The Deployment of Western Literary Modes

Chapter 4
The Deployment of Western Literary Modes

This chapter discusses the texts of Crate, Maracle and Marchessault from a narratological perspective. If the earlier three chapters discussed the points of deviance between native and mainstream writing, this chapter discusses the ways in which the native texts adhere to western literary and narratological standards.

Counter discourse could be made effective by the subversion of the existing dictates of the colonial discourse. At the same time, the redeployment of the techniques of the main discourse for subversive purposes is also possible. For instance, mythical patterning in narratives is a dominant mode employed by many modern writers. The numerous native myths are introduced by native writers to create a native canon of their own. Similarly, the archetypal patterns employed in the native narratives under discussion serve to prove that native reality too is as ordered as that of the colonizers. Again, the equilibrium state in narratives, envisaged by narratologists like Todorov and a reading of the native texts on the basis of this equilibrium could pass a negative commentary on the colonizers.
A structural analysis of the various plots under discussion would show that the presence of the narrator as well as the reader is imperative to the text. Other aspects such as narrative expectations, dialogue, point of view etc, too, will be discussed in this chapter.

Fiction is indeed an attempt to create order out of a chaotic reality. Mythological motifs are often integrated into the general plot line as devices that aid the patterning of both plot and character. A myth introduced by a modern novelist into his/her work can prefigure and hence anticipate the plot in a number of ways. An ideal reader will be familiar with most pre-figurations beforehand, and thus the myth will offer the novelist a shorthand system of symbolic comment on modern events.

Any story, being a succession of events, the event itself is the basic unit of narrative discourse, and the selection and ordering of events is the basic task of plot construction. John Holloway in his *Narrative and Structure: Exploratory Essays*, discusses the need to have three definite sets of events in a narrative. The first, of course, is the Initiating Event which constitutes the first significant event of the story and which also generates narrative expectations regarding the plot. The Reversing Event is that which counters our supposition --
an event that creates tension by providing some kind of conflict or by arousing the reader's sense of curiosity. The Terminating Event may well not be what comes in the very last page of the narrative; it is indeed what resolves the narrative and finally determines its conclusion, everything that follows it being mere consequence and detail. The Terminating Event often stands in certain formal relations to the earlier items in the series and quite often are found to be in a state of equilibrium vis-a-vis the initiating event. In such cases, the plot movement is found to be circular, the end linked to the beginning by resolution of an opposition or revelation of a similarity.

Todorov extends this analysis further by distinguishing five indispensable elements in a narrative ("Narrative" 39): a state of equilibrium at the outset; a disruption of that equilibrium; a recognition of that disruption; an action aimed at repairing that disruption; and a reinstatement of the initial equilibrium. Sometimes a narrative lacks the first two elements, thus starting from disequilibrium or at times it lacks the last two, thus ending in a tragedy.

A surface reading of the novels of Lee Maracle, Joan Crate and Jovette Marchessault reveal this structure. In Joan Crate's *Breathing Water*, the equilibrium of a distant
past is hinted at. The happy days of her childhood when her father narrated the stories of the Indian mythology is recalled and Dione's directionless movement could be regarded as an attempt to re-establish this equilibrium. This initial equilibrium is upset when her father disappears from her life. Since the search for the father is the guiding motif in this novel, it is to be concluded that Dione has had a recognition of the disruption of the equilibrium and that she attempts to reinstate that equilibrium. Her search for her father ends in vain, but she learns to narrate her father's stories to her son Elijah. It is while she learns to recognise her father's voice in her stories that she finally gets in control of her life.

In Lee Maracle's *Ravensong* and *Sundogs*, the initial equilibrium is a distant racial memory. If the protagonists perceive a false sense of equilibrium in their lives, it is only by way of ignorance. If on the superficial level, the status quo of the village life in *Ravensong* is disrupted with the entry of the dreaded flu, on a deeper level, Celia's vision of the first flu epidemic long ago -- "somewhere else, in some other time men ... digging, singing desperately, rushing through the digging" (14) informs us that epidemic and whites came hand in hand. Stacey, in her own way, puts up a meek
resistance to win equality and power and her struggle inside the classroom should be seen in the light of Native Indian struggle for empowerment. The suppression of the flu coincides with Stacey's decision to attend classes at the UBC — both these movements bear the unignorable symbolic meaning of resistance. They are also attempts to reinstate the lost equilibrium.

In Sundogs, on the other hand, it is Marianne's ignorance of facts that makes her live comfortably in her pseudo-equilibrium. Her mother's frequent reminders of "Genocide Pure and Simple" (8) fall on deaf ears. However, it is Elijah Harper's emotional speech that awakens her to the chaotic existence of Native Indians. Her recognition of the horrendous battle her mother fought against terrible odds is brought about by Elijah Harper. "I lack the affection to believe in my mother," she comments, "Elijah restores this affection. The nattering, the abuse, catalyze self-inflicted wounds and I, and children like me, grab daggers, aim them at our mother's hearts, and gash holes in their hopes, dreams, and codes of conduct" (69-70).

Ironically, it is this same recognition that opens Marianne's eyes to the disrupted equilibrium of her people's lives. Marianne's decision to join the Peace Run and her terrifying experiences on the road are certainly
corrective measures aimed at the betterment of Native Indian life, but it is also a means by which Marianne attempts to achieve personal equilibrium. Both Sundogs and Ravensong end with the promise of a better future for the Indians.

