Chapter III

A Jest of God

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

A Jest of God

A Jest of God published in 1966 is the second of Margaret Laurence's Manawaka novels. The novel won the Governor General's Award for fiction in 1967. Laurence wrote this novel at Elm Cottage, her house in Buckinghamshire in England in 1964-1965. The novel was made into a successful film entitled “Rachel, Rachel” in 1969.

In this novel Rachel Cameron, the intelligent, sensitive and fiercely introspective protagonist tries to identity herself with the Prairie town of Manawaka. Rachel is in Laurence’s own words, “a compulsive pulsetaker.”

She is an oppressed individual, who is obsessed by her fears and inhibitions. She being a school teacher in Manawaka, lives in a cosy flat isolated from most human contact by the bond of duty to her mother.

Rachel’s life is dull without any close friends or relations. Her only diversion after school is her casual acquaintance with Calla, a fellow teacher. When she moves to Manawaka she develops friendship with a farmer, Lennox Cates who has not even completed high school and who is married and has three children.

At the age of thirty four, Rachel does not want to become an
eccentric spinster, an object of laughter. She lives with a feeling of failure in life. She feels that she can see no dignity in the kind of life she is leading. In the beginning of the novel, she is seen standing near the window of her grade two classroom, looking out at the children playing in the school yard. She feels isolated and lonely because she thinks that she is not attractive. Moreover she thinks that the children are making fun of her in their songs. She refers to herself “as a thin streak of a person, like the stroke of a white chalk on a black board” (JG 29) and “The silver fish white of arms, the crane of a body, gaunt metal or gaunt bird” (JG 115).

Rachel feels envious towards her sister Stacey who lives in Vancouver with her four healthy children. After her father’s death fourteen years ago, there was not enough money for Rachel to complete her education. So at a very young age of twenty, Rachel came back to Manawaka to teach in a school and to look after her mother.

Rachel has a strong desire to have children. She is seen to have a deep liking for one of the boys in her class, James Doherty. She has a maternal affection for him and she likes the way he conducts himself. “He goes his own way as though he endures the outside world but does not believe in it” (JG 5). In a drawing class, James exhibits his artistic talents. He draws a spaceship with many detailed parts such as knobs, oxygen tanks, instrument panels and so on. Rachel finds that James
has a good knowledge about cars, planes, electricity and jet planes. She knows that James exhibits independence of mind.

James hides from Rachel the pages on which he has incorrectly solved two sums out of ten. She feels hurt and strikes him with a ruler. She, later regrets her actions, and utters, “I cannot say I’m sorry. Not in front of them all, twenty-six beings, all eyes” (JG 53). James becomes the symbol of free spirit to Rachel. In the beginning she thinks that Grace Doherty, James’s mother does not deserve to be his mother.

Rachel is of the opinion that Grace brings up her child in an improper manner. She thinks that Grace is concerned about James’ marks rather than his feelings and attitudes. Grace is more concerned about James getting a good report only because she does not want James to do worser than her sister-in-law’s sons.

James’ true nature is seen only when Grace informs Rachel that James would not be tormented by society’s fears and principles. Rachel informs Grace about James playing the truant in school. Grace also partially admits later that sometimes she allows James to waste his time amidst nature instead of going to school. In fact Grace was with James on two occasions. These incidents were spotted by Angela Siddley, the principal’s wife. The reports show James as a symbol of free spirit to Rachel.

In the novel, Rachel suppresses her feelings in many places. It is
the conservative society of Manawaka which has taught her to behave in this manner. Even in her dreams, she has to escape from society. In many instances, where Rachel meets Nick Kazlick, her friend, it is either a forest or a beach. She prefers to be away from ‘everywhere.’ ‘It has to be right away from everywhere. Otherwise she may be seen’ (JG 18). In one of her dreams she finds herself in a Hollywood type orgy in ancient Egypt.

When Rachel accompanies Calla to the “Tabernacle of the Risen and Reborn” (JG 29) she gives vent to her pent up feelings. She behaves in a hysterical manner. Her speech is incoherent. She is not bothered about the inhibitions of the society.

Mrs. Cameron has a very strong hold on her daughter, Rachel. She manipulates her daughter by acting pathetic, yet she is aware of her own deceptions. David Stock, a critic characterizes Mrs. Cameron as “a frail but vain little woman whose tyranny over her daughter ranges from sharp censure of her activities to pathetic intimations of her own death.”

On one occasion Rachel mentions to Calla that she intends joining a course in English the next term. Mrs. May Cameron overhears and resents that Rachel had not mentioned it to her. Rachel wanted to have an extension card attached to the phone so that she can take it to her room. But she does not do so because her mother will not
be convinced by any kind of explanation. This attitude leads her to hide facts from her mother. Even when she accompanies Calla to the Tabernacle, she does not inform her mother. Later when Nick calls her over the phone, she wishes that her mother had not answered her phone.

