CHAPTER IV

Quest for survival:

*The Fire-Dwellers*
The Fire-Dwellers raises questions about the presentation of female subjectivity, about women's relation to their cultural inheritance, and whether the autobiographical form which has become the staple of women's fiction can be made sufficiently expansive to contain wider social and political issues beyond personal self-scrutiny. These questions can be asked of all the Manawaka novels, where every narrator reinvents Manawaka in her own idiom and by doing so, redefines the contours of her own inner space and her relation to the outer spaces of place and community. Stacey's narrative is undeniably "inner-space fiction," a term used by Doris Lessing, offering a different model for women's stories.

The central character in the novel is thirty-nine year old Stacey Cameron. She is the wife of Clifford 'Mac' MacAindra a salesman and the mother of Jen, Duncan, Ian, and Katie. The Mac Aindras live on Blue Jay Crescent in Vancouver. Stacey's narrative begins with a nursery rhyme which indicates some of her fears and anxieties.

Ladybird, ladybird
Fly away home;
Your house is on fire,
Your children are gone
-CRAZY RHYME. Got it on the brain this morning. That's from trying to teach Jen a few human words yesterday. Why anybody would
want to teach a kid a thing like that, I wouldn't know [7].

This is Stacey's distinctive voice commenting on her daily activities as mother and housewife. "The inner monologue, of course is strictly in Stacey's voice, and it was through this largely, that I hoped to convey her basic toughness of character, her ability to laugh at herself, her strong survival instinct." 1

Stacey's two year old daughter, Jen cannot talk. In order to make her talk, Stacey tries to teach her a few human words. Stacey is confused and despondent woman worried about trivialities, such as the fat that years have added to her and worried about her own sense of isolation even in the middle of the family. She is always conscious of her own lack of formal education: "Everything would be all right if only I was better educated. .....I wish I lived in some country where broad—beamed women were fashionable" (8).

Instead of accepting themselves as they are, all women in the novel worry over what they are not. Stacey feels inferior to her gorgeous-looking childless neighbour, Tess Fogler who starves her body while she feeds her skin with expensive cosmetics.

On one sunny morning she starts walking to the corner of Bluejay Crescent and goes into the past. Stacey is disturbed by violence of war. She remembers the incident narrated by her father, when she was a child where a hand grenade went off near a boy of eighteen "and the
blast caught him between the legs." (10) She is greatly disturbed by the crime news in the newspapers. She thinks that she is from a small town Manawaka and there is no stability for her. She remembers how she reached Vancouver when she was nineteen, left Manawaka. She takes shelter in YWCA that is the place for all prairie girls.

She gets down the bus and starts walking beside the harbour. She observes a seagull:

At the beach, once. Stacey watching a gull repeatedly dropping a closed clamshell from a great height. Finally the shell cracked on a rock, and the bird landed and calmly fed. Stacey had to admire such a simple knowledge of survival.

(13)

Thus the theme of survival is hinted at in the very first chapter. Stacey is disturbed at all times from all sides, by her own demands upon herself, by others' demands upon her and needs of her and fears created by the world's immediate communication system. Stacey sends SOS messages out beyond her world, as she often does in her mind. Even God is a victim as she is:

At the Day of Judgement, God will say *Stacey Mac Aindra, what have you done with your life?*

And I'll say, *Well, let's see, Sir, I think I loved my kids.* And He'll say, *Are you certain of that?* And
I'll say, God, I'm not certain about anything any more. So He'll say, To hell with you, then. We're all positive thinkers up here. ...May be He'd say, Don't worry, Stacey, I'm not all that certain, either. Sometimes I wonder if I even exist. And I'd say, I know what you mean, Lord. I have the same trouble with myself. (14)

Stacey is greatly struck by the noise of Streets of Vancouver. Sometimes she looks through the living-room window at the snow mountains, far off, and wishes she could go there, just for a while, with no one else around and hardly any sound at all, the wind muttering, maybe, and the snow in weird sculptures and caverns, quiet. She says some of this to Jake Fogler, her neighbour, who said that she had a death wish.

In order to escape from the boredom of her daily routine, as it forms a significant counterbalance within her distorted psyche, she often fantasizes things. Thus a Vancouver street can also be transformed by her distorted vision in a more sinister way:

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

(14-15)

Sometimes she is lost in daydreams and fantasizes various incidents. As she reaches her destination, she gets down the bus and hears the sound of a Buick coming to a sudden halt. She is terrified to look at the seven year old boy, lying lifeless on the road. "Stacey does not go over to look because she cannot" (16). Instead she begins running home to see if her children are safe at home. She is "overprotective" (17) as a mother and she is extremely worried about the safety of her family.

The title of the novel and the nursery rhyme with which it begins reflect the inner and outer fires: "Private fears echo public horrors. It's the confusion that bothers me. Everything happens all at once, never one thing at a time. So how in hell do you know what effect anything is having on them?" (18).

Mac, her husband used to sell encyclopedias. He is forty three and looks tired, and worries about how to support the family. But he quit the job and after a while Drabble's business picked up in the spray and flavour trade so he joins that.

Stacey looks out upon the world and is overcome by a sense of futility. Her conversations with her husband are inconclusive. Their words fail to express what is really felt or what each needs to utter. They can be compared to the two existentialist tramps in Samuel
Beckett's "Waiting for Godot." Stacey and Mac talk in a manner that reminds us of a tennis game with the ball going back and forth over the net and occasionally missed by one of the pair. Stacey's inability to communicate meaningfully with others is not a problem peculiar to Stacey alone. All characters in the novel with the exception of Luke, Stacey's lover, have a similar problem. All the characters are stirred and have emotions and thoughts but they find no meaningful expression. Thus, Stacey's youngest daughter, Jen is a symbolic representation of the condition that is prevalent everywhere. She cannot talk. For this reason, the people in the novel exist in relationships that are unfulfilling and incomplete.

Stacey complains to God that Max "systematically restores his physical and mental energy through sleep while I lie here like a bloody board" (27). When Duncan gets a bad dream that night, Mac gets angry with Stacey and remarks that Stacey is going to ruin the kid. It's the one thought Mac can't bear, the insufficient masculinity of one of his sons and says: "you are babying that boy and it isn't doing him any good. Can't you understand even that?" (29) Stacey talks to herself, "I will anything. I will turn myself inside out. I will dance on the head of a pin. I will yodel from the top of the nearest dogwood tree. I will promise for anything, for peace" (30).

Further she says, "I've aged this man. I've foisted my kids upon him" (30). Thus Stacey regards herself as the cause of the failure and
feels that she has aged Mac, foisted her kids up on him and that her constant nagging makes him weary of the family. Both Stacey and Mac feel that the other misunderstands every word that is uttered. Stacey is acutely aware that over the years every aspect of their relationship has turned mechanical but, unlike her mother, she makes numerous attempts to salvage it. Anxious to avoid "tomb silences" (30) that existed between her own parents, Stacey tries to goad Mac into verbalizing his accrual thoughts and feelings with questions like: "What do you think, I mean in yourself? (43) Mac however, dismisses such queries as entirely meaningless.

