CHAPTER IV

SISTERS’ NARRATIVES: A JEST OF GOD, THE FIRE-DEWELLERS
CHAPTER V

A BIRD IN THE HOUSE
CHAPTER IV

SISTERS' NARRATIVES: A JEST OF GOD, THE FIRE-DWELLERS

A Jest of God\(^1\) and The Fire-Dwellers\(^2\) are the only pair of novels in the Manawaka cycle. I have treated them together since the heroines in these novels are both sisters and both present questions that are central to the feminine predicament— the presentation of female subjectivity, about women’s relation to their cultural inheritance and whether the autobiographical form which has become the staple of women’s fiction can be made sufficiently expansive to contain wider social and political issues beyond personal self-scrutiny. Rachel Cameron’s and Stacey MacAindra’s narratives are “inner-space fiction.” This chapter has been divided into two sections wherein I have attempted to make a study of each of the novels separately. Questions and issues common to both the novels will be discussed at the end of the chapter. A Jest of God, like all other Manawaka novels is set in Manawaka, while The Fire-Dwellers is Laurence’s only Manawaka novel which is set in the city of Vancouver.

Laurence works within the tradition of realistic fiction and the stories of these two women’s lives offer no radical departure from traditional patterns of what women do. Rachel the unmarried schoolteacher is still unmarried and still caring for her mother at the end of the narrative, and Stacey the wife and mother-of-four looks forward to ‘mutating into a matriarch’ as she lies in bed beside her husband at the end of her story. Their stories do allow Rachel and Stacey to ‘breathe’ as fictional characters by registering contradictions between their outer and inner lives. At the same time, they focus the woman’s dilemma: caught within the inherited codes, how is a woman to express her deepest desires and fears? The answer is ‘Never openly’. Both sisters are imprisoned within the social decorum of silence and they both feel very embarrassed when, on occasions, they transgress those rules. Such narratives are bound

123
to be double-voiced, with their registration of the ordered surfaces of these women’s daily
lives, disrupted by their silent discourse of resistance through fantasies, daydreams and
nightmares.

The fantasy narratives within Rachel’s and Stacey’s interior monologues are structured as
direct imaginative responses to their social situations, for, to Laurence the possibilities of
subversion and revision lie within individuals and existing structures. She uses the
conventions of autobiographical fiction which privilege subjectivity in order to create
the spaces for her character’s dreams and fantasies and such breathing spaces in their turn
expose the limits of realist fiction as a construction of private or social reality.

A. A JEST OF GOD

As in The Stone Angel, the primary theme is survival. Survival continues to be the basic
theme in A Jest of God - the attempt of the personality to survive with some dignity, tilting
the load of excess baggage, that everyone carries, until the moment of death. Connected
to this theme are a set of interrelated themes - the incompleteness of human relationships resulting in
aloneness, the ambivalence between human relationships, miscommunication or lack of it, human
alienation, personal identity and the case of women in a male-dominated world - all of which result in
isolation.

The theme of isolation will be elaborately analysed in this chapter. Since ‘death’ isolates and ‘love’
is an attempt to cross the barriers of isolation this concept of ‘Death’ - a concept which figure
prominently in the novel is juxtaposed with love and is therefore shown as a recognition of isolation.
The next point is that isolation involves separation from other human beings as well as separation
from God. Rachel felt herself separated from both human beings as well as from God. Interestingly,
Manawakans, with their small-town mentality evaded both, ‘Death’ as well as ‘God’. Towards the
end of the chapter, Laurence’s theme of ancestors, the recognition of our roots and our past come
into the forefront. The strengths that were built into Manawaka by its pioneers and the terribi
inhibiting power of the towns constraints are at battle in the person of Rachel Cameron. Rach
realizes that despite the fact that Manawaka was the cause of her ordeal, at the same time, without them she has no identity at all. When she finally leaves for Vancouver, she realizes that Manawak must and will go with her always.

However, *A Jest of God* is not only a psychological study but a representation of socio-historical forces within Canada and of that country's relation to Great Britain. The tyrannical Mrs. Cameron is the mother country in its role as imperial power; Rachel is symbolic of “a Canada seeking to free itself from an authoritarian colonial past and to make its own future”; her tumor represents that colonial past and its authoritarian values, while its removal is the end of the colonial state of mind. Women's problems and the old identity question ‘Who am I’ plagues Rachel. In the end, Rachel’s partial victory is due to her “beginning to learn the rules of survival”. Rachel’s questions point to the central issues of the novel. How can a person feel “real” or authentic when she is divided within and against herself, when she speaks in conflicting voices, when she resents the family roots which support her, when she cannot communicate with those to whom she is most intimately joined? Her desire for, yet fear of, true intimacy - “constant communication” shows that for Laurence the notion of voice implies the whole intricate, painful enterprise of personal and literary communication. When Rachel says, though only to herself, “Nick - listen”, she is calling for the attention of a sympathetic audience. Hagar, in *The Stone Angel*, made the same silent appeal: “Listen. You must listen its important”. (AJG. p.282)

A.1.PLOT

*A Jest of God* is a vividly realized but claustrophobic novel, narrated by a woman on the edge of hysteria; Rachel’s life, conducted always under the watchword of “proper appearances” is exceedingly narrow. She is isolated from most human contact by the bond of duty to her mother.
The novel is in many ways the reverse of *The Stone Angel*. Rachel is younger (thirty-four years old), has not yet left Manawaka, has never rebelled against her family. The novel is the story of this spinster schoolteacher who lives with her widowed mother. The portrait of Rachel Cameron is almost a casebook study of an "old maid" obsessed by her fears and inhibitions.

Rachel Cameron, daughter of Niall Cameron, an undertaker in Manawaka, lives in uneasy misery with her widowed mother. Rachel and Mrs. Cameron live in a cosy flat, decorated to her mother's tastes. Rachel feels a mixture of resentment and envy towards her sister Stacey - married, with four children - living in Vancouver. Fourteen years ago, she had come back to Manawaka to teach and to support her mother. At this present crisis-point in her life, she cannot find any dignity at all, either in what she has done or in what she is doing. Her Principal Willard Siddley, seems a sadist to her; at the same time she is sickened because she is so aware of his physical presence; she envies Jimmy Doherty's mother Grace, and beats herself with guilt because of her frustrated maternalism. The fact that she is teaching, that she manages to get through each day and night, that she does manage to support, pamper and feel some indulgence for her mother, mean nothing to her. Rachel fears being thought eccentric, queer, a fool locked within her own fears and inhibitions, her strength constantly sapped by a self-debasing humility as destructive as Hagar's pride and the mirror image of that pride. Rachel is desperate with the need to reach out and touch some life outside her own, and yet she is bound by the negative imperatives that make up her own emotional life: the chafing ties of duty to her mother, the frustration of her surrogate maternal affection for young James Doherty whom she teaches and the guilt of her obsessive sexual fantasies. She is full of fear of everything within her claustrophobic circle of hell and of anything outside of it.

She lives in a female world and has not, like Hagar, defined herself through opposition to men. Her father is dead. She is dominated by a possessive, manipulative mother. Rachel is timid, passive, self-effacing, diffident; all that Hagar despises. She has never fully grown up, and the story is about her maturing. The novel is limited to only one summer though there are memories stretching into the past. A crisis forces her to act. She has a love affair with a former acquaintance, Nick Kazlik, and faces the possibility that she is pregnant. An odd joke,
A Jest of God, is being played on her. It is ironic that so timid and chaste a woman should find herself in this state. In view of her character, her family, her town, it is a catastrophe. It is doubly ironic that she is not really pregnant but has a benign tumour.

The plot of the novel describes a brief affair which Rachel has during the summer holiday with Nick Kazlik, a teacher from Winnipeg staying at his father’s farm near Manawaka. Rachel’s need for love is so strong that she overcomes all her fears and self-doubts and enters a passionate physical relationship with Nick, hoping that she will become pregnant. “If I had a child, I would like it to be yours.” This seems so unforced that I feel he must see it the way I do. And so restrained, as well, when I might have torn at him - Give me my children.” [AJG., p. 181]

But Nick withdraws from the relationship when Rachel confesses her desire for children. Ironically, this man who might have delivered Rachel from the tyranny of her mother and her own inhibitions is similarly bound to his parents. He is fettered by his brother’s death and his guilty refusal to carry on his father’s farm. He shows Rachel a snapshot of a boy, which she concludes is his son, but is actually of himself. Both Rachel and Nick are trapped by their need to seek out and establish their own identity in relation to their parents. But Rachel believes for a time that she has become pregnant and undergoes a desperate struggle deciding whether to accept or reject the child, a conflict waged between her deepest needs and desire and her instinct for social self-preservation. Her conviction that she is pregnant coincides with the discovery that Nick has left. This precipitates Rachel’s crisis, her turning point, and eventual release. The idea of abortion is repugnant. Manawaka calls the abortionist “angel-maker”. Yet birth would be only the beginning of difficulties, of eighteen years of financial, physical and emotional responsibility. (AJG, p.169.) The present, the past, the questionings and the fantasies of Rachel are all woven together and their strands join in the aftermath of her affair with Nick Kazlik. She does not lose Nick because she never had him in any committed sense and she does not bear his child as she hoped and feared she would do. (AJG, p.293). The struggle she endures has a powerfully liberating effect. As she comes out of the anaesthetic after the operation, she says, “I am the mother now.” Rachel’s real salvation and significance is that she is not a tragic figure, but just an
ordinary human being. In her despair at her possible pregnancy, when the time comes to make the final grand gesture to take the whiskey and the sleeping pills and throw it all away she does not defy and reject life. She adapts to its blows and its demands.

“At that moment when I stopped, my mind wasn’t empty or paralyzed. I had one clear and simple thought. They will all go on in some how, all of them but I will be dead as stone and it will be too late then to change my mind.” (AJG, p.170)

Rachel does learn to accept to live with her limitations and life’s. “I am the mother now”. These words are her key to freedom and an acceptance of herself as she is. As Nick could not be God for her, so she must not be God for her mother. Her choices are human and humanly limited and she makes one of them - the decision to move out Manawaka. The finding of decision and spirit, the affirming of the future, is in Rachel’s context a great victory.

A.2. NARRATIVE

The entire narrative of A Jest of God centers round the character of Rachel Cameron. As such, a major part of this section will be focussed on her character, a study of which will throw light on the major thematics of the book. These have already been mentioned in the introductory sections of this chapter. Fear is the dominant force and the true subtext of Rachel’s narrative is the fear of death.

Isolated within her own mind and body, she is most of the time estranged from other people and she is sometimes estranged from herself. In this section, I shall also investigate Rachel’s odd splittings of consciousness. Manawaka has also contributed to the personality of Rachel Cameron. The strengths that were built into Manawaka by its pioneers - and also the terrible inhibiting power of the town’s constraints - are at battle in the person of Rachel Cameron. A Jest of God is the story of Rachel’s ordeal and of her limited victory.
Thus we see that Rachel begins totally in chains, some of her own making, but others of her parents, her ancestors and the town of Manawaka's. She resents the chains, but at the same time without them she has no identity at all. She could not stand on her own strength. When the book ends, she has shaken free the binding - supporting chains and she realizes the pitiful smallness of her strength. But she also realizes that what strength she has, she must use and that Manawaka an inheritance and the source of her identity - must - and will - go with her always.

A.2.1. RACHEL CAMERON'S NARRATIVE

Rachel Cameron's narrative opens with herself as subject engaged in an act of simultaneous translation of what she hears in the world outside:

The wind blows low, the wind blows high. The snow comes falling from the sky, Rachel Cameron says she'll die. For the want of the golden city

They are not actually chanting my name, of course, I only hear it that way from where I am watching at the classroom window. (*AJG*, p. 1)

In this interior monologue there is no harmonious relation between subject and object. As Rachel stands inside the classroom she is haunted by the discontinuities between her inner and outer worlds and at the same time. She is conscious of the doubleness of perceptions. She leads "a strangely pendulum life", oscillating between the world of social convention and her inner fantasy life. Confined within the boundaries of her role as decorous unmarried school teacher and dutiful daughter, Rachel's silent monologue insistently questions that image and registers her deep dissent and self-division.

