CHAPTER III

Quest for freedom:
A Jest of God
Contemporary women's fiction all over the world opts to prioritize those categories of women and aspects of female experience which the representational practices of the dominant phallocentric culture tend to marginalize or even erase. One such prioritization can be envisaged in *A Jest of God*. The novel dramatizes the plight of a woman marginalized in a male-oriented chauvinistic society. In this novel Margaret Laurence attempts at focusing on the inner life of her protagonist. The concern of the novel is woman in society, her nature and ability to handle personal relationships, to control her destiny within the limitations imposed by that society, and the coercive effect of social pressure.

*A Jest of God* indices a novel image of a woman who resists being relegated to the margins and portrays an independent human being. Margaret Atwood’s comments are pertinent here: “What Rachel can offer us now as a reader is something we still need to know: how to acknowledge our own human and necessary limitations, our own foolishness. How to say both No, and Yes.”

Rachel Cameron is the protagonist of the novel *A Jest of God*. She is a spinster school teacher, caring for her senile, ailing, and a psychologically disintegrated mother. Rachel’s is a dual life-schism between marginalized Rachel and her ego. May Cameron, Rachel’s mother, is an egocentric hypochondriac bound to her fears and pills. Her pleasures in life are the small vanities of high heels, fussy blue rinsed curls, and bridge parties. Rachel is also neurotic and egocentric;
emotionally, she and her mother are both children, each unwilling to grow up and leave the other free, each battening on the weakness of the other. Rachel's will is a negligible force; she does things, makes decisions not at all by choice but simply through desperation. She wavers on the brink of hysteria, and her voice, through the book's three chapters, is like a long, barely controlled scream. Rachel speaks in the first person.

Technically, this novel's success depends upon the immediate involving of the reader in the sound of Rachel's voice and the dimension of her imagination. She speaks first as she stands looking out of the window of her Grade Two classroom at the children in the school yard. She is walled in by glass from even the illusion of freedom that their play presents, and she is desperately afraid of her own shadow-fears and fantasies. The first half of the book tells us everything basic to our understanding of Rachel's tormented, self-doubting mind and her present state of near—hysteria:

*The wind blows low, the wind blows high*

*The snow comes falling from the sky,*

*Rachel Cameron says she'll die*

*For the want of the golden city*

She is handsome, she is pretty

She is the queen of the golden city

They are not actually chanting my name, of course. I only hear it that way from where I am
watching at the classroom window, because I re-
member myself skipping rope to that song when I
was about the age of the little girls out there now.
Twenty-seven years ago, which seems impossible,
and myself seven, but the same brown brick
building. Only a new wing added and the place
smartened up. It would certainly have surprised
me then to know I'd end up here, in this room, no
longer the one who was scared of not pleasing,
but the thin giant. She behind the desk at the
front....

*Spanish dancers, turn around,*

*Spanish dancers, get out of this town.*

People forget the songs, later on, but the
knowledge of them must be passed like a secret
language from child to child-how far back? ...

*Nebuchadnezzar, King of the Jews,*

*Sold his wife for a pair of shoes.*

I can imagine that one going back and back,
through time and languages. Chanted in Latin,
maybe, the same high sing-song voices, smug
little Roman girls safe inside some villa in Gaul
or Britain, skipping rope on a mosaic courtyard,
not knowing the blue-painted dog men were
snarling outside the walls, stealthily learning.
There I am doing it again. This must stop. It isn’t
good for me. Whenever I find myself thinking in a
brooding way, I must simply turn it off and think
of something else. God forbid that I should turn
into an eccentric. (7-8)

We are struck initially by the sadness of Rachel’s voice and by
the spread of her imagination. Every adult recognizes her dream and its
loss, and we become engaged in sympathy for her by the gap between her
young dream-self, “queen of the golden city,” and her thirty-four-year-old
reality, shut in behind her window, looking out and worrying about
becoming an eccentric spinster, that stereotyped butt of cruel laughter.
In Rachel’s Manawaka, “proper appearances” are strictly defined and do
not include any hint of strangeness. She thinks in a brooding way, “Not
only teachers, of course, women who haven’t married. Widows can
become extremely odd as well, but at least they have the excuse of grief”
(8).

In *The Stone Angel* Hagar’s voice moves away from her own
problems through time, first compelling and then, as the book goes on,
holding our sympathy, our interest, and our respect. As she experiences
the happenings of her life, Rachel’s voice is constantly engaged in sifting,
analyzing, and questioning them. George Bowering in his essay on *A Jest*
of God examines Margaret Laurence’s techniques of language as follows:

“What happens happens in the writing, not in front of it. One sees through the eye not with it. Mrs. Laurence is not talking about life; she is trying to re-enact the responses to it.”2

Rachel and her mother live in a claustrophobic flat underneath which is the undertaking establishment. She feels a mixture of resentment and envy towards her sister Stacey, married with four children, living in Vancouver. There was not enough money after her father’s death for Rachel to finish University. Fourteen years ago, she came to Manawaka to teach and to support her mother. At this crisis-point in her life, she cannot find any dignity at all, either in what she has done or in what she is doing.

Her Principal, Willard Siddley, seems a sadist to her. All her students are unique to her which sentiment Willard would endorse. At the same time she is sickened because of her frustrated maternism shown towards James Doherty, one of her pupils. Willard is a strict disciplinarian. He always looks for occasions to strap the boys. Rachel has a repulsive feeling towards him. Once she is told by Willard to send James to his room for James has tripped Gil Maitland, his classmate, and made him go on his knees in the gravel. Tripping is prohibited. But Willard does not know the truth that Gil jumped off the teeter totter the previous day purposely when James was at the top end, and the plank crashed down and James was hurt, which Rachel alone knows.
Willard is informed by his wife Angela that James was seen on the banks of Wachakwa thrice. So he wants to punish James for absenting himself from school. Rachel tells that James has been suffering from tonsillitis and that his mother gave him notes to excuse his absence. Though Rachel has maternal love towards James, she cannot stop Willard from strapping James. She sends him to Willard's chamber and as he returns, she thinks that "his face look like bone, his eyes staring my betrayal at me, then I want only to go to Willard and tell him to listen, just to listen. I am not neutral-I am not detached-I know it. But neither are you, and you do not know it" (31-32). She is afraid of losing the job and she thinks of leaving the school.

