when compared to the strong and defiant Hagar Shipley, yet she too experiences a movement towards self-understanding and freedom. In writing this novel, Mrs. Laurence narrowed her focus slightly by concentrating particularly on Manawaka and the stifling effects of small-town, prairie mentality. In her third Canadian novel, Mrs. Laurence came closest to an examination of her adult life through the character of Stacey MacAindra, Rachel's older sister. In studying Stacey, she broadened her view to include not only the past effects of Manawaka but also the present effects of the world at large. In her most recently published Canadian work, A Bird in the House, Mrs. Laurence finally comes face to face with her own childhood experiences. Through a series of short stories she simultaneously looks at the effects of the town, the era (the Depression and the drought) and the cultural background as witnessed in her grandparents and parents.

In this thesis I propose to study the general literary and personal growth of Margaret Laurence as reflected in her Canadian works. The study will focus upon each of her female characters and their

development while on their voyages of self-discovery. Attention will be paid to such factors as the effects of the small-town mentality and the puritanical religious attitudes commonly found in the prairies, the influence of parents on their children, the individual's need to communicate as well as her need to escape, and her need to recognize not only her own identity but also her own responsibility. Attention will also be paid to the general literary development of Margaret Laurence as revealed in the Canadian works, with particular emphasis on the shifts in tone and in themes. Having focused upon these various aspects, some conclusions will be drawn with regard to the personal growth and maturation of Mrs. Laurence who, like her characters, has experienced a voyage of self-discovery.

## Notes to the Introduction:

- 1  
M. Laurence, "Sources", Mosaic, 3, 3, (Spring, 1970), p. 80.
- 2  
M. Laurence, The Prophet's Camel Bell (Toronto, 1963), p. 1.
- 3  
M. Laurence, This Side Jordan (London, 1961), (originally: Toronto, 1960).
- 4  
M. Laurence, The Tomorrow-Tamer (Toronto, 1970), (originally: 1964).
- 5  
W. French, "Margaret Laurence: Her books rear up and demand to be written", The Globe Magazine (April 25, 1970), p. 6.
- 6  
"Laurence of Manitoba", Canadian Author and Bookman, 41 (Winter, 1966), 4-6.
- 7  
W. E. Swayze, "Margaret Laurence: Geographer of Human Identities", (A paper delivered at the annual meetings of the Association of Canadian University Teachers of English, Ottawa, 1967), p. 26.
- 8  
French, "Margaret Laurence", p. 6.
- 9  
The Prophet's Camel Bell.
- 10  
M. Laurence, Long Drums and Cannons (London, 1968).
- 11  
Swayze, p. 5.

- 12  
M. Laurence, "Half War/Half Peace . . . a writer's working relationship with publishers", (a paper delivered at the Edward Johnson Concert Hall, Toronto, November 20, 1969), pp. 4-5.
- 13  
M. Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentences", Canadian Literature, 41 (Summer, 1969), 10-16.
- 14  
Laurence, "Sources", p. 81.
- 15  
Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentences", p. 12.
- 16  
Ibid., p. 11.
- 17  
Laurence, "Half War/Half Peace", p. 5.
- 18  
Ibid., p. 4.
- 19  
Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentences", p. 11.
- 20  
[Cancelled portion of] Preface to Long Drums and Cannons.  
Text as in the MS, McMaster University Library.
- 21  
Laurence, "Sources", p. 80.
- 22  
The Stone Angel (Toronto, 1968), (originally, 1964).
- 23  
A Jest of God (New York, 1966).
- 24  
The Fire-Dwellers (Toronto, 1969).
- 25  
A Bird in the House (Toronto, 1970).
- 26  
Laurence "Sources", pp. 81-82.
- 27  
Ibid., p. 81.

CHAPTER I

HAGAR

I am rampant with memory. 1.

Hagar Shipley at ninety years of age is rampant with memories that span a lifetime of experience from her childhood days as the daughter of a prominent Manawaka businessman, through her life as the wife of Bram Shipley, a Manawaka farmer, to her present existence living in a home on the west coast of Canada with her elderly son Marvin and his wife Doris. Her story is one of raging---raging against love, life, and finally death. Through the autobiographical technique, which blends personal reminiscence with stream-of-consciousness<sup>2</sup>, Mrs. Laurence allows Hagar to reveal herself as a self-centred, proud, and mercilessly independent woman who refuses to be subdued by old age or infirmity. From the vantage point of her ninety years Hagar embarks on a belated voyage of self-discovery during which she recalls, defends, questions, but finally accepts and understands, all the events and feelings that have been important to her in ninety years<sup>3</sup>. Only by doing this is Hagar at last able to recognize her own identity and her own responsibility and thereby achieve her moment of freedom.

In her presentation of Hagar, Margaret Laurence has skilfully employed the technique of double vision or double exposure, so we see Hagar both as she is and as she was. She is Jason Currie's black-haired daughter "strutting the board sidewalk like a pint-sized peacock, resplendent, haughty, hoity-toity" (p. 6). Yet she is also the aged "queen of moth-millers, empress of earwigs" as she views herself in a purse mirror while sitting alone on an upturned box, in a dusty, deserted old cannery (p. 216). Hagar is also both a daughter and a mother. As a daughter she challenged her father's authority by marrying

Bram Shipley against his better judgement, for Bram, according to the opinion of respectable townspeople, was as "common as dirt" (p. 47). Marrying him "without her family's consent" (p. 49) also marked Hagar as "common". As a mother, Hagar must watch her son John follow in her own footsteps by flouting her authority and continuing to see Arlene Simmons. Using an argument, similar in nature to one used by her father, Hagar tells John, "you have to avoid not only evil but the appearance of evil" (p. 238).

The double exposure technique also reveals the significance of Hagar's maiden and married names: Currie and Shipley. As a Currie, Hagar had been brought up in the true Scots Presbyterian tradition. She had been taught the virtues of sobriety, seriousness, and self-restraint. She had also been taught the values of reason, judgement, and above all respect for both parental and divine authority. Yet in her adult life, Hagar met and married a Shipley, who stood for the exact opposite of puritan repression. Bram displayed vulgarity in his speech, his dress, and his manners. He was sensual, earthy, and emotionally expressive, and he feared the authority of neither man nor God. In every way he represented the polar opposite of puritanical religion, namely the western pioneer spirit. While reviewing her life, Hagar now realizes the irony of their marriage as she says:

---here's the joker in the pack---we'd each  
married for those qualities we later found  
we couldn't bear, he for my manners and  
speech, I for his flouting of them.

(pp. 79-80)

This marriage on one level was the union of two highly dissimilar individuals, while on another level it was the uneasy union

of two dissimilar ways of life--the pioneer and the puritan. But the pioneer laughter and lust floundered in the face of the ingrained puritan restraint as witnessed in Hagar's attitude towards sexual relations with Bram.

His banner over me was only his skin,  
and now I no longer know why it should  
have shamed me. People thought of things  
differently in those days. Perhaps some  
people didn't. I wouldn't know. I never  
spoke of it to anyone.

It was not so very long after we wed,  
when first I felt my blood and vitals rise  
to meet his. He never knew. I never let  
him know. . . . I prided myself upon  
keeping my pride intact, like some maiden-  
head.

(p. 81)

This pride, inherited from Jason Currie and guarded so carefully by Hagar Currie, like everything else in the novel is also double-edged. While her parents always believed it meant sturdy independence, courage and character, Hagar and Margaret Laurence learn that it could also mean pigheadedness, domineering possessiveness, and sheer cussed-  
4  
ness .

This duality of vision is basic to Margaret Laurence's understanding and appreciation of life in a small prairie town. Through writing this book, Mrs. Laurence came to recognize the clash between the puritan ways and the pioneer ways, between the rigid and non-rejoicing standards of the old world (in this case Scotland) and the wild spirit of freedom and rejoicing characteristic of the new world. The effect of the struggle for supremacy between two ways of life is made obvious through the personal struggles experienced by Hagar. This pattern of the conflict between the wild and the tame is reinforced

by the flower imagery used throughout the novel. Early in the opening chapter we are made aware of this battle for survival as it related both to Hagar and to the natural plants of the prairies.

Hagar recalls:

I used to walk there [the Manawaka cemetery] often when I was a girl. There could not have been many places to walk primly in those days, on paths, where white kid boots and dangling skirts would not be torn by thistles or put in unseemly disarray. How anxious I was to be neat and orderly, imagining life had been created only to celebrate tidiness, like prissy Pippa as she passed. But sometimes through the hot rush of disrespectful wind that shook the scrub oak and the coarse couchgrass encroaching upon the dutifully cared-for habitations of the dead, the scent of the cowslips would rise momentarily. They were tough-rooted, these wild and gaudy flowers, and although they were held back at the cemetery's edge, torn out by loving relatives determined to keep the plots clear and clearly civilized, for a second or two a person walking there could catch the faint, musky, dust tinged smell of things that grew untended and had grown always, before the portly peonies and the angels with rigid wings, when the prairie bluffs were walked through only by Cree with enigmatic faces and greasy hair.

(pp. 4-5)

If Bram Shipley represented the wild and uncivilized prairie man, then Jason Currie, Hagar's father, represented the industrious, civilized, and proud immigrant pioneer whose aim it was to make the new world over into the image of the old world. We meet many people like Jason Currie in the works of Margaret Laurence, since these are the people who populated her youth. Jason, like others of his

generation,

. . . never believed in wasting a word or a minute. He was a self-made man. He had started without a bean, . . . had pulled himself up by his bootstraps. . . . He put his faith in homilies. They were his Pater Noster, his Apostle's Creed.

(pp. 7-8)

As the proud owner of the first store in Manawaka, Jason Currie believed it was his duty to be a god-fearing Christian as well as an upright citizen. This duty was met by ritual grace at meals, regular attendance at church, and the ostentatious donation of a family pew "with long cushions of brown and beige velour" (p. 16) to enhance both the church and Jason. The most important sign of Jason Currie's pride and religion, however, was the enormous marble stone angel that marked the grave of Hagar's mother.

Above the town, on the brow, the stone angel used to stand. . . . in the memory of her who relinquished her feeble ghost as I gained my stubborn one, my mother's angel that my father bought in pride to mark her bones and proclaim his dynasty, as he fancied, forever and a day. . . . She was not the only angel in the Manawaka cemetery, but she was the first, the largest and certainly the costliest.

(p. 3)

This "doubly blind" stone angel with its "sightless eyes" (p. 3) and aura of pride becomes one of the central symbols in the novel. It is a visual image of the great concern for public opinion which marked Jason Currie's generation. But it is also a symbol of the pride, rigidity, and blindness which was passed on to Hagar.

Although Hagar could never bear that statue (p. 179), it was impossible for her to leave it. Throughout the novel she is constantly associated with and haunted by the angel--"the woman held in stone, wanting always to be released but never able to release herself"<sup>5</sup>. When she leaves Bram, with whom she had refused to be anything but cold and stone-like, Hagar must pass by the marble angel "sightlessly guarding the gardens of snow, the empty places and the deep lying dead" (p. 142). After Bram's death, over which Hagar shed no tears, she and her son John visit the Manawaka cemetery only to find that:

the marble angel lay toppled over on her face, among the peonies, and the black ants scurried through the white stone ringlets of her hair.

(p. 178)

When they discover the mishap, John appropriately notes, "The old lady's taken quite a header" (p. 178). Just like the stone angel, her symbolic counter-part, Hagar too had "taken a header" when she realized that in his last days Bram had not even recognized her. Much to her disgust, she had reminded Bram of his "fat and cowlike first wife" (p. 173). Again, after John's death, Hagar found that tears had been locked too long and would not come at her bidding:

The night my son died I was transformed to stone and never wept at all.

(p. 243)

Because of her childhood training and years of emotional restraint Hagar had become like the stone angel--hard, cold, and unseeing. But in her last few hours Hagar realized she was not totally like the stone. As she recalls her last visit to the cemetery she once again

thinks of the stone angel, which John had reluctantly pushed upright. Although the stone angel was still standing, just as Hagar was still living, the winters and the lack of care, which had altered Hagar, had also altered the statue:

The earth had heaved with frost around  
her, and she stood askew and tilted. . . .  
We didn't touch her. We only looked.  
Someday she'll topple entirely, and no  
one will bother to set her upright again.

(p. 305)

The grinding attrition of time and bodily decrepitude finally have caused Hagar, with her bed wetting and belching, her gall-bladder attacks, her humiliating recurring confusion, her physical and psychic impotence, to realize that unlike the stone angel, she is not enduring.<sup>6</sup> Hagar is not made of stone but of "plaster of Paris". This recognition marks one of several steps Hagar must take on her voyage of self-discovery.

Besides using the stone angel as a major symbol in the novel, Margaret Laurence also employs Biblical analogies throughout, in her effort to understand Hagar's particular background and the general Canadian pioneer experience it represents. The isolation, exile, and separateness of the pioneers living on the prairies during the drought and the Depression is very similar to that of the Israelites living as exiles in the land of Egypt. The Israelites' search for the promised land is also analogous to Hagar's search for the promised land of inner freedom. Belief in a just, merciful God became very difficult in both cases. Although we are not made aware of any questioning of God's ways on the part of Jason Currie, we definitely hear Hagar as

she expresses her sentiments about God, Heaven, and God's interest in mankind. Her mental images of God and Heaven reveal her general disrespect for those things normally held sacred. At one point she wonders:

Can God be One and watching? I see Him  
clad in immaculate radiance, a short white  
jacket and a smile white and creamy as zinc-  
oxide ointment, focussing His cosmic and  
comic glass eye on this and that, as the  
fancy takes Him. Or no--He's many-headed,  
and all the heads argue at once, a squabbling  
committee.

(p. 93)

As for the existence and value of a Heaven, Hagar says:

Even if heaven were real, and measured  
as Revelation says, so many cubits this  
way and that, how gimcrack a place it  
would be, crammed with its pavements of  
gold, its gates of pearl and topaz, like  
a giant chunk of costume jewelry.

(p. 120)

In a passage which did not reach the final version, Hagar mentally replies to Mr. Troy's question regarding God's infinite Mercy, by thinking:

What I don't say is that I believe in  
his infinite curiosity. He or It wants to  
see what'll happen, if this pinch of stuff  
and that are put together. So we get  
green-fingered gardeners, red-handed  
murderers. He doesn't know in advance  
or care.<sup>7</sup>

Yet the wilderness in which Hagar and her ancestors wandered was partly of their own making. The emotional and physical restraint adhered to by the Scots Presbyterians created a wilderness and

isolation far more severe than anything nature could have provided.

