A STUDY OF METAPHOR, SYMBOLISM, AND BIBLICAL ALLUSION IN THE NOVELS OF MARGARET LAURENCE

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CONTENTS

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IN THE NOVELS OF MARGARET LAURENCE

Margaret Laurence expresses her vision through metaphor, symbolism, and Biblical allusion, all of which enrich the narrative and give cohesion to the form of the novels. Through these literary devices the author explores the human condition, the female psyche, her own identity, and the nature of the creative process. The title of each novel contains a central controlling image which is expanded into the metaphoric framework of the novel. Through the metaphoric implications and ramifications of the title-image the author sheds light on the mysterious elements of the human condition. Laurence appears to define "mystery" in the Apocalyptic sense, as an incomprehensible phenomenon with hidden symbolic meanings intended to be revealed to man by God through his Spirit. It is a fundamental premise of this thesis that Margaret Laurence, though sceptical in manner, is essentially a religious writer whose background is rooted in Christianity. For this reason, Biblical allusion and symbolism, particularly Apocalyptic symbolism, feature prominently in each novel and are an integral part of its organic unity. Through Biblical analogy and allusion each protagonist is linked with her ancestral past and with religious myths, and is also associated with her archetype. Through symbolism the various strands of the novel are interwoven, as one item or event symbolizes or prefigures another of greater significance.

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Laurence is a religious writer. Speaking to a group of English students at the University of Saskatchewan, she is quoted as having said:

> Yes, I do consider myself a religious writer. I was brought up in the United Church. My theological frame of reference is Biblical and many of my protagonists hold conversations with God.[1]

It is not surprising then that Biblical allusions and analogies feature prominently in each of her five novels. As Frank Pesando illustrates, her primary sources are Genesis and the Book of Revelation, the first and last books of the Bible respectively, which deal with the beginning and the end of the world.[2] But, in addition to these, Laurence also alludes to Joshua, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Jonah, the Gospels, and the Epistles of Saint Paul. Closely related to the Biblical references is the symbolism, particularly symbols such as the sea, the river, the wilderness, and the city.

What is uniquely Laurence, however, is her use of metaphor which is implicit in every title and cleverly expanded through each novel. This artistic manipulation of metaphor represents the essential Laurence. Indeed, metaphor is Laurence's principal literary tool for

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[1] George Melnyk, "Literature begins with Writer's Craft," Quill and Quire, 43, No.6 (May 1977).

[2] Frank Pesando, "In a Nameless Land: The Use of Apocalyptic Mythology in the Writings of Margaret Laurence," Journal of Canadian Fiction, 2, No.1 (Winter 1973).

exploring "the mysterious at the core of writing"[3] and it is upon this contention that this thesis is based.

For purposes of clarification the term "metaphor" is to be understood here in the broadest sense, and in this regard the definition given in Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary is appropriate: "A figure of speech in which one object is likened to another by speaking of it as if it were that other."[4] The writer of this thesis, however, has taken the liberty of extending the word "object" in the above definition to include "person". Apropos this, Martin Foss's explication of the term "metaphor" as the making of a living image of experience that goes beyond the immediate representation, and also as a process of tension and energy manifested in the process of language itself as opposed to the single word, is acceptable.[5]

Thus, for example, the title of Laurence's second novel, The Stone Angel, inherently possesses metaphor - a form of literary symbiosis - which identifies a cemetery monument with an old lady. Similarly, in The Fire Dwellers, when Stacey regards the seagulls as "prophets in bird form",[6] the author is again employing metaphor. It may be said that Laurence has a penchant for illustrating a point or imparting a significant insight in this manner. Indeed, metaphoric expression is

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[3] Melnyk, Quill.

[4] Standard Dictionary, International Edition (New York:Funk and Wagnall, 1969),II.

[5] Martin Foss, Symbol and Metaphor in Human Experience (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1949), pp.55-56.

[6] Margaret Laurence, The Fire-Dwellers (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart,1969),p.9.

second nature to the extent that she even talks metaphorically on occasion, for she is reported as having ". . . . confided wistfully to a few friends that she had 'divined' her last novel."[7]

Laurence is deeply concerned with the nature of fiction writing. When Morag poses the question: "Does fiction prophesy life?"[8], it is as if she were reiterating Laurence's own hypothesis, the ramifications of which are far-reaching in terms of the nature of the creative process, inspiration, and the inherent value and purpose of writing.

Though Margaret Laurence may be regarded as a Christian religious writer, she does not adhere to the tenets of any particular denomination in her writings. On the contrary, she frequently and often ruthlessly exposes religious myths and the pretence of formal religious practice and beliefs. Nevertheless, the topic of religion, in one form or another, consistently features in every one of her novels, and it is principally to religion that the central metaphor, the symbolism, and of course the Biblical allusion, are directly or indirectly related.

The purpose of this thesis is to identify and analyze Laurence's use of metaphor, symbolism, and Biblical allusion in This Side Jordan, The Stone Angel, A Jest of God, The Fire Dwellers, and The Diviners.

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[7] Marci McDonald, "The Author: All the hoopla gets her frazzled," Toronto Star, 18 May 1974, p.H-5.

[8] Margaret Laurence, The Diviners (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p.254.

THIS SIDE JORDAN

This Side Jordan addresses itself to the problems encountered by Ghana in the transition period between colonialism and national independence. The country's growing pains experienced in bridging the gulf between tribalism and modern civilization are epitomized and personified in Nathaniel Amegbe, the principal character. The title presents the central metaphor which correlates the imagery, symbolism, and Biblical allusion; and at one level, the novel can be read as a narrative metaphor in its presentation of one man's progression from an unregenerate to a regenerate condition. Indeed, it would appear that the literary technique of metaphor is essential to the author's method of revealing and communicating her personal vision.

The novel begins and terminates with allusions to the Biblical River Jordan, and both allusions are symbolic as well as metaphoric. The final passage reads:

> And beyond the city, the plains. And beyond the plains, the forest. And beyond the forest, the desert.
>
> "Aya!" he cried. "Shall we call him Joshua? That's a good name isn't it?"
>
> "He has his names already," she said smiling.
>
> "But Joshua - that's a good name."
>
> "All right," she said, "if you want it."
>
> . . . . . .
>
> - Joshua, Joshua, Joshua, I beg you. Cross Jordan, Joshua.[1]

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[1] Margaret Laurence, This Side Jordan (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1960), pp.281-282.

Besides relating the conversation between Nathaniel and his wife, Aya, regarding the choice of a name for their child, the passage is the culmination of the central theme and conflict of the novel, namely the emergence of a new civilization epitomized on the global level by the country of Ghana, and on the personal level by Nathaniel. But the complete import of the passage hinges on the reference to Joshua and Jordan.

Who is Joshua, and what is the significance of the River Jordan? These are the questions which challenge the reader who wishes to understand the implications of the analogy, solve the meaning of the title, and analyze the Biblical allusion contained in the novel.

Joshua is a common name in the Old Testament, but the reference here is clearly to the contemporary of Moses. This Joshua was a brave warrior from the tribe of Nun, who received from Moses and God the mandate to lead the Israelites, God's chosen people, across the River Jordan and into the Promised Land. His original name was Osee, but this was changed by Moses to Josue, or Joshua, which means "Yahweh is salvation". Joshua prefigures Jesus, not only by virtue of the fact that his name is derived from the same root, but also in his prime function: to save his people. Joshua's purpose was to complete the task begun by Moses, that of leading his people from a state of bondage into one of freedom and self-fulfilment beyond the River Jordan. By symbolic extension,

Nathaniel's son, Joshua, assumes the features of his Biblical namesake. Geographically, the barrier between safety and danger for the Israelites was the River Jordan. To make it across the river would ensure safety, happiness, fulfilment, and freedom. Crossing the river meant attaining the Promised Land which symbolized both material and spiritual plenitude. In this context the River Jordan symbolizes the final obstacle, the ultimate step, and the crucial breakthrough into a new and better existence.

However the novel is not about Joshua, except for the final pages; it concerns itself primarily with his father, Nathaniel, who is a Moses figure in so far as he is the one who endured the personal struggles, the temptations, and the sojourn in the wilderness, but who did not live to enjoy the benefits of the Promised Land. Early in the novel Nathaniel is endowed with Moses-like characteristics even though he is only a humble, unqualified teacher at a third rate school. He is explicitly referred to as preacher and prophet:

> ... Nathaniel taught History. He did not have the gift of spoken words - only of imagined words, when he made silent speeches to himself. In class he referred too often to the text, and the boys had discovered that if they all stared hard at him he would begin to stammer.
>
> Only in one course did he hold their interest, his own fire breaking through his anxiety.
>
> He had begun teaching African Civilizations of the past. Victor Edusei, who was a journalist, had made fun of him, claiming there were no African Civilizations of the past worth mentioning. Victor was wrong. But it made no difference. They were still right to teach the course, even if every word of it was a lie.
>
> In some way, this course was his justification.
>
> - Nathaniel the Preacher. Nathaniel the Prophet.
>
> - There must be pride in roots, O my people. Ghana, city of gold. Ghana on the banks of the Niger, live in your people's

> faith. Ancient empire, you will live again. And your people will laugh, easily, unafraid. They will not know the shame, as we have known it. For they will have inherited their earth.[2]

The parallels here with Genesis are worth noting. Moses, like Nathaniel, we are told, suffered from a speech defect similar to stammering. Also the concept of a chosen people inheriting their own special land is common to both narratives. Like Moses, but on a much smaller, microcosmic scale, Nathaniel is involved in leading his people out of the slavery of ignorance, through the wilderness of superstition to a richer quality of life.

Nathaniel's faith, sincerity, and self-determination set him apart from his people as a leader. He would not sit indolently like the rest and wait for God to grow the cocoa; he would rather assume responsibility himself for its growth. Yet his allegiance to the past is not broken easily. At times he is filled with doubt about his own identity. His wife, and his mother-in-law, aggravate his personal dilemma by condemning him for arranging for his child to be born in hospital and not back in the village. Although he won the battle, his integrity was not always so steadfast. By accepting a bribe from his students he lapsed badly into the worst aspects of the old culture, and he regretted having done that. There were times when he rejected the new ways: once when he decided to accept the job of working for the tribal chief, and again when he spat on the

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[2] Laurence, Jordan, p.22.

crucifix, thus symbolically rejecting Christianity. These lapses prevented him from making a clean break with the past, and his imperfection, like that of Moses, costs him the actual entry into the Promised Land. Consequently he does not cross Jordan and can only pass that triumph on to Joshua, his son and surrogate.

When making a critical inquiry into the effects and implications of allusions, metaphor, and symbolism one cannot assume to understand the intention of the writer of fiction. Moreover Laurence is not primarily a didactic novelist nor a writer of propaganda, but rather a writer of psychological novels which attempt to get inside the skulls of the characters. She admits this is difficult because to a certain extent the writer is outside her own creation and because her art is involved in the act of creating, there is in that respect an element of mystery. Laurence has the following to say with regard to creative writing:

> And yet, for a writer of fiction, part of the heart remains that of a stranger, for what we are trying to do is to understand those others who are our fictional characters, somehow to gain entrance to their minds and feelings, to respect them for themselves as human individuals, and to portray them as truly as we can. The whole process of fiction is a mysterious one, and a writer, however experienced, remains in some ways a perpetual amateur, or perhaps a perpetual traveller, an explorer of those inner territories, those strange lands of the heart and spirit.[3]

The cognitive processes involved in interpreting fiction are also mysterious, particularly when the writer has employed the devices

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[3]Margaret Laurence, Heart of a Stranger (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), pp. 11-12.

of allusion, metaphor, and symbolism which each individual reader interprets at different levels and in a myriad of ways. The problem for the would-be literary critic is to interpret the written word with sufficient imagination in order to extend possible meaning and give insights into the full import of the novel without straying too far from the text.

The Biblical allusions in This Side Jordan create additional interpretation and meaning in the novel. In this context Nathaniel's dilemma is not only his personal "struggle between the forces of growth and open inquiry, and those of fear and stultified thought";[4] but also an extension of the Biblical myth associated with Moses, Joshua, the River Jordan, and the Promised Land. Whether we consider myth as that which forms intellectual constructs that fuse concept and emotion into images; or as primordial patterns which arise from the collective unconsciousness of the race and so mysteriously move us when they appear in literary works; or as pragmatic charters of primitive faith and moral wisdom; the effect is to universalize and extend. By associating Nathaniel's personal experience with the myth the author universalizes that which is otherwise personal, individual and endemic to a specific person, place, and period in time. Thus through the myth the reader in turn is able to identify with Nathaniel's experiences. It is as if the canvas of the artist is

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[4] Laurence, Heart, p.20.

broadened in terms of time and place to the point where it becomes all-encompassing in its particular dimension of experience. By association with the myth, Nathaniel in a sense becomes "Everyman" in his search for personal salvation, through suffering and renewal. Despite the fact that his situation is different from anyone else's, the reader can empathize with his struggle against the forces of evil, as when the wiley Adua tries by emotionally blackmail to make him take his wife, Aya, back to her village for the birth of his child, or when Jacob Abraham uses and abuses him to further his own avaricious and egotistical ends, or when Johnny Kestoe persistently denigrates him.

The milieu in which Nathaniel struggles is a wilderness of ignorance and a desert of idolatry similar to that encountered by Moses enroute to the Promised Land. At times Nathaniel's own past, his sub-conscious, and his conscience are his worst enemies, because he is caught in the stringent demands of two opposing cultures and religions which are pulling him apart in two different directions. The occasion of his father's death exemplifies the dilemma:

> The Kyerema would not be acceptable to God. That had seemed very clear at the time. Had not the mission priests taught it? "I the Lord thy God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me." The drummer would walk among the howling hordes of hell to all eternity, his dark eyes as haughty and unyielding as they had been in life.

> Damned. The Drummer, damned. That had seemed very clear at the time. (Oh, young Nathaniel, having eaten the mission's consecrated bread, year after year, having eaten faith and fear and the threat of fire.)
>
> He, Nathaniel, had damned his father to that eternity. The father had been damned by his son's belief.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Nathaniel's heart was gripped by a terrible love, a terrible fear.
>
> "They have not stolen your soul," the uncles repeated, satisfied.
>
> And the boy had agreed, his aching body sweating and trembling lest the lie should strangle him and lest his father's gods should hear and slay him.
>
> The noise of the drums was the howling of lunatics, and the palm-wine had the taste of death. Then he had drunk himself insensible. . . . . .
>
> When he went back to the Mission, Nathaniel had gone alone to the chapel one night. He had stood before the statue of God's crucified Son. And he had spat full in the Thing's face, his heart raging to revenge his father. But it did not work. For he believed in the Man-God with the bleeding hands, and he could not spew that out of himself.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Shame swamped Nathaniel. He had never been brave enough to burn either Nyame's Tree or the Nazarene's Cross.
>
> Nine years ago he had been a fool. He could see it now. Now he was different. Both gods had fought over him, and both had lost.[5]

It should be noted that the technique of the interior monologue used here by Laurence to enable the reader to get inside the character and gain insight into the inner being, is one which she employs extensively in her later novels.

The theme of coming to terms with one's past, both personal and ancestral, is a prominent and recurring one in the writings of

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[5] Laurence, Jordan, pp. 28-30.

Laurence. In no other character is this more evident than in Nathaniel who struggles continually to shed the chains of the past in order to achieve personal freedom and integrity. His personal dilemmas are the birth pangs, the exorcisms, or rites of passage, after which revelation and epiphanies take place. With great hardship he rejects the pagan gods of the past and affirms his belief in Christ, but significantly in his vision Jesus appears like a king of Ashanti, his own warlike tribe, and crosses the River on a horse - an image which is Apocalyptic in tone and description:

> - All night long my soul wrestled with the devil. Who will hear me?
> - Jesus, my Redeemer, hear me (if You are there). Jesus, my Redeemer be there. Hear me. For I am drowning. Save me. Jesus, I beg you (if You are there).
> - King Jesus came riding on a milk-white horse. And He crossed the River of Jordan.
> . . . . . .
> ...Then he remembered one thing.
> Jesus fantastically had been arrayed like a King of Ashanti.[6]

Without Nathaniel being fully aware of the fact, the vision had indicated ironically that Christianity could build on the past without destroying it and that a compromise could be achieved - a conclusion arrived at by protagonists in Laurence's later novels.

A compromise for Nathaniel would be to retain the good aspects of his old culture while firmly rejecting the false. He sums up his dilemma thus: "I do not want to throw it all away but how can you keep part, without keeping all." He is repeatedly tempted to return

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[6] Laurence, Jordan, p.76.

to his village and its way of life as when Adjei Boateng, his uncle, persuades him to work for the tribal chief. The temptation is subtly insidious, and is reflected in the imagery of the River:

> The drowning man would struggle for a while and then he would be quiet, and the River would lap him around with its softness, the brown murky stillness of its womb.
> "I can't go," Nathaniel repeated desperately. -How many times have I cut the cord that has fed me? How many times have I fought with the Mother to give me birth? How many times has the fish, feeling his gills a flutter with the stars, dragged himself from the womb of water, painfully to breathe?[7]

The birth and death imagery, as well as the fish imagery, here recur as part of the stock imagery in the author's writings. The theme of self-renewal and self-actualization through suffering appears again in the later novels. The theme often operates at two levels - physical and spiritual, and here it represents, in metaphoric terms, Nathaniel's crisis of being torn between his natural instincts and his ideal spiritual aspirations, between paganism and Christianity. The new religion made its own demands on him as the Mission School had not only given him a new name, but through Baptism, a new soul. Yet the sacrament had not changed his past, and consequently Nathaniel felt that he belonged between yesterday and today. Metaphorically, he is spiritually dispossessed - a dominant theme in Margaret Laurence. Adjei, condemns him thus:

> You have forgotten your own land. You live in the city of strangers, and your god is the god of strangers, and strange speech is in your mouth, and you have no home.[8]

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[7] Laurence, Jordan, p. 100.

[8] Ibid, p. 103.

Laurence is preoccupied with the symbols of death to an extent suggesting necrophilia. Death imagery recurs in the futile deaths of small creatures such as geckoes, gophers, and fish; and also in the macabre contemplation of dead things, insects, animals, and humans - even the classrooms in Future Academy are described as 'wood-and-plaster skeletons'. In This Side Jordan the market place has a grotesque collection of death images, ju-jus which have been endowed with supernatural power. The following passage is an example of how the metaphoric process of the language takes effect. The dramatic tension is heightened, and Nathaniel's embarrassment is acute as he and the pregnant Miranda visit the market place:

> - What can I say? That is my heritage? The heritage of Africa, the glorious past.
> - The crocodile head was put out into the sun, and the sun rotted its flesh, and the ants picked it clean. And here it is, the bones grating against the husk of the brittle skin. Here it is in its power. And the monkey head, dried and hairy, eyes closed, dead nostrils puckered with the stench of death, here it is in its power. And the clenched hands of dead monkeys, they are here. And the putrid bird heads, blood dried on the mouldering feathers, they are here, their beaks sharp in their power. And the skulls of small animals that died running, they are here. . . . . And the dead chameleons, tails curled as they curled in life, bones rattling inside grey decayed almost-transparent skin. They are here in their glorious power.
> - Oh my people. Oh my children.
> - Soul is abroad in the world. Soul is stronger than flesh. We believe it. And believing it has led us to this. The taste of death is in our mouths. The stench of death is in our nostrils, and we pray to old bones. Our crops are blighted and our children die. The husband is cut down by his enemy, and the wife bleeds to death in birth. What can we do? The taste of fear is in our mouths, and we pray to old bones.[9]

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[9] Laurence, Jordan, pp. 158-159.

The tragic effect of this superstition is brought vividly and poignantly to the attention of the reader by juxtaposing the description of Nathaniel's sister's death at the age of two with that of the market place. The fetish priest and his ju-jus had been impotent to save the child's life and the symbols of death had been capable only of generating death.

Nathaniel's mother, witnessing the ineffectual pseudo-magic rites of the fetish priest as her child dies, is described as "stone" and her eyes as being "dead". This same metaphor which will later be employed and extended in The Stone Angel serves to describe in a pithy and poignant manner the inner feelings of the mother. It is as if the writer borrows from another artistic medium, in this instance, sculpture, to add power to the expression. Nathaniel's mother is turned into a Michelangelo's Pieta, as she is etched momentarily in stone. The narrative continues in a metaphoric vein as Miranda refers to the "little clay vessel" which "looks as though it were meant to mix medicine in". The juxtaposing of the 'stone' mother, the fetish priest mixing medicinal herbs, the little body of the two year old child, and this statement of Miranda, adroitly and dramatically evokes the associative power of language. Indeed Laurence frequently displays a penchant for illustrating the hidden power of language through metaphor.