Though set in Manawaka and surrounded by the spaces of the prairie, Rachel's narrative takes no account of vastness, for the spaces she inhabits are all interior - the schoolroom, the
apartment she shares with her mother above the Japonica Funeral Chapel and the space inside her own skull. There are a few significant excursions outside and a final leave-taking but this narrative is in every way an interior monologue.

Laurence described Rachel as 'a potential hysteric who does not for quite a while realise this about herself'. If hysteria has to do with 'the mind's internal divisions, self-alienation, self estrangement and a splitting of consciousness', then Rachel displays many of these characteristics. Her consciousness is dominated by gaps in comprehension and by the untranslatability of language. In her mind words separate themselves from meaning or at best exist in unstable relationships, so that language becomes the agent not of human communication and self-expression but of alienation. Her images of 'the blue-painted dogmen snarling outside the walls, stealthily learning the words of the children's skipping rhymes (AJG, p.2) or of Dr. Moreau's beastmen prowling and waiting, 'able to speak but without comprehension' (AJG, p.32) suggest her apprehension of the sinister threat within words. This perception is linked with St. Paul's text, 'Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian unto me' (AJG, p.135) It is not so much the fear of open utterance that deters Rachel when she is invited to go to the Manawaka Tabernacle of the 'Risen and Reborn' where some of the congregation have received the gift of tongues, but rather a fear of the incomprehensible.

Rachel's language does not issue from a unified centre of consciousness; rather, it issues through a rift in consciousness as words deformed and fragmented rise unbidden to her lips. As speaker she is not responsible for her words, and yet their origin is within herself. Rachel's outburst is similar to Breuer's account of Anna O's hysterical symptom of speaking in a polyglot language which simultaneously encoded and hid her repressed desires and fears.

It is the fear of death which is the true subtext of her narrative. As the daughter of an undertaker living above the mortuary, Rachel is obsessed by the forbidden place of her childhood and its mysteries continue to haunt her dreams.
The stairs descending to the place where I am not allowed. The silent people are there...He is behind the door I cannot open. And his voice- his voice- so I know he is lying there among them, lying in a state, king over them. He can’t fool me. (AJG, p.19)

Death is a subject forbidden by her father and excluded from the house by her mother. Rachel’s mother had an interesting fear of the touch of both death and life, a double fear that her daughter has picked up. George Bowering makes the connection between sex and death which Rachel’s narrative makes without comment and its transition from erotic fantasy to the death dream quoted above. In Manawaka death is rude, unmannerly, not to be spoken to in the street (AJG, p.13). ‘Unmannerly ‘ and ‘forbidden’ are words applied both to sex and to death, and Rachel’s narrative enacts her exorcism of the one through the other. Nick Kazlik with his memories of his dead twin brother offers a shadowy parallel to Rachel’s obsession, though they are both too enclosed in their private places even as lovers to give any kind of mutual rescue.

Thus we see that Rachel is the “old maid” humanized and dignified. “This is a person, certainly flimsy and perhaps gutless, no heroics, no promethean pride here, but a living human being capable of growth and demanding respect”.

Rachel is not brave. She is plummeted and buffeted by every fear she conjures up and yet even her range of fearing is narrow. Her cruel self-portraits constitute an attempt to deal with the limbo she inhabits. Rachel sees herself as a skinny sapling servicing a dog, a scampering giraffe, gaunt crane, lean grey-hound on a beach, cross of bones and inhibited ostrich walking carefully through a formal garden.

This fearful suspension between other states perceived as real is depicted in grotesque and macabre images as Rachel tries unsuccessfully to sleep. The night is a gigantic carnival wheel turning in blackness; glued to the wheel, Rachel is powerless to stop its pointless circling; “I see scratch of gold against the black and they form into jagged lines,
teeth, a knife edge, the sharpened hackles of dinosaurs (AJG, pp. 18, 15). Rachel, "tries to break the handcuffs of her own past, but she is self-perceptive enough to recognize that for her, no freedom from the shackledom of the ancestors can be total. Her emergence from the tomb-like atmosphere of her extended childhood is a partial victory. She is no longer so much afraid of herself as she was. She is beginning to learn the rules of survival." 

Her colleague Calla offers friendship but Rachel is embarrassed by Calla’s differentness, by her uninhibited sloppiness and by the fundamentalism of her Pentacostal religion:

“If only Calla wouldn’t insist on talking about the Tabernacle in Mother’s hearing. Mother thinks the whole thing is weird in the extreme, and as for anyone speaking in a clarion voice about their beliefs - it seems indecent to her, almost in the same class as what she calls foul language. Then I get embarrassed for Calla, and ashamed of being embarrassed, and would give anything to shut her up or else to stop minding.”

Rachel turns back to her friend in time of trouble. Calla’s non-judgmental acceptance, unqualified offer of help, and shared strength help Rachel to discover her own strength. We could draw the conclusion that, like other protagonists in the Manawaka cycle, Rachel perceives three worlds with herself caught in the middle, “a weak area between millstones.(AJG, p.94) The remark has psychological and social analogues. Psychologically, the first world (Rachel’s world) belongs to her pupils and the apparently self-confident teenagers they so rapidly become. The third world belongs to her mother and the mores of Manawaka. Both worlds exclude Rachel and isolation generates fear.

We shall now analyse the techniques in the novel.
Laurence’s interest in multimedia techniques culminates in the record which accompanies *The Diviners*. In *A Jest of God* it takes the form of children’s chants, folk-songs, hymns. The chant that introduces the novel evokes time passing, change and yearning: a yearning for admiration, respect, power, sexual fulfillment, all things denied to Rachel in her view. The cryptic advice to Spanish dancers to get out of town is prophetic with regard to Rachel’s decision to leave Manawaka. It hints at her need to transcend the psychic prison of local attitudes. The golden city, Zion or New Jerusalem in Biblical typology, suggests a fulfillment which is both physical and spiritual. This is picked up in the Anglican’s solo, “Jerusalem the Golden” and in the Pentecostal rendering of *Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanual/shall come to thee, O Israel*. Rachel’s fears are excluding her from this joyful state.

The metaphors in the opening scene are largely demonic. Time is imagined as a process leading to confined boxes (the school, her classroom) which suggest prisons and coffins. Power is arbitrary (the “thin giant She” can pick any colored chalk, write anything at all on the board) and is ultimately illusory. Growing up is a grotesque distortion of the child’s body, leading to the final distortion of the undertaker’s act. Conversely, the images at the end are full of hope and affirmation. Heading west, the bus flies smoothly and confidently like a great owl. The possibilities imagined by Rachel are comic, whimsical, but largely pleasurable. Time in Laurence’s comic fiction, is seen to play a redeeming role. Orientals, in Manawaka, fare worse than Ukrainians. The Regal Cafe is owned and run by Lee Toy, a dried shell of a man who seems ageless. Laurence’s implicit comment on Toy’s heroism and on two contrasting cultures, Oriental and Western, is caught in the two pictures which hang on the walls of the Regal Cafe. One is a Coca-Cola poster, the other, a Chinese scroll with a mountain and solitary tiger. Laurence discovers “the extraordinary within the pedestrian”. Nick’s inner demons, Toy’s lonely pain, reflects Rachel’s fears and grounds them in a specific soil.
A.2.3. JESTS

A Jest of God hints at a dark god whose ways are not only mysterious but cruel. Rachel thinks that God, if he exists must be some kind of brutal joker. She sees her plight as a “knifing” reality, “grotesque, unbearably a joke if viewed from the outside”. (AJG, p.151) Her life is one long fight with God; she prays with no certainty of being heard; and speaks of God to her mother, wondering if this is a partial triumph or the last defeat. (AJG, p.151) The fool pattern modulates from the demonic to the apocalyptic form. Calla reads from St. Paul: “If any man among you thinketh himself to be wise, let him become a fool, that he may be wise.” The word God recurs four times in the novel’s last short paragraph, composed of thirteen words. The last sentence identifies God with mankind as Divine fool. Mercy/Grace/Pity are the three verbs of the closing sentences. This is the culmination of an intricate pattern on the folly of fear and the fear of folly. Wreathing with it, Rachel is ready to smile at “The fool of a fear, that poor fear of fools”; I should be honoured to be of that company. (AJG, p.151) Rachel’s quest like Hagar’s is a search for freedom and joy.

The title, rich in ambiguities, relates to an image-pattern of fools, clowns, jesters. The silent dead on Cameron’s first floor wear clowns masks. Mrs. Cameron and her bridge playing friends have clown voices. Rachel continually sees her tall, awkward body as clown-like grotesque. Nick’s father was Nestor the Jester to the local children when he delivered milk; senile and mourning for his dead son, Nestor’s plight suggests the black joke of a cruel deity. Rachel thinks that God, if he exists must be some kind of a brutal joker. She sees her plight as a “knifing reality”: grotesque, unbearably a joke if viewed from the outside”. (AJG, p.151) Her life is one long fight with God.

Variations on jests-cosmic and human- include the speaking in tongues at the Tabernacle. The speaking in tongues, which has been an object of terror, broadens out into a symbol of the difficulties of human communication, the mystery - yet important- of what Mannoni calls the Other. Rachel calls it “God’s irony - that we should for so long believe it is only the few who
speak in tongues” (AJG, p.134). St. Paul speaks of many kinds of voices in the world, none without significance: a statement, Rachel thinks, not of what should be but what is.

A jest of history is reflected in Manawaka’s cultural composition, half Scottish, half Ukrainian. Both groups came because of poverty and hope. Rachel sees the two as oil and water: “The Ukrainians knew how to be better grain farmers, but the Scots knew how to be almightier than anyone but God”. (AJG, p.65) Pride and anger sustained the first few generations of Scots in Manitoba, but by Rachel’s time the backbone has “splintered”. She thinks that pride is not her problem, but her fears stem partly from a pride of appearance that acts to isolate her. In that, Rachel’s problem is similar to Hagar’s: “Because anyone who is desperately afraid of having human weakness, although they feel very unself-confident, as Rachel did, is in fact suffering from spiritual pride”. Nick remembers the alienation felt by Ukrainian children in a town where the power structure, the hegemony, was Scottish. To Mrs. Cameron, Ukrainians and Galicians or Bohunks are unfit companions for her children.

We could conclude this section with the knowledge that Rachel is not a tragic figure like Hagar, who was the knowing, willful agent of her own thwarted existence; rather, she is an ironic figure like Eliot’s Prufrock, repressed and self-conscious. The closing lines of the novel direct us to the same achievement of self-knowledge and wry self-acceptance that Eliot gives to his protagonist.

A.2.4. THE TWIN MOTIF IN A JEST OF GOD

In this novel Laurence has used the twin motif very generously. Laurence’s focus on the twin motif reflects both the circumstances of her own life in the early 1960’s and also a ‘Zeitgeist. Much of mid-1960’s thought seems to have been directed toward speculation about doubleness. An ambidextrous universe, a bihemispheric brain, a double helical structure of DNA, the fundamental genetical material; all these concepts were being popularized, generally discussed and absorbed into the contemporary 1960’s.
Several much discussed books which appeared around the time, Margaret Laurence was writing *A Jest of God* showed interest in the twin phenomena. An example is, Martin Gardner’s *The Ambidextrous Universe*. The physicists came out with the hypothesis that two chains in complementary relation running in opposite directions as a double right handed helix, form an acceptable model of essential substance. In the 1960’s major experiments on right- and left-handedness had led to a cognate vision of twining - this time within the brain. Concepts in general circulation were summarized in papers such as R.W. Sperry’s Hemisphere ‘Disconnection and Unity in Conscious Awareness’, and J. Lery’s ‘Differential Perception capacities in major and minor Hemisphere’.

These concepts moved from the formal prose of science into the popular stream of thought as a concept of twinship, metaphors of equal and opposite identities.