In Jovette Marchessault's novels, the plot structure works on a deeper level. Her initial state of equilibrium in Mother of the Grass as well as in Lesbian Triptych is utopian in its vision. The highly autobiographical setting of Mother of the Grass is a special, even sacred place. For the mature female narrator reflecting back on the meaning and psychic impact of her long ago riverside homeland, the world of nature and the world of women appear harmoniously in tune, in equilibrium. In the fourth chapter, the narrative speaks about the movement of the young protagonist to impoverished conditions in the slums of Montreal. The disillusionment and oppression she suffers in the male-dominated city is but a brief interlude. The seeds of the protagonist's regeneration, maturation, and eventual artistic strength are planted during a trip to Yucatan when she is suddenly struck by an unusual and debilitating illness due to an insect bite, then cured by a wise old woman and her mysterious herbs. The subsequent death of her grandmother forces her return to the banks of Ouareau River and the imminent restoration.
of her equilibrium. The novel ends with the following lines:

I went to live on the banks of the Ouareau River... to give myself a chance, to dive splashing into the navel of the world. And then, I told myself, perhaps one day I shall be able to create something, to testify to hope and life. Perhaps, I will even write a few lines about a grandmother, myself, Earth, the Mother of the Grass.... (173)

The three stories of Lesbian Triptych, too celebrate a utopian equilibrium of the distant past. They also look forward to the creation of a new feminist era which would fight the heterosexual ideology of male supremacy. "The Night Cows" is about a mythical cow and her daughter in a pre-patriachal world. The first story "Lesbian Chronicle" is a forward movement in time which narrates the history of patriarchal violence in Quebec. That this world of jouissance has been disrupted is clarified by the narrator at various levels in the text. In Marchessault's vision, only a lesbian world where women are conscious about their choices for personal freedom and about the quality of life on this planet, will reinstate the equilibrium.
The surrealistic opening of Like a Child of the Earth does not deny the existence of an initial state of equilibrium. The novel which depicts the narrator's travels around "Native" North America in the "belly of a dog" (31) is an attempt to appropriate the native land imaginatively for herself and for aboriginal people. By reliving the torture inflicted by Columbus and the subsequent western explorers, Marchessault asserts her indignation at the rupture of the holistic world view of Native Indians. In the surrealistic plane too, the novel plots a circular structure. If "Song one" boasts of her celestial origin, the final chapter "Song Twelve" informs us of the protagonist's quest ending with a memory of celestial origins. The journey motif circles around, geographically and in time; there is not the linear narrative line from "away" to "home". Rather, by the end of the novel, the entire North American continent and the universe itself come to be recognized imaginatively as home by the narrator.

Marchessault's third novel, White Pebbles in the Dark Forests, at the first glance appears to be a novel without a plot structure. But then a narrative without a plot is a logical impossibility. It is not that there is no plot, but rather that the plot is not an intricate puzzle, that its events are as Barthes puts it, "of no great importance", that "nothing changes" (S/Z 17). In the
traditional narrative of resolution, there is a sense of problem -- solving, of things being corrected in some way. *White Pebbles in the Dark Forests* seems to fall under the genre which Seymour Chatman calls the modern plot of revelation (47). Here, the function of the discourse is not to answer the question regarding the events in the narrative nor even to pose it. Early on we gather that things will stay pretty much the same and that events will hardly be resolved.

A Structural Analysis of the Narratives

Following Todorov's analysis of narratives on two broad categories, namely, the story (which consists of a logic of actions and a syntax of characters, and discourse (comprising tenses, aspects, and modes pertaining to narrative) ("Categories" 126), an attempt is made to carry out a general analysis of the narratives under discussion. To understand a narrative is not only to follow the unfolding of the story (equilibrium --> disruption --> equilibrium) but also to recognize in it a number of strata, to project the horizontal concatenations of the narrative onto an implicit vertical axis.

The first level -- that of the story -- could be further broken up into "level of functions" and the "level of actions" (Barthes, "Narrative" 243). The
breaking up of a narrative into smaller narrative units necessarily introduces the idea of function. The "soul" of any function, writes Barthes, "is its seedlike quality, which enables the function to inseminate the narrative with an element that will later come to maturity, on the same level, or elsewhere on another level" (244). Since enumerating all functional units of all the narratives would be impossible, the most prominent functional units are discussed.

In Lee Maracle's Ravensong, the bridge that separates the reservation from the "white town" (15) serves as an important functional unit. The bridge represents not just a physical and geographical separation between the Native Indians and the Whites, it also signifies the mental barrier between the two. In order to emphasize the essential differences in the sensibilities of the two communities, Maracle introduces several related points. The communal life of the Native Indians where every single person served the community is compared to the white community where "no one individual was indispensable" (26). The artificiality of the white life style (especially in the Snowden household) is contrasted with the jovial, genuine atmosphere in Stacey's house. The Polly incident and the epidemic further bring out the ever-widening gap between the two worlds. The bridge functions as a metaphor throughout the novel, but it
becomes functional only when Stacey perceives the unbridgeable fault between the two worlds.

The functional units in *Sundogs* are never too hard to find, for the very core of the novel is related to it. Elijah Harper's emotional speech addressed to Native Canadians leads to changes on two levels. Marianne recognizes the trauma her mother must have suffered in the past to groom her children, she also recognizes the truth element in her mother's never-ending plaints against the whites, the end result being Marianne's conversion from a shallow, vain girl into a native activist.

In Joan Crate's *Breathing Water*, the numerous Indian myths act as functional units. The myth of Blue sky is related to Dione's sexuality and her nymphomaniac phase. The myth of the wife of son of the sea is related to the claustrophobic existence Dione leads in her husband's house. The latter becomes a true functional unit when the protagonist gives a twist to the otherwise tragic tale -- when she learns to breathe in water. In Jovette Marchessault's novels, the grandmother certainly functions as a functional unit, for it is her flood of words and her gynocentric vision that shapes the young protagonist's character. Again, in *Mother of the Grass*, the river Ouareau acts as a functional unit, for the movement away
from the river destroys the tranquil life of the protagonist. The novel begins with a recollection of the happy days of the protagonist's childhood, "In those days, we lived beside the river" (5) and ends with a movement back to the riverside after the soul-stifling life in the cities, "I went to live on the banks of the Ouareau River" (173). In "Lesbian Chronicle," it is the definition of choke which the young girl obtains from her cousin -- "the strangler" -- (36) that forms the functional unit. The girl grows up as a lesbian because of her misplaced parallelism between the two words, choke and bloke.