Stacey dreams of a hillside burning, trapping all of her children, except one unknown child whom she is permitted to save. Stacey's very strength as a mother is threatened here by external forces, namely by fire, and she feels this is "not to be born. Not to be born would be not to have to die. But that would be useless" (31). "The beginning is contained within the end"2 and the cycle seems futile to Stacey at this point. "But neither would she choose nor to have borne her children just to have spared them their death."3

Stacey's other fears and anxieties are bred and sustained by patriarchal ideas of womanhood. She fears the thought of being trapped by "trivialities" all her life, dreads the process of ageing and is convinced that unlike other women, she is unable to cope. Though these are true of a woman, it is necessary to view Stacey in the context of the novel, as
primarily a North American housewife in the sixties. Her condition seems painful on account of her uncritical acceptance of what Friedan calls, “the feminine mystique.” Stacey feels that something is wrong with her. This feeling is the result of identity crisis. Stacey regards her mind as slovenly and ordinary but we are made aware of her alertness and sensitivity from the very beginning of the novel. She is so convinced of the mediocrity of her mental make-up that she does not realize that she is often right. At an adult education course on Ancient Greek Drama, she heatedly quarrels with her young male, Ph. D. professor over the character of Clytemnestra and asserts her maternal point of view with the words: “The king sacrificed their youngest daughter for success in war-what’s the queen supposed to do, shout for joy?” (33)

Stacey remembers her past and Manawaka, “all the trains ever said was Get on your way, somewhere, just so something will happen, get up and get out of this town. So I did” (33). She reaches Winnipeg and does Business course and saves money to come out to Vancouver. She is self-educated, but zanily. She thinks that she bores Mac because: “The slightest effort at speech seems too much for him lately, too debilitating” (33). She has to say a lie to please people, though “These lies will be the death of me sooner than later, if they haven’t already been. What goes on inside isn’t ever the same as what goes on outside. It’s a disease I’ve picked up somewhere” (34).
The significant contours of Stacey's imagined worlds are progressively mapped in her narrative and as a fantasist she is, in touch with the way her imagination works:

Everything drifts. Everything is slowly swirling, philosophies tangled with the grocery lists, unreal-real anxieties like thorns waiting to tear the uncertain flesh, nonentities of thoughts floating like plankton, green and orange particles, seaweed-lots of that dark purple and waving sharks with fins like cutlasses, herself held underwater by her hair, snared around auburn-rusted anchor chains. (34)

This is Stacey's version of the sea-change wrought by the imagination upon reality, and it is also her version of herself as a drowned poet, a figure which frequently recurs in Canadian poetry.

As Stacey is engaged in a day-dream Mac comes and announces the news of his new job. He has joined Richalife. Stacey remembers the advertisements she has seen in newspapers: "Richalife—Not just vitamins-A New Concept-A New way of Life. With testimonials. Both Spirit and Flesh Altered. Richness is a Quality of Living" (34). One day Mac takes Stacey to Thor Thorlakson, his employer's house. Stacey says to her inner self that "Thor's the wizard....he's bat-winged Mephistopheles" (44). Sometimes she is afraid of Mac's silence. She is
reminded of her father Niall Cameron who spent most of his time in Cameron Funeral Home, drinking and that her mother, calling him to quit drinking. Stacey thinks Mac also may become like her father.

Stacey is much attached to their present house whereas Mac hates it more every year as it’s so dowdy and reflects upon him. Buckle Fennick, a friend of Mac’s visits their house. As a good-wife-and-mother she asks him for lunch. Buckle is a truck driver. His wife Julie left him four years ago with a child. Buckle’s mother is too cautious about her son’s movements and warns him: “Be careful on them dangerous roads” (54). Stacey is embarrassed with Buckle as he calls her “gorgeous”. Though she hates him, she is attracted towards him.

Actually Stacey’s narrative is by far the more hallucinatory with its kaleidoscopic mixture of science-fiction fantasy, adolescent memories and nightmarish visions of destruction which challenge the limits of domestic realism. Yet there is never any doubt in the reader’s mind that her narrative is a structure of containment and might well have been called “Memoirs of a Survivor.”5 In Laurence’s only city novel, Vancouver is transformed momentarily by Stacey’s narrative into a vision of Hell and the future into an apocalypse of flame: “Anyway, I probably exaggerate. Do I? Doom everywhere is the message I get. A person ought not to be affected, maybe” (58). But Stacey is affected by the images of war and violence shown on television and by newspaper headlines of disaster which interact with her maternal fears for the safety of her own children.
to create the hallucinations of burning buildings, forest fires and Roman centurions which flash across her inner vision.

Mac gives Stacey a quiz form which she refuses to fill up. But Mac presses her to fill it up, she obliges him saying: “Okay okay okay. Lies are permitted, I take it?” (61) Mac reminds her of what she did with the Civil Defense form Ian brought three years ago. Name, address and phone of person who could be contacted in National Emergency if parents not available. To the final question, Stacey had written: Name: God. Address: Heaven.

Stacey suffers from distorted vision because her inner world is a strange place full of visual transformations of the ordinary, where hairdressers’ assistants become “butterfly priestess” (277). One day Stacey goes to a Supermarket along with Jen. There she imagines that the supermarkets are seen as temples filled with:

The mounds of offerings, yellow planets of grapefruit, jungles of lettuce, tentacles of green onions, Arctic effluvia flavored raspberry and orange, a thousand bear faced mouse-legended space-crafted plastic-gifted strangely transformed sproutings of oat and wheat fields. Music hymning from invisible choirs. (71)
Stacey attends a demonstration at Tess' house because the Polyglam woman wants to exhibit their new products in order to increase sales. Tess is the wife of Jake Fogler, a radio actor who is fond of talking about the breakdown of verbal communication and the semantics in mass media (78). Tess lives on pine apple and cottage cheese. Bertha Garvey is another neighbour of Stacey. Julian Garvey is twelve years older than Bertha who used to be an accountant. Now he putters round the house or do a little gardening which he dislikes. He cannot forget the fact that Bertha went beyond grade school.

Stacey, Tess, and Bertha wait upon the Polyglam woman and watch the new plastic items and are amazed at the strength of the new plasticware. At the end of the night, as she is about to go home, she meets Jake Fogler with the look of an aging owl—like boy caught in some moment of nefariousness. After reaching home she looks at the Polyglam booklet:

Along with the Superware, families are shown on each page. Kids beam peacefully and undisturbedly. Mothers with young untired faces flow contentedly. Fathers with young untired faces smile proudly and successfully. Grandmothers with young untired faces gaze graciously and untroubledly. (84)
The immediate reaction of Stacey is “Shit.” She cannot believe the naturality of the untiredness in the faces of the mothers, fathers and grandmothers in the booklet. How can they be untired, looking after the children each day? Margaret Laurence laughs at the beautiful lies of the advertising business.

Stacey’s feels isolated and alienated. Her alienation from herself is partly caused by the illusions and the web of lies fabricated by the world of business and advertising and disseminated through the media. Stacey attempts to resist the materialism rampant in her society and act in accordance with her own thoughts and feelings. However she often falls prey to it, and entirely in keeping with her negative self-image, chides her-self and not the conmen for the lapse. Sitting in her hammock and studying her lilac front door, Stacey remembers being conned into idiocy by advertisers. Though Stacey does buy a few things, she rejects the Polyglam booklet with pictures of peaceful happy kids, young untired mothers, successful untired fathers, and young untired grandmothers, as pure rubbish. The manipulators in consumer Dom believe that housewives, who constitute seventy-five percent of the purchasing power in North America, “can be given the sense of identity, purpose, creativity, the self-realization, even the sexual joy they lack-by the buying of things. Pseudo-cults and ‘isms thrive in the absence of genuine religious faith. The old symbols of God and churchmen are replaced by media and business. The supermarket becomes almost a place of worship to which
women throng in large numbers in the hope that the acquisition of “things” will alleviate their feelings of emptiness and desperation. To Stacey the aisles of the supermarket seem like those of a temple with side chapels and music “hymning from invisible choir”. Religious terms are used by Stacey when describing the parlor. She sees the hairdresser as “priestess...clad in pale mauve smocks” working busily on a robust client who leans back her head “to receive the benediction of the shampoo”. (93)

Stacey's salesman—husband Mac, helps create consumer Dom by selling encyclopedias, essences and Richalife vitamin pills as: “Richalife-Not Just Vitamins—A New Concept-A New Way of Life Both Spirit and Flesh Altered. Richness is a Quality of Living” [34]. This pseudo—gospel which feeds a dying civilization with the hope of rejuvenation, is a secular parody of the religious vision of the Promised land.6

Stacey and Mac go to the Richalife evening party. There she indulges in conversation with Thor under heavy drink which irritates Mac. Next day morning she thinks of the incident and wants to say that she would walkout on Mac, if Mac beat her up. Then Stacey speaks to herself:

...Would I? With four kids? How could you walk out on him, Stacey, whatever he did or was like?