During a summer holiday Rachel has a brief affair with a former school mate, Nick Kazlick, a teacher from Winnipeg. Nick had come to stay at his father’s farm near Manawaka. Rachel has a strong desire for sex. She conquers all her fears and self doubts and has a passionate relationship with Nick, hoping that she would become pregnant.

Rachel’s relationship with Nick offers her an opportunity to free herself from her mother’s control. Her attitude towards her mother changes as she goes steady with Nick. One night she crosses all hurdles and goes out. She is overwhelmed by this new-found enthusiasm in her.

When Rachel returns after meeting Nick, she finds her mother wide-awake. She informs her mother that Nick had taken her to his house to meet his family. The mother’s face changes. She asks Rachel if the affair was serious. She is worried about her own state if Rachel leaves the house. “What will become of me” (JG 114) after Rachel is gone. This realisation irritates Rachel who goes to the extent of wishing that something bad should happen to her mother. “Why can’t
she die and leave me alone" (JG 114). Mrs. Cameron does not approve of her daughter's Rachel's relationship with Nick. She considers Nick inferior to them as he is a milkman's son. But Rachel does not allow her mother to interfere in her love affair: "I can't believe it could happen, though. A thing like that—to grow a child inside one's structure and have it born alive? Not within me. It couldn't. I couldn't really believe it could ever happen. Nick, give it to me (JG 117-118). The idea grows upon her and she is anxious of this: "If I had a child, I would like it to be yours" (JG 148).

When Rachel confesses her desire for children, Nick withdraws saying that he is not God and that he cannot solve anything. Nick shows her a snapshot of a boy. It is a photograph of his own childhood. But she misunderstands and takes it to be a photograph of his son.

Rachel, the protagonist is conscious that she should lead her life as per the code of conduct prescribed by the society. There is a conflict in her mind whether to accept or to reject the child. She is worried also about the possibility of her becoming pregnant: "What, I ask myself, Rachel, could I have done, in bringing you up, that you would go and do a thing like that?"(JG 160)

Rachel finds no one to advise her on the procedure of terminating the pregnancy. With no one to help her she gets desperate. She even thinks of going to her sister Stacey but realises that she would not be of much help. After a great mental turmoil, she decides to rebel against
the norms of the society. She declares her decision to have a child of her own: "Look—it's my child, mine. And so I will have it" (JG 171).

Rachel experiences a gradual change in her. She slowly comes out of her mother's control and gains confidence. When she goes for medical check-up she is told that she is not pregnant—it is only a uterine irregularity. Her pregnancy is not life but a tumour which has to be removed by an operation.

Rachel undergoes her final humiliation. Her desperate struggle between acceptance and rejection of the child-to-be is all brought to anti-climax. The growth within her is not life, but a kind of random nothingness, a benign tumour:

All that. And this at the end of it. I was always afraid that I might become a fool. Yet I could almost smile with some grotesque lightheadedness at that fool of a fear, that poor fear of fools, now that I really am one. (JG 181)

In the hospital at Winnipeg, the little tumour is removed from her uterus and with it goes her association with Nick. The struggle she endures has a powerful liberating effect. She learns to accept and to live with her limitations and life. Lying in the hospital bed, Rachel under the influence of anesthetics says, "I am the mother now" (JG184). Her words make no sense to the nurse, but these are very significant words. It becomes real to her. These words proclaim her
emergence as an adult free from dependence on her mother. These words are a key to a degree of freedom and an acceptance of herself as she is.

In spite of her mother's tears, threat and protests, Rachel decides to leave Manawaka to take up a teaching position in Vancouver. For her, her mother becomes "an elderly child". She declares herself to be a mother:

We watched until the lights of the town could not be seen any longer. Now only the farm kitchens and the stars are out there to signpost the nights. The bus flies along, smooth and confident as a great owl through the darkness, and all the passengers are quiet, some of them sleeping. Beside me sleeps my elderly child. Where I'm going, anything may happen. Nothing may happen. Maybe I will marry a middle-aged widower, or a longshoreman, or a cattle-hoof-trimmer, or a barrister or a thief. And have my children in time. Or maybe not. Most of the chances are against it. But not, I think, quite all. What will happen? What will happen. It may be that my children will always be temporary, never to be held. But so are everyone's.

(JG 201)

The closing lines of the novel direct us to Rachels' achievement of
self-knowledge and self acceptance.

Kenneth James Hughes brilliantly sums up the symbolic significance of Rachel's false pregnancy and the surgical removal of her tumour:

In terms of the individual Rachel, the tumour represents symbolically the internalized psychological watch-dog of an external repressive society, the surgery makes the removal of paranoiac and paralyzing self consciousness which frees Rachel for action as a self moving, whole individual.\(^3\)

Like Rachel, Nick too seeks to establish his own identity in relation to his parents. Nick who is bound by his parents is fettered by his brother’s death. Nick lied to her about his being married, she comments: “He had his own demons and webs. Mine brushed across him for an instant, and he saw them and had to draw away, knowing that what I wanted from him was too much” \(\text{\textit{JG 189}}\).