Religious symbols, particularly those related to the concepts of priesthood, sacrifice, and God are used frequently in a compelling manner. Besides the pagan gods, and the Christian God, James Thayer,

like Thor in The Fire Dwellers, is referred to as a god who had walked on Olympus. Jacob Abraham's office is referred to as a 'sanctuary', and his desk is a "desk-altar". Nathaniel is described as a priest before whom "Kumi laid his offering"; and later the innocent virgin, Emerald, is offered as a bleeding victim to satisfy the lust of Johnnie Kestoe. In these instances Laurence associates the concept of God with that of power which has to be appeased, by sacrifices and offerings, so that creatures can survive. This Old Testament concept of God recurs in The Fire Dwellers when Stacey fears that God will punish her sins by taking the life of her child. It is of interest to note that This Side Jordan, parallels the Old Testament in so far as the book leads up to, anticipates, and converges towards the birth of Joshua, in a manner that suggests the Old Testament converging towards the birth of Jesus.

One other explicit symbol in the novel is that of gold: "Life was in it, and it was a symbol of life". Gold is often associated with the sun and with the country of Ghana which is part of the Gold Coast of West Africa. This was the prime target of the colonialists who exploited the area not only for its slaves but also for its gold. Laurence deals with the question of exploitation in one of Nathaniel's interior monologues. The fact that the Christian message had been brought by the colonialists, the exploiters, posed a paradox and a dilemma for Nathaniel. Apparently they did not offend their God by treating his people like animals. Their God was happy at the haul of black ivory. Gold is also perceived as a vehicle for

bribery and propitiation - a means of exerting power over other people, as when Awuletey offered Nathaniel a gold necklace in return for a favour. The concept of bribery with gold is pursued in the cynical allusion to the Apocalypse: "Take the gold from golden Guinea.- Take the gold and bring it to the Lamb. Take the diamonds and be sure their souls are saved"- as if Christ too was subject to bribery.

A parallel theme to that of exploitation and dispossession at the national level is Nathaniel's personal dilemma. He is referred to as Esau, the Biblical figure who was exploited and tricked into forfeiting his birthright, and the directness of the identification suggests the myth that **Nathaniel** is part of the distant past, in the Jungian sense that certain basic human patterns perennially recur and that human behavior has a mythical origin of counterpart. Hence Nathaniel, like Esau, had sold his inheritance and birth-right for the equivalent of a bowl of red pottage - in his case a gold necklace and a silk shirt. The spiritual effect of being dispossessed, was the same for both. "I cannot have both gods and I cannot have neither. A man must belong somewhere," Nathaniel cries in his dilemma.

Closely related to this notion of spiritual dispossession and alienation is the symbolism of the forest, which is one of the most prevalent in the novel. The forest imagery surfaces continually, especially when Nathaniel is undergoing mental anguish and doubts about his past. The following quotation illustrates this:

> If I had stayed a boy on my father's land. If I had stayed a boy in my father's village, clearing in the forest, huts made of grass. If I had stayed, where would I be now? Beating back the forest, from now until I die.[10]

The forest often symbolizes Nathaniel's past and man's origins in Mother Earth: "The forest is rank, hot and swelling with its semen . . . . . ." a place where "death and life meet and mate". By extension, the forest also symbolizes the subconscious and particularly the perilous aspects of the subconscious which have the tendency to obscure reason. When Nathaniel in a metaphoric sense "wrestled with the devil", the devil was portrayed as being part of the forest - a gorilla figure along with the adulterer and the thief. The forest is also associated with Nathaniel's Eden - a place he metaphorically left in search of the Promised Land:

> Only sweat and the forest, and at night songs and love. That was Eden a long time ago.
> . . . . . .
> - But something said - GO. Something said - vomit it out, the forest, the stinking hut, hoe and machete, dead men's bones. Something said - don't stay here, boy, sure as God don't stay here.[11]

But having left his origins it was difficult to reach the Promised Land. Existentially, Nathaniel becomes a lonely pilgrim en route without ever arriving at his destination.

In contrast to the forest symbolism, that of the river, like laughter, is usually related to healing, catharsis, renewal, and

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[10] Laurence, Jordan, p. 167.

[11] Ibid. p. 167

regeneration, although at times it is also associated with drowning. However the dilemma for Nathaniel was his inability metaphorically to cross the river and allow its healing water to wash away the past definitively and without vascillation. Even though he had received the sacramental water of Baptism and lived in the city which is the symbol of the future and of Jerusalem, the Promised Land, he did not completely belong there. Like Rachel in the chapel, he was unable to accept the Christian message proclaimed by the African preacher without calling it into question. He was a doubting Thomas who baulked against the final crossing. Like his namesake in John's Gospel, referred to by Christ as the Israelite in whom there was no guile, Nathaniel was being called by Christ into the New Covenant. As his name suggests he was about to receive a gift from God, but forsaking the old ways proved difficult. Consequently he remained in a state of ambivalence until the birth of his child.

Like most novels of Margaret Laurence This Side Jordan addresses itself to the problems involved with communication and inter-personal relationships. Nathaniel is unable to communicate satisfactorily with his wife, his relatives, Jacob Abraham, Johnnie Kestoe, Miranda, and with God. His counterpart, Kestoe, encounters problems relating to his wife, to Thayer, Cunningham, as well as to Nathaniel, Victor, Emerald, and to blacks in general. Major breakthroughs are experienced in some relationships, sometimes in a manner which points to that of Hagar and Murray Lees. Often these breakthroughs are achieved symbolically, even sacramentally, through

a gift, a sharing experience, or a tactile gesture such as holding hands. Such is the case in the births of Joshua and Mary.

The hospital scene depicting the birth of Joshua and Mary is a key convergent point in the novel. Consequently one may assume that the contrived and neatly manipulated events of this section of the plot have been given special significance by the author and thus deserve analysis and comment. Aya, Nathaniel's wife, has clearly indicated her desire to retain the old culture, and the hospital represents to her the antiseptic, unknown, fearful world of the future. It is even associated with death, thus: "The hospital seemed as quiet as death", and earlier in the same passage it is referred to as "The Pit of Hell". Upon entering the hospital, Aya becomes completely isolated, inhibited to the point where she is unable to cry in the presence of the clerk. Only the sister is able to communicate with her.

Symbolically the African sister is the epitome of the best features of the old and the new, of African and British, of black and white, as illustrated by the whiteness of her uniform and the blackness of her skin. Ironically (or perhaps appropriately) she is the only one in the hospital who is able to relate to Aya in a manner which reassures, because it combines the efficiency of modern life and the personal empathy of tribal community. At the hospital it is not long before the African sister assumes responsibility for Aya and the birth of her child. Following this the remainder of the scene is conspicuously devoid of details related

to the actual birth of Joshua.

By contrast, the details surrounding the birth of Miranda's child are given prominence. Johnnie Kestoe is depicted in a trapped situation - confined as it were with his wife - and it is through his eyes that we see the birth of the baby. Significantly the writing abounds in water symbols such as waves, the wild river, whirlpool, which do not pertain to the healing, salubrious qualities of water but rather to its evil, destructive forces which cause drowning, or as Laurence described it: "breathed water", indicating elemental confusion. Unlike the water imagery associated with the River Jordan, here the water imagery appears to relate to a different rite of passage - that of passing through the River Styx of the underworld. Whereas Aya had progressed through the final stage on her own without Nathaniel, Miranda needed Johnnie throughout the duration of the labour pains. Only the breaking of the waters initiates the regenerative process for her. Johnnie, on the other hand, sees the yellow pus and impurities instead of the so-called water, and wonders how a living creature could issue from the poisonous flood. Doubting the process of nature, he anticipates a still-born child. Miranda, by contrast, seems gradually to gain inner strength when she refuses to inhale the gas which by implication symbolizes her acceptance of the regenerative process. The "jagged scream" she emits suggests the animal instinct in her, indicating the fine, but precarious distinction between man and beast. In a broader context it illustrates that the evolutionary process is

continuous and unending. The fact that Miranda had symbolically reverted to a beast, points to the fact that her regenerative pilgrimage was complete. Finally the blood imagery, which for Johnnie had previously symbolized death, now generates life.

One is tempted to speculate on the significance of the birth of a female - the opposite sex to Aya's child. There is the possibility of a future union, a marrying of the two cultures and colours; but there is nothing in the text to substantiate such speculation. However, the name Mary has various associations and implications, foremost of which are motherhood, and the heralding of a saviour of mankind, as well as representing Johnnie's roots.

In essence the hospital episode is a microcosm of the central conflict posed in the novel: that of self-renewal and self-regeneration. The throes of childbirth are the rites of passage both for Aya and Miranda, and their husbands. Each had to make an individual journey into the unknown and back again, affirming life in his own peculiar manner. In this context the choice of Joshua for the name of his child represents a final and definitive affirmation of Nathaniel's Christian faith, pointing to the future, whereas the choice of Mary for Kestoe's child indicates the past, Johnnie's roots, " like the roots of swamp weeds".

By way of summary, it may be said that This Side Jordan has been enriched because of the different levels of meaning and the various new dimensions brought to it by the use of metaphor and

symbolism. In many instances too, the dramatic effect has been heightened. Certainly the themes have been universalized by the use of allusion, particularly Biblical allusion. Through these literary techniques the novel has gained cohesiveness and its various strands have been woven together artistically into a closely knit fabric. In this regard the strength of the metaphor lies in its power to link the external with the internal, the universal with the existential, and the past with the present. Perhaps there is an over-abundance of imagery and symbolism, particularly in Nathaniel's interior monologues, for at times it seems that the author has overloaded these with the writer's machinery to the extent that it becomes obtrusive. Clara Thomas describes this flaw as an "over-emphasis" and "over-energy" on the part of Laurence in her first novel.[12]

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[12] Clara Thomas, The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), p.51.

THE STONE ANGEL

Margaret Laurence's second novel, the first of her Manawaka series, has a significant title. Not only does it imply paradox and incongruity, but more importantly it contains the controlling metaphor of the narrative. Though the stone angel is readily identifiable as the ostentatious monument on the grave of Hagar Shipley's mother, its metaphoric significance is inherent in the relationship between Hagar and the statue.

The word "angel" connotes a superhuman, God-like being, who is traditionally represented anthropomorphically as a human being with wings implying transcendence over man. In the Book of Revelation angels are classified into a hierarchy headed by the seraphim, each class having a specific set of functions. According to Hagar's description, the angel cast in stone which stood on her mother's grave ranked no less than with the seraphim and possessed other features which flaunted the great pride of the Currie family:

> She was not the only angel in the Manawaka cemetery, but she was the first, the largest, and certainly the costliest. The others, as I recall, were a lesser breed entirely, petty angels, cherubims with pouting stone mouths...[1]

The monument was primarily a product of the pride of Jason Currie, Hagar's father, who is metaphorically referred to as pharaoh wanting to commemorate

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[1] Margaret Laurence, The Stone Angel (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964), pp. 3-4.

his dynasty. Ironically, a prominent defect of the statue was the absence of eyes which made it "doubly blind, not only stone but unendowed with even the pretence of sight. Whoever carved her had left the eyeballs blank."[2] Although the main purpose of the stone angel was to commemorate the death of Hagar's mother, by implication it also indirectly represented the birth and life of Hagar because her mother had died in the process of giving birth to her.

The protagonist, Hagar, is identified with the monument of the stone angel in a number of references and allusions indicating their common characteristics. Similarly the imagery and symbolism - particularly that associated with stone, blindness, pride, and wilderness - reinforce their common identity. Thus,for example, Hagar is described as being emotionally as cold as stone and unable to express her true feelings. For that reason, when she falls and hurts herself in the presence of Doris her tears "have sprung so unbidden", and recalling the saddest moment of her life when her son, John, died, she did not cry: "The night my son died I was transformed to stone and never wept at all."[3] Hagar's incapacity to act through compassion is evident in her refusal to wear her mother's shawl to comfort Matt who was dying.

Hagar is further endowed with the attributes of the stone angel. We are told that Doris guided her as though she were "stone blind", and John refers to her as an angel but later chides her for not seeing that

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[2]Laurence, Stone, p.3.

[3]Ibid., p. 243.

Marv was her boy. On the bus to Shadow Point Hagar sits as "rigid as marble", and when she is in the cannery dementedly embellishing her hair with June-bugs, she is transformed in a manner reminiscent of the over-turned monument. At other times she is treated by others as if she were a monument or an object rather than a person. An illustration of this occurs when she had fallen and Doris and Marvin were attempting to lift her up; Hagar thinks to herself: "They spoke before as though I weren't here, as though it were a full gunneysack they dragged from the floor."[4] It is as if this episode prefigures the struggle in the cemetery with the statue.

It has been noted that the stone angel reflected the pride of Jason Currie and that it was the costliest monument as well as the most conspicuous in the cemetery. In addition to this, it also occupied a commanding position overlooking the town. Hagar inherited her father's pride which was at once the hallmark and the flaw in her character. It interfered with her personal relationships and through a process of petrification became a stone barrier which prevented communication and the expression of love. Thus her sexual experiences with her husband, Bram, found her lacking in response, as the following passage indicates:

> Didn't I betray myself in rising sap, like a heedless and compelled maple after winter? But no. He never expected any such thing, and so he never perceived. I prided myself upon keeping my pride intact, like some maidenhead.[5]

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[4] Laurence, Stone, p.32.

[5] Ibid., p.81.

The incongruity between stone and angel is reflected in the striking difference between Hagar's body and her spirit. The latter is vibrant, independent, and indomitable, whereas physically she is debile, fat, and dependent. Moreover the imagery associated with her body is crude and perjorative. She is called " a calf to be fattened", "a constipated cow","a lady -bug", and "a caterpillar". The concept of imprisonment and confinement is also expressed in the imagery - she felt "like a fenced cow meeting only the barbed wire whichever way she turns",[6] or "like an earthworm impaled by children on the ferociously unsharp hook of a safety pin."[7] Hagar's sense of imprisonment operates at two levels: physically she is trapped in her own house, her room, and afraid of being trapped in Silverthreads; spiritually her true and better self is trapped inside a stone exterior which it is unable to penetrate. Lying in her hospital bed,Hagar realizes this personal dilemma:

> 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.[8]

Besides the controlling metaphor of the stone angel which serves as an objective correlative, the author also employs Biblical analogy as a mythic frame of reference for the story of Hagar Shipley. Thus the

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[6] Laurence, Stone, p.53.

[7] Ibid., p.54.

[8] Ibid., p.307.

protagonist is given many of the characteristics associated with Hagar of Genesis, some of which are overt and explicit while others are symbolic. In order fully to comprehend the import of the novel therefore, it is imperative to recall at least the salient features of the Genesis Hagar; namely that she was a bondwoman in the service of Sarah, the wife of Abraham; that she gave birth to Abraham's son, Ishmael, and was later banished into the wilderness because of Sarah's jealousy and through her own pride; and finally that she returned to Abraham's household at the behest of an angel whom she met at a well only to be banished a second time.

Although this story is different from that of Hagar Shipley, there are some basic resemblances. Besides bearing the same name, the two women share the personal trait of pride and stubbornness. Hagar Shipley felt enslaved by her environment and by her own body; her Biblical namesake was a bondwoman. Both attempted to escape from their bondage and both were persuaded by a stranger to return home. Also the concept of wilderness appears in both stories, as does the significance of water. The man in each of the women's lives bore the name Abraham, and both were eventually separated from their man. Finally, although both were alienated from society, they both became partially reconciled with God.

The Genesis account of Hagar merely hints at her personal pride, but there is the suggestion that when she became pregnant by Abraham she began to lord it over Sarah. Later when the latter took revenge she chose to escape with pride rather than remain in the household of Abraham in humiliation. As for Hagar Shipley's pride it is ubiquitously in evidence throughout the novel. Thus, for instance, she

married Bram in defiance of her father's wishes; she was too proud to express intimacy and sexual satisfaction to her husband; and there were numerous occasions when she would not allow others to help her even when she was old and unable to help herself. Such was the case when the nurse tried to comfort her in the hospital after John's fatal accident:

> But I shoved her arm away. I straightened my spine, and that was the hardest thing I've had to do in my entire life, to stand straight then. I wouldn't cry in front of strangers, whatever it cost me.[9]

Again, after one of her falls she regained her stand only to feel as "Proud as Napoleon or Lucifer" as she surveyed the symbolic wasteland she had conquered.

Pride was a chain for Hagar Shipley which held her true inner self enslaved and which over the years metaphorically transformed her into stone and exiled her into the wilderness. This psychological metamorphosis rendered her less capable of establishing and maintaining positive inter-personal relationships; this failure resulted in her alienation from the households to which she should have rightly belonged. Thus she defied her own father and left his household without his approval, and later abandoned her husband, Bram, and her own household. This defiance of Hagar associates her with the Lucifer of Genesis who defied God and consequently forfeited Paradise. For a period of time she was a servant in the household of Mr. Oatley, and finally she became isolated in her own house because she was too proud to relate meaningfully to Marvin and especially to Doris. The harsh reality eventually

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[9] Laurence, Stone, p.242.

became very clear to her: she did not belong to any household. At this sobering realization she felt threatened and afraid as expressed in the ensuing interior monologue:

> I do know it, and do not. I can think of only one thing-the house is mine. I bought it with the money I worked for, in this city . . which has served as a kind of home ever since I left the prairies. Perhaps it is not home, as only the first of all can be truly that, but it is mine and familiar. 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 of 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.[10]

Hagar's preoccupation with house and sense of belonging is evident in this passage; to lose her house would be tantamount to losing her own personal identity and to become both spiritually and physically dispossessed.

The fate of Hagar Shipley, in this regard, echoes the plight of her Biblical namesake who, though attached to the house of Abraham, did not belong to it as a member of the family because of her status of bondwoman. Yet the fact of belonging to a household was of great importance in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, where the inspired writers take pains to indicate and record the lineage and household of people. Likewise Laurence is careful to point out that Hagar Shipley's father metaphorically resembled an Egyptian pharaoh and that Hagar was pharaoh's daughter thereby associating her with the prototype Hagar and her lineage. Moreover it was precisely because Sarah was

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[10] Laurence, Stone, p. 36.

protective of Isaac her son's lineage and birthright that Hagar and her son, Ishmael, were exiled.

Initially it would appear that the Biblical Hagar was excluded from the chosen people of God and that later her salvation was made possible only through a special covenant God established with her through Ishmael. This was contingent upon her response to the angel's proposal at the well. Hagar Shipley, by comparison, excluded herself from the family of God by her cynical attitude towards religion as shown in her dealings with Mr. Troy , the minister. Later she admits that she is unable to relate to the sentiments expressed in Psalm 23 "The Lord is my shepherd" and gains more consolation from Keats' poem, "Meg Merrillies" because she can identify more readily with that outcast figure. This admission is significant because the anthropomorphic image of God as the good shepherd is a fundamental one in the Bible, conceived by David, the psalmist and later endorsed by Christ himself who identifies with the good shepherd . In this manner Hagar's lack of trust and her fear typify the Puritan attitude to God and to some extent the Old Covenant of Judaism. Consequently she felt unable to perceive of God as Abba, Father, as Paul exhorts Christians of the New Covenant, and to that extent placed herself outside the house of the new chosen people. Her relationship to God reflects her relationship with her own father, Jason Currie, in this respect.

Saint Paul, in his letter to the Galatians expounds on the concept of covenant and Hagar's relation to it:

> For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bond-maid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the

> bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband. Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise.[11]

It is significant that the Jerusalem above and the joy associated with the children of the New Covenant both eluded Hagar who towards the end of her life realized that all she had wanted to do was rejoice, but that she was unable to. The essential point, however, that Paul is making is that personal salvation does not come through external observation of the law, but through faith in Christ. In the passage quoted above Agar is cited as representing the Old Covenant of Judaism and its concomitant accretions of external trivia, the observance of which was believed to earn salvation. The outcome of this belief was pharasaical pride and self-righteousness. In this context, and by association with her namesake, Hagar Shipley, the stone angel, symbolizes the lapidary externals which eventually stifle the spirit through a process of emotional petrification.

Commenting on the relevance of the Genesis and Pauline accounts of Agar to the story of Hagar Shipley, Anne Thompson writes thus:

> Essential to an understanding of the organic structure of The Stone Angel, and the function of the imagery within this structure, is a knowledge of the Biblical Hagar, as she is portrayed in Genesis, but more importantly as she is interpreted by St.Paul in the fourth book of his Epistle to the Galatians.