You couldn’t sweetheart, and don’t you forget it.
You haven't got a nickel of your own. This is what they mean by emancipation. (114)

On such occasions she is left in confusion as to what to do—to leave him or to live with him. Her troubled self is further aggravated by dreams like the one as follows:

The rain forest is thick, matted, overgrown with thorned berry bushes, the fallen needles from the pine and tamarack bronzing the earth. Smell of moss, wet branches, mellowy rotten leaves. It is very difficult to walk through. The wild brambles stretch out their fish hooks to tear at exposed skin. The ground is spongy underfoot, for the moss tops centuries of leaf mold. She has to continue, bringing what she is carrying with her. The thing is bleeding from the neck stump, but that cannot be helped. The severed head spills only blood, nothing else. She has tunneled at last through the undergrowth. Now she has the right to look. She holds it up in front of her. How is it that she can see it? What is she seeing with? That is the question. The head she has been carrying is of course none but hers. (115)
This dream is very significant as the "severed head" of hers indicates her wounded and fractured self which is to be healed and united. Thus Stacey feels amputated from her self. Added to this, she is constantly troubled by the news on the radio, television and newspaper which talk about crime, violence, and death. As she is distressed within herself she suspects that she is becoming neurotic and complains of a head ache; she has got a tumor of the brain. Stacey starts worrying about the children very much. When she thinks of her self: "Really, it’s only what would happen to the kids? It doesn’t matter about you, Stacey? ...thinking of me like I’m prehistoric, and it bugs me. I’m sorry, but it does. I’m not a good mother. I’m not a good wife. I don’t want to be. I’m Stacey Cameron and I still love to dance" (124). She is in utter disgust for herself and her living.

Dr. Spender examines her and the X-ray results are negative. Stacey does not have tumor of the brain. She feels greatly relieved and says: “This calls for some slight celebration. Reprieve. I’m not a goner yet" (124). She finishes her drink and starts dancing slowly and then faster and faster to the tune of music: “Once it seemed almost violent, but now it seems incredibly gentle. Sentimental, self indulgent? ...I love to dance. I love it. I can still do it” (124). Here one can notice the change that has come over Stacey; she feels lighter physically and mentally. Her “mental baggage” (38) that she is carrying seems not that heavy as she
thinks it to be. Stacey's inner self is getting healed slowly. She starts living life and loving life.

It was twelve thirty in the afternoon, when Stacey tries to heat up a sandwich and burns her hand. She puts the kettle on and accidentally and puts her hand on the boiling spout. She is scared and tries to call out for help, but nobody is there to help her. Once again she feels dejected. During the same period, Stacey finds Mac sitting so close to another girl, named Delores Appleton, at Richalife party.

One day Stacey writes a letter to her mother that every thing is looking up and goes out to post the letter when she meets Buckle, Mac's friend on the street. He takes her for a ride in his truck; then back to his place, where his blind mother is sitting in the room drinking port from a battered tea pot. There Stacey finds that Buckle enjoys sex with himself only-but with her as an onlooker. Next day Buckle phones Mac and informs him that he and Stacey have been to bed together. Mac accuses Stacey of her infidelity and she is outraged and feels insulted. She continues to say that she didn't, but Mac doesn't care for her word. Here one should notice her response and reaction, which is not despair, but action.

She gets into the Chevrolet which is parked in front of the house and drives to the seashore and meets a young artist, and writer Luke Venturi. He is so simple and practical, Stacey likes him. She enjoys talking to him. He says, "You give someone a complement and they
interpret it in reverse. It is a semantic problem we have” (166). Stacey tells him that she likes SF, science fiction, when he starts calling her “merwoman” (166), and asks: “Who held you down? Was it for too long?” He offers her a coffee; Stacey is impressed by the way Luke speaks without inhibitions, no lies, simply outspoken.

By the time Stacey reaches home, Mac is about to call the police. After four days, Stacey goes out to meet Luke again. She wears a cotton dress “printed in blue and dark green, like sea water and fir trees” (174). She finds him on the shore and he tells her about his family and the recent wedding celebration of his sister Angela. Then Stacey wishes, she would have that kind of family. Luke smiles and says:

Everything looks both better and worse from the outside, I guess. You think-How lucky they are or How in hell can they stand it? May be they are not so lucky, but they can stand it. (182)

Luke tells her about the story that he is writing for which he can’t think of any way to end it, which is “his problem” (185). Stacey makes love with him. There she finds the answer for which she has been looking for. She is able to find her self out. She is happy with Luke that he doesn’t role-type her and communicates openly, and feels that she is able to voice her actual feelings unselfconsciously. Luke suggests her to come out of her hiding and cease attempting to be a good mother and good
wife. Stacey senses that she should start being again with someone like Luke:

...with every thing simpler and clearer. No lies. No recriminations. No unmerry-go-round of point less words. Just every thing plain and good like today, and making love and not worrying about unimportant things and not trying to change each other. (189)

When Stacey reaches home, Katie has been crying for what happened to Jen at Mrs. Fogler’s house. She makes Jen watch a big fish devouring a small fish. Jen is frightened and tries to escape but Mrs. Fogler doesn’t allow her to do so. Stacy makes her mind up never to leave Jen with Tess. That evening Duncan informs his mother that Ian nearly missed being run over by a car. Stacey feels sorry because she was away with Luke making love while Ian might have been hurt. Stacey comforts Ian.

Stacey feels restless as she doesn’t find anyone who can talk to her openly. Tess, Bertha, Mac even her children never care for her word. Stacey thinks:

What’s the matter with us? Or may be you really are only talking about the outer skin? I don’t know. I can’t get through the sound barrier any more than I can with any one of them. Is it only
me who wants to? (Is it only I who want to?)


Stacey looks into the mirror and finds herself better than she was a week ago. After meeting Luke, there has come a change in Stacey's attitude and the way she views things. She thinks: “It isn’t the number of years that count, it’s the way people feel about each other” (203).

Mac has a conference that night, children will be asleep and Stacey goes to Luke. He tells her that he is going away and asks her to come with him. Stacey replies: “I’ve imagined myself getting away more times that I can tell you......I want to go with you. ...No. Luke—I can’t leave....My kids and and” (209). Here she learns the truth that life is simply enduring, that life goes on, and that life is reality. Stacey is able to put her brief affair with Luke in right perspective. It is an oasis in the desert of life. It offers her refreshment and hope; even if for only a brief moments. It has given her the assurance of what is needed to face reality. It has been no more than that. Stacey has learnt the stubbornness of human survival. In spite of the frustrations, of the doomed dreams and the pain of isolation, human beings endured and lived on.

When Stacey reaches home, Mac informs her that Buckle is dead. Stacey cannot take in the reality of Mac’s words or quite believe yet that Ian is safe. She never cared for Buckle, but never wished him any harm.
She hates him for his behaviour at his residence. Now he won't be able to tell any more lies to Mac about her. While both of them are going to mortuary, Stacey is on the point of speaking several times, but she is afraid she may say the one wrong or fuse like word which may make something explode in his head or heart and break the control which he will need, which he would never forgive himself for not having in this final encounter (214). Stacey feels sorry about Buckle and says, “What do I do about that? One more piece of baggage to lug along. I wish I could get rid of all of it. I wish I could start all over, with things simpler, really simple, none of this mishmash” (214). Stacey finds Mac crying, the lung drenching spasms of a man to whom crying is forbidden. She doesn’t know how to comfort him. She prays to god: “What I lack is strength. Enough strength. Enough calm. Just give me enough to boggle through this one night, God, and I’ll never ask for anything again” (216).

Mac remembers the days when Buckle and he were in Italy near the end of the war. They were on supply transport, truck full of rations. Mac was separated from Buckle, and Buckle’s truck was blown by a mine and was able to recover after one year. But he still looked suffering from pain. Mac could guess that Buckle wouldn’t be able to go to bed with Stacey. He feels sorry for doubting Stacey and confesses that he has gone to Delores once, only after he thought Stacey had gone to bed with Buckle.
The following day Mac comes home early and Stacey is worried. Mac informs her that there is a party at Richalife and both should be going. There at the party Mac is injured in the ball game thrown by Thor. Mac and Stacey leave the place immediately. Mac tells her that because of the kids and Stacey he couldn’t give up the job. Stacey starts blaming herself responsible for they had four kids and Mac says: “You blame yourself? But that’s insane, Stacy. Anyway, that’s all in the past.” “The past doesn’t seem ever to be over”, is the reply from Stacey.(235)

That night Stacey has the dream as follows:

They, place is a prison but not totally so. It must be an island, surely, some place where people are free to walk around but nobody can get away. The huts are made of poplar poles chinked with grown and free, nothing to worry about for her at this moment. Lying together on the bed of leaves, she and Mac listen to the guards’ boots. The Legions are marching tonight hard against the mud and they have flat roofs where the people sleep. There is ladder leading up to each sleeping plateau, and when she and Mac are safely on top, they pull up the rope ladder after them. The children are not here. They are in another place,
pavements and there is nowhere to go but here.

