CHAPTER V

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INTRODUCTION

While Margaret Laurence was writing novels, she was also producing a number of short stories that appeared in a variety of magazines including Chatelaine, Saturday Evening Post, and The Atlantic Advocate. Eight of these stories, were collected into one volume and published under the title A Bird the House. The eight stories that compose A Bird in the House reveal a society through its precocious product and critic. They trace Vanessa MacLeod’s growth to maturity, depicted as an understanding of herself and her heritage. The collection forms an unconventional novel, linked by character, setting, narrative, voice and structure. Vanessa is ten in the first three stories, and eleven or twelve in many others. In briefer incidents she is a small child, an older adolescent, or young adult.

A Bird in the House is an integral and necessary part of the pattern of the Manawaka works as they have evolved. The descriptions of ordinary peoples and ordinary things, street stores, houses, rooms in houses, and the everyday life of people in them, evoke the quality of life in Manawaka. They also make a unique contribution to Canadian literature in a particular Canadian time and place, under the deadening blows of the Depression and drought of the 30’s, and into the early years of the Second World War. Place and time have been appropriately evoked and the importance of the Depression has been emphasised.
The stories are unified by a steady progression in the type of suffering depicted. The first deals with social exclusion and loneliness; the second, with a past death and painfully aborted dreams. The birth of a baby boy, a new Roderick, effects a bitter-sweet mood. The third concerns Grandmother Connor’s death, the family’s grief, and Aunt Edna’s lost love. The death of Dr. MacLeod in the fourth story precipitates Vanessa’s loss of religious faith. The fifth, sixth and seventh stories relate individual suffering to massive social failures: economic breakdown, world war, poverty, class friction, and racial discrimination. Laurence shows a development in Vanessa’s ability to comprehend both human suffering and the limitations of her understanding in this regard.

By predicament as well as by place the people of *A Bird in the House* are united and ... the sense of alienation is crucial, though here it is not the transformation of a society so much as the failure of a society that sets the tone. Society, in general, having failed, the natural social units become important again, and families are willy-nilly reunited. Aunt Edna coming home from jobless Winnipeg, Dr. Macleod moving in with his widowed mother because his patients can no longer pay him in cash; the Depression removes the pioneer intensity of relationships within small and threatened groups and that intensity Laurence mordantly evokes. 3

As a feminist statement, *A Bird in the House* is subtle, never didactic. It shows three generations of women coping with inherited myths and changing conditions. Vanessa’s mother, who stood first in the province in high school graduation, was denied a college education. She and the indomitable Aunt Edna remain admirable models. ‘Escape’ for this generation usually meant marriage. In the last story, we see that Vanessa sets out for college and the city feeling less free than she had expected: higher education is no panacea. Laurence’s female protagonists continue to wrestle with difficulties in the battle that is life. When the book ends, we see that the real freeing is still in process. In order to bring out the concept of freedom, Laurence uses the bird imagery which I have discussed in a separate section entitled ‘Cages and Escapes.’
Laurence says that the stories were conceived from the beginning as a related group and that the net effect is "not unlike" a novel. She describes themes and events in the average novel as a series of wavy, interlocking, horizontal lines:

The short stories have flow lines which are different. They move very close together but parallel and in a vertical direction. Nevertheless, the relationship of time and the narrative voice can be seen just as plainly in the stories, as in a novel.

Laurence describes her handling of voice as follows:

The narrative voice is, of course, that of Vanessa herself, but an older Vanessa, herself grown up, remembering how it was when she was ten. This particular narrative device was a tricky one. What I tried to do was definitely not to tell the story as though it was being narrated by a child. This would have been impossible for me and also would have meant denying the story one of its dimensions, a time - dimension, the viewing from a distance of events which had happened in childhood. The narrative voice had to be that of an older Vanessa, but at the same time the narration had to be done in such a way that the ten year-old would be conveyed. The narrative voice therefore, had to speak as though from two points in time, simultaneously.

In the subsections to follow we shall see that Margaret Laurence has used the narrator to a number of clear advantages. For one thing, she has employed the device of the double perspective. The actor is telling these admittedly autobiographical short stories from the point of view of an adult who was once a child named Vanessa. By her...
complete control of the method, Margaret Laurence has avoided the usual dangers of this method — the danger of betraying the child's perspective by imposing judgments and thereby rewriting history and the danger of betraying the present by nostalgia — and has accomplished the virtues inherent in the method. That is, the adult narrator learns from what the child experienced and failed to understand. Vanessa sees things but Margaret Laurence sees the significance of things. And she has wisely chosen to call the child "Vanessa" rather than "Margaret" because Margaret Laurence is here not writing autobiography, but fiction, and using fictional methods to evoke significance. And by being the teller telling the tale, Margaret Laurence has involved both the verbal range and the judgements which a camera, recorder of pictures, cannot. The significance of the story is as much in the telling as in the story.

_A Bird in the House_ would also seem to indicate a development in the little-used genre: the short story collection as whole-book. These stories re-examine the same chronological period as other stories, but examine them with a new focus and a different pattern of events.

It has been the failing of the short story form that it is based upon a false premise, that one set of events implies a lifetime. But against this psychological inaccuracy there has also been the virtue of the short story form: that it can invoke significance by means of its sharp, limited focus. _A Bird in the House_, by being a series of short stories, achieves the breadth of scope which we usually associate with the novel (and there by is as psychologically valid as a good novel), and at the same time uses the techniques of the short story form to reveal the different aspects of the young Vanessa. By using this kind of series, Margaret Laurence has escaped the imposed sequence, which is the psychological failing of the novel form that is, the novel — by its very adherence to chronology — is as false to the ways in which humans develop as the short story form — by its dependence upon the implication of the whole from the part — is to human-time). In the same period of time different things occur in the life of Vanessa. She does not recognize their significance. However, the narrator —by looking at different patterns in that same sequence of time — does.
At the same time, the stories of *A Bird in the House* are not written in the usual short story form. With one or two exceptions, they do not employ the revelation of epiphany which we have come to expect since James Joyce. That is, Margaret Laurence is not particularly interested in revealing a point or an idea; she is interested in revealing a revaluation of a character. Therefore once again the necessity of a series of short stories is stressed. Grandfather Connor for example, may be seen in one story as a domineering bully but is in fact reevaluated in the last story in the book. This throws a great deal of stress upon the narrator, who has been learning throughout the book by the very process of reevaluating Vanessa’s judgements. Therefore it is the voice of the narrator which is of final importance in reading *A Bird in the House*.

Vanessa’s love of writing is another ingenious aspect of the voice. Because she thinks of herself as a writer struggling to understand people, Vanessa is a “Professional Listener” who eavesdrops unashamedly in plain view or from various posts such as bed room air-register. This helps to solve one of the problems of first-person narration, the need for the observer’s omnipresence. Vanessa’s writings are tragic, romantic and melodramatic. As she begins to understand the real passions around her, she despises her compositions. Her stories and flamboyant fantasies are ironically juxtaposed with family events so as to serve as indirect commentary.