In addition to the functional units, one also perceives events with the integrative function. Barthes calls them "indices" or "indicators" which "instead of referring to a complementary and consequential act, refers to a more or less diffuse concept which is nonetheless necessary to the story: personality traits concerning characters, information with regard to their identity, notations of 'atmosphere', and so on" ("Narrative" 247). Narratives in which the indices play a predominant role are also called "psychological novels" (247) because of their accent on the development of characters. The novels of Lee Maracle, Joan Crate and Jovette Marchessault could be considered as psychological novels as the protagonists move along a cycle of discovery or anagnorisis. Paradoxically, in the novels of Maracle, one also finds that
characterization often takes a back seat, for, what the author attempts to convey is not just the tale of a girl's development, but also the harrowing story of a people's struggle for liberation.

Structuralists have further divided the functional units into two -- the "cardinal functions (or nuclei)" and the "catalysis" (Barthes, "Narrative" 248). All the events hitherto discussed as functionals could be branded as cardinals because of their significance. The catalyses on the other hand, are functional, in so far as they enter into correlations with a nucleus, but their functionality is toned down considerably. Barthes enumerates the functions of catalysis thus: "It is not redundant. Though a particular notation may seem expendable, it retains a discursive function: it precipitates, delays, or quickens the pace of the discourse, sums up, anticipates and sometimes even confuses the reader" (249).

The Mark episode in Sundogs and the Steve episode in Ravensong function as catalyses as they serve to delay the pace of the discourse. While Stacey in Ravensong refuses to give in to the whims of adolescence inorder to pursue her dream of starting a school in the Reservation, Marianne's affair with the native Mark in Sundogs delays the discourse and yet speeds up her movement towards
native politics. In the aftermath of the knowledge of Mark's marriage, the disillusioned protagonist makes a decisive move to join the Peace Run. These two episodes are certainly not the nuclei in the two narratives for, the main plot line in both the narratives is about the young heroines' awakening of native self. But the two incidents do help us to pass a comment on the protagonists' attitude towards life and hence are integral to the story line. Again, the story of the lives of Marianne's brothers and sisters do not function as the nucleus of the story, but they do succeed in building the image of a native family lost in the wilderness of city life.

In *Breathing Water*, Dione's numerous sexual encounters function as catalyses while her search for the father is the true nucleus of the narrative. In Marchessault's *Mother of the Grass*, the suicide bid of the young child protagonist functions as the catalysis. The event precipitates the building tension in the family, and it also quickens the pace of discourse, for, the reader must have perceived the trauma of the young girl.

The wide span of functional arrangement in narrative imposes an organization based on relays, whose basic units can be no other than a small group of functions. The sequence thus formed is a logical string of nuclei, linked
together by a solidarity purpose. A whole network of
subrogations binds together the narrative from the smaller
matrices upto larger functions. It is only when the
narrative has reached a greater expansion, one connection
leading to another -- the movement from one functional
unit to another -- that the analysis of the narrative can
be considered complete. The "stemma" of the main plot
line in *Sundogs* could be represented thus:

```
Sundogs
  v
---------------------
v                                     v
  v
: Ignorance of Marianne
  v
: Experiences (painful)
  v
: Orientation in tribal values
```

The Experience segment could further be represented as:

```
Experience
  v
---------------------
v                                     v
  v
: Elijah Harper's speech
  v
: Tragedy within the family
  v
: Mark episode
```

Again, Elijah Harper's speech and its effect on the
protagonist could be shown as:

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This representation is obviously analytical and before a sequence is completed, the initial term of a fresh sequence can be introduced.

The "stemma" of the main incidents in *Breathing Water*

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**Elijah's speech**

- awareness of her mother's struggle for existence
- awareness of her community's struggle
- Resolution to join the arena of Native Politics

**Breathing Water**

- Dione's unhappy marital life
- Search for experiences
- Dione reconciling to monotonous lifestyle

- Meeting with Buzzard
- Meeting with artist

- Search for the Father
- feeling the vacuum in her life
- remembering the incomplete Native stories narrated by her father
- finding a voice to complete the incomplete stories of her father, thus finding a reason to live

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The tree diagram of the important incidents in *Mother of the Grass*

```
Mother of the Grass
  | v
  | v
  | v
Happy childhood Unhappy city life Return to River side
  | v
  | v
  | v
  | v
Suicide bid Stifing life in cleaning house, garment house, factories Debilitating illness
  | v
  | v
  | v
  | v
Reexamines Cured by wise old medicine woman Return to Native ways of thinking
```

The second level of a narrative -- that of discourse -- seeks to study the aspects and modes pertaining to narrative like point of view, narrative expectations etc. The story teller's stance vis-a-vis events of a narrative can be usefully comprehended under the rubric of point of view. Any tale implies a teller (not necessarily the author), a fictional persona who perceives, selects,
recounts and sometimes comments upon the events of the plot. The implied teller very often knows the movement of the story and this privileged knowledge allows him/her to vary the chronology.