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[11] Galatians 4. 22-28. (Authorized King James version)

> ...From the Old Testament Story, then, the reader derives the association of Hagar Shipley with the idea of life in the wilderness. However, it is to St. Paul's reference to Hagar in the New Testament that the reader owes the idea that Hagar's bondage and dismissal to the wilderness was really of her own making.[12]

Certainly this view is endorsed by Hagar's own words that pride was her wilderness, and the demon that led her there was fear.[13]

It should be noted in this regard that fear, as opposed to love, is what distinguished the Old Covenant from the New and that the common recurring sin of the Old Testament Jews was their pride and obstinacy. On both counts Hagar Shipley typifies the Old Covenant, and one is reminded of her when Ezekiel upbraids the people of Israel for having hearts of stone instead of hearts of flesh, and for being obstinate and stubborn. The same prophet speaks of the new spirit that is required in order to reach the symbolic Promised Land, and threatens exile for those who lack this new spirit - themes which are addressed in The Stone Angel with particular reference to Hagar.

Evidently, Laurence possesses skill for creating mythical patterns, especially Biblical ones, and for deftly weaving them into the fabric of the novel. This is apparent in the manner in which she manipulates the wilderness imagery. The Biblical Hagar fled twice into the desert wilderness - a place usually associated with isolation, alienation and lack of water - where she was comforted and strengthened by an angel. Laurence's description of the prairies covered in snow connotes wilderness:

> The farms were lost and smothered. Emaciated trunks of maple and poplar were black now and the branches were feathered with frost.

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[12]Anne Thompson, "The Wilderness of Pride: Form and Image in The Stone Angel", Journal of Canadian Fiction, 4, No.3 (1975), 95.

[13]Laurence, Stone, p.292.

> The sloughs were frozen over, and the snow was banked high against the snow fences and shadowed blue in the sun. Everything was blue-bleak and white for distances.[14]

This was the wilderness Hagar Shipley remembered the day she exiled herself from Bram and his household. In the summer also, the prairies, baked by the sun and experiencing drought, often resemble a wilderness.

The stories of the two Hagars continue to parallel each other with regard to the angel and the thirst-quenching liquids of water and wine. In Genesis the encounter with the angel takes place at a well which is a vitally important refuge in the desert. Hagar not only revives her own life and that of her son by sharing a drink of water with the stranger-angel, but in addition experiences a change of heart. Similarly, in the story of Hagar Shipley, Laurence carefully parallels the details of the Biblical analogue. Thus, on her second escape into the wilderness, Hagar Shipley takes refuge in the fish cannery where she encounters Murray Lees, a symbolic angel, who is an agent of change for her and with whom she quenches her thirst. Like that of water, the symbolism of wine is significant because of its strong overtones of the sacramental. Wine signifies the New Testament, water the Old. One recalls that Christ changed the water into wine, and that at the Last Supper he used wine to represent His blood. There is the metaphoric suggestion that upon encountering Lees, Hagar experienced a similar form of transubstantiation which was sacramental in its effect, in the sense that there was an internal spiritual change effected through the performance of an external liturgy or rite.

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[14] Laurence, Stone, p. 142-143.

Some critics have compared Hagar to Lear, and Murray Lees to the Fool, in Shakespeare's play King Lear, and though the comparison may be a valid one, the comparison does not possess the fundamental significance and import of the Biblical analogue. Murray Lees is more than a fool because of his religious symbolism. He is a Melchisedech figure who appears out of the wilderness. As Melchisedech did for Abraham, he performs a rite, which prefigures Christ and the New Covenant. Hagar's random and mysterious encounter with Lees initiates a major catharsis in her life through a process which suggests the sacramental, for communion and reconciliation took place between two people through the spirit. Hagar appreciates the fact that Lees had been instrumental in saving both her body and her spirit when she accedes to Doris's remark:

> "How can you be so snippy, mother?" Doris protests. "After all Mr. Lees saved your life."
> This ridiculous statement almost makes me laugh, but then, looking into this strange man's eyes, an additional memory returns, something more of what he spoke last evening, and I to him, and the statement no longer seems so ridiculous. Impulsively, hardly knowing what I am doing, I reach out and touch his wrist.
> "I didn't mean to speak crossly. I - I'm sorry about your boy."
> Having spoken so, I feel lightened and eased. He looks surprised and shaken, yet somehow restored."[15]

The episode in the fish cannery evidently may be seen to be teeming with symbolism, religious and other. For example the building itself symbolizes a place of refuge, a home , a church, for Hagar who until this point in the novel felt spiritually and physically dispossessed. Moreover, besides the Christian symbolism of the fish, which dates back to the early Church, there is the recurring symbol

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[15] Laurence, Stone, p.253.

of death represented by a bird in the house, in this case the seagull. The death portended is clearly Hagar's and ironically the wounded and trapped seagull symbolizes Hagar, who is incapacitated and equally trapped. Lees is chased by dogs which are reminiscent of those in the Apocalypse, and the sea is referred to once again as harbouring the forces of evil. The overturned box which Hagar uses as a table may be seen as representing an altar. The lighted match is a symbol of Christ, and initiates an epiphany for Hagar whose spiritual blindness is about to be cured at least momentarily. Before that occurs, however, she experiences the dark night of the soul, symbolized by the darkness of the cannery, the howling of the dogs, her pain, and the threatening aspect of the sea. She identifies with the wounded gull - its "terrible rage of not being able to do what it is compelled to do"[16] as she herself, disabled with arthritis, is subjected to crawling on her hands and knees in the dark. This humiliating experience signifies the initial breaking down of Hagar's pride. The alchemical transformation had commenced which would cause the "lapis" to crumble and disintegrate. Subsequently, she passes through the process of metamorphosis beginning with the base stone devoid of any form of life, through the animal stage represented by the crawling, to the human stage when she could at least admit to some need: "I don't trust him (Lees), but I've had my fill of being alone."[17] And the final stage is a

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[16] Laurence, Stone, p.218.

[17] Ibid., p. 221.

spiritual awareness and appreciation of communion and reconciliation with another person. Even the shells symbolise Hagar in that they are rough and calloused on the exterior surface but silken and pearled inside. The symbolism of the gull is more complicated because in addition to its identification with Hagar it has another dimension - that of victim. By diverting the dogs which were in pursuit of Lees it indirectly saved him by its own death. In this regard it is worth noting that the essence of a religious sacrifice is the death of an innocent victim. Thus the gull may be interpreted as a symbol of Christ and also representative of the death of Hagar's pride, at least momentarily.

Murray Lees is cast as a ministering angel to Hagar,and although she is unable to trust him immediately, and is typically concerned about her appearance when he comes close to her, he is eventually able to touch her spirit in a manner which had eluded the representatives of formal religion. He helps her through the barriers between darkness and light, external and internal, fear and trust. Because Hagar and Lees had both experienced the death of a loved one, they were able to relate to each other. The irony of Lees's tragedy was that it had happened while the family were attending a service in the church of The Redeemer's Advocates. It is as if Laurence is hereby questioning the loving Providence ofa God whom Hagar perceives as laughing at the suffering of mankind.

This irony echoes the paradox inherent in the central metaphor, stone angel, and is a significant part of the writer's vision of life which incorporates simultaneously the incongruities of birth and death, faith and disbelief,strength and weakness, internal and external, sight

and blindness, and other such apparent polarities. Thus, cohesiveness is gained by use of hinge symbolism which links together images, symbols and themes, no matter how seemingly incongruous, paradoxical, and incompatible, to the central incongruous symbol of the stone angel.

It is ironic, but in character with the protagonist, that her important realizations all take place in the final weeks of her life. When she is taken to the hospital, which like the cannery provides a temporary refuge and home for her, Hagar relates meaningfully to another person and thereby gains spiritual insights. Despite the age gap between the two, Hagar and Sandra Wong were able to communicate. Some aspects of the hospital scene resemble those of the cannery. For example, confinement, thirst, and suffering are common to both. Like the cannery, the hospital is a purgatory symbol, a place of suffering and purification wherein 'the self' is 'refined' and 'cured.' Hagar observes that the whole world has shrunk as she has come the full circle of life; from youth which is symbolized by the pink pills, to extreme old age. Yet for her, the final human experience - that of dying - is one of growth. In helping Sandra she learns to rejoice and enjoys a measure of inner freedom which in the previous ninety years had evaded her because of her code of external appearances:

> 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?[18]

Having interacted spiritually with Murray and Sandra, Hagar is

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[18]Laurence, Stone, p. 292.

able to relate less cynically to Mr. Troy, the minister. She is even sensitive and empathetic towards him, but only after she has allowed her stone exterior to break down:

> He thinks me formidable. What a joke. I could feel almost sorry for him, he's perspiring so. Stonily I wait. Why should I assist him? The drug is wearing off.[19]

A little while later, as if some alchemical transformation has taken place within her, Hagar remarks:

> He looks at me with such an eagerness that now I'm rendered helpless. It's his calling, He offers what he can. It's not his fault.[20]

Thus Hagar has learned to accept people for what they are, rather than bind them with the chains of her own expectations which had been the cause of so much grief:

> I was alone, never anything else, and never free for I carried my chains within me and shackled all I touched. Oh, my two, my dead. Dead by your own hands or mine?[21]

Now she has experienced growth of the spirit into self-knowledge and inner freedom.

Having achieved this inner freedom, Hagar experiences regret for "the incommunicable years", and has a strong desire to relate deeply and meaningfully with others. This is especially evident in her conversation with Stephen: "Stephen - are you alright, really? Are you - content?"[22] she asks. Hagar has made the dark journey of the soul towards deep inner self-consciousness. She has moved through the circles of life to the inner core, the epicentre, which is symbolized by the needle.

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[19] Laurence, Stone, p.290.

[20] Ibid., p.291.

[21] Ibid., p.292.

[22] Ibid., p.297.

The "waiting symbol" which prevails throughout is now broken, and its attendant pain is arrested. This is expressed in Hagar's words:

> Hurry, hurry, I can't wait. It's accomplished, and before it has time to take effect, I'm relieved, knowing the stuff is inside me and at work.[23]

At this point in the novel, much of the symbolism and metaphor converge, for the change which Hagar undergoes is at once medical, alchemical, physical, and spiritual. Indeed the metamorphosis which has taken place represents Hagar's human journey from "stone" angel to human being.

That the human journey is never static is illustrated later in the hospital scene when the rooom at night is "deep and dark" and Hagar feels like "a lump of coal at the bottom of it". Here the significance of a person's name is reiterated in Hagar's own identification with the Biblical Hagar. She regrets her negative feelings towards her husband, Bram, who was wont to call her by name. By association, the significance of a name is related to the central Biblical concept of God's chosen people who have been called by name to belong to Him, as the prophet, Isaiah: "I have called you by your name".[24] At first, Hagar is unable to recall Sandra's name, but because she wants to initiate a human relationship she tries desperately hard to remember it and finally succeeds. The incident indicates Hagar's progress of soul and for the first time in the novel she actually laughs, not in a cynical way, but in an honest, trusting, sharing manner with her young friend. She has finally discovered her ability and freedom to rejoice.

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[23] Laurence, Stone, p.297.

[24] Isaiah 43.1.

Now that the stone has disintegrated, and her spiritual eyes have shed their blindness, Hagar is able to see the true value of her son, Marvin. She had perceived in Stephen's voice a "mocking echo of John's" and the interaction between the two had been less than complete, but her final encounter with Marvin would be different. At first their conversation is typically superficial until Hagar reaches out: "I'm frightened, Marvin, I'm so frightened." His response is one of feeling, expressing regret and seeking reconciliation, followed by a sacramental and symbolic gesture, that of holding hands. Hagar has finally broken through all the barriers of fear and gives the ultimate expression of her love and freedom which incorporates the power and poignancy of the myth and the reality:

> 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.
>
> It's in my mind to ask his pardon, but that's not what he wants from me.
>
> "You've not been cranky, Marvin. You've been good to me always. A better son than John."[25]

The metaphor in this passage identifies Marvin with the Biblical Jacob who obtains the blessing and birthright from his father Isaac and hence becomes the child of promise representing the New Covenant as opposed to the disinherited as represented by Esau. In this instance, Marvin becomes both the Ishmael figure and the Jacob figure; the former, in so far as he is the agent through whom the covenant of God will be honoured and which indirectly spiritually saves Hagar; and the latter because he now inherits the birthright of his mother's love and her

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[25]Laurence, Stone, p. 304.

household which for so long had been given to his brother, John.

In the final pages of the novel Hagar is preoccupied with her house and her sense of belonging to some place. She recalls the last visit she made to the Shipley house and how Marvin had been impressed with the new exterior, the modern style, the late model car; whereas she had not . "No sense in parking here, and gawking at a strange house," she said.[26] The same sense of strangeness and alienation enveloped her in the cemetery as she stood by the Currie family plot. The stone angel which symbolized her was toppling over, altered by the winters and the lack of care. The subtle switch in the narrative from the past to the present describing Hagar lying in her "cocoon", juxtaposed with her recollection of the family home and grave, suggests that her only true home is deep within herself. Her yearning for a traditional Scottish Highland funeral and the pibroch seems to her absurd because she does not belong there either, although it was the home of her ancestors. Sandra reinforces the concept of home in her farewell to Hagar on the occasion of her returning home, and symbolizes Hagar's death in the lilac shape of her face. At this point Hagar's long life has narrowed down to the fundamentals of pain and comfort, life and death. For her "the world is a needle."[27]

Ambivalence which has prevailed throughout the novel is apparent again in the final episode. Recalling the only two free acts that she had done in her ninety years, Hagar considers one to have been a joke and the other a lie. She is unable to pray the "Our Father" because she thinks it is tantamount to begging and untrue to her nature. Her thirst signifies that she has not yet completed

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[26] Laurence, Stone, p.305.

[27] Ibid., p.307.

her journey through the desert wilderness, and because she will not allow Doris to hold the glass of water for her there is the indication that she is still chained by pride even in the act of symbolically drinking from the cup of grace. To the end she remains Hagar, and the extent of her inner transformation is uncertain. Consequently her salvation is in doubt and thereby true to the human condition.

It would appear that her perception of God has not changed significantly since she is unable to call Him father. In this regard, she persists in perceiving herself as "pharaoh's daughter, reluctantly returning to his roof." Her father had been accustomed to calling her Hagar, and she accepts that role unequivocally: "I was Hagar to him." She is unable to relate to God as a loving father because she lacks faith and trust. She conceives of God as impersonal and distant:

> 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.[28]

This cynical concept of God is evident again as Hagar, isolated in the cannery, awaits "the terrible laughter of God", - an echo of King Lear - where God is seen essentially as a cruel power figure who hurts and kills human beings for sadistic pleasure. Hagar's caricature of God portends that of Rachel's and Stacey's, and resembles the description of Thor in The Fire-Dwellers, who is himself a caricature of God. The concept of God described here is quite foreign to the Biblical images of God.

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[28] Laurence, Stone, p. 93.

Commenting on Margaret Laurence's use of Apocalyptic mythology, Pesando illustrates how the author employs the vision technique of using one event to prefigure a later one - a technique used by Saint John, the inspired writer of the Apocalypse. Pesando cites as an example of the Apocalyptic vision technique Lottie's crushing of the chicks as prefiguring the death of Arlene and John. In both instances Hagar is involved as a passive, self-centred onlooker. Pesando notes that most of the Biblical imagery is taken from Genesis and the Book of Revelation, the first and final books of the Bible respectively. The images of decay, which abound in The Stone Angel, and references to the two edged sword, the sequined heaven of Saint John of Patmos, the vicious dogs, and the skeletal horsemen, relate to the Apocalyptic vision of the death of the world. Likewise the sea, although at times a regenerating force in the novel, is also referred to as an agent of destruction similar to the "sea of glass"[29] in the Book of Revelation:

> Outside, the sea nuzzles at the floorboards that edge the water. If I were alone, I wouldn't find the sound soothing in the slightest. I'd be drawn out and out, with each receding layer of water to its beginning, a depth as alien and chill as some far frozen planet, a night sea hoarding sly-eyed serpents, killer whales, swarming phosphorescent creatures dead to the daytime, a black sea sucking everything into itself, the spent gull, the trivial garbage from boats, and men protected from eternity only by their soft and fearful flesh and their seeing eyes. But I have a companion and so I'm safe, and the sea is only the sound of water slapping against the planking.[30]

Peasando suggests that the fat women who feature in the novel - Bram's daughter, Mrs.O'Reilly, Doris and Hagar herself - are associated with the diabolical monsters of the sea. Hagar, in particular, feels that her ancient, fat carcass is a curse. The imagery of drowning, and the description

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[29]Revelation 15.2.

[30]Laurence, Stone, pp.224-225.

of rotten, bloated bodies stem from the final destruction of the world described in the Apocalypse and which may be interpreted cosmically or individually. Pesando argues that in this novel the body is regarded as a shell or cage through which apparitions and revelations penetrate, threatening one's sanity by the truth they reveal and the death and destruction they portend.

Sandra Djwa, in her paper entitled, "False Gods and the True Covenant: Thematic Continuity between Margaret Laurence and Sinclair Ross", discusses Hagar in relation to the Mosaic Law and to the New Covenant between God and man. According to Djwa, Hagar is continually exhibiting a "false front" or "persona", the term Jung applies to the exterior protective shell which hides the true inner self. Consequently, her external code of appearances represents the Mosaic Law while her true inner self is the New Covenant. Referring to the "terrible laughter of God" which is a strain running through all of Laurence's writings, Djwa perceives that it is related to the irony of human existence, that man from his restricted vantage point is unable to comprehend his own condition, and that Hagar, metaphorically the sightless stone angel, rages blindly against circumstances until she finally comes to see her own tragic limitations.

The primary function of the Biblical allusions, according to the same critic, is to provide a "resonating mythic framework" through which a particular psychological type is explored and to invoke a sense of universal human nature. Djwa states that Laurence "consistently invokes Biblical myth as archetypes of psychological man", and "presents the human situation in terms of Biblical allegory".[31]

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[31] Sandra Djwa, "False Gods and the True Covenant:Thematic Continuity between Margaret Laurence and Sinclair Ross," Journal of Canadian Fiction, 1, No.1 (Winter 1972), 49.

Laurence is seen as a religious writer whose mode of perception is essentially Puritan and tends toward the satiric, but who like Jung locates God in the human spirit, thereby defining religion as a "numinous experience". This explains, in part, her satiric manner of presenting formal religious services in The Stone Angel and in her other novels. The position taken is that the "false gods" are to be rejected and true ones redefined by the individual.

However, although Hagar Shipley progresses from a guilt-ridden, stifling concept of a stern God who laughs at men to one who offers hope of salvation through the Spirit, she remains a doubting Thomas. Moreover, despite her progress towards self recognition, Hagar does not surrender her personality. Rather there is a compromise, typical in Laurence's protagonists, whereby Hagar prays, but on her own terms, and takes her chances on the after life. She is not Sarah - she has made her journey through the wilderness, but there is no evidence that she has entered the Promised Land. Perhaps Djwa has overstated her thesis when she concludes that Hagar, the Egyptian, the stone angel, and the imprisoned spirit, has completed her spiritual metamorphosis, for no significant change in Hagar's character is apparent in the final passages of the novel.

Anne Thompson, writing about form and imagery in The Stone Angel, perceives Hagar's spiritual progression paralleling the New Testament symbolic movement from wilderness to garden - man returning through the redemptive process of Christ, the second Adam, to his original Garden of Eden home. She also explains how the garden symbol transmutes into the city symbol - Jerusalem the Golden of the Apocalypse, and by extension, the Promised Land of the Old Testament:

> It would appear, therefore, that within the Biblical tradition the garden, and later the city, symbolize a state of ideal existence, a state of grace, whose attributes are freedom, peace, and joy, the fruits of love. By contrast, the wilderness represents man in his unredeemed state, separated from God, the source of life, and held in bondage by his own sinful pride. Hagar, at the end of her life, sees it as a wilderness of pride and it is important that we recognize all that is implied in Margaret Laurence's use of the word "wilderness".[32]

Elucidating the symbolism, the imagery, and Biblical analogy, Thompson goes on to claim that these literary devices add richness of association and cohesiveness of form to the novel, and create an organic wholeness which is its strength. In contrast to Djwa's perception of Laurence's use of the Bible as a mythic framework, Thompson perceives the function of Biblical analogy in The Stone Angel as "organic".

Taken from this viewpoint, Hagar's story may be more closely interpreted in relation to the title-image. Thus, though Hagar is cast in the traditional role of ministering angel with Murray Lees and in the hospital, she also evokes association with the angels who ministered to Christ in the wilderness, to the angel who guarded Eden, and especially to the angel who rolled away the stone from Christ's tomb. Nevertheless, whereas there are signs of growth within Hagar, the angel, there is no conclusive evidence of her organic transformation from stone, to flesh and blood, to spirit. Rather, at the end of the novel she remains hermaphroditic - part angel, part stone - and true indeed to the title-image.