The fact that she teaches, that she manages to get through each day and worse still, each tormented night and on to the next, that she does manage to support, pamper, and even feel some indulgence for her mother—all of these factors mean nothing to her. But the reader sees them. What Rachel is actually doing plays its counterpoint—limited in range, but necessary to the novel's success—to what she thinks are her total failures. More than anything else, she fears being thought eccentric, queer, and foolish, by her present pupils or the ones she used to teach, by any one at almost of all by herself, though she constantly beats herself with burning ridicule. She refers to herself as some grotesque being: "that giant She" (7), "a stroke of a white chalk" (35), "gaunt metal or gaunt bird" (121). The isolation from which she suffers so much is, in
part at least, self—induced; there have been hands stretched out to her, but through fear, or snobbery, or insecurity, she has pushed Lennox and Calla away:

When I first came back to Manawaka, Lennox Cates used to ask me out, and I went, but when he started asking me out twice a week, I stopped seeing him before it went any further. We didn't have enough in common, I thought, meaning I couldn't visualize myself as the wife of a farmer, a man who'd never even finished High School. He married not long afterwards. I’ve taught three of his children. All nice-looking kids, fair-haired like Lennox, and all bright. Well. (37)

Calla Mackie is her colleague. Rachel feels that she looks quite smart in comparison with Calla whereas Calla has no dress sense at all. Calla also offers friendship, but Rachel avoids social gatherings. She is embarrassed by Calla's indifferentness by her uninhibited sloppiness, and most of all by the fundamentalism of her Pentecostal religion. When Rachel goes with Calla to the “Tabernacle of the Risen and Reborn” (35), to her absolute self—degradation she is seized with hysteria and begins to moan and babble as if speaking with tongues. Back at Calla’s apartment, she suffers more shock and revulsion when
Calla kisses her. When Calla's affection is revealed as a lover's, not a friend's, she flies from there.

_A Jest of God_ moves Manawaka generations forward in time from Jason Currie and some such people, the tough and "God fearing" Scots. Rachel is a descendant of the Scots and Nick Kazlik, her former schoolmate, is a descendant of Ukrainians and comes into the area a little later:

Half the town is Scots descent and the other half is Ukrainian. Oil, as they say, and water. Both came for the same reasons, because they had nothing where they were before. That was a long way away and a long time ago. The Ukrainians knew how to be the better grain farmers, but the Scots knew how to be almightier than anyone but God. (71)

In the dreary summer holidays Rachel meets Nick Kazlick, who teaches in Winnipeg, and who has come back to his father's farm outside Manawaka for the summer. Her physical need for love outweighs all her crowding doubts and fears. When Nick asks her out, she goes; when he kisses her, she responds; when he makes love to her she is ready, strong enough in her own desire to trample down all the crowding fears, though miserably shamed by the awkwardness of her virginity. Their love affair runs its course throughout the summer.
One day Nick takes Rachel out for a ride. He takes her down around the Wachakwa River where he used to come with his twin brother Stefan Kazlik, who died eighteen years ago. Rachel feels sorry and asks him whether he feels lonely. Nick replies, "That's what I wouldn't care for," "Even with Steve and myself, people used to group us together, although we were quite different. He never seemed to mind. He just laughed it off. But I hated it." And he adds, "I wanted to be completely on my own. And then it happened that way" (90). Thus Rachel's quest for freedom begins with her affair with Nick and she desires such independence for herself.

As their conversation continues, Rachel says that she envies the Ukrainian kids for their freedom. Further she says,

I don't know how to express it. Not so boxed-in, may be. More outspoken. More able to speak out. More allowed to-both by your family and by your self. Something like that. Perhaps I only imagined it. You always think things are easier somewhere else...in winter on your dad's sleigh, and I remember the great bellowing voice he had, and how emotional he uses to get-cursing at the horses, or else almost crooning to them. In my family, you didn't get emotional. It was frowned upon. (94)
Here one can find Rachel gaining strength to voice out her inner feelings in solid words. We never find her voicing her actual thoughts so far. Earlier, when she wanted to say something she was unable to speak out with fear of being thought eccentric or fastidious. Now she has come out of the sphere of her fear and she wants to say, “I don’t care, I don’t care about anything, except this peace, this pride, holding him” (98). When she reaches home, she thinks, “Right now, I’m fantastically happy. He did want me. And I wasn’t afraid. I think that when he is with me, I don’t feel any fear. Or hardly any. Soon I won’t feel any at all” (100). Rachel gains courage to deceive her mother and discovers that she can be ruthless in opposition to her when the issue is something she wants and needs as badly as her hours with Nick.

One day Nick asks Rachel to his house when his parents are away. This newfound ruthlessness exhilarates her. She will not turn back. She goes out to Nick’s place. There she is unable to express her doubt that she is due. Then Nick asks her,

“What’s the matter, Rachel?”

“Nothing. Nothing’s the matter. I feel better, actually, here in this place”

“How – better?”

“Safer.”

He laughs. “Because of its four walls and a roof?”

“You think that’s foolish, don’t you?”
“Yeh, may be. But women don’t.”

Women. I’m not the only one, then, who feels that way. Nick goes to the window and opens the curtain. (109)

Nick suggests what he may want to do with Rachel, when on entering his parents’ house with her, he goes to the window and opens the curtains, to let the sun in. Rachel’s home is surrounded by the ancestor’s trees to protect it from eyes outside. When Nick enters her body, she curiously thinks of herself in language that might speak of a house: “...the knowledge that he will somehow inhibit me, be present in me, for a few days more—this, crazily, gives me warmth, against all reason” (110). It is also language that describes a disease, the disease that Rachel is filled with when she imagines her body and her self occupied by foetus or tumour, or the eccentricities of advancing age and the town’s influence. Rachel has her own fears regarding talking. She can not think of anything to say whereas Nick talks “so easily when he wants, yet he does not seem bothered by silences. I am the opposite” (111).

Rachel, who is lost in the thoughts of Nick, reaches Calla’s house. There she continues her talking with Nick and says, “I’m not afraid when I am with him, but when I’m not with him, it seems to return” (137). Calla reveals to Rachel that she is given the gift of speaking in tongues: “It was peace. Like some very gentle falling of rain” (142). Rachel talks to
Nick and says that she feels she is completely known to him and then remembers she has only talked to him like that when she is alone. Nick's father is becoming old and he calls Nick Steve three times. He wants him with him in Winnipeg.

Finally, in a burst of self-confidence that follows her first experience of physical release in love, Rachel voices her need for a child, his child:

If one speaks from faith, not logic, how does that turn out?

I do not know, except that I am so strong in it, so assured, that it cannot possibly go wrong.

"Nick -"

"Mm?"

"If I had a child, I would like it to be yours."

