CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION
If our upsurge of so-called nationalism seems odd or irrelevant to outsiders, and even to some of our own people (what's all the fuss about?), they might try and understand that for many years we valued ourselves insufficiently, living as we did we under the huge shadows of two dominating figures, Uncle Sam and Britania. We have only just begun to recognize ourselves, our land, our abilities. We have only just begun to recognize our legends and to give shape to our myths.

Margaret Laurence recognized the significance of the writer's role in helping to formulate national identity as also individual identity. Her strong conviction of the writer's role, especially the novelist's, enabled her to reflect the society by which she is formed, but at the same time and necessarily, helped to form the society as well. Canada, for Laurence, was still struggling to assert its distinctive identity and its people were yet to learn to fully value what they have as a nation. In such a situation, Laurence through her writings enabled the people to realize that there is a great need to possess their own land and to know of their own heritage.
The validity and necessity of Margaret Laurence's fictional commitment to reclaim the indigenous cultural heritage and establish a bond between the past and the present is confirmed by Northrop Frye who, notwithstanding his assessment of Canadian literature in his conclusion to the 1965 edition of Klincks's *Literary History of Canada*, makes an insightful assessment of the Canadian dilemma of identity when he says that Canadian sensibility "is less perplexed by the question who am I? than by some such riddle as 'What is here.'"² Frye perceptively highlights the absence of roots and a sense of place which in a profound way denies an adequate resolution of the Canadian problematic of the identity crisis. Margaret Laurence's fictional commitment to relocate the cultural roots, therefore, reflects a significant ideology obtaining in the post-sixties. It provides an important mode for a satisfactory resolution of the Canadian problematic.

The *Stone Angel* is the first novel that Laurence wrote out of her own Canadian background. The fictional world of the novel is set in the period of Laurence's grandparents' generation which was rooted in the stern puritanical values of rigid authoritarianism. The exploration of the Scottish-Irish heritage in fictional terms enabled Laurence to not only understand it and come to terms with it but also
to love and value it. However, the past she fictionalizes in the novel is as much a communal inheritance. The novel, therefore, incorporates an ideological proposition that has both an individual as well as a communal relevance. It is owing to this "largeness of scope and vision" as he calls it, that George Woodcock compares Laurence with Tolstoy like whom she fulfils, as he says, "one of the great functions of art - the preservation of lost times and worlds in such a way that outsiders can imaginatively apprehend them". 3

The actual time-span of the narration of The Stone Angel is only a few days but the narrative brings within its fold the story of three generations of Hagar's family. What the novel depicts is Hagar's journey across time to her origins that enables her to locate the present in a true perspective. For, it is her inability to come to terms with her past that is chiefly responsible for her inability to come to terms with the present. Thus a review of and reconciliation with the past enables Hagar eventually to discover who she really is. Hagar emerges out of her self-inflicted isolation and alienation in the course of the novel. The change in Hagar emblematizes the possibility of an altered perspective and thus establishes the validity of Laurence's proposition in regard to the need to relate the past to the present for an adequate self-perception. The ritualistic journey enables Hagar to come to terms with her
past and brings about a release into an inner freedom. Like Hagar, Laurence too needed to understand and accept her past to recover a sense of her own place at the time she wrote the novel, as she discovers her own Scottish-Irish ancestry. The quest-archetype obtaining in the novel, however, apart from fulfilling Laurence's own personal need to come to terms with her past, has a larger national relevance as well. As she says, "the ancestors, in the end, become everyone's ancestors."  