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[32]Anne Thompson, "The Wilderness of Pride: Form and Image in The Stone Angel ", Journal of Canadian Fiction, 4, No.3 (1975),105.

A JEST OF GOD

The title of Margaret Laurence's third novel, A JEST OF GOD, contains within itself the central metaphor which pervades the story of Rachel Cameron and provides a cohesive framework for the related imagery and symbolism. Implicit within the title is the concept that God plays tricks on man; and Rachel, revealing a similar attitude to that of Hagar, perceives God as one who is not only responsible for the ironies, disappointments, and sufferings of mankind, but as one who actually revels in them. This satiric, Lear-like image of God - alien to that presented in the New Testament and to most of the anthropomorphic analogies of Yahweh in the Old Testament - would appear to have its origins within Laurence herself, as well as in Calvinism, Puritanism, and classical mythology overlaid with cynicism and agnosticism. Indeed the protagonist's attitude towards God is a strange amalgam of irony and, at times, incongruity.

One of the most prominent ironies continually exhibited by Rachel is her habit of talking to God and simultaneously denying his existence. Thus, for example, after her traumatically embarrassing experience in the Tabernacle and subsequent to witnessing Tom Gillanders make a fool of himself in church, Rachel virulently attacks God as follows:

> If I believed, I would have to detest God for the brutal joker He would be if He existed.[1]

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[1] Margaret Laurence, A Jest of God (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966), p. 42.

And following her first sexual encounter with Nick, she expresses her perception of God in a similar incredulous vein:

> I don't know why a person pleads with God. If I believed, the last kind of a Creator I would imagine would be a human-type Being who could be reached by tears or bribed with words.[2]

Rachel's ambiguous and paradoxical attitude towards God is particularly evident in times of personal crisis. In the dilemma over her imagined pregnancy, for example, she utters the following tenuous yet poignant prayer:

> Help me.
> 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. Were my apologies all a kind of monstrous self-pity? How many sores did I refuse to let heal? My God I know how suspect You are. I know how suspect I am.[3]

Rachel's relationship with God is strictly confined to her inner self and she is particularly sceptical of external religion as evidenced in her attitude towards The Tabernacle and the church services which her mother attends. Like Hagar, she does not have a loving and trustful relationship with God. The analogy of Doctor Raven's waiting room to the Day of Judgement betrays Rachel's Puritan tendencies:

> We are waiting to be called for examination, as though this were death's immigration office and Doctor Raven some deputy angel allotted the job of the initial sorting out of sheep and goats, the happy sheep permitted to colonize Heaven, the wayward goats sent to trample their cloven hoofprints all over Hell's acres. What visa and verdict will he give to me? I know the country I'm bound for, but I don't know its name unless it's limbo.[4]

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[2] Laurence, Jest, p. 95.

[3] Ibid., p. 171.

[4] Ibid., pp. 176-177.

The Biblical reference to the sorting of goats from the sheep, basic to the Puritan belief of predestination, describes salvation as something granted only to the few, God's elect, who were pre-destined for Heaven while the rest were pre-destined for Hell. Ironically, Rachel considers herself destined for Limbo, a middle ground, traditionally reserved for the innocent and especially for unbaptized infants.

Later, Rachel relates to God in an impersonal and satiric manner as she perceives Him as a form of supreme technologist who is remotely controlling the universe:

> Do not let there be any arguments or anything unexpected which demands decision or response. This was all I prayed, to no one or to whoever might be listening, prayed unprayerfully, not with any violence of demand or any valiance of hope, but only sending the words out, in case. Do you read me? This message is being sent out to the cosmos, or into the same, by an amateur transmitter who wishes for the moment to sign off. Don't let anything happen.[5]

Finally by experiencing personal crises and suffering, Rachel gains a new awareness of God, by recalling Psalm 51:

> Make me to hear joy and gladness, that the bones which Thou hast broken may rejoice.[6]

There is the indication that Rachel is beginning to accept the suffering in her own life as part of a divine plan to enable her to grow. The first sentiment expressed in the psalm suggests that God allows suffering for a purpose and if "broken bones", a theme common to both the Bible and the novel, may be understood metaphorically as humiliating

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[5] Laurence, Jest, p. 185.

[6] Ibid., p. 201.

experiences, personal crises, and mental suffering, the implication is that God allows these, as in the case of Rachel, so that man may appreciate his dependence on the Creator, and experience a transformation through death and rebirth. In conversation with Hector Jonas, Rachel refers to this process of transformation - a process in which she has been involved. By suffering through the crises of rejection in love, imagined pregnancy, attempted abortion, and cancer, Rachel is transformed, comes to terms with her personal situation and gains the confidence to become a pro-active agent. One outcome of the transformation which has taken place is manifested in her relationship with her mother in which Rachel assumes the role of mother and correspondingly her mother becomes the child.

Nevertheless, despite the evidence favouring Rachel's personal growth, and her apparent spiritual transformation from an attitude of defiance and bitterness to one of acceptance as suggested in her interior monologues, Rachel's faith remains ambiguous. Her final allusion to God pitying himself, obliquely as a fool, is reminiscent of the ambivalence of Hagar's final statements which can hardly be interpreted as a clear affirmation of faith. At best it suggests a partial acceptance of what has happened to her, and of God's suspect providence.

It is significant, and appropriate to the title of the novel, that Rachel perceives the crises in her personal life as jests of God. As noted earlier, this perception appears to attribute the responsibility for the events and results of the human predicament entirely to God -

a perception that calls into question man's free will and his control over his own life. Upon closer analysis, however, it may be argued that the jests, though cruel in conception, are actually benign in their effects. Through these jests, Rachel becomes liberated to the extent that she begins to take control of her own life, which for her is a significant break-through.

In his review of the novel, Robert Harlow is particularly critical of the story's not living up to the promise of the title. He writes as follows:

> The cosmic joke promised by the title, the technique and the barebones narrative structure is never delivered. Indeed it cannot be delivered because a cosmic joke demands a cosmos for the punchline to rattle around in. In this novel the clash between techniques and the intention precludes jokes, cosmic or otherwise.[7]

However, one questions the validity of this criticism, not only on the basis that the critic pretends to know Laurence's intention in writing the novel, but also because of his assumption that the joke was intended to be, or indeed has to be, of cosmic proportions for the reader to identify with it. It may be said that the author has employed literary techniques in order to universalize the impact and appeal, which may not be completely effective, but that is quite a different criticism. Close analysis, however, reveals that the metaphor and inherent meaning of the title are subtly worked through the novel.

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[7]Robert Harlow, "Lack of Distance", Canadian Literature, 31 (Winter 1976), 72,

Thus for example the "laughing symbols", which occur in the form of people laughing or being laughed at, relate to the concept of God as a practical joker implicit in the title and it is important to note that the numerous "laughing symbols" are entirely contingent upon Rachel's personal perceptions, because the narrative is written almost exclusively in the first person. In fact, the protagonist is excessively self-conscious and lives in dire fear of becoming an object of derision herself. Her apprehension about becoming eccentric and appearing odd is given expression early in the novel as she watches the children skipping in the schoolyard. Later she feels "like an idiot" when taken out by the embalming fluid salesman. As she lies in bed fantasizing about an imaginary lover, she considers it a worse evil to be laughed at than to be demented. She describes the gift of "talking in tongues", a religious phenomenon she witnessed in The Tabernacle, as "sinister foolery". After making love to Nick, Rachel dressed with great rapidity as she imagined "an unseen audience ready to hoot and caw with shocking derision", and later when she thinks she is pregnant it is "a joke if viewed from the outside". Ironically, Nick is consistently described as smiling, laughing or mocking, and Rachel imagines God and the angels laughing at her. Rachel's phobia of becoming an object of derision stems from her upbringing in a small provincial town and her mother's preoccupation with what Sinclair Ross refers to as "false fronts" and "the small town gods of Propriety and Parity".[8]

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[8] Sinclair Ross, As for Me and My House (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1957), p.6.

Rachel expresses this phobia of appearing foolish and of witnessing examples of stupidity in the following passage;

> I can't bear people making fools of themselves. I don't know why, but it threatens me. It swamps me, and I can't look, the way as children we used to cover our eyes with our hands at the dreaded parts in horror movies.[9]

As suggested in the title, the novel addresses itself to the absurd dimension of the human condition and the reader views life through the neurotic eyes of Rachel. Because of this, the story is teeming with "fool symbols" which are closely related to the "laughing symbols" referred to earlier. Hector Jonas, for example, is described as "a comic prophet" and "a dwarf seer". Tom Gillanders, the octogenarian chorister, makes a fool of himself by singing off key in church. He is thus a cause of embarrassment in a similar manner to the mongoloid boy who swears in church and shockingly alerts the genteel congregation by loudly announcing: "I need to go pee, Mama". Cluny Macpherson is another one who regularly made a fool of himself, and occasionally of Rachel also, at the local dances. Both Willard and Calla are given odd and pathetic dimensions, and Nick's father is nicknamed "Nester the Jester" undoubtedly for good reasons. Julie Kazlik's first husband, Buckle Fenwick, is notorious for his foolhardiness and dare-devil stunts on the highway and consequently kills himself in the performance of one such stunt. Even the corpses are

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[9] Laurence, Jest, p.27.

"painted whitely like clowns". Niall Cameron considered his wife to be stupid and the voices of Mrs. Cameron's bridge group sound "Shrill, sedate, not clownish to their ears, but only to mine". The lay preacher in The Tabernacle makes St. Paul sound like a fool. Willard refers to Nick as "a bit of a joker"; God by implication is called a fool; and of course Rachel, at least in her own eyes, becomes the biggest fool of all.

Herein is the central irony of Rachel Cameron's fate; that despite, or perhaps because of her dread of appearing foolish in the eyes of others, she ultimately becomes the butt of a grotesque joke. Killam succinctly relates the dénouement as follows:

> Nick leaves Manawaka and Rachel discovers she is pregnant. An operation reveals however that she has a tumour and not a foetus inside her. Here is the potential of life and death poised delicately in the balance, here is the ultimate "jest of God". The tumour is benign but the experience prompts understanding. Now she can accept being a fool.[10]

Rachel's own comment on the situation endorses this view:

> All that. And this is the end of it. I was always afraid I might become a fool. Yet I could almost smile with some grotesque lightheadedness at that fool of a fear, that poor fear of fools, now that I really am one.[11]

Killam concludes that this brush with death enables Rachel to gain the wisdom through folly which St. Paul advocates. But perhaps this is

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[10] G.D. Killam, Introduction, A Jest of God (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966).

[11] Laurence, Jest, p.181.

overstating the case. Unquestionably, Laurence suggests association between the Pauline theme of growth in wisdom by identifying with the folly of Christ's cross, but there is no evidence that Rachel's Christian faith is strong. In actuality the reverse of faith is indicated by her constant questioning of God's existence. With regard to this topic, Clara Thomas remarks:

> The resolution of Rachel's story comes existentially out of her life's present confusion. Here Margaret Laurence does not call upon any doctrinal supportive pattern; she works only with and through what meaning might reasonably be expected to come from Rachel's own muddle. On its own terms the book is, however, yet another variation of a religious quest. Repeatedly Rachel says: "If I believed", and her moment of release is a prayer to a God whose existence is completely in doubt.[12]

In her vacillation of faith Rachel echoes Nathaniel Amegbe, Hagar, the doubting Thomas, and the incredulous Jews who wanted a definite sign from God before they would believe. The following passage reveals this:

> If you have spoken, I am not aware of having heard. If you have a voice it is not comprehensible to me. No omens. No burning bush, no pillar of sand by day or pillar of flame by night.[13]

The reference to the signs employed by Yahweh to lead the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt, across the wilderness to the Promised Land echoes a recurring theme in Laurence's novels. Rachel, echoing the plight of the Jews, and the other protagonists of the Manawaka scene, is entrapped and enslaved by circumstances of time and particularly of place. The

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[12] Clara Thomas, The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), p.88.

[13] Laurence, Jest, p.171.

basic problem facing them is to come to terms with their past, and with their present predicament, and to assume control, at least over the things they can change.

Rachel's predicament is paradoxical in that the external facets of her life belie the aspirations of her inner self. She is "boxed in" the spinster-teacher image and the dutiful-child image, both of which are slowly destroying her. Metaphorically she is continually wearing a mask and erecting "false fronts". Consequently she is afraid of exposing her inner feelings, and of discussing them with anyone other than herself - hence her continuous interior monologues. As C.M. McLay points out in his article entitled "Everyman is an Island", Rachel is indeed an isolate:

> She searches for permanent relationships, with father, lover, child, to escape from her sense of isolation, yet isolation brings too invulnerability, and escape from the present, as she recognizes in the mournful train voice and the lonely call of the loons at Galloping Mountain.[14]

Virtually the only person with whom she can converse meaningfully is God, but, as has been noted, her scepticism towards the Creator renders this relationship ironic and less than real. Though she continually reaches out to God and religion, both fail her in that they provide no answers. Thomas makes the following observations:

> Her solitary quest for meaning, reassurance, faith, God, has been contrasted and counterpointed throughout the novel, first by the seemingly empty formality of her mother's brand of Presbyterianism

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[14] C.M. McLay, "Everyman is an Island: Isolation in A Jest of God", Canadian Literature, 50 (Autumn 1971), 59.

> and then by Calla's Pentecostal enthusiasm. In her mother's church the figure of Christ at the front is like "a languid insurance salesman". In Calla's Tabernacle the two pictures of Jesus are "bearded and bleeding, his heart exposed and bristling with thorns like a scarlet pincushion". Rachel rejects both ways of worship, but she is herself a child of the Presbyterians and she is particularly ashamed and revolted by Calla's uninhibited worship.[15]

The symbols of formal religion are meaningless to Rachel who would rather place her faith in Nick as her saviour, although he tempers her enthusiasm by retorting that he is not God and cannot solve anything. He is nevertheless the key agent in God's trick on Rachel, and he is at the very nub of the ironic drama. Initially he almost satisfies two basic inner urges and needs of Rachel: sexual love, and motherhood. In the final analysis he serves as a rite of passage for Rachel as they go their separate ways.

The theme of motherhood is an important one in A Jest of God. Rachel's biblical namesake is a symbol of motherhood and yet paradoxically she was unable to bear her husband Jacob a child for many anxious years. As one has come to expect of Margaret Laurence, the analogue is very cleverly kneaded into the texture of the story with subtle points of reference interspersed throughout the novel. The Genesis story describes how Laban deceived Jacob, making him wait and work for fourteen years before he could marry Rachel, and how following the marriage, Rachel was barren, while her servant and her sister were

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[15] Thomas, Manawaka, p.88.

bearing children to Jacob. It would appear that the biblical Rachel also was the victim of a jest of God in so far as she was an integral part of the house of Jacob to whose descendents the Messiah would be born, and yet ironically she was barren, at least initially. Her predicament was aggravated by the fact that the other women in the household were fertile. Eventually, however, she was blessed by God and gave birth to Benjamin and Joseph who continued the genealogy of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob into which Christ was born.

Like the Rachel of Genesis, Rachel Cameron is also sensitive to the fertility of her sister, Stacey, whose children she imagines will always identify her as single Aunt Rachel, their perennial spinster aunt.

> I will get annoyed at my sister. Her children will call me Aunt Rachel, and I will resent it and find then that I've grown attached to them after all.[16]

Similarly she has a desperate need to bear her own children. Ironically, both Rachels were surrounded by children not their own. In fact the very first image of Rachel Cameron presented to the reader is that of the spinster teacher locked into the microcosm of a school full of children. On a daily basis, she is surrounded by children and she frequently meets past pupils on the street or in the Regal and Parthenon Cafés. At home she lives with a possessive mother who chains her to the role of child. An isolate, Rachel feels that life is literally passing

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[16] Laurence, Jest, p.202.

her by and that she is outside the mainstream of it. She is in the habit of referring to the pupils as her children, and she is particularly fond of James, not only because he is a free spirit and she can live through him vicariously, but also because she has a latent desire actually to be his mother - a feeling which becomes overt at the interview with Grace Doherty when she realizes that she really loves James but that he has no need of a surrogate mother, the role Rachel wanted to assume. Rachel's urge for motherhood becomes almost aggressive with Nick as she wants him to father her child, and assumes the character of the Biblical Rachel lamenting her children. Ironically her friend, Calla, frequently calls her "child", a term of endearment to which Rachel takes exception. The turning point of her love affair occurs when Nick shows Rachel his childhood picture. She believes the child is Nick's. Even at the conclusion of the novel Rachel is still hopeful of having children of her own, but by this time she is resigned to taking life as it comes and refusing to fret about things that she is unable to change. Her new-found wisdom is expressed thus:

> Beside me sleeps my elderly child.
> Where I'm going, anything may happen. Nothing may happen. Maybe I will marry a middle-aged widower, or a longshoreman, or a cattle-hoof-trimmer, or a barrister or a thief. And have my children in time. Or maybe not. Most of the chances are against it. But not I think quite all. What will happen? What will happen? It may be that my children will always be temporary, never to be held. But so are everyone's.[17]

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[17]Laurence, Jest, p.201.

Rachel's significant realization and achievement in the question of motherhood is that she can, and does, assume the role of mother in relation to her own mother. In this way she breaks out of her own role of child, which was stifling her. By reversing the roles, Rachel takes the first step towards maturity and self-actualization. In relation to this, Bowering makes the following remark:

> Part of Rachel's quandary springs from the condition of her female dominated world, a world that militates, by its condition, against her growing naturally out of her adolescence, perhaps. That condition traps her as much as the isolation of the shrinking town.[18]

With regard to Rachel's personal maturation Bowering writes:

> I see the change in Rachel's consciousness as a result of her getting in touch with her body, that part of self the Scottish Christians preferred to cover with rough wool and to forget.[19]

It is doubtful if this change would have taken place had not Rachel experienced the love affair with Nick, the ensuing personal agony over her imagined pregnancy, and her encounter with death when she faced the prospect of having cancer. These were symbols of death and rebirth to her. And in this context, the epigraph from Sandburg's poem, "Losers" has its significance and relevance:

> If I should pass the tomb of Jonah
> I would stop there and sit for a while;
> Because I was swallowed one time in the dark
> And came out alive after all.[20]

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[18] George Bowering; "That Fool of a Fear: Notes on A Jest of God", Canadian Literature, 50 (Autumn 1971), 166.

[19] Ibid., p. 169.

[20] Carl Sandburg, "Losers", A Jest of God.

In one sense the biblical Jonah was also the butt of a divine jest. Having been thrown to his death at sea he was conveniently swallowed by a whale which after three days took him back to shore and regurgitated him unharmed, and indeed fortified to perform the task God had originally demanded of him. It is important to note that besides being a death symbol, which relates him to Hector Jonas, Jonah is also a symbol of rebirth, and as such prefigures Christ, who spent three days in the tomb before his resurrection. The subtle associating of Rachel, Jonah, and Christ, through death and rebirth symbolism is effective, and serves to alleviate the pessimism and cynicism inherent in the plot. Thus the final outcome contains some hope, and Rachel is not merely the victim and butt of a divine parody, but ultimately shares in the joke, and experiences spiritual growth.

Bowering's perceptive remark that Rachel had to get in touch with her body in order to understand herself, makes one focus on the body imagery in the novel. He refers to "the risk of the gift of getting naked" - a concept diametrically opposed to the Puritan ethos which inhibited Rachel, her mother, and the people who lived on their "side of the track" and was the root of their guilt feelings, as well as their self-righteousness: "the Scots knew how to be almightier than anyone but God". Body imagery features strongly in the novel and relates to dead bodies as well as to the living. In fact there is a correlation between body imagery, sex, and death in the story. This stems from Laurence's preoccupation with the subject of death which is evident in all of her novels. Indeed a sense of death pervades A Jest of God, and

McLay writes:

> From the beginning of the novel, Rachel is caught between the world of dream and the world of nightmare and death, as indicated by the childish jingle she overhears and remembers: "Rachel Cameron says she'll die / For the want of the Golden city."[21]

Rachel's father was an undertaker and the family lived above the funeral parlour. Niall Cameron preferred the company of the dead to that of the living and consequently spent most of his time downstairs. Rachel's mother, by contrast, had an inordinate fear of death; hence it was her practice to place doilies on the furniture under her husband's hands, and she would not allow him to touch her because of her fear that death was somehow contagious and would be passed on to her. As for Rachel, she was not allowed downstairs in the funeral parlour, as her parents sought to protect her from the facts of death as indeed they had protected her from the facts of life. In effect her father was a symbol of death as were the other men in her life. Consequently in Rachel's first relationship with Nick there is the suggestion of death in sex, symbolized by Nick's remark that the place was "as private as the grave". And later in the emotion-charged scene when Rachel is deliberating between abortion and birth, suicide and living; life and death are poignantly juxtaposed. The suggestion of necrophilia on the part of Niall is made overt when Rachel asks Hector Jonas if her father actually liked corpses. Hector's reply that her father did not know

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[21] McLay, "Everyman is an Island", p.64.

what he was selling suggests that Niall may have been in the business because he had necrophilic tendencies. This sobering thought enables Rachel to make the choices in her own life between life and death, and to free herself from the situation she was in of living-death. Her dilemma was that she was surrounded by images of death before she had the opportunities really to live. Thus one of the first things she tells Nick is that she hates living where she does and later she wishes that her mother would die and leave her alone.