This seems so unforced that I feel he must see it the way I do. And so restrained, as well, when I might have torn at him- *Give me my children.*

His flesh, his skin, his bones, his blood—all are still connected with mine, but now suddenly not. Not a muscular withdrawal. Something different, something unsuspected.

His face turns away from mine: He puts
his mouth momentarily on my shoulder. Then, still not looking at me, he brushes a hand across my forehead.

"Darling," he says, "I am not God. I can’t solve anything." (154)

Nick pulls out his wallet and extracts a photograph of a six year-old boy and Rachel asks "yours?" and he replies, "Yes." Rachel does not hear from him again. As summer ends and school begins, she has that loss to bear and the terrible fear and just as terrible hope of pregnancy besides. But she cannot go to the doctor. He will ask about the things that are none of his concern: "Have you told the man, Rachel? Would he be willing to marry you?" (178). Immediately she thinks of her mother’s heart. She may get another attack. Similarly she can not go away with any explanation. She thinks of various possible ways, but she can not find any true solution. The very next moment she wonders whether it is a girl or a son. She imagines things like anesthetics may sometimes damage the child; he has black hair and his eyes are slightly slanted like Nick’s. So she is not going to lose it. She wants to talk to someone. Nick is not there. So she goes to Calla for help. Calla helps her and assures her that “Everything’s going to be all right” (181): Rachel can have her child. Her mother can be looked after by a housekeeper and finances can be managed.
Dr. Raven examines her and says that there is a tumour, and she may have to consult a specialist in Winnipeg. Then Rachel remarks, "All that. And this is at the end of it. I was always afraid that I might become a fool. Yet I could almost smile with some grotesque lightheadedness at that fool of a fear, that poor fear of fools, now that I really am one" (188). Under anesthetic, she mumbles, "I am the mother now" (191).

When Rachel is discharged like a freed prisoner, she travels back to Manawaka. Later she goes to Nick's house and enquires after Nick and his family. Nick's mother informs her that Nick is never married yet. Then she remembers the photograph. She understands that it's Nick's childhood photograph, which he intended her to misunderstand. Thus the secret of Nick's photograph is not disclosed till the end of the novel. However, Rachel forgives Nick and says, "He had his own demons and webs. Mine brushed across him for an instant, and he saw them and had to draw away, knowing that what I wanted from him was too much" (197).

Rachel decides to leave Manawaka and take up a teaching position in Vancouver. She decides, "Nothing must disturb be" (192). Her mother pampers her for a week, gets a stroke and her mouth goes dark. Dr. Raven treats her and she is back to normalcy. Rachel realizes, "I'm not responsible for keeping her alive. There is, suddenly, some enormous relief in this realization"(202). Later she takes leave from Willard, Calla and Hector Jonas.
The present and the past, the questionings and the fantasies of Rachel are all woven together and their strands join in the aftermath of her affair with Nick. As Hagar in The Stone Angel was on one level, Biblically symbolic of the proud and usurping handmaiden of Abraham and the mother of Ishmael, so Rachel is also symbolically Biblical in her mourning for her children, the children she has never had.

Nick is real to Rachel as a lover, and yet she needs him more urgently as a father for her children than as a lover. After ten days Rachel comes to know that Nick has left for Winnipeg a week ago. She cannot understand the depth of his own problem as the son of a Ukrainian immigrant and as the child who cannot do for his parents what Steve, his dead brother, would have done. Steve would have preserved the land that his father, Nestor Kazlik loved and would have given himself to it; Nick cannot. He understands Rachel better than she understands him. When he says, “I am not God. I cannot solve anything” (154), we know the depth of his meaning, but Rachel still has to learn it, painfully. She does not lose Nick because she never had him in any committed sense, and she does not bear his child as she hoped and feared she would do.

Nick helps Rachel a great deal in that he enables her to reach out, hold and touch another human being, which is what the sexual experience means for her. It is reaching out to another person and making herself vulnerable, as Rachel is able to do ultimately, with Nick,
which leads her to be able to some limited extent to liberate herself. Nick’s hasty retreat is integral to the quest theme in the novel, as with him around, Rachel would merely have transferred her dependence from her mother to him.

Rachel’s real salvation is that she is not a tragic figure, not the character in a drama that she sometimes makes of herself, but just an ordinary human being. In her despair at her possible pregnancy, when the time comes to make the final grand gesture, to take whiskey and the sleeping pills and throw it away, she does not and cannot defy and reject life. She adapts to its blows and its demands. And at that point in her ordeal, she makes a concession that is comparable to Hagar’s (in *The Stone Angel*) concession of error, as she finds herself on her knees. Rachel has a final humiliation to undergo: her desperate struggle between acceptance and rejection of the child-to-be is all brought to ant—climax. The growth within her is not life but a kind of random nothingness, a benign tumor:

All that. And this is the end of it. I always afraid that I might become a fool. Yet I could almost smile with some grotesque Light headedness at that fool of a fear, that poor fear of fools, now that I really am one. (188)

Through the torture of her struggle, however, and the reality of her operation, Rachel does learn to accept and to live with her limitations
and life’s. “I am the mother now” (191), the words murmured under anesthetic, become real to her. They are her key to a degree of freedom and an acceptance of herself as she is no tragic heroine, but an ordinary foolish mortal. As Nick could not be God for her, so she cannot and must not be God for her mother.

Rachel’s choices are human and humanly limited, but she does have choices and she makes one of them the decision to move. She is no longer afraid to leave Manawaka, for she is no longer dependent on her fear of the town for a kind of tortured security of identity. She is free of the geographical place, Manawaka, while still knowing and accepting that in the deepest sense the town will be with her forever, both its strengths and its constraints. These she will always carry within her to deal with. She applies for and is accepted by a school in Vancouver and against all her mother’s tears and threats she moves there, taking “her elderly child” with her:

We watched until the lights of the town could not seen any longer. Now only the farm kitchens and the stars are out there to signpost the night.
The bus flies along smooth and confident as a great owl through the darkness, and all the passengers are quiet, some of them sleeping. Beside me sleeps my elderly child. Where I’m going, anything may happen. Nothing may
happen. May be I will marry a middle-aged widower, or a longshoreman, or a cattle-hoof trimmer, or a barrister or .....a thief. And have my children in time. Or may be not. Most of the chances are against it. But not, I think, quite all. What will happen. It may be that my children will always be temporary, never to be held. But so are everyone's. (208-209)

The finding of decision and spirit, the affirming of the future, is in Rachel's context a great victory. And the moment of recognition that "I am the mother now" is more than Rachel's, it is everyone's and it is one of the saddest and strongest moments that life holds. Margaret Laurence prepares us for this moment in Rachel's life throughout the novel, and specifically on two previous occasions when Rachel mistakenly or confusedly referred to her mother as her child. Moreover, *A Jest of God* makes a great affirmation of life and living, happening in the midst of and in spite of terrible muddle, anxiety, and confusion. Rachel does not grandly go mad or tragically die like those who would break life to their wills. She bends to life's blows, as most mortals have done before her, and life plays its amazing, everlasting trick once again for her, bringing vitality and at least some hope out of defeat.