In the end Rachel’s decision to move away from Manawaka indicates that she is an authentic individual, trying to create her own identity. She is free to accept the care of her mother and to move westward into a quiet new life.

The finding of decision and spirit, the affirming of the future, is in Rachel’s context a great victory. For Clara Thomas:

“I am the mother now” is more that Rachel’s, it is
everone's, and it is one of the saddest and strangest moments that life holds. Margaret Laurence has prepared us for this specifically on two precious occasions when Rachel has mistakenly or confusedly referred to her mother as her child. Moreover, *A Jest of God* makes a great affirmation of life and living, happening in the midst of and 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 least some hope out of defeat.\textsuperscript{4}

One of the main identity crises presented in the novel is Rachel's relationship with others. Being an introvert by nature, Rachel has the habit of hiding her sincere and true feelings. She is not frank and outspoken and does not interact with the outside world. She considers herself as a disciplined teacher, who keeps herself at a distance from her students. She is depicted as a woman longing to do away with her spinsterhood and who has very wild fantasies. Rachel longs for freedom and personal identity. She lives in a world of fantasy; she gets repressed under the weight of home, school and church and desperately longs for freedom.
When she meets Nick Kazlik, her former schoolmate, who comes to Manawaka to spend summer holidays he falls in love and indulges in a physical relationship. Later she becomes aware of her new feelings and new experiences. She spends the summer holidays with Nick. She moves freely with Nick in the Prairie outskirts of Manawaka. She is not satisfied with her lover. She wants to establish a permanent relationship with Nick. She questions Nick in the following way: “If one speaks from faith, not logic, how does that turn out? I do not know, except that I am so strong in it, so assured, that it cannot possibly go wrong. Nick ‘Mm?’ If I had a child, I would like it be yours” (JG 148).

Rachel has a strong desire for children. She reiterates her demand: “Give me my children” (JG 148). Nick’s immediate reply is “Darling, he says, I’m not God. I can’t solve anything” (JG 148). Rachel moves suddenly into the world of uncertainties when Nick suddenly leaves Manawaka. She is very delighted with the feeling of becoming a mother. This feeling gives her a fair measure of self-recognition.

God has his own ways of reacting with people. God’s cruel joke dawns on Rachel when she realises that her much awaited child turns out to be a tumour. Rachel is disappointed. This disappointment in discovering that she is not a mother is very destructive. She gradually matures through this unusual experience which brings a remarkable change in her attitude to her own life.
Rachel in saying “I am the mother now” brings out an idea that mere biological fact of having children does not mean that a woman has a full control over her life.

Elizabeth Waterston comments on Rachel’s dual nature:

The first plot begins with Rachel as a neurotically double being. She is obsessed with her own status, her image in the community, her family position; yet she harbours an inner self, anarchic, exotic, disorderly.5

John Braddock in his review of the novel comments on Rachel’s character. He says “I was conscious at the end of the book that I had not read about Rachel Cameron, but experienced her.”6 The success of the novel lies in the character’s struggle for survival and identity. These are revealed by means of the present tense voice, the first-person narrative and style.

Rachel Cameron’s personal identity is enriched by her dual personality which she always exhibits. She does what she does not want to. She is her own critic, observing and analysing herself.

Another aspect of personal identity of Rachel is that she always carries with her the memories of her dead father. She always faces this ghostlike figure. She is also confronted with a nagging mother, from whom she cannot escape.
The secular church (the Tabernacle) which Calla visits is as unacceptable to Rachel as is the traditional church, the former refers to the spiritually hysteric while the latter seems designed for the spiritually dead. It is in the secular church with its emotional exuberance that Rachel's repressed self surfaces for the first time, indicating the gulf between her conscious and her unconscious selves. The description and the bluish-green colour of the walls in the Tabernacle point to the psychic plunge that Rachel must make to survive with dignity. The hymns sung in the secular church sound like jazz and Rachel feels chilled hearing a man speak in tongues. The words of the lay preacher regarding the diversity of god's gifts fail to touch her. The whole place is filled with noises. According to Coral Ann Howells, “is filled with voices crying out in confusion—the voices of Rachel, her mother, Nick, Calla, Willard siddley.” Rachel is worried about Calls being granted the gift of tongues but does not realise that it could happen to her, when unknown to her she speaks in tongues.