Omniscient narrative is employed by Lee Maracle in *Ravensong*. This mode gives the narrator the freedom to move through the minds and actions of the two characters in the story, Stacey and her sister Celia. Many of Stacey's actions are perceived as wrongful by Celia. Thus the readers are given ample help to judge the character of Stacey. In Chapter 1, the narrative begins with Celia's vision of the impending epidemic. Stacey's perceptions of a funeral scene are also recorded. The Raven, the unavoidable element in native stories further provides a comment on the character of the two sisters. The Raven praises Celia for "[the] child had the courage to look while Stacey... refused to see" (15). Later we find Stacey disturbed by the squawking of the Raven: "She had the feeling Raven was mocking her, bragging, telling her she wasn't very clever, scolding her for something she had about what had happened at her grandmother's funeral" (16). A comparison of the activities of the two girls on the day of the funeral helps us to recognize that Stacey "judged the world through a pair of glasses whose colours did not match reality" (22). The omniscient narrator
through his/her privileged access to the characters' thoughts, motives and feelings assist the reader to draw broader conclusions. Following Seymour Chatman's analysis, the diagram of narrative-communication situation (151) of Ravensong may be represented thus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Real author</th>
<th>Implied Narrator</th>
<th>Implied author</th>
<th>(III person)</th>
<th>Reader</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The narratee is absent in Ravensong.

In Sundogs, on the other hand, the first person narrative technique is employed. The primary advantage of limiting the means of perception to a single character is that the reader is more readily drawn into the story. This is partly due to the sense of identification with that of the character, a feeling which should not be confused with sympathy, respect or even approval. At the same time, the sentiment that Marianne is an unreliable narrator is expressed in the novel. Her values are strikingly divergent from that of the implied author's. Marianne's insensitivity to her mother's feelings, her capricious behaviour and her biases are all made evident in the first few pages and the implied reader is expected to have a disparaging opinion of the narrator.
Joan Crate employs the stream of consciousness mode in *Breathing Water*. This happens to be the most subjective form of writing and the purest form of the first person narration. Crate succeeds in creating the illusion of listening to the character’s thoughts without any interruption from the outside world. The resulting narrative is wandering, disjointed, highly personal and the connections are by association rather than by logic or narrative sequence. A pure stream of consciousness tends to cut the reader off from valuable devices like action, dialogue, setting etc., but Crate has balanced all these devices quite commendably and has also incorporated these elements into the narration. Flashbacks are also inserted into the narrative to recount events of the past. The flashbacks in *Breathing Water* are not a simple reference to the past seen through Dione’s thoughts or dialogue. The scenes with her Indian father are presented with setting and very often with dialogue. The reader is informed of the fact that the story is moving back to an earlier time by the movement of the tense from present to the past.
Marchessault's *Mother of the Grass* is considered to be the most autobiographical of her works. Since the novel attempts a revalorization of the feminine, Marchessault deviates constantly from a purely autobiographical discourse in order to insert mature feminist observations and philosophical argumentation alongside her own youthful experiences. The first person narration conveys very well the reminiscences of the protagonist. This first person point of view gives the narrator a kind of double viewpoint -- the older narrator and the younger self going through the experience. This preserves all the advantages of the single means of perception, yet a different viewpoint is offered as well.

In *Like a Child of the Earth*, a version of the stream of consciousness mode, the interior monologue is attempted. The protagonist/narrator's self-reference is in the first person. The current discourse-moment is the same as the story-moment; hence any predicate referring to the current moment is in the present tense.
I am thinking about you, dear Francine, and I am thinking about our friends from the old days, actors, tight-rope walkers, strolling players who, with heads high and ardent mouths, carried their fervour into forgotten places on the banks of the Jupitagan River.... (73)

Memories and other references to the past occur in the simple past, not the past perfect:

You were no longer here -- around me, time made no sound and Mexico was already dissipating in my memory. (67)

The language -- idiom, diction, word -- and syntactic choice are those of the narrator's and all allusions to her experience are made with no more explanation than would be needed in her own thinking. Or, in other words, in Like a Child of the Earth, there is no presumptive audience other than the thinker herself, no deference to the ignorance or expository needs of a narrattee. The narrative moves in a pace decided by the Greyhound in which the protagonist travels and the shifts in the focus of narrative is left unexplained. For instance, in "Song Four," after narrating the events in Mexico, the narrative suddenly shifts its focus to Christopher Columbus. This digression certainly forces us to drop the idea of a narrattee existing in the text.

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The three stories in Lesbian Triptych, too, appear in the first person narration mode. But very frequently wherever the collective lesbian experience is hinted at, the first person plural "we" is inserted into the narrative. This is especially so in the second story "Night Cows". In these narratives, we also find that the implied reader is a kindred lesbian soul. It is not the flesh-and-bones ordinary reader who is addressed, rather the narrative presupposes a sympathetic audience. The note of complaint is clearly discernible in the first passage from "Lesbian Chronicle".

In that period in medieval Quebec, lesbians competed with beings from outer space for sheer horror value. They were even in competition with monsters from the European Middle Ages. (31)

The implied reader is very often taken into confidence by the lesbian protagonist. In the moving passage that describes her visit to normal society from the fringes that constitute homosexual life, the protagonist writes,

They did not listen to me; they wanted to hear nothing at all. My friends, my sisters, all
averted their heads. If I came too near them, they pushed me away with angry, even disgusted gestures. But most of all, they were afraid! They made threats, they warned me, they made pessimistic predictions, while all the time continuing to march backward. (69)

This knowledge that her erstwhile friends were marching backwards is shared by the lesbian protagonist with the sympathetic audience.