1.2. ELEMENT OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN *A BIRD IN THE HOUSE*

Margaret Laurence calls these stories “fictionalized autobiography. Her own growth from a child’s awareness of the small, tight world of family to an adolescent’s understanding of the widening circles of the world around her is paralleled by Vanessa MacLeod’s. The deaths of the heroine’s parents, the changes made first by loss and grief and then, inevitably and relentlessly, by the practical circumstances of her life, are present in Vanessa’s story.
Basic to this work and linking it to the genre of autobiography is the continuum of time as an integral part of its structure. The stories move through ten years of Vanessa’s life from about 1935 onward. As she grows, she is aware of the landmarks which have had their continued bearing on her own life and on Manawaka: the emigration of the pioneers to Manitoba, the First and Second World Wars, and the tragedy of Dieppe where so many Manawakan boys, recruits to the Cameron Highlanders were killed. But only as the adult Vanessa, looking back at her child-self, can she begin to understand her history and all history as “the past”, with all its powers over the present in both its challenges and chains.

The peculiarly introverted but powerfully dramatic development of A Bird in the House is illustrated by its approach to a subject which was to become of increasing concern to Laurence: the history of the Metis and the memory of their cultural dispossession in favour of a new generation of English-speaking settlers of Protestant background. Perhaps the main motivation behind these stories was to exorcise the powerful demons of Laurence’s own past, particularly the figure of her grandfather who had inspired in her so much bitterness while growing up.

I came to write about my own background out of desire, a personal desire to come to terms with what I call my ancestral past...... My family began in Scotland and I was brought up with a great knowledge of my Scots background, but it took me a long time - before I recognized that ...... these ancestors were very far away from me and that Scotland to me was just an ancestral memory, almost in a Jungian sense. And that if I came from anywhere, I came from a small prairie town of Scots- Presbyterian stock. I had to come to terms in some way with that environment which I had, at the time rebelled against - I wanted very much to get out- I couldn’t wait to get out of that town. Then, years later, I found I had to come back and examine all those things, examine my own family, my own roots and in some way put to rest the threat that had been there. I think that, in a sense, this is what I have done. (BH, p. 66)
I shall now go into the details of the autobiographical elements as well as the realism in *A Bird in the House*.

1.2.1. THE REALISM OF LAURENCE’S SEMI-AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION

In this section I have shown that Laurence conveys a deep respect for realism, for the novel as a medium which continues to represent the ordinary experiences of daily life. Perhaps her strongest conviction and most emphatic claim is represented by the simple statement that, there is a lot of history in my fiction.”7 The distrust of ‘theorising’ and the assimilation of fiction to history indicates an uncompromising commitment to a realistic procedure. This commitment, which deserves closer analysis, is most evident in this collection of stories, described by the author as ‘the only semi-autobiographical fiction. I have ever written’.  

Realistic fiction, David Lodge has argued, ‘works by concealing the art by which it is produced and invites discussion in terms of ethics and thematics rather than poetics and aesthetics’.9 Margaret Laurence’s attitude towards her own writing tends to confirm this view. Her work leaves the critic uneasy over the problem which Lodge’s statement implies: that such a mode of vision appears to grant a higher priority to the content of a novel than to its form. Laurence has characteristically asserted that ‘theorising, by itself, is meaningless in connection with fiction.”10 But she has been ready to comment in detail on the ethical and thematic interest of her novels. Laurence’s whole approach to narrative fiction may appear the inevitable extension of her strong sense of regional identity. In conversation with fellow Western Canadian writer Robert Kroetsch, she chose to speak of a ‘compulsion to set down our background’.11 Laurence continues to emphasise realism as a criterion of her business as a novelist. She remarks that, ‘Fiction is related to life in a very real way’. One fact is confirmed: that she was ‘involved in making a new literature out of a new experience’. The insistence on a new approach appears especially in emphasis throughout their
fiction on the ‘rediscovery’ or ‘retelling’ of kinds of stories which have already become traditional to prairie life. Her renewed commitment to realism represents the new writing. The compulsion to find a new standpoint from which to present western experience informs her realism, even when its limits seem most sharply restrictive, as in the special case of *A Bird in the House*.

The story of a child growing up on the prairies during the Depression has been so often retold that it has become part of an assumed tradition of western writing. A paperback blurb quotes the Vancouver Sun’s recommendation: ‘When Mrs. Laurence approaches this oft-told tale she breathes fresh life into it.’ But the cliché of resuscitating a dying tradition conveys a misleading and discouraging idea of the book. The stories as Laurence actually tells them propose anything but a resigned acceptance of regional myth. On the contrary, the narrative as a whole demonstrates an icy comprehension of the types of stories people often like to tell themselves or others: Stories of an assumed popular interest which have to do with pioneering; Scots or Irish ancestry; the outdoor life, Indians; the Depression; and the two World Wars. This material is predictably part of the narrative, but the medium through which these aspects of regional history are presented is not one of an easily assumed, transparent realism. Very much part of the experience that the stories convey is the sense of deliberate effort of reconstruction, by the narrator, which goes into the telling. Predictable features of prairie life are given only grudging recognition. Laurence’s style of narrative shows itself constantly hostile to the oft-told tale.

The stories carefully avoid any attempt at a large narrative sweep. Instead, they persistently foreground gaps in knowledge, inconsistent reports and breaks in narrative continuity.

1.2.1.1. DEPRESSION

In *The Bird in the House*, Laurence has commented at length about the Depression of the 30’s.
The Depression did not get better, as everybody had been saying it would. It got worse, and so did the drought. That part of the prairies where we lived was never dustbowl country. The farms around Manawaka never had a total crop failure, and afterwards, when the drought was over, people used to remark on this fact proudly, as though it had been due to some virtue or special status, like the children of Israel being afflicted by Jehovah but never in any real danger annihilation. But although Manawaka never knew the worst, what it knew was bad enough. Or so I learned later. At the time I saw none of it. For me, the Depression and drought were external and abstract, malevolent gods whose names I secretly learned although they were concealed from me, and whose evil I sensed only superstitiously, knowing they threatened us but not how or why. What I really saw was only what went on in our family. (BH, p. 136)

Thus we see that the force of the Depression impinges on all the stabilities of Vanessa’s life. The Depression forced her Aunt Edna back from Winnipeg to keep house for Grandmother and Grandfather Connor; her father cannot collect bills or hire a nurse or a girl to help with the housework because of the Depression; she and her parents have moved in with Grandmother MacLeod “when the Depression got bad”, and the Depression ruined her cousin Chris’ bright dreams of education and success. The child Vanessa is a sensitive observer of the individual lives and relationship around her: the range and power of the stories is enhanced by the fact that her field of vision is shaken by disturbances she could not have explained at the time. Even so, scenes included in ‘The Loons’, ‘The Half-Husky’ and the title story show that what is referred to here simply as personal or family experience is strongly marked by the general crisis of the times. The narrative point of view incorporates a strong sense of historical irony arising from the gradual realisation of what differences the Depression had made to people’s lives.
The text plainly deals with an environment and form of received wisdom already familiar in prairie literature: a Scots-Irish Protestant morality with its classic opposition between duty and love, work and sexuality, the ‘upright’ good and the ‘downright’ bad. Laurence’s attitude towards this frame of mind is suggested in one of the stories by the ironic application of the title ‘To Set Our House in Order’. Vanessa’s narrative questions this conception of order and the sources of authority which dictate it. From the opening description of Grandfather Connor’s Brick House onwards, as the Manawaka scene is set, the images of that order are nakedly exposed. The concluding story, ‘Jericho’s Brick Battlements’, connotes by its title the end of an era. The effect of Laurence’s writing is not to perpetuate a traditional view of prairie life but to show where the sequence of experience put together in the course of Vanessa’s recollections comes into the conflict with what used to pass as received opinion. Jarring particulars are remembered as well as the kind of general statements which reflect traditional or anonymous source of authority. The older Vanessa, herself now a mother, catches herself out in using the proverbial sayings or ‘cliches of affection’ (*BH*, p.207) which her own mother had used to her. The effects most strongly foregrounded in the language of the stories suggest the brash, colloquial realism of a child’s point of view. Sometimes metaphor is used to dramatise this point of view, as when Vanessa reports: ‘I felt, as so often in the Brick House, that my lungs were in danger of exploding, that the pressure of silence would become too great to be borne’ (*BH*, p. 66). In the final story, the same metaphoric pressure arises in the incident of the furnace fire which, to the perception of everyone but Grandfather Connor, threatens the house itself. The style is consistently deflationary and yet capable at the same time of generating strong tension.