The voices in her throughout the novel indicate the rift between the two selves. The voices within her acts independently and it seems to go beyond her control. She even identifies herself as the “Queen of the Golden City” (JG 93). This is a sharp contrast with the dull reality. She comments: “I can't bear watching people make fools of themselves. I don't know why, but it threatens me” (JG 27).
Mrs. Cameron constantly compares Rachel with her sister Stacey. Stacey is well-married and a mother of four children. Both sisters maintain a mutual admiration for each other. The distance between them aids this understanding and love for each other. Stacey is quiet aware of her position. Rachel feels that her sister would know how to react in complicated situations. For instance Rachel is unable to take decisions about her suspected pregnancy. But Stacey faces all sorts of familial problems. Stacey feels that Rachel is clever in avoiding all these entanglements.

Mrs. Cameron plays a very important role in shaping Rachel’s future. She is bound by her vanities in costume, appearance and parties. Mrs. Cameron is also of a poor and weak health. She cites of her poor health—her weak heart in order to gain Rachel’s attention and sympathy.

Rachel’s confusion and embarrassment are brought out in the following lines:

That Voice! Chattering, crying, ululating, the forbidden transformed cryptically to nonsense, dragged from the crypt, stolen and shouted, the shuddering of it, the fear, the breaking, the release, the grieving—Not Calla’s voice.

Mine. Oh my God. Mine. The voice of Rachel. (JG 36)

Rachel does not seem to gain much experience from it. She sums
up her opinion about the secular and traditional churches in the following words. “The Tabernacle has too much gaudiness and zeal, and this has too little” (JG 41).

Rachel does not find any comfort in the church and its proceedings nor in her father’s atheism. She wants to believe in God but seriously doubts his existence. Thinking herself pregnant, and not knowing what to do when her suicide fails she finds herself on her knees “unprayefully” (JG 185). She prays not out of belief but out of need.

Rachel fails to see the God archetype as a unifying and healing presence ‘within’ her. She regards God as a “brutal joker,” (JG 42) sees herself as a victim of a jest of God. She would “wholeheartedly agree with Gloucester who says in King Lear: “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, They kill us for their sport.”8 Rachel has reached a stage of incomplete wholeness and hence her spiritual quest remains incomplete.

The identity crises attains its pinnacle when Rachel has an affair with Nick. This relationship brings a turn of events in the novel. Rachel, before the affair, is bound by the morals of the Manawaka society which is represented by her mother. She goes against the social conventions only in her dreams.

Rachel finds happiness in the new found relationship with Nick.
At first she longs to cultivate an intimate relationship with Nick, but later cultivates an intimacy with Calla and decides to break away from the control of her mother.

The late night visit to Hector's funeral parlour serves as an aid to Rachel's self-awareness. Through this visit, she does away with the taboo's of Manawaka against confronting death directly. C.M. McLay makes some interesting remarks as the central role of death in the fiction:

While human relationships are an attempt to counter isolation, death is a recognition of it [...] In Laurence, however, death [...] accentuates our consciousness of an isolation which already exists. It is only in facing death that we are able to assess life, and to recognize our own isolation.9

Rachel's relationship with Calla is quite a shadow. She resent's Calla calling her 'Child'. It is rejection of her own nature. Nancy Bailey points out:

Her [Rachel's] childishness is evident in her fearfulness and in her refusal to venture beyond the tracks or down into her father's world. Rachel, like her bedroom, remains "girlish" she resists growth.10

Rachel realises that Calla is the right person to confide
everything. In spite of her apparent dislike for Calla, she shares her thoughts with Calla revealing her closeness with her:

Her (Rachel) growth, aided by her sexual relationship with Nick, is first sparked, then nurtured and later, freed by her relationship with a mother-surrogate whose love and loyalty give Rachel the ability to ‘become the Mother’. Nick may help Rachel discover her Eros, but it is Calla who helps her find herself.11

Regarding religious concepts Rachel is skeptical of the religious teachings offered to her. At the initial stage of the novel, A Jest of God she views God as a cosmic comedian taunting people for his perverted sport. This position leads her to reject her mother’s church and Calla’s Tabernacle which has “too much gaudiness and zeal” (JG 41). She comes to an understanding of St. Paul’s dictum. “If any man among you thinketh himself to be wise, let him become a fool, that he may be wise” (JG 135). Later Rachel humourously remarks: “God’s mercy on reluctant jesters. God’s grace on fools. God’s pity on God” (JG 202).

Rachel comes to a stage of showing comparison not only to men but also to God. She puts up with this sort of understanding outwardly for fear of displeasing others:

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. No use to say that. (JG 39)

Though Rachel is skeptical. She does not like Calla’s views of the Tabernacle:

How can anyone bear to make a public spectacle of themselves? How could anyone display so openly? I will not look. I will not listen. People should keep themselves to themselves—that’s the only decent way. (JG 35)

Rachel feels very strange and unusual when she has people behaving in an odd manner at the Tabernacle. There is a jazziness in the hymn’s sung by the people and even in their speech. She has never undergone the peace of mind that accompanies after such an event.