(235-236)

In the next chapter we find Stacey going to Buckle's place to know whereabouts of his blind mother. She is informed that Salvation army people have taken her away to look after her. On the way home she meets Valentine Tonnerre, who is also from Manawaka. She informs Stacey that Thorlakson is no other than Vernon Winkler who studied in Manawaka Public School and who was teased by older students. Now he has undergone plastic surgery and wears built up shoes; changed his name and is the manager of Richalife. Then Stacey understands why Thor behaves strangely with Mac, because his wife is from Manawaka and that she might have recognized his real identity.

Stacey receives a call from Mr. Fogler. Immediately she goes to his house and comes to know that Tess tried to kill herself by swallowing many sleeping pills and a bottle of rye but is saved by doctors. Yet she has to be kept in mental hospital. Stacey always felt jealous about Tess' glamour but realizes that she herself is in better condition as she has a good husband and four children.

Stacey visits her neighbour Bertha, and hears her husband Julian shouting at her. He is mean and feels inferior to her and disapproves of her going out on her own as his is twelve years older to her; he is frightened that she may attempt suicide as Tess did. Bertha replies that she is "too stubborn to die yet for a while" (250).
One afternoon, Mac comes home and Stacey is worried whether he is fired. But to her utter astonishment he informs her that “Thor has been offered a job in Montreal and he has decided to take it. They want me to be the manager here” (262). Stacey thinks of Val; she must have told Thor something; it may be settling an old score for Val. In fact, Mac wants to hand in his notice the same week he decides to quit but he has become the manager of Richalife. Stacey doesn’t tell him anything about Thor. She contemplates: “It’s actually lying. It’s just refraining from saying. The silences aren’t all bad. How many times Mac has protected me by not saying? He probably noticed the burn on my hand that time” (264).

As children are asking her to take them to beach, Stacey takes the three younger children and starts collecting shells on the shore along with Jen. Ian and Duncan have gone to the retreating sea. After sometime Stacey looks up and sees Ian only, Duncan is not to be seen. Then she runs, by the time she reaches, Ian has pulled Duncan out of the water, but only part of the way. Duncan’s “head is bleeding and the sea pours from his nostrils. His mouth is open, and his eyes. But he is not seeing anything and he does not seem to be breathing” (265). Meanwhile Ian fetches a lifeguard who gives Duncan artificial breathing and the boy is resuscitated. Mac also reaches the site and holds Duncan in his arms which he never does before. He says to Ian “You did fine.” (269) Stacey remembers what she was thinking out there on the sand
when she did not know what to do with Duncan's unconscious body: “God, if it was anything I did, take it out on me, not on him—that's too much punishment for me” (270).

Duncan recovers in a week. Except Mac everyone opts to go to the beach including Mac's father, Mathew. Stacey invites him to her house and calls him dad. Jen talks a sentence who is dumb throughout. Stacey keeps on listening to the news and advertisements on the radio and laughs with minimal amusement and says, “I was wrong to think of the trap as the four walls. It's the world” (276).

Next morning the letter from Stacey's sister arrives. Rachel and her mother are moving out there. Stacey's fortieth birthday is the happiest moment in her life as everyone gets closer to her; Mac, Katie, Mathew and others. Mac enquires after her dad's revolver she kept with her. Stacey replies that she chucked it into Timber Lake that summer. Earlier she was afraid of the safety of her children. So she kept the revolver, but now she has “come to realize that there was no use keeping the gun”(279). Mac was afraid that she may do something like Tess did.

Stacey continues to watch the televised images of burning streets in ravaged cities within the comfort of her sitting room, and her dreads continue in their familiar pattern: “I see it and then I don't see it. It becomes pictures. And you wonder about the day when you open your door and find they've been filming those pictures in your street” (278). Radical protest either of the Peace March kind or of domestic rebellion
may be deliberately rejected here. The themes of survival and social outrage pervade the narrative as they are assimilated into Stacey's interior monologue and modulated in the dramas of her family life. For her apocalypse comes to have its strongest resonance in personal realization: “Will the fires go on, inside and out? Until the moment when they go out for me, the end of the world. And then I'll never know what may happen in the next episode” (280).

Stacey is a new person now with a realization that she cannot be twenty-one again. She decides to discard Richalife pills; instead she wants to take high protein diet not banana diet and prays to God: Give me another forty years, Lord, and I may mutate into a matriarch” (281).

The novel ends quietly as family romance, with Stacey in bed and her husband and children asleep:

Stacey heaves over onto her side. The house is quiet. The kids are asleep. Downstairs in the ex-study, Matthew has been asleep for hours, or if not asleep, meditating. Beside her, she can already hear the steady breathing that means Mac is asleep. Temporarily, they are all more or less okay.

She feels the city receding as she slides into sleep. Will it return tomorrow? (281)
The world outside is much the same as it was in the beginning, and the conclusion focuses on personal and family survival within the nightmare world. It is a precarious position but the only one available outside the self—enclosed worlds of fantasy which Stacey has successively inhabited. Yet her fantasizing has given her the necessary inner space to come to terms with the world she inhabits as forty-year-old Stacey Mac Aindra, a world constituted for her by human relationships as mother, wife, friend, sister and daughter.

Thus Laurence works within the tradition of realistic fiction, and the story of the woman's life offers no radical departure from traditional patterns of what women do. Stacey wryly looks forward to "mutating into a matriarch" (281), as she lies in bed beside her husband at the end of her story. Here the female voice speaks out of domestic spheres and nurturing roles, never openly dissenting from them any more than her mother had done, and indeed in her own life confirming traditional cultural patterns.

Stacey is "a spiritually, isolated housewife threatened by domestic and social chaos which she fears both as personal hell—fire and nuclear holocaust." Caught in a whirlpool of a myriad demanding roles in a plumb-crazy civilization "with the characteristic symptom of believing itself unusually sane" this self-aware and moderately intelligent woman seems touchingly real. Lonely, bewildered, self-doubting and guilt-ridden, Stacey is however, "worthy of respect for her valiant fight simply in
coping from day today." Laurence regards her as "Hagar's spiritual granddaughter" as she too has some guts and some humour."

Stacey is open, benevolent and alive. She is not terrified of the expression of passion and human need in others and is desperate to know the actual people behind their social masks. Clara Thomas rightly says that while pride causes Hagar and Rachel to designate themselves as "different" and "special" people and hold themselves away from other "ordinary" men and women, Stacey is constantly striving to reach out to others. "She thinks of herself as commonplace and ordinary, but the great achievement of her anxious, rueful, urgent voice is to reveal her extraordinary qualities of love, fortitude and especially vitality."

"Stacey's mind is revealed in a swift-flowing stream of dialogue, reaction, reproach and nostalgia" through imaginative use of typography. The chaotic vitality of the form conveys the "jangled quality" of her life and the "the sense of 'everything happening all at once' (18), simultaneously." Third person narration with first person focus is represented in ordinary type. It is used to advance the narrative and sometimes, to provide commentary on the characters or events. Stacey's dreams and fantasies are in italics while her private thoughts are introduced by a long dash. The introductory dash, as Allan Bevan notes, is particularly important "when conversations are interlaced with Stacey's private comments." Memories of newspaper events are in ordinary type with deep indentation and radio and television news
appear in unpunctuated capitals. Laurence does not use any quotation marks for the character's speech and some of their sentences are unfinished or trail off because, according to her, this is the way many people actually talk. The form of the novel, which succeeds in fusing numerous themes, resembles "a fast-shuttering, multi-screen camera and soundtrack technique."\textsuperscript{15}

The trigger mechanisms effectively integrate flashbacks into the fictional present. Almost every page is "visibly cluttered and untidy just as Stacey's life and her inner passion."\textsuperscript{16} According to Leona Gom, "the continual jumps in perspective have the added effect of suggesting a kind of schizophrenic impersonalization of self.... Thus the reader becomes aware that the thinking and feeling Stacey is usually very different from the woman who acts."\textsuperscript{17} The dialectical nature of her thought process effectively expresses the conflicts within her. Her dissenting voice indicates the split in her psyche. This assured, ironic self often lends her practical advice and helps her regain her equilibrium by truncating both her wishful thinking and her self-deception. The reader is expected to see more of Stacey than she sees of herself and question such assumptions of herself as, "I've got everything I always wanted" and her feeling that like her father, Niall Cameron, she too is unable to cope.