*A Bird in the House* shows a strong novelistic potential but the volume actually achieves a form which comes somewhere between the compact dramatic expression of a series of short stories and the more extended narrative interest of a novel. The stories were conceived from the beginning as a series, Laurence has told us. On the other hand, each story is self-contained: ‘definitely a short story and not a chapter from a
novel. Yet the total effect becomes 'not unlike a novel'. The ambiguity of this conception accords with the tentative and exploratory nature of the work. Nevertheless the selection of thematic material included in *A Bird in the House*, though centred on domestic scenes and developed on the basis of the oft-told tale, anticipated the wider social and historical scope of *The Diviners*, the novel which follows next in order of composition and Laurence's most ambitious work. The narrative voice of Vanessa MacLeod, like that of Morag Gunn in *The Diviners*, recalls and revises the history of her own experience, looking back over a period of twenty years' absence from Manawaka. In the stories, the significance of events is essentially realised at a subliminal level in the consciousness of the narrator as the child she then was, while a more critical adult perspective is implied rather than stated. Vanessa's attitude to her own early experience is no less strongly revisionary than Morag's, though her presence as a character is reserved until the point where she directly intervenes at the end.

1.2.1.2 METIS

We shall now see how Laurence approaches the question of the Metis and their cultural dispossession. The album of Metis songs collected at the end of *The Diviners* testifies to the sincerity of the tribute which the author pays to a people whose way of life once represented a radically different form of society from the one which the eventual settlement of the prairies had created. However, *A Bird in the House* deals most directly with the experience of those belonging to the social order which had conspicuously triumphed. Vanessa MacLeod, the narrator and subject of these stories, is seen as the restless child of a family in which standards are still set by the founders of Manawaka itself, the grandparents' generation. When reminded that Grandfather Connor was a pioneer, Vanessa at once abandons her juvenile attempt at writing a romance of pioneer life: the prospect of romance is spoiled by this confrontation with the known reality. Vanessa's subsequent contact with the Metis girl Piquette Tonnerre then further undermines her confidence in her own background and outlook without providing the new friendship for which she naively hoped: the difference between them is such that Piquette cannot begin to respond to the advances of a middleclass
child such as Vanessa. In a review of George Woodcock's biography of the Metis hero Gabriel Dumont, Laurence herself acknowledges the barrier of prejudice which had still to be overcome in the attitude of her contemporaries:

There are many ways in which those of us who are not Indian or Metis have not yet earned the right to call Gabriel Dumont ancestor. But I do so, all the same. His life, his legend, and his times are a part of our past which we desperately need to understand and pay heed to.¹⁴

In the story, this enlargement of experience occurs only in the narrator's retrospective view of her relationship with the unlucky Metis girl. But this suggestion of desperate need provides a key to the romance which underlies the realism of these stories. The Metis connection in this particular story brings into focus a pattern of romance of which variations occur throughout the volume and which illustrates a psychological compulsion.

In the Loons', Piquette is described as a 'half-breed'. The narrative introduces the Tonnerre family as a familiar part of the local scene, though they are treated as outcasts by the rest of the community:

They were as my grandfather MacLeod would have put it, neither flesh, fowl nor good salt herring.... Sometimes old Jules, or his son Lazarus, would get mixed up in a Saturday night brawl, and would hit out at whoever was nearest, or howl drunkenly among the offended shoppers on Main Street, and the Mountie would put them for the night in the barred cell underneath the Court House, and the next morning they would be quiet again. (BH, p. 115)

The narrative code which introduces the Metis always soon relapses into silence. The proposal that Vanessa's doctor-father makes to take Piquette on holiday with his own family, to their cottage at Diamond Lake, is an attempt to alter the predicted course of
Piquette’s life. Inevitably Piquette is seen with mixed feelings by the young Vanessa. The story confirms the authenticity of Piquette’s suffering and the strength of Vanessa’s fascination with this untouchable girl who is finally perceived as the true aristocrat of Diamond Lake. The place is ironically later renamed Lake Wapakata, ‘for it was felt that an Indian name would have a greater appeal to tourists’ (BH, p.126).

‘The Loons’ is an evocation of atmospheric stillness, a momentary glimpse of a way of life belonging to the past which has almost completely disappeared. Vanessa’s holiday plans for Piquette quickly fade; her curiosity about Piquette’s origins appears impertinent. ‘It became increasingly apparent that, as an Indian, Piquette was a dead loss’ (BH, pp. 120-1). The emotional content of the scene remains high, however: the death of Vanessa’s father has been anticipated in the previous story, though he is still alive in this one. Vanessa is both drawn to and repelled by the crippled Metis child temporarily adopted by her family. The narrative induces a vision of a different order by her family. The narrative induces a vision of a different order of things from that represented in the course of the story: not simply what it might have been like to grow up as Piquette Tonnerre instead of Vanessa MacLeod; but an intimation of the repressed history of the Metis and the way it still remains to be realised as a vital part of Vanessa’s own background and cultural heritage.

Copious psychological observations stress the remarkable role played by Red Indians in North America and especially Canadian Family Romances where they presumably replace the historically non-existent aristocrat. The characteristics traditionally associated with them would favour such a substitution: the Red Indian is proud, noble, indomitable, a generous and the rightful owner of the land. Compared to those who exterminate them the Indians can easily be seen as superior beings and thus replace Kings and Nobel Fathers who occupy the most exalted position in the European Romance.15

The autobiographical impulses is there not only in the incidental detail of realistic presentation but even more decisively in the strong but strongly controlled element of romance. ‘The Loons’, for example, is part of the imaginative design of A Bird in the
House because the evocation of a lost world of Metis ancestors offsets the mediocrity of present reality. The opening recalls the moment at which the Metis, who might well have been considered the rightful owners of the land, ‘entered their long silence’ (BH, p. 114). The stillness of Diamond Lake just survives at the time of Vanessa’s childhood, though the close of the story retrospectively acknowledges that Piquette ‘the only one’ (BH, p. 127) to whom the former spirit of the place was perhaps still recognisable.