In *A Jest of God* Laurence uses the twin-motif subtly but persistently. From the time we meet the ‘Venusian twins, blonde images of seductive young femininity, through the moment when we hear about the unmarried girl who has given birth to twins, we move towards a central focus on the mystery of Nick Kazlik’s twinship, a correlative of the doubleness in Nick and in many other aspects of the rich mysterious world created in this novel. Nick Kazlik is literally a twin. The death of his brother Steve has damaged his self-sufficiency and his self-image. Rachel Cameron’s link with her sister Stacey is looser than twinship, but this relationship, seen in conjunction with Nick’s, similarly suggests the power of an over close sibling relationship. Nick’s troubling twinship is echoed in the hurtful way Rachel contrasts herself, and is contrasted by her mother, with Stacey. Not only in their sibling situations are Rachel and Nick ‘twinned’. As alien in town, trained teacher, grown up child in strained relation with one parent, devoted to the other, bedeviled by remembered webs, Nick is Rachel’s double.

Critical moments in Rachel’s life are marked by allusions to twins. In an early scene Rachel, on River Street, encounters the two ‘Venusian ... like twins from other space. Their fantastic silvery beehive hair-styles draws Rachel into defensive thought about her own molebrown hair. Their twins’ names Carol and Clare, clearly call Rachel into a first sharp consciousness
of her own duality. She is a double being, her external drabness belying the opulence of her dreams. Again, near the end, in a scene set in the ‘Ladies’ at the bus station another pair of giggling girls appears or rather, are heard, for one is hidden, while the other peers obsessively into the mirror. Rachel is hurt into distress over what is now a more serious disparity between her inner feelings and her outward position in society. This is the moment when she recognises the probability that she is pregnant, caught, in the consequences of romantic desire.

A linked use of the twin motif begins when Rachel’s mother gossips about Cassie, the unmarried Stewart girl who has had twins. Near the end of the novel, when Rachel faces her pregnancy she thinks of Cassie, who has kept her twins. Cassie’s twins have helped Rachel actualise her dilemma and accept her lonely responsibility for the child she presumes she is carrying.

Like Nick, Rachel too is partially deformed, psychologically, by her relationship with her sister. Throughout the novel, she thinks resentfully of Stacey, who escaped from Manawaka and who has found a husband and produced children. Nick and Rachel both move out of twin, out of unbearable situations, but they move in opposite directions. ‘Nick and Rachel are equally narcissistic, apparently equally unable to achieve the self-integration necessary for a truly free life;’ Rachel and Nick, equal in professional commitment, in strong sexuality and in seriousness, are set inexorably against each other, in spite of their equality or perhaps because of it.

Here again Laurence reflects the Zeitgeist of 1960’s of all the polarities of the period, such as the radical setting of young against old, of have-nots against haves, of black against white, of drop-outs against establishment and the sharpest and tensest of apportionings came between men and women. The militant feminists inculcated awareness of a long subordination. The message percolated that women must move away from dependence, through flight, self-discovery and female network. Rachel is a powerful, funny, embarrassing study of womanhood in the double-edged 1960’s.
A.3. THE THEME OF ISOLATION

An analysis of this chapter would be incomplete without an elaborate analysis of the theme of isolation. Although on a superficial level, *A Jest of God* appears to be a love story with an unhappy ‘ending’, the central relationships in the novel are not confined, static, but multiple and ambivalent. This section is an attempt to prove this fact by focussing on the main relationships: Rachel’s relationship with her father, with her mother, with her pupil James Doherty, with Nick, her lover, with her “child”, and with God. What emerges is the fact that relationships are sought after in order to escape from a sense of isolation. Rachel searches for permanent relationships in order to reach out, to escape out of herself into another’s identity. The dominant relationship in the novel between Rachel and her child is also an attempt to find the elusive personal identity.

Death as the recognition of isolation is the subject matter of the next subsection. The true nature of our individuality is revealed through death, the reason why its truth is evaded by the people of Manawaka. Rachel however is fascinated by Death; it both obsesses and frightens her. Rachel’s encounter with the concept of death, and the juxtaposition of love and death will be discussed in detail. Towards the end we understand that despite her fascination with death, Rachel fights for survival. Hence we see that while death isolates, then love is an attempt to cross the barriers of isolation. But isolation may involve not only separation from other human beings but a separation from God, a discussion of which will be provided in this section.

The sub-section on God is an attempt to understand Manawaka’s treatment of the God figure. Manawakans evade a real recognition of God as they do of Death. Laurence’s title *A Jest of God* in itself suggests that the novel is concerned with something beyond human limitations, with a God all-powerful but mocking; who as an outsider and looks down upon a world which is “distorted, bizarre, grotesque, unbearably a joke.” Rachel is of the opinion that the congregation uses religion to escape from isolation into a relationship with those in their circle and with God. Like all her other relationships, Rachel’s relationship with God is also ambivalent. Doubting the reality of God she demands his existence and finally realises that
even God cannot solve her problems. In the end Rachel is forced to face the essential isolation of the individual: "We mortal millions live alone."

A.3.1. IDENTIFYING ISOLATION IN THE NOVEL

Let us begin by identifying the sense of isolation that pervades the novel, a malaise that afflicts not only Rachel, but all the characters in the novel. In this novel Margaret Laurence suggests that every man is an island, a theme more typical of the twentieth century. All the characters in the novel, minor as well as major, are isolated. Only the young seem to be unaware of this and Rachel envies their surface sophistication, their otherworldliness. The girls of sixteen are "from outer-space. Another race. Venusians". The young lovers in the cemetery exist in and for themselves, and James Dougherty pulls away from his mother, wanting "to be his own and on his own." The old huddle together pathetically, to evade a sense of their own isolation, their subjection to time. The old men sit in the sunlight on the steps of the Queen Victoria Hotel, or gather by the oak counter in twos and threes to recall the past, their faces crinkled and unshaven, their throats scrawny with prominent adam’s apples. The old ladies play bridge and gossip, yearning for the days of Claudette Colbert and Ruby Keeler, their voices "shrill, sedate, not clownish to their ears but only to mine, and of such unadmitted sadness I can scarcely listen and yet cannot stop listening." Mrs. Cameron at first seems shallow in her martyred and predatory coyness, but later to Rachel’s sharpened perception she becomes pathetic too, fearing the outside world as a child fears a dark cellar; Rachel has always blamed her mother for her father’s withdrawal from life, but the rejection, she comes to see was on both sides, and Mrs. Cameron mumbles in halfsleep, "Niall always thinks I am so stupid." And the middle generation too are alone. Calla lives with a songless canary, who does not even notice her, for she finds comfort in listening to some movement in the darkness of the night, and Rachel asks herself at the Tabernacle, as she sees her in new circumstances, "Don’t I know her at all?" Willard Sidley, the self-possessed Principal who has both attracted and repelled Rachel, she now views in a new light as asking her for something, perhaps condolence and she wonders: "if he’s asked for it before, and if at times he’s asked for various other things I never suspected, admiration or reassurance or whatever it
was he didn’t own in sufficient quantity.” And even funny little Hector, her father’s successor in the Japonica Chapel, she sees for a moment of truth “living there behind his eyes.”

In his own way Nick also faces the same problem of loneliness. He is ambivalent about his Ukrainian heritage; he both resents and admires his father; he feels a threat to his identity, as he shows by alluding to his dead, twin brother:

“I used to be glad we weren’t the same, that’s all. How would you like there to be someone exactly the same as yourself?”

“I’ve never thought about it. Would it make a person feel more real or less so? Would there be some constant communication, with no doubt about knowing each other’s meanings, as though you yourselves were invisibly joined?”

Thus we see that human relationships are a reaching out, an attempt to cross the barriers of the “unplumb’d, salt, estranging sea.” But the contact is spasmodic, momentary. After a while, each draws back into its separate world and the moment is lost.

A.3.2. AMBIVALENT NATURE OF RELATIONSHIPS

Having identified loneliness and isolation in the novel, we see that relationships become essential in order to combat isolation. Let us analyse this by making a study of Rachel’s relationships and their ambivalent nature. The central relationships in this novel are not confined, static, but multiple and ambivalent. Rachel both protects James and threatens him; she loves her mother “as much as most children”, yet wishes her dead. She longs for a child, yet she hesitates. Even the relationship between twins is complex and shifting. Rachel considers Nick and Steve and wonders if twinship itself is an insurance against loneliness: “Would it make a person feel more real or less so? Would there be some constant communication, with no doubts about knowing each other’s meanings, as through your selves
were invisibly joined?” But Nick denies this: Rachel comes to realize that the Nick she knows, like her father, exists only in her mind.

But the dominant relationship of the novel is not between lovers, but between mother and child where, for a period of several months, two human beings do exist within one skin. The child, Rachel thinks, “is lodged there now. Lodged meaning living there. How incredible that seems.”

Even in part II, the summer with Nick, the desire for this child to replace her loneliness is strong. Nick’s reply, “I m not God, I can’t solve anything,” is primarily a protection of his own independence, his ego, but it is also recognition that Rachel demands too much of human relationships. Like her sister Stacey and Gracey Dougherty, she seeks a child for her own fulfillment, to escape her isolation as a separate being, and God alone can grant her freedom.

In the first part of the novel, Rachel satisfies her maternal instincts through her classes of seven-year-olds, although even then she realizes that the phrase “my children” is a threat to her as it is not to Calla. She faces the summer with regret, for “this year’s children will be gone then, and gradually will turn into barely recognized faces, no connection left, only hello sometimes on the street.” Later she tries to explain to Nick:

I see them around for years after they’ve left me, but I don’t have anything to do with them. There’s nothing lasting. They move on, and that’s It’s such a brief thing. I know them only for a year, and then I see them changing but I don’t know them any more.

Her affection for James Dougherty, her “exasperated tenderness”, her belief in his uniqueness and her contempt for the moronic mother who doesn’t deserve to have him”, are clearly the result of such a substitution. For after the summer, as she watches the children entering her classroom, “two by two, all the young animals into my ark”, she realizes that there will never be another James, “no one like that, not now, not any more”.

141
Yet it is in Part I that she learns the true nature of the mother-child relationship. She has despised the possessiveness which leads her sister Stacey to rush home to Vancouver and her children after only a week's visit: "I know they're quite okay, and safe, but I don't feel sure unless I'm there, and even then I never feel sure — I don't think I can explain — it's just something you feel about your own kids, and you can't help it." After observing Grace Dougherty with James, Rachel comprehends.

But while she understands this in principle, she has not accepted it in fact; she too wants a child to shelter and be sheltered by, and the discovery that she carries not a child but a tumour she attributes to "A Jest of God". Her wail is like that of the other Rachel "wordless and terrible", and Rachel "weeping for her children … [who] would not be comforted because they are not." The children of Rama were real; their destruction was real. Rachel Cameron’s child is an illusion; yet it is Rachel’s recognition of this illusion which ironically frees her. “I am the mother now,” Rachel’s apparently cryptic remark under anesthesia, indicates her acceptance of her role as adult and mother to her aging child. She comes to see that under her mother’s foxiness, her calculated emotional appeals and demands, lies a terrible fear of isolation and desertion which is the lot of every human being, even mothers. Her mother is like a child, totally dependent, totally trusting: “She believes me because she must, I guess. If I came back late a thousand nights, I now see, and then told her I’d be away an hour she’d still believe me.” And while Rachel resents her mother’s dependence, even wishes her dead, she concedes, “I do care about her. Surely I love her as much as most parents love their children. I mean, of course, as much as most children love their parents.” She agrees that, to take her mother to Vancouver, away from home and memories, is cruel, unfair, and may even cause her death. But she also realizes “It isn’t up to me. It never was. I can take care, but only some. I’m not responsible for keeping her alive.” Her present child is elderly; her future children may be only her school-children, yet she comprehends at last that tie of motherhood does not ensure immunity from isolation: “It may be that my children will always be temporary, never to be held. But so are every one’s.”