A Jest of God and The Fire-Dwellers, the two novels that followed The Stone Angel, are concerned primarily with the exploration of the problems of two women in different, but not typical situations. They reflect Laurence's socio-political concerns with regard to the status of women in society. However, her preoccupation in these novels is with discovering the destructive effects of imperialistic and subjugating socio-cultural constructs on individuals and the processes of coping with these forces. The women protagonists in both these novels attempt to escape from society as it repressed their feelings. For Rachel in A Jest of God, the short-lived, abortive affair with Nick Kazlick enables her to make the symbolic descent into her shadow self and have a confrontation with her persona or her 'other self.' She can cope with imperialistic and colonizing
forces symbolized by her mother and her society and assert her independent will as is evidenced by her decision to leave Manawaka against her mother's wishes. More importantly, Rachel is able to make her peace with her inherited past symbolized by her dead father and accept it, thereby putting to an end the conflictual relation she had always had with her past. The imperialistic and colonizing forces invariably create a crisis of identity by distorting and destroying the colonial links with the indigenous past. Rachel's mother, symbolizing the imperialist power structure, had similarly caused in Rachel's mind conflictual relation with her inheritance and roots by positing her own prejudicial and distorted version of her father and his profession. Rachel in her new 'birth' is able to resolve this conflict and acquire a holistic sense of self by reclaiming and valuing her inherited ancestry for whatever it is worth. As she tells Hector, "He probably did do what he wanted most, even though he might not have known it. But maybe what came of it was something he hadn't bargained for. That's always a possibility, with anyone". As, for Stacey in The Fire Dwellers. Luke Ventri functions as her persona to enable him to re-emerge, after the ritualistic confrontation with new knowledge about herself. Stacey's narrative of desire and desperation is set against the backdrop of media-infested urban culture that appropriates her sense of a meaningful
identity. The narration and narrative device Laurence employs in the novel reflect the chaos and disorder of Stacey's life. Things are, as it were, falling apart and the centre just cannot bear to hold. Her desperate need to 'only comment' leads her to Luke Ventri who, in seeing her (and showing her) only as woman and not in anyone of her multifarious roles - mother, daughter, wife, mistress, housewife, etc - is able to help her regain a true perspective of herself.

In the end, each makes her own self-discovery and wins her limited peace by performing the archetypal Jungian 'rite de passage', like all Laurence heroines in the Manawaka novels. More importantly, they relate the present to past thereby putting an end to conflictual apprehensions.

The Diviners, Laurence's last novel, completes the Manawaka cycle and enshrines and epitomizes Laurence's major thematic and socio-cultural concerns and preoccupations that run through all her earlier writings. The means used to present Morag's tale are more complex and variegated than those used in the earlier novels. She uses structural devices borrowed from the mass media, inner monologues, photographs, and even songs to provide a multi-linear, multi-dimensional representation of Morag's felt reality. Morag Gunn, the narrator-protagonist, is at a critical juncture of
her life when the novel begins. Prime facie, Pique, her teenage daughter's sudden disappearance on an unspecified journey west is the most immediate and apparent cause of her anxiety and distress. However at a deeper level, Morag is faced with another and more serious crisis that is caused by her inability to apprehend clearly the precise significance of herself and her work in relation to everything else. She suffers from a sense of inadequacy in her present that causes a dilemma regarding her identity. This sense of absence of meaningful identity makes her undertake a voyage of exploration across time and space towards acquiring an adequate self-perception, and that constitutes the novel. As Barbara Godard says: "At the core of the story is an absence; quest for this absence is the only presence." Morag has problematized the authenticity of her past by a continual publication of her lived past and tailored it to suit her needs. It resulted in her refusal to either accept or value her inheritance. Having been orphaned at age four and brought up by a loving but marginalised foster parents, Morag suffers from a sense of injustice and inferiority complex that engenders self-hate and an antipathy for her past. She leaves Manawaka at the first opportunity. However, as Laurence says in Long Drums and Cannons, "no one's past is to be dismissed by an act of will." Although Morag believes she is done with Manawaka and all her past along with it when
she leaves town, Morag's voyage of exploration quite inevitably leads her to examine the question who or what she is by examining where she has come from. In Laurence's value system, as has been noted earlier, it is the past that shows the present its own face. Morag's conflictual relation with her inherited past is, in a profound sense, responsible for her inability to come to terms with her present and she resolves her present crisis only when she accepts and values her inheritance in its true perspective. Morag's acceptance and revaluation of her indigenous, inherited past finally releases her from her conflictual relationship with her past. Morag's progressive journey towards adequate self-perception illustrates quite explicitly the concept stressed by Laurence in all her writings of the need to come to terms with the past for a satisfactory resolution of the dilemma of identity.

Margaret Laurence's Manawaka novels, therefore, are primarily concerned with fictionalizing the processes of the different woman-protagonists, search for an adequate sense of a meaningful identity. However, inasmuch as the quest for self-actualization and self-assertion in each case necessitates a reconciliation with the past and an acknowledgment of the inherent bond between the past and the present, these narratives contextualize Laurence's strong belief in the need to come to terms with the past for an
adequate resolution of the dilemma of identity, and by implication, posit a mode to cope with the Canadian dilemma of identity. As Laurence quite appropriately observed in her conservation with Robert Kroetsch "fiction relates to life in a very real way."8

Margaret Atwood provides a very perceptive assessment of Laurence in "Face to Face" when she says that "she is not a safe person to underestimate".9 What Atwood observes about Laurence as a person applies also to Laurence as a writer. For, without making her fiction a direct vehicle for propaganda, Laurence in her writing examined two important issues, viz., the female problems of a woman and the Canadian dilemma of identity.