Towards the end of the novel, Rachel rejects both Testaments—God of Anger and punishment of the Old Testament and the God of Redemption of the New Testament. She opts for a God who “would be a human-type being who could be reached by tears or bribed with words.”12

A negative or a low self-esteem mars a harmonious relationship. Rachel in A Jest of God develops a low self-esteem because she is not able to continue her University career. She always feels inferior to others as against her fathers profession as an undertaker. Another unpleasant factor is that even at the age of thirty-four she is single.
This develops a negative image of herself. Moreover Rachel’s affair with Nick is neither deep nor a permanent emotional involvement. It is the last effort which Rachel undertakes to escape from her spinsterhood.

Rachel’s relationship with Nick is the beginning of her inner peace and self-confident. It is a knowledge that he will somehow “inhabit” her gives strength “against all reasons” (JG 104).

Characters with low self-esteem depend on others for the sense of identity, well being and happiness. For example Rachel admits that she is not afraid when she is with Nick. She is not confident to face the difficulties of life, without Nick. She is much interested in having a long lasting relationship with Nick. She expects Nick to solve all her psychic conflicts. Nick loses interest in her, the moment he comes to know that she is dependent on him for all her needs. He withdraws saying that it is not a muscular withdrawl. Something different, something unsuspected.

Like Rachel, Nick too seeks to establish his identity in relation to his parents who inextricably bind him. Nick is fettered by his brother’s death and his guilty refusal to work 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.”13
The protagonist seeks refuge from the inner solitude which is the outcome of the remote life of the Manawaka country farms. The younger generation of the Prairie town begins to revolt against the traditions of the society.

Rachel who belongs to the younger generation represents the passive and feminist citizen of the Canadian story. Later at the end of the novel she takes control of her mother, whose views are limited by the habits of the little town. She takes a new decision. She decides to move west.

Rachel cheated by her lover and deprived of her hope of motherhood, remembers the whistling trains of her childhood. This train would carry her better in the flat land than what it would have done in the mountains. She grew up with the voice of the train that said: “don’t stay don’t stay just don’t ever stay-go and keep on going never mind where” (JG 167). The voice of the train thus invites the girl for an interior voyage which would help her to lead her life successfully.

The war had an impact on Rachel’s life as she grew up in Manawaka during the depression years and the war that followed afterwards. Rachel is frantic about children. She likes to bear her own children instead of looking after other’s children.

The place Manawaka represents the past which she cannot
escape and also the present which she cannot endure. She has lost the past and in a confused way she feels the loss. The country is filled with one half as Ukrainian and the other half as Scottish.

Nick represents the Ukrainian. Hence when she meets him she remembers again his father, Nestor who used to be a milkman when she was young. Nick was unable to have an involvement in the land as Nestor had. Nick leaves the farm and later leaves Rachel also, and is forced to get away from his past and from all emotional ties. Rachel has no memory and no pride over her ancestry. She finds no support for herself in their achievement. She knows how to free herself from the past. When she realises that she is bearing a child and finally finds that she has only a tumour, she suffers but learns to free herself from it. She goes westward to teach taking her mother with her.

Isolation is one of the aspects which is found in almost all the characters in the novel. The major and minor characters are almost all the time found in isolation. For example Rachel, Mrs. Cameron and James Doherty who leaves his mother, wanting “to be his own and as his own” (JG 54). Calla lives all alone with the songless cannery and even Willard Siddley, the Principal who has both attracted and repelled Rachel.

The characters play an important role in identifying the identity of the characters. For example the professional roles of the major and
minor characters add an extra social dimension to other familial and personal relationship. Through her intellectual pursuit, Rachel manages to resist the social norms of getting married and leading a stereotyped life as house wife. Being a teacher adds extra dimension to her role as an obedient daughter and lover. Obsessed with fear, she fears what other people might think of her, of being different, and is scared of being isolated. She also fears the authoritarianism of Willard Siddley, just as she fears displeasing her mother in the familial relationship. She also fears the transgression of normal limits in her relationship with James Doherty, her favourite pupil. There is thus conflict and unnecessary tension created in this sphere due to the fear and dependency in relationships.

Rachel’s relationship with Willard takes the form of the oppressor-oppressed relationship in the colonial situation. Rachel revolts in her mind against social norms. For instance, when she is with Mr. Willard in an interview, she becomes self-conscious. She says “I know I must not stand up now, not until he’s gone. I am exceptionally tall for a woman, and Willard is shorter than I”(JG 7). This sort of dependency leads to her submission to all his decisions. For instance the strapping of James Doherty which she knows would not do any good to the boy, and that it is an unfair punishment, she does not say so but justifies Willard’s stand by accepting to send James
to him. Later after this incident, she badly wants to leave the job and the school. Her wish is fulfilled only when she undergoes an operation in the hospital for false pregnancy. She becomes aware of her relationship with Willard.