White Pebbles in the Dark Forests is perhaps the most complex of the novels of Jovette Marchessault. Eventhough the novel could be regarded, in a general way, to be an attempt at first person narration, we also find the negative pole of narrator-presence in the narrative. In some sections, the narrative purports to be untouched transcripts of the protagonist's dialogue with other people. The minimal marks of narrative presence or tags like "Noria says" and "I say" are attached. At times, a free style is attempted with the deletion of such tags.
The most prominent passage in free style is to be found in "Fourth Song":

"I thought of punishment, sacrifice, immolation and purification."
"I thought of veiling my face, covering my head with ashes and lamenting."
"I thought of all the poisons we had spread."
"I thought of duality."
"I thought of the manifest worlds."
"I thought of revenge." (78)

In such narratives which are predominantly dialogic or rely heavily on it, the implied reader is required to do more inferring than in other kinds. To a greater degree than normal, the reader divines for him/herself the illocutionary force of the sentences spoken by characters to each other. Since there are not many direct reports of events, not many authorial comments on the inclinations of the various characters, the implied reader has to supply, metatextually, the information that would aid comprehension. Moreover, each speech or thought (within quotation marks) of a character also presupposes, in Bakhtin's words, two "speech centers and two speech unities" (Poetics 154). In such cases, the struggle for dominance between the implied author and the narrator also becomes prominent. That in dialogic texts, the dialogues
convey information is indisputable. But on another level, the dialogues are objectivized when viewed from the contextual plane of the implied author, too, is certain. But the fact that an "ultimate semantic authority which requires a purely object-oriented understanding... exists in every literary work" (Bakhtin, Poetics 155) makes the implied author usurp the position of dominance.

Real --> Implied author --> Implied narrator --> Reader --> reader

Story within the Narrative

The discussion upto now was concerned with the narration of the story. At times, one finds that there may also be narration inside the story. A character whose actions are the object of narration can in turn engage in narrating a story. Such narratives within narratives create a hierarchy whereby each inner narrative is subordinate to the narrative within which it is embedded. The speech acts of the character(s) may differ logically from that of the implied author or even that of the narrator. For, the narrator-narratee relationship, in stories within the main story, in unbalanced. The speech acts of the narrator, during the course of the inner narrative, directly interact with other characters, not with the narratee and/or implied reader.
In Joan Crate's *Breathing Water*, one finds many instances of Dione's Indian father narrating stories. Dione's reactions on hearing her father narrate the stories are also recorded. The stories are narrated in the past tense and the quotation marks have been removed. Dione in the midst of her stream of consciousness, remembers the story of the Blue sky, narrated by her father in the past. Again, earlier in the novel, Dione narrates the story of the son of the Sea. Here, too, the narrator's (Dione's father) speech is not recorded within quotation marks. The story becomes a part of her thoughts and perceptions. The narration begins:

Father, tell me your story. She was the chief's daughter, and he loved her as he loved the land he ruled over. I remember Jewell quipping, was she beautiful? and Father stopped to describe her raven hair, her red berry lips, her doe eyes and shell ears. (23)

Halfway through the story, while narrating the incident when the sea's son proposed to the chief for his daughter's hand, the dialogues are reported in direct speech, again without quotation marks:

No! they cried, you cannot marry the chief's beautiful daughter. No, the chief told him, you cannot have my daughter, and the son of the sea returned to water. (23-4)
In the final chapter of the novel, Dione herself attempts a retelling of her father's stories. The sentences are not as simple or the diction as easy as in her father's narrative. The stories are also complete and end with a sense of finality. The differences in the narratorial style of both Dione and her father are evident here. The diagram of the story within the story in *Breathing Water* can be represented thus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative</th>
<th>Story within the story</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Implied author</td>
<td>Narrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father---&gt; Young Dione</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dione ---&gt; Son Elijah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-- Implied reader</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Lee Maracle's work of non-literary prose, *I Am Woman*, one can see another instance of a story within a story. In this book, which attempts to bring together the impacts of racism, sexism and national oppression, one also notices the author's attempt to narrate a love story -- "Rusty". Maracle writes, "Rusty, I didn't ever want to know your story, but since you gave it to me, I am going to give it back to the people responsible for it" (44). As the alcoholic Rusty narrates her tragic story, Maracle intersperses the narrative with her own comments. Maracle also registers her fear that Rusty might tell her
unpleasant details from her life, "I knew that you were going to tell me all about it, Rusty, that you weren't going to spare me" (48). Rusty's story is narrated in the present tense, while most of Maracle's comments are in the past tense. This ushers in the feeling of deja-vu in the mind of Maracle even as she listened to Rusty's story.

In both these cases, one finds that the implied author/narrator of the primary narrative controls the discourse of the narrative, while the narrator(s) of the secondary narrative only play a minor role— their function being only that of explicating things from a different viewpoint to the reader.

Role of the Reader

The role of the reader is very important in narrative communication and the reader gets to recognize and interpret situations by way of narrative expectations. It is when the events of the narrative fit in with the schema of the reader's mind that a narrative expectation is fulfilled. At every stage in the action, some new experience is added or some of the established ones are
eliminated. The reader's narrative expectations are usually turned topsy-turvy with the advent of the reversing event. But at times, in the case of specific works, like plots of revelations, even the reversing event falls within the parameters of narrative expectation. That is the reason why in *Ravensong* and in *Sundogs*, the reader searches for the reversing event even as he/she browses through the text.

Readers come to recognize and interpret conventions by naturalizing them. As Seymour Chatman puts it, "to naturalize a narrative convention means not only to understand it, but to 'forget' its conventional character, to absorb it into the reading out process, to incorporate it into one's interpretive net" (49). Naturalization is also the means by which the reader fills in the gaps in the text, adjusts events and existents to a coherent whole, even when ordinary life expectations are called into question. Thus when the lesbian protagonist in "Lesbian chronicle" decides to step out of the sidewalk and walk through the streets, the reader is not shocked. Again, when Marianne in *Sundogs* decides to join the Peace Run, the reader reacts almost as if he/she had expected it all along.
In verbal narratives, in creation of the story space, the readers play a vital role. For instance, in Maracle's *Ravensong*, the bridge that separates the Reservation from the white town will represent, to any perceptive reader the metaphorical content. Verbal story space is what the reader is prompted to create in imagination on the basis of the character(s) perception and/or the narrator's reports. Thus, in Marchessault's *White Pebbles in the Dark Forests*, the reader gets a fine description of the setting from the character's perception.