Thematically *A Jest of God* is important and convincing in its dignity. In *The Stone Angel*, a Christian pattern is discernible, enclosing
Hagar's story as culminating in the symbolic water, the gift of grace. But the resolution of Rachel's story comes existentially, out of her life's present confusion. Here, Margaret Laurence does not call upon any supportive, doctrinal pattern; she works only with and through what meaning might reasonably be expected to come from Rachel's own muddle. On its own terms the book is, however, yet another variation of a religious quest. Repeatedly Rachel says, "If I believed," and her moment of release is a prayer to a God whose existence is completely in doubt:

If you have spoken, I am not aware of having heard. If you have a voice, it is not comprehensible to me. No omens. No burning bush, no pillar of sand by day or pillar of flame by night. (177)

That cry from her wilderness is no less a cry of Rachel's blind struggle for faith, just because she does not know the direction in which to send it and does not dare to dream or dare to hope that her cry will be heard. Her solitary quest for meaning, reassurance, faith, God is contrasted and counter-pointed throughout the novel, first by the seemingly empty formality of her mother's brand of Presbyterianism and then by Calla's Pentecostal enthusiasm. In her mother's church the figure of Christ at the front is like a "effeminate insurance salesman" (47). In Calla's Tabernacle the two pictures of Jesus are "bearded and bleeding, his heart exposed and bristling with thorns like a scarlet pincushion" (36).
Rachel rejects both ways of worship, but she is herself a child of the Presbyterians and she is particularly ashamed and revolted by Calla's uninhibited worship. She is appalled and sickened by disgrace when she herself is seized with hysterical utterance:

*That voice!*

Chattering, crying, ululating, the forbidden transformed A cryptically to nonsense, Dragged from the crypt, stolen and shouted, the shuddering of it, the fear, the breaking, the release, the grieving. Not Calla's voice, Mine. Oh my God, Mine. The voice of Rachel. (42-43)

Much later Calla herself is finally granted the gift of tongues and she tells Rachel that to her, "It was peace. Like some very gentle falling of rain" (142). Calla is the friend to whom Rachel goes for help and Rachel is finally humbled by her generosity: "Maybe she'll pray for me, and maybe, even, I could do with that. But she hasn't said so, and she won't, and that is an act of great tact and restraint on her part" (182).

In *The Stone Angel*, the Old Testament figure of Hagar in the wilderness is brought forward to the New Testament; the resolution of her story is offered us in New Testament terms. In *A Jest of God* the Old Testament figure of Rachel mourning for her children is left finally and resolutely in the Old Testament's framework, to show forth whatever meaning is possible in its terms alone. Rachel moves, like her Biblical
ancestress, through monstrous darkness. Hagar is at first grotesque, but she has savored life; in fact she has been greedy for all its experiences and sensations. Rachel sees both herself and life as grotesque; she is afraid of her own instincts, and all the life that she can see is distorted, chaotic terrifying, an enormity of injustice.

Finally, there is a flow of light in her darkness; not much light, but enough to show her where her path lies ahead. Rachel sees that she expected justice, without being able to give it; she was looking for an Old Testament's patriarch god, a father—figure who would direct and protect her, and she was also looking for the New Testament's Christ who would redeem her and quite literally, make her new. She moves finally to recognition that she must and she will rely on whatever strength she can find within herself. "God's pity on God" (209) — for only God is entirely alone. This is the final almost light-hearted up-beat of the novel. Rachel has her "elderly child" with her and she has ranged herself with the life-affirming among the community of mankind.

In A Jest of God because everything comes through Rachel's consciousness and because her mind is so completely, believably, neurotically obsessed, she cannot really see the world around her or the people in it, particularly her mother and Nick, the ones who are close to her. Much of the time these two are almost stereotypes of the selfish mother and the casual seducer and, of course, this is essentially how Rachel sees them as she hugs her feelings of inadequacy and injury.
From Nick she gets many clues about complexity of his own problem; his responses to his father and mother, his Ukrainian background, and his need to be himself, not his father's confused image of his dead twin, Steve. But no more than a superficial understanding of Nick can penetrate Rachel's self-absorption and her doomed feeling that their relationship could not possibly become permanent. Finally, we understand that Nick has his own fears and doubts about Manawaka. The snapshot he shows her, which she thinks is of his son but is really of him, remains as much a mystery to us as to Rachel.

Rachel's voice, in the present tense, almost hysterical and yet propelling the reader compulsively onward, is the remarkable achievement of *A Jest of God*. The voice is as taut as elastic stretched to snapping point, but within its narrow range there is still great variation and density of effect. Though Rachel thinks of herself as dry and empty, her world is not. It is as teeming with objects and sensations as Hagar's and therefore compelling to the reader. In particular, Rachel's words are laced together by a lavish use of nature-imagery in similes and metaphors which add their extra and sensual dimensions to the text. Bird imagery is especially constant. Rachel sees herself "rising gawkily, like a tame goose trying to fly" (136), or "an ostrich walking with extreme care through some formal garden." She describes Calla as "looking like a wind-disheveled owl, a great horned owl, her fringed hair like grey-brown feathers every which way" (32). There are scores of others: "sour as a
“crabapple” (95), “thin as a thigh-bone” “like a stroke of white chalk” (35), “crane of a body, gaunt metal of gaunt bird” (121), “like a dried autumn flower stalk, “an empty eggshell skull”(192). Most of these images refer to Rachel herself, combining the pathetic and the absurd in their effects, but all of them extend the range of Rachel’s voice and increase the variety of its effects.