It is clear that for Laurence herself, the wish to identify with these silent Metis ancestor is immensely strong. However, to speak of an element of ‘romance’ in her fiction is not to deny her true concern with the actual history of the Metis, which is a commitment firmly resumed in her last novel, The Diviners. To be fully understood, the special appeal of the Metis cause must be measured against the kind of reality it opposes within the story: the view of the world embodied especially by Grandfather Connor, whom the author frankly described as based on her own maternal grandfather. The opposition between romance and reality provides access to the symbolic code of the narrative. The narrator, for examples, recalls her juvenile disgust at the off-recited ‘epic’ story of the day Grandfather Connor first arrived in Manawaka: ‘Unfortunately he had not met up with any slit-eyed and treacherous Indians or any mad trappers, but only with ordinary farmers who had given him work shoeing their horses, for he was a blacksmith’ (BH, p.10). None of Vanessa’s many childhood stories and daydreams, including the romantic misconception about Indians which affects her relationship with Piquette, allows her for a moment to triumph over given reality. But the writing clearly illustrates the psychological compulsion to question that reality.

Once the element of romance is given its proper emphasis, the other stories in A Bird in the House confirm Vanessa’s inner struggle to find a richer meaning in the prosaic facts of her daily life. Young Vanessa’s imaginings are presented as a defensive strategy. They are both an attempt to relieve the atmosphere for herself and a recognition of the capacity for self-repression in adult life, of which her bear-grandfather is by no means the only example. One can appreciate the force of
Laurence's acknowledgement of her own autobiographical investment in the book. Marthe Robert's argument entails the proposition that, by the very nature of the genre she employs, the novelist is dominated by a 'dialectic between the acceptance and the negation of reality'. This proves to be 'not only the source of endless original ideas' but also an indication of 'the actual pressure of creation' in the novelist's own circumstances. Laurence, it may be remembered, is the novelist who at one time thought that she 'had written herself out of that prairie town' but later felt compelled to revise this statement, acknowledging that her mental horizons necessarily still centred on her conception of Manawaka: whatever I am was shaped and formed in that sort of place and my way of seeing... remains in some enduring way that of a small-town prairie person. The same ambivalence is reflected in the persona of the narrator Vanessa MacLeod.

There is an unmistakable power in Laurence’s presentation of those elements of romance which constitute the 'negation of the reality' in her writing. Vanessa's wayward inner development keeps this imaginative dimension of the work constantly before the reader. She confesses her naive proprietary interest in her cousin Chris, who comes from shallow Creek: the place is still unknown to her but her imagining of it illustrates again a psychological displacement of the present order of things in the house, a continuing reaction against the only kind of family life she knows:

His sisters - for Chris was the only boy - did nor exist for me, not even as photographs, because I did not want them to exist. I wanted him to belong only here. Shallow Creek existed, though no longer filled with ice mountains in my mind but as some beckoning country beyond all ordinary considerations. (BH, p. 134)

No doubt the foremost of Laurence's writing is her deliberate insistence on common experience: her style is ultimately grounded on that. But her realism incorporates a fierce rejection of the commonplace and a distrust of what Robert Kroetsch calls 'certain traditional kinds of realism'. Vanessa experiments in composing stories until
she is finally ready to tell the story of that childhood and its prolonged internal exile. It is clear that story as eventually told transgresses the cultural code which is supposed 'to set our house in order' at the Brick House.

1.2.1.4. BREAKING DOWN OF METANARRATIVES IN A BIRD IN THE HOUSE

Kroetsch’s theory of narrative proves to have strong bearing on Laurence’s writing after all. The favourite strategy of contemporary Canadian writers, Kroetsch has argued, is the breaking down to ‘metanarratives’. This implies a refusal to accept certain kinds of ‘shared’ or rather ‘assumed’ stories which had come to acquire a privileged status in the community’s cultural life. Such stories would include the epic of Grandfather Connor’s arrival in Manawaka, since that story represents a tradition which holds god of three generations and has to be celebrated once more at time of his death. In a significant passage near the end of A Bird in the House, the narrator recalls how her grandfather’s death changed her perception of the story she herself had to tell:

> What funeral could my grandfather have been given except the one he got? The sombre hymns were sung, and he was sent to his Maker by the United Church minister, who spoke, as expected, of the fact that Timothy Connor had been one of Manawaka’s pioneers... Then he had built his house. It had been the first brick house in Manawaka. Suddenly the minister’s recounting of these familiar facts struck me as though I had never heard any of it before (BH, p. 204)

From the moment of his death, the inevitable ‘recounting of these familiar facts’ no longer represents the same threat to her. In her own narrative she is free to use the same facts and yet to refuse them the privileged interpretation which they had always seemed to carry.
Metanarratives are conveyed through recorded history as well as through literature and other sources. It is certain that Laurence considered herself more deeply engaged with the history of her own province than with any theory of fiction. The future of Manitoba itself has been subject in a peculiar way to rival views from its very beginnings. At the time of the Province’s entry into the Dominion, a contemporary observer even suggested that:

Manitoba has been to Canadians on a small scale what Kansas was to the United States. It has been the battle-grounded for their British and French elements with the respective religions, as Kansas was the battle-ground for Free Labour and Slavery. Ontario has played a part in contests there analogous to New England, Quebec to that of the southern states. The late government... was, with respect to the Riel affair, in the position... an American government, resting at once on Massachusetts and South Carolina, would have been with respect to Kansas.19

The origins of conflict are not forgotten in the small world of A Bird in the House. Grandfather MacLeod, for example, 'looked down on the Connors because they had come from famine Irish'. (BH, p.63) Vanessa’s last meeting with Piquette reveals to her the full extent to which her own experience of life in the same small town has been divided from that of the Metis girl, whose different future is already clearly marked in her face:

For the merest instant, then, I saw her. I really did see her for the first and only time in all the years we had both lived in the same town. Her defiant face, momentarily, became unguarded and unmasked, and in her eyes there was a terrifying hope. (BH, p. 124)

The instant of recognition is convincingly reported though the distance between them can never be overcome. Points where the narrative falters, where divisions suddenly become apparent within the generally unquestioned reality of everyday experience,
continually recur. The stories which Vanessa has to tell contradict conventional wisdom even as they are moulded by its pressure. Conceived at once as a whole book and as a series of stories, *A Bird in the House* hesitates to assume the pattern of the oft-told tale, resists the formation of metanarrative.