In order to be liberated Rachel had to make the symbolic, psychological journey into self and the psychic descent into the past and the dead. This is symbolized, not only by the death in sex experienced with Nick, but also by her nocturnal visit to Hector's funeral parlour. At that time Rachel came to terms with her past and the reality of death. When Hector endeavoured to camouflage this reality by telling Rachel that it was all "a question of presentation", and that he was not selling death but relief and "modified prestige", her reaction was to laugh at the pretence and the irony. Their conversation continues:

> "Death's unmentionable?"
> "Not exactly unmentionable, but let's face it, most of us could get along without it".
> "I don't see how".
> I'm laughing more than seems decent here in this place and yet I know it's absurd to hold back, as though there were anything hushed or mysterious.[22]

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[22] Laurence, Jest, p.122.

Rachel then faced up to the fact of death, dispelled some of the fears of the unknown, and clarified some of her myths. She realized that her father drank and spent so much time with the dead because he was unhappy with life. It was a choice on his part. The realization that "he drank because he was never happy" fortified her to go in search of her own happiness. The absurdity of Hector's funeral parlour became clear, because of its sham and pretence. The walls were made of simulated pine, and Hector boasted of "the beautiful, real veneer"- a contradiction in terms. The stage was set for "a drama that never was enacted" a phrase that, to this point, summed up her own life. Hector was perceived as a "comic prophet", and a "dwarf seer" as he squatted on the high altar of his own making. He informed her that religious funerals were going out of style because they were too harrowing. Hence Hector's repertoire of religious hymns was chosen for comforting and included such fantasy songs as "There is a happy land far, far away...." At this time the epiphany which came to Rachel was that she should not wait for death to bring the happy land but that she should rather go in search of it while she was still alive even if the immediate "happy land" appeared to be Vancouver. Rachel's catharsis of laughter suddenly changed to tears as she perceived Hector for an instant "living there behind his eyes", and, in addition to apologising, she thanked him for the valuable experience. The ascent of the stairs symbolized a new awakening and the beginning of her rebirth. Like the neon signs which had changed by degrees from "funeral parlour", to "Japonica Chapel", Rachel would then attempt to celebrate life rather

than death. In a town which had taught her repression and the importance of putting up a good appearance she had now learnt to face realities, to cut through the pretences, and to become pro-active instead of reactive in the search for her own identity and happiness. Her growth is also indicated by her growing ability to laugh at the absurdities of life and to have a sense of humour about herself which would serve as a safety valve in moments of crisis.

The tension in and discrepancy between Rachel's public image and her true inner self is evidenced in the imagery, as well as in her dreams and fantasies. She is described by herself as "a tame goose trying to fly", "a gaunt greyhound", and as one having a "crane of a body". These images, illustrating lack of freedom and poor self-concept, are endorsed by her feelings of being "boxed in", treated as "a child", and of being ridiculed by God and men alike. But Rachel's phantasies and dreams tell us most about her innermost desires and about her subconscious, which is symbolized by the forest as it was in the case of Nathaniel Amegbe. At the conclusion of the first chapter, the reader has shared a day with Rachel and has gained the following insights into her inner self:

> Tonight is Hell on wheels again. Trite. Hell on wheels. But almost accurate. The night feels like a gigantic ferris wheel turning in blackness, very slowly, turning once for each hour, interminably slow. And I am glued to it, or wired, like paper, like a photograph, insubstantial, unable to anchor myself, unable to stop this slow nocturnal circling.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> - A forest. Tonight it is a forest. Sometimes it is a beach. It has to be right away from everywhere. Otherwise she may be seen. The trees are green walls, high and shielding, boughs of pine and tamarack, branches sweeping to earth, forming a thousand rooms amoung the fallen leaves. She is in the green-walled room, the boughs opening just enough to let the sun in, the moss hairy

> and soft on the earth. She cannot see his face clearly. His features are blurred as though his were a face seen through water. She sees only his body distinctly, his shoulders and arms deeply tanned, his belly flat and hard. He is wearing only tight fitting jeans, and his swelling sex shows. She touches him there, and he trembles, absorbing her fingers' pressure. Then they are lying along one another, their skins slippery. His hands, his mouth are on the wet warm skin of her inner thighs. Now -.[23]

The key ingredients of this sexual phantasy are inhibition, the desire for anonymity and security, and the desperate urge for sexual fulfilment. The scene bears out the veracity of Margaret Atwood's comment that Rachel suffered from the "Rapunzel syndrome". Later the account of Rachel's second dream describing the sensual and sexual customs of the Romans and Egyptians at the time of Antony and Cleopatra reveals the same needs as the first dream, but, whereas Rachel needed sexual privacy, the Romans and Egyptians "would copulate as openly as dogs".

At the Tabernacle, the hymn "Day of wrath! O day of mourning" prompts Rachel to recall an early childhood dream, the brief account of which is related in the following passage:

> The voices are weak at first, wavering like a radio not quite adjusted, and I'm shaking with the effort not to giggle, although God knows it's not amusing me. The voices strengthen, grow muscular, until the room is swollen with the sound of a hymn macabre as the messengers of the apocalypse, the gaunt horsemen, the cloaked skeletons I dreamed of once when I was quite young, and wakened and she said "Don't be foolish, Rachel - there's nothing there."[24]

Again there is the subconscious preoccupation with death as symbolized by the Apocalyptic gaunt horsemen and skeletons, and there is the

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[23] Laurence, Jest, p.18-19.

[24] Ibid., p.32.

indication that her mother's influence is the source of Rachel's fear of appearing foolish. By using the technique of dreams and phantasies Laurence rounds out the psychological dimensions of the principal character thereby giving the story a plausible cohesiveness.

It may be said that it is the quality of cohesiveness that gives the novel its strength. An analysis of the symbolism reveals the close interrelationship between the central metaphor, namely God's tricks on Rachel, and its several variations. Mention in this paper has already been made of the "fool symbols" and the "Laughing symbols"; also related to these are the "jest or trick symbols" especially as they relate to Rachel. The first of these is her traumatic experience in "The Tabernacle of the Risen and the Reborn" when she ironically becomes involved in the kind of hysteria she abhors. Besides this, being kissed on the mouth by her friend, Calla, may be interpreted as a sick joke especially when we recall Rachel's desperation for the love of a man. Then there is the crucial trick of Nick's photograph which she wrongly assumes is the picture of his son - a riddle which is never quite resolved. Subsequent to this, another trick takes place when Teresa Kazlik casually informs Rachel that Nick is not married. Finally there are the cruel jests which torture her - the imagined pregnancy, the mistimed confiding in Calla, the tumour, the town gossip linking her with Willard, and then her basically unchanged situation. The real and the imaginary had gone the full circle, and because the final outcome of God's jest is relatively benign like the tumour, Rachel, following the same basic pattern as Laurence's other protagonists, makes the ultimate compromise of

accepting her predicament in life but with some newly-acquired insights and wisdom.

The quality of cohesiveness in the novel is also achieved by the Biblical allusions which, taken together, form another structural framework for the narrative. Thus the name-association with Rachel of Gensis supports Rachel Cameron's inner urge for motherhood. Rachel's waiting for her own children, her cries of "Give me my children" and the reference to her wailing for her children, resonate a universal chord by sounding the Biblical myth. Similarly the Pauline themes of communicating the Good News through glossalalia, and the wisdom that comes through folly for those Christians who experience the cross and the absurd sufferings of Christ, add new dimensions and depth to the central metaphor of God's jests on man. The Jonas imagery integrates subtly and effectively with the theme of symbolic death and rebirth, experienced by Jonas, Christ, Paul, and to some extent Rachel herself. In this context Rachel has joined the most eminent galaxy of fools. The "bone symbolism" which is almost imperceptibly alluded to and interspersed throughout the novel culminating in the reference to Psalm 51, reinforces the concept of the experiencing of epiphanies, and new awakenings, resulting from suffering and crises, and associates effectively with the death - rebirth theme.

Even the less salient symbols cleverly underscore the major themes. For example the jingles, the snatches of songs, poems and hymns, relate to Rachel's situation either by directly expressing her feelings or by counter-pointing them in a cynical manner. An instance of this is the

following hymn sung in the Tabernacle where Rachel is overwhelmingly hemmed in both physically and emotionally:

> In full and glad surrender,
> I give myself to Thee,
> Thine utterly and only
> And evermore to be.[25]

The sexual overtones of this hymn emphasize at two levels the irony of Rachel's plight. In the same fashion the hymns about "Jerusalem the golden", and "the happy land far, far away", ironically suggest to Rachel that her happiness lies elsewhere than Manawaka, and their imagery is that of death, escape, and sexual fulfilment. Other minor symbols such as the "samovar" belonging to the Kazlik family, and the "little black leather book" serve the purpose of filling in the backgrounds of Nick and Rachel respectively. These are details of their ancestral past with which Nick in particular has made a clean break and with which Rachel is gradually coming to terms. This is reinforced when Nick quotes the prophet, Jeremiah:

> I have foresaken my house - I have left mine heritage - mine heritage is unto me as a lion in the forest - it crieth out against me - therefore have I hated it.[26]

This quotation captures one of Laurence's themes which will be pursued at greater depth in The Diviners: namely the search for personal identity and a sense of belonging. Nick has discovered by his return to Manawaka and his nostalgic visits to his old haunts that he is unable to

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[25] Laurence, Jest, p.34.

[26] Ibid., p.110.

identify with his past and his family. The desire of his parents for him to carry on the family business, and to be an "alter ego" of his twin brother, Steve, irks him further and strengthens the conviction that he does not belong. Perhaps one of the ultimate ironies of the novel is that he classifies Rachel with Manawaka and the past which he rejects.

But besides being a cause of sorrow in Rachel's life, Nick is also a catalyst for her coming to terms with her personal and ancestral past. In particular, he enables her to reject Manawaka and to seek her happiness elsewhere - a decision which aligns her with Laurence's other protagonists.

To summarize, it may be said that the story of Rachel Cameron explores the tension between the providence of God and the freedom of the individual. Comparing Laurence with Sinclair Ross, Sandra Djwa succinctly describes the essential Laurence as follows:

> Laurence and Ross share a central vision - a sense of the ironic discrepancy between the spirit and the letter of the religious dispensation, a discrepancy which is often explored through an essentially psychological analysis of character (particularly through the interior monologue) with reference to Biblical myth.[27]

Robert Harlow sees the build up of tension and discrepancy producing a form of alienation in the protagonist. He writes:

> Mrs. Laurence's novel is about a kind of alienation from the self, from a possible identity rather than from society or the world at large.[28]

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[27] Sandra Djwa, "False Gods and the True Covenant: Thematic Continuity Between Margaret Laurence and Sinclair Ross," Journal of Canadian Fiction, 1, No.1 (Winter 1972), 43.

[28] Harlow, "Lack of Distance", p.72.

He also states that the author's concern about the phenomenon of alienation in an impersonal universe associates her with such writers as Camus and Kafka who "tend toward hard edges and defined surfaces which reflect a disinterested universe if not always an actually absurd one."[29] Harlow criticizes A Jest of God on the question of technique, arguing that the exclusive use of the first person narrative was a mistake. Hence according to him it lacks "objectivity, distance, irony", and "one yearns for the third person point of view and the omniscient author." However this may be, the critic has overlooked, or not been aware of, the fact, that Laurence meticulously avoids intruding into her narratives because of her desire to let the characters speak and act for themselves. Harlow is disappointed because he seems to have read into the title cosmic dimensions which perhaps were not present. He does not appear to appreciate that Rachel's story is essentially microcosmic and existential - Rachel herself as interpreted by her own consciousness and understanding. Like the stories of Nathaniel, Hagar, Stacey, and Morag, the story of Rachel is first and foremost subjective. Consequently it does not have the universality of Lear, for example, despite the allusions to, and the parallels with, the Biblical archetype. Nevertheless, while there are spinster teachers in small towns, the story of Rachel Cameron will have some universal appeal.

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[29] Harlow, "Lack of Distance", p.72.

Neither is it preposterous to suggest that the metaphor inherent in the title has a universal application in that, to some extent at least, every individual is a jest of God or has on some occasion experienced the quirks and ironies of fate.

Bowering states a case for the universality of the novel:

> A Jest of God, like The Stone Angel, deals with a universal human problem and the protagonist is close to the primitive essentials of love, birth and death. In the moment of facing death, both Hagar and Rachel affirm life. While Rachel's predicament is essentially feminine, it is also human. If the child were real, Rachel would become dependent upon another human being for her existence; she would live for the child. But the "child" does not exist, and Rachel is forced to face the essential isolation of the individual: "We mortal millions live alone."[30]

Another critic, Killam, contends that Rachel has gained enlargement of the understanding by the fact that she is able to accept herself as a fool. He quotes St. Paul who states that a man who thinks himself wise should first become a fool so that he may become wise. But there is nothing in the novel to substantiate that Rachel has such strong faith; on the contrary there is evidence to prove her lack of it.

Yet, at the end of the novel when Rachel acquires the inner freedom to say:

> The wind will bear me, and I will drift and settle, drift and settle. Anything may happen, where I am going.[31]

her sentiments recall the words of Jesus to the Pharisee, Nicodemus, who represented the Old Law:

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[30] George Bowering, "That Fool of a Fear", p.56.

[31] Laurence, Jest, p.201.

> The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is everyone that is born of the Spirit.[32]

And perhaps the covert suggestion here is that Rachel has been born again of the Spirit. But the conclusions of Laurence's novels tend to be ambivalent, never definitive, and the protagonists compromise rather than affirm strong religious belief. In this respect A Jest of God is no exception.

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[32] St.John 3.8.

THE FIRE-DWELLERS

As suggested by the title, the fourth novel of Margaret Laurence is the most depressing of all. It depicts the life of a typical middle-aged, middle-class, Canadian housewife whose interior struggles and frustration belie the apparent happiness of her situation. The title is pregnant with connotations and associativeness, and its metaphoric meaning relates to what is happening inside Stacey MacAindra, the protagonist, who is "suffering from delayed adolescence or premature menopausal symptoms, most likely both."[1] Stacey is burning internally with unfulfilled sexual desires and is consumed with the need to escape from the dull existence of housewife and mother of four demanding children. She also perceives the world in which she lives as violent, fragmented, and volatile:

> Will the fires go on, inside and out? Until the moment when they go out for me, the end of the world.[2] And then I'll never know what may happen in the next episode.

Stacey's vision is jaundiced with pessimism. The opening pages of the novel progress from a disillusioned perception of herself, through a depressing representation of down-town Vancouver, to the depiction of the world in general as a place of misery:

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[1] Margaret Laurence, The Fire-Dwellers (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969), p.87.

[2] Ibid., p.307

> What is it like, really? How would I know? People live in those rooms above the stores, people who go to the cafes and bars at night, who prowl these streets that are their territory. Men down from the forests or off the fish boats. Faithless loggers clobbering their faithless women. Kids gaming with LSD - Look at me, Polly, I'm Batman--zoom from the sixth floor window into the warm red embrace of a cement death. Ancient mariners tottering around in search of lifeblood, a gallon of Calona Royal Red. Whores too old or sick-riddled to work any classier streets. Granite-eyed youngsters looking for a fix, trying to hold their desperation down. Is it like that? All I know is what I read in the papers. "Seventeen - year - old on Drug Charge." "Girl Kills Self, Lover." "Homeless Population Growing, Says Survey." "Car Crash Decapitates Indian Bride, Groom." "Man Sets Room Ablaze, Perishes." All sorts of cheery stuff.[3]

These images of universal destruction recall the holocaust foretold in the Apocalypse and the metaphoric suggestion here is that a large sector of mankind, including Stacey herself, exists in a form of hell.

Reinforcing the Apocalyptic notion of Armageddon, and the idea of life as a hell on earth, are the ubiquitous images of fire which pervade the novel. The epigraph, the second verse of Sanburg's poem "Losers", introduces the theme of fire and futile destruction at the very outset of the novel:

> If I pass the burial spot of Nero
> I shall say to the wind, "Well, well! -
> I have fiddled on a world on fire
> I, who have done so many stunts not worth doing."[4]

The actual narrative begins in the same vein with a verse from the nursery rhyme, "Ladybird, ladybird," repeated throughout the novel,

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[3] Magaret Laurence, The Fire-Dwellers (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969), p.7.

[4] Ibid., p.7.

the last two lines of which tell of the house on fire and the children gone. Luke Venturi later recites this rhyme to Stacey and it becomes for her an obsessive symbol of guilt. The fear of fire invades Stacey's subconsciousness to the point where she falls asleep imagining the hills are ablaze, because of a carelessly thrown cigarette; yet both Stacey and Mac continuously and compulsively light up cigarettes. Stacey metaphorically burns with sex and frustration, and subsequent to the quarrel between Mac and Stacey over her suspected affair with Buckle, Stacey leaves the house, drives through the city - consistently a symbol of evil in the novel-and sees it metaphorically burning:

> She heads into the city along streets now inhabited only be the eternal flames of the neon forest fires and a few old men with nowhere to go or youngsters with nothing to do.[5]

There are radio reports of Buddhist monks burning themselves, houses, villages, and cities burning in the wake of war, or "set ablaze by the children of Samson and Agonistes".[6]

The central metaphoric image in the novel is that of Stacey as the epicentre of a burning pool, the fiery concentric circles of which spread outwards to embrace the entire world. News from the media endorses Stacey's perceptions:

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[5] Laurence, Fire-Dwellers, p.167.

[6] Ibid. p.305.

> Newspaper photograph. Some new kind of napalm just invented, a substance which, when it alights burning on to skin, cannot be removed. It adheres. The woman was holding a child about eighteen months old and she was trying to pluck something away from the scorch-spreading area on the child's face.[7]

The radio also celebrates death by incessantly informing the listener of the ravages of the Vietnam war, and the cenotaph on which the pigeons defecate is a symbol to Stacey of previous futile savagery, and reminiscent of the death of the Cameron Men at Dieppe. The apparent continuous succession of wars presents to Stacey's consciousness the insurmountable problem of the reality of universal evil in the human condition from which there is no escape. The "skeletal horsemen of the Apocalypse",[8] referred to in A Jest of God, are ubiquitously in evidence again in The Fire-Dwellers, as they ride abroad wreaking destructive vengeance.

Pesando astutely points out Laurence's use of apocalyptic mythology particularly with regard to the symbolism of the sea.[9] For Stacey the sea has a dual purpose. It is at once a place of rejuvenation, a retreat in which she finds solitude and solace, where she met Luke, and where she takes her children for enjoyment. But it also represents for her "the sea of glass" , in the Apocalypse

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[7] Laurence, Fire-Dwellers, p. 96.

[8] Ibid. p.89.

[9] Frank Pesando, "In a Nameless Land: The Use of Apocalyptic Mythology in the Writings of Margaret Laurence," Journal of Canadian Fiction, 2, No. 1 (Winter 1973).

an evil place which harbors monsters, other evil forces, and even death itself. She imagines herself at one point being drowned in the sea:

> ...nonentities of thoughts floating like plankton, green and orange particles, seaweed - lots of that, dark purple and waving, sharks with fins like cutlasses, herself held underwater by her hair, snared around auburn - rusted anchor chains.[10]

Luke calls her "merwoman", as if she belonged to the sea, and he asks, "who held you down? Was it for too long?" Later, when Matthew refers to Psalm 69: "Save, Me O God, for the waters are come into my soul", it causes Stacey to weep. When her son Duncan is almost drowned in the sea, one is again reminded of the Apocalyptic concept of the sea as part of the underworld and a place of death. Even on the beach at Diamond Lake Stacey recalls being:

> ...frightened, but having to stay, listening to the lunatic voices of the loons, witch birds out there in the night lake, or voices of dead shamans, mourning the departed Indian gods,[11]

She also imagines the sea harbouring evil monsters and deadly creatures:

> How far out does it go? How many creatures does it contain, not just the little shells and the purple starfish and the kelp, but all the things that live a long way out? Deathly embracing octupus in the south waters, the white whales spouting in the only-half-melted waters of the north, the sharks knowing nothing except how to kill.[12]

The recurrence of monster images in Stacey's mind recalls the

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[10] Laurence, Fire-Dwellers, p.33.