While human relationships are an attempt to counter isolation, death is a recognition of it, and thus it plays a central role in A Jest of God. Donne’s statement, “any man’s death diminishes
me, because I am involved in Mankind” approaches death as a destruction of human community. In Laurence, however, death merely accentuates our consciousness of an isolation which already exists. Nick and Steve, though twins are separate identities and the death of Steve does not effectually alter the personality of Nick. Rachel’s father and mother are separated not by death but by life, and similarly, Rachel lost her father long before he entered the world of the dead he had always preferred. Rachel’s “child” is lost, yet it has been not living but dead, a symbol of Rachel’s negation of life. It is only in facing death we are able to assess life, and to recognize our own isolation.

It is because death reveals the true nature of individuality that its truth is evaded by the people of Manawaka. Hector changes “Japonica Funeral Chapel” people do not die; they “pass on”. When Rachel suggests that death is unmentionable, Hector replies: “Let’s face it, most of us could get long without it.” He succeeds as a business man because he understands the human psychology of death. “What am I selling?” he asks Rachel, and answers himself: “One” Relief. Two: Modified Prestige.” He alleviates the panic of the bereaved when faced with the body, and handles all the details according to three price ranges, to simplify problem of choice concerning oak or pine, velvet or nylon: “They want to know that everything’s been done properly, of course, but the less they have to do with it, the better... you take your average person, now. It’s simply nicer not to have to think about all the stuff”. This refusal to face death reaches its extreme in the cosmetic skills of the undertaker who paints and prettifies “the last dried shell... for decent burial” It is not merely a denial of reality for appearance but an attempt to make death look like life, to negate the difference. The ultimate form of his denial is seen in Mr. Kazlik who, in his senility, asks after Rachel’s father and calls Nick by the name of his dead brother.

Yet this denial of death is healthier than Rachel’s fascination with it which both obsesses and frightens her. She emerges out of a background of death, as the daughter of the local undertaker who prefers his silent companions downstairs to friends or family. As a child, Rachel was not allowed to go down into the funeral parlour, and she came to believe that there must be some power of the dead which might grasp and hold her as it had held her father. Her mother is morbidly concerned with death, saving the pink nylon nightgowns sent by Stacey
every Christmas "for hospital and last illness, so she'll die demurely." Even the house itself, with the Japonica Chapel downstairs, represents a world of shadow and nightmare; the dense growth of spruce trees surrounds Rachel and separates her from the world outside:

No other trees are so darkly sheltering, shutting out prying eyes or the sun in the summer, the spearheads of them taller than house, the low branches heavy, reaching down to the ground like the green black feathered strong-boned wings of giant and extinct birds.

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." Here the contrast is accentuated between the real world of wind and snow and the illusory world of the child and adolescent. "She is handsome, she is pretty, / she is the queen of the golden city." The choice is simple: the dream or death, and it is her failure to move from the simple alternatives of the child to the more complex understanding of the adult which marks Rachel's delayed development.

In part I, Rachel's world is alternated between dream and nightmare, love and horror. The images of the night are Poe-like, demonic. Night brings "Hell on wheels"; it becomes "a gigantic ferris wheel turning in blackness, very slowly... interminably slow. And I am glued to it, or wired, like paper." The essence of Hell is its isolation, its annihilation of humanity by sucking it into meaninglessness or tearing it part, skin from bone:

The slow whirling begins again, the night's wheel that turns and turns, pointlessly when I close my eyes, I scratches of gold against the black and they form into jagged lines, teeth, a knife's edge, the sharp hard hackles of dinosaurs.

Countering these horrors are scenes of love: the dream lover with blurred features, under the sheltering wall of pine and tamarack, or the Egyptian girl and Roman soldiers, banqueting on
oasis melons, dusty grapes and wine in golden goblets, and copulating sweetly under the eyes of slaves.

A.3.3. The JUXTAPOSITION OF LOVE AND DEATH

This occurs not only in the dream world but in the real one. The sequence of Rachel’s first visit to the Kazlik house and her conversation with Hector in the Japonica Chapel is central to the structure of the novel. But earlier, Rachel comes upon the young lovers in the cemetery, as spring replaces winter and the crocuses bloom palely against the grass of the last year “now brittle and brown like the ancient bones of birds”. Despite her fascination with death in Part I, Rachel fights for survival even here. She wears a white raincoat so that she can be seen by a driver on a dark night; she worries that she might set fire to the house by smoking in bed. The turning point in her movement away from death and back to life occurs in the scene with Hector in the Japonica Chapel, where she relinquishes her hold upon the past and the dream of her father, not as she was but as she wanted him to be: “Nothing is as it used to be, and there’s nothing left from then, nothing of him, not a clue.” She recognizes in her voice a bitterness, “some hurt I didn’t know was there”, and concedes the truth of Hector’s claim “I would bet he had the kind of life he wanted most.” Her father had chosen his own path in life, isolation from human contact and communication with the dead. In turning away from this, Rachel comes to accept both her father’s right to his choice and his rejection of her:

If my father had wanted otherwise, it would have been otherwise. Not necessarily better, but at least different. Did he ever try to alter it? Did I, with mine? Was that what he needed most, after all, not ever to have to touch any living thing? Was that why she came to life after he died?

She refuses suicide—“They will all go on in somehow, but I will be dead as stone and it will be too late then to change my mind”—and faces life, with resignation “Everything is no more possible than it was. Only one thing has changed: I’m left with it.” And she accepts too a limited form of free will: “I will have it [the child] because I want it and because I cannot do anything else.” Laurence’s “modified pessimism”, as she calls it in “Ten years sentences”, is
the recognition with Edgar in *King Lear* that life must be endured, that we are not free to
determine the manner of our death any more than our birth.

While death isolated, then love is an attempt to cross the barriers of isolation. But isolation
may involve not only separation from other human beings but a separation from God. The
modern doubt of God which implies too a sense of loss is conveyed by Arnold’s lines: “Who
renders vain their deep desire? / A God, a God their severance ruled!” and the vagueness of “a
God” suggests the vain searching for some power of justice and order beyond human life, a
theme more explicit in “Dover Beach”. Laurence’s tittle “*A Jest of God*” in itself suggests that
the novel is concerned with something beyond human limitations, with a God all-powerful but
mocking who as an outsider looks down upon a world “distorted, bizarre, grotesque,
unbearable a joke”.

The people of Manawaka evade a real recognition of God as they do of death. The church
which the Camerons attend is tasteful and controlled, essentially unreal like the scene on the
stained glass window of “a pretty and clean-cut Jesus, expiring gently and with absolutely no
inconvenience, no gore, no pain, just this nice and slightly effeminate insurance salesman
who, somewhat incongruously, happens to be clad in a toga.” The minister is “careful not to
say anything which might be upsetting,” for the large part of the congregation is like Mrs.
Cameron: “If the Reverend MacElfrish should suddenly lose his mind and speak of God with
anguish or joy, or out of some need should pray with fierce humility as though God has to be
there, Mother would be shocked to the core.” The superficiality of this view of God is
underlined when Rachel invokes Him as the only authority on her mother’s heart, in place of
Doctor Raven: “God? She shrills, as though I had voiced something unspeakable,” and then,
as an ex-choir member, she hastens to concede” “Well, certainly, dear, of course, all that goes
without saying”.

Specially contrasted with this empty ceremony are, on the one hand, her father’s professed
atheism and on the other, is the flamboyant exuberance of The Tabernacle of the Risen and
Reborn, with its pictures of Jesus “bearded and bleeding, his heart exposed and bristling with
thorns like scarlet pin-cushion.” Its pulpit is draped in white velvet, and the wood is
“blossoming in bunches of grapes and small sharp birds with beaks uplifted”. While the congregation of the Reverend MacElfrish denies sensation and a direct communication with God, the people of the Tabernacle suggests a Hell, dark cold and “foetid with the smell of feet and damp coats. It’s like some crypt, dead air and staleness, deadness, silence.” The room becomes clausrophobic, “swollen with the sound of a hymn macabre” and the people “crouching, all of them, all around me, crouching and waiting”. Their exhibitionism is, to Rachel, indecent: “People should keep themselves to themselves – that’s the only decent way.” Yet the congregation of the Tabernacle uses religion to escape from themselves and their own isolation into a relationship with those in their circle and with God. Their escape may be momentary; Calla must return to her room and her songless canary. It may be unreal, for the speaking in tongues too is illusionary. Yet Rachel is horrified not because she understands the unreality, but because she fears public exposure of her inner self. It is not only Calla’s admission of love for her which makes her feel violated’ it is her denial of commitment, not only to Calla but to God. She cannot share Calla’s religious experience for she will not accept its premises.

Rachel’s relationship to God is ambivalent. She observed the Sunday ritual of church to save argument with her mother she does nor believe: “I didn’t say God hadn’t died recently, within the last few years, but a long time ago, longer than I could remember, for I could not actually recall a time when He was alive.” Yet she cannot accept his non-existence. After her exposure in the Tabernacle, she marks, “If I believed, I could have to detest God for the brutal joker He would be if I existed.” And later, when she learns of the “child”: “I could argue with you (if you were there) until doomsday. How dare you? My trouble, perhaps is that I have expected justice. Without being able to give it.”

Doubting the reality of God, she demands His existence. She comes to admit the exaggeration of both her “monstrous self-pity” and her self-abasement, indeed her uniqueness to God among millions of beings. And she confesses her deep need:

“Help- if You will- me whoever that may be. And whoever you are, or where...we seem to have fought for a long time, I and you... 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”.

147
Yet even when she turns to God, not through “faith, or belief, or the feeling of deserving anything” but through desperation, she has not yet renounced her own desired. For having accepted life instead of death, the child instead of abortion, she is not prepared for the final irony, the tumour: “Oh my God. I didn’t bargain for this. Not this.”

Thus she finally faces her own isolation. Even God cannot solve her problems. She admitted earlier that she imagined horrors and exaggerated them, to make the real ones seem lesser. Now there are no more horrors, or she no longer needs them. She has feared to be a fool, but now she has no more fears, for “I really am one.” Like King Lear she achieves wisdom though folly, as St. Paul has said: “If any man among you thinketh himself to be wise, let him become a fool, that he may be wise.” Her reply to her mother’s question that God may know her future surprises Rachel herself, although she does not yet know whether this is “some partial triumph... (or) only the last defeat”. But her new wisdom brings compassion, not only for men, isolated and alone, but for God Himself, isolated from man: “God’s mercy on reluctant jesters. God’s grace on fools. God’s pity on God.”

Thus *A Jest of God* represents Rachel’s descent into the world of nightmare, the “Everlasting No,” and suggests too a return to life, a modified “Everlasting Yea,” as anticipated in the quotation from Sandburg’s “Losers”: “[With Jonah] I was swallowed one time deep in the dark / and came out alive after all.” The tone is more bitter, more ultimately pessimistic than either *The Stone Angel* or *The Fire-Dwellers*, for both Hagar and Stacey affirm the importance of human relationships to give meaning to an unstable universe. Yet despite adverse criticism, the novel is on the whole more universal than *The Fire-Dwellers*. Rachel’s world is no more confined than our world; it has the same potentialities, the same failings. Her thoughts, however trivial and self-concerned, reflect our thoughts and momentary reflections if we record them impartially. Her view of Calla, her mother, Nick, is one-sided, uncorrected by an omniscient narrator; Laurence rejects what is, after all, only a fictional device for a technique closer to reality. For this is indeed her primary message, that we can never truly know another human being, never penetrate behind their façade, since words which reveal also conceal. Yet be free to stand alone.
Thus we see that *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 of the individual: "We mortal millions live alone." In Laurence's handling, Rachel's plight becomes an analogue for human alienation and isolation, a crisis which finds its solution in the woman coming to terms with the jests of God, coping with difficulties, and growing stronger in the process. Rachel matures, not by rejecting responsibilities but by transforming them so that she can accept them on her terms. She escapes not from society, but into more dynamic forms of community life.