There is a particular example of metanarrative which seems especially relevant to Laurence’s fiction. This is ‘the so-called nation-approach to the Canadian past.’\(^{20}\) Carl Berger outlines this approach in his examination of the career of the Canadian historian W. L. Morton, whose *Manitoba: A History* deeply impressed Laurence herself. Berger shows how Morton had felt compelled to challenge a certain type of reading of Canadian history which appeared to marginalise events in the West. The statement of ‘the Laurentian theme’, for example, rested on an economic interpretation of history and implied a homogeneous view of Canadian experience; it relegated the history of the West to a peripheral question; and, above all, it was indifferent to the question of justice and equitable relations between the four sections and two races in Canada.\(^{21}\)

Morton’s profound opposition to such a view led him to wish for, in Berger’s words, ‘a history of the west written with such fidelity to the inner texture of local experience and so evocative of the sense of place that it would immediately trigger a recognition in those who had been moulded by that tradition’.\(^{22}\) There is no doubt of the close correspondence between Morton’s history of Manitoba as it came to be written and Laurence’s expanding conception of Manawaka. Having been moulded by the same tradition, Laurence was to appreciate the strong revision of Western history that Morton’s approach implied. Morton has already praised the author of *The Stone Angel* in his book. She herself read Manitoba: A History during the summer in which she began writing *The Diviners*. But the coincidence of views between them goes back further. Commenting on this at the time of Morton’s death, Laurence chose to emphasise their shared commitment to the idea of a multicultural society in Manitoba; and their realisation that the ‘many and varied histories’ of its people must be strongly foregrounded: ‘what I share, most of all with Morton is the sense of my place, the prairies, and of my people (meaning all prairie peoples), within the context of their
many and varied histories and the desire to make all these things come alive in the reader’s mind. Neither the historian nor the novelist was satisfied with previously assumed stories of provincial life.

Morton’s revised account of Manitoba’s history acquired an even stronger emphasis in the section ‘Epilogue: New Growth’, which he added to the second edition. He envisaged a potentially ‘prosperous, rational, humane and vivid society’ which must be achieved by overcoming ‘the mediocrity of survival as it was and had been’. The community history which the stories of *A Bird in the House* relate is the imaginative record of an insider to that struggle during a critical period. The household is touched by the general crises of the period, as they affected Manitoba. The Battle of the Somme is part of living memory to Vanessa’s father, though Vanessa herself is embarrassed by the annual parade of veterans; the Battle of Britain and the raid on Dieppe are recent events as the narrative closes. The question forced from Edna near the opening of the book has by then accumulated more significance for Vanessa’s herself: ‘Won’t this damn Depression ever be over? I can see myself staying on and on here in this house—’ (*BH*, p. 14). Vanessa’s stories suggest in domestic detail how the general pressure of the times is transmitted locally into ‘the mediocrity of survival’. But the text as written can never be reconciled with that prospect as the complete reality. Laurence herself can be seen as a committed but realist, but as being deeply opposed to a form of realism which could appear to take for granted the conditions it described. Here it represents one of the strongest revisions of western experience in contemporary Canadian writing.

1. CHARACTER SKETCHES

In this novel there are some personalities with strong characters. A study of these characters would add to a better understanding of the plot.

2.1 GRANDFATHER MACLEOD

*A Bird in the House* begins by suggesting that the father is subject to various undefined psychological constraints and captivities. What Vanessa, at seventeen, can see is that,
though alive, he had been dying all along. What she does not yet see is that his death was perhaps a paradoxical attempt at life and the only later escape that he could allow himself.

Paradigms image the protagonist’s situation. Vanessa, in one story, “The Mask of the Bear”, sees her grandfather callously subvert his daughter’s romance. Later he will similarly try to tyrannize over her or, in “Horses of the Night”, Vanessa tells of a cousin, whose problems, she recognizes, are much greater than hers. He plans to escape the narrow limitations of his life by going to war but then evades the dehumanization of that war through the still more desperate one of insanity.

Grandfather Connor is the hero in A Bird in the House. In Canadian literature Grandfather Connor is the most powerfully realized portrait of the patriarchal pioneer, the self-made man. He is proud, tough, self-disciplined, and demands obedience from others. In Laurence’s imaginative world he is the archetypal parental figure who inspires fear, guilt, and rebellion in her heroines.

In the cycle of stories, Laurence gives the grandfather figure exactly the mythic proportions of the Old Testament God exacting obedience and respect from the members of his family, but never showing them love. The only emotion he exhibits is anger. To the young Vanessa the old man’s angry refusal to help his never-do well brother Dan and his rude, peremptory treatment of his youngest daughter’s “gentlemen callers” seems outrageous. But from the outset the portrait of the grandfather is a complex one, for we are made to realize that the old man’s concept of an authoritarian, patriarchal society was one that was valid for his generation. He plays a role, wears a mask, which Vanessa only sees through once - when she finds her grandfather crying after his wife’s death. But as he grows very old and Vanessa begins to mature herself, she sees him in more human terms. There is however, a final showdown between the old man and his granddaughter when, during the war, she comes home late one night with a young man from the air force. The grandfather not only reprimands them for being out late but surmises that the young man is already married. Eventually the old
man’s guess proves correct. It is infuriating to the girl that he is right, but it is also the author’s way of accrediting him with wisdom. When he dies, the members of the family reflect on his life — his coming from Ontario to Manitoba by steamer, his walking from Winnipeg to Manawaka, earning his way by shoeing horses, building up his house and business by long years of hard work — but they cannot cry. They are just amazed that he is gone.

I was not sorry that he was dead. I was only surprised. Perhaps I had really imagined that he was immortal. Perhaps he even was immortal, in ways which it would take me half a lifetime to comprehend. (A Bird in the House, p 177.)

Years after, Vanessa realizes the extent of that immortality. She herself has become like her grandfather: “I had feared and fought the old man, yet he proclaimed himself in my veins.” Laurence’s emphasis on the necessity for coming to terms with one’s ancestors and gods finds its most powerful expression in this symbolic remark.

In “The Sound of Singing” Grandfather Connor is respected as an upright man: hard-working, thrifty, a strict observer of Sabatarian laws. His brother Dan, is a downright man, like others whom the town folk despise. They were described as ‘downright worthless’ or ‘downright lazy’. “These shadows of wastrels, these flimsy remnants of past profligates, with their dry laughter like the cackle of crows or the crackling of fallen leaves underfoot, embarrassed one terribly..... yet I was inexplicably drawn to town, too.” (BH, p. 9)

The two brothers suggest Jung’s persona and shadow archetype. The shadow, the repressed part of the personality, is feared by the conscious public self. It is usually dark and threatening, immoral in conventional terms. In Laurence’s comic version, Grandfather’s shadow is profligate, gay, happy as a child - all characteristics that a Puritan culture tends to repress. Grandfather and his brother Dan serve as an effective introduction to Vanessa’s family, to the town, and to its Puritan values and attitudes.
Brick House, beam, battle, bird, horse, song: the key images are central to the collection. Grandfather's house, like his person, is dwelling place, monument and embattled fortress in a heathen wilderness. The opening metaphors hold the ambivalence Laurence has frequently expressed towards her heritage. It is “sternly protective (with the sweeping spruce branches), yet also threatening and inhibiting. Warlike images include a lawnmower beheading stray flowers. In the last story, opposing Grandfather is like batting one's head against a brick wall.

Grandfather is introduced as “some great watchful bear waiting for the enforced hibernation of Sunday to be over”. Bear suggests his impatience, temper, strength and ability to survive. Timothy Connor's early life is sketched in the first and last stories. He has left school early, and come west from Ontario to Manitoba by Red River steamer, like Laurence’s Grandfather Simpson. He walked the hundred - odd miles from Winnipeg to Manawaka finding work as a blacksmith along the way. He saved money, started a hardware business, and built the town’s first brick house. He is fond of noting that no one helped him, is proud of the financial responsibility he continues to shoulder, and puzzled that thrift and prudence do not earn love.