Stacey's isolation from herself is due to the fears bred in her by the violence around her and the numerous cramping patriarchal ideas of womanhood which she has internalized. Her alienation from her true self
though largely caused by forces beyond her control is, at least partly, of her own making. Stacey's greatest fear is of the violent incendiary world in which she lives. Maternal to the point of being over-protective, she is extremely worried about the safety of her family. Death seems oppressively present and takes numerous forms in the society in which she lives and lurks dangerously close to Stacey and her family. Stacey fears dying or being driven into committing suicide before her kids are grown up. She fears that her recurring headaches are caused by a tumor which would cause her death at the age of thirty-nine. Her fear of death is, partly at least, the result of her childhood and adolescence spent above her father's funeral home in Manawaka. A nudging pain under her ribs makes her wonder if death will meet her "with violent quickness, a growing fashion" (280). One night, when after a fight with her husband Mac, she gingerly drives to the shore, she narrowly misses colliding with another car. Both Mac and her daughter Katie, fear that Stacey will attempt suicide like her friend, Tess. Peter Challoner, Ian's friend, and Buckle, Mac's friend being run over by a car when one day he runs onto the road after a football. Duncan's near drowning seems the closest brush with death and causes Stacey, Mac and Ian to feel as terrified as Duncan himself.

The Ever-Open Eye (the television), radio and doom-shrieking newspaper constantly report deaths caused by bombs dropped in distant places, maiming by napalam, deaths caused by battering, suicides,
accidental deaths caused by police bullets, road accidents, deaths in riots and those caused by starvation. "Every body’s living dangerously in our hate-filled world which contrary to T.S. Eliot’s assertion in *The Hallow Men* is likely to end not with a whimper but a bang. The deceptive appearances on the television screen of smiling newsreaders who read “PRINTED DISASTERS IN..... VANILLA-FLAVOURED WHIPPED-CREAM” [153], voices and interpret death as numerals, immunize us to a certain extent of *Doom everywhere*. At times Stacey feels that the news on the Ever—Open Eye is an unreal as the Western serials but at other times she dreads the thought of the day when, on opening her door, she finds that the pictures have been filmed in her own street. (278) Stacey’s panic is genuine as “anything that could happen to anybody could happen to anybody”. It is very difficult to survive in a world in which one needs to work very hard only “to escape whatever it is that’s wanting to crush you like a grape”.

Stacey laughs at the thought of people in California wanting to migrate to Canada for safety as being in Canada, between two super powers; she does not feel at all safe. Stacey tells us that she kept her father’s revolver for a while to put her children out of misery if they got damaged or maimed beyond any hope of recovery. Later, she realizes her inability to act in this manner even under such circumstances she throws the revolver into Timber Lake and began imagining other ways of escaping if need be [179]. Aware that the survival of the human race is in
jeopardy in our nuclear world, she remembers feeling enraged at a Civil
Defense form Ian brought home one day. Among the numerous details
required, was the name, address and phone number of any person who
could be contacted in case of a National Emergency if parents were not to
be found. Much to the irritation of Mac and Ian, Stacey had written:
"Name: God, Address: Heaven". This is semi-autobiographical incident at
which Laurence comments angrily: "Next of kin indeed! As if anybody on
this earth could be found in case of a nuclear attack." The city in which
Stacey lives, represents the violence in the outside world in a miniature
form and seems to be inhabited by the spiritually dead. Vancouver,
despite it's reputation of being the jewel of the Pacific Northwest, seems a
kind of wasteland. Stacey is distressed at the sight of the old men sitting
in the lobby of the Princess regal Hotel waiting for the beer parlor to open
while an old yellow—toothed woman sweeps the lobby clean. Much to her
horror, she witnesses an automobile accident near her home and
knowing the victim to be a young boy of seven or ten, dashes home to see
if Ian and Duncan are safe. The buildings at the heart of the city appear
"brash, flashing with colors, solid and self-confident" and reassure
Stacey but when she looks at them again the next instant they seem
"charred, open to the impersonal winds, glass and steel broken like
vulnerable live bones, shadows of people frog-splayed on the stone like
the other city". Stacey's mention of the other city is undoubtedly a
reference to Hiroshima. She knows that the rows of old, high, rickety
timber houses near the beaches are without proper fire escapes. These dangerous dilapidated constructions are not vacant but occupied by people who desperately need shelter.

The violence in the outside world and in the city, filter down to violence with in her own family and herself. With "the embryonic cougar" (118), lurking in each of us, every individual is capable of being both a victim and a bully. Stacey greatly fears her own capacity for violence and hopes she will not hit her kid harder than intended when the feeling of being trapped in her family becomes unbearable. Time and again she remembers how she had once grabbed Ian and Duncan by their shoulders and flung them to the floor during their fight over the bug that Ian was making. She also dreads the thought of getting temporarily deranged and battering her helpless, two year old daughter Jen for something that is not her fault and prays to God (whose existence she doubts) to stay her hand on such an occasion. Conditioned into monster Dom Ian and Duncan are as violent as the others around them. The boys fight over everything; from the bug, Ian is making to the relative size of each other's helping of dessert. While playing, their antagonism remains "suppressed and undeclared" but threatens to surface at any minute.

The violence in the outside world is completely internalized by them. Stacey feels that she is unable to act calm and sober, as in her case, everything happens all at once, "never one thing at a time" (18). The jangled quality of her life with every other minute "an emergency" is
brilliantly brought out in the short scene, descriptive of a typical morning, with which the fourth chapter begins. The radio blares out the news of violence in different parts of the world, Ian wants her to look for his social studies scribbler, Duncan refuses to eat his cereal and wants her to give him fifty cents for “Cripples or something” (87) for the form his teacher has given him, Katie wants her to look for her orange earrings, Mac anxiously talks about the party at Thor’s, insists she get her hair done and leaves without his breakfast and Jen yells having finished her morning job. To add to the “chatter buzz wail” which is little short of madness, Tess phones. The constant noise and never—ending conflicts make her feel sick of trying to cope and fear that she is turning crabby. Though she strongly desires peace and solitude, it is she who often initiates quarrels, particularly with Mac. Her “mental baggage” (38), which is a conglomeration of memories of both the distant and the recent past add to the confusion. She feels that she resembles her alcoholic father Niall Cameron, and attempts to escape from her situation with the help of alcohol, romantic fantasies and by having an affair.

Stacey’s desire for sex with Buckle proves abortive. In a desperate attempt to go back in time and relive her younger, happier self, she abandons her myriad roles one afternoon, dresses in tight-fitting velvet slacks, a purple blouse and high-heeled gold-strapped sandals and drinks and dances away her blues. Her short affair with Luke proves extremely satisfying. In the manner of biblical namesake, the twenty-four
year old Italian youth helps heal Stacey's fragmented psyche and regain contact with her Eros. She is overjoyed that Luke does not role-type her and communicates openly. Stacey finds a perfect confidant in Luke and feels that she is able to voice her actual feelings and bawl unselfconsciously. On hearing her talk about her numerous anxieties, he advises her to come out of her hiding and cease attempting to be a good example. Stacey feels that she would like to start being again with someone like Luke "with everything simpler and clearer. No lies. No recriminations. No unmerry—go—round of pointless words. Just everything plain and good" (206). Her euphoric mood does not last long and she arrives at the painful realization that life with Luke would not have turned out any simpler than that with Mac. Underneath his know-it-all, cool cat mask, Luke, who like Stacey is not blessed with faith, gropes for some kind of meaning in life and has not found any easy escape route. "Like the loons he can keep going further north, but civilization will continue to encroach on his dream of a return to the natural harmony of the country's original peoples."19