In a moment of awareness in the last hour of her life Hagar recognizes that

Pride was my wilderness, and the demon  
that led me there was fear. I was alone,  
never anything else, and never free, for  
I carried my chains within me, and they  
spread out from me and shackled all I  
touched. Oh my two, my dead. Dead by  
your own hands or by mine? Nothing can  
take away those years.

(p. 292)

By asking if she did not in some way cause the deaths of Bram and John, Hagar achieves another step on her road towards self-discovery and freedom. However, we are still aware that many of her ancestors did not reach that promised land of freedom but died in the wilderness along the way.

As well as using the general Biblical analogy of the exiled Israelites in search of a promised land, Margaret Laurence has also employed the more particular story of Hagar and Ishmael. Like the Biblical Hagar, Hagar was not free, in the sense that she was trapped by her upbringing. She also called herself the Egyptian and Pharoah's daughter as she wandered in the wilderness created by her fear and her pride. As the second wife of Bram Shipley she bore him a son, who,  
8  
like Ishmael, was a "wild ass of a man". Although Mrs. Laurence did not want Hagar's story to follow its Biblical counterpart too closely, she did hope that Hagar's reaction to John's death would be recognized as a recasting of the Biblical Hagar's reaction to the anticipated  
9  
death of Ishmael when she said:

Let me not see the death of the child.

(Genesis 21:16)

In her references to Jacob and his night wrestling match with the angel of God, Mrs. Laurence skilfully blends the Biblical symbols with the symbol of the stone angel. Hagar, whose love for her second son, John, blinds her to the needs of her first son, Marvin, tried to see John as a Jacob figure while he struggled to right the fallen stone angel. However, Hagar says:

I wish he could have looked like Jacob then, wrestling with the angel and besting it, wringing a blessing from it with his might. But no. He sweated and grunted angrily. His feet slipped and he hit his forehead on a marble ear, and swore. His arm muscles tightened and swelled, and finally the statue moved, teetered, and was upright once more.

(p. 179)

Yet in her last hour, lying in a hospital bed with Marvin tightly holding her hand, she realizes the truth of her life's situation:

Now it seems to me he is truly Jacob, gripping with all his strength, and bargaining. I will not let thee go except thou bless me. And I see I am thus strangely cast, and perhaps have been so from the beginning, and can only release myself by releasing him.

(p. 304)

Hagar--the woman cast as a stone angel wanting to be released--is now the angel of God who alone has the power to release her son. She does so with a lie which once again marks another step towards recognition of her responsibility and the freedom it brings.

In her book on Margaret Laurence, Clara Thomas adds one further dimension to the Biblical analogies. She sees a strongly marked sacramental pattern moving with benign irony through the novel . While I would disagree with the term sacramental since it

suggests the Roman Catholic and not Presbyterian religion, the idea of Hagar's movement through a repentance and acceptance of her sins is sound.

The spirit of the religion which Hagar had known only in an emptiness of form takes her through repentance and confession, from the prison of self to the moment of knowledge pointing toward freedom, and on to the simple but signal acts of restitution which do give her a sense of freedom.<sup>11</sup>

The repentance and confession occur during a poignant scene in the fish cannery. Here, Hagar, for the first time in her ninety years, breaks through her stone exterior to "exchange vulnerabilities" <sup>12</sup> with another human being, the falsetto-voiced insurance salesman, Murray F. Lees. Like King Lear, Hagar, in the agony of her last days, achieves vision, understands human suffering, and reaches out her hands in a gesture of love <sup>13</sup>. Also like Lear, Hagar recognizes her responsibility in the tragedies which have marred her life.

Following her repentance and confession, Hagar takes one more step in her voyage towards self-discovery. As she lies awaiting death in the confines of a semi-private hospital room, she reluctantly allows Mr. Troy, the young minister, to follow his calling by singing Psalm One Hundred. When he is finished Hagar suddenly realizes what her life has been about.

This knowing comes upon me so forcefully, so shatteringly, and with such a bitterness as I have never felt before. I must always, always, have wanted that--simply to rejoice. How is it I never could? I know, I know. How long have I known? Or have I always known, in some crevice of my heart, some cave too deeply buried, too concealed? Every good joy I might have held, in my man or any child of mine or

even the plain light of morning, of walking the earth, all were forced to a standstill by some brake of proper appearances---oh, proper to whom? When did I ever speak the heart's truth?

(p. 292)

With this new found knowledge of herself, this awareness of the physical and emotional restraint which has brought only pain, not pleasure, Hagar is able at last to perform the two "simple but signal acts of restitution" which complete the religiously symbolic pattern and give Hagar the moment of freedom in which she truly knows herself.

Up until this point, Hagar's identity has always been associated with material things outside herself. The most important indication of her identity has been in the house she bought when she left the prairies, the house in which she presently resides. When Marvin and Doris suggest selling the house, Hagar rages. She mentally indicates the value of the house in terms of her understanding of her own identity as she thinks:

My shreds and remnants of years are scattered through it visibly in lamps and vases, the needle-point fire bench, the heavy oak chair from the Shipley place, the china cabinet and walnut sideboard from my father's house. There'd not be room for all these in some cramped apartment. We'd have to put them into storage, or sell them. I don't want that. I couldn't leave them. If I am not somehow contained in them and in this house, something of all change caught and fixed here, eternal enough for my purposes, then I do not know where I am to be found at all.

(p. 36)

While in the hospital Hagar once again reaches out to help first Sandra Wong and then Marvin. In doing so, she finds something other than material objects with which she can ascertain her identity.

I lie here and try to recall something truly free that I've done in ninety years. I can think of only two acts that might be so, both recent. One was a joke--yet a joke only as all victories are, the paraphernalia being unequal to the event's reach. The other was a lie--yet not a lie, for it was spoken at least and at last with what may perhaps be a kind of love.

(p. 307)

In laughter and love, Hagar has found something she has been searching for for over ninety years. Her voyage of self-discovery has come to an end but ironically so, because as it concludes, so does her life.

In the climactic moment of the novel, the sacramental pattern also culminates as Hagar takes the cup of water symbolic of the cup  
14  
of life and the grace of God .

I wrest from her the glass, full of water to be had for the taking. I hold it in my own hands. There. There.  
And then---

(p. 308)

Despite her bed-wetting and belching, her incessant anger, her blindness and her pride, Hagar was a figure to be respected. In death as in life she raged. It is this characteristic struggle against all odds that Margaret Laurence recognized and admired in her grandparents' generation. In exploring the character of Hagar as daughter, wife, mother, and grandmother, Mrs. Laurence came to understand more clearly the tensions created by the uneasy harnessing

of the pioneer freedom and puritan restraint. By recognizing the problems inherent in such a situation, Margaret Laurence advanced one step closer towards discovery of her own identity and own background, just as she came one step closer to releasing the ghosts of her past who had stirred such mixed emotions as fear and admiration, love and hate.

As her first Canadian novel, The Stone Angel both follows and deviates from Margaret Laurence's earlier African writing. Her ability to draw strong character portraits and to catch the essential meaning of life's events is still apparent. Her sympathetic understanding and appreciation of human nature in all its complexity is also evident. Although her optimistic tone is somewhat modified, Mrs. Laurence at this point still believes in man's ability to achieve freedom by recognizing his own identity and by coming to terms with his past. Hagar reaches such a point when she is able to recognize and accept herself for what she is. When Doris questions Hagar regarding Mr. Troy's hospital visit, Hagar, in her typical fashion, snaps back a curt reply. However, as she does so, she mentally admits:

Oh, I am unchangeable, unregenerate. I go on speaking in the same way, always, and the same touchiness rises within me at the slightest thing.

(p. 293)

This recognition about herself, plus her final acts of restitution, bring Hagar successfully to the end of her journey of self-discovery. In Biblical terms she has reached her own promised land of inner freedom. However, with this achievement comes Hagar's death. We are thus left wondering how Hagar's newly achieved understanding of herself might

have affected her life. Mrs. Laurence does not provide an answer in this novel since Hagar dies before she has a chance to return to the world. However, in her second Canadian novel, A Jest of God, Mrs. Laurence does give us a picture of what may or may not happen to a person much younger than Hagar who undergoes a voyage of self-discovery and must then face the world.

Since The Stone Angel represents Mrs. Laurence's first attempt to come to terms with her own background (that of a child raised in a small prairie town), it is interesting that the specific setting of this novel is not a prairie town but a large, metropolitan city (probably Vancouver) on the west coast of Canada. Manawaka is seen only through the eyes of Hagar as she mentally voyages through her childhood and early adult years which were spent there. The experience of Manawaka is a remembered experience and therefore a distant one. Such a technique of distancing was necessary for Mrs. Laurence, who at that point felt she was still too closely involved with her own past to maintain the objectivity necessary for a sound and just evaluation of it. When Mrs. Laurence turned to her second novel, however, she was aware of the need to examine Manawaka more closely. Thus the story of Rachel Cameron takes place in present day Manawaka.

In speaking of Hagar and her story Margaret Laurence has said:

If The Stone Angel has any meaning, it is as an old woman anywhere, having to deal with the reality of dying. On the other hand, she is not an old woman anywhere. She is very much a person who belongs in the same kind of prairie Scots Presbyterian background as I do, and it was, of course,

people like Hagar who created that background,  
with all its flaws and its strengths.<sup>15</sup>

Mrs. Laurence believes that the person and the place are very  
important. To understand either you must understand both.

## Notes to Chapter I:

- 1  
M. Laurence, The Stone Angel (Toronto, 1968), p. 5. Hereafter all textual references will be indicated within the body of the thesis by the page number only.
- 2  
S. E. Read, "The Maze of Life: The Work of Margaret Laurence", Canadian Literature, 27 (Winter, 1966), 5-14.
- 3  
C. Thomas, Margaret Laurence (Toronto, 1969), p. 35.
- 4  
R. Davies, "Talks with Margaret Laurence", University of Toronto Graduate, 3, 2 (Spring, 1970), 25-29.
- 5  
Laurence, "Half War/Half Peace", p. 9.
- 6  
Swayze, pp. 19-20.
- 7  
The Stone Angel Text as in the MS, McMaster University Library, p. 3.
- 8  
Genesis 16:12, R.S.V.
- 9  
M. Turner, "An Interview with Margaret Laurence: June 19, 1970, Peterborough, Ontario", Appendix A, pp. 107-108.
- 10  
Thomas, p. 42.
- 11  
Ibid.
- 12  
Swayze, p. 18.

13

Read, "The Maze of Life", p. 11.

14

Thomas, p. 42.

15

Laurence, "Sources", pp. 83-84.

CHAPTER II

RACHEL

I dramatize myself.<sup>1</sup>

Rachel Cameron, the heroine of Margaret Laurence's second Canadian novel, A Jest of God, is a character in complete opposition to Hagar Shipley. Although both women were born and raised in Manawaka and both women embark on voyages of self-discovery, Rachel is much younger and much weaker than Hagar. Clara Thomas has suggested that if Hagar has the proportions of a Lear figure, then Rachel has the proportions of a Prufrock.<sup>2</sup>

While Hagar was exuberant, forceful, and strong, Rachel is withdrawn, introspective, and fearful not only of the world outside her but also of the world of unexpressed emotion inside her. Rachel's life, ironically though not intentionally,<sup>3</sup> has been very similar to the life of Regina Weese, whom Hagar so disliked and scorned.

So much for sad Regina . . . I always felt she had only herself to blame, for she was a flimsy, gutless creature, bland as egg custard, caring with martyred devotion for an ungrateful fox-voiced mother year in and year out.<sup>4</sup>

Rachel, like Regina, has in fact spent the past several years of her life fulfilling her duty to her widowed mother by living with her and looking after her. She is also flimsy, gutless, and bland in both her physical appearance and her personality. Although she is far more self-perceptive and aware than Hagar ever was, Rachel tends to exaggerate vastly her own inadequacies and shortcomings to the point where we must regard her assessments of herself as "loaded".<sup>5</sup>

At thirty-four, Rachel sees herself as a complete failure.

She is still single and living at home under the ever-watchful eye of her hypochondriac mother. In fact, Rachel still sleeps in the same bedroom, with the same girlish furniture, that she slept in as a child. In many ways Rachel is still living in an extended childhood. Although she did temporarily escape the confines of her home and her town when she went away to university, her father's untimely death forced Rachel to return to Manawaka and her mother. As a result of her abortive education, Rachel must teach public school instead of high school. While she does not dislike her job, she is ashamed of her failure to do something she considers dignified and worthwhile--that is teach in a city high school. Later in the novel when Rachel meets Nick Kazlik in the drugstore, he questions her about where she is teaching. In an embarrassed and somewhat childish manner Rachel defensively replies:

'Grade Two'. I find I'm laughing-- tittering, maybe---yes, for Christ's sake, that. 'I wouldn't want to cope with high school'.

(p. 78)

Rachel is also painfully aware of her failure to establish permanent relations with anyone--male or female. When Willard Siddley, the school principal, makes a slightly personal and friendly remark about the enigmatic smile on Rachel's face, she responds in her typical nervous, embarrassed, and even fearful fashion.

His humor. I didn't know I was smiling. If I was, it was only out of nervousness. Which is ridiculous. I've nothing to be afraid of, with him. He has never given a bad report to the School Board on my teaching, as far as I know. I don't know

why I should even think he might have. I can feel my face paling to the peculiar putty color it takes on when I'm thrown a little off balance.

(p. 10)

When Willard invites Rachel to dine with him and his wife, Rachel immediately searches for an excuse not to go. Her reaction is similar when Calla Mackie, a fellow teacher, invites her to a religious gathering at the Tabernacle of the Risen and Reborn. In both cases Rachel uses her mother's bridge game as a barrier behind which she can hide from any advances made by the outside world. Although Rachel cannot feel any binding affection for the adults in her life, she is strongly but innocently attracted to one of her red-haired, male pupils--James Doherty. Yet so fearful is she of revealing any of her affection that Rachel goes the opposite way by striking James on the face with a ruler and thereby causing his nose to bleed. Constantly uncertain and unsteady, Rachel wanders in the wilderness of her mind, in search of something which will give her life some meaning and provide her with some knowledge of her own identity.

Besides feeling she has failed in a professional and personal sense, Rachel also feels she has somehow failed physically as well. She realizes she is much too tall and too pale. When she walks past a darkened window in her white raincoat she sees herself as a "stroke of white chalk on a blackboard" (p. 37). Her hair, in contrast to the latest styles worn by her grown-up students, is done in "nondescript waves, mole brown" (p. 17). Her dress is always simple and sedate,

nothing to arouse the attention of others. In addition to her poor physical appearance, Rachel also carries around with her the burden of poor health. She is a constant pulse taker and diagnostician and with her wild imagination Rachel's mind operates in leaps and bounds. Rachel, unnecessarily, is constantly brooding about death.