Grandfather looms as some Old Testament Jehovah, while his gentle wife is mercy incarnate. The image patterns converge in the last story, where the brick battlements are invaded by suitors, grandfather's auto becomes Vanessa's retreat for writing, and the bear of a man is laid to his final rest. The Brick House is prison, and fortress against winter storms. “The absolute worst wouldn’t happen here, ever. Things wouldn’t actually fall apart”. (BH , p.187)

The MacLaughlin - Brick is an amusing variant on horses. This form of power, connoting money and pride, suits Grandfather. At twelve, Vanessa remembers riding with him when he was very young. The horn bannered their conquering presence: “A - hoo - gah! I was gazing with love and glory at my giant grandfather as he drove his valiant. Seven years later, Vanessa returns for his funeral and remembers herself
remembering driving with him," in the ancient days when he seemed as large and admirable as God." The incident evokes the dominant metaphor of Laurence's work, of journeying in search of freedom and joy. It reminds us, too, of her insistence that our local roots, our direct ancestors, provides our myths.

"Mask of the Bear" depicts love and death through relationships in the Connor household. The story is unified by the bear mask metaphor, a symbol of lonely, bewildered rage literally, the mask is thoroughly approximate: not only are bears indigenous to Manitoba, but the bear is a totem for the Canadian Indian and his socio-religious art. Grandfather's heavy bear coat suggests the family responsibilities he has shouldered for half a century and his stern Puritan culture. Vanessa thinks of him as the Great Bear, not simply because of his surliness but because he is caged by his unbending personality and his strict code of ethics.

Sabbath laws reduce grandfather to the level of a caged bear and unwanted visitors drive him to his basement lair where his displeasure is expressed by growling rockers. Grandfather Connor estranged himself from his children and his grandchild, but his concept of a rigid, authoritarian, patriarchal society was as valid to his generation's vision as it was alien to theirs. Throughout the course of these stories, there is a cumulative accretion to the character of grandfather; he moves away from Vanessa's childish conception of him as an over-bearing, domineering old man to take on a mythic proportion. Finally in the last story, Laurence intends - and achieves - a real catharsis of pity for the man and admiration for his type:

What funeral could my grandfather have been given except the one he got? The sombre hymns were sung, and he was sent to his maker by the United Church minister, who spoke, as expected, of the fact that Timothy Connor had been one of Manawaka's pioneers.... He looked exactly the same as he had in life... the same handsome eagle-like features. His eyes were closed. It was only when I noticed the closed eyes that I knew that the
blue ice of his stare would never blaze again. I was not sorry that he was dead. I was only surprised. Perhaps I had really imagined that he was immortal, in ways which it would take me half a lifetime to comprehend....

"You know something, Beth?" Aunt Edna went on, "I can't believe he's dead. It just doesn't seem possible".

"I know what you mean", my mother said.

"Edna, were we always unfair to him?

My aunt swallowed a mouthful of rye and ginger ale.

"Yes we were", she said. "And he was to us, as well". ( BH, p. 204).

Aunt Edna's ironic voice implicates us all. Here, finally Laurence has fanned out beyond Vanessa's story. She encloses us all in recognition of the inevitability of estrangement and the possibility of understanding between generations and among all men and women. In 'The Mask of the Bear', the associations provided by her grandfather's coat generate an imaginative landscape remote from the atmosphere of the Brick House and illustrative of the metaphoric limits of a brick establishment:

In my head I sometimes called him 'The Great Bear'. The name had many associations other than his coat and his surliness.... In some unformulated way... I associated the secret name with Great Bear Lake which I had been only on maps and which I imagined to be a deep vastness of back water, lying somewhere very far beyond our known prairies of tamed fields and barbed-wire fences. Somewhere in the regions of jagged rock and eternal ice, where human voices would be drawn into a cold and shadowed stillness without leaving even a trace of warmth. (BH, pp. 61-2)

2.2 GRANDMOTHER MACLEOD

Grandmother MacLeod's character is brought out through the story of the birth. "To Set Our House in Order". The event is placed within a web of interlocking images which contribute to the central theme: of life amid death, and renewed hope amid failed dreams. The removal of Vanessa's mother to hospital leaves the child with her
stern, aristocratic paternal grandmother and her practical Aunt Edna. The child’s fears are expressed; the grandmother’s repressed, as the culture dictates. Grandmother tells Vanessa that the MacLeods do not tell lies; that they accept what happens as God’s will, and that she has survived the loss of her son Roderick, killed at the Battle of the Somme. The story reveals that living involves, lying and lies can be loving.

Grandmother MacLeod wishes to live as an aristocrat, like her Scottish ancestors. In pioneer conditions, and a depressed economy in the 1930s, she struggles to maintain her imagined world of silver, lace and tea parties. Her husband, a country doctor, read Greek tragedies in their original languages. The thwarted scholar’s son, Vanessa’s father, wanted to enter the merchant marine. His library is filled with travel books and copies of National Geographic Magazine. Vanessa’s final thoughts about order link these failed dreams with the new born life.

The strangeness of these diverse viewpoints, is suggested in the circular rose window in the MacLeod house. Its many coloured glass permits the viewer to see the world under very different aspects, “as a place of absolute sapphire or ... a hateful yellow”. The multiple colours (all components of light), the perfect shape and the traditional Connotations of the rose in Christian Iconography combine to make the window the kind of image Northrop Frye calls anagogic, an image which seems to contain the cosmos. Vanessa rejects Grandmother’s version of God’s will, yet the image patterns point to some transcendental order, suggested by the rose window and the golden poplar leaves in the bluff.

The themes of inner freedom is represented by bird imagery. Grandmother MacLeod’s hair is “bound grotesquely like white feathered wings in the snare of her coarse night-time hairnet” (BH, p. 40). Vanessa’s dream of a captive bird mingles with the sound of her mother crying and the voices of dead children. The reference is to an earlier baby born dead; metaphorically, it evokes the failed dreams and stillborn hopes of the fictional characters and of people everywhere. Human ambivalence is expressed
through Vanessa’s reaction to her new brother, towards whom she feels “such tenderness and such resentment”.

The depression had earlier forced Dr. MacLeod to move himself and his family into his widowed mother’s home. No one, including Vanessa’s Grandmother MacLeod, found that living arrangement comfortable. But with the demise of the father, “everything changed”. At the end of “A Bird in the House”, the MacLeod house is sold. Grandmother MacLeod is taken in by a daughter in Winnipeg. The mother, with her two children, goes to live with her father.

Vanessa, who found her grandmother MacLeod difficult and forbidding soon discovers that her autocratic grandfather Connor is even less appealing. The young girl exchanges one house where she does not really belong for another one that is still more constraining. Vanessa, in her Grandfather’s house was so disturbed by the sparrow’s plight. But the child protagonist could only sense what the adult narrator can show - that the bird’s predicament symbolised her own.

Grandmother MacLeod, Vanessa’s paternal grandmother, is obsessed by the past and at her family’s cost, tries to live in terms of a past that no longer exists.

“When I married our Grandmother MacLeod”, she related, “he said to me, ‘Eleanor, don’t think because we’re going to the prairies that I expect you to live roughly. You’re used to a proper house and you shall have one’. He was as good as his word.