**CONCLUSION:**

*A Jest of God* makes a great affirmation of life and living, happiness in spite of terrible muddle, anxiety and confusion. Rachel does not grandly go mad or tragically die like those who would break life to their wills: she bends to life's blows, as most mortals have done before her, and life plays its amazing, everlasting trick once again for her, bringing vitality and at Rachel's story and all the Manawaka works, dramatize the plight of women in a male-oriented chauvinistic society where both sexes are often unconscious of bias and social conditioning. Hagar's experience could be transposed into a male key with relatively minor alterations, but Rachel's is inescapably female. Her basic insecurity and passivity, her financial anxiety, her sexual vulnerability in the event of pregnancy, and her responsibility for her mother are all traditional female dilemmas.

**B. THE FIRE-DWELLERS**

Stacey's narrative, like Rachel's is also an interior monologue, but it is Stacey's lack of repression which makes the difference between the two. In the course of our analysis of *The
Fire-Dwellers, we shall see that actually Stacey’s narrative is by far the more hallucinatory of the two with its kaleidoscopic mixture of science-fiction fantasy, adolescent memories and nightmarish visions of destruction which challenge the limits of domestic realism. Yet it is evident that Stacey’s narrative is a structure of containment and might well have been called Memoirs of a Survivor.

Statistics indicate that in real life the number of women who are enacting what was a traditionally women’s role—that of a home-centred wife and mother—is diminishing rapidly, and it is the same in fiction. In fiction as in real life, the external characteristics of the role are changing radically. In this chapter I have attempted to show that Laurence’s portrayal of a maternal figure in The Fire-Dwellers testifies to the continuing power of the archetype as distinct from its societal and time-conditioned image. Though radical protest either of the peace march kind or of domestic rebellion may not figure in this novel, yet the themes of survival and social outrage pervade the narrative as they are assimilated into Stacey’s interior monologue and modulated in the dramas of her family life. For her, apocalypse comes to have its strongest resonance in personal realisation.

B.1. PLOT

Stacey MacAindra is Rachel Cameron’s married sister who has grown up in Manawaka but escaped early. The novel covers several months in Stacey’s thirty-ninth birthday, ending on the eve of her fortieth birthday. Events include her husband taking a sales job with Richalife, the death of Mac’s best friend, Buckle and Stacey’s brief affair with Luke, a young writer. Much of the action takes place inside Stacey’s head as she struggles with herself, her husband, their four children, and their society, to wring a modified victory from besetting difficulties. The narrative is thick with irony and honesty of vision.

B.2. NARRATIVE

Like the narrative of A Jest of God, Stacey’s narrative, proves that interior monologues can be expanded to contain wider social and political themes beyond personal self-scrutiny. The
significant contours of Stacey’s imagined worlds are progressively mapped in her narrative. We shall see that Stacey’s fantasising has given her the necessary inner space to come to terms with the world constituted for her by human relationship as mother, wife, friend, sister and daughter.

B.2.1. THE ELEMENT OF FANTASY IN STACEY’S NARRATIVE

Stacey’s narrative like Rachel’s begins with a nursery rhyme which signals some of her major anxieties, though unlike her sister Stacey stands not at a distance from the outside world but is enmeshed in a cluttered domestic scenario:

Ladybird, Ladybird,
Fly away home;
Your house is on fire,
Your children are gone.

Crazy rhyme. Got it on the brain this morning; That’s from trying to teach Jen a few human words yesterday. Why anybody would want to teach a kid thing like that, I wouldn’t know. (Fire-Dwellers, p.1) This is Stacey’s distinctive voice commenting on her daily activities as mother and housewife.

The inner monologue, is strictly in Stacey’s voice, and it was through this, largely, that I hoped to convey her basic toughness of character, her ability to laugh at herself, her strong survival instincts. In a life characterised by multiple demands from her husband, her four children and her friends, Stacey’s responses are a contradictory mixture of resentment, guilt and acceptance:

What’s left of me? Where have I gone? I’ve brought it on myself, without realizing it. How to stop telling lies? How to get out? This is madness. I’m not trapped. I’ve got everything I always wanted. (FD, p. 62)
If Rachel suffered from defective hearing then Stacey suffers from distorted vision, for her inner world is a strange place full of visual transformations of the ordinary into the extraordinary, where hairdressers' assistants become 'butterfly priestesses' and supermarkets are seen as temples filled with

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-leg-ended space-crafted plastic-gifted strangely transformed sproutings of oat and wheat fields. Music hymning from invisible choirs (p.64)

Such fantasising is Stacey's most creative form of escape from the boredom of her daily routine, though it also forms a significant counterbalance within her psyche to her more threatening scenarios of apocalypse. A Vancouver street can also be transformed by her distorted vision in a more sinister way: The buildings at the heart of the city are brash, flashing with colours, 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. (FD, p.8)

As a fantasist Stacey is, unlike her sister, in touch with the way her imagination works:

Everything drifts. Everything is slowly, philosophies tangled with the grocery list, unreal-real anxieties like rose thorns waiting to tear the uncertain flesh, 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. (FD, p. 27)

This is Stacey's version of the sea-change wrought by the imagination upon reality, and it is also her version (in prose) of herself as frowned poet, a figure which frequently recurs in Canadian poetry—for example, A.M. Klein, 'Portrait of the Poet as Landscape' (1948), Gwen

Stacey is, in one of her multiple selves, the mermaid lurking under a chapeau, and the ‘Merwoman’, as Luke playfully names her when he finds her alone at night beside the waters of Vancouver Sound. Yet it is not Stacey who drowns; it is her son Duncan who nearly does in the major crisis of the narrative, where images of fantasy surface terrifyingly into the real world.

His head is bleeding and the sea pours from his nostrils. His mouth is open, and his eyes. But he is not seeing anything and he does not seem to be breathing. His seven-year old body is heavy in Stacey’s arms, a dead weight. She flounders through the water and weed-netted mud, back to the damp exposed sand. She puts Duncan down. She cannot think what to do. She cannot seem to think at all.

Underwater fantasies and visions of destruction are translated into the scenario of family nightmare, where in a condition of total helplessness, Stacey re-enacts the agony of the Vietnamese mother holding her dead child (p. 238) However, Duncan is restored to life by a bronzed lifeguard and Stacey is rescued by her husband who takes over ‘unequivocally’ his male protector role, and the fabric of domestic life is undamaged. Stacey continues to watch the televised images of burning streets in ravaged cities within the comfort of her sitting room, and her dreads continue in their familiar pattern:

‘I see it and then I don’t see it. It becomes pictures. And you wonder about the day when you open your door and find they’ve been filming those pictures in your street.’ (p.261)

For Stacey, apocalypse comes to have its strongest resonance in personal realisation: ‘Will the fires go on, inside and out? Until the moment when they go out for me, the end of the world. And then I’ll never know what may happen in the next episode.’ (p. 263) The novel ends quietly as family romance, like Joyce’s Ulysses, with Stacey in bed and her husband and children asleep.
Temporarily, they are all more or less okay. She feels the city receding as she slides into sleep. Will it return tomorrow? (FD, p. 264)

The world outside is much the same as it was in the beginning, and the conclusion focuses on personal and family survival within the nightmare world. It is a precarious position but the only one available outside the self-enclosed worlds of fantasy which Stacey has successively inhabited. Yet her fantasising enables her to have the inner space which is required to come to terms with the world. Rachel’s ‘I will be different. I will remain the same’ is echoed less solemnly by Stacey:

It would be nice if we were different people but we are not different people. We are ourselves and we are sure as hell not going to undergo some total transformation at this point. (FD, p.247)

The truth is that I haven’t been Stacey Cameron for one hell of a long time now. Although in some ways I’ll always be her, because that’s how I started out. But from now on, the dancing goes on only in the head. (FD, p. 259)

Thus we see that throughout her narrative, realism is interspersed with a vivid subtext of fantasy, which provides the breathing space for Stacey and is indeed the means by which she survives, coming to terms with herself and the world which she inhabits.

B.2.2. THE COMIC NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

In this section we shall see that Laurence’s wit and love of humour runs throughout the novel. The comic narrative structure is buttressed by many techniques for humour, from puns to juxtaposition. Jen suggests genuine Polyglam, synthetic or false glamour, “fishwife.fleshwife; “No recriminations. No unmerry-go-round of pointless words.” Something unendurable is not to be borne. Not to be born would be not to have to die.”(FD, p.21) Science fiction is used to suggest grotesque, macabre aspects of society.
The comic narrative structure is buttressed by many techniques for humour, from puns to juxtaposition. Jen suggests genuine; Polygam, synthetic or a false glamour; fishwife, fleshwife, sagging guttily”; “No recriminations. No unmerry-go-round of pointless words.” Something unendurable is “Not to be borne. Not to be born would be not to have to die”. (FD, p. 21) Laurence’s wit and love of language runs throughout her work, but The Fire Dwellers is perhaps her funniest novel.

Science fiction is used to suggest grotesque, macabre aspects of society. Stacey perceives supermarkets as a temple with long aisles and chromium side chapels. Votive offerings include dead fish, strawberries on ice... of grapefruit, jungles of lettuce, “a thousand bear-faced mouse-legged, space-legended space crafted plastic-gifted strangely transformed sproutings of oat and wheat fields”. (FD, p. 74) At the hairdresser, mauve-clad priestesses with talonless claws set off one of Stacey’s SF sex fantasies. Thor is a wizard, and the polyglam lady “a slickly sleight-of-handling magician.” Convoluted language suggests social deviancy. Luke’s SF story of the Greyfolk in North America, some thousand years hence, if is neat reversal of white colonial policy in Africa. In this connection, we are given the unnecessary hint that SF is an allegory for contemporary human life. (FD, pp. 180, 200)

An imaginative use of typography indicates Stacey’s different voices and separates these from third-person narration. The latter, represented by ordinary type, advances the narrative, and sometimes provides oblique commentary. Stacey’s practical thoughts, factual and ironic, are introduced by a a long dash, whereas her poetic and romantic daydreams are in italicized passages with regular margins. Memories of newspaper events are in ordinary type, with deep indentation. Snippets of radio news come in unpunctuated capitals like telegrams. Open-ended remarks, without terminal punctuation, accurately reflect verbal patterns, while Stacey’s longer inner monologues are in stream-of-consciousness form. As Allan Bevan notes, in his Introduction to the New Canadian Library Edition, the introductory dash is essential in conversations and interlaces with Stacey’s thoughts and there is constant interaction of memories, thoughts, fantasies, conversations, and actions.
Laurence made three or four false starts on The Fire-Dwellers over a ten-year span. She was seeking a form to convey a sense of simultaneity and complexity: “Narration, dreams, memories, inner running commentary, - all had to be brief even fragmented, to convey the jangled quality of Stacey’s life.”23 (No single voice could convey the disparity between the inner and outer aspects of her experience, and the frequent contrasts between her thoughts and speech. Problems of voice, Laurence adds, were compounded by the multiplicity of interlocking themes, all inherent in Stacey’s situation: the marriage relationship after many years; the relation between generations; the relation with an incendiary world; and the relation with Self, which includes coping with aging and death.

Laurence acknowledges the effect of television on her technique, and her desire to capture sharp visual images, “the effect of voices and pictures”.24 She suspects that readers conditioned by film and television need visual variety on the page, hence her typographical innovations. Curiously she aspired in this novel to write a sparser, more “pared down” prose than she had previously written. Yet The Fire-Dwellers is weakened by unnecessary repetition, boring exchanges, and occasionally blatant symbolism. None of Laurence’s other work, with the possible exception of This Side Jordan, suffers from these weaknesses. Some of the dialogue (such as the conversation between wives at the Richalife parties, or Stacey’s bedtime talks with her tried, harassed husband) is realistic but dull. The technical problem of depicting a boring exchange without boring the reader remains unresolved.

Some dialogues sound like a Harold Printer play, but there are too many relatively futile exchanges. There are repetitions that add nothing, such as the second reference to Katie’s long hair which looks as if it has been ironed (FD, p. 12, 13). We do not need so many examples of fear, anxiety, and noncommunications. The heavy-handedness here is unlike Laurence’s usual style; examples might include Tess Fogler’s comment that Jen is “determined not to communicate”; and Jake’s fondness for talking about the breakdown of verbal communication. Laurence’s theme suffers from overkill.