This pain inside my skull--what is it?  
It isn't like an ordinary headache which  
goes through like a metal skewer from temple  
to temple. Not like sinus, either, the  
assault beginning above my eyes and moving  
down into the bones of my face. This pain  
is not so much pain as a pulsing, regular  
and rhythmical, like the low thudding of a  
drum.

It's nothing. How could it be a tumor?  
It's nothing. Perhaps I have a soft spot  
in my head. This joke doesn't work. I  
can't hold on to the slang sense of it,  
and its other meaning seems sinister.  
Fontanele.

(p. 23)

This association of a tumour and a joke becomes highly important later in the novel.

In such a condition, it is understandable that Rachel would gradually be moving into a world of fantasies and dreams in which her life would have purpose, her friendships would be meaningful and productive, and her health (in body and in mind) would be sound. But life is concerned with reality, not fantasy, and Rachel herself recognizes that her constant retreats into fantasy are dangerous.

God forbid that I should turn into an eccentric.  
This isn't just imagination. I've seen it happen.  
Not only teachers, of course, and not only  
women who haven't married. . . .

I don't have to concern myself yet for  
awhile, surely. Thirty-four is still quite

young. But now is the time to watch out for it.

(pp. 4-5)

Thus, when we meet Rachel, she is alone and afraid. She feels trapped by her home, by her job, and by her town--Manawaka. Although she recognizes the need to act, her natural tendency towards indecisiveness hinders her. Nevertheless, Rachel, like Hagar before her, does embark upon a voyage of self-discovery in which she comes to terms with her past life as the daughter of Niall Cameron, owner and operator of Cameron's Funeral home, and her present life as a sexually frustrated, spinster school teacher. In her struggle for independence and self-realization, Rachel moves from blindness to insight particularly in three major areas: religion, sex, and death. To understand Rachel's problems in these areas it is first necessary to examine the small prairie town attitudes on such matters. These attitudes and beliefs are best expressed by Rachel's mother, May Cameron.

Although the entire novel is told in first person narration by Rachel herself, we do get a fairly substantial view of May Cameron and all that she represents through her own dialogue and through Rachel's thoughts on what she has heard from her childhood onward. As the wife of Manawaka's first and only funeral parlor operator, we might have expected May Cameron to be proud, but instead she is embarrassed and she passes this embarrassment on to her children, in particular Rachel. Death is not to be named and mention of it should be avoided at all cost. There are also certain rooms on the ground

floor of their home that must remain hidden from Rachel's sight and her knowledge if possible. The name changes from Cameron's Funeral Parlour to Cameron's Funeral Home to Japonica Funeral Chapel are also indicative of the town's desire to minimize death, and Rachel jokingly thinks to herself:

All that remains is for someone to delete the word funeral. A nasty word, smacking of mortality. No one in Manawaka ever dies, at least not on this side of the tracks. We are a gathering of immortals. We pass on, through Calla's divine gates of topaz and azure, perhaps, but we do not die. Death is rude, unmannerly, not to be spoken to in the streets.

(p. 18)

From her childhood on Rachel has had to bear the shame of living in a house for the dead. Even as an adult walking up to the blinking neon sign which advertises what is now Hector Jonas's funeral business Rachel realizes:

. . . how laughable it is, to live here,  
how funny lots of people must think it,  
how amusing, how hilarious.

(p. 69)

Besides representing the town's narrow attitudes towards death, May Cameron also provides an indication of their strict religious and moral attitudes. When Rachel decides she will no longer attend church her mother, in a typical small town fashion, does not openly reproach her. Instead, she applies the slower but surer technique of social pressure by saying such things as, "I don't

think it would look very good" (p. 49) or:

"Reverend MacElfrish asked after you, dear. He hoped you were well. I suppose he thought you probably weren't, as he hasn't seen you."

(pp. 49-50)

Such slyly pointed barbs and insinuations are the weapons, whether conscious or unconscious, of such small town matrons in their battle against sin and corruption. Certain unwritten but rigid laws such as the need for regular church attendance, the need for emotional restraint at all times, and the avoidance of drinking, swearing, smoking, or gambling, must always be upheld by citizens who are conscious of maintaining proper appearances.

As a result of these particular beliefs, Rachel, like Hagar before her, is torn between two extremes. While the extremes for Hagar could be seen in terms of the puritan restraint versus the pioneer freedom, the extremes for Rachel are epitomized in the conflicts between the two religions: Presbyterianism (again associated with the old, reserved, stately world) and Fundamentalism (associated with the open, unreserved, new world). The friendship of Calla Mackie, a strong believer in Fundamentalism, causes Rachel a great deal of embarrassment because of the conflicting attitudes between these religions.

I should care what Mother thinks of her. What does it matter? If only Calla wouldn't insist on talking about the Tabernacle in Mother's hearing. 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 else to stop minding.

(p. 33)

Not only has Rachel been shielded from death but also from sex. As a child she realized there was little physical contact between her parents. As an adult, she suspects that her mother believed her father was in some way unclean because he worked with the dead. The subject of pregnancy is also, like death, a subject which must be couched in euphemistic terminology. When Mrs. Cameron tells Rachel the latest piece of town gossip that unwed Cassie Stewart had twins, she begins with the customary euphemism, "You know she's been away?" After announcing that Cassie plans to keep them, May Cameron passes her own and the town's judgement on such an indecent situation:

I can't fathom the thoughtlessness of some girls. She might consider her mother, and how it'll be for her. It was Mrs. Barnes that told me. I said to her, I thank my lucky stars I never had a moment's worry with either of my daughters.

(p. 72)

Rachel immediately notices her mother's use of the past tense had and realizes that her time for bearing children is running short. Yet ironically Rachel is still a child herself, a child who must listen to and obey her mother at all times. Rachel's role in life is confused, and she recognizes this when she says:

What a strangely pendulum life I have,

fluctuating in age between extremes, hardly knowing myself whether I am too young or too old.

(p. 71)

In order to reach a state of permanent maturity, Rachel must face her background, understand and accept it, and then establish an identity of her own. This is achieved during her thirty-fifth summer when Rachel releases herself emotionally and physically from the grip of Manawaka and gains the freedom she so desperately needs.

Rachel's movement towards freedom occurs in three phases, each of which is related to her relationship with either Calla Mackie, Nick Kazlik, or Hector Jonas.

Calla Mackie, Rachel's friend and fellow teacher, is solidly built, earthy, and outspoken and it is her belief that "we hold ourselves too tightly these days" (p. 34). Although Rachel is embarrassed by her differentness, her uninhibited sloppiness and her non-conforming fundamentalist religion<sup>6</sup>, she also admires her ability to rejoice in life. To Rachel, Calla is a sunflower, "brash, strong, plain, and yet reaching up in some way . . ." (p. 13). This ability to rejoice in life has been achieved through the aid of her religion. Her attendance at and participation in the services at the Tabernacle of the Risen and Reborn are the 'rock' of Calla's soul. It is this foundation rock she wishes to share with Rachel. Despite Rachel's fears of what her mother and others in town will say, she agrees to attend a special service as a form of appeasement to Calla.

The scene in Calla's church is in sharp contrast to the scene

in May's church. The differences between the two religions are epitomized in the portraits of Christ's death which appear in each church and the contents of the hymns that each sings. In May's church where death and pain are to be ignored and hidden from both mind and eye, a stained glass window shows:

. . . a pretty and cleancut Jesus expiring  
gently and with absolutely no inconvenience,  
no gore, no pain, just this nice and  
slightly effeminate insurance salesman who,  
somewhat incongruously, happens to be clad  
in a toga, holding his arms languidly up  
to something which might in other circumstances  
have been a cross.

(p. 52)

By comparison, the portrait in Calla's church shows the glory of a "bearded and bleeding Christ" whose heart is "exposed and bristling with thorns like a scarlet pincushion" (p. 38). The fundamentalist hymns with their prophecies of "heaven and earth in ashes burning" (p. 40) also contrast sharply to the gentle, mild Presbyterian hymns that sing of "Jerusalem the golden, with milk and honey blest..." (p. 52). While the Presbyterians shun pain and death, the fundamentalists believe they are a part of life and therefore must be understood and accepted if the individual is to develop into a whole human being. Yet neither religion suits Rachel who thinks:

The Tabernacle has too much gaudiness and  
zeal, and this has too little.

(p. 52)

When Rachel first enters the Tabernacle, she feels trapped and ashamed as though she were a "gate-crasher" who had come in under false pretenses (p. 40). She wonders how anyone could make a public

spectacle of himself and decides:

I will not look. I will not listen. People  
should keep themselves to themselves--- that's  
the only decent way.

(p. 44)

Yet Rachel unwillingly responds to the Tabernacle service and becomes  
so "caught-up" in the voice of the lay preacher that suddenly:

That voice!

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, the grieving---

Not Calla's voice. Mine. Oh my God.  
Mine. The voice of Rachel.

(p. 46)

In a moment of emotional frenzy, Rachel temporarily escapes  
the prison of her self and the restraint she has always felt. But  
she has opened the flood gates of her emotions only to find they must  
be closed immediately because accompanying this traumatic experience  
is Rachel's discovery that Calla feels a lesbian attraction to her.  
To undergo two such bewildering experiences forces Rachel to feel and  
act decisively probably for the first time in her life.

My anger feels more than justified, and in  
some way this is a tremendous relief.

It takes less than a minute to get to the  
front hall and put on my coat and hood.

. . . I won't slam the door, I must  
shut it very quietly. Once I am outside,  
I can begin running.

(p. 48)

Rachel realizes now that her purposeless existence cannot continue as  
it has done. Her inhibition, her fear and insecurity, her thwarted  
sexual energy must have release or Rachel will be forced into the

permanent retreat of private fantasy.

Rachel finds this release when she meets Nick Kazlik, a childhood acquaintance, who has returned home from his job teaching high school in Winnipeg. Although Rachel is at first reluctant to date Nick, her anxieties are soon overcome by her tremendous need for a man. This need even leads Rachel to lie to her mother about her friendship with Nick. It also makes her aware of the "concealed undercoat, the tint of malice" which resides behind her mother's coyness (p. 135) and which sent Niall Cameron to his cadavers, Stacey Cameron to the West Coast, and Rachel Cameron to a retreat within herself. It is thus with tremendous effort and courage that Rachel comes out of her shell to seek a more permanent relationship with Nick by saying, "If I had a child, I would like it to be yours" (p. 177). In her desire for a strong relationship Rachel has exaggerated Nick's feelings for her and she has become too dependent on and too devoted to a man she hardly knows. He, on the other hand, recognizes her problems and in a speech which parallels the Biblical Jacob's<sup>7</sup>, says to Rachel:

I'm not God. I can't solve anything.

(p. 177)

In her first act of open commitment to another human being Rachel has been rejected. When Nick quickly leaves town, Rachel is forced to come to grips with her problem of suspected pregnancy all by herself. Once again the flood gates of her emotions have been opened but this time they cannot be closed so easily. Although Rachel

recognizes the necessity of action, she is torn between her own desire to keep the child and the realization of what her mother and the town would think of such a decision. To escape this situation Rachel attempts but fails to commit suicide. The suicide scene contains just enough black humour on Rachel's part to prevent it from becoming melodramatic. While her own attitudes towards death might be far in advance of her mother's, Rachel is still not prepared to give up her life willingly. Ironically, at this point, Rachel turns to God, whom she has earlier referred to as a brutal joker (p. 53), and in an interior monologue Rachel reveals an insight into her own character and an ability to come to a firm decision by herself as she says:

Help---if You will---me. Whoever that may be. And whoever You are, or where. I am not clever. I am not as clever as I hiddenly thought I was. And I am not as stupid as I dreaded I might be. . . .

I don't know what I've done. I've been demented, probably. I know what I am going to do, though.

Look--it's my child, mine. And so I will have it. I will have it because I want it and because I cannot do anything else.

(p. 204)

But God is the brutal joker Rachel suspected He was. The baby which she believed was a life giving force turns out to be a cervical tumour with the power of death. At this point it would seem that both Rachel and the 'baby' will die. However, while coming out of the anaesthetic after her operation, Rachel reveals the transformation which has occurred within her by saying:

I am the mother now.

(p. 219)

By losing her imagined baby, Rachel has moved out of her extended childhood forever. The reality of her pain prevents Rachel from re-entering her world of fantasy.

Something collapsed, some edifice. No---  
not so much that, not a breaking, nothing  
so violent. A gate closed, quite quietly,  
and when I tried to open it again, it  
wouldn't. There wasn't any way around it.  
No way in, not there, not any more. Visa  
canceled. I don't know why. The gate just  
shut. I once used to try to stop myself  
going there, but now when I tried to get in,  
I couldn't. I needed to and wanted to, but  
I couldn't.

(p. 218)

There is no need for daydreaming since Rachel now understands that her role in life is to make decisions for both herself and her mother. Not only must she make these decisions, she must also carry them out. Thus it is that Rachel announces that she has a new job teaching on the west coast and she plans to move at the end of the month. As well as recognizing her own identity Rachel also sees her mother clearly for the first time and realizes that she, Rachel, is not responsible for keeping her mother alive. With this realization comes "some enormous relief" (p. 232) as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

Shortly after her return from the hospital Rachel pays a second visit to Hector Jonas's funeral parlour. It is this visit which breaks Manawaka's last hold on Rachel, that is, her lack of understanding about her father and his profession. During her first return visit to the forbidden rooms of her childhood, Rachel is aware of the enormous changes which have occurred. As she talks to Hector

Jonas, who is simultaneously a "comic prophet, dwarf seer" figure (p. 149), Rachel learns that death is not something to be feared and shunned. It is a business in which one sells relief and modified prestige (p. 145). She also learns that Hector believed her father had had the "kind of life he wanted most" (p. 149). While at the time Rachel could not fully understand or accept this theory, she is able to do so on her second visit. She admits to Jonas:

No, I don't think you were wrong. He probably did do what he wanted most, even though he might not have known it. But maybe what came of it was something he hadn't bargained for. That's always a possibility, with anyone.

(p. 237)

Jonas perceptively realizes that Rachel is speaking about both her father and herself. Just as Rachel's story partially parallels the story of the Biblical Rachel, her story also relates to the epigraph of the book. Rachel does stop and sit awhile in "the tomb of Jonah" (Jonas's morgue) where she is swallowed deep in the dark of her past and she does come out alive and restored by her new awareness of herself and her situation.