Rachel's relationship with James Doherty, her favourite pupil in her class represents two levels. On one level James who is Rachel's favourite pupil wishes to have a Mother-Son relationship. At another level James is a substitute figure for Nick. James, like Nick, breaks the convictions of Manawaka society. Grace Doherty also acts as a foil to all the mothers of Manawaka.

The fear of becoming a stereotype school teacher is very predominant in the novel. For instance it is seen when Rachel asks her students to come back to class:

Come along, Grade Two's. Line up quietly now Am I beginning to talk in that simper tone, the one so many grade school teachers pick up without realizing? At first they only talk to the children like that, but it takes root and soon they can't speak any other way to anyone. (JG 2)

The students play an important role in the novel. They represent Rachel, what she was in the past and links Rachel to her past. The songs the students sing when they skip is the same that Rachel had sung twenty seven years ago. Also these children, in a way teach
Rachel important lessons in life. She realises that her inability to possess her children permanently, is a trait she shares with all mothers. In the end, she moves to Vancouver, with her mother with a hope of a new life and a successful future. She has learnt the most important lesson in life, that is, that one simply had to go on, take one step after another.

The quest for self-knowledge by the protagonist and the urge to know the self itself has psychological and spiritual dimensions in this work of Laurence. There are other factors which aid Rachel’s awareness. One is the late night show visit to Hector’s funeral parlour. Through such visits Rachel has confronted death directly.

Calla’s timely help enables Rachel to have a healthy friendship with her. She stops worrying about the fleeting relationship she will have with her pupils. She finally prays to God to bless her or she would not beg. This shows how much Rachel has progressed in life and this is proved in the final sentence of the novel “God’s mercy on reluctant jesters. God’s grace on fools. God’s pity on God” (JG 202).

Rachel’s final stance is the proof of Laurence’s concern with the human conditions. Her point of realisation comes when she understands and accepts the restrictions within which Nick is operating. She even forgives him for his deception.

A Jest of God depicts the Jungian concept of the need to accept
one's own dark side in order to realise the self. Rachel alienates herself from human warmth and companionship. She does this, not because of pride but because of the fear of transgressing the norms of Manawaka society. She clings to her personality provided by her roles as teacher, spinster and daughter. She suppresses her instinctive nature. Her relationship with James Doherty is one such. She punishes James unduly for the fear of making public her maternal affection for him.

Her true inner self is completely hidden behind the veil of a spinster schoolteacher. Her true nature breaks in during an unexpected moment. Once, she fantasises a sexual encounter with a shadow prince. She imagines the whole scene away from the places which she normally visits. It is a deep forest because she is scared of being seen by somebody. Thus she is scared of what the others might say.

Rachel’s relationship with Calla, who acts as shadow is a tensed affair. Her objection of Calla calling her “child” is a rejection of her own nature. Rachel’s true nature emerges during her speaking in tongues at the Tabernacle. Instead of accepting it gracefully, Rachel feels ashamed of her hysteric outburst. Rachel has a wrong attitude to Calla. She concludes that Calla is a lesbian because Calla kisses her. Later she changes her attitude when Calla offers a positive support to her during her supposed pregnancy. It is this true friendship which makes Rachel finally accept the wisdom of being a fool.
Rachel’s affair with Nick liberates her against the sexual taboos which her mother emphasises. By loosing what her mother terms “a woman’s most precious possession” she realises her natural instincts. Moreover this relationship with Nick also prepares her for a final step, for the quest for self, in her midnight visit to the funeral parlour of Hector Jonas.

Rachel learns to confront death, in her visit to Hector Jonas funeral parlour which is another taboo in the Manawaka society. In the figure of Hector Jonas, Rachel confronts her own father whom she had not understood fully when he was alive. This lifts the final veil which blinds her vision:

Hector Jonas, who has for so long plied his trade below while I tried to live above. Comic prophet, dwarf seer. The life he wanted most. 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?. (JG 124-25)

Rachel was leading a dead life alienating herself from the others or from any living thing. It was Hector, the Jungian wise old man who helps Rachel to realise that like her father, she had kept away from any living creatures. This incident offers her the strength to accept the supposed pregnancy. She decides to have a child even after Nick leaves
her. Later when she knows that it is only a tumour she gracefully accepts it. Rachel’s statement. “I am the mother now” should be taken only symbolically and not literally. This statement throws light on her rebirth in finding a new self. Fear is a dominant force in A Jest of God as pride was in The Stone Angel.

Rachel Cameron’s story is a study of anxiety that leads to madness. Rachel has incorporated the Manawaka values such as work, devotion to duty, decency and respectability.

Like other protagonists in the Manawaka novels, Rachel is caught between various worlds. She belongs to her pupils and later they become self-confident teenagers. She also belongs to the Manawaka and her mother. But these worlds exclude her. This isolation which she experiences generates fear.