Stacey’s individual crisis, however, requires a social setting, and this necessitates some repetition. The structure in the first three-quarters of the novel is virtually static, with multiple
repetitions illustrating a central theme. The kinetic movement of comedy begins near the end of the novel: as she learns from her experience, Stacey grows inwardly. Her growth is paralleled by similarly affirmative movements in other family members. In a very real sense the protagonist in The Fire-Dwellers is postwar Western society. Stacey is a female version of the “little man” in contemporary antiheroic fiction. She is atypical only in her strongly ironic sense of humor. Stacey’s final short soliloquy is comic. She decides that trivialities may be acceptable distractions; that she is unlikely to become thinner, and that this is ludicrous but not tragic: “Give me another forty years, Lord and I may mutate into a matriarch.” The time span is that of the Israelites’ desert exile en route to the Promised Land; mutate suggests an evolution of species; alliterations adds a comic touch; and matriarch suggests a family clan or a dynasty, along with a shaping power for its female founder. This mutant joins her family and city in peaceful sleep.

Stacey is one of Laurence’s survivors. She wrestles a modest victory from a society which she finally accepts on her own terms. She enjoys debunking hypocrisies propagated by Richalife, Polygam, and other advertisers. Violence remains but “there is nowhere to go out but here” (FD, p. 259), Stacey learns that the trap is the world, not her four walls, and that it is not without its compensations and pleasures.

Let us now analyse the dominant themes of the novel: violence and lack of communication.

B.3.3. THEMES OF VIOLENCE AND LACK OF COMMUNICATION

We have seen that Stacey’s external world is the frighteningly familiar one of a post-war North American city. This is a manipulative society characterised by brutality and deception; masked violence. Stacey’s fears, both personal and social, are generated largely by her society. This section revolves round the major theme in this novel which is violence. Through Stacey’s narrative Laurence puts across the fact that while violence represents one type of violence, it also represents the failure of other types. One of Stacey’s chief fears is of being unable to communicate, or of remaining trapped in her skull. The difficulty of peaceful
communication, the alternative to violence becomes a dominant theme. The problem preoccupies Stacey. She moves from the naïve view that it can be solved by an honest voicing of thoughts and feelings to the understanding that whereas this may be a partial solution, silence and concealment are also necessary in human relations, and communication does not simply depend on words. Besides the above mentioned themes, this section also deals with Deception, the demonic form of communication which goes hand in hand with the anxieties of modern life. For Stacey the breakdown in communication extends to religion. Stacey yearns for a transcendent reality and communicates with a God in whom she does not believe.

Two year-old Jen’s refusal, or inability, to speak belongs to this pattern, and one of several optimistic events at the novel’s end is Jen’s first speech-social words, significantly: “Want tea, Mum?” Stacey’s relief, to our amusement, is most immediately replaced by a new fear, that Jen may never say anything else. The novel opens with Stacey thinking of her efforts to teach “a few human words”, followed by her half-conscious recognition that words conceal more than they reveal, and that nursery rhymes are full of horrors.

After nearly twenty years of marriage, Mac and Stacey find it difficult to communicate. Stacey resents Mac’s silences. After a day spent alone or with children (the typical situation for the housewife), she looks to Mac to bring her something of the outside world. But he responds to questions with the demand to be left alone. Stacey fears he no longer takes her seriously or finds her attractive” “can you imagine what it’s like to live in the same house with somebody who doesn’t talk or who can’t or else won’t and I don’t know which reason it could be”. (FD, p. 197) Her imagination connects Mac’s willed isolation with his fear of pain.

Stacey’s memories of her childhood in Manawaka revolve around failures in communication. She remembers the “tomb silences” of her parents; her mother’s unsuccessful attempts to force Niall Cameron to conform to Manawakan standards; and the pattern of deception between her mother and herself as she placated her mother’s fear with false assurances about boys and liquor. Stacey half-knows, half suspects Mac’s similar difficulties with his father Matthew. They are all moulds: “Once I thought it was only people like Matthew and my mother who has that kind of weak eyes. Now I know its me, as much” (FD, p. 164).
Tess and Jake Fogler, the MacAindras’s childless neighbours, provide another variant of concealed violence fear, and failed communication. Ironically, Jake is part of the euphemistically named communications industry. He is a radio actor, fond of talking of the breakdown of verbal communication. Jake knows nothing of his beautiful wife’s fears that he finds her stupid or that he may be attracted to a radio actress, while Tess is equally ignorant of Jake’s self-consciousness about his ugliness and short stature. Tess copes with fear by purchasing objects for which they have no use, and cosmetics designed to vanquish the ravages of time. Her pet goldfish, who devour one another, image her society. Tess forces Jen to watch this cannibalism. Her suicide attempts comes as no surprise, but Stacey blames herself for her failure to see the fear behind the glamorous mask.

Private fears echo public horrors. The epigraph from Carl Sandburg’s “Losers” speak of fiddling to a world on fire, and hints that action is meaningless. This epigraph, and the children’s rhyme (“Ladybird, ladybird, / Fly away home; / Your house is on fire, / your children are gone”) reflects the character’s fears. In Stacey’s society, death takes many forms: suicide, automobile accident, police bullets, bombing, maiming. Her city assumes, for an instant, the form of “that other city” (Hiroshima), “glass and steel broken like vulnerable live bones, shadows of people frog-splayed on the stone” (FD, p. 11). A gull is admired for its simple knowledge of survival. Stacey thinks her children will need to know the violence of the city’s core.

Newspaper headlines chase through Stacey’s mind as backdrop to family activity: “Seventeen-Year Old on Drug Charge.’ ‘Girl Kills Self, Lover.’ Homeless population growing, Says Survey.’” The radio blares disaster at frequent intervals: NINE O’CLOCK NEWS: PELLET BOMBS CAUSED THE DEATH OF A HUNDRED AND TWENTY FIVE CIVILIANS MAINLY WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN ...” A story of an ex-soldier with murderous reflexes suggests we have been conditioned into monsterdom. Everyone lives dangerously, Stacey tells Luke; we are all fire dwellers in a word gone mad. Niall’s revolver provides an escape fantasy which she finally abandons. Even the children fear death having lost one friend in an auto accident.
Lesser anxieties concern the need for a university education; the need to look beautiful and elegant the need to be "free" in some unspecified way; and the need to be a perfect spouse. Popular journalism feeds the "tapeworms of doubts" in the social body: "Nine ways the Modern Mum May Be Ruining Her Daughter"; "Are you Castrating Your Son?"; Are you Emasculating your Husband?" Conversations at parties reveal the fear of many women at the prospect of an empty house after the children are all at school.

Since people prefer not to see the disasters they help to create, society develops deception to a fine art. The conman is king. Mac's new employer illustrates our will to be deceived. Richalife, promising rejuvenation through vitamin pills, is a secular parody of the religious vision of the promised land: "Both Spirit and Flesh Altered." The parody extends from the obvious pun in the name to evangelical testimonials at rallies by those who believe the pills have altered their lives. Thor Thorlakson is the prophet of this pseudo-religion, preaching the good news that the shackles have been lifted" (FD, p. 39). Richalife promises to cure anxiety, depression and lack of energy. Thor is unaware of the irony that he proposes to replace old addictions (to caffeine, liquor, tranquilizers) with new. His suggestion that they are selling not just pills but themselves sits oddly with his vaunted freedom. Laurence's parody of high-pressure religious evangelism is extremely funny.

Modern business methods and language are also subject of Parody. Thor sprinkles his conversation with jargon such as "alert wise" and "Caffeine-wise." He sees no hidden intent when Stacey uses this jargon in the mock approval in her parody of a testimonial: "caffeine wise I'm like a new woman." The forms of systems analysis and psychological testing are parodied in the Richalife Quiz designed to identity guilt feelings, goals and family relationships, and in the individual programs based on self-assessment. Mac is shocked when Stacey asks if lies are permitted. However, he and Thor have put themselves on Richalife programs which identity them as younger, happier and less anxious than they are. The confessional element in the quiz parodies the religious confession. Stacey says it is naive to expect truth on a form and that the quiz, like much of modern life, "Communicates" an attractive lie. The quiz and the individual charts are manipulation masked on helpfulness.
Laurence’s portrait of the intrusion of corporations into private lives (The Big Brother is Watching You syndrome) is black comedy: Stacey has trouble with the word intrusion when she is drunk. Beneath a jolly, fatherly veneer, Thor is mean and vindictive. He has a “court” of simpering henchmen. The thundergod is all wind, no substance. But the fears he generates are real.

Deception the demonic form of communication, goes hand in hand with the anxieties of modern life. Lies, not pills or alcohol, are the chief sedatives and the basis of many relationships. Stacey cannot bear to think of Matthew living in the MacAindra household because his need for constant reassurance necessitates her lies. The “Human words” of the opening paragraph modulates into “talking sounds” exchanged amid anxieties. The Polyglam party is an even broader farce than the Richalife rallies and on the same theme. The “plastic lady” is oracle and trickster magician. She masks her fear of aging beneath garish makeup. Her parlor game fosters anxiety in the housewives, who dutifully follow instructions. Stacey wonders what they are frightened of: “Making a scene? Finding out we’re alone after all” (FD, p. 87), Like the Richalife material, the Polyglam booklet offers the attractive lie of peaceful, happy families. Ployglam understands the importance of packaging, as does the hostess, Tess.

Laurence’s ironic techniques includes Stacey’s silent dialogue with a God in whom she does and does not believe. This dialogue is at the core of Stacey’s personality. The image of God fluctuates from an authoritarian, omnipotent being to one who shares in our helplessness. (FD, p. 11, 212) Talking with God is also talking to the unmasked self, questions remain largely unanswered but can be faced with some degree of honesty. God is connected with the destructive aspect of time passing: contemplating her present shape, Stacey decides God has “a sick sense of humour.” She attempts to bargain with Him for the safety of her children, like Jacob wrestling with the angel.

The breakdown in communication for Stacey’s generation extends to religion. Since she envisages Matthew as a man with no religious problems, Stacey is touched when he reveals lifelong doubt. She pretends to faith for the sake of her children, but suspects that they are not deceived. Like Laurence, she “mourns” her disbelief. Stacey’s yearning for a transcendent
reality, like Rachel’s, is suggested by her singing hymns beloved in childhood, where God is the theme too high “for mortal tongue.”

Time, as humans experience it, is one of Laurence’s continuing concerns. In The Fire-Dwellers, she examines the breakdown in communication in terms of the ways in which we experience time. Stacey wonders if time has imposed layers of masks over too tender truth (like the circles that tell the age of tree), or stripped them away. Time passing has turned Mac from a confident extrovert into an anxious, silent person. Throughout much of the novel, time appears to Stacey as a negative, hostile phenomenon. Her inner self is masked by fat; stretch marks on thighs and belly appear as silver worms, an image of death and putrefaction. Her intelligence has also altered for the worse. Evening courses bore and humiliate her: “Where have I gone?” “Once I was different” (FD, p.72-73).

Personal relations also change. Mac and Stacey, once compatible, have acquired mutually irritating habits. The metaphor of invisible garbage recurs. Problems have ancient roots. Time alienates people, introduces guilt, or becomes a treadmill where one communicates one’s own unchanging awfulness to oneself. Like Rachel, Stacey has a sense of inhabiting a middle world, a limbo frightening and unreal:

“I stand in relation to my life both as child and parent, never quite finished with the old battles, never able to arbitrate properly the new, able to look both ways, but whichever way I look, God, it looks pretty confusing to me” (FD, p. 47).

With Luke, the young stranger encountered after a bitter quarrel with Mac, Stacey hopes to shed her accumulated baggage. This escapist interlude is Stacey’s last attempt to be eighteen again, and to leave behind the encumbrances of town and family.