Rachel is not a figure of strength like Hagar. She cannot break life to her will nor can she be heroically tragic. Her salvation comes in her recognition of these facts and her acceptance of life's ambiguities. Because Rachel does not die, as Hagar did, Mrs. Laurence must show the reader what becomes of a person who discovers herself. She does this by giving Rachel a long thought passage at the conclusion of the novel in which Rachel recognizes

many important truths about the value of her recent experiences.

Where I am going, anything may happen. . . .  
 Maybe I will marry . . . and have my  
 children in time. Or maybe not. . . . Any-  
 thing may happen, where I am going.

I will be different. I will remain the  
 same. I will still go parchment-faced with  
 embarrassment, and clench my pencil between  
 fingers like pencils. . . . I will be afraid.  
 Sometimes I will feel light-hearted, some-  
 times light-headed. I may sing aloud, even in  
 the dark. I will ask myself if I am going  
 mad, but if I do, I won't know it.

God's mercy on reluctant jesters. God's  
 grace on fools. God's pity on God.

(pp. 239-240)

Rachel has learned to understand and accept her past as the child  
 of a small town funeral operator. She has looked religion, sex,  
 and death in the face and come to some understanding of each. But  
 most of all, Rachel has learned one important thing about life in  
 general and her life in particular. When she discovers that Hector  
 Jonas, with all his seeming wisdom, falls prey to the town gossip  
 that Rachel in fact was pregnant and for that reason is leaving town,  
 she thinks:

I do not know whether to laugh or to storm,  
 but I find I can do neither. The ironies go  
 on.

(p. 238)

While Rachel does find a degree of personal freedom, she is  
 aware that life places certain limitations on the amount of freedom  
 anyone may achieve. Of Rachel, Mrs. Laurence remarks:

. . . she is self-perceptive enough to  
 recognize that for her no freedom from  
 the shackledom of the ancestors can be  
 total. Her emergence from the tomb-like  
 atmosphere of her extended childhood is a

partial defeat--or, looked at in another way, a partial victory. She is no longer so much afraid of herself as she was. She is beginning to learn the rules of survival.<sup>9</sup>

The use of the word survival is indicative of Margaret Laurence's changing attitudes towards life and towards man's ability to attain freedom. As she matures, Mrs. Laurence slowly realizes that just as Rachel could never be totally free of her past, neither can she herself be totally free. While writing this novel helped release some of the ghosts, others were still left.

Not only has Mrs. Laurence's primary theme shifted from freedom to survival, but her tone has also shifted from modified optimism to modified pessimism<sup>10</sup>. Magnificent acts of heroism are a thing of the past. Man must be considered heroic for his unknowingly brave act of survival. However, this survival does not mean to merely exist, it means to survive with dignity. Rachel, when threatened by her past and by various inadequacies she feels, does find within herself the strength to survive, to change and to move into new areas of life<sup>11</sup>.

If through the character of Hagar, Margaret Laurence looked at her grandparents' generation and their struggles to amalgamate the pioneer and puritan ways of life, then through the character of Rachel, Mrs. Laurence is looking at a member of her own generation, not particularly close to her own personality, but one who has had to come to terms with her own identity and that identity into which the town of Manawaka has tried to shape her. The experience of

Manawaka is now less a remembered one, as it had been in The Stone Angel, and more an actual one. In her next novel, The Fire-Dwellers, Mrs. Laurence once again studies a member of her own generation, but this time it is one who is very similar to Mrs. Laurence in many ways. With each novel, Margaret Laurence moves closer and closer to her own background and the source of her own identity, namely her childhood. But, like Rachel's growth and forward movement, Mrs. Laurence's growth and movement back to her roots is a slow and gradual process.

## Notes to Chapter II:

- 1  
M. Laurence, A Jest of God (New York, 1966), p. 7.  
Hereafter all textual references will be indicated within the body of the thesis by the page reference only.
- 2  
Thomas, p. 45.
- 3  
Turner, "Interview", pp. 105-106.
- 4  
The Stone Angel, p. 4.
- 5  
M. Laurence, "Gadgetry or Growing?...Form and Voice in the Novel", (a lecture delivered at the University of Toronto, October 28, 1969), p. 7.
- 6  
Thomas, p. 48.
- 7  
Genesis 30:2
- 8  
Thomas, p. 50.
- 9  
Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentences", p. 14.
- 10  
French, "Margaret Laurence", p. 6.
- 11  
Laurence, "Sources", p. 83.

### CHAPTER III

. STACEY

If I live to be ninety, I'll be positively venomous.<sup>1</sup>

At thirty-nine years of age, Stacey MacAindra, the heroine of Margaret Laurence's third Canadian novel, The Fire-Dwellers, is disillusioned and disenchanted with her life. Although she still has a long way to go before she reaches Hagar Shipley's ninety years, she recognizes her growing tendency towards the perversity, irascibility, and rampant cynicism that is characteristic of old age. On the verge of forty, that point-of-no-return in any woman's life, Stacey is simultaneously trying to cope with the everyday demands of her house, her four children, and her husband, with the anxieties which accompany advancing middle age, and with the unrelenting problems and pressures from the outside world. Adding to this already weighty burden is Stacey's fear that with so many roles to play, she has no time to be herself--whoever that may be.

Stacey's story, like the stories of Hagar and Rachel, is basically one of self-discovery and self-acceptance. Although she possesses a clearer understanding and awareness of herself than either Hagar or Rachel did, Stacey is still facing a situation in which she must come to terms with her past and her present, if she is to survive to enjoy any future. But the story is also an important step in Margaret Laurence's personal voyage of self-discovery. While writing The Stone Angel, Mrs. Laurence required the distance which separated her from her grandparents' generation to maintain any objectivity. Although in A Jest of God Rachel and Margaret Laurence were of the same generation, their personalities were so divergent that the

distancing effect was still present and Mrs. Laurence was able to examine the effects of a small prairie town, like Manawaka, on someone who had never escaped as she herself had done. In The Fire-Dwellers Mrs. Laurence comes closest to approaching her own life and experience through the character of Stacey MacAindra because, as she has indicated:

She [Stacey] is like me in many ways and even speaks with one of my voices.<sup>2</sup>

Such close yet objective affinity to a character would have been almost impossible for Mrs. Laurence when she first began her exploration of her past. At this point in her career, however, she was prepared and even eager to deal with a character like Stacey.

I was fed up with the current fictional portraits of women of my generation-- middle-aged mums either being presented as glossy, magazine types, perfect, everloving and incontestably contented, or else as sinister and spiritually cannibalistic monsters determined only to destroy their men and kids by hypnotic means.<sup>3</sup>

To present Stacey, who falls somewhere between these two extremes, Mrs. Laurence employed a complex technique centring primarily on the various forms of Stacey's mental action. Through her inner thoughts, her memory flashes, and her interior dialogues with a voice whom she addresses as God, Stacey forcefully asserts her "toughness of character, her ability to laugh at herself, [and] her strong survival instincts"<sup>4</sup>.

Although she is Rachel Cameron's older sister, her personality is much more akin to that of Hagar Shipley. Since both Hagar and Stacey are mothers, their boundaries are wider than Rachel's and yet ironically their lives are more strictly channeled than hers. Both Rachel and Stacey realize this. When Rachel thinks of Stacey and her children she says to herself:

League of matriarchs. Mothers of the  
world, unite. You have nothing to lose  
but your children.<sup>5</sup>

In a deliberately similar statement Mrs. Laurence has Stacey say:

Give me another forty years, Lord, and  
I may mutate into a matriarch.

(p. 308)

This assertion, along with the one used as an epigraph to this chapter, reveal Stacey's psychological consanguinity with Hagar.

Mrs. Laurence herself admits that she saw Stacey as Hagar's "spiritual granddaughter" because she had inherited that vitality of character and that strong instinct for survival which characterized the early  
6  
Canadian pioneers .

Despite these pioneer instincts, Stacey is still a woman of the mid-twentieth century. In her need to find her own identity and in her emotional, mental, and physical frustrations, Stacey is:

. . . a plausible and everyday housewife;  
dreaming of an escape to a simple life in  
a northern landscape, yet realizing her duty  
and attachment to her children; wanting to  
communicate openly with people, yet repeatedly  
forced to tell lies to keep the fires banked;  
hastily judging other people, but finding

that she is not alone in doubt and disappointment; deceiving herself, discovering herself.<sup>7</sup>

In this see-saw existence, Stacey is constantly being torn between the old and the new, youth and age, joy and sorrow, fulfillment and frustration, security and insecurity, stability and instability.

Mrs. Laurence sets this tug-of-war pattern in the opening chapter. Although Stacey has lived in a large west coast city, "the jewel of the Pacific Northwest" (p. 6), for the last twenty years of her life, she realizes that she knows nothing about the city. She is and always will be an alien because of her small-town prairie background (p. 109). As Rachel's older sister, Stacey's background, of course, was Manawaka and more specifically Cameron's Funeral Home. There she listened to her mother's,

. . . soft persistent mew from upstairs,  
the voice that never tired of saying how  
others ought to be and never were . . .

(p. 18)

and wondered about her father, who was "down among the dead men, bottles and flesh" (p. 47) slowly and quietly drinking his life away. She also learned by rote such puritanical observations as:

and . . . vanity isn't becoming.  
It's not how you look, it's what you are  
that counts . . .

(p. 18)

and heard such restrained but pointed admonitions as:

You are certainly not going to a public  
dance hall, dear. You wouldn't want to be

the sort of girl people wouldn't respect,  
would you?

(p. 46)

Stacey was made fully aware of how high one's standards needed to be if one was to pass muster in Manawaka. For these very reasons, Stacey fled from her home and Manawaka at the age of nineteen. As Rachel indicated:

She [Stacey] knew right from the start what she wanted most, which was to get as far away from Manawaka as possible. She didn't lose a moment in doing it.<sup>8</sup>

Stacey, however, could never totally free herself from her "residual  
<sup>9</sup> Presbyterianism" and her small-town upbringing.

--I stand in relation to my life both as child and as 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.

(p. 47)

Despite her hatred of Manawaka and its small-town mentality, Stacey, like Margaret Laurence herself, has learned to recognize some of its values. When she recalls the tolerant attitude towards Old man Invergordon, the town drunk, who sang at local concerts in Manawaka, Stacey sees that:

They weren't so bad, any of them, I now see. How I used to dislike them then, the ladies' Aid and mother's bridge cronies and all of them, never seeing beyond their own spectacles and what will the neighbours think what will they say? But who here or anywhere, now, would put up with old

Invergordon? Drop dead, that's what he'd get here and now.

(pp. 139-140)

Stacey's past also stands her in good stead when she encounters Thor Thorlakson, an overgrown pep pill, who manages the regional branch of Richalife, the company with which her husband Mac is associated. At a party given by Thor, Stacey unknowingly threatens his false front by expressing interest in his prairie background. What Stacey at the time does not realize is that Thor Thorlakson is in fact Vernon Winkler, the boy weakling of Manawaka. Because of her openness and honesty about her own past, Stacey cannot imagine anyone else concealing his past. But Thor has tried to conceal his and he is so fearful of exposure that he moves to another region and Stacey's husband, Mac, is offered his position. Thus, Manawaka honesty does have its value in this case.

As Stacey gets older, she begins not only to see value in her past, but also to romanticize it somewhat as people her age are wont to do. In her desire to escape from the worries of her present life and to find an identity for herself, Stacey partially falls prey to the slogans of the current pop culture, best exemplified by Richalife, whose commercial health campaigns promise restored vitality and rejuvenation. Aware that her hips are too broad, her hair unruly, her lipstick the wrong colour and her hemlines the wrong length, Stacey thinks of Thor Thorlakson and Richalife, then raises her glass of gin and tonic in a toast:

--Here's to the god of thunder. He's

right. If I spent my life pouring myself full of vitamins and tomato juice instead of gin, coffee and smoke, maybe I would be a better person. I would be slim, calm, good-tempered, efficient, sexy and wise.

Also beautiful. Beautiful and intelligent.

(p. 45)

In other words, she would be a single and free Stacey Cameron, not a married and imprisoned Stacey MacAindra.

In her need for a clear identity and in her fear of middle age, Stacey has fallen into the trap of glorifying youth in general and her own youth in particular. Mrs. Laurence is aware of this problem when she says that:

[Stacey holds] the suspicion, not uncommon among her age-peers, that one was nicer, less corrupt and possibly even less stupid twenty years ago.<sup>10</sup>

Although Stacey still recalls the narrow, restrictive atmosphere of Cameron's Funeral Home and Manawaka, she truly believes that once she was different:

Stacey traveling light, unfearful in the sun, swimming outward as though the sea were shallow and known, drinking without indignity, making spendthrift love in the days when flesh and love were indestructible.

(p. 73)

As Stacey Cameron, she was not burdened by the "abrasions" and the mental baggage that accumulate over the years, or by the "heavy invisible garbage" with which we live (p. 121). Nor had the lies, trivialities, and tiredness taken up "permanent residence" in her arteries (p. 23). Stacey was still young, free, sure of herself and sure of her future. To distinguish this vision Stacey holds of herself,

Margaret Laurence uses the metaphor of the dance---the dance of youth and vitality. In a memory flash, prompted by the self-conscious awareness of her own dowdy appearance in contrast to that of an "unpimpled and unpowdered" girl who has just boarded the bus (p. 12), Stacey remembers herself as a girl:

Stacey Cameron, Seventeen. Flamingo Dance Hall every Saturday night, jitterbugging. Knowing by instinct how to move, loving the boy's closeness, whoever he was, loving the male smell of him. Stacey spinning like light, like all the painted spinning tops of all the spinning world, whirling laughter across a polished floor. . . .

(p. 12)

In a bizarre attempt to salvage some remnant of her lost youth, Stacey, with gin and tonic in hand, goes to her closet and dons whatever apparel takes her fancy. She then changes the record player to seventy-eight and puts on Tommy Dorsey Boogie. Lost in reverie Stacey muses:

---Once it seemed almost violent, this music. Now it seems incredibly gentle. Sentimental, self-indulgent? Yeh, probably. But I love it. It's my beat. I can still do it. I can still move without knowing where, beforehand. Yes. Yes. Yes. Like this. I can. My hips may not be so hot but my ankles are pretty good, and my legs. Damn good in fact. My feet still know what to do without being told. I love to dance. I love it. I love it. It can't be over. I can still do it. I don't do it badly. See? Like this. Like this.