Margaret Laurence recalls trying to write this novel in the third person:

Everything about those first drafts of the first pages was wrong. They were too stilted; the character of Rachel would not reveal herself. So finally I gave up and stopped struggling. I began to write the novel as I must have very intensely wanted to write it— in the first person, through Rachel’s eyes. I knew that this meant the focus of the book was narrow—but so was Rachel’s life. I knew I had to be very careful, for Rachel is a potential hysterical who does not for quite a while realize this about herself, but the prose must not be hysterical or it would lose its ability to convey her. I knew that the other characters, viewed only
by Rachel, might not emerge as clearly as I wanted them to.\(^3\)

In process of writing a novel, Margaret Laurence's identification with her characters is so close that to her they are real persons, feeling, acting-and speaking. This empathy, which is a kind of possession of author by characters, is of course, the source of Rachel's energy, her convincing life. "Rachel," Margaret Laurence says, was self-perceptive, indeed, a compulsive pulse taker":

She saw things about herself which Hagar did not see about herself, Although Rachel tended to exaggerate vastly her own inadequacies and shortcomings. I hoped that this exaggeration would be plain, not only through Rachel's own obviously loaded assessments of herself, but through Nick's reaction to her. To Nick, Rachel does not at first seem anything except a fairly attractive and intelligent woman, and it is only when Rachel reveals her deep uncertainties to him That he perceives how desperate is her need and how little he can fulfill it. No one could fulfill it—she needs too much...

The present tense of the novel naturally presented problems in terms of the narrative con
tinuation—getting from point A to point B, as it were, and I think here are places in the novel where this becomes a serious flaw. On the other hand, I felt that the present tense was essential in order to convey a sense of immediacy, of everything happening right that moment, and I felt that this sense of immediacy was necessary in order to get across the quality of Rachel’s pain and her determined efforts to survive.  

Rachel’s tormented mind and heart and her alienation from herself and those around her is revealed to us through the organic form of the novel. Rachel, like Hamlet, is an introvert who does not reveal much by way of speech. Interior monologues are, therefore, as essential to the novel as are the soliloquies in the play. Rachel is an unreliable narrator. Her judgments are neurotic and unreliable. The first person present tense form helps us experience Rachel’s pain as we journey with her from her existence limbo into life. The present tense conveys a “sense of immediacy, of everything happening right that moment.” Commending this quality, John Braddock in his review of the novel says, “I was conscious at the end of the book that I had not read about Rachel Cameron but experienced her.” George Bowering likewise feels that Rachel’s unsureness and confusion emerge so vividly through the form chosen by Laurence that we find ourselves “wanting to talk to Rachel.”
He applauds the success of "the present tense and the interior, confused, first person narrative" and Laurence's attempt at "a responsive vocal style." Laurence's, coming to terms with the fears and inhibitions of her past, enables her to break the chains which have bound her for long. Coming to terms with her past, enables her to prepare herself for the present in a better way as well as to plan her future. Though the beginning of her affair with Nick Kazlik itself serves as an initiation to her realization, the specific movement occurs when she is in the hospital undergoing surgery for a benign tumor. Under anesthesia she voices out: "I am the mother now" (191). This cry assumes significance because she has finally come to terms with herself, her surroundings and her relationships. To put in Margaret Laurence's words, "She is beginning to learn the rules of survival." John Moss sums up Rachel's self-realization in succinct terms: When Rachel discovers that the growth inside her is not Nick's child she is carrying but a tumour, the transience of their affair is confirmed. It is a cruel joke that even this growth is benign, but one that shocks Rachel into capitulation to a more complete or integrated self than her rigid adherence to fragmenting roles had al-
lowed. Rachel gets body and mind together, as it were, and accepts herself as a whole person.\textsuperscript{12}

Considering her earlier conflict between her mental fantasies and her outward appearance and behaviour, Rachel has come a long way in uniting her inner and outer selves.

There are other factors which aid Rachel's awareness. One is the late night visit to Hector's funeral parlour. Through this visit, Rachel does away with the Manawaka taboo against confronting death directly. Commenting on the central role played by the consciousness of death in \textit{A Jest of God}, C.M. McLay makes some interesting remarks:

While human relationships are an attempt to counter isolation, death is recognition of it... In Laurence, however, death... accentuates our consciousness of an isolation, which already exists. It is only in facing death that we are able to assess life, and to recognize our own isolation.\textsuperscript{13}

Also, Calla's timely help enables Rachel to have a healthy friendship with her. Further, Rachel stops worrying about the fleeting relationships she will have with her pupils. Rachel's rejection of Calla's Tabernacle and her mother's Church culminates in her words: Bless me or not god, for I'll not beg. This shows how far she has progressed and the final sentence of the novel "God's mercy on reluctant jesters. God's grace on fools. God's pity on God" (209) is an indication of this. Patricia Morley points out the
circular structure of this sentence and how it identifies “God with mankind as Divine Fool.” Mercy, grace, and pity become the basic criteria of relationships. According to Morley, “this is the culmination of an intricate pattern on the folly of fear and fear of folly. Wrestling with it, Rachel is ready to smile at “that fool of a fear, that poor fear of fools” (188).

Citing Rachel’s final stance as the proof of “Laurence’s concern with the human condition,” Sandra Djwa suggests the possible Existentialist parallels in that Rachel is made to “choose between nausea of bad faith and the anguish and despair of freedom” as also in her focus on the “process of becoming.” The culminating point of her realization comes when Rachel understands and accepts the restrictions within which Nick is operating. She even forgives him for his deception with the photograph: “He had his own demons and webs. Mine brushed across him for an instant, and he saw them and had to draw away, knowing what I wanted from him was too much” (197).

Viewed from the present, Rachel’s future holds out bright prospects. Above everything else, she takes charge of her life and plans her moves and takes decisions personally. Though this is nothing extraordinary, the fact that it comes from Rachel marks her triumph. The first among these is her decision to take up a job in Vancouver and thus move out of Manawaka. Rachel finally breaks free of her mother’s domination over her. To her mother’s plea against the move when she
cites her poor health, Rachel replies, “It isn’t up to me. It never was. I can take care, but only some. I am not responsible for keeping her alive. There is, suddenly, some emotional relief in this realization” (202).

She literally mothers her mother when the latter fervently, even childishly, appeals against the move. In an article entitled “Politics and A Jest Of God,” Kenneth Hughes brings in an interesting analogy between Rachel’s relationship with her mother and that of the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer, say, Canada and Britain. Mrs. Cameron becomes the imperial power whereas Rachel is symbolic of “a Canada seeking to free itself from an authoritarian colonial past and to make its own future.” Rachel’s tumor represents the colonial past and its authoritarian values, while its removal suggests freedom from the colonial state of mind. This novel can be seen as a socio-political allegory of the colonial situation. Rachel’s quest, like Hagar’s is a search for freedom and joy. She wins a partial release from fear, a new understanding of her relation to her mother, and an acceptance of the mystery of human personality.

Rachel also re-works her relationship with Willard. She is clear about her thought. She now sees that her fear of him was totally baseless and unnecessary. Regarding her future, Rachel herself is realistic and does not fantasize. She keeps her options open. She may marry “a middle aged widower, or a longshoreman, or a cattle-hoof-trimmer, or a barrister or a thief” (208). She may or may not have children. Light-heartedly, she
pictures herself as an old spinster wearing outlandish costumes that Stacey’s children will call Aunt.