The basically optimistic temper of Laurence’s vision shows in a series of events late in the novel, where Stacey accepts herself, her responsibilities, and the changes wrought by time, the ‘Black Joker’. Eventually, time plays a redeeming role. One of the first of such events
involves Jen’s frightening experience with Test Fogler. In their mutual concern for Jen, Katie and Stacey encounter one another as persons, without the role-playing structures of mother and daughter: they say “we”, like Hagar and the Oriental girl in the hospital bedpan incident.

Other affirmative events include Duncan’s narrow escape from drowning, and the accompanying role reversals among the Mac Aindra males. Ian now exhibits love for Duncan, not jealousy; and Mac is released to demonstrate the affection which his father has taught him to conceal. Duncan is able to face the sea again. Jen begins to talk. Stacey finds she can talk to Mac, as to Luke but all genuine communication is difficult.

Thus we see that *The Fire-Dwellers* points implicitly to the force of social conditioning on women’s consciousness. Stacey has no thought of getting work outside the house; she has neither time nor strength for such aberrations. There is no irony in this encounter, no suggestion that the woman has needs beyond those which might be satisfied by marriage and a family.

We see that Stacey shares Rachel’s obsession with death as she shares her recognition of the untranslatability of human words and gestures. However, it is Stacey’s lack of repression which makes the difference between their interior monologues. There are interesting similarities between *The Fire-Dwellers* and Lessings’s *Children of Violence* (also written during the 1960s) with their scenarios of the late twentieth-century urban nightmare, their fears of nuclear catastrophe and their mixture of realism and fantasy. In Laurence’s only city novel, Vancouver is transformed momentarily by Stacey’s narrative into a vision of Hell and the future into an apocalypse of flame: “Anyway, I probably exaggerate. Do I? Doom everywhere is the message I get. A person ought not to be affected, maybe.” (FD., p.50)

But Stacey is affected by the images of war and violence shown on television and by newspaper headlines of disaster which interact with her maternal fears for the safety of her own children to create the hallucinations of burning buildings, forest fires and Roman centurions which flash across her inner vision. She is caught within the same twentieth-
century nightmare as Lessing’s protagonists and shows the same inclinations towards science fiction in her fantasies.

Science-fiction images of apocalypse and extra-terrestrials are an important strain in Stacey’s imagination, as she tells Luke Venturi in her escapade to Vancouver Sound:

I sometimes you know can imagine that kind of a situation, SF, I mean

(*FD*, p.155)

Once again there is a shadowy parallelism between characters, and it comes as no surprise to find that Luke writes science fiction himself, ’Not space opera with sex. Allegory more, and all happening on this planet’ (p. 154); nor is it any surprise when Luke tells Stacey one of his stories to find that he cannot think of an ending. This surely is Laurence’s comment on the limitations of the genre, the conventions of which do not allow enough breathing space for individual human complexity. Stacey’s own science-fiction fantasies collapse as soon as they are confronted by the resistant unaccommodating details of her daily life. As imaginative spaces they give her room to express her intuitions and her deepest fears, but they are not translatable into the context of realism which is the structural base of this novel.

**B.3.4. CO-RELATION BETWEEN THE FIRE-DWELLERS AND THE STUDY OF ARCHETYPES**

The presentation of Stacey’s inner as well as external world is a perspective that corresponds and illuminates previous work done on the study of archetypes. In this section, Stacey’s character shall be examined on the basis of studies made by Eric Neuman, Joseph Campbell and other followers of Carl Jung. The section will also offer a deep insight into Stacey’s character. Despite all her struggles, Stacey does emerge as the survivor.

In Stacey MacAindra, the only protagonist in Laurence’s Manawaka novels enacting the traditional role, Laurence creates a remarkable portrait of the life of a middle-aged mother-of-four with all its horrors, its impossibilities and its absolute centrality to feminine experience. A
sensitive and challenging definition of the maternal emerges that renews the concept for modern times and yet links it with the Biblical women whose children rise up and call her blessed. Laurence's focus encompasses not only an external, forceful and easily recognised social reality, but also a rich and sensitive internal perspective that often corresponds to and illuminates work done by Eric Neumann and Joseph Campbell.

In primitive societies and matriarchal times, the force of the maternal mystery was biological. Increasing knowledge of humans as physical and also spiritual/psychological beings leads Eric Neumann\textsuperscript{27} to conclude that there are two basic patterns to the so-called mysteries of religion, myth and legend that correspondence to pattern within the individual self. Whether the initiates are male or female, the masculine mysteries, Neumann suggests, are based on 'heroic labours' such as those of Jason or Hercules and represent active struggles of the ego to conquer and vanquish. The feminine mysteries (such as the Elusinian ones), again, whether the initiates are male or female, are described as rituals of birth and re-birth whose labours are not to conquer but to transcend, to achieve a new union and a new identity. The experience of motherhood is an acted parable of this latter rite.

The psychic results of the feminine mysteries may not be as obvious as those of the masculine rites, despite the symbol of the child (often a God) which so powerfully represents them. The contrast is analogous to the difference between the two Laurence novels that focus on the Cameron sisters. Stacey's sister Rachel, at the end of \textit{A Jest of God}, is seen to be triumphing through a change in milieu and attitude. Though she is still represented within an external determining force, that force (the bus) is in motion, whereas in the first scene of the novel she was seemingly held a static prisoner behind the schoolroom windows, looking out on life as its activity passed her by. Her conquest of herself has been heroic and demonstrably what Laurence herself has been heroic and demonstrably what Laurence herself terms a 'partial victory'.\textsuperscript{28} In contrast, in \textit{The Fire-Dwellers}, to open and close the novel, Laurence uses passages which are identical in setting and even phrasing except for the change from morning to night and for the final paragraph is the omniscient voice in the present tense.
Stacey heaves over on her side. The house is quiet. The kids are asleep. Downstairs in the ex-study Matthew has been asleep for hours, or if not asleep, mediating, beside her she can already hear the steady breathing that means Mac is asleep. Temporarily they are all more or less okay. (*FD*, p.7)

The emphasis on quiet peace and intimate closeness in a continuum of past, present and future is the consequence of Stacey’s victory in the feminine mysteries whose centre is, in Jung’s terms, the feminine Eros-relatedness. Such a victory is undramatic and endlessly to be re-won but of greater magnitude than the masculine Logos battle she must have fought years before to escape Manawaka. The tremendous energy produced by the conflict of conscious and unconscious in the interest of feminine wholeness creates confusion within Stacey as wild as the bedlam of her external life. She feels, however, that there is one who understand her problem, namely, God. One of her early conversations indicates:

Are the kids okay? Damn, I wish I didn’t always have to be home at the right time. At the Day of Judgment, God will say Stacey Mac Aindra, what have you done with your life? And I’ll say, Well, let’s see, Sir, I think I loved my kids. And he’ll say, are you certain about that? And I’ll say, God, I’m not certain about anything any more. So He’ll say, To hell with you, then. Then again, may be He wouldn’t. May be He’d say, I’m not all that certain, either. Sometimes I wonder if I even exist. And I’d say, I know what you mean, Lord. I have the same trouble with myself. (*FD*, p.11)

The forcefulness of Stacey’s narrative, like the bold familiarity of her arguments with God, is indicative of the power that- according to Jung- the self possesses when the God-image resides within. The amusing passage in which Stacey argues that God should return to earth in the likeness of herself is an example. This inner dialogue occurs just before Stacey meets Luke. She argues:
Listen here, God don’t talk to me like that. You have no right. You try bringing up four kids. Don’t tell me you’ve brought up countless millions because I don’t buy that. We’ve brought our own selves up and precious little help we’ve had from you. If you’re there. Which probably you aren’t, although I’m never convinced totally, one way or another. So next time you send somebody down here, get it born with a large family and a rotten boss, eh? Then we’ll see how the inspirational bit goes God, pay no attention... I’m nuts. I’m not myself. (FD, p.168).

Stacey is, nevertheless, much closer to being herself than she realises. The novel does not record the process whereby Stacey has come to the point of individuation, Jung’s term for the wholeness of the integrated self. *The Fire-Dwellers* takes place in a narrower time span and a more confined space than any of other novels and involves its protagonist in establishing relationships with the figures of her real and immediate presents, her husband and her children. Somehow, in the past, Stacey has dealt with the parental forces, especially that of her mother. Although from seeing in her daughter Katie her own response to her mother, Stacey develops an increasing awareness and sympathy for Mrs Cameron. Her troubling and more frequent memories are of her father. The seriousness of the father image to Stacey is stressed by the inner monologue that immediately precedes her approach to the sea on what is clearly her dark night of the soul. After being falsely accused by Buckle and Mac of being unfaithful to her husband, Stacey, in despair, drives out by herself. In this crisis of the novel, placed at its structural center, Stacey is horrified at the possibility of a relationship between her long-dead father and her husband and herself. She reflects:

Okay, Dad. Here’s looking at you. You couldn’t cope, either. So I married a guy who was confident and (in those days or so it seemed) outgoing and full of laughs and free of doubts, fond of watching football and telling low jokes and knowing just where he was going, yes sir, very different from you, Dad. Now I don’t know. Perhaps it isn’t that the masks have been put on, one for each year like the circles that tell the age of a tree. Perhaps they’ve been gradually peeled off and what’s there
underneath is the force that's always been there for me, the unspeaking
eyes, the mouth for whom words were too difficult. No. No. No I can't
take that. I won't Hush. How to get through, just this minute, to the
shore? What if there are dogs? Alsatians, Dobermans? Come on Stacey.
(I'm sacred. What am I doing out here alone?) (FD, p.170)

The unconscious world reflected here is that of the underworld Hell whose entrance is guarded
by the dog Cerberus. Stacey has moved into what Jung felt was the more fateful and
consequential second stage of life described by Jolande Jacobi as 'the realm of the “Mothers”,
the unconscious, on whose threshold the shadow stands'. The shadow self no longer appears
(as in A Jest of God) as a projection of the personal unconscious but in the alternative form
Anjela Jaffe suggests of injustice and suffering in life and the world'. Far from freeing her
of pain and suffering, Stacey's progress towards the individuation goal of wholeness involves
her fully in what Jung refers to as 'the passion of the ego'. Stacey's memories and fantasies
are indicative of unconscious health and vitality but at the same time they increase her
awareness of the multiple selves that go to make up one individuality. Without a firm sense of
self there can be no relationship and communication with others, yet the consciousness of her
own multiplicity makes her sometimes fear a lack of self. She says:

Listen, God, I know it's a worthwhile job to bring up four kids you don't
need... I'm converted. But how is it I can feel as well that I'm spending
my life in one unbroken series of trivialities? The kids don't belong to
me. They belong to themselves. It would be nice to have something of
my own, that's all. I can't go anywhere as myself. Only as Mac's wife or
the kids' mother. And yet I'm getting now so that I actually prefer to
have either Mac or one of the kids along. Even to the hairdresser, I'd
rather take Jen. It's easier to face the world with one of them along. Then
I know who I'm supposed to be. (p. 95)

What Stacey is worrying about here are the changing masks or personae that she must wear.
The real self which underlies the diverse personae is one that she must come to know and
understand. One part of that self is, of course, her strong maternal nature. Though at times she appears to herself and her children as the dark or devouring Mother, her nature shows an instinctive and spontaneous ability to enact the nurturing and protective values associated with the Great Mother. To protect her son’s need for privacy she will not back down as she usually does into passive resistance with Mac. Her maternal concern, far from being limited to her own children, extends not only to Buckle’s mother, but to Mac’s father, whose confession she hears and to whom she can open both heart and home in a truly generous and life-enhancing way. Though Stacey resembles her father in her fondness for the gin bottle, and though she asks for his gun as her inheritance, it is essentially because of her children that she throws the gun in the lake and remains untempted by the solution of suicide that her neighbour Tess adopts.