[11] Ibid. p.172.

[12] Ibid. p.298.

Apocalyptic version of the destruction of the world. Thus, Buckle Fenwick's truck is referred to as "a steel monster", and ships are like "great sea cows", and "monolithic ghosts clanking and groaning". Buckle's mother is referred to as "a she-whale", and on one occasion Stacey calls herself "a monster".

The city, like the sea, is seen as a place of sin and danger similar to that presented in the Apocalypse. Stacey imagines that: "the thin panthers are stalking the streets of the city, their claws unretracted after the cages of time and time again."[13] It is especially in the city that the "skeletal horsemen" ride abroad wreaking destruction and relentlessly pursuing their victims. The buildings evoke pain and death:

> The buildings at the heart of the city are brash, flashing with colors, solid and self-confident. Stacey is reassured by them until she looks again and sees them charred, open to the impersonal winds, glass and steel broken like vulnerable live bones, shadows of people frog-splayed on the stone like in that other city.[14]

Other reminders in The Fire-Dwellers of the Book of Revelation are the false prophets: Thor Thorlakson, Janus Uranus, Mrs. Clovelly, the Polyglam lady, the semi-prophets "with shoulder-length hair", and the seagulls with "angelic presences and voices like gravel out of a grave." There are also the numerous references to God's judgement, the Day of Judgement, and the punishment which God will mete out to sinners. Stacey frequently sees herself in this category, particularly when she lives out her sexual fantasies and when

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[13] Laurence, Fire-Dwellers, P.89.

[14] Ibid., p.11.

she neglects her responsibilities towards the children. At times Stacey's perception of herself recalls the Scarlet Woman in the Apocalypse. Marriage has not quelled her sexual desires and hence Paul's prescription; "Better to marry than to burn", is an inadequate solution to her problem. Buckle sees her as a sex symbol and she is the cause of Mac's infidelity; consequently he heaps coals of fire on her head. Finally, the immediate death images such as the death of the goldfish, the disembowelled gopher, and the deaths of Peter Challoner and Buckle Fenwick, enhance the Apocalyptic dimension of the novel. Stacey's recollection of her father's funeral parlour and Mac's visit to the morgue serve the same purpose.

In The Fire-Dwellers Laurence once again reveals her keen interest in the diverse beliefs of man. She notes for example, that Luke Venturi's mother "believes in the corporate power of prayer" and places great trust in the Pope. Whereas Matthew MacAindra finds consolation in the Bible, Stacey is obsessed by the Presbyterian fear that God is basically there to judge and punish sinners like herself. Janus Uranus and his clients have faith in horoscopes. Thor Thorlakson appears to be his own idol, and Valentine Tonnerre is devoid of faith and hope. Reilly, a truck driver acquaintance of Buckle's, keeps a Saint Christopher's medal in his truck, but Buckle himself disclaims any form of superstition, though Stacey thinks otherwise:

> His head must be full of unnamed gods meshing like a whole set of complicated gears. He's as superstitious as a caveman, but he always denies having any superstitions.
> . . . . . .

> - His shrines are invisible. I wonder what they look like, and what fetishes and offerings lurk on those altars.[15]

Mac seems to have no specific faith despite the fact that his father "wanted him to grow up with some strong background of faith." Others place their faith in Richalife pills, Hatshepsut cosmetics, drugs, sex, booze, or like Luke, in SF and freedom. Even the "educated Greyfolk" of Luke's novel "have developed the belief that their ancestral culture was harmonious, agrarian and ideal until the disaster,"[16] but this belief, which parallels the Genesis myth of Eden, turns out to be an illusion - a comforting belief which has no foundation in fact. It is significant that of all the various religions referred to in the novel, that of the North American Indians, who respect their dead and ancestral gods as symbolized by the totem poles, is presented with the most deference. Laurence treats their myths without cynicism and with a respect often lacking in her treatment of other beliefs. It is as if the culture of the Canadian native peoples appears to her be more genuine and devoid of the phoniness endemic to peoples of modern Western society, their idols, and religious tenets. The author's regard for the culture of the native peoples is illustrated by several subtle and deferential ploys. Thus, for example, Luke, who is the most positive character in the novel, habitually wears an Indian sweater - a symbol of his freedom, simplicity, and lack of

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[15] Laurence, Fire-Dwellers, p.53.

[16] Ibid. p.200.

societal pretence. Significantly, moreover, Stacey's imaginary and symbolic journey with Luke has as its destination a primeval Indian village.

By presenting a roster of characters who are essentially losers like those in Sandburg's poem, Laurence portrays through the eyes of Stacey, a world of suffering and hopelessness which in itself is a definition of hell. Certain characters are presented in a manner designed to evoke pessimism. Buckle Fenwick, for instance, is cast in a mould of one who is bent on self-destruction and on the destruction of others. His own death-wish is evident in the way he drives, daring on-coming vehicles with head-on collision. His sick, sexually-warped mind makes him take revenge on his best friend, Mac, whom he wrongly thinks has slighted him. He obscenely exploits Stacey, Mac's wife, and then deceives Mac into believing that he had sexual intercourse with her. Buckle eventually and predictably destroys himself in a road accident. Meanwhile his blind, grotesque mother ekes out her sad existence drinking cheap alcohol contained in a teapot. Tess Fogler, of whom Stacey was initially envious because of her meticulous appearance and apparent trouble-free life, turns out to be another loser. Her mental sickness reveals itself through her unusual fascination in the cannabalistic activities of her goldfish and especially when she makes Jen observe one fish eating another. Eventually she is taken to a mental hospital following her attempted suicide. The Tonnerre family, who feature in several of Laurence's novels and who symbolize the Métis outcast, appears in this

novel in the person of Valentine. She describes for Stacey the miserable death of her sister, Pique, who was burned to death with her two young children when their shack caught fire. Valentine's comment "If I know Piquette, she was stoned out of her mind, most likely",[17] adds a sense of futility to the tragic incident. Valentine herself epitomizes the loser as she informs Stacey of her plans to "take her last trip". Finally, Mac is not the Agamemnon that Stacey initially imagined him to be. Instead he assumes the unattractive features of middle-age; he is overworked, underappreciated, and forced to sell a product in which he has no faith.

To a lesser extent Stacey herself is a loser, albeit "one of the most likeable losers in modern fiction", as Phyllis Grosskurth remarks.[18] Her perception of the human condition and of her own predicament borders on despair, and perhaps the most devastating realization for Stacey is expressed in the following: "I was wrong to think of the trap as the four walls. It's the world." This statement expresses the profound unhappiness of Stacey's predicament which is aggravated by the fact that there is no possibility of escape. With regard to this, F.W. Watt makes the following comment:

> Margaret Laurence senses the need for depths beneath the depths Stacey's flow of consciousness represents, for hells profounder than the hellish moods she lets us glimpse: "I'm not a good mother. I'm not a good wife. I don't want to be. I'm Stacey

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[17] Laurence, Fire-Dwellers, p.264.

[18] Phyllis Grosskurth, "Wise and Gentle", Journal of Canadian Literature, 39 (Winter 1970), 91.

> Cameron and I still love to dance". "I want to go home, but I can't because this is home." Better to marry than burn, St. Paul said, but he didn't say what to do if you married and burned." The author interpolates a number of passages of mood-description which evidently attempts to express states of mind more extreme than can be caught in Stacey's flip idiom.[19]

Indeed the pessimism evident in Rachel's dilemma becomes more acute when perceived in context with her sister's situation, because ironically the married life and the big city for which Rachel is yearning is but another version of "hell on wheels". But, whereas Rachel's dilemma evolves into a dream with some hope, Stacey's situation is devoid of escape.

Though there is repeated reference to God and religion, neither provide any alleviation for her dilemma. Like her sister, Rachel, Stacey frequently converses with someone she refers to as God, but whom one suspects is merely a psychological extension of herself. Glib remarks such as: "Don't listen in God, it's none of your business", and "God has a sick sense of humour", together with her essentially cynical attitude to religion, indicate a lack of deep personal faith on Stacey's part. Yet religion is a very real part of Stacey's consciousness and continually features in one guise or another. For example following the Polyglam Lady's presentation of her "Superwares", Stacey, attempting to stave off boredom, passes the time in writing trivia, one phrase of which is "Safe in the Arms

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[19] F.W. Watt, "The Fire-Dwellers", Canadian Forum, (July 1969), 87.

of Jesus", followed by: "Lost in the Arms of Morpheus". On another occasion after burning her hand on the element of her kitchen stove she has this reaction:

> It hurts it hurts it hurts what is it
> She has without knowing it pulled her hand away. She regards it with curiosity. Two red crescent lines have appeared on the skin of her left palm.
> My brand of stigmata. My western brand. The Double Crescent. It hurts hurts.[20]

The allusion to the stigmata, a symbol of Christ's crucifixion, is a further example of how spontaneously religious associations spring to Stacey's mind, but usually in a slightly satirical manner. Having identified herself with Christ through the stigmata, Stacey later identifies with Mary the Mother of Christ by referring to the immaculate conception. She also obliquely refers to Mary as follows:

> 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.[21]

The reference to the kids rising up and calling her blessed is taken from Mary's salutation to Elizabeth recorded in Luke's gospel. Once again the tone of the passage is satirical and without respect and seriousness, as if Stacey, and perhaps the author through her, were ridiculing.

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[20] Laurence, Fire-Dwellers, p.140.

[21] Ibid. pp. 298-299.

The embodiment of the Christian religion in the novel is Mac's father Matt, an ex-minister who gives the impression initially that he is the recipient of much spiritual contentment. In his presence Stacey feels obliged to send the children to church and to make them say their prayers - responsibilities she otherwise neglects completely. To her disillusionment Matt eventually admits to his own personal doubts about religion, and so from a "towering Moses" he also is reduced to a weak and insecure creature.

The cynical attitude towards religion which has become a hallmark of Laurence's novels surfaces repeatedly in The Fire-Dwellers. For example Stacey, though she has given up her own faith, occasionally sends her children to church, but she perceives this as: "One more strand in the tapestry of phoniness." Another subtle satire is created by comparing religion and the supermarket:

> The long aisles of the temple. Side chapels with the silver-flash of chrome where the dead fish lie among the icy strawberries. The mounds of offerings, yellow planets of grapefruit, jungles of lettuce, tentacles of green onions, Arctic effluvia flavored raspberry and orange, a thousand bear-faced mouse-legended space-crafted plastic-gifted strangely transformed sproutings of oat and wheat fields. Music humming from invisible choirs.[22]

Religion is again classified along with vulgar merchandise when the Polyglam lady is described "in her sleeveless dress" which "shimmers like the scanty robe of some new oracle", and the hairdressers are described as priestesses. Even the seagulls are seen as "birds in

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[22] Laurence, Fire-Dwellers, p.74.

prophet form", in the guise of religious symbols, but in reality their appearance belies their function which is merely to scavenge and prey on man. Without exception, the religious symbols in the novel give rise to disillusionment and scepticism.

Perhaps the most blatant satire of all appears in the person of Thor Thorlakson; . . . besides the obvious association of his name with the Icelandic gods, the parody is extended to the merchandise he sells. This, like the worst aspects of religion, is designed to seduce people into believing that the quality of life can be improved by consuming regular doses of the supposedly miraculous medicine - Richalife pills. He preys on the psychological weakness of human beings who imagine that happiness can be purchased in oral capsules. His manner is both patronising and manipulative and he is the epitome of pretence. Thor's image finally degenerates when Valentine Tonnerre exposes to Stacey his true identity - that of Verner Winkler, the misfit school kid who had taken her into the bushes in Manawaka. This realization has iconoclastic effects in Stacey's mind. Having lost his mystique, she now perceives him as a living deception, who probably puts "vodka in his tomato juice" in the same manner as she is addicted surreptitiously to her "gin and tonic". She perceives Thor's charisma and mystique as merely fraudulent fronts, and because of that Thor had made Mac suffer through a fear that she might expose his humble origins.

With the possible exception of Luke, all of the characters in the novel live in a modified version of hell. It is significant that

he lives apart from the materialistic, acquisitive society to which Stacey belongs. Consequently, like his New Testament namesake who was both physician and evangelist, he is able to relate to her as an agent of healing and comfort. However, he is but a rite of passage for Stacey, and not the ultimate source of inner peace. He represents the escapism which she imagines she is looking for, but he is not her reality. Luke temporarily assuages Stacey's sexual urges and fantasies, and for a while bolsters her flagging self-image. But when he invites her to be his companion and to leave the domestic situation she thinks she abhors, she lacks the courage.

In addition to the symbolic journey which Stacey makes from her home in suburbia to the sea-front where she meets Luke, the latter invites her to accompany him on a much longer journey up the Skeena river to the northern jungle where the river is "as wild as hell" and where an old man named Charon ferries people across - a scene reminiscent of the mythical River Styx. The proposed journey is a symbolic one into the depths of the inner-self and also to the primeval, where Stacey would have to face reality and make decisions about her personal life-style. Luke describes the journey in the following manner:

> And there's this village near there somewhere, Indian village, a bunch of rundown huts and everything dusty, even the kids and the dogs covered with dust like they were all hundreds of years old which maybe they are and dying which they almost certainly are. And they look at you with these dark slanted eyes they've got, all the people there. They come out and look at you with a sort of inchoate hatred and who could be surprised at it? Because lots of people visit the place every summer, for maybe half an hour. The attraction is the totem poles. And they are -

> - high, thin, beaked, bleached in the sun, cracking and splintering, the totems of the dead. If I were one of them, the nominally living, I'd sure as hell hate people like me, coming in from outside. You want to ask them if they know any longer what the poles mean, or if it's a language which has got lost and now there isn't anything to replace it except silence and sometimes the howling of men who've been separated from themselves for so long that's it's only a dim memory, a kind of violent mourning, only a reason to stay as drunk as they can for as long as they can. You don't ask anybody anything. You haven't suffered enough. You don't know what they know. You don't have the right to pry. So you look and then go away.[23]

Luke is a potential catalyst for Stacey; he holds the mirror before her eyes so she can see herself for what she is. By implication she is one of "the nominally living", and perhaps one of those "who've been separated from themselves for so long that it's only a dim memory, a kind of violent mourning". But in reality she hasn't suffered enough.

Stacey's response to her dilemma is one of compromise. She finally accepts her imagined hellish situation even though she would still like to have "an army between her legs" and to be one of the great courtesans of old. She chooses to remain married and yet to burn. Her imagined prison and her burning sexual fantasies appear to her more secure than the alternatives. In this conclusion, the novel may have some universal meaning, and in this context the reference to Stacey and Mac as Adam and Eve - perhaps a somewhat pretentious allusion to the archetype - has some justification. Stacey is representative of some

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[23] Laurence, Fire-Dwellers, p.227.

North American middle-aged, middle-class, bored, suburban housewives. She rationalizes that Luke would have been no different from Mac in the long run. After the fact, she fantasizes about Luke again and what might have been, but her realizations and her decisions are to remain:

> Okay, Stacey, simmer down. The fun is over. It's been over for some time, only you didn't see it before. No - you saw it alright but you couldn't take it. You got four kids and a mortgage
> . . . . . .
> I guess the fun's been over for Mac quite a while. It would be nice if we were different people but we are not different people. We are ourselves and we are as sure as hell not going to undergo some total transformation at this point. That's right, doll. Mrs. C. MacAindra, by an overwhelming majority voted The Most Sensible Woman of the Year.[24]

Grosskurth concludes her review of The Fire-Dwellers thus:

> The novel ends in unresolved compromise. Some of the old problems disappear, others emerge to take their place. If there has been any progress in Stacey's development it has been an enlargement of understanding as she begins to comprehend that all the people around her are also living in burning houses, in persistent states of emergency.[25]

The narrative ends where it began - in Stacey's bedroom where the nylons and the roll-on girdle lie on the floor and the two books, The Golden Bough and Investments and You, Hers and His, on the respective bedside tables. Stacey is still hankering after her former beauty and Mac is still trying to make more money, thus epitomizing a large sector of our modern Western society. The monotonous and some-

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[24] Laurence, Fire-Dwellers, p.289.

[25] Grosskurth, "Wise and Gentle", p.92.

times vicious circle of Stacey's life remains unchanged. Metaphorically speaking, the fires are still burning, but Stacey finds some consolation in her renewed appreciation of Mac:

> She moves towards him and he holds her. Then they make love after all, but gently, as though consoling one another for everything that neither of them can help nor alter.[26]

The heroine has learned to live within limits, to remain caged like a bird in the house, and to accept her lot in life. She appreciates that the quest for an Arcadia, or Paradise, can be a futile one, that every Chevrolet is not a winged chariot, but that one makes a hell or heaven within oneself.

Stacey, in a very limited way, realized in part her dreams as symbolized by the stars, in her relationship with Luke. Laurence, like Blake before her, affirms that experience, not innocence, is significant to man in the post-Eden condition. Stacey's symbolic experiential voyages to the sea, the forest, and into the past enabled her to arrive at some realizations. It would be somewhat pretentious to compare Stacey with Prometheus, yet both the fire imagery and the theme of acceptance of one's lot in life, no matter the pain, are common to both. Nevertheless, in her experience Stacey did steal some fire from the gods which to a degree purified her and helped her grow.

Marian Engel appears to appreciate the Promethean-like qualities in Stacey when she writes:

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[26] Laurence, Fire-Dwellers, p.307.

> Stacey has the acerbity and grit of both Rachel and Hagar, and she feels, as they did, the attraction of booze, sex and the other side of the tracks in a world of starved imaginations. Her effort to wrench a reasonable life from her past and her present is solid and real.[27]

Certainly Stacey redeems the novel from being dull and conventional. Commenting on the artistic merit of the novel Watt writes:

> The ground occupied by The Fire-Dwellers, in both subject-matter and technique, is on the border-line between art and soap-opera. For readers who need art to hold their interests, she gives an authentic freshness of vision and insight even with the stale material of middle-aged marital tedium, loss of identity and motivation and sexual escapism. But her currency is always that of ordinary life, the normal world where easily recognizeable people do their wanting, crying, hurting and loving.[28]

In concurrence with Watt's observation it may be argued that The Fire-Dwellers does tend toward melodrama. Stacey's problems are exaggerated by Stacey herself, and one is not totally convinced that her situation is as bad as she imagines. To this extent the novel falls short of the title and the narrative hardly substantiates the central metaphor. Although Stacey's situation is not Paradise, neither does it qualify as hell. In fact the fires that Stacey dwells in, appear to be more purgative than destructive,with the exception of the war, which in any event does not appear to affect her directly. What Stacey imagines as hell is perhaps only purgatory. After all, she could choose not to be there, and by the end of the novel she is more purified than she was at the beginning. Stacey dwells in purgatorial fires - very

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[27]Marian Engel, "The girl who escaped from Manawaka is at the core of Margaret Laurence's new novel", Saturday Night, May 1969, p.38.

[28]Watt, "The Fire-Dwellers", p.87

different from the hell fires of Buckle Fenwick's mother who was blind, grotesque and addicted to drinking "fire-water" from the teapot; or from the actual flames which took the lives of Pique Tonnerre and her children. Perhaps at the end of the novel Stacey has come to the realization, presented to her by Luke, that she hadn't suffered enough and hence should not perceive her own personal situation in life too pessimistically.

Another of Stacey's significant realizations, based on the Bible, is that post-Eden life on earth is, by its very nature, imperfect. Watching her two sons fight she remarks: "Cain and his brother must have started their hatred like this". Still later, she reflects on her relationship with her husband:

> Does he hate me?... Where did it start?....The roots vanish because they don't end with Matthew, even if it were possible to trace them that far. They go back and back forever. Our father Adam.[29]

As Walter Swayze points out, The Fire-Dwellers has been criticized for presenting a rosily pat, sentimental solution to a variety of insoluble problems.[30] Surprisingly, he considers the novel more positive than its predecessors even though like them it can claim only partial victory for the protagonist, who finally is able to communicate with her husband at least better than previously, and whose family is "temporarily ... more or less okay."

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[29] Laurence, Fire-Dwellers, p.167.

[30] Walter E. Swayze, "The Odyssey of Margaret Laurence", English Quarterly, 3, No.3 (1970), 14.

By ending the novel where it began - in Stacey's bedroom - the plot appears to have completed a cycle, thereby creating the illusion that life in the MacAindra family goes on as usual. Stacey still burns inside with lust and is acutely aware of the fires of war and violence abroad. Thus she is at the very heart of the title-image; she is a fire-dweller who is consumed within and threatened from without by metaphoric fires.