There are three obvious Biblical references in the novel. First, is Rachel’s fear of losing pupils, her “children” as she refers to them. This has its parallel in the mourning of the Biblical Rachel of her unborn dead children. Sandra Djwa’s reading of this particular Biblical reference is perceptive in that it points to the possibility of interpreting *A Jest of God* as “a socio-religious allegory.”17 In Genesis this is a lament by a barren wife; in the allegory of Rachel in Jeremiah it is a lament by the Israelites who have fallen away from the fruits of the spirit into the worship of false gods; both concepts are contained in Laurence’s presentation of Rachel’s character(47). Second is the reference of St. Paul: “If any man among you thinketh himself to be wise, let him become a fool, that he may be wise” (141). This dictum is central to the novel. Behind such a statement lies the paradox central to Christianity. Third, is the reference to Jonah in the Sandburg epigraph to the novel:

*If I should pass the tomb of Jonah*

*I would stop there and sit for awhile;*

*Because I was swallowed onetime deep in the dark*

*And came out alive after all (5).*

Rachel has to make the journey into her own self and there confront her repressed side just as Jonah was destined to spend time in the stomach of the whale. Rachel’s crisis is comparable to that of the
alienation and isolation experienced by any human being. She copes with the difficulties and grows stronger in the process. As Patricia Morley rightly sums up in her book *Margaret Laurence:* “Rachel escapes not *from* society, like some Canadian Huck Finn, but *into* more dynamic forms of community life.” 18

Rachel’s indexing of the self in *A Jest of God* is analogous to the spiritual quest pattern outlined by Carol Christ, a feminist theologian, who describes a period of awakening followed by a descent in and ascent in imitation of Demeter-Persephone myth.19 An increased awareness of the mother-daughter relationships manifests in this kind of female journey. In *A Jest of God* Rachel undertakes a journey on her own. The novel grapples with issues like pregnancy and mortality; confrontations with issues like motherhood, sufferance, fate, generational conflict, social withdrawal, themes of birth all are explored, examined and comprehended from women’s perspective. Atwood’s comment highlights the preoccupations of *A Jest of God:*

*A Jest of God* is structured almost entirely around children and the flow of time and emotion in and around them: and thus around mothers and mothering, fathers and fathering, and the relationships, often interchangeable, between those who mother and are mothered
Nick Kazlik and Calla prompt Rachel to embark upon a journey. Rachel's relationship with Nick Kazlik is of utmost importance as it paves way for comprehending herself. The character of Rachel can also be approached and appreciated in a better way through this relationship. Rachel's affair with Nick is not a deep emotional attachment but a last resort to save her self from the "shame" of eternal spinsterhood. Rachel comments, "Nick doesn't know how—he doesn't know how I've wanted to lose that reputation, to divest myself of it as though it were an open yoke, to burn it to ashes and scatter them to the wind" (98).

In fact, it is Nick Kazlik who provides Rachel with a "neutral space" in her world of conscience and material world. Incidentally, Rachel's conscience is characterized by dualism—her mother's world which provides her with a refuge when confronted with the eternal world and the constructs, perpetrations of an androcentric world which perpetually torment and disturb Rachel with the distorted images of herself. Nick enables her to comprehend the fact that everyone has his or her "own demons and webs" (197). From this acquired position, Rachel subverts the binary opposition, privileges the womb over the phallus. Rachel's supposed pregnancy is a material signifier of this Freudian change: "In the development of Oedipus complex in women, the wish for a penis is replaced by a wish for a baby." When Nick deserts Rachel, she realizes...
that she is alone: “There isn’t anyone, I am on my own” (171). Hence her attention shifts from the phallic lack to the “supposed child” in her womb: “look it’s my child, mine and so I’ll have it. I’ll have because I want it and because I cannot do anything else” (177). Interestingly, Rachel’s “imagined pregnancy” is a neurosis turned into a somatic disorder in the form of a tumour, the resultant factor of a marginalized woman’s attempt at fashioning her universe where she shall be the mistress in an “ill conceived” notion, which is in fact, fatuous and futile in the context. The episode of Rachel’s pregnancy leaves us with a distinctly bitter taste, illustrating very forcefully indeed the strength of androcentric ideals of motherhood, as Rich cogently puts it: “Motherhood is ‘sacred’ so long as its offspring are ‘legitimate’-That is as long as the child bears the name of a father who legally controls the mother.”22 One must note the fact that when Rachel comes to realize that the “supposed child” is a “tumour,” she laughs. Through such a “jest” where the tumour is malignant and harmful to an individual, mothering becomes carcinogenic to a woman. Rachel’s pseudo pregnancy also contributes in comprehending the grim realities of both life and her own body, the female body. Atwood makes an interesting observation in this connection: “Rachel’s false pregnancy is an ambiguous indication of the lesson she comes to learn: how to be a mother, to herself first of all, since true mothering has been denied her.”23
One of the lovely things about this novel is the gradualness of change. It is not that Rachel realizes steadily her early weakness and confusion but her thirty-five-year-old character traits are still there at the end of the novel. They are just not so bad now. They are accompanied by the later knowledge and experience that alternate with them in her mind, and modify them to some extent. For instance, when Rachel goes to the Parthenon Café, to think about her pregnancy, her tired mind talks to Nick. At first she wants him to be there so that she can see him and speak with him, not asking to touch him. After she has faced herself in the middle of the crisis, thinking of abortion, she admits that she could forgo speaking with him if she could hold him and lie down beside him (186). Touch is the first thing she wants now. She manages to go again to Calla, to touch her with an admission of her trouble, to establish greater intimacy than they have ever known. At the same time, Rachel decides to shake her mother's formerly awful control: "My mother's tricky heart will just have to take its own chances" (183). There is confiding and confidence, outside and inside.

An interesting aspect of Calla is, not being a mother she exhibits maternal instincts: "I've looked after many a kid before" (182). Moreover, Calla's qualities of nurturing can be seen in her addressing Rachel as "child" and nursing her after her operation. Through Calla, Rachel comes to realize that one need not be a "biological mother" in order to be addressed as "mother" but can be a "universal mother" by nurturing.
others like Mother Teresa. Since Calla associates herself with the Tabernacle, whose submission to desire is viewed as deviance by the societal constructs, Rachel views Calla as a "crank" initially. But as her association with Calla progresses, Rachel realizes that Calla's love and faith, which society mocks at, are true. She reverses it since she envisions wisdom and strength underlying Calla's eccentric appearance and mien. The fear which Rachel possesses, that of blurting out her affair with Nick under anesthetic effect, is freed by Calla's care. It is, supposedly, liberation of the unconscious and so frees her emotions. By the time they bid adieu to each other, Rachel acknowledges that Calla loves her and overcomes her aversion to speak of that love with understanding:

"you must have thought I was a fool. As, of course, I was"

"Yes, I suppose so, but heavens, child that's the least of your worries."