Stacey's affair with Luke also helps her understand that the idea of perfect communication between individuals is largely a myth and that it is perhaps possible only after death, as promised in the Pat Boon Number: "There's a gold mine in the sky" (129), which she croons one night in a drunken state. Perfect communication is not possible even with someone as open and as easy to talk to as Luke. Furthermore,
though Luke tries to divest his verbal exchanges with Stacey of lies, clichés and verbal niceties and rejects them at rational level, he needs them emotionally as much as the others. For instance, it gives him pleasure to think that by having sex with Stacey, he is some kind of saviour, giving her what she desperately needs. Also, both lie to each other about their age. When interacting with others, Stacey tells that she dislikes her constant “fib-telling” and is anxious to tell the truth but continues to lie in her anxiety to maintain her good wife-mother-neighbour-daughter—in—law image. Stacey fantasizes about Utopian society:

Out there in unknown houses are people who live
without lies, and who touch each other. One day
she will discover them, pierce through to them.
Then everything will be all right, and she will live
in the light of the morning. (85)

Yet she knows that at times lies are necessary, even desirable. For instance, when Mac asks if his crew cut looks all right, Stacey lies and assures him that it looks great and knows that in the like manner, Mac too has protected her from the sight of herself. Likewise, just when the relationship between Stacey and Mac seems to be improving, Mac confesses having “once” gone to bed with Delores Appleton. Stacey naturally feels stabbed to the heart and jeeringly thinks: “May be I’ll undergo a change of heart. The new one will be plastic and unbreakable.”
(221) But assures Mac that she "honestly" does not mind it. Towards the end of the novel she asks Matthew to move in with them and though she is fully aware that she will regret the move and asks herself: Why did I even once feel that to tell the truth and nothing but the truth would be a relief? It would be dynamite, that's all it would be. It would set the house on fire (257).

In other words, it is impossible to live sanely without lies. Addicted to words, Stacey resents silences but grows to realize that silences are often necessary and not all bad. She also understands that communication does not solely depend on words and that people cannot be pried open like oyster shell. When driving Mac to the morgue to identify Buckle's body, she remains silent, afraid that she may say the one wrong or fuse like word which may make something explode in his head or heart. She also does not reveal Thor's identity to Mac as she thinks it humiliating for anyone to feel that he or she has been frightened by a man of straw.

Stacey finally "comes to terms with her life and recognizes herself as a survivor." She realizes that she should accept herself as she is and stop wishing to be like others for, as Luke rightly says: "Everything looks better and worse from the outside" (182). Having decided to remain with Mac, Stacey decides to take life as it comes and quit fearing the unknown. This realization is not the result of divine inspiration in the form of a
revelation but is arrived at after being considerably battered by the slings and burrs of fortune. With characteristic irony Stacey observes:

I used to think there would be a blinding flash—light someday, and then I would be wise and calm and would know how to cope with everything and my kids would rise up and call me blessed. Now I see that whatever I'm like, I'm pretty well stuck with it for life, Hell of revelation that turned out to be. (272)

The novel ends on a note of reconciliation and acceptance of those things which cannot be changed. The fact that Stacey's fragmented psyche was healed even at the deepest unconscious level is indicated by her dream:

She is dancing alone. The café is in a village, a village of low white washed huts, surrounded by and threaded through with whatever kind of trees they have in Greece. Olive trees. Yeh, those. However they look. The café is small, and the band is only two or three men playing (unspecified string instruments). She starts slowly, following the beat of the music, her bare feet certain, confident. (275)
Thus Stacey's conflicting internal urges are juxtaposed with her contradictory outward actions and words. A violent, chaotic, external world both causes and parallels her personal inner chaos. Stacey's need to cope with that world and to find security within her family unit reflects her need to regain balance in the chaotic world of the self. Thus Stacey embarks on what Joseph Campbell calls the monomythic inward adventure to greater self-knowledge. Her journey significantly, is one of rediscovery. According to Joseph Campbell, this circularity is peculiar to the cosmogonic cycle:

The cosmogonic cycle...gives to the adventure of the hero a new and interesting turn; for now it appears that the perilous journey was a labour not of attainment but of reattainment, not discovery but rediscovery. The godly powers sought and dangerously won are revealed to have been within the heart of the hero all the time.21

Stacey's strength, her capacity for independence and autonomy, her nurturing maternal qualities, and her ability to reach out to others are all evident from the outset of the novel in her actions, thoughts, and memories, although diffracted and obscured from her sight. Consequently, Stacey must seek the reintegration of these disparate
elements of a healthy psychic whole within herself and in equilibrium with the external world.

Stacey passes through the three stages of the monomythic journey in this search: separation, initiation and return. She feels fragmented and is separated from her true self and her family by the end of the fourth chapter, as symbolized in her dream of walking decapitated through a rainforest carrying her severed and bleeding head. She crosses the adventure threshold in chapter five when she accepts Buckle's invitation to his apartment and later, at home, she burns her hand in her drunken negotiation of her wifely and motherly roles. In chapter six and seven, when she enters the initiation stage of her journey, she penetrates to the true source of her power, her nurturing relatedness, her ability to connect with others, in her affair with Luke Venturi, whose very name is symbolic of his healing qualities. In this affair she rediscovers her power to act positively for herself and makes the conscious decision not to escape with Luke from her family and her duties, which would negate the fundamental strengths of her nature.

By the end of the novel, after Stacey enters the final stage of her journey, she re-establishes her equilibrium within a world of unchanging violence, finding the inner strength that arises from self-awareness and self-respect. Ultimately, personal psychic health and a secure family unit are the only human resource, the only security, against the external world. As Stacey realizes, “the trap” is not “the four walls. It is the world.”
Stacey has learnt the survival theory. Choosing to remain with her family rather than go north with Luke, she discards the crutches. Stacey realizes that her strength she needs to cope with her situation is within herself and that she can do anything if she sets her mind to it. Sure of strength she light-heartedly says: “A few more years of this life, God, and if I’m not dead or demented, I’ll have a hide like a rhinoceros” (260). Stacey learns to survive not only without escape devices but also without much help from god. Her view of God is complicated. God, says the Bible, created man in his image, but Stacey, confused as she is, created God in her image. Stacey often feels that she is living an unreal, mechanical life, devoid of meaning and that she is manipulated by a force beyond her control. This fear finds its fullest expression in her science fiction fantasies. Her conversations with God seem to have a cathartic value and fulfill her desperate need for a confidant as seen from her words: “God knows why I chat with you, God—it’s not that I believe in you. Or I do and I don’t, like the echoes in my head. It’s somebody to talk to. Is that all? I don’t know” (66). Robert Chambers rightly observes that behind the pleasantry, Stacey gropes for some pattern of meaning amidst a chaotic life.23

Stacey observes the people around her and feels alienated which is largely due to the problems inherent in the nature of human communication which mainly includes words and gestures. Laurence believes that we human beings do not communicate at as deep a level as
we are capable. This theme runs like a leitmotif through everything Laurence has written. Fully aware of her own contradictions, doubts, anxieties and conflicts, Stacey fears being the sole “fire-dweller” and is desperate to break through the verbal blocks of others and find out if their actual thoughts and feelings resemble hers in any way. Stacey yearns to see signs of life in others. Her problem is aggravated by the fact that everyone around her, herself included, is a living lie.

All the characters in the novel consciously repress their true selves from which they are considerably alienated, and create false fronts based on the expectations of the significant ‘Others’ around them. Each one lives in his or her private hell convinced that the other is better than oneself and uses language to create and sustain the mask. Stacey finds her alienation from Mac, painful to the point of being unbearable. She fears that Mac regards her as a “thing” and feels like his car or toothbrush. For some reason unknown to her, Mac hardly talks about anything more and conveys the feeling that “the slightest effort at speech seems too much for him....too debilitating.”(133) When Stacey married him, she thought him to be very different in every way from her alcoholic father who preferred the company of the dead to that of the living. At thirty-nine, after sixteen years of marriage, she is no longer sure of the difference between them and says despondently: “Perhaps it isn’t that the masks have been put on, one for each year like the circles that tell the age of a tree. Perhaps they’ve been gradually peeled off, and what’s
there underneath is the face that's always been there for me; the unspeaking eyes, the mouth for who words were too difficult” (170). Both Stacey and Mac feel that the other misunderstands every word that is uttered. Stacey is acutely aware that over the years every aspect of their relationship has turned mechanical but, unlike her mother, she makes numerous attempts to salvage it. Anxious to avoid “tomb silences” (30) that existed between her own parents, Stacey tries to goad Mac into verbalizing his accrual thoughts and feelings with questions like: “What do you think, I mean in yourself? (43) Mac however, dismisses such queries as entirely meaningless.