The pupils in the school consider Rachel as a demigod. They fear the authority figure. Rachel sees herself as a sole survivor of an extinct species. Her story and all the Manawaka works dramatise the sufferings of women in the chauvinistic, male-oriented society, her passivity and insecurity, her sexual vulnerability, her financial anxiety, her responsibility for her mother are all traditional female dilemmas.

In the opening scene Rachel is painfully conscious of the social myth that women especially a single woman, are prone to hysteria and
eccentricity. She thinks that young girls are exceptionally anxious to please others but fails to apply this to herself. She is nervous with her male supervisor and fears of losing her job.

In the Manawaka novel, sexual taboos figure prominently. The story of an unmarried mother is received ironically but the protagonist knows how unpleasant a single woman with child would be treated. Rachel is ashamed to let Nick know that she is a virgin at the age of thirty-four. Sex with Nick brings Rachel inner peace and self-confidence. Her desire for sexual love is another aspect of her desire to reach out, to escape out of herself into another's identity.

Nick's relationship with Rachel is very significant. Nick's relationship offers her a short-time solace through the summer affair. This enables her to evolve into a strong woman. Nick acts as a redeemer who helps her to reach out to another person and go beyond her own self. Nick is a staunch supporter of Rachel. He instills in her a sense of freedom. Laurence's critics unanimously praise her gift for characterisation. One of Laurence best character sketch is Rachel. Rachel's desire to establish her motherhood and feminine identity speak for her kind heart and loving nature. Rachel's love for children is well depicted in her treatment of the school children. Her love for James is a symbolic representation of motherhood.

Rachel sacrifices her personal wishes and academic development
for the sake of her mother. This reveals her as a dutiful daughter though she hates her mother. Her unwillingness to go against her wish is an instance of her respect for elders. Even her acceptance to go to the Tabernacle with Calla, does not hamper her mother. Even at the Tabernacle, she is not able to concentrate because of her desire to go back to her mother. She suffers a guilty conscience, as she neglects her duty as a daughter.

Calla is a minor character who reveals her identity in the later part of the novel. Calla neither marries nor pursues a heterosexual lifestyle nor does she suppress her sexuality and let it turn her into a neurotic, but sublimates it in religion and turns her sexual energy into spiritual energy.

Calla is greatly influenced by the Tabernacle. It is a positive influence, which the Tabernacle has for Calla. Calla’s needs are fulfilled through the sense of community she experiences there. At the tabernacle the form of worship is unconventional. The Presbyterians of Manawaka regard religion as a topic unfit for polite conversation. For Calla, faith is a working force in her life.

May Cameron is a typical mother of Manawaka trying to impose the narrow traditions on her favorite daughter. She does not bother about Rachel’s spinsterhood. She is worried about medicines. Though Rachel wants to leave Manawaka, May Cameron stops her saying that
she would not feel at home anywhere else. May expects her daughter to stay and look after her personal needs. It would, of course, indirectly affect Rachel’s growth. In the end Rachel decides against May Cameron.

Rachel displays many of mind’s internal decisions, such as self-alienation, self-estrangement and a dual consciousness. This dual consciousness depicts lack in the continuity of conversation, comprehension and use of words which always has a different meaning. Her use of language and her expression does not convey the purpose of human communication and self-expression but reveals only alienation.

The narrative technique used in *A Jest of God* is the first person, present tense narrative, the narrator who is also the central character in the novel. This first person technique presents Laurence as a writer with the feeling that she is sharing another person’s mind. Laurence also tries to convey her message to the leader that human beings are hopelessly isolated from each other.

Margaret Laurence presents protagonists for whom speeches are beyond conscious control, either they lose their ability to articulate or their own inner voice takes over. Rachel appears to be a confused and a frustrated personality. She is plagued by self-doubt and guilt. She struggles to free herself from taboos such as psychological, sexual and
linguistic repression. The interior monologues reveal the internal conflicts of the protagonist.

A stylistic analysis of the interior monologues reveal Rachel's split character. Margaret Laurence has chosen phrases, clauses words, patterns within sentences in order to create a distinct style for each voice.

The two voices in Rachel differ in the subject matter of their speech. Rachel's one voice is meaningless but contains emotionally charged phrases. Another form of the voice is that when Rachel speaks in mother's formula to Calla. It is a reflection of the strict standards of Manawaka which one usually hears in mother's speech.

Rachel's other inner voice is often lively and imaginative but it is at times sarcastic and harsh. She offers critical opinions on the world, but is especially critical of her own timid and anxious self. Her strong voice is polite but not servile or deferential like her nice voice. Her strong voice is rich in alliteration.