This really so. It's the least of my worries. What is so terrible about fools? I should be honoured to be of that company."(205)

Rachel views that a spinster's unhappiness is due to an asexual life led by her and believes that sex would solve all her problems. She is left with acute self-consciousness, a fractured self and feeling of inadequacy intensified. But she does not succumb. Interestingly, it is the
sexual act which liberates Rachel consenting voluntarily to have premarital sex. The antithetical approach of Rachel towards sexual intercourse, that yearning tantamounts to viewing the social texture of a sexist culture, an instance of impersonal mode of expression to deny the conventional view that a woman cannot live without a man.

Being a woman in a sexist culture and hence relegated to the margins, Rachel's life is conducted always under the shibboleth of "proper appearances." Her life is informed by a powerful need to have children since motherhood and mothering enables a woman to gain recognition in a gendered society. Being a woman, Rachel's movement is restricted only to key sectors—home, school and church, the variegated modes of repressive, sadistic, societal norms, which institutionalize the values of the dominant phallicratic world. Hence, Rachel's anger is directed at the differences in social roles which demarcate her from male. The prowess of societal constructs emerging victorious can be witnessed in her attitude towards pregnancy, which is contradictory, to accept or reject the child, a conflict between the Apollonian and Dionysian elements. The struggle Rachel endures due to her "imagined pregnancy" has a liberating effect, and corroborates Kathyn Allen Rabuzzi's concept of motherhood, the idea that women's search for autonomy is unique. Rabuzzi contends: "Mothering is a mystical experience because pregnant woman is both one and two persons simultaneously. The spiritual hero
can never have the dimensions of experience open to women and compensates for this by individuation and striving.”

In the novel, Rachel's interaction with the novel's secondary characters delineates her “marginal traits” quite markedly. Being marginalized as “second sex” in a sexist culture, Rachel suffers from inferior psychological frame of mind and depends on others for a sense of identity, well being, and happiness. She feels that others are in a position to comprehend and control the world while she is not able to do that. For instance, Rachel's interaction with Nick succinctly sums up her marginal traits. She observes, “I am not afraid when I am with him, but when I am not with him it seems to return” (137).

Love, a supposed panacea, “marginalizes” Rachel in relation to the other characters in the novel. The ‘jests’ of God comprise rejections of love: Calla’s for Rachel, Rachel’s for Stacey, Mr. Cameron’s for Rachel, Rachel’s for Nick, Rachel’s love for her “unborn” child, etc. Rachel is ushered to the “margins” and she is in a dilemma whether to accept the orthodox “God” as her fear of rejecting her mother whose ties with conventional religion are powerful. Neither an extreme form of maternal love nor Nick’s love brings her comfort. Nick, who is associated with Apollo and the Sun, desires to be aloof. “He is so apart” (91), says Rachel. She, on the other hand is compared to Eve and water who wants to be close to or attached always, longing for personal ties. Thus, the portrait of Rachel Cameron is almost an instance of a “middle aged spinster” on
the edge of hysteria. The effect of such a portrait would be, as Clara Thomas puts it, "like a long barely controlled scream." Rachel's "rites de Passage" seems to be complete with her outright rejection of Doctor Raven's role "as my father or judge" (184). The defiance, refutation of the townspeople, gossip about her visit to Winnipeg hospital tantamount to her new—born confidence in herself. The novel comes to a close on this note of indexing of the individual freedom and the assertion of the "persona":

I will walk by myself on the shore of the sea and look at the free Gulls flying. I will grow too orderly, plumping up the ChesterField cushions just so before I go to bed. I will rage in my insomnia like a prophetess. I will take care to remember a vitamin pill each morning with my breakfast. I will be afraid sometimes. I will feel lighthearted, sometimes light-headed. I may sing alone, even in the dark I will ask myself, if I am going mad. But if I die, I won't know it. (209)

Perhaps, the most exciting issue in A Jest of God is the "dual motif" used by Margaret Laurence. Nick Kazlik is literally a twin. The death of his brother Steve has damaged his position in the family; damaged his self-sufficiency and his self-image. Rachel Cameron's link with her sister Stacey is looser than twinship but this relationship, seen in conjunction
with Nick's, similarly suggests the power of an over-close sibling relationship. Nick's troubling twinship is echoed in the hurtful way Rachel contrasts herself, and is contrasted by her mother, with Stacey. Not only in their sibling situations are Rachel and Nick "twinned". As alien in town, trained teacher, grown-up child in strained relation with one parent, devoted to the other, bedevilled by remembered webs, "Nick is Rachel's double. And in this novel, double is trouble."²⁶

Laurence's focus on the twin motif reflects both the circumstances of her own life in the early 1960s and also a Zeitgeist. Much of mid-1960s thought seems to have been directed towards a speculation about double ness. An ambidextrous universe, a bi-hemispheric brain, a double helical structure of DNA, the fundamental genetical material—all these concepts were being popularized, generally discussed, and absorbed into contemporary lore in the 1960s.

Laurence successfully structured A Jest of God into a beautiful symmetry. Two contrasted stories dominate the novel: Rachel's desire to find freedom; and her fate to meet Nick. As one story winds down, the other winds upward. The two movements correspond in careful symmetry. Furthermore, as in the double-helical DNA²⁷ structure postulated by the scientists, these counter-coiled backbones are linked by elements which bond them and form their core.

The first plot begins with Rachel as a neurotically double being. She is obsessed with her own status, her image in the community, her
family position; yet she harbours an inner self, anarchic, exotic, and disorderly. Trained for a profession, but programmed to yearn for romance, longing for motherhood at the very moment when her own mother's demands show this relationship to be the forger of unbearable bonds, Rachel perfectly encapsulates the dilemma of women in her time, those troubling 1960s blending freedom with the lingering hierarchic tradition. During the days of feminism, Laurence offered a moving vision of the limits of liberation. Rachel faces a number of dilemmas. With James, her interest could bring her the traditional teacher's reward of fostering a bright young intelligence; but it brings her dangerously near a neurotic possessiveness, and also becomes the node of a professional battle against her school principal.