(p. 135)

But it is over and Margaret Laurence is quick to show Stacey and the readers that "the process of life is irreversible" . Stacey, in a sequence painful both for herself and the reader, sees her daughter Katie dancing and immediately recalls herself dancing:

Katie is dancing. In a green dress Katie MacAindra simple and intricate as grass is dancing by herself. Her auburn hair, long and straight, touches her shoulders and sways a little when she moves. She wears no make-up. Her bones and flesh are thin, plain-moving, unfrenetic, knowing their idiom.

Stacey MacAindra, thirty-nine, hips ass and face, heavier than once, shamrock velvet pants, petunia-purple blouse, cheap gilt sandals high-heeled, prancing squirming jiggling

(p. 137)

Life is not over, but youth is gone--gone forever. Stacey is no longer a Cameron but a MacAindra and it is as a MacAindra that she must find her identity. It is not until the final pages of the novel, however, that Stacey is at last able to realize that:

The truth is that I haven't been Stacey Cameron for one hell of a long time now. Although in some ways I'll always be her, because that's how I started out. But from now on, the dancing goes on only in the head. Anything else and it is an insult to Katie, whether or not she witnesses the performance.

(p. 303)

In her efforts to discover and understand herself and the changing patterns from childhood and adolescence to adulthood, Margaret Laurence has gradually broadened her vision. While she still recognizes the need to come to terms with her past, which, like the past of Stacey or Hagar or Rachel, is Manawaka and all it represents, Mrs. Laurence now realizes that that is not enough. The achievement of any type of promised land of inner freedom will signify nothing if a person cannot survive in the outer world in which we all live. We must not only release the ghosts of the past, but also confront and

conquer the demons of the present.

To symbolize the past, with its freedom and gaiety, Margaret Laurence chose the metaphor of dance. To symbolize the present, with its traps and traumas, she chose the metaphor of fire. The title of the novel reinforces the meaning of this symbol as Mrs. Laurence has indicated:

The fire theme threads through the whole novel, because the fires are both inner and outer, and if we are to live within the present world, we must learn to be fire-dwellers, to live within the fires and still survive until we die.<sup>12</sup>

The inner fires for Stacey consist of her "constantly smouldering personal anxieties"<sup>13</sup> about her physical appearance, her imagined loss of identity, and the weight of mental baggage she totes around, her inability to communicate openly with people in general and her husband Mac in particular, her knowledge that "what goes on inside isn't ever the same as what goes on outside" (p. 33), her growing awareness of the complexity of her children, and her fear that she is living in a trap, full of duties and responsibilities, from which she cannot escape. The tug-of-war pattern, established in the opening chapter, occurs repeatedly throughout the rest of the novel in relation to Stacey's inner fires. While at one time she feels guilty because of her "sad defection of duty" (p. 41) with respect to her family, at another time she cynically comments:

I feel it is my duty to appear to be doing my duty, that's all. A farce.

(p. 46)

Although Stacey fervently wishes she could openly communicate with

people, she is repeatedly forced to tell lies or put up false fronts:

Funny thing [she muses], I never swear in front of my kids. That makes me feel I'm being a good example to them. Example of what? All the things I hate. Hate, but perpetuate.

(p. 5)

While sometimes wanting to be with people and to converse freely, Stacey at other times wants only to be left alone. In one of these latter moods, she finally takes a step she has long wanted to take. She gets in her car and drives away from her home and family out to the Sound.

Once at the Sound, Stacey meets Luke Venturi, a young man who does for Stacey what Nick Kazlik did for her sister Rachel. He gives her the attention and also the shock she needed to make her face herself and her situation. While in one sense Stacey's affair with Luke represents another attempt to hold on to her lost youth, in a second sense it represents Stacey's plea for help. When she thinks back to her experience with Luke, she realizes:

I said unspokenly Help and you didn't turn away. You faced me and touched me. You were gentle. You needn't have been, but you were, and that I won't forget or cease being glad for.

(p. 277)

In her moment of greatest need, Stacey found someone to turn to and to communicate with but, as Luke well knew, his role was only temporary. When he offers Stacey the opportunity to escape from her trap, to leave behind all her problems and flee to the simple northern life, she suddenly recognizes her responsibilities and realizes that:

. . . however great [are] the difficulties between her and her husband, he matters to her enormously and she couldn't up and leave. She genuinely loves her children and [she] couldn't leave them [either]. There is no new beginning, in the sense that at this point in her life, she can't pick up and leave.<sup>14</sup>

Later, when Stacey sees Luke and a young girl at a peace march in which they are all participating, she finally learns that despite her desires and her efforts, she cannot return to her youth, nor can life be forever simple and uncomplicated. Even if Luke had been older, or she younger and free, it would not have turned out any simpler with Luke than it had done with Mac (p. 278). Over the years lies are piled upon lies, not to punish others but to protect them. In every lasting human relationship, whether it is between husbands and wives, sisters and brothers, or parents and children, time builds such intricate emotional ties that:

. . . to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth would be . . . dynamite. . . .  
It would set the house on fire.

(p. 282)

However, the fires are not confined to her house, they spread and engulf the outer world as well as the inner world. As a middle-aged housewife and mother, living in a large metropolitan centre with all its conveniences and inconveniences, Stacey is facing problems of adjustment and survival which neither Hagar nor Rachel had to face.

Mrs. Laurence indicated her awareness of this situation when she said:

She is concerned with survival, like Hagar and Rachel, but in her case it involves living in an external world which she per-

ceives as increasingly violent and indeed  
lunatic . . .<sup>15</sup>

This world is filled with death by wars, highway accidents, drownings, or suicides. It is filled with pressures to buy or to sell, to build or to destroy, to do or to out-do. From all sides Stacey and her family are constantly bombarded by the various media of the outside world, simultaneously bringing news of death and bargains, fear and hope. The Ever Open Eye reports:

NINE-O'CLOCK NEWS PELLET BOMBS CAUSED THE  
DEATH OF A HUNDRED AND TWENTY-FIVE CIVILIANS  
MAINLY WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN

(p. 114)

while the radio sings, "Dollar Forty-nine Day plink plink" (p. 5), and a magazine article asks, "Are You Emasculating Your Husband?" (p. 56) while a newspaper ad reads:

Richalife--Not Just Vitamins--A New Concept--  
A New Way of Life. . . . Both Spirit and  
Flesh Altered. Richness Is a Quality of  
Living.

(p. 34)

To convey the chaos of everything happening simultaneously,  
16

Mrs. Laurence paid particular attention to the form of the novel :

I was, I think, considerably influenced, although subconsciously, by years of T.V. watching. I kept thinking "What I want to get is the effect of voices and pictures--just voices and pictures". I became obsessed with this notion, as it seemed to convey the quality of the lives I wanted to try to get across. It was only much later that I realized that "voices and pictures" is only another--and to my mind, better--way of saying "audio-visual".<sup>17</sup>

Voices and pictures do come across in the novel and as Stacey indicates, the message they convey is that "everything is equally unreal" and doom is everywhere (p. 59). Such a message is much more pessimistic than that of Mrs. Laurence's African works or even The Stone Angel and A Jest of God. It is, however, the message of someone who has realized that the world is on fire and is threatening to consume us at any moment. Stacey, like the speaker in Carl Sandburg's Losers, feels that she has spent her life fiddling in a world on fire and performing stunts not worth doing. In one of her many interior dialogues with God, she reveals her fear that her life has been useless:

At the Day of Judgement, God will say Stacey MacAindra, what have you done with your life? And I'll say, Well, let's see, Sir, I think I loved my kids. And He'll say, Are you certain about that? And I'll say, God, I'm not certain about anything any more. So He'll say, To hell with you, then. We're all positive thinkers up here. Then again, maybe He wouldn't. Maybe He'd say, Don't worry, Stacey, I'm not all that certain, either. Sometimes I wonder if I even exist. And I'd say, I know what you mean, Lord. I have the same trouble myself.

(pp. 10-11)

However, by the conclusion of the novel, after her affair with Luke, Stacey has reached some conclusions about herself and the validity of her life. Although many of the stunts she has performed have been worthless, she now sees it is not worthless to fulfill the roles of mother and wife. It takes a kind of strength and bravery she can now recognize and even respect. Stacey also recognizes now that the trap in which she lives is not just the four walls of her house on Bluejay

Crescent---it is the world itself (p. 303) and she perceptively wonders:

---Will the fires go on, inside and out?  
Until the moment when they go out for me,  
the end of the world. And then I'll never  
know what may happen in the next episode.

(p. 307)

Whatever may happen in the next episode, Stacey has learned that the discovery of one's own identity does not necessarily mean freedom and rejuvenation. Just as Rachel saw that her life would move into new areas of greater awareness where she would be different and yet sometimes the same, so too Stacey now sees that she will never be able to alter her life or her self in any major ways:

I used to think there would be a blinding  
flash of light someday, 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 what-  
ever I'm like, I'm pretty well stuck with it  
for life. Hell of a revelation that turned  
out to be.

(p. 299)

From the day of our birth we begin packing our mental baggage which never leaves us, because "nothing is ever looked at and torn up and thrown away like scrap paper" (p. 121). Although Stacey will never be as beautiful as Tess Fogler or as efficient as a magazine mum, she does possess the "simple knowledge of survival" which she once admired in a seagull (p. 10). She admits:

. . . bravery has never been my specialty.  
All I know how to do is get by somehow.

(p. 277)

But it is this very toughness of psyche that Margaret Laurence

appreciates and praises in Stacey. Despite the fires, the insecurity and the instability, the terrors and the fears, that fill this world, Stacey will go on raging and struggling, she will learn to be a fire-dweller.

In her exploration of the problems of all three Manawaka women, Margaret Laurence has gradually matured in both her literary and her personal life. In the form of her novels, Mrs. Laurence has on the one hand moved from complexity to simplicity, and on the other hand from simplicity to complexity. While The Stone Angel and A Jest of God take part of their imagery from the Bible, The Fire-Dwellers contains no Biblical analogies. The age of heroes or heroines in Biblical tradition and stature is past. The events of this life are not heroic but mundane, and the imagery in The Fire-Dwellers has appropriately been confined to two basics--fire and dance. Yet while life's events may not be heroic they are complex, and thus the form and voice in Mrs. Laurence's novels has become increasingly complex. Whereas in The Stone Angel Mrs. Laurence used personal reminiscence mixed with stream-of-consciousness thoughts and memories, in The Fire-Dwellers she uses both first and third person narration, mixed with interior and exterior dialogues, memory flashes, dreams, fantasies, and newspaper, radio, and T.V. bulletins.

In terms of her personal growth Mrs. Laurence has gradually matured in her understanding and awareness of the meaning of life and the nature of freedom. In The Stone Angel, having examined and

evaluated the forces which shaped and moulded her grandparents' generation, Mrs. Laurence still believed in the possibility of a fruitful inner freedom. In A Jest of God, where she considered the intricacies of life in a small prairie town, she realized that the nature of freedom was more complex than she had originally thought. Rachel will never be able to make a total break with her past, but Mrs. Laurence does hold the belief that by leaving Manawaka, Rachel may enter a world where a degree of freedom is possible. However, in The Fire-Dwellers, she tests this belief and finds it wanting. Stacey, like Margaret Laurence herself, did escape from Manawaka and she does take a voyage of self-discovery in which she comes to terms with herself and her past life, but she also discovers that the world at large is a trap and the only true release from it is death. However, Mrs. Laurence now extends the hope that because of man's indomitable spirit and his unknowing bravery he will learn to survive in this inferno as he continues to search for his identity.

## Notes to Chapter III:

- 1  
M. Laurence, The Fire-Dwellers (Toronto, 1969), p. 81.
- 2  
N. Asante, "Margaret (Rachel, Rachel) Laurence", Montrealer 43 (June, 1969), 30-33.
- 3  
Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentences", p. 15.
- 4  
Laurence, "Gadgetry or Growing?", p. 11.
- 5  
A Jest of God, p. 29
- 6  
Turner, "Interview", p. 103.
- 7  
C. Ballstadt, "Rachel's Ultra-lucky Sister, Stacey, Proves She's Not So Lucky After All", The Hamilton Spectator (June 14, 1969).
- 8  
A Jest of God, p. 15.
- 9  
[Cancelled portion of] Chapter Two, p. 19 in The Fire-Dwellers.  
Text as in the MS, McMaster University Library.
- 10  
Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentences", p. 15.
- 11  
Laurence, "Gadgetry or Growing?", p. 10.
- 12  
Laurence, "Half War/Half Peace", p. 10.
- 13  
Ballstadt, "Rachel's Ultra-lucky Sister . . .".

14

Turner, "Interview", p. 103.

15

Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentences", p. 15

16

Notes to the publishers for *The Fire-Dwellers*. MS, McMaster University Library. In a note attached to the manuscript, Mrs. Laurence specified the exact form in which the novel was to be set:

Narrative Third Person---typed straight

Stacey's Thoughts---typed straight but begun with a hyphen

Fantasies and Dreams---Italics; paragraphed to begin

Conversation---No quote marks

No full-stop when words trail off

Radio and T.V.---Capital Letters, No paragraphing

Stacey's Memories---14 spaces indented. Her speech typed plain; other's speech in italics.

Songs, hymns, etc.---Placed mid-page; italics.

17

Laurence, "Gadgetry or Growing?", p. 10

## CHAPTER IV

VANESSA

I was a professional listener. 1

As a "professional listener", Vanessa MacLeod was alternately bewildered or bemused, perplexed or pleased, entrammelled or entranced, by the events and emotions she overheard or observed as a child. However, from the platform of adult awareness, Vanessa is now able to look back with a consistently calm, rational viewpoint<sup>2</sup>, to the events of her childhood, which marked her growing consciousness of her own identity and her background. Although her emotions still range from

. . . a simple, happy curiosity to a baffled remembering resentment, to a grieving sense of loss and waste<sup>3</sup>

her overall attitude is one of nostalgia. By recalling and re-evaluating several incidents of her past, each of which is intricately bound up with various members of her family, Vanessa, like her other literary predecessors, embarks on a voyage of self-discovery which releases many of the ghosts of her past.

As Margaret Laurence's last Canadian work to date, A Bird in the House is both different from and similar to her earlier works.