However, besides the negative aspects of fire amply described in the novel, it should not be overlooked that fire has important positive symbolic meanings. Thus in the Christian tradition fire is one of the most expressive liturgical symbols. In the solemn paschal liturgy, fire symbolizes Christ, who is hailed as "the light of the world". Also from early Christian times fire has been associated with purification. The evangelists, Luke and Matthew, quote John the Baptist who declared that Christ would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Both sacred writers also record the metaphor of Christ burning the chaff with unquenchable fire. It does not appear to have happened by chance that Laurence named two characters in The Fire-Dwellers after the two evangelists who record in their gospels the fire imagery employed by Christ. This does not imply that Mark and John omit Christ's references to fire - John indeed records in detail Christ's metaphor of the vine wherein there is mention of the fruitless branches being burned - but simply to make the observation that Matthew and Luke record more instances of fire imagery.

But perhaps it is in The Acts of The Apostles that we find the most significant and specific use of fire symbolism. Here it is recorded that the Spirit descended on the apostles in the form of tongues of fire and it was only then that they received the gifts of the Spirit which gave them the fortitude and other qualities they needed to perform their mission. In the concluding pages of The Fire-Dwellers Stacey appears to have received in some small measure the gifts of the Spirit as she is more peaceful, accepting, and prayerful. To some degree she has been purified by the fires and strengthened by the Spirit. The final statement of the novel is thus not only a reiteration of the title-image but also a quiet affirmation of faith.

THE DIVINERS

The title of Margaret Laurence's last novel contains a hidden meaning which gives the clue to the central metaphor and relates obliquely to the controlling analogy of the river. The narrative is concerned primarily with the biography of a writer, Morag, who perceives her occupation as analogous to that of her friend, Royland, the water diviner. Through the symbolism of water, and the associativeness of the word "divine", the novel explores the metaphoric affinities between the water diviner, the writer, and God. Thus, for example, because the water diviner possesses the special gift of discovering water, which in Laurence, as in the Bible, usually symbolizes life, and because the writer's special gift is to reveal the meaning of life, or at least to present insights into the human condition, the contingent premise is that both water diviner and writer have something in common. Through connotation with the word "divine", the title suggests that these gifts are attributes of God and must therefore originate from Him, a belief which is endorsed by Pauline doctrine. Another symbolic link emerges when one considers that the water which the diviner divines has as its source a stream or river, albeit subterranean, and the key symbol in the novel, as well as the secondary source of Morag's inspiration, is also the river.

Paralleling the symbolism of the river and reflecting its

continuous motion, is the "pilgrimage" motif that pervades the narrative. We read that "Morag has a need to make pilgrimages", and she fulfils this need, not only in her many travels, but also vicariously in her writing. Thus her personal life may be seen as a series of pilgrimages or quests, and her writing as ventures into the realm of fiction. Furthermore, Morag's peculiar chronological perspective, intermeshing past, present, and future, symbolized by the indeterminable fluidity of the river, portrays the continuous passage of generations in terms of a voyage from birth to death. Appropriately, the analogy of life as a pilgrimage - a literary convention as old as the Bible - smoothly integrates with the Apocalyptic tenor of the novel.

It is significant that The Diviners begins and ends with the analogy of the river:

> The river flowed both ways. The current moved from north to south, but the wind usually came from the south, rippling the bronze-green water in the opposite direction. This apparently impossible contradiction, made apparent and possible, still fascinated Morag, even after the years of river-watching.[1]

The river represents human life in general in its journey from source to outlet, from birth to death. It also represents Morag's individual personal life - the mature woman perceiving her life ever flowing both ways, from the past and from the future and meeting in her present consciousness. Laurence has employed the

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[1]Margaret Laurence, The Diviners (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p.3.

literary technique of interior monologue in all her novels, but in The Diviners she explicitly employs a stream of consciousness using the river as the objective correlative. Every chapter begins with a reference to the river, and as the opening of each chapter focuses the narrative back into the present, there is the indication that the river parallels and reflects Morag's immediate awareness and perception of life.

Unlike the River Jordan which Laurence used metaphorically in her first novel, This Side Jordan, the river flowing by Morag's cottage has not to be crossed, but rather observed and contemplated as though it gives insights into one's life and helps explain life's mysteries. The metaphor of the river as a mirror of life and as a means of understanding the phenomenon of life's passage from one's past, through the present, and into the future, is enhanced by the reference to the diviner, Royland, as "The Old Man of the River". More than any other character in the novel, Royland is Morag's guide, philosopher and mentor; from him she learns the importance of faith.

Morag perceives her life as analogous to the river. The mainstream of her life is comprised of the continuous passage of time and her personal experiences are perceived as tributaries flowing into it at different points in time and place. Both mainstream and tributaries are joined together initially, flowing in the same direction; this analogy demonstrates how any given experience

is not fully appreciated until it is past and seen in the perspective of time. It would appear that Morag accepts internalized experience as her absolute, but, like the river, life's experience is in a constant state of flux and uncertainty:

> The waters flowed from north to south, and the current was visible, but now a south wind was blowing, ruffling the water in the opposite direction, so that the river, as so often here, seemed to be flowing both ways.
>
> Look ahead into the past, and back into the future, until the silence.
>
> How far could anyone see into the river? Not far. Near shore, in the shallows, the water was clear, and there were the clean and broken clam-shells of creatures now dead, and the wavering of the underwater weed-forests, and the flicker of small live fishes, and the undulating lines of gold as the sand ripples received the sun. Only slightly further out, the water deepened and kept its life from sight.[2]

Morag's river is actual, not mythical like Nathaniel's, and her Promised Land not across the river, but rather down the river, the river of experience. At the age of forty-seven, the pilgrim Morag has arrived at the confluence of her life where the mainstream and tributaries of her experiences meet in her present consciousness. Paradoxically, she is simultaneously at the watershed of her existence where the water, even the mainstream, will divide and flow divergently. In this manner the river analogy symbolizes what is actually happening to Morag and her daughter, Pique, as they go their separate ways:

> Something about Pique's going, apart from the actual departure itself, was unresolved in Morag's mind. The fact that Pique was going west? Yes. Morag was both glad and uncertain. What would Pique's father think if he knew? Well, he wouldn't know and didn't have all that much right to judge anyway. Would Pique

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[2]Laurence, Diviners, p.370.

> go to Manawaka? If she did, would she find anything there that would have meaning for her?[3]

The passage suggests that Pique has inherited her mother's need to make pilgrimages.

The pursuit of searching for meaning in one's life is of paramount importance to Morag, hence her mental voyages into her past. The narrative traces the river of Morag's life from its source to her present age and situation, and the value of her past experiences is determined in the light of her present consciousness. Laurence contrives the narrative tenses in order to simulate the manner in which the mind functions, as it recalls and recreates the past, using past experience to understand the present and to predict the future. Commenting on this, Barbara Hehner writes the following:

> In The Diviners, Laurence's protagonist is, for the first time, a woman who has already found a measure of fulfillment, whose present life is busy and, by and large, satisfying. Thus Laurence's seemingly perverse decision to write of Morag's past in the present tense, and of Morag's present in the past tense, is the right one. The past tense narrative in much of Laurence's work suggests an achieved personal equilibrium, and this Morag possesses. On the other hand, Morag has experienced a difficult journey to her present autonomy, and she vividly recalls her earlier struggles; indeed, she feels that she is constantly reworking her past, even embellishing the events, in order to link her past life to her present life in a meaningful way.[4]

Hehner's allusion to Morag's life as a "difficult journey" underscores the pilgrimage motif and suggests that the novel is a modern-day psychological Pilgrim's Progress.

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[3]Laurence, Diviners, p.5.

[4]Barbara Hehner, "River of Now and Then", Journal of Canadian Fiction, 74, (Autumn 1977), 48.

Morag perceives the role of the creative writer as one who makes journeys into the realm of fiction in search of meaning and truth in order to transmit them to others in her writing. Thus the metaphorical link between the writer of fiction and the water-diviner is established in so far as both attempt to reveal the hidden essentials of life: water and truth. Laurence shares Morag's concern about telling the truth in fiction:

> That's not the only talent in writing well. . . The greatest problem of all is to try and tell enough of your own truth, from your own viewpoint, from your own eyes, to be able to deeply enough. . . It sounds easy just to tell the truth. There isn't anything more difficult. [5]

In one very real sense The Diviners is a novel about writing novels, fiction about the nature of fiction. Reviewing Marie-Claire Blais' novel, Dürer's Angel , Margaret Laurence expresses her own views on fiction:

> The writer herself, in the opening line, bears out my own feeling that there may well be no such thing as autobiographical fiction or even straight autobiography. Both these forms are fiction in the truest sense, since both, like any other form of fiction represent highly selected aspects and events of life seen and interpreted through one pair of eyes, the writer's. By her very style and selectivity and by her observations on a person (a character) writing about "her" life, Marie-Claire Blais is implicitly exploring the nature of fiction itself.[6]

Morag takes this concept of fiction one stage further, stating that "fiction was more true than fact" and that "fact was in fact fiction". The implication is that everyone, not only the

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[5]Graeme Gibson, ed., "Margaret Laurence," Eleven Canadian Novelists (Toronto: Anansi, 1973), p.189.

[6]Margaret Laurence, "More Perils of Pauline," Books in Canada, 6, No.4, (April 1977), 26.

writer of fiction, makes a fiction of his past thus transmuting it into his perception of truth. And this new truth becomes his personal myth. Laurence identifies selection and interpretation as two essential characteristics of fiction writing. In The Diviners the author selects and interprets her material in a manner designed to discover meaning and coherence in the human condition, personal roots and identity, as well as to make statements about the craft of writing fiction. Morag's creator believes that writing fiction is a journey towards self-discovery, and in this context both writer and protagonist are pilgrims:

> For the writer, one way of discovering oneself, of changing from the patterns of childhood and adolescence to those of adulthood, is through the explorations inherent in the writing itself. In the case of a great many writers, this exploration at some point - perhaps at all points - involves an attempt to understand one's background and one's past, sometimes even a more distant past which one has not personally experienced.[7]

The metaphorical framework of The Diviners allows for a comparison between the equally mysterious skills of writing fiction and divining water. Laurence has spoken of " the mysterious at the core of writing", implying that the writer, like the water diviner, is unable completely to comprehend or explain certain aspects of her craft which appear to be ultimately beyond her control. These aspects may be termed inspiration, special gift, or genius, but this does not really explain the phenomenon; rather it sets it

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[7]Margaret Laurence, "A Place to Stand On," Heart of A Stranger (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), p.13.

apart into the realm of the unknown and the supernatural:

> No boats today. Yes, one. Royland was out, fishing for muskie. Seventy-four years old this year, Royland. Eyesight terrible, but he was too stubborn to wear glasses. A marvel that he could go on working. Of course, his work did not depend upon eyesight. Some other kind of sight. A water diviner. Morag always felt she was about to learn something of great significance from him, something that would explain everything. But things remained mysterious, his work, her own, the generations, the river.[8]

One of Laurence's literary purposes is to probe the mysteries of life in an attempt to find meaning in her own life, and life in general. By way of introducing her article entitled "Where the World Began", she wrote the following:

> I wrote this article in 1971, when I was beginning my novel, The Diviners. I see now that I used it as one more means of working out a theme that appears in the novel, that is, the question of where one belongs and why, and the meaning to oneself of the ancestors, both the long ago ones and those in remembered history. Until I re-read these articles, I didn't realize how much I had written on this theme before I ever dealt with it fictionally. I didn't realize, either, how compulsively I'd written about the river, the same river that appears in the novel.[9]

Mysteries can be elucidated by symbols and by metaphor, and Laurence is particularly adept in using these devices to probe life's mysteries and to give her writing a coherent frame of reference. In The Diviners the two key symbols are the river and the water diviner, Royland. It is worthy of note that the symbolism of the river is important to Laurence both within and outside the novel, in fiction and in her personal life. The following quotation indicates that both symbols were in the

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[8]Laurence, Diviners, p.4.

[9]Laurence, Heart, p.213.

author's mind and indeed a reality in her own life long before her last novel materialized:

> The cabin has a long window across its front western wall, and sitting at the oak table there in the mornings, I used to look out at the river and at the tall trees beyond, green-gold in the early light. The river was bronze; the sun caught it strangely, reflecting upon its surface the near-shore sand ripples underneath. Suddenly, the crescenting of a fish, gone before the eyes could clearly give image to it. The old man next door said these leaping fish were carp. Himself, he preferred muskie, for he was a real fisherman and the muskie gave him a fight. The wind most often blew from the south, and the river flowed toward the south, so when the water was wind-riffled, and the current was strong, the river seemed to be flowing both ways. I liked this, and interpreted it as an omen, a natural symbol.[10]

In The Diviners, the river is a source of inspiration, hence careful observation of the river is important. Morag's significant insights and revelations are obtained from river-watching, as the following quotation illustrates:

> The dawn mist had lifted, and the morning air was filled with swallows, darting so low over the river that their wings sometimes brushed the water, then spiralling and pirouetting upward again. Morag watched, trying to avoid thought, but this ploy was not successful.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The swallows dipped and spun over the water, a streaking of blue-black wings and bright breast-feathers. How could that colour be caught in words? A sort of rosy peach colour, but that sounded corny and was also inaccurate.
> I used to think that words could do anything. Magic. Sorcery. Even miracle. But no, only occasionally.[11]

Later in the novel the beautiful epic simile of the blue heron enables Morag to arrive at an important realization:

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[10] Laurence, Heart, p.218.

[11] Laurence, Diviners, pp.3-4.

> Then she saw the huge bird. It stood close to shore, its tall legs looking fragile although in fact they were very strong, its long neck and long sharp beak bent towards the water, searching for fish, its feathers a dark bright blue. A great blue heron. Once populous in this part of the country. Now rarely seen.
>
> Then it spotted the boat, and took to flight. A slow, unhurried take-off, the vast wings spreading, the slender elongated legs folding up under the creature's body. Like a pterodactyl, like an angel, like something out of the world's dawn. The soaring and measured certainty of its flight. Ancient-seeming, unaware of the planet's rocketing changes. The sweeping serene wings of the thing, unknowing that it was speeding not only towards individual death but probably towards the death of its kind. The mastery of the heron's wings could be heard, a rush of wind, the wind of its wings, before it mounted high and disappeared into the trees above a bywater of the river. . .
>
> That evening, Morag began to see that here and now was not, after all, an island. Her quest for the islands had ended some time ago, and her need to make pilgrimages had led her back here.[12]

This exquisite description of the heron, reminiscent of the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, contains a great deal of Laurence's essential thinking. The beauty of nature, the importance of observing nature and being sensitive to it, death of the individual, and extinction of the species, survival, and spiritual awareness, all find their place in this superb piece of writing. But, the important point is the subsequent statement that her quest for the islands had ended and her need to make pilgrimages had led her back to the same place. The implications are that her wanderings were merely rites of passage and that she had found the Promised Land within herself.

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[12]Laurence, Diviners, p.292.

Both of these important revelations come to Morag while she is watching the river, and secondly while she is actually in the company of Royland, the water diviner. Although the religious significance of the river is not explicit, there is an inter-relationship between river and pilgrimage. The river is a symbol of motion and life, providing the means for imaginary voyages into time or actual voyages to places, and a pilgrimage is a special kind of voyage. Moreover, Morag's repeated accounts of the "revelations" which come to her while watching the river, her reference to "the children of the Apocalypse","Jerusalem","Halls of Sion","prophets" and "prophecy", Royland's reference to the mark of God on the forehead, and Laurence's own words concerning the river as a symbol, point to the Book of Revelation as the most likely source. Here the symbolic river is described as follows:

> And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bear twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.[13]

The symbolism of the river as the river of life in Revelation is perfectly compatible with the "river of now and then" in The Diviners. Moreover, the sequel to the angel's showing the inspired writer the river of life: the references to prophecy, truth, the Spirit, the water of life, and the written word, have a correlation with Morag's perception of the act of writing. When Morag, struggling

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[13]Revelation 22. 1-2.

with her thoughts on the import of her novel, Spear of Innocence, poses the question: "Does fiction prophesy life?" the implication is that she believes she shares the special gift, at least in part, of the inspired writers of the Bible. This belief is consistent with the central metaphor of the novel which suggests that diviners, be they water diviners, tellers of tales, or writers of fiction, are in touch with God when they perform their special function.

Indeed there is the metaphoric implication in the novel that fiction writing per se is an extension of the Bible - the Book of the Word of God. The theological possibilities of this conjecture are tenuous but nevertheless plausible when it is considered that Royland divines water, the symbol of life, and that Morag, who believes that she has a function relationship with him, "divines" words. "Life" and "word" are the key words in this context because they relate to Christ who is "the way, the truth, and the life", and who is also the "Word of God".

Besides the use of Apocalyptic symbolism, Laurence occasionally employs the Apocalyptic technique whereby one event, usually a disastrous one, prefigures another that will occur at a later date. Thus there is the reference to the adverse future effects caused by polluting the river; Prin's death foreshadowed by the death of the baby birds; and Eva Winkler's abortion prefigured by the abandoned foetus in the Nuisance Grounds. Also the recurring references to "revelations", as when Gord begs revelations from Morag who in turn is fearful of "interpreting" Pique through her own experience,

indicate how readily Laurence responds to the Apocalypse. It would appear that for her the mysterious power latent in language and in the writing of fiction is epitomized in the Book of Revelation. In keeping with the notion of life as a pilgrimage, she is concerned with Apocalyptic, eschatological issues - the problems related to suffering, death, the after life - and also with signs and hidden meanings, after the fashion of Pilgrim's Progress. She further displays a preoccupation with discovering design in the totality of the human condition, past, present and future, as illustrated by her dictum, "Look ahead into the past, and back into the future, until silence".

Both the writer of fiction and the sacred writers must have faith, like the pilgrim. In The Diviners, Morag learns faith from Royland, the character who is an extension of the title-image. He is introduced as "looking as old as Jehovah" and Morag felt that "she was about to learn something of great significance from him, something that would explain everything." From Royland, Morag learns the importance of faith in one's own special gift and the necessity of using the gift while one has it because it cannot be presumed to last forever. Morag holds Royland in high regard, even after he has lost his special gift. She refers to him as an "ex-shaman" who has influenced the gods and shared in their divine powers. At times Royland talks like a priest and a prophet and significantly he has a religious background. For a period of time he had been a gospel preacher who had thought he possessed the revealed word of God and

imagined that he had received the call from God after the fashion of the prophets of the Old Testament. The fact that he had rejected that way of life after his misguided zeal had driven his wife to commit suicide suggests that Laurence is once again questioning the value of formalized religion. Indeed the verbal sharing of this personal tragedy with Morag recalls the occasion of a similar intimate sharing between Hagar and Murray Lees. From this it would appear that the important message the author is transmitting is that true religion resides within the individual, and that God can be found deep within the human heart. The genuineness of this revelation finds a positive response in both Hagar and Morag.

Besides Royland, the obvious diviner, there is Christie Logan. He not only divines the garbage but is also directly linked to the title-image in so far as he is a medium with bizarre religious affinities. In her childhood, Morag is exposed to Christie's tales of the past. These merit analysis not only of content, but also of style and context. Laurence, somewhat facetiously but also significantly, presents Christie in a drunken stupor whenever he recounts his tales. Phrases such as the following are interspersed in his narrations: "Then in those days a darkness fell over the lands"; "By their garbage ye shall know them"; "I say unto you"; "I tell you this"; all of which have a distinctive Biblical flavour. Morag alludes to the "Proverbs of Christie Logan" as if he ranked with the inspired writers. Furthermore his tales evoke Christ's parables and have a concrete religious ancestry despite their blasphemous tone.

It is also relevant to note that the name Christie is quite evidently a derivative of the name Christ. Symbolically, he is the first saviour of Morag, and his way of life and his death are significant. Like Christ he is misunderstood and rejected by society, yet his burial scene is one of the most beautiful and poignant in Laurence's work. For Morag he is an integral part of her past and also a transmitter of her ancestral past. Christie's version of Morag's past is a combination of both fact and fiction. It creates her personal myth, one in which she believes until her visit to Scotland in her adult life. Besides his "gift of tongues" and "gift of prophecy" Christie also possesses the gift of divining garbage. Symbolically he is endowed with attributes which emanate from God and hence, along with Morag and Royland, qualifies as a diviner in his own right.

Another character who belongs in this category is Jules Tonnerre. His special gift is music, and the lyrics he sings proclaim the dignity and misfortunes of the native peoples of Canada. His story is one that epitomizes the dilemma of the free spirit living in a world both alien and at times hostile. The personal tragedies and sufferings he endures make him a Job-like figure.