Stacey feels inferior to her gorgeous-looking, childless neighbour Tess, who starves her body while she feeds her skin with expensive cosmetics. Tess’ language indicates the mask she is wearing to face the world. Conscious of herself as a very dainty type of person, she constantly sugarcoats her language to make it seem as delicate and “cute” as her appearance. Much to Stacey’s irritation, she refers to the toilet as the Little Girl’s Room and instead of asking Stacey if she would like another drink, she asks her to allow her to ‘freshen’ her drink. Tess enjoys the spectacle of her pet goldfish devouring the others in her private aquarium. This is beyond doubt a truthful image of her society which seems to have reverted to the jungle law of the survival of the fittest. Tess' “impressively packaged exterior” (91) masks her small, puzzled and lonely self. So carefully does she wear her mask that even
her husband cannot see through it till the moment of her attempt at
suicide. Jake, who loves talking about breakdown of verbal
communications and the problems of semantics in mass media, does not
realize it happening in his personal life. Tess and Jake are like strangers
to each other. While Tess fears that Jake thinks her too dumb, her
husband fears that she finds him very ugly [247]. So overwhelmed is
Stacey by Tess' beauty and her plastic perfection, that she too fails to see
through her mask. She often wonders what goes on in Tess' head and if
her thoughts and emotions resemble her own in any way. While Stacey
feels inferior to Tess, Tess feels inferior to Stacey. She sees Stacey as a
person with "terrific will-power" (91) and admires her ability to cope.

Stacey's another neighbour, Bertha, is well-built, efficient and
practical, also not as confident as she appears to be. Bertha regards
herself as inferior to her accountant-husband who constantly reminds
her that she was born and raised in a lumber camp and has not studied
beyond grade school. Julian's meanness and his crabby behavior are
largely because he finds it difficult to reconcile himself to the fact of
aging. Older than Bertha by twelve years, he disapproves of her going out
on her own and fears that she may attempt suicide as Tess did. Stacey,
Bertha and Tess never communicate at as deep a level as they would like
to and are capable of. The "sightless....she whale" (238), Buckle's mother,
an ex-prostitute is, like the others, very eager to cling to her mask of
respectability. Buckle mockingly tells Stacey that by drinking port from a
teapot rather than a bottle, his mother thinks she appears “decent”. Under this mask however, lurks a frightened old woman. Her failed attempt at suicide after Buckle’s death indicates her helplessness and the pathos of her situation. The plight of the other prostitute in the novel, Valentine Tonnerre, is even more painful than that of Buckle’s mother. Part of the irony of Valentine’s situation lies in her name for she is nobody’s valentine. Three to four years younger than Stacey, she is a Metis by birth. Valentine’s present reminds Stacey of the past of the Metis people. She acknowledges that the lives of the Metis involve a horror. Stacey feels guilty for belonging to the white community which has victimized them and feels sympathy for them. In this sense, she comes a step closer to Morag, who genuinely understands their plight and has a Metis lover. Stacey understands that the revealing clothes and flashy, hard appearance of Valentine conceals a terribly lonely and disillusioned woman who see life as meaningless and is probably contemplating suicide. Stacey greatly benefits from meeting Valentine as, on getting to know Thor’s real identity, she can ascribe motives to his malicious behaviour with Mac.

Stacey’s alienation from the other men around her is also largely due to the masks they wear. Mac’s father Matthew, does everything he can to conceal his uncertainties and anxieties and maintain his image of a good and steadfast United Church minister. Stacey feels that she and Matthew talk in a burble way with neither saying what he or she actually
thinks or feels. Stacey hates Matthew as he walks in without knocking and pussyfoots behind her. Matthew is unaware of Stacey’s “teeth-grinding fury” as she does not voice it. Stacey’s exasperation with Matthew diminishes as the novel proceeds and she asks him to move in with them for she eventually sees him as an ailing, guilt-ridden, lonely old man beneath his proud bearing. Thor too clings to his social mask and wants everyone to regard him as a highly efficient and confident young manager of Richalife. Well in keeping with his dream-maker image, he attempts to appear remote and almost ethereal in his suits of blue and silver and his carefully-laundered, halo like mane. Thor uses language to create illusions and manipulate his victims. He controls Mac by instilling fear in him and Stacey too feels terrified of this “bat-winged Mephistopheles” (44). He repeatedly talks about his improvement on taking the Richalife pills alertness-wise, caffeine-wise and nicotine—wise but refrains from divulging any information about his past. Thor’s preference for plastic flowers to natural ones is absolutely keeping in with his false front behind which lurks a frightened, small—town boy, Vernon Winkler. Having dissociated himself from his old self, Thor desperately latches on to his new self which he has created with the help of plastic surgery and compensation shoes till Valentine or some unknown event causes him to quit his job as a manager in Vancouver and move to the head office in Montreal. Mac’s friend Buckle, also rarely says what he means. Anxious to maintain his rough-and-tough, “king of
the road" image, his conversation is strewn with lewd phrases and words. Every time he greets Stacey as “Hi, gorgeous” (49), she feels irritated. Likewise, his almost mechanical verbal response when offered a drink is: “Don’t mind if I do” (49). Stacey’s feelings for him are highly ambivalent. She dislikes his crude mannerisms and his habit of dropping in at dinnertime but, much to her own irritation, finds him sexually attractive. Neglected by Mac and children, she feels particularly drawn to him when he takes her to his apartment one day. Intoxicated by his own expertise in handling his truck which he refers to as his “diesel dinosaur” (50), he delights in terrifying tourists and farmers on the highway. Like in the case of the other characters in the novel, his self-assured, bragging exterior, masks a terrified alienated individual who regards himself as an inferior being on account of his lack of formal education. So desperate is he to compensate for this lack and get attention that he resorts to wayward means like his terrifying game of chicken on the highway and masturbation in the presence of an onlooker. Mac’s refusal to acknowledge him in the presence of Thor hurts him immensely and he seeks revenge on Mac through Stacey. But Stacey recognizes the real people under the masks and able to survive among the masked people.

Through Stacey the novel provides an absolute centrality of feminine experience. In the words of Eric Newman, duality manifests in the mysteries of religion, myth and legend which runs parallel to the duality of the individual self. According to Newman, the mysteries are
based, irrespective of sex, on "heroic labours" where Jason or Hercules offer paradigms and echo the active struggles of the ego, to conquer and vanish.25 The feminine mysteries designate the rituals of birth and rebirth, enabling transcendence to carve a novel union and identity.

Incidentally, motherhood is a manifestation of the parable of the feminine mysteries. Some passages in the novel echo these feminine rites. An omniscient voice declares: "I will turn myself inside out. I will dance on the head of a pin. I will yodel from the top of the nearest dogwood tree. I will promise anything, for peace" (30).

The word "Quite peace" is a continuum symbolizing Stacey's victories as feminine which Jung calls "Feminine Eros relatedness."26 This victory is perhaps of greater importance than the masculine battle before escaping Manawaka. In Stacey, the conflict between the conscious and the unconscious anatomizes her external and internal life, creating wholeness in the interest of feminine experience. Stacey observes: What goes on inside isn’t ever the same as what goes on outside. I stand in relation to my life both as a child and as a parent, never quite finished with the old battles, never able to arbitrate properly the new, able to look both ways. (46)

Stacey finds solace in God. Her silent dialogue with God throws light on Laurence’s ironic techniques. The dialogues enable one to comprehend Stacey’s personality. God gradually melts into someone who partakes in our helplessness from an authoritarian omnipotent position.
God in a way is speaking to the unmasked self. Such self interrogations, where questions are not answered help one to confront oneself with a degree of honesty. Stacey’s conversations with God, prompts her to believe that God has a “sick sense of humour”. She prays for her children’s safety with him reminding of the fight between Jacob and angel (28). Listen, God, I didn’t mean it. Just don’t let anything terrible happen to any of them, will you? Stacey feels at home speaking to God. Her conversations with God echo Jung’s “The self possesses when the God image resides within.” One is made to feel the power behind her speeches. For instance:

Listen here, God, don’t talk to me like that. You have no right. You try bringing up kids. Don’t tell me you’ve brought up countless millions because I don’t buy that. We’ve brought our own selves up and precious little help we’ve had from you. If you’re there. Which probably you aren’t, although I’m never convinced totally, one way or another. So next time you send somebody down here, get It born as a her with seven young or a him with a large family and a rotten boss, eh? Then we’ll see how the inspirational bit goes. God, pay no attention. I’m nuts. I’m not myself (156).
Through her speeches, it is quite evident that Stacey yearns for a transcendental reality, which is in fact also reflected in her hymns sung in childhood where God is beyond the reach of mortal tongue. Stacey’s encounter with God is quite humorous as she thinks that God listens to her, understands her. Moreover, Stacey’s faith in God and her need of Him are real enough because the world which Stacey inhabits is a world full of nightmares, violence and destruction. Fear is a part of that world and the only way out for Stacey is, to find consolation in God, just like the Christian existentialists. Her arguments with God, remind one of George Herbert’s conflict with God.