Before we’d been in Manawaka three years, he’d had this place built. He earned a good deal of money in his time, your grandfather. He soon had more patients than either of the other doctors. We ordered our dinner service and all our silver from Birks’ in Toronto. We had resident help in those days... and never had less than twelve guests for dinner parties. When I had tea, it would always be twenty or thirty. Never any less than
half a dozen different kinds of cakes were ever served in this house" (BH, P.45)

Grandmother MacLeod also romanticized the remote ancestral past, Vanessa found her Grandmother difficult and forbidding. “I’m sorry”, Vanessa early realized was the password to Grandmother’s house. 25

I was not astonished that my grand-mother thought the bloody death of Jonathan was very nice, for this was her unvarying response, whatever the verse. And in fact, it was not strange, for to her everything in the Bible was as gentle as she herself. The swords were spiritual only, strokes of lightness and dark, and the wounds poured cochineal. (BH, P.7)

And again, “My grandmother was a Mitigated Baptist. I knew this because I heard my father say “at least she’s not an unmitigated Baptist”. (BH, P.17)

3. THEMES : TIME, COMMUNICATION

In this section we shall see that as Vanessa grows her judgements are reevaluated. Only as an adult can Vanessa understand her history as “the past”, with all its powers over the present in both its challenges and chains. Roots, ancestors, the past, problems of communication continue to be the themes in The Bird in the House. All these themes will be studied by making a study of the characters.

In this section we shall study the theme of time and communication. Vanessa’s burden is not heavy as Hagar’s or Stacey’s, because she is younger and her life has been less catastrophic. Vanessa reveals the power of time to both heal and hurt when she recalls how she was jilted by her first boy friend. Her mother can offer only ambiguous comfort: “...I know you won’t believe me, honey, but after a while it won’t hurt so much. And yet in a way I guess it always will, to some extent. There doesn’t seem to be anything anybody can do about that.”
As it happened, she was right on all counts. I did not at the time believe her. But after a while it did not hurt so much. And yet twenty years later it was still with me to some extent, part of the accumulation of happenings which can never entirely be thrown away. (BH, pp. 201-202)

This incident combines the pain and disillusionment of the moment with the wisdom and regret of retrospection. It illustrates how the narrative voice can speak from two points in time simultaneously. Most important, it shows how Vanessa’s effort to communicate her life-story reveals in the very process of speaking the historical nature of both, life and story. First, it displays how her life is conditioned and complicated by the flow of time. Her personality is not static: it evolves, accumulates, and alters with age. The notions of inheritance and survival, which Laurence says are central to all her novels, implicate a character in time, binding her to past and future. David L. Jeffrey argues that Laurence’s fascination with time is peculiarly Canadian because it reflects our belief in the existence, utility, and necessity of historical meaning. People cannot understand themselves or their plight in isolation; they need the context of larger cultural forces. When Vanessa complains, “I wanted only to be by myself, with no one else around,” (BH, p. 25) she does not yet realize that even her most solitary concern with personal identity requires that she see her own life as part of something larger and older.

However, she too must communicate as both a means of understanding and a ritual of expiation. She must speak in order to make peace with her past. In particular, she must come to terms with her grandfather, Timothy Connor, the patriarchal figure whom she regarded as the domineering villain of the family. Yet in the final story - “Jericho’s Brick Battlements” - it is from him and the family past he embodies that she receives a kind of blessing. She has an involuntary memory: “... I remembered something I didn’t know I knew. I remembered riding in the MacLaughlin-Buck with my grandfather. It was a memory with nothing around it, an unplaced memory without geography or time.” She recalls flying triumphantly through Manawaka: “A-hoo-gah! A-hoo-gha! I
was gazing with love and glory at my giant grandfather as he drove his valiant chariot through all the streets of this world”. Later, when he dies, this “memory of memory” returns of its own accord and becomes an emblem of the whole book, which is Vanessa’s triumphant tour of her life. Through it she confirms the intensity and the intricacy of her feeling for her family, her past, and especially for her grandfather, whom she had feared and rejected, but whom she finally acknowledges as her ancestor.

Thus we see that Grandfather Connor was first considered as a bully by Vanessa. His character was later reevaluated.

4. BIRD IMAGERY

In *A Bird in the House*, the bird was a sparrow that had managed to get itself “caught between the two layers of glass” of a storm window.(BH, p.100) Vanessa MacLeod, the child protagonist and retrospective adult-narrator of each story “could not bear the panic of the trapped bird”.(BH, p.101) She rushed to free it. But by opening the inner window she merely released the captive creature into a larger cage, whereupon “it began flying blundering around the room, hitting the lampshade, [and] brushing against the wall”. “Petrified” and “revolted”, Vanessa was afraid that she would soon see the bird “lying broken on the floor” and angry that Noreen, the servant girl, might make some typical religious comment such as “God sees the little sparrow fall”. The actual comment, however, was more perturbing than the anticipated one; “A Bird in the House means a death in the house’ Noreen remarked”.(BH, p. 102) Even more upsetting, the prophecy soon proves correct. Later, the protagonist’s doctor father dies from the same flu that he had cured in others, including his daughter.

Even Grandfather Connor, the protagonist’s chief antagonist, is trapped in his own concept of himself as a self-made man. Raging in the cage of his retirement he only confirms the trap. All the characters are caught up in parallel captivities and engaged in divergent flights.
The most significant of these flights is Vanessa's. Vanessa’s first captivity is her constrained childhood, which encourages imaginative escapes and sets her on the road to her vocation as a writer. Then, as an apprentice writer, she encounters even more clearly what she has already experienced as a confused child. The most basic “Cage” in the book is the immediate limitations of self. The youthful Vanessa is trapped by what she is, by her inexperience as well as by her limited experiences, particularly those experiences with which she has not yet fully come to terms. One of Laurence’s most persistent themes is the problem of “time and the personal and ancestral past”. Characters are all, to a degree, prisoners of their past. But that condition can be a final self-defeat, as with grandfather Connor, a “pioneer” still surviving beyond his time, or as with Vanessa, the beginning of a personal liberation. The child endures Manawaka; the adolescent about to leave for university can look with some magnanimity on some of what she has experienced; the older adult narrator can more fully review Manawaka. Through these somewhat different characters, Vanessa makes - and retrospectively maps - her course to self-determination. In effect, she frees herself psychologically by remembering a place she earlier left physically and by then restructuring or recreating those memories into meaningful stories.

The young Vanessa reacts passionately to her life’s story; the somewhat older Vanessa re-examines sympathetically; the author, a mature Vanessa, writes analytically, with an objectivity impossible to the “trapped” child. But the adult narrator too is trapped in a new cage, in the subtler cage of memory that makes youth look grander in retrospect as age limits possibilities and admits to compromise where once was only promise. The child, rebelling against one’s cage, is, in some ways, freer than the mature writer who, ultimately, has turned life into fiction, categorized emotions, confined what was fluid for her earlier self into narratives as balanced and structured as autobiographies tend to be.