Before the geologic drama, the mountains of the Appalachians... were as tall as the Himalayas today. But one day, a force unknown, clashing and spurting with trap doors and cyclones of ice, cut off their hands to a depth of nine kilometres of rock. This glacial sheet, breaking over them like one stride of a colossal sheep... past the beaver pond where the undergrowth of moss and ferns begins, the ghostly site of a village. (42)

It is here that the utopian community of women is formed. This is also a fine instance of providing mental images of verbal spaces by direct definition. Similarly, the Riverside in *Mother of the Grass*, the Reservation in *Ravensong* and the North American landscape in *Like a Child of the Earth* are all framed by means of definition.
The presence of an active reader sometimes helps also in the creation of irony. For instance, in Maracle's *Ravensong*, the narrator, through the perception of the Raven show us that Stacey is immature. Again in *Sundogs*, Auntie Mary tells us early in the novel that Marianne, too, is naive. She says:

You are a sweet, blind baby aren't you. You wander about this world, the youngest of five kids with both eyes closed and your eyes shut tight, then you make judgments on all and sundry. (30)

While the first case is a brilliant example of dramatic irony, the second is a case where the author attempts to warn the reader about the over-confident heroine, the unreliable narrator. In Marchessault's novels, on the other hand, the reader is taken into confidence when the narrator attempts a vehement and pointed satire against patriarchy, religion, heterosexuality and capitalism.

Functions of the Mythical Pattern

As pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, mythological motifs often aid the fulfillment of narrative expectations. Modern novels with the mythological content do not retell the ancient myths. For the modern writers,
myths are not even the scaffold upon which their stories are erected. They are used in most cases to offer some kind of a loose analogy, as a means by which the reader could be made aware of the prefigurations within the narrative or in other words, it is a means to attract the attention of the reader and to add significance to a theme or situation by means of illustration or parallel.

Critical opinion has been divided on the issue of the use of myth in modern novels. Frank Kermode finds the use of myth to be a sign of regressive tendencies. He observes:

A yearning for ritualistic satisfactions can have a bad effect in literature... and it is a common enough complaint that the search in novels for mythical order reduces their existential complexity. It remains something of a mystery, this anachronistic myth-hunt. ("Time" 40).

The criticism here is directed more against the presence of myth, in the archetypal sense, in modern literature. Rene Welleck expresses similar sentiments when in Concepts of Criticism, he writes about the "obliteration" of the "boundary lines between art and myth and even art and religion," the result, he insists, is "a feeling of futility and monotony" (361).
In spite of these attacks, the fact remains that the presence of mythological motifs exercise an essentially ennobling effect upon modern fiction. They often challenge the reader to figure out for him/herself just where the modern narrative stands in relation to the myth. Moreover, a mythological novel is accepted only when it presents the reader with a realistic theme and makes him/her feel the chosen analogy has enriched his/her understanding of the primary material.

Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism* proposes to speak for the status of literary criticism as a science, whose techniques and approaches could be systematically evaluated and categorized. His method demands that a concept of order be established in literary studies and the mythical framework often helps in the establishment of this order. In a structural analysis of a narrative, a study of the employment of myth as a principle of order thus becomes inevitable.

A pattern is something which both genuine myths and mythological motifs share. Hence in a modern novel which attempts to use a mythological motif, both the narrative and the character is expected to complete a pattern. In the narrative where the order of events is of crucial concern, a unilinear model would seem to be the best one with which to approach the subject of establishing a
motif. Sometimes attempts are made right at the beginning of the narrative, to establish a highly ambiguous prefiguration which activates in its turn an extensive set of expectations about the course the plot is likely to take.

Mythical Patterns in Narratives

The theme of rebirth is often found to exist in the level of mythic significance. This, in turn could be related to the story of Proserpine, who disappears into the underworld for six months of every year. The pure myth is certainly one of death and revival but its parallel in modern narratives might be slightly displaced. The young homicidal girl in Marchessault's *Mother of the Grass* and Dione in Crate's *Breathing Water* follow the rebirth theme.

In Marchessault's novel, further parallels are proposed since the child protagonist also happens to be a child of Nature. The disruption of her serene life-style and the pressures of city-dwelling disorient the young protagonist who attempts to gas her family to death,

I felt full of initiative. I examined the stove all over, picking out its knobs and taps. Then I turned it on, turning each knob and tap full on.... I heard the hissing and recognized that
odour which is so eloquent that every thing else is just its shadow.... I waited a little while, out of caution, my last caution, then went back to my own room and closed the door. (96-7)

The next chapter "Song Five" begins with the statement"They were not dead" (98). The incident brings her closer to both her mother as well as her grandmother, with both attempting to bring her back to her healthy spiritual self.