When there is an emotional crisis between the two voices there in stress and contention between them. She is not sure how to react. Rachel in such situations generally responds to the outside in her nice voice, but her stronger voice mocks sarcastically from within. She is embarrassed at the dual nature within her. She remains and reacts to her spirited self.
When Rachel meets Nick for the first time, she speaks to him in the wrong voice. This is due to the result of confusion which she has in her personality. The voice of the mother reacts quicker than the stronger voice of the clever school teacher. She fumes internally, “It’s as though I’ve thought in Mother voice” (JG 64). Rachel speaks frankly and she does not know how to react to jokes. Rachel, lacks social and linguistic confidence. This is very obvious when she converses with Nick:

What is there to do here in the summer? Nick asks

“I don’t—well, not a great deal, I guess”. Would you come to a movie on Friday night, Rachel?” “Oh well—I guess—well, thanks. I—yes, I’d like to.” (JG 64)

The elements of Nature have been exhibited in each of the Manawaka novels. In *A Jest of God* air is a dominant element. Air acts as both good and bad elements. The wind and the voices of those who speak in tongues happen to represent the same things. The opening scene of the novel shows the children in the schoolyard. “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” (JG 1). The wind plays an important role in each stage of Rachel’s life. At the initial stage in her life at the age of thirty-four Rachel is dying emotionally, because she cannot let herself or give herself up to the
winds.

When Rachel is not able to get along up with the pregnancy that is to go along the force of natural desire she complains that the wind is becoming colder but she really means that escape is difficult. Finally when she does escape, through her affair with Nick, the wind loses its threatening force. Rachel happily donates her reputation. It is gone with the wind “to the wind” (JG 92). Finally towards the end of the story, Rachel yields herself to the wind like a feather. “The wind will bear me, and I will drift and settle and drift and settle. Anything may happen, where I’m going” (JG 201).

The novel depicts individuals caught in the labyrinth of loneliness. Individuals remain strangers to each other largely due to the problems involved in verbal communication. Rachel is completely alienated both from those who are afraid of appearing foolish and those who are not. Characters such as May, Williard and Angela Siddley chained to social mythologies belong to the group who are afraid of appearing foolish. The main change in Rachel towards the end of the novel, as Laurence sees it, is that she is not afraid of looking like a fool any more, which in itself is “a kind of liberation.” 14 Afraid of seeming foolish, the characters have sacrificed their trueselves. Repression causes them to lead joyless and sterile lives with each one wrestling in isolation with his or her own demons. These characters take risk and
at times even appear foolish.

The others belong to the group who are not afraid of appearing foolish. Calla, Grace, Hector, Teresa and Nestore are not afraid of seeming foolish. They are guided by their faith and intuitions rather than by rigid social codes. On one occasion, Calla quotes St. Paul who says: "If any man among you thinketh himself to be wise let him be a fool, that he may be wise."  

Rachel, by the end of the story, has learned the meaning of her "Other voice". At the Tabernacle this voice reveals itself. It cries out "wordless and terrible, the voice of some woman mourning for her children" (JG 187). Like the Biblical Rachel, she also mourns for her children. Later she realises that children are always temporary. But she becomes aware of a more important truth: "But so are everyone's" (JG 201). Rachel discovers that her plight is universal. She learns a lesson that God appears a jester only to those who are afraid of being taken for a fool, that is, among those who are true to themselves and to others, without regard to appearance. Rachel learns the supreme lesson "know thyself."

In the novel A Jest of God Death has a very prominent role to play. Rachel imagines that Doctor Raveins waiting room is "death's immigration office and Doctor Raven some deputy angel allotted to the job of the initial sorting out of sheep and goats, the happy sheep
permitted to colonize heaven, the wayward goats sent to trample their cloven hoofprints all over Hell’s acres” (JG 176–177). Doctor Raven is a harbinger of death. He sends Rachel into purgatory, when he discovers that Rachel is incubating a tumour and not an embryo. The decision that cost Rachel so much seems all for nothing. This is the ultimate jest of God. Rachel does give birth, not to an infant but to an adult self. Rachel has also gained a child. This is because she realizes, “I am the mother now” (JG 184). God has the final laugh. Rachel has always been terrified of being foolish. She has taken a long time to develop a spiritual sense of humour. She is embarrassed by Nick and his performance. This affair teaches her a lesson. Finally she says, “All right, God—go ahead and laugh, and I’ll laugh with you, but not quite yet for a while” (JG 115).

At the end of the novel Rachel understands the joke of God: “All that. And this at the end of it. I was always afraid that I might become a fool. Yet I could almost smile with some grotesque lightheadedness at that fool of a fear, that poor fear of fools, now that I really am one” (JG 181). Rachel having become a fool, can now be wise enough to pity the joker: “God’s mercy on reluctant jesters. God’s grace on fools. God’s pity on God” (JG 202). And this is the impact of His jest on Rachel. All our minor plans are set off by his master plans, still we all “go ahead and laugh” (JG 115) and this is a jest of God.