But Vanessa - the naive child, the rebellious adolescent, the mature writer - is not Margaret Laurence. Beyond the narrator who delimits her life’s story, is the fictional who frees it. If in one sense the author is the exhibition of cages, the proponent of the
human condition, with all its limitations, then she is also the master of escapes. The last escape is art, the achievement of an extra dimension. The young Vanessa is an aspiring writer who composes conventional romances. As an adult, she is a promising writer who explores the partly fictitious realities of her past and does so by conjoining her present voice and her former ones. Yet the author, a better artist, can underscore and emphasize the tones of those voices and regularly speaks both more and less than she knows.

Vanessa has written herself out of dispossession into her inheritance, but the ending where so much is left unaccounted for offers no solutions to the enigmas of history or of the self. Her consciousness of identity does not reveal an authentic core of selfhood but rather an awareness of multiple selves at different ages. Her last story, with its selection of those different selves, writes in her sense of reparation from that past yet also her awareness of her mature self as continuous with them. Interestingly, Vanessa leaves Manawaka twice, first as a girl of eighteen leaving for college, when she is surprised to find that, "in some way which I could not define or understand I did not feel nearly as I'd expected to feel."(BH, p. 208) And then again twenty-three years later. When she drives away for the last time, no longer expecting to be free, knowing that there is certain amount of baggage which one is stuck with. Her resistance of the past is transformed into a revision of the past as she comes to accept her role as inheritor as well as accepting the multiplicities within herself. She is both successive and continuous.

4.1. CAGES AND ESCAPES IN A BIRD IN THE HOUSE

Vanessa, who found her grandmother MacLeod difficult and forbidding soon discovers that her autocratic grandfather Connor is even less appealing. The young girl exchanges one house where she does not really belong for another one that is still more constraining. Vanessa, in her Grandfathers house was so disturbed by the sparrows plight. But the child protagonist could only sense what the adult narrator can show - that the birds predicament symbolised her own.
Mysteries surround Vanessa not only the fears and puzzles of all the things she does not understand in the present, but also the mysteries inexplicably hanging-over from the past. The immediate past of the first world war impinges on her family, a looming factor in her father's decision to become a doctor, in his helpless regret over the death of his brother Roderick and his half resentful, half-guilty subservience to his mother on that account. Vanessa feels these stifling shadows around her in grandmother MacLeod's house where the touchstone-words are always "I'm sorry".

Vanessa MacLeod, at age nine, is already an obsessive writer. Vanessa's writing is her obvious destiny at so early an age. But more importantly, it shows how the child was jostled towards perceptions and understandings of the people for instance. In "The Mask of the Bear", Vanessa is writing the story of a barbaric queen "beautiful and terrible, and I could imagine her, wearing a long robe of leopard skin and one or two heavy gold bracelets, pacing an alabaster courtyard and keening her unrequited love." (BH, p. 64). Not only a process of emotional matures is being shown throughout these stories, but also Vanessa's growing awareness of appropriate and inappropriate modes of fiction of the insufficiencies of the high romantic mode for the actual presentations of life's losses and agonies.

Vanessa's world is a small circle, constantly impinged upon or threatened by death, the depression, fears and the effects of two world wars. It is the world of harsh edges, muted colours or no colours. Its surfaces are all rough and it is dominated by grandfather and the Brick House, symbols of the roughness of all the elements that buffeted Vanessa into maturity. Each story ends with some recognition that is a stop towards maturity; sometimes we finish with a limited child's point of view as in "To set our House in Order";

I could not really comprehend these things, but I sensed their strangeness, their disarray. I felt that whatever God might love in this world, it was certainly not order (BH, p. 59).
And sometimes the adult Vanessa’s perceptions finally beam through to lighten the
gloom of grandfather Connor in her background:

Many years later, when Manawaka is far away from me, in miles and in time, I saw
one day in a museum the Bear Mask of the Haida Indians. It was a weird mask. The
features were ugly and yet powerful. The mouth was turned down in an expression of
sullen rage. The eyes were empty caverns, revealing nothing. Yet as I looked, they
seemed to draw my own eyes towards them until I imagined I could see somewhere
within that darkness a look which I know, a linking bewilderment. I remembered than
that in the days before it became a museum piece, the mask had concealed a man. (BH,
p.87).

Basic to this work is the continuum of time as an integral part of its structure. The
stories more through ten years of Vanessa’s life from about 1935 onward. As she
grows, she is aware of the landmarks which have had their continued bearing on her
own life and on Manawaka: the emigration of the pioneers to Manitoba, the first and
second world wars. But only as the adult Vanessa, looking back at her child-self can
she begin to understand her history and all history as “the past” with all its powers over
the present in both its challenges and chains. Vanessa exhibits personal responsibility
and qualified free will. Qualified because of heredity and environment. Each story is
unified by a dominant image. The theme of inner freedom is represented by bird
imagery.

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psychological constraints and captivities. What Vanessa, at seventeen, can see is that,
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Later he will similarly try to tyrannize over her or, in “Horses of the Night”, Vanessa
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child, rebelling against once cage, is, in some ways, freer than the mature writer who, ultimately, has turned life into fiction, categorized emotions, confined what was fluid for her earlier self into narratives as balanced and structured as autobiographies tend to be.

But Vanessa - the nave child, the rebellious adolescent, the mature writer, is not Margaret Laurence. Beyond the narrator who delimits her life’s story, is the fictional who frees it. If in one sense the author is the exhibition of cages, the proponent of the human condition, with all its limitations, then she is also the master of escapes. The last escape is art, the achievement of an extra dimension. The young Vanessa is an aspiring writer who composes conventional romances. As an adult, she is a promising writer who explores the partly fictitious realities of her past and does so by conjoining her present voice and her former ones. Yet the author, a better artist, can underscore and emphasize the tones of those voices and the regularly speaks both more and less than she knows.

Vanessa has written herself out of dispossession into her inheritance, but the ending where so much is left unaccounted for offers no solutions to the enigmas of history or of the self. Her consciousness of identity does not reveal an authentic core of selfhood but rather an awareness of multiple selves at different ages. Her last story, with its selection of those different selves, writes in her sense of reparation from that past yet also her awareness of her mature self as continuous with them. Interestingly, Vanessa leaves Manawaka twice, first as a girl of eighteen leaving for college, when she is surprised to find that in some way which I could not define or understand I did not feel nearly as I’d expected to feel (BH, p. 203), and then again twenty-three years later. When she derives away for the last time, no longer expecting to be free, knowing that there’s certain amount of baggage which one in stuck with. Her resistance of the past is transformed into a revision of the past as she comes to accept her role as inheritor as well as accepting the multiplicities within herself. She is both successive and continuous.
One of the traits which Vanessa inherits as a storyteller is her family's sense of decorum. Unlike Morag Gunn whose fragmentation is signaled from the beginning of The Diviners, Vanessa's sense of her own self-divisions is written far more discreetly into her narrative through her need to memorialize her father and her grandfather and through the fragmented form of her story sequence with its breaks and its supplements. What emerges is Vanessa's consciousness of a self always incompletely understood existing in a world order where order is insistently disrupted and meaning is consciously deferred. A Bird in the House offers us different portraits of a future artists as various young women.

NOTES

3. ibid. p. 22.
8. Ibid., p.4.
10. Robert Kroetsch A Place to Stand On, p