In her attempt to look at her own past, Mrs. Laurence felt it was necessary at first to distance herself from her material. Thus she began with a novel about her grandparents' generation and only gradually did she move on to examine her own generation in her last two novels. However, during the period in which these novels were being written Mrs. Laurence did make a tentative start at examining her own childhood, not by writing another novel, but by writing the first of several semi-autobiographical short stories:

I wrote the first story quite a long time

before the others. It was written in Canada about 1961-62. I was trying to be evasive and trying not to be too obvious that it was my family. I was afraid of putting in fiction anything that was so close to my experience and then I realized it was the only way it could be done. . . . Various aspects had to be written about singly.<sup>4</sup>

While the details of Vanessa MacLeod's youth are not identical to those of Margaret Laurence's youth, the similarities are numerous. Both spent their childhood living in a small, prairie town best typified by the fictional Manawaka. Both lost their fathers at an early age and were compelled to go with their mothers and brothers to live with their maternal grandfathers who were indomitable, pioneer figures. Both were highly inquisitive and perceptive as well as creative children. In fact, the title, Pillars of the Nation, which Mrs. Laurence gives to one of Vanessa's innumerable stories is the exact title of a novel (which "filled two whole scribbles"<sup>5</sup>) that she herself wrote as a child. However, despite these similarities, A Bird in the House is primarily a work of fiction, the creation of which marks the final step in Margaret Laurence's own voyage of self-discovery.

Because these stories were written during the same period in which the novels were written, many of the themes and patterns of imagery which appear in the various novels also appear in the short stories. However, the overall impression created by this work marks it as displaying the style of the more mature Margaret Laurence. The stories' message is presented in the tone of modified pessimism which Mrs. Laurence gradually moved towards in her Canadian works as a whole, but more particularly in

A Jest of God and The Fire-Dwellers. The emphasis on the theme of survival as opposed to the theme of freedom is also prominent in the short stories, as is the belief that life's prisons extend beyond the self and the family to include the external world.

As the only child in her family for several years, Vanessa spent her youth in the company of adults whose lives we have filtered through her growing consciousness<sup>6</sup>. Because of her emotional and physical proximity to her parents, Vanessa's comprehension of their personalities and their problems was more a feeling one than a rational one. She felt their sorrow over the death of her infant sister but she could not understand why she was not enough for them; she experienced their anger towards her grandparents but she could not understand their tolerance towards them; she sensed their anxieties over their growing financial insecurity but she could not fully grasp the significance of what to her was merely the word, Depression. While she badly wanted to understand "comprehendingly" (p. 151) and to impress people, particularly her father, with her abilities of perception, Vanessa was constantly confronted with situations and events which made her aware of her "burden of . . . inexperience" (p. 70). When her father tried to answer her questions about his experiences in the First World War, Vanessa unexpectedly empathized with the agony he suffered as he helplessly stood by and watched his younger brother Rod die:

I looked at my father with a kind of horrified awe, and then I began to cry. I had forgotten about impressing him with my perception. Now I needed him to console me for this unwanted

glimpse of the pain he had once known.

(p. 94)

Vanessa also encountered a similar situation when she followed her mother and her Aunt Edna upstairs in their attempt to escape from the tensions of the Connor place. Once in her aunt's room, Vanessa watched and listened as her mother and aunt secretly smoked their cigarettes and lamented the effects of the ever-present but rarely mentioned Depression. Beth, Vanessa's mother, in her pregnant and somewhat weakened state, was forced to work as a nurse in her husband's office because they could not afford to hire professional help. Edna, despite her Winnipeg education, could not find a job and was, therefore, forced into keeping house for her parents where her father constantly carped and complained about everything. Once again, Vanessa empathized with their sorrow only to wish she could have avoided such feelings:

Their sadness was such a new thing, not to my actual sight but to my attention, that I felt it as bodily hurt, like skinning a knee, a sharp stinging pain. But I felt as well an obscure sense of loss. Some comfort had been taken from me, but I did not know what it was.

(p. 22)

Although Vanessa, the child, did not recognize her comfort as the comfort of innocence and inexperience, Vanessa the adult did. She realized that the Depression and the Drought were evils she had sensed "only surreptitiously" (p. 136), knowing they threatened her and her family but not knowing how or why.

Throughout her childhood her parents and her aunt protected Vanessa as best and as often as they could. While they succeeded in

shielding her from much of the pain and misery of the outside world, they could not shield her from the pain and misery of the inside world inhabited by her various grandparents who, like Jason Currie, were proud, narrow-minded, God-fearing people with rigid standards and intolerant attitudes. Although Vanessa's understanding of their personalities and problems was more rational than her understanding of those of her parents, her emotions still coloured many of her judgments.

Of all her grandparents, Timothy Connor, her maternal grandfather, was most prominent in her life. Although his size alone was impressive:

He was a tall husky man, drum-chested, and  
once he had possessed great muscular strength, (p. 5)

his proud, independent, and authoritarian spirit was also highly impressive, especially to a child like Vanessa. In one story she effectively described him as "some great wakeful bear" (p. 8) who lumbered restlessly about the Brick House, that "embattled fortress in a heathen wilderness" (p. 3). As one of the chief "crusaders" in this wilderness Grandfather Connor had fought long and worked hard to bring the attributes of civilization into the prairies and he felt it was both his duty and his responsibility to uphold the traditional religious, social, and moral values of that civilization despite his occasional personal inconvenience. One such value was the strict observance of Sunday as a day of rest. When Vanessa recalls these

Sundays she remarks:

I did not know then the real torment that day of rest was for him, so I had no patience with his impatience. What I did know, however, was that if he had been any other way he would not have passed muster in Manawaka.

(p. 9)

Like Hagar, Rachel, and Stacey, Vanessa knew, even as a child, what the standards of Manawaka meant.

Besides observing Sundays in such a strict manner, Grandfather Connor also observed his (and others') weekdays according to a list of unwritten rules which banned smoking, drinking, card-playing, dancing, or tobacco-chewing (p. 18). Should anyone, guest or otherwise, break a rule, the old man either left the room for his basement retreat or openly pointed out the error of the debauchee's ways. However, leaving the room did not mean silence, since

From his cave, . . . the angry crunching of the wooden rockers of his rocking chair against the cement floor would reverberate throughout the house, a kind of sub-verbal Esperanto, a disapproval which even the most obtuse person could not fail to comprehend.

(p. 62)

Timothy Connor also vocalized his disapproval of other facets of life, such as social issues, with such frequency and such a high degree of clarity that Vanessa says:

. . . they were known even to me--all labour unions were composed of thugs and crooks; if people were unemployed it was due to their own laziness; if people were broke, it was because they were not thrifty.

(p. 74)

In other words, if anyone were suffering it was undoubtedly because

he or she had broken one of the standards of the Protestant Ethic, namely honesty, hard work, and thriftiness. Yet when Vanessa sees the problems facing her parents and her aunt she realizes this is not true. She senses that the world is far more complex, both in its pleasures and pains, than her grandfather would ever admit.

The world is also not as orderly or simple as her paternal grandmother, Eleanor MacLeod, would have her believe. Grandmother MacLeod, like Grandfather Connor, was proud, independent, and outspoken. In fact, Vanessa imagined that if these two persons had ever really clashed:

. . . it would have been like a brontosaurus  
running headlong into a tyrannosaurus.

(p. 63)

The foundation stones upon which her life had been built were that MacLeods never tell lies and that God loves order. But Vanessa soon learns that as youths her father and his brother both told lies, one to get into the war and the other to protect his mother from knowledge of the true situation at Rod's death. Vanessa also comes to believe that even her grandmother tells lies. When she thinks of the many "accidents" that might or might not happen to a person, such as the death of her sister but not herself, or the well-loved yet unshared worlds of her great-grandfather's leather-bound volumes in Greek or her father's pictures of leopards and green seas (p. 59), Vanessa remarks:

I could not really comprehend these things,  
but I sensed their strangeness, their dis-  
array. I felt that whatever God might love

in this world, it was certainly not order.

(p. 59)

As Vanessa grows and learns more about the adult world of death and sorrow, this suspicion of God increases as does her dislike for the life styles of her grandparents. Her first encounter with death ironically is with the death of her Grandmother Connor, who of all her grandparents she loved the most. As the complete opposite of her husband, Agnes Connor had acceptance at her heart and thus:

To the rest of the family, thrashing furiously and uselessly in various snarled dilemmas, she . . . appeared to live in a state of perpetual grace.

(p. 72)

Yet her gentle, loving ways did not protect her from death. To Vanessa the loss of her grandmother meant the loss of the "uncertain peace" which, through Agnes Connor's efforts, had prevailed in the Frick House.

Although at the time Vanessa did not believe that anyone she cared about could really die (p. 80), she soon learns to accept the fact. Within a year of her grandmother's death, her father, a kind-hearted, understanding, and thoughtful general practitioner, catches the flu and dies. Just prior to his death Vanessa accidentally lets a trapped sparrow into the house thus prompting Noreen, the hired girl, to repeat the adage:

A bird in the house means a death in the house.

(p. 102)

When her father suddenly dies, Vanessa with horror recalls this incident:

I felt physically sick, remembering the

fearful darting and plunging of those wings,  
and the fact that it was I who had opened  
the window and let it in.

(p. 109)

In her own mind, Vanessa feared that as a result of her impulsive action her father had died. The possibility that he might now be resting in another and better world meant nothing to her because God had now become the "cosmic joker" he had been to Hagar, Rachel, and Stacey. To Vanessa God was now:

Distant, indestructible, totally indifferent.

(p. 148)

There was definitely no order in a world where people like her father and grandmother died, while people like her grandfather went on living.

Not only did Vanessa experience the sorrows of death but also the sorrows of love. Although she at one time innocently believed that both love and death were regrettably far from Manawaka (p. 65), Vanessa soon learned that even in a small prairie town both were present. Just after the outbreak of the Second World War a young airman was stationed in Manawaka. After paying court to Vanessa and attracting her love, he visited the Brick House. When Grandfather Connor met him, in his typical authoritarian and outspoken manner, he immediately stated, in front of all parties concerned, that:

I'll bet a nickel to a doughnut hole he's  
married. That's the sort of fellow you've  
picked up, Vanessa.

(p. 199)

Vanessa, who is simultaneously horrified, ashamed, and angry, immediately screams that it is a lie. However, she soon discovers its truth and is forced to accept the reality of the situation. Along with the deaths,

this incident now becomes another piece of mental baggage Vanessa must learn to tote around with her. As her mother wisely tells her:

. . . after a while it won't hurt so much.  
And yet in a way I guess it always will,  
to some extent. There doesn't seem to be  
anything anybody can do about that.

(p. 201)

Except for the gentleness of tone, these words could be spoken by Stacey or even possibly Rachel.

As in her other novels, Margaret Laurence has chosen a central metaphor for this work which encompasses all the major themes of the stories. In A Bird in the House the bird and the Brick House dually serve as a metaphoric expression of our state of existence. Although Vanessa is too young to be fully aware of the external fires which Stacey had to live with, she is not too young to learn about the meaning of being trapped. In the first story, "The Sound of Singing", Vanessa, looking at her grandmother's canary, wonders if the bird feels trapped by its cage. The grandmother replies that:

it had been there always and wouldn't know  
what to do with itself outside.

(p. 6)

While the reply is typical of Grandmother Connor's view of life, it is also typical of the view held by most people of her generation. The Jason Curries, Timothy Connors, and Eleanor MacLeods lived in self-created prisons yet, like the bird, they would not have known what to do with themselves outside the walls, which they saw as protective. However their children, like Hagar, Beth and Ewen, in varying degrees realized they were trapped but they did not know how to escape. The men if

"lucky" could go to war while the women might leave home, go to the big city, and get an education. But in most cases they failed to escape. However, when one of them, like Stacey or even Vanessa, did escape, she discovered that the prison is everywhere.

Mrs. Laurence has very effectively shown Vanessa's growing awareness of this trap by developing the relationship between Vanessa and her cousin Chris. As a youth from northern Manitoba, Chris was filled with hopes and dreams of getting a good education and job. However, because of the Depression he found his choices and opportunities constantly narrowing. Although he had been given to verbal fantasizing in his youth, he was always gentle and known as a "respector of persons" (p. 133). When the war came, however, and Chris was forced to kill, he broke down both physically and mentally. Vanessa learned of this breakdown in a letter:

. . . what it said was that they could force his body to march and even to kill, but what they didn't know was that he'd fooled them. He didn't live inside it any more.

(p. 153)

Vanessa now realizes that the dimensions of Chris's need to talk (p. 152) had been too great and he had resorted to the world of fantasy too often. When her mother remarks that Chris had always seemed such a hopeful person, Vanessa wonders if maybe it had not been something other than hope:

I was thinking of all the schemes he'd had, the ones that couldn't possibly have worked, the unreal solutions he'd clung to because there were no others, the brave and useless

strokes of fantasy against a depression that was both the world's and his own.

(p. 153)

The world is a battle ground and a trap (p. 153) according to Mrs. Laurence, and those who cannot stand up and fight, distance themselves from it by dreams and fantasies.

The Brick House, in which the Connors lived, was also symbolic of this trap. Like the man who owned it, the house was sturdy and strong, but above all gloomy. It expressed the puritan simplicity and forthrightness of Timothy Connor. Aunt Edna and Vanessa most particularly saw it as a trap from which they must escape if they were ever to get husbands and their freedom. Yet ironically Mrs. Laurence reveals that the house also had a second dimension; it was a fortress as well as a prison. When Edna finally has the opportunity to escape by marrying Wes Grigg, she is almost reluctant to leave as she tells her sister Beth:

I guess I've got used to being back here in the old dungeon. It's strange, Beth. Father's impossible, and certainly no one has said it oftener than I have. I have less patience with him than any of us ever had, except possibly Vanessa, and she's only fourteen, for Heaven's sake. I know all that. But, he's--well, I guess it's just that I have the feeling that the absolute worst wouldn't happen here, ever. Things wouldn't actually fall apart.

(pp. 186-187)

When Vanessa overhears this conversation, the mixed feelings her aunt has, upset Vanessa who, like any child, wishes the world were all black and white with no grey. But on her voyage of self-discovery Vanessa

must learn to accept the realities of life.

To epitomize the growth Vanessa experiences in her movement from childhood to adulthood, Margaret Laurence reveals the changes which occur in Vanessa's attitude towards her grandfather Connor. As a "professional listener", Vanessa was often required to sit and listen to the tales of her grandfather's past. But at the time she sarcastically indicated:

To me there was nothing at all remarkable in the fact that he had come out west by stern-wheeler and had walked the hundred-odd miles from Winnipeg to Manawaka. Unfortunately, he had not met up with any slit-eyed and treacherous Indians or any mad trappers, but only with ordinary farmers who had given him work shoeing their horses, for he was a blacksmith. He had been the first blacksmith in Manawaka, and finally had saved enough money to set himself up in the hardware business. He frequently related the epic of that significant day.