Through Calla's door she could move to mature companionship or to debilitating obsession. With Nick she is free to indulge in love or lust. Within her body life or death can grow. With her mother, she may be a traditional spinster daughter or truly responsible guardian. In these four cases, in spite of contemporary liberation, the choice between the two paths is not made by Rachel. James's mother aborts the friendship with the little boy; Calla suddenly produces tact and restraint; Nick leaves town; Dr Raven says 'Nevermore' to whatever Rachel's body was harbouring. In none of these situations does Rachel mature through choice. Yet she does change. She stops playing the child's game of "mother, may I?" and takes her on the bus. She gets out of town like the
Spanish dancers in the children's skipping song. She moves toward "the golden city" to join her sister Stacey, the "fire-dweller".

Rachel fears being out of control because she might then violate Manawaka constraints. Her fear is so intense that she feels death would ensue. Control is an important issue to her. It helps her stay within bounds. All this has been revealed through imagery. And it is to this imagery that one has to return in order to see the complex pattern of Rachel's maturity. What actually occurs is that Rachel metaphorically confronts her fear of death and as she comes to realize, albeit unconsciously, that she will not die, she begins to allow herself to experience powerlessness, lack of control, and even lack of restraint with far less fear. It is through this deceptively simple, yet psychologically sound, process that Rachel grows.

Rachel's first experience with death occurs when she decides to visit Hector Jonas. Rachel has never before visited Hector, nor has she ever had the desire to. It is nearly one o'clock in the morning, yet Rachel feels compelled to journey down the frightening stairs into the death-filled realms of the mortuary. Here Rachel symbolically begins her confrontation with her beloved, yet distant father and with her fear of death and rejection—both necessary confrontations for emotional growth. Here Rachel also begins to learn how to act on her own life. Troubled by self-doubt, anxiety and fear of pregnancy and independence, Rachel goes
to visit Hector Jonas. She fearfully allows herself to enter the forbidden mortuary, her father’s hide-out, the one from which he told her to run.

Rachel visits the funeral chapel. But now inexplicably she moves into it. And here she meets Hector who appears to be a “comic prophet,” a “dwarf-seer” (131). At his “high altar” (130), Hector reveals the truth. With his eyes owling down at Rachel, Hector speculates about Niall Cameron and the choices he made in his life. When Rachel says that her father drank because he was unhappy, Hector remarks that he sees it differently: “I bet he had the kind of life he wanted most” (131).

This speculation is significant because of the setting in which it occurs. Rachel has descended to the place of death and confronted its presence. She has found the mortuary hygienic and bright not unlike a hospital—totally antithetical to her fears. She has had a new vision. Now she has heard a prophet speak. And what he says, she hears: he had “the life he wanted most.” This idea is new to Rachel. Again she experiences a new vision. Her father actually chose the life he lived if he had wanted another, he would have chosen that and lived it. This simplicity is astounding to her and Rachel accepts. Moreover, she examines her own life and concludes that it too may be changed. Finally, she reinterprets her parents’ relationship. Perhaps it was her father who avoided the living rather than her mother who rejected the dead. Rachel re-sees she has a new vision of the past.
In Rachel's life critical moments are marked by allusions to twins. In an early scene on River street, Rachel comes across twins, Clare and Carol who look like two "Venusians...like twins from outer space" (18), and clearly call her into a first sharp consciousness of her own duality. For the first time she realizes that she is a double being, her external drabness belying her opulence. A linked use of the twin motif begins when Rachel's mother gossips about Cassie, the unmarried Stewart girl who had twins. The scene ends with Rachel administering a sleeping pill to her mother, who "sleeps like a baby" (64). Near the end of the novel, when Rachel faces her pregnancy, she thinks of Cassie, who has kept her twins "twice as reprehensible as one" (64) and is raising them with her mother's help. Rachel faces the certainty that no such help can be expected from her own mother. She moves toward a possible quietus, in the thought of taking an overdose of her mother's sleeping pills; but in the end—perhaps partly because of the memory of Cassie—she throws them away. Cassie's twins have helped Rachel actualize her dilemma and accept her lonely responsibility for the child she presumes she is carrying.

Nancy Bailey writes convincingly of Rachel's renewal in her journey toward individuation and strength. Rachel is still in a phase of desire, however, and her desires still include finding a husband: "a widower, or a longshoreman, or a cattle-hoof trimmer, or a barrister or a thief" (208).
As at the beginning of the novel, she is still looking at the world through a window.

Nick's thoughts about his twin brother Steve mark stages of development. When Rachel and Nick first drive together toward the river, Nick grudgingly admits his twinship but emphasizes his hatred of the joining, his desire to be completely on his own. Yet he has brought Rachel to a place shared once with his brother. On their first visit to the Kazlik's house, Nick discusses the way this home is connected with his dead brother, the brother who would have stayed, would have cared about his heritage. Rachel responds with recognition that Nick cannot force himself to be other than what he is. After his parents have returned to the house, Nick takes Rachel to “the green edge of a brown river”. For him, the crisis with his father has come; the old man is calling him ‘Steve’ now, in a move, as Nick sees it, to induce him to stay in Manawaka, by insisting on his identity with his twin. But that twin, for Nick, is a “dead man.” Steve Kazlik died of crippling polio; Nick has lived on, imperceptibly deformed. Rachel is partially deformed, psychologically, by her relationship with her sister Stacey. Stacey, unlike Steve Kazlik, is alive and strong.

Nick and Rachel both move out of town, out of unbearable situations, but they move in opposite directions. Nancy Bailey says, "Nick and Rachel are equally narcissistic, apparently equally unable to achieve the self-integration necessary for a truly free life.”29 Certainly this man and woman, equal in professional commitment, in strong sexuality and
in seriousness, are set inexorably against each other, in spite of their equality, or perhaps because of it. Here again Laurence reflects the Zeitgeist of the 1960s. Of all the polarities of the period, such as the radical setting of young against old, of have-nots against haves, of black against white, of dropouts against establishment, the sharpest and tensest of oppositions came between men and women. The militant feminists inculcated awareness of a long and subtle subordination. The message percolated that women must move away from dependence, through flight, self-discovery and female network. Women, emphasizing their equality with men in everything but opportunity, came to say, like Nick, "People used to group us together....I wanted to be completely on my own" (90).

A Jest of God carries its readers beyond the erotic moments. A liberated audience was being prepared to accept a new kind of final scene: climbing on a bus and getting out of town, rather than walking down a church aisle or setting. Similarly Rachel is also liberated and finds her freedom from chains. Rachel is the most neurasthenic, the most absorbing of Margaret Laurence's women characters.
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