Stacey completes the Jungian process of individuation—The wholeness of integrated self. She is aware of the discontinuities with herself and perceives that schism is the essential condition of life “able to look both ways, but whichever way I look. God, it looks pretty confusing to me.” The nightmarish visions of Stacey are unconscious:

No, No, No, I can’t take that, I won’t hush.

How to get through, just this minute, to

The shore? What if there are dogs? Alsatians.

Dobermans. Come in Stacey [I am sacred.

What am I doing out here alone? (157)

This vision of Stacey perhaps reflects the Hades guarded by Cerebrus. In fact, this movement in the world of Jolande Jacobi is
“Towards the realm of mothers, the unconscious, on whose threshold the shadow stands.”

Stacey’s path towards individuation involves, suffering, pain, and wholeness with her full participation which Jung refers to as “The passion of ego.” Stacey’s preoccupation is about her precipitating personae, to explore the repertoire of personae which is masked by the real self. Stacey’s fears quite naturally echo the fear of every mother. Moreover, Stacey is also confronted with the fear of Mac going to other women. She also feels that her kids might be aware of violence in the city which they inhabit. All these factors get on Stacey’s nerves and she tells Luke that all are fire dwellers in a world gone mad and feels that human beings have inherent monstrosity. This, in fact, leads one to social conditioning, its implications of women’s psyche. The most exciting issue in The Fire Dwellers is the use of violence and Stacey’s world is full of cacophony. Violence in latent or obscure form permeates the relationship between individuals in the novel. The incompatibility between Mac and Stacey prompts Stacey to despise Mac’s silences and fears, that Mac no longer finds her attractive- hence does not bother to answer her queries.

Stacey lives in the present eon of flame. Although all the elements are present in the novel, two-fire and water-predominate. Both operate in the novel as dual symbols of destruction and rebirth. Both represent the external destructive forces that tear at Stacey’s stability, and both represent constructive and destructive influences within her
psyche. Fire and water thus inherently both circumscribe the cosmogonic cycle and are inscribed within the cycle, symbolizing the complex simultaneity of life and death. Images of fire and water dominate the both, Stacey's internal and external worlds, spanning the past and the present and encroaching on the future.

Once Stacey’s psyche has begun to heal, both cycles of fire and water imagery return again to their destructive phase, but with a significant difference: life is contained within images of death and destruction. Stacey becomes no less frightened of the fires of the external world that threaten her personal existence, but she has learned to place these fires in their proper perspectives, to reserve her concern and energy for the true gods of fire, to see through the false gods, and thus, to cope in a world consumed with fires she cannot extinguish.

When Stacey returns to the beach where Duncan almost drowned she contemplates the power and mystery of the sea, which contains the duality of both life and death for her:

I wonder how deep it is, at the deepest? How far out does it go? How many creatures does it contain, not just the little shells and the purple starfish and the kelp, but all the things that live a long way out? Deathly embracing octopus in the south waters, the white whales spouting in the only-half-melted waters of the north, the
sharks knowing nothing except how to kill (271-272).

Stacey is no longer so "frightened to death of life."

In *The Fire Dwellers*, cycles of time, psychic growth and imagery, frame and structure the novel. The dynamic continuum of Stacey's personal world within a larger seemingly unchanging, violent socio-political environment is revealed in the renewed phases of the cycles of her memory, fantasy, and dream, of theme and imagery. Ultimately the heroine's guest leads to rediscovery of her inherent strength and recognition of her ability to cope in a world on fire by placing both herself and that world in proper perspective.

There is a persistent imagery in the novel which stresses the contrast between what is said and what appears to be. "Under this chapeau," Stacey affirms, "lurks a mermaid, a whore, a tigress" (15). The mermaid imagery in particular, emphasizes the rebirth theme. It is familiar imagery, of course, but nonetheless powerful and suggestive in its suggestion of ocean as a force symbolic of rebirth and regeneration. To the biologist, it is a truism to declare that without water there is no life. To the writer in all ages, the ocean and its waters have suggested the possibilities of a life that is vital, free and meaningful. Thus, in one aspect, Stacey is a mermaid---a creature of the sea and a creature of vigorous, meaningful potential. It is thus significant that Luke Venturi's pet name for Stacey is "Mermaid". For, Stacey is potentially the mermaid, the creature of the
ocean, the romantic figure evocative of a quality of life far different from that which she knows in everyday existence. There lies a problem in the reconciliation of the two roles: Stacey as mermaid and Stacey the thirty-nine year old drab. Thus, the sea imagery has two sides to it. On the one hand, the mermaid imagery suggests a different quality of life, a quality inherent in her initial escape from the prairies and its suffocating environment, where “all the trains ever said was, “Get on your way, somewhere, just so something will happen, get up and get out of this town” (33). On the other hand, the sea is fraught with dangers. Not only may it suggest possibilities of freedom and vigor; it may also suggest death and suffocation.

Stacey had learned of the stubbornness of human survival. In spite of the frustrations, in spite of the doomed dreams, in spite of the pain of solitude, human beings endured and lived on. That was the human bond which united all of them—Mac, herself and the children. With a few more years of life, she would have “a hide like a rhinoceros” (260). Mac was much stronger than he thought he was. The children were much stronger than they thought they were. Even Stacey was probably much stronger than she conceived herself as being.

Thus Margaret Laurence probes deeper and deeper into a woman’s suffering in the context of mystifying terrain of human relationships. In the words of Nancy Bailey, Laurence gives us “unforgettable portraits of
women wrestling with their personal demons, striving through self
eexamination to find meaningful pattern in their lives.”

The Biblical framework which provided some insight in the earlier
novels, is merely used as a parody in this novel. The first instance of this
is Stacey’s statement “Cain and his brother must have started their
hatred like this” (12) when her two sons fight over a go-cart. The religious
parody is at its best in the sections featuring Thor. The Richalife
campaign promising rejuvenation is a secular parody of the religious
vision of the Promised Land. Thor is the pseudo-prophet. There is an
obvious reference to evangelical testimonials, at rallies when people
declare the alterations made in their lives by the pills. Similarly, the
confessional element involved in the Richalife quiz which each employee
and his family is asked to fill in, parodies religious confessions.

Another important Biblical reference is that of Luke’s role in
bringing a change in the life of Stacey. Like the Biblical Luke, he is a
physician to Stacey who also provides “a temporary unreality” to her by
calling her ‘merwoman’ and identifying her with water. This affair enables
Stacey to abandon her responsibilities as mother and wife temporarily
and consequently, direct attention to herself. John Moss’ comment on
Stacey’s affair and on the ending of the novel is precise and lucid and to
quote him:

There were no scintillating alternatives for
Stacey along the way; only variations. A life
deeper than she was and a little older Stacey is left at the novel's close to carry on and perhaps even to enjoy life somewhat more, having witnessed it for a brief time from the different perspective afforded by her affair.\textsuperscript{30}
REFERENCES


6. Patricia Morely, "Cain and His Brother" *Margaret Laurence* (Boston: Concordia University, Twayne Publications, 1982) 103.


11. Margaret Laurence, “Ten Years’ Sentences” 32.