(pp. 9-10)

Although Vanessa had heard these tales with regularity she never actually realized that they were pioneer tales. Once, when she had been writing a story about pioneers, she accidentally discovered that Grandfather Connor was a pioneer. The story immediately lost its interest and value for her, as she noted:

If pioneers were like that, I had thought, my pen would be better employed elsewhere.

(p. 67)

However, several years later, after Vanessa has witnessed the strange effect her grandmother's death had on her grandfather and after she has received money from him towards her college education even though he did not believe in women's education, she hears about his pioneer

past once again at her grandfather's funeral. Her reaction is similar to Hagar's reaction over the death of John in that she cannot show any sign of open emotion:

I could not cry. I wanted to, but I could not. . . . I was not sorry that he was dead. I was only surprised. Perhaps I really imagined that he was immortal. Perhaps he even was immortal, in ways which it would take me half a lifetime to comprehend.

(pp. 204-205)

In reviewing her past, Vanessa has discovered that her grandfather and the pioneer background he represented could never really die. It had become part of her own mental baggage and even to some degree, part of her children's mental baggage, as she finds herself repeating the clichés of her parents and grandparents to them. Despite her fear and her hatred of her grandfather, Vanessa as an adult realizes she did respect and in some ways love him:

I had feared and fought the old man, yet he proclaimed himself in my veins.

(p. 207)

Just as Vanessa, Hagar, Rachel, and Stacey have learned something about themselves and their background, so too Margaret Laurence through writing about these characters has learned something about herself and her background. It was not until she completed the Vanessa MacLeod stories that she realized how much they were dominated by the figure of her own maternal grandfather, who came of Irish Protestant stock:

I think perhaps it was through writing these stories that I finally came to see my grandfather not only as the repressive authoritarian figure from my childhood, but also as a boy who had had to leave school in Ontario when he

was about twelve, after his father's death, and who, as a young man, went to Manitoba by sternwheeler and walked the fifty miles from Winnipeg to Portage la Prairie, where he settled for some years before moving to Neepawa. He was a very hard man in many ways, but he had had a very hard life in many ways, too. I don't think I knew any of this, really knew it, until I had finished these stories.<sup>7</sup>

Like Vanessa, Mrs. Laurence required a lifetime of reviewing her past to gain a balanced evaluation of its significance and value. She too revisited her home town at the age of forty to discover the old pains could still be roused despite the distance of several years. But through the writing of her four Canadian works, Margaret Laurence has also learned of the joys as well as the sorrows of her past, of the good times as well as the hard times, and of the love as well as the death. She has completed her voyage of self-discovery at least as it relates to her Canadian, prairie past, and she has looked into the people and the places of that past with clearer understanding and more compassion than she previously could have done.

## Notes to Chapter IV:

1

M. Laurence, A Bird in the House (Toronto, 1970), p. 11.  
Hereafter all textual references will be indicated  
within the body of the thesis by the page reference  
only.

2

Thomas, p. 56.

3

Thomas, p. 55.

4

Turner, p. 110

5

Thomas, p. 7

6

B. Callaghan, "A Cold Universe", The Toronto Telegram (February  
28, 1970).

7

Laurence, "Sources", pp. 82-83.

CONCLUSION

MARGARET

The mosaic of myself<sup>1</sup>

"Mosaic of myself" is a phrase Vanessa Macleod uses in connection with the particular music of her generation, but it also epitomizes the essence of Margaret Laurence's vision of herself and her work. Each of her works, whether African or Canadian, forms a piece in the mosaic that is Margaret Laurence. The Canadian works, in particular, focus on her own cultural background and the events of her past, in her effort to understand the changing patterns of her life. Through her exploration of the dilemmas of Hagar, Rachel, Stacey and Vanessa, Mrs. Laurence has gradually worked towards an understanding and acceptance of her Canadian prairie experience.

When she first began her Canadian works it was with the knowledge that she had to write about people whom she "knew from the inside"<sup>2</sup>, if she was to continue writing at all. But to write about one's self and one's past required an objectivity and critical detachment Mrs. Laurence recognized she did not, at that time, possess. In retrospect she remarks:

I was lucky. If I had tried to write an autobiographical novel first, it would have been a disaster. I was still too close to it, too upset by it.<sup>3</sup>

Her past had to be approached cautiously, first through a character related to her grandparents' generation, then through two characters of her own generation who were not Mrs. Laurence, and finally through the semi-autobiographical portrait of herself as a child. Caution was required because of Mrs. Laurence's mixed feelings, ranging from hatred and fear to love and respect, with regard to the people and the places

of her past. Of the people she has said:

. . . how difficult they were to live with, how authoritarian, how unbending, how afraid to show love, many of them, and how willing to show anger. And yet--they had inhabited a wilderness and made it fruitful. They were, in the end, great survivors, and for that I love and value them.<sup>4</sup>

As A Bird in the House revealed, the person who most disturbed Mrs.

Laurence was her maternal grandfather:

I hated him for a long time, even after his death. Now I have a kind of respect and admiration for him.<sup>5</sup>

This respect came primarily from her re-evaluation of his past and his life style through the medium of her short stories. Mrs. Laurence also found it necessary to re-evaluate her feelings about the prairies:

I had, as a child and as an adolescent, ambiguous feelings about the prairies, and I still have them, although they no longer bother me. I wanted then to get out of the small town and go far away, and yet I felt the protectiveness of the atmosphere, too.<sup>6</sup>

Survival and freedom are both key words in Mrs. Laurence's vocabulary. While she at one time believed people could be free, Margaret Laurence gradually came to realize that all people live in traps from which there are no genuine escapes. Although as a child she did not fully realize that her grandparents and parents also lived in a trap, as an adult she did see this and more. She saw that the nature of freedom, like the nature of life, is highly complex and elusive. While Stacey and Margaret believed they could escape their past by leaving Manawaka (or Neepawa), both discovered first, that the

past is a part of our mental baggage which goes where we go, and second, that whether we escape to the west coast of Canada or the east coast of Africa, we cannot escape the trap, since it is world wide. Of her movement from the theme of freedom to the somewhat more pessimistic theme of survival, Mrs. Laurence says:

The theme of survival---survival not just in the physical sense, but the survival of some human warmth and ability to reach out and touch others---that is, I have come to think, an almost inevitable theme for a writer such as myself, who came from a Scots-Irish background of stern values and hard work and puritanism, and who grew up during the drought and depression of the thirties and then the war.<sup>7</sup>

Although the tone of Mrs. Laurence's writing has shifted from modified optimism to modified pessimism, she does not feel

. . . that any of the fiction set in Canada is pessimistic---it is not cheerful, but it is not downbeat.<sup>8</sup>

For each of her characters, Mrs. Laurence does hold out the hope that they have achieved at least a degree of personal freedom by discovering their own identity and that they will in the end survive in this world of fire.

Although the characters in the Canadian works each reflect an aspect of Margaret Laurence and her past, Mrs. Laurence is adamant that they are "very definitely themselves" and not herself. Yet she does admit to a "deep sense of connection with the main character" in each case.<sup>9</sup> Of her first Manawaka woman Margaret Laurence says:

Hagar was my grandparents' generation---I felt I knew her extremely well, although she was certainly not based on any actual

person. Indeed, none of the characters in any of my novels are based on any actual person.<sup>10</sup>

But because of this deep sense of connection, Mrs. Laurence first began to realize just how great an impact the voices and the ways of the people of her childhood had made upon her:

I felt when I was writing The Stone Angel an enormous sense of conviction of the authenticity of Hagar's voice, and I experienced a strange pleasure in rediscovering an idiom I hardly knew I knew, as phrases from my grandparents' generation kept coming back to me.<sup>11</sup>

Yet these phrases, like the people and the places of her past, roused ambiguous feelings. Mrs. Laurence's feelings were so mixed that her attitude towards her grandparents was carried over to her attitude towards Hagar. She resented Hagar's authoritarian outlook yet she loved her for that battling spirit so necessary for survival.<sup>12</sup>

Of all her female characters, Rachel is the one least like Mrs. Laurence herself. But Rachel's small prairie town experience is definitely part of the mosaic of Margaret Laurence's experience. Despite Rachel's weaknesses and her frustrating indecisiveness, Margaret Laurence, in reviewing her past, has learned to respect, if not like, the Rachel Camerons and Regina Wooses who inhabited her world. Rachel's problems of communication were just as real as Hagar's or Stacey's and her isolation and alienation was perhaps even greater than theirs since she was childless. However, by the end of the novel, Rachel is not as afraid of life as she had been and she is much less "shut in".<sup>13</sup> Her victory may be couched in negative and limiting terms but it is still

a victory and Mrs. Laurence admires those who fight.

When Margaret Laurence wrote about Stacey she wrote about  
 14  
 someone she knew "awfully well" , someone who mirrored her own feel-  
 15  
 ing, particularly with respect to religious matters . Through  
 exploring Stacey's problems of accepting her past and adjusting to  
 her present, Mrs. Laurence realized just as Stacey did that whatever  
 her personality and appearance were like she was stuck with them for  
 16  
 life . She also realized that escape did not mean freedom since,  
 as the title of the novel suggests, the world is aflame, violence is  
 17  
 the norm, and the security of the individual is nil .

As in her first Canadian novel, Mrs. Laurence found that the  
 idioms of The Fire-Dwellers were very familiar to her:

. . . I experienced the same feeling I had  
 had with The Stone Angel, only perhaps more  
 so, because this time it was a question of  
 writing really in my own idiom, the ways of  
 speech and memory of my generation, those  
 who were born in the 20's, were children in 18  
 the dusty 30's, grew up during the last war.

This ability to reproduce the variations in idiomatic speech lends  
 greater authenticity to the import of her works and also reveals Mrs.  
 Laurence's fine sensitivity not only to the nuances of human behaviour  
 but also to the nuances of human speech.

As already noted, when Margaret Laurence came to deal directly  
 with herself as a child she found it impossible to write a novel. The  
 form she used was the short story in which items of her "mental baggage"  
 could be singled out and examined separately. Although each story is  
 a self-contained unit, the collection is interwoven by common characters,

settings, and themes and, as Mrs. Laurence admits, they were conceived

19

of as a set, nearly from the beginning . Through her examination of

Vanessa and her life in a world inhabited by adults of two different

generations, Margaret Laurence at last digs up her own roots, examines

20

them, wonders at them, and finally accepts them . She begins to under-

stand the difficulties her ancestors faced in the wilderness of western

Canada and to understand why they in turn were difficult and at times

unbearable. She also releases many of the ghosts of her past, although

not without some pain and anguish.

Over the past ten years, in which Margaret Laurence has been writing continuously, many changes have occurred in her life and in her

work. When she raises the query, "What has changed?", her answer is:

Everything. The world and myself.<sup>21</sup>

. . . I have become more involved with novels of character and with trying to feel how it would be to be that particular person. My viewpoint has altered from modified optimism to modified pessimism. I have become more concerned with form in my writing than I used to be. I have moved closer (admittedly, in typically cautious stages) to an expression of my own idiom and way of thought. . . .

I've listened to the speech of three generations--my grandparents, my parents and my own, and maybe I've even heard what some of it means.<sup>22</sup>

Having completed her four Canadian works, Mrs. Laurence once remarked

that she had written herself out of that prairie town, but she now knows better:

My future writing may not be set in that town--and indeed, my last novel, The Fire-Dwellers, was set in Vancouver. I may not always write fiction set in Canada. But somewhere, perhaps in the memories of some characters, Manawaka

will probably always be there, simply because whatever I am was shaped and formed in that sort of place, and my way of seeing, however much it may have changed over the years, remains in some enduring way that of a small town prairie person.<sup>23</sup>

Notes to the Conclusion:

- 1  
A Bird in the House, p. 194.
- 2  
[Cancelled portion of] Preface to Long Drums and Cannons. Text  
as in the MS, McMaster University Library.
- 3  
French, "Margaret Laurence", p. 6.
- 4  
Laurence, "Sources", p. 82.
- 5  
French, "Margaret Laurence", p. 6.
- 6  
Laurence, "Sources", p. 82.
- 7  
Ibid., p. 83.
- 8  
Turner, "Interview", p. 109.
- 9  
Laurence, "Sources", p. 81.
- 10  
Laurence, "Gadgetry or Growing?", p. 4.
- 11  
Ibid.
- 12  
Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentences", p. 14.
- 13  
Turner, "Interview", p. 102.
- 14  
Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentences", p. 15.
- 15  
Turner, "Interview", p. 103.

- 16  
The Fire-Dwellers, p. 299.
- 17  
Turner, "Interview", p. 105.
- 18  
Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentences", p. 15.
- 19  
Laurence, "Half War/Half Peace", p. 6.
- 20  
French, "Margaret Laurence", p. 6.
- 21  
Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentences", p. 10.
- 22  
Ibid., p. 16.
- 23  
Laurence, "Sources", p. 84.

APPENDIX A

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARGARET LAURENCE

PETERBOROUGH, JUNE 19, 1970.

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

On Friday, June 19, 1970, I drove down to Peterborough to have lunch with Margaret Laurence. She had kindly consented to granting me an interview before she returned to England. The interview was held at her cedar cabin just south of Peterborough on the Otonabee River (home of the Strickland sisters). The cabin was bought by Margaret Laurence in the spring of 1970 from a bachelor fisherman, and she very appropriately named it "Manawaka". The sign bearing this name was given to her by her children as a Christmas gift and it now rests at the entrance of the drive behind her cabin. When she moved in there was a great amount of renovation needed but, once completed, the cabin became a very pleasant summer home. Mrs. Laurence tentatively plans to return to this cabin each year for six to eight months, in which time she will continue her writing.

Mrs. Laurence revealed some of her prairie background when she indicated that she, like Vanessa MacLeod (her autobiographical counterpart) was thrilled by looking in Eaton's catalogues to furnish her cabin in the chosen colours of green, yellow and orange. Mrs. Laurence spent several hours of almost childlike rapture while going through the catalogues and ordering whatever took her fancy from dishes to pillows, to lamps and curtains. Besides the items she obtained from the catalogues, Mrs. Laurence also picked up odds and ends in the way of furniture from auctions and friends. One interesting item is the table used in both

the living-room, kitchen area. This table was originally an oak library table. When we first entered, we were going to sit at this table. However, Mrs. Laurence warned me that one of the chairs was broken. She related a rather amusing anecdote as to how this happened. Apparently Al Purdy (a Canadian poet and friend of Mrs. Laurence) who was, according to Mrs. Laurence, "a very large man", sat in the chair and leaned back only to find that it would not support his weight. Besides using the table for eating purposes, Mrs. Laurence uses it as her work desk. As she sits at her typewriter she is able to look through the very large picture window at the Otonabee River, where she enjoys watching the birds, the fishermen, and the boats.