The concept of special gift or charisma bestowed gratuitously on certain people, presumably by God, which is an important religious theme in The Diviners, echoes a key Pauline theme in the New Testament. Paul writes to the Corinthians:

> Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit;to another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; to another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues; but all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will.[14]

That Morag appreciates the bestowal of different gifts upon different people is clearly shown when Royland is divining at the Smith house:

> They went outside. Royland had a Y-shaped piece of willow, one hand on each side of the fork. He held his hands clenched, palms upwards, clutching the green wood tightly. The tail of the Y was held up. They watched.
>
> At the back of the house, Royland began walking slowly. Up and down the yard. Like the slow pace of the piper playing a pibroch. Only this was for a reverse purpose. Not for the walk over the dead. The opposite.
>
> Nothing happened.
>
> "Does it ever - well, you know - not work, Royland?" A-Okay asked.
>
> "Alf, Sh!" Maudie hissed the sounds, as though A-Okay had interrupted during a symphony or a seance.
>
> "Doesn't fail if the water's there, or at least not so far," Royland said. "You don't have to sh-sh. I don't need quiet."
>
> But all the same none of them talked after that. Tom stood with his hand in his father's hand. The whiz kid, now subdued.
>
> Morag had once tried divining with the willow wand. Nothing at all had happened. Royland had said she didn't have the gift. She wasn't surprised. Her area was elsewhere. He was divining for water. What in hell was she divining for? You couldn't doubt the value of water.
>
> "Hey - look!" Thomas.
>
> The tip of the willow wand was moving. In Royland's bony grip, the wood was turning, moving downwards very slowly, very surely. Towards the earth.

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[14] 1 Corinthians 12. 4-11.

> Magic, four yards north of the Smith's clothesline.
> "How about that?" A-Okay said. "Well, I guess we'll see when the driller comes in, eh?"
> Wanting faith, taking it on faith, but not yet convinced. Would the driller strike water?
> Tom, encyclopaedic mind suddenly pierced by mysteries, could only stare.[15]

The words "seance", "faith", and "mysteries" connote religious and metaphysical phenomena, thereby associating the gift of divining with the supernatural. Moreover, the gift defies human comprehension and demands faith. Often the gift, like hidden untapped water resources, lies latent in the possessor. Thus the process of divining presupposes discovery at two levels: the discovery of the gift within oneself and the discovery of latent water beneath the earth's surface.

Morag is a pilgrim in the sense that she is concerned with a search for latent meaning, and self-discovery. Margaret Laurence has also admitted to this same pursuit through the writing of fiction. She is concerned with the hidden meanings of words, just as Royland is concerned with finding the hidden water that is a symbol of life. Occasionally she plants hidden meanings in the words she uses, which if discovered can be a source of revelation for the reader. The word Morag, for example, is Gaelic for Sarah, and the knowledge of this fact adds a hitherto unknown dimension to the narrative, assuming that Laurence's choice of names has been made with deliberation. One recalls that all of Laurence's protagonists, with the exception of Stacey, have Biblical names that are linked

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[15]Laurence, Diviners, pp.83-84.

to major themes within their respective novels.

In The Diviners the name Sarah relates to the Biblical wife of Abraham who accompanied the patriarch in his wanderings to a promised land and became the matriarch of the chosen people. Also metaphorically it may be said that God "divined" Sarah's child in her old age when she was beyond the age of child bearing. Thus the name association of Morag with the Biblical Sarah adds new dimensions to the pilgrimage and motherhood themes addressed in the novel. The lives of Morag and Sarah are analogous, not so much by detail but by the overall pattern of event and activity. Through the Biblical pattern parallel with Sarah, Morag is identified with an archetype matriarch and pilgrim. Moreover, through Morag, Laurence brings together the major ethnic strands in Canadian history - Scottish, English, French, and Indian. Furthermore, by extension the symbolism of Isaac as the prototype offspring of the chosen people is paralleled in Pique who epitomizes the Canadian mosaic. Extending this symbolism even further, one notes that Pique has been and will be victimized because of her roots. This victimizing recalls the sacrificial image of Isaac, who in turn prefigures the Christ victim. In this respect Pique inherits a messianic dimension in the sense that she is the amalgam of the key elements of the Canadian heritage, the flower of her nation. There is the implication too that she will assume the role of saviour of her people depending on how she responds to society and especially on how society responds to her. She is the ultimate inheritor.

The symbolism of "wandering" or "pilgrimage" is common to both Morag and her Biblical namesake. Like Sarah, Morag has experienced a series of journeys in her lifetime. The first was from Manawaka to Winnipeg, whence she travelled to Toronto, Vancouver, England, Scotland, and finally back to Canada. These wanderings represent not only a search for new places and subliminally for the Promised Land, but also for her own roots and to find her true self. Several of her journeys are referred to as pilgrimages, religious quests, made for the purpose of understanding, and hence accepting or dispelling her personal myths. Her visit to Sutherland, Scotland, is one such pilgrimage. Each of the places associated with Morag's life appears to have a special significance and symbolic meaning.. Manawaka, for example, though mythical, is located geographically in the centre of Canada and is given a native Indian name. Toronto and Vancouver represent the east and west of Canada respectively. Morag's stay in London, England, coincides with her growth as a writer - Hampstead being a haven, indeed a shrine, for writers and creative artists. Later, Morag's visit to Scotland and her return to Canada signify a coming to terms with her own past and an acceptance of Canada as her true homeland where she belongs.

The recurring subject of death in The Diviners integrates with the theme of pilgrimage because symbolically death is the end of each individual's earthly journey. In her infancy Morag is faced with the phenomenon of death. The recollection of her parent's death, ingrained in her memory, is described as follows:

> Dr.MacLeod had been that evening, and Morag had been sent out to play long after supper, when it was nearly dark. Mrs. Pearl's face looked scary when she put Morag to bed, but she said not a word.
>
> Morag is alone in the dark. The stove hisses a little, and sighs as the fire dies down. Morag gets up and tries the door and it opens into the living room. She stands barefoot, the linoleum cool on her skin, and listens.
>
> From upstairs, there is a sound. Crying. Crying? Yes,crying. Not like people, though. Like something else. She does not know what. Kiy-oots. She knows only that it is her father's voice. There is no sound of her mother's voice, no sound at all.
>
> Morag, terrified, scuttles back to the kitchen like a cockroach - she is a cockroach; she feels like one, running, scuttling.
>
> Next morning, Mrs. Pearl does not have a talk with Morag. Not that day. Or the next. But finally. When?
>
> "Morag, honey, they have passed on," Mrs. Pearl says, blushing, as though caught in a lie, "to a happier land,we know."
>
> Morag does not imagine that they have gone to some real good place. She knows they are dead. She knows what dead means. She has seen dead gophers, run over by cars, or shot, their guts redly squashed out on the road.[16]

The vividness of this memory is a revelation to Morag of the finiteness of human life and that death is a termination of an otherwise ongoing process. Her sense of fear and helplessness makes her identify with a cockroach, an insignificant and despicable insect. The association of her parent's death with that of the gophers is an another example of the Apocalyptic style whereby one event foreshadows another.It is also clear in the final paragraph of the quoted passage that the concept of an after-life in a happier land is viewed cynically, without consolation and without acceptance on faith by Morag, even as a child. Faith is something she will learn later in life, particularly through Royland who will frequently admonish her to accept on faith those things over which she has little or no control.

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[16]Laurence, Diviners, p.13.

One of the most macabre and bizarre incidents in the novel occurs when Piquette Tonnerre and her two children are burnt to death in their shack. The impact of this tragedy is heightened by Morag's being assigned the unenviable task of reporting on it for the local newspaper. The witnessing and the writing of an account of this disaster overwhelms Morag, as though the process of being a medium were devastating. Other accounts of death are those of Prin and Christie Logan, Val Tonnerre, and Jules Tonnerre. Besides these actual accounts of death - a large number for one novel - there are numerous death symbols. Thus Pique is referred to as Morag's "harbinger of death." The surname of Morag's ex-husband, Skelton, is blatantly suggestive of skeleton, and Morag bore this death name for ten years. Ella's husband is called Mort which evokes the French word for death. In addition, mention is made of a dead foetus found in the Nuisance Grounds, also of the death of Fan's snake, and as in every one of Laurence's Manawaka novels there is the inevitable funeral parlour - a constant reminder of death.

One explanation of the prominence given to the subject of death in The Diviners is the common loss of parents experienced by Laurence and Morag, but there is another which has its source in the Bible. Death is a prominent theme in the Bible, and Laurence is pre-eminently a religious writer whose background is rooted in the Bible. From her perspective, life is viewed as a journey or pilgrimage from birth to death. In this regard she is concerned with unravelling the mystery of death as well as life.

For this reason religion in one form or another features in all of her novels. Hence, in The Diviners Morag questions and searches her own religious beliefs as well as those of others. Significantly, her references to God and Jesus are not characterized by the bitterness of Hagar, Rachel, and Stacey. As a child she experiences an inconsistency in her attitude towards the Christian faith:

> Morag loves Jesus. And how. He is friendly and not stuck up, is why. She does not love God. God is the one who decides which people have got to die.[17]

Later she questions the Catholic religious practice of displaying pictures of Christ, observing that it did not help the Tonnerres whose shack was burnt. Similarly when lodging in the Crawley's home she takes down the picture of the Bleeding Heart of Jesus from above her bed. However, it would appear in this that she is not rejecting Christ per se, but merely, like Rachel, showing her dissatisfaction with an insipid representation of Christ. In her maturity, there are indications that Morag has found new faith mainly through her friendship with Royland:

> The inheritors. Was this, finally and at last, what Morag had always sensed she had to learn from the old man? She had known it all along, but not really known. The gift, or portion of grace, or whatever it was, was finally withdrawn, to be given to someone else.[18]

Similarly, when Morag bids farewell to Pique, "So long. Go with God, Pique.", in the final pages of the novel, one senses a depth of faith not found in any of the other protagonists. David Blewett refers to a

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[17] Laurence, Diviners, p. 63.

[18] Ibid., p. 369.

"rhythm of reconciliation" in Laurence's Manawaka novels, and it is in The Diviners, the last novel in the cycle, that reconciliation is most apparent. The same critic expresses this well:

> The note of quiet optimism on which The Diviners ends, the closing suggestion of reconciliation and of the defeat of many of the divisive forces that deaden and destroy human life, is the final and culminating repetition in a pattern that gradually emerges in the Manawaka cycle.[19]

Although Blewett does not specify here the religious aspect of reconciliation, he concludes his perceptive article by stating that the source of the Manawaka cycle's impressive unity is Margaret Laurence's vision that the fragments of experience are part of a larger, universal design.

It is evident that Laurence uses sections of the novel as a platform for expressing views on God and religious practices. The concept of a loving, caring God is frequently questioned as are formalized faith and practices. But nowhere is there evidence of a complete rejection of God and religion; rather they are perceived as part of people's lives and as such integral to the human condition. The faith of Morag, like that of Hagar, Rachel, and Stacey, is never naive nor blind, but on the contrary filled with doubt and always tenuous. Nevertheless there is perceptible growth on the part of Morag whose readiness to accept on faith differs considerably from Hagar's scepticism. Clara Thomas strongly affirms the religious nature of The Diviners in the following quotation:

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[19]David Blewett, "The Unity of the Manawaka Cycle," Journal of Canadian Studies, 13, No. 3 (Fall 1978), 36.

> It is a profoundly religious novel and its final assertion speaks for a Miltonic Eternal Providence. In fact, the echoes of Paradise Lost are strong throughout, both in its foundation-fabric and in its precise details. The farm gates clang shut behind Morag and she loses Eden. Margaret Laurence has always written of the dispossessed - and on her work's deepest level, the dispossessed of Eden. She perceives all men and women, not just as pawns in a cosmic battle of Good and Evil, of Darkness and Light, but more puzzling than that, as damaging and destroying one another in the grip of some mysterious Primal Darkness. The miracle is that they are also, often tragically, sometimes joyously, but always stubbornly, stumbling onward towards the Light. Morag's final understanding, the energy of her acceptance, is her "Paradise Regained" - and by implication, Everyman's.[20]

Another critic, Phyllis Bruce, describes the deeper meaning of The Diviners thus:

> But this complex novel is more than a retrospective quest for self-discovery. Through its portrait of Morag, the artist, it explores the power of the creative imagination to redeem the apparent chaos of human experience.[21]

The use of the powerfully evocative word "redeem" in this context is significant because it underscores the title-image of the novel, namely the inter-relationship of divining, fiction writing, faith, and human salvation.

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[20] Thomas, Manawaka, pp. 170-171.

[21] Phyllis Bruce, "The Diviners," Canadian Forum, 54 (May 1974), 15.

CONCLUSION

The initial generic hypothesis of this paper was that Margaret Laurence is a religious writer who explores her own peculiar vision of the human condition through metaphor, symbolism and Biblical allusion. In support of this hypothesis it has been noted that religion, in one form or another, is a major strand woven into the fabric of every novel. It can also be documented that certain dominant symbols recur consistently, and that Biblical allusion features significantly in all of the author's novels. Another important observation is that in each novel the title-image forms the metaphoric framework for the narrative, and is the objective correlative to which is linked most of the symbolism and allusion.

The principal recurring symbols, like the imagery, may be grouped as they relate to the major time frames of past, present, and future. Consequently, the symbols and imagery of Eden, ancestry, house and household, the forest, and Manawaka itself, all belong to the past. Symbols and imagery associated with wilderness, pilgrimages, the river, and the sea, would appear to belong primarily to the present; and those related to the Promised Land, Jerusalem, and reconciliation, to the future. Other symbols, particularly those related to death, such as the skeletal horsemen of the Apocalypse, and the funeral parlours, span across all of the time frames, and, like the "river of now and then", mesh the past and future into the eternal present. Referentially,

most of the major symbols are Apocalyptic and eschatologically oriented, as they relate to suffering, death, and beyond death.

It may be contended that Laurence's use of symbolism is appropriate for the metaphysical themes about which she writes, such as religion, myth, inner freedom, death, inter-personal relationships, and those aspects of the human condition which defy empirical comment. By their very nature symbols are associative as they link one image with another, and as such they are a means of achieving cohesion and unity, for which the author appears to be striving. Furthermore, the symbols which Laurence employs occasionally possess a sacramental dimension in so far as they provide an external image of something internal and spiritual; and for that purpose symbols are an effective dynamics of the language. In Laurence, symbolism generally enriches the narrative by adding levels of meaning, variety of interpretation, and by linking one idea, event, or person with another.

With regard to the inter-relationship of the key symbols in The Stone Angel, and how they relate to those in Genesis, Anne Thompson writes:

> Essential, too, is an understanding of the whole garden-wilderness complex of symbols operative within Biblical traditon. They make their first appearance in the Garden of Eden narrative where man-in-Eden, a symbol of the joyous, innocent life, falls into bondage to his own sinful pride and is exiled into the wilderness of painful toil, of sin, and of death. The final verse of the third chapter of Genesis which describes the eviction of Adam and Eve from the Garden will prove significant within the context of the symbolism proper to The Stone Angel: "So he drove out the man; and he placed at

> the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way to keep the way of the tree of life".[1]

The same critic observes that most of the symbolism, as well as the imagery, is related to the Bible:

> It is a fact that Laurence's novels contain an abundance of Biblical allusion. Djwa perceives its function as providing a mythic framework and giving a universal dimension to character.

She comments as follows:

> The primary function of Biblical allusion would seem to be to provide a resonating mythic framework. . . explicit in Laurence for the exploration of a particular psychological type. Laurence, in particular, appears to favour Biblical myth because it invokes a sense of universal human nature.[2]

Forman and Parameswaran, on the other hand, express a different understanding of Laurence's use of Biblical allusion:

> The significance of such allusions is not simply that Margaret Laurence is exploiting Biblical archetypes, but that having seen Hagar as an essentially tragic figure she has placed her in a modern setting and explored her point of view.[3]

Another critic, Barbara Hehner, is more pejorative in her views. She criticizes the author in the following manner:

> In the past, Laurence has given mythic dimensions to otherwise rather sketchy characters by suggesting that their relationship

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[1] Anne Thompson, "The Wilderness of Pride: Form and Image in The Stone Angel", Journal of Canadian Fiction, 4, No.3 (1975), 97.

[2] Sandra Djwa, "False Gods and the True Covenant: Thematic Continuity between Margaret Laurence and Sinclair Ross," Journal of Canadian Fiction, 1, No.1 (Winter 1972), 45.

[3] Denyse Forman and Uma Parameswaran, "Echoes and Refrains in the Canadian Novels of Margaret Laurence," The Centennial Review, 16, No. 3 (1972), 233.

to the protagonist re-enacts a Biblical situation.[4]

Hehner further contends that the Biblical myth does not always enhance the narrative. She continues:

> In A Jest of God particularly the demands of the myth with which Laurence was working made the realistic level of the novel less effective. . .All of Nick's Jacob-like revelations are made to Rachel in the course of normal conversation, and as has been pointed out, these monologues are not only boring but unconvincing.[5]

Linda Hutcheon, however, condones Laurence's use of Biblical analogy:

> In a story about personal freedom and feminine identity the choice of the name Hagar, which invokes the narrative of her Biblical namesake, is obviously approprate in terms of the structure of the plot.[6]

Hutcheon goes on to say that Laurence's use of Biblical allusion is not subtle. Comparing The Stone Angel with Atwood's The Edible Woman, she argues that Laurence tends to explicate the symbolism and allusion, leaving little to the imagination. She cites this as the reason for the "readability" and hence popularity of Laurence's novel.

However divergent the critics' opinions appear to be regarding the effectiveness of Laurence's Biblical allusion, all concur that the Biblical dimension provides both a unifying framework for the narrative and a universalizing effect upon character.

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[4]Barbara Hehner, "River of Now and Then:Margaret Laurence's Narratives," Canadian Literature, 74 (Autumn 1977), 54.

[5]Ibid., p.54.

[6]Linda Hutcheon, "Atwood and Laurence:Poet and Novelist," Studies in Canadian Literature, 3, No.2 (Summer 1978), 256.

Finally, it has been consistently postulated in this thesis that metaphor is one of the key literary devices Laurence employs to communicate her personal vision. And even though, as Hutcheon points out, she does not display the same "policy of metaphoric laissez-faire" as Atwood, nevertheless metaphor is used repeatedly and significantly as an integral part of the form and structure of every novel. Indeed, in one sense all of Laurence's novels are merely expanded metaphors. It is as if the author hopes to discover and reveal truth by juxtaposing apparently incongruous and incompatible images, such as a tombstone and an old lady, or a water-diviner and a writer of fiction. As one critic aptly observes with specific reference to The Diviners, Laurence establishes "the metaphoric equation of writing with 'magical' activities such as divining."[7]

Nevertheless, though metaphor, symbolism, and allusion help to elucidate the mysterious aspects of life, Laurence acknowledges the limitations of human comprehension and the inadequacy of language to communicate completely. In relation to this McCallum writes:

> Like the river that flows both ways, development of conscious understanding is never presented as a unilinear progression. Instead it is a hesitating movement towards perception, often thwarted by retreat into confusion and mystification.[8]

And addressing the problems of communicating, the same critic writes:

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[7]Ildiko de Papp Carrington, "'Tales in the Telling': The Diviners as Fiction about Fiction," Essays on Canadian Writing, 9 (Winter 1977/78), 160.

[8]Pamela McCallum, "Communication and History:Themes in Innis and Laurence, Studies in Canadian Literature, 3, No.1 (Winter 1978), 9.

> It is similarly important to understand that The Diviners is not merely a testament of faith in the divining power of either written or oral communication. The radical innovation of the novel lies in its recognition that all forms of communication are limited and distorted by the pressuring social structures they necessarily inhabit.[9]

To summarize, it has been illustrated that Laurence relies on symbolism, allusion, and metaphor to communicate her personal vision of the human condition. And even though she may tend to explicate her literary devices within the novel itself, there is still enough hermeneutic potential to interest many readers. Thus the author's insights may be assimilated into their own myths, and employed in their discovery of truth and search for personal identity.

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[9]McCallum, "Communication and History," p.9.

APPENDIX

Published books by Margaret Laurence in chronological order:

A Tree for Poverty (1954)

This Side Jordan (1960)

The Prophet's Camel Bell (1963)

The Tomorrow-Tamer (1963)

The Stone Angel (1964)

A Jest of God (1966)

Long Drums and Cannons (1968)

The Fire-Dwellers (1969)

A Bird in the House (1970)

Jason's Quest (1970)

The Diviners (1974)

Heart of a Stranger (1976)

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