But the world that Stacey’s children inhabit is shown in the novel as the destructive fire world in which we all dwell, a world lacking, as Manawaka did, qualities of culture and art, but worse than the Manawaka did, in its closeness to death and destruction by violence. The media reports force themselves into Stacey’s consciousness and increase her sense of powerlessness. Because of her children she cares about the external world but because both, of her children and the inadequacy of her formal education, she has no realistic hope of ever changing or giving direction to her concern. Consequently her dreams are of escape to a new world or of the destruction of her children by atomic explosions. Nevertheless, while Stacey is at present deprived of a way to change the external world, Laurence creates in her a character who clearly has potential far greater than that of those currently in control.

As the Polyglam lady and the Richalife Thor comically demonstrate, the world deprived of Eros values is a vacuous place lacking all spiritual power. Its energy is either material or dependent on the pseudo-spiritual gods of psychology and science. Nowhere in the Manawaka works are masculine Logos values demonstrated as in *The Fire-Dwellers*, with comic and satiric force in Thor, and with pity in Buckle, the Fogles and the Garveys. The qualities Stacey shows would be assets for any woman in any role. Her lack of a public voice and identity is not as great a failure as that her society suffers when it fails to sustain and to incorporate women like her.
Stacey's undeveloped potential is clearly not dependent on her rational function—The Golden Bough remains unread, and she has lost patience with the male professor's interpretation of Clytemnestra. Instead, her intuitive wisdom is focused on the personal world around her, and its strength here is demonstrated in her instinctive distrust of Mac's Richalife's job and in the support she gives him to free himself. Demonstrated, too, in her relation to Matthew as well as to Mac is her ability to 'inspire others to become conscious of their own psychic contents and those of others'. Stacey finally acknowledges that verbal communication is not essential when she muses about Mac and Ian. She says:

They're not like me, either of them. They don't want to say it in full technicolor and intense detail. And that's okay, I guess. Ian gets the message. It's his language, too. I wish it were mine. All I can do is accept that it is a language, and that it works, at least sometimes. (p. 296)

But then she goes on to admit that this non-verbal, intuitive language of communication is hers, too more than she likes to admit. As she says: 'Whatever I think that I think of it, it's the one I most use.' Instead of mutating into a matriarch as Stacey thinks she might, it is more likely that she will, in later stages of her life, develop powers of expressing her intuitive wisdom. Stacey's instinct for the verbal communication which she cannot use within her own family is that of a writer. The strengths she shows are often attributes of a novelist as, for example, the clear-sighted realism; the sense of humour; the awareness of what lies behind the mask; the recognition of the simultaneity of existence and the difficulty of plotting a defined course. As a woman, Stacey fulfills Virginia Woolf's demands of women writers in A Room of One's Own: 'to live in the presence of reality, an invigorating life'. She lacks what Woolf thought necessary for the writer, the ability to earn money and to have a room of her own. Whatever may lie in the future for Stacey, Laurence emphasises that her struggle in the present is to maintain the real and erotic part of her self that Manawaka society had tried so hard to destroy, but that is essential, according to psychologists, if a woman is to be able to value individual relationships and the fulfillment of personality, rather than simply subordinate personal identity to family and social norms.
The special significance of Stacey's relation to her daughter Katie illustrates Adrienne Rich's contention that 'until a strong lien of love, confirmation, and example stretches from mother to daughter, from woman to woman across the generations, women will still be wandering in the wilderness.' The extended time frame achieved through sequences of memory, dream and fantasy is essential to the novel's technique and equally essential to Stacey's ability to be herself. Only if Stacey Cameron stays alive in memory as a part of the present Stacey MacAindra, will the present self be able to include the wife/lover of the early days of her marriage. What Stacey has fought for in the past is not a grotesque clinging to fantasy and youth. Rather it is an indication of Stacey's intuitive instinct for wholeness. Stacey recognises that 'the truth is that I haven't been Stacey Cameron for one hell of a long time now', but she also knows that in some ways I'll always be her, because that's how I started out' (FD, p. 303). Because Stacey Cameron did once dance, Stacey Mac Aindra can accept that from now on, the dancing goes on only in the head'. However, she notes: 'the head isn't such a terrible place to dance. The settings are magnificent there, anyhow. I did dance at one time, when I could. It would be a lot worse if I never had.'

By keeping alive within her the erotic self, Stacey supports her instincts to treat her children as individuals. This keeps her from the excessive domination and possessiveness that is one danger for the Maternal woman. It also frees her from the Maternal tendency to regard the male as simply the father of her children. By the end of the novel Stacey is closer to Mac than she has ever been since those honeymoon days when she could say: 'you know something, Mac? I like everything about you' (FD, p.37). Now she sees behind his mask and helps to free him from it. Her growing perception of Mac's hidden needs and real strength offers fresh hope for their marriage.

What Stacey accomplishes in extending the mother archetype to include the sensual is to reunite the Demeter (Mother) and Kore (Maiden) figures so long kept apart by patriarchal and Western culture, thus depriving us, according to Adrienne Rich, of the mother-daughter passion and rapture. The mystery of the mother who is at the same time a maiden was central in primitive matriarchal societies.
Neumann points out that the sculpted figures of Demeter and Kore could often not be distinguished from one another except for the typical symbol that each held: wheat for the mature woman and flower for the maiden. He describes one ‘wonderful relief in which the two look smilingly and knowingly into each other’s eye, both holding flowers’. 40 The psychic consequence for the woman of such a union, he suggests, was release of life-giving and transformative energy leading beyond the ‘guaranteeing (of) earthly fertility and the survival of life’ to a ‘union on a higher plane in a spiritual aspect of the Feminine, the Sophia aspect of the Great Mother’. 41 Neumann points out that ‘Sophia, who achieved her supreme visible from as a flower’, does not vanish in the ‘nirvanalike abstraction of a masculine spirit;... her spirit remains attached to the earthly foundation of reality’, exhibiting’ a wisdom of loving participation’. 42 For this reason the spiritual power of Sophia is living and saving’. In The Fire-Dwellers the Sophia archetype is represented not only in Stacey but also by the elemental and spiritual symbols of fire and water that are central to the novel. Though both elements are shown to contain archetypal ambivalence as death-life forces, the final orientation is to life. 43 The rebirth symbols, though they are not directly connected to Stacey, are strong-Jen the flower-child’s sudden willingness to speak; the re-birth from the sea of Duncan, the child undesired by his father, into the arms of his father; Mac’s release from the war-like Thor (perhaps, as Stacey to bank (p.212). No matter how much more comfortable life would be without the transformative fire of conflicting values within, Stacey recognises its presence is essential to life. Her inner voice muses: ‘Will the fires go on, inside and out? Until the moment when they go out for me, the end of the world’ (p. 307)

Although the fire within Stacey is clearly a sexual one, her inner flame is also closer than she realises to being a spiritual light, illuminating the darkness of others. Nevertheless, she herself still feels the need of a ‘blinding flash of light’ that would leave her ‘wise and calm knowing how to cope with everything’. Then she thinks, her ‘kids would rise up and call [her] blessed’ (p. 299). Instead of the hoped-for flash of light, Stacey is granted a miraculous meeting with a man who bears the name of the Biblical physicians, and, appropriately, a name which sounds like luce or light. Luke is to Stacey a lover as well as a spiritual healer. He appears suddenly when in her dark night of the soul she has sought out the sea ready to abdicate from being ‘a
good wife and mother' (p.179). The challenge that Luke represents is not a call to the confession of inner truths preciously rejected but rather to the full acceptance of the demands of the individual self.

Luke's youth prevents his being in any sense a father-figure, and indeed, because he is, as Stacey recognises, young enough to be her son, there arises a suggestion of the mother-son incest motif so often found by Neumann in his study of the Great Mother, as 'the secret background of the spiritual experience' of feminine transformation.44

Luke appears as a nocturnal and sinister figure, and only because Stacey's own strength and inner knowledge is great enough for her to break her tie to his temptation does he function in the novel as a positive Friend and Healer.

In contrast, the association of betrayal is placed instead on Buckle. Unlike Luke, Buckle is clearly not a projection of Stacey's inner self. While Stacey herself drives to Luke, she does not actively seek out Buckle; when she is in his truck she is carried along by the force which he alone commands, in a direction which he admits is orientated to death. His grotesque mother and aberrant sexuality render him pathetic until his apparent harmlessness becomes active evil in his malicious lie to Mac that he had made love to Stacey. Stacey's inability to counter his lie parallels her helplessness in Buckle's cab. This enforced passivity in Stacey's relation to Buckle marks the nadir of her despair, a point that finds its cleansing opposite in her affair with Luke.

Luke (like Hector Jones in A Jest of God and, to a lesser extent, Jules Tonnerre in The Diviners) represents a weakness in characterisation unless, we are aware that Laurence often dramatises her women's inner truths through projection in specific male characters. If the reader is misled by what appears to be the traditional and non-symbolic mode of the novel, then Luke seems to be a novelistic trick, a fortuitous intervention which however, destroys the verisimilitude of Stacey's characterisation. If, on the other hand, he is seen in terms of the internal self of the protagonist as an animus, Luke is a completely realistic figure, albeit a rare one, since so few of the traditional animus images in western literature have been positive.45
The appearance of Luke is the most forceful example of the way chance (or coincidence) seems throughout the novel to work for Stacey: it is not Stacey’s son but Peter Challoner who is killed by a car on their street; Buckle’s death frees Mac from his divided loyalties; Mac is given a new job, so on. It is certain, however, that Stacey will not be lulled into passivity by her luck. She will continue to worry over the large and small irritants of her life. As the novel’s last line suggests, she will never be sure of the morrow.

Nevertheless, the novel is not as pessimistic as Maeser suggests because it ‘ends on a note of repetitive monotony’. As we leave Stacey we leave a woman of remarkable strength who resembles those Ann Ulanov describes when commenting on the individuated woman:

If [a woman] knows herself, she can avoid developing her own stereotypes of women and avoid having those of others foisted upon her. She falls neither into the trap of thinking and acting as ‘just a housewife,’ of being unable to accept the pluralism of the contending forces within her that might lead her to be more than one kind of woman. If she responds to the archetypes underlying her nature, then she can respond to the deep motivations that the archetypes provide, which can only enrich her life, her relation to others, and her contributions to her society. Such a woman as Stacey has the potential to break what Rich calls the cycle of women’s lives lived too long in both depression and fantasy while our active energies have been trained and absorbed into caring for other.

Laurence’s portrayal of what Rich calls ‘courageous mothering’ is a remarkable achievement of characterisation. Never does the universal psychological validity of the character intrude upon the vitality, individuality and spontaneity of the particularised protagonist, and yet never is the accuracy of the psychological realism betrayed. The colloquial, comic and ironic understatement of the narrative voice does not relieve the reader of an obligation to enter into an often painful yet liberating comprehension of what the experience of being both a mother and a woman entails.
At the end of this chapter we may conclude that both these women, Stacey as well as Rachel, in common with the narrators of the other Manawaka novels, share the double sense of the discontinuities within their lives at the same time as they perceive them to be a continuum, for there are unaccountable connections just as there are gaps and unanswerable questions in any narrative sequence. They come to acknowledge their own limits of understanding, of sympathy, of power, just as they recognise the limits imposed on them by language, social conventions and family obligations. These Manawaka novels are social protest novels of a subtler kind than overtly ‘feminist’ novels as they chronicle the changes within an individual consciousness and construct from the available fictional conventions a variety of discourses for women’s personal survival.

NOTES

5. see C.M. McLay, “Everyman is an Island: Isolation in *A Jest of God*, *Journal of Canadian Literature* 50, Autumn 1971, 57-68.

175
9. Ibid.


24. Ibid. p. 12.

25. The minor motif of Sophoclean tragedy supports this emphasis on society. Stacey thinks of her husband as Agamemnon, and has attempted a course in Greek tragedy. William Rose Benet speaks of Sophocles’ portrait of the individual’s search for truth and self-knowledge.

26. Laurence told Gibson (Eleven Canadian Novelists, p. 202) that Stacey's real self-discovery was that she was a survivor who has come to term with her past. Cf. Allan Bevan: “The novel, then, ends on note of low-keyed optimism”


38. Ibid., p. 237.


41. Ibid., p. 319.

42. Ibid., p. 325

43. Ibid., p. 331.