When the interview began I asked Mrs. Laurence if she would mind if my mother, who had accompanied me, took down the interview in shorthand. She expressed her pleasure with this method and noted that it would be nice not having to worry about a tape recorder. Although she had sat through several interviews which were tape recorded, she still felt uneasy in the presence of such a machine. We talked for about an hour, during which time Mrs. Laurence treated all my questions, whether very important or very trivial and factual, with an equal degree of attention. Her warmth and kindness put us immediately at ease. There was nothing pretentious or artificial in either her clothing or her manners. Following a very pleasant luncheon, which she prepared for us, we continued our talk until mid afternoon.

Mrs. Laurence's speech is very idiomatic and often quite disjointed. Her thoughts, like those of her characters, are often set off

in opposite directions by word references or ideas. As a result, some portions of the interview read like sentence fragments expressing the character of Margaret Laurence herself. When we spoke of the writer's relationship with the publishers' readers, Mrs. Laurence indicated that the greatest amount of correspondence was probably between herself and Judith Jones, the reader for Alfred A. Knopf Publishing Company, and this correspondence, which has been continuous since 1964, reveals the intensity of emotions Margaret Laurence feels toward her works. Unfortunately, around 1962, because of the sheer bulk of paper work, Mrs. Laurence decided to stop keeping copies of the letters she sent. Although she has kept the letters from Judith Jones and other publishers, they alone have the letters sent by Mrs. Laurence.

Having met Mrs. Laurence and talked with her at some length, I can see features of her own personality and her attitudes towards life in almost all of her female characters. One can truly believe that she knows these characters "from the inside". Although she has another novel in mind, she was unwilling to disclose what it would be about. She did, however, bring out a copy of her latest publication, JASON'S QUEST. Again she revealed a childlike pleasure and thrill with the illustrations in the book. This, along with some comments she made later with regard to the form of the novel THE FIRE-DWELLERS, reveals Mrs. Laurence's great concern for the visual impact of her novels. Mrs. Laurence believes that because we are a generation of television viewers, the visual impact of a novel is very important, and in her writing she attempts to make use of the audio-visual techniques.

The following is an edited version of the transcript of the main points covered during the interview.

At the beginning of the interview, Mrs. Laurence made some general comments about the movie version of A JEST OF GOD (Rachel, Rachel).

They were very true to the character. Estelle Parsons was marvellous.

I didn't mind that [the changes made by Stewart Stern, the writer of the screen play] --it's translating from one medium to another medium. . . . I thought the dialogue he wrote dovetailed very well with the dialogue in the book. I was glad they didn't change the ending. I thought the ending was awfully well done.

Speaking to Mrs. Laurence about her friendship with Ethel Wilson, I noted that Ethel Wilson's message seemed to be, "No man is an island". Yet I felt her attitude, if not opposite to this, is definitely an ironic expansion of it.

I think your phrase 'ironic expansion' is accurate--the sort of difficulties of people in communicating with one another. The thing is they desperately want to reach out and touch other people and in every case succeed to some extent. That is, Rachel at the end of A JEST OF GOD is a changed person. At least she isn't as afraid of life as she had been. Her brief affair with Nick had enabled her to open herself to life a little more. She was much less shut in.

I related to Margaret Laurence the incident which occurred at the meeting of the Association of Canadian University Teachers of English in Winnipeg, June, 1970, in which one man felt Stacey had copped out at the end of the novel because she refused to make a clean break with her past life, leave her husband and children, and go north

with Luke. When I asked Margaret Laurence about this she said that others, usually young people, had raised this question and she often felt like saying, "Why don't you wait another ten years?"

What Luke is facing her with is what she will have to face and doesn't realize. What she has to come face to face with (and she does) is however great the difficulties between her and her husband, he matters to her enormously and she couldn't up and leave. She genuinely loves her children and couldn't leave them. There is no new beginning, in the sense that at this point of her life she can't pick up and leave.

Referring to the quotation (spoken by Stacey to herself) on page 81, "If I live to be ninety, I will be positively venomous", I asked Margaret Laurence if she had Hagar Shipley in mind at this point. She replied that it was "a deliberate reference to Hagar".

I saw her as Hagar's spiritual granddaughter. She had inherited some of these pioneer things. She was much stronger in psyche than she thought. I didn't think the ending was a cop out.

Stacey talks to God quite frequently, but I feel here that He is almost an alter ego. Did you intend this?

Oh, sure. She's both talking to God and to herself.

What are your feelings about the existence of God?

She (Stacey) mirrors my own feeling. I describe myself as a religious agnostic, and yet in some ways there are moments when I do believe.

Referring to the phenomenon of a heightened religious experience, e.g., the tabernacle scene in A JEST OF GOD, Margaret Laurence says:

It isn't a religious experience for Rachel, but

for Calla it is. My feelings are mirrored particularly in THE FIRE-DWELLERS. I think of it in terms of African religions. It happens to us and we are embarrassed by it--- moments when you are writing at a higher pitch and you are writing things you didn't know you knew and it seems mystic.

In your notes to the publisher regarding THE FIRE-DWELLERS you specify the different forms of typesetting to be used. Do you think of this as you are writing?

The form of THE FIRE-DWELLERS gave me a lot of trouble and I tried to figure out things in advance. I had an enormous amount of difficulty with the beginning of that book. I visualized that her fantasies would be in italics and her dreams in the margin. I wanted to do it in a way so that it didn't need any explanation. There were no flashbacks in that book---just short memory flashes. The editor at Knopf said she liked the way the book was orchestrated.

In the manuscript you remove a reference to Stacey's "residual Presbyterianism" and also another passage related to her awareness of her background. Why did you remove these overt references? Did it either give away more than you wanted, or did it affect Stacey's character by making her too perceptive?

I think possibly I felt it was a little out of character. After all, she was not an anthropologist.

What significance has "fire" for you? I see fire as the fire of death and destruction; the fire of passion; the fire of hell and damnation in a religious sense.

A combination of all of these. I see it in terms of the title---there is something about the apocalypse---I came to this title after a great deal of difficulty. To me it had a connotation

of cave dwellers and apartment dwellers---  
poles apart.

What exactly do you mean by fire-dwellers?

To me it meant we are really living in a world on fire---Stacey trying to bring up her kids in a setting where violence is the norm, where the security of the individual is nil. What do you do if you live in a world on fire? You learn to live with it.

Some critics have said that Luke Venturi is the stereotype Italian lover. Do you feel this is a just assessment?

I didn't think of it. Both Stacey and Rachel had a tendency to feel that things would be better with someone brought up in a different background. I think of him more as a representative of the sort of generation in a sense younger than Stacey, who do not have some of the hang-ups of my generation. He did understand what was going on. Both gave her the physical warmth she needed and she could talk to them. Mac was not a verbal person. Luke brought her very gently to the realization of where her identity lay.

Margaret Laurence further proves her point about the fallibility of critics' assessment of character by referring to the lack of sympathy some critics exhibited for the character of Doris Shipley in THE STONE ANGEL.

If you take Hagar at her own assessment you miss the whole thing. Poor benighted Doris---how she suffered. Some people want their books in black and white---no ambiguity. I try to present the human individual with all his paradoxes. Every human is a tremendous mixture.

I then switched to a few questions focussing on A JEST OF GOD.

Is Rachel a reincarnated Regina Weese?

There may have been a connection, but if there

was it was a subconscious one. The character of Rachel had been in my mind long before I wrote the novel---about 1962---but Stacey had been in my mind longer than that. I tried to write THE FIRE-DWELLERS first, but I couldn't because the other one had to be written first. I always had them in mind as sisters. One of the ironies there is that at the moment of real crisis in their lives they would have liked to have communicated with their sisters, but thought the other sister would be scornful.

Did you like the name change of the movie (Rachel, Rachel)?

I think my title, "A JEST OF GOD", is better than Rachel; Rachel. They were going to call it "Now I Lay Me Down".

It seemed to me that in some respects your work was almost Faulknerian. Was Faulkner an influence in your writing?

No. I don't think Faulkner has influenced me. I didn't read very much Faulkner until a relatively few years ago, so I wouldn't think it was one of the formative influences. As far as the town is concerned I think that happened accidentally. When I wrote THE STONE ANGEL there sort of somehow came to my mind a great number of people who lived in that town and I thought I would like to write something on my childhood family. It was partly a real town and partly a fictional town. Well, I was sorry when the film changed the setting to New England. I think in a way they lost something. Canadian prairie background is part of Rachel. Basically they were true to the character. It is an interesting thing to see someone else's interpretation of your work. The film was not my work--the novel was. The funeral home in Danbury, Connecticut, was real and in use.

At this point she related an incident which revealed the kindness and thoughtfulness of Stewart Stern, the writer of the screen play. On the first day's shooting they were working at the school filming the children at play on the swings on the playground. The sun caught the

reflection of something on the ground under one of the swings. When the cameraman went over to remove it he discovered that it was a Canadian penny. Taking this as a good omen, they taped it to the camera for the remainder of the filming. When the filming was complete the coin was sent to Margaret Laurence as a memento.

Are you making a deliberate echo of Genesis 30:2 where Isaac says to Rachel, "Can I take the place of God who has denied you children?" when you have Stacey say to Mac, "You're not God", and Nick say to Rachel, "I'm not God"?

That was deliberate. It is a profound feeling I have that one is not totally responsible for any other being, even your children. You can not and must not take on that kind of responsibility.

You make repeated references to the Bible (e.g. Hagar and Rachel, in particular) yet these references seem to dwindle in *THE FIRE-DWELLERS* and *A BIRD IN THE HOUSE*. Is there any reason for this?

There are no Biblical parallels in *THE FIRE-DWELLERS*, but there are in Rachel and Hagar. Partly we are dealing in archetypes, but not deliberately in archetypes. Archetypes are not abstract, but something that happen again and again throughout history. I hoped I was not making them too obvious. I think the characters should stand as individuals--as themselves. I didn't want Hagar or Rachel following Biblical characters too closely. I hoped I was not placing too much emphasis on this. The same thing happens in *THE STONE ANGEL* as in *A JEST OF GOD*, and that was deliberate where Nick says to Rachel, "I am not God, I can't solve anything". This was a more or less semi-deliberate re-casting of the speech to the Biblical Rachel. It isn't the fact that Hagar was cast out into a wilderness of her own making, but at the point when John dies and she says "Don't let me see him"--parallel with Biblical Hagar who says,

"Let me not see the death of the child".  
(Genesis 21:16).

I now turned the questions to focus on THE STONE ANGEL and A BIRD IN THE HOUSE. Here (THE STONE ANGEL) and in A JEST OF GOD you have emphasized names, e.g., Hagar, the Shipley place, etc. Do names have a particular significance for you? Mrs. Laurence first explained that the phrase "Shipley place" is standard prairie idiom. She recalled that the house in which she was raised was always referred to as the "old Simpson place" long after the Simpsons had left. With reference to people's names, she said:

Yes, I do place an emphasis on people's names and this may be an African influence. They believe it is a mistake to tell someone all of the names because it may give them power over you. I went through a trauma over my own name. I was always called Peggy, which I hated, and it didn't seem to be me. When we were in Vancouver I changed it back to Margaret.

Why did you choose the title, A BIRD IN THE HOUSE?

This was a kind of thematic phrase. It illustrated or summed up one of the book's main themes. Vanessa began to feel she was a bird in the house---trapped. She managed to get out, but her parents never managed to. Her father had wanted to travel and never did. The brick house was both a prison and a fortress. It is the wild bird who's been brought up in captivity and won't go out.

Did you deliberately bring in frequent references throughout your various works to the Tonnerre family?

Yes, it was deliberate. In the fictional town they lived there and it seemed natural to bring them in and partly because there were other Metis families who lived in Manitoba when I was a child

and these people fascinated and concerned me. I'd like to write a novel about that family but I can't because I don't know them well enough from the inside. They were part of the fabric of that town. They had come into all the books of Canadian fiction, partly because they are there and nobody notices them. You would think these people really existed, but they didn't. Lazarus was Jules' son and was a friend of John whom Hagar disapproved of. There was a Metis girl (Madeline) when I was a child who did have T.B. of the bone and she was brought up by the matron of the Neepawa Hospital, and this girl used to come to our house. In fact her fate is midway between what happened to Valentine and what happened to Piquette. She did marry an Anglo-Saxon, but that cracked up.

At this point I suggested to Margaret Laurence that her Canadian works seemed to move from a concentration on the theme of freedom to a concentration on the slightly more cynical theme of survival. I asked her if she felt this was a just assessment of the direction of her work.

I think I am still concerned with the theme of freedom---inner and outer---but I am concerned with the theme of survival. When I say survival I mean not just physical survival, but with some sort of integrity and dignity. I don't feel that any of the fiction set in Canada is pessimistic---it is not cheerful, but it is not downbeat.

In looking through her manuscript for *A BIRD IN THE HOUSE* I came across a few pages of notes to the editor in which she indicated what changes she agreed with and what changes she disagreed with. Since they were not addressed to any specific editor, I asked her for whom these were meant.

I submit every book to three publishers and what happens is that all three send me their editor's

suggestions and I wait until I have all three sets of suggestions in and I decide what I agree with and what I don't agree with. Then I write to all the editors. Judith Jones, the editor of Knopf, is a fantastic lady. She didn't approve of the title THE FIRE-DWELLERS. [The details of this controversy are elaborated upon on page 10 of the talk about the writer's relationship with his publishers given at the Edward Johnson Concert Hall on November 20, 1969].

At the close of the interview, still referring to the problems a writer has with publishers, Mrs. Laurence indicated that the American company wanted her to convert the Vanessa MacLeod short story into novel form. However, Margaret Laurence felt this would be unfaithful to the original approach she had taken and she refused to alter the nature of the stories. As a compromise solution, the various editors at no point labelled the work A BIRD IN THE HOUSE as a collection of short stories, noting that the public is not overly receptive to this form of writing. In dealing with her own background, Margaret Laurence felt it necessary to work through the medium of short stories, rather than in long "novel" form. About this she says,

I wrote that first short story quite a long time before the others. It was written in Canada in about 1961-62. I was trying to be evasive and trying not to be too obvious that it was my family. I was afraid of putting in fiction anything that was so close to my experience and then I realized it was the only way it could be done. My stories came to mind when I got to England. I wrote the others over a period of about six years in England. Various aspects had to be written about singly.

Marion Turner

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