If the "rebirth" pattern is introduced by the suicidal protagonist into the narrative of Mother of the Grass, in Breathing Water, the case is different. In an attempt to become pregnant again, Dione visits the doctor for the removal of IUD. She nearly bleeds to death. After this incident, Dione never once goes after erotic adventures. True to the reborn protagonist, she finds consolation in her normal life. Again, the mythical story of the wife of the son of the sea is narrated time and again in Breathing Water. One of its versions is about a chief's daughter who is married off to a strong and handsome youth who had come for her from across the sea. On their homeward journey, the young girl realizes that she had married a dead man -- "a grinning skull with empty socket eyes" (287). Taken to the land of the Dead, the
young bride pines for her family. With the birth of a child, the young woman is given a chance to lead a life in her own homeland. Another version pertains to the return of the girl who was sacrificed to winter, the girl who after her return seemed to possess extraordinary powers. In yet another version, we are told about Kumush and his daughter who go to the underworld to collect bones and return to the Above World. When the bones are brought to the earth, they become people. After each character returns to the real world, one finds a transformation or rebirth of the personality.

In Marchessault's *Mother of the Grass*, there is yet another archetypal pattern. The valorization of the grandmother as the Mother of Grass is similar to the veneration of the Virgin Mary -- who as Magna Mater, Stella Maris, Our Lady of the Vineyards, our Lady of the Barley, Our Lady of the Caves, etc. combined the qualities of pre-Christian virgins alien to the Roman Catholic conception of chastity. The rebellious grandmother could certainly be related to the ancient mother goddess, for as Markale puts it, "Apart from a tendency to restore the ancient mother goddess in the guise of Virgin Mary, there have been a great number of heresies within Christianity itself that have sought to implement the female rebellion" (qtd. in Pratt et al 170-71). The grandmother in Marchessault's fiction with her system of values -- her
empathy with the living creatures of nature, and her rebellion against all forms of oppression -- with the marvellous descriptions of the mother spirit in plant, beast and growth and with her blasphemic twist to the story of creation, could be seen as the true Mother Goddess.

The Grandmother is depicted, through the protagonist's eyes, as an artist of great skill and imagination. Her piano music, recalls the narrator, was "one with the Earth, with its underground springs, its caverns, its earthworms, its thunder lizards, with germination, that vegetal and mineral epiphany ripening in the womb of a volcano or the palm of an ice floe" (14). The grandmother views nature as a constant reminder and superb mediator between present experience and the ancient origins of life. For it is through nature that the world of the beginnings still, speaks to her, through the constellations of the evening sky, the moonlit domain of "la mere des herbes", through the all too-frequently maligned beasts of the forest, woods and prehistoric landscapes, and finally, through the feminized grottos and caves, the matrices of Mother Earth.

In a closer parallel to the Demeter myth, one finds the grandmother in spring collecting herbs. The protagonist narrates, "In the heavens, the Mother of the
Grass was creating her flora, weaving without haste all kinds of herbs.... The Mother of the Grass was giving birth to her daughters of vegetation, her daughters venerated in the spring sky" (24). Di Brandt in her essay "These our Grand-mothers" writes that the Mother of the Grass in Marchessault's fiction is also what could be identified as Primavera, goddess of spring, and Demeter, goddess of harvest. She writes, "it is interesting that, while the goddess figures in the Greek myths are differentiated by function and location, all are conflated in native mythology in the figure of the Mother" (92).

The mothers in the works of the native women writers are dignified and are presented as independent women with choices and preferences of their own. In Sundogs, the mother very effectively pulls the strings in Marianne's life. The open sexuality of Stacey's mother and her courage during the epidemic further proves the strength of character of these women. In Marchessault's "The Angel Makers", the Mother is related to the archetype of the Great Mother Goddess, as a weaver and spinner of a heroic new destiny for women. The protagonist exclaims, "My mother is a legend!" (84). Abortion is envisaged as a high form of spiritual rebirth in a world where maternity leads to victimization.
In Like a Child of the Earth Marchessault creates the myth of a divine being, the protagonist herself. Even though her divine origin makes her a component of myths, her actions relate her to what Frye calls "romance". In romance, Frye writes, the hero's "actions are marvellous" but he is "identified as a humanbeing" (Anatomy 33) And further,

The hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended; prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him, and enchanted animals... and talismans of miraculous power violate no rule of probability once the postulates of romance have been established. (33)

In Like a Child of the Earth, there is a heroine who conquers obstacles. She fights with a host of obstacles: from the thoughts of her travelling companion, Francine, to the technocratic excess of the state; from her own anguished moods to the story of Quebec; from the love and sense of humour of her grandmother, who would sketch hens, to the tavern of Joe Beef, who revelled in senselessly killing animals numbed with fear. The struggle or the fight is cosmic in nature.

In travel mythologies ascendant and descendant schemes in space are typical. Marchessault uses both
vertical and horizontal schemes in her novel. The horizontal schemes follow her trip across the Amer-indian continent and back to her native Quebec. The vertical schemes are those of the fall, the descent into hell, the trauma of birth. There are also the schemes of an ascent towards celestial life (172). Again, in the dragon-killing romances, we find images of hero moving inside the monster's body. Frye writes,

Secular versions of journeys inside monsters occur from Lucian to our day, and perhaps even the Trojan horse had originally some links to the same theme. The image of the dark winding labyrinth for the monster's belly is a natural one, and one that frequently appears in heroic quests.... This theme may become a structural principle of fiction on any level of sophistication. (190)

This motif is to be seen in Like a Child of the Earth as well, where the protagonist is "travelling in the belly of a dog" (20). Marchessault writes about the Grey hound, "that grand baroque orchestra", about "the Herculean energy" of the bus and even comments on "what immortal hand or eye dare frame thy fearful symmetry" (62). She also writes about her in the bus experience: "I was
swallowed up in a bus which was completely deserted... and at once a diabolical vibration swept over me" (67).

The quest motif is found in novels like Breathing Water and Sundogs as well. In the romances, we often find characters who tend to "be either for or against the quest" (Frye, Anatomy 195). If they assist the protagonist, they are idealized as courageous and if they obstruct the protagonist, they are caricatured as villainous. Every protagonist in a romance tends to have a moral opposite - sometimes benevolent to the extent of being an active participant in the quest. Frye in his "Theory of Myths" writes about "a potential bride like Solveig in Peer Gynt, who sits quietly at home waiting for the hero to finish his wanderings and come back to her" (Anatomy 195). Similarly, while speaking about the "polarization... between the lady of duty and the lady of pleasure" (196), Frye makes a comment on the light and dark characters of Victorian romance. According to him the simple way to represent this is to create the daughter-in-law/mother-in-law relations: a theme of reconciliation after enmity and jealousy. At times, where there is no reconciliation, the older female remains sinister.

The benevolent characters in the romances discussed above include Francine, the protagonist's fellow
traveller in *Like a Child of the Earth*; Sophie and Jo-Jo in *Breathing Water* and Lacey in *Sundogs*. In *Breathing Water*, one can perceive the polarized relationship mentioned above. While Dione, the quest heroine represents the lady of duty, her mother-in-law appears as a dark character who is never happy in her company. On Elijah's birthday, when the mother-in-law pretended to be fastidious, Dione remarks, "[she] will not let the old bitch get [her] down" (257). There is indeed some kind of a reconciliation in the end when Dione decides to confront her:

> You may like me. You may not. If doesn't matter. You won't speak about me as if I don't exist when I'm in the room. You will talk to me directly, not through your son. (269)

Reconciliation is certainly hinted at as the conversation ends with Dione saying "Mamma... my name is Dione" (270).

William Righter in his book *Myth and Literature* gives a structural analysis of the cyclical sequence in a romantic hero's life. 1) Mysterious birth 2) innocent youth 3) undertaking of the quest 4) vision of happy society 5) moral stratification in a detached and contemplative view of society and 6) which contains the
movement from active to contemplative adventure (70). While in Sundogs and Breathing Water, all the sequences except the first are present, it is only in Marchessault's fiction that one finds perfect adherence to the sequence of a romance. In Like a Child of the Earth, one gets a fine description of her mysterious birth. Her innocent youth is best portrayed in the first half of Mother of the Grass. The actual quest is introduced in Like a Child of the Earth; in "Night-Cows" one finds the protagonist's vision of happy society. In Mother of the Grass and in "Lesbian Chronicle", one gets the protagonist contemplating society and finally in White Pebbles in the Dark Forests, one can perceive the movement from active to contemplative adventure.

Trevor Blackwell and Jeremy Seabrook in The Politics of Hope have constructed a diagram relating the Christian story beginning with Eden and ending with Jerusalem and the Marxist myth that moves from the primitive communism of tribal society to the advanced communism of post-capitalist society (iii). A similar, if not a mathematical parallel might be established between these myths and the lesbian myth of deliverance created by Marchessault.

1. Eden/Primitive Communism (memories of lesbian community in "Night Cows")
2. The Fall/the development of private property (the movement from Riverside to the city in *Mother of the Grass*).

3. The Wilderness/class society (The patriarchal oppression within the family and without narrated in *Mother of the Grass*).

4. The Crucifixion/the oppression of the proletariat (the experiences the protagonist suffers in the factories in the city as narrated in *Mother of the Grass*).

5. The resurrection/the rise of class consciousness (the discrimination against female sex the protagonist perceives in the Papal Bulls in "Lesbian Chronicle").

6. The Day of judgement/the revolution (the movement from the "sidewalks" to the streets in "Lesbian Chronicle" and the activity of the abortionists in "The Angel Makers").

7. Jerusalem/classless society (the lesbian community envisioned in the locale of the Appalachian Mountains in *White Pebbles in the Dark Forests*).
Many methods are employed by writers of modern mythical novels to create an awareness of the myth in the minds of the readers. One mode is that of using the title to draw attention to the motif. Titles remain the most direct narrative device the modern author can choose to trigger off a prefigurative pattern. The problem associated with this device is that the reader is often accustomed to associate titles with main themes and may be unable to see the modern use of prefigurative titles in the right perspective. An example of this mode could be perceived in the titles "Breathing Water" and "Mother of the Grass".

Water traditionally belongs to a realm of existence below human life, the state of chaos or dissolution which follows ordinary death. Hence the soul frequently crosses water or sinks into it at death (Frye, *Anatomy* 146). The death-in-life existence which Dione learns to lead in *Breathing Water* is closely associated to the condition of the heroine in the Native Indian myth of the Wife of the son of the sea. The significance of the element water is left ambivalent in the novel -- the water symbol, in apocalyptic symbolism, represents "water of life". Yet, it has the connotation of the destructive element as in Conrad's fiction. In *Mother of the Grass*, the title has prefigurations in Christian as well as Native Indian myths. The revalorisation of the Grandmother finds
parallel in the veneration of Virgin Mary and also in the Indian myth of the Plant Mother. Elsewhere we are told that the "Mother of the Grass" is a mythical reference to moon (154).

The relation of this type of analysis to the study of modern narratives may be hypothetical, but the use of myth as an organizing principle is an effort to give shape to structural principles underlying literature. The archetypal patterns in women's fiction provide a ritual experience for the reader containing the potential for personal transformation and the novels discussed above constitute literary variations on preliterary folk practices that are available in the realm of the imagination even when they have long been absent from day-to-day life. The feminist revisioning of myths is a popular feminist strategy and has been discussed in an earlier chapter.

The adherence of the native narrative techniques to the western literary modes is only superficial. The seemingly strong similarities are used by native authors to further their designs of proving that they, too, are capable of creating stable fictional worlds out of a chaotic reality. The native versions of the creation myth and the death-rebirth myth all prove that the native world too is as complex as the world of the colonizer.
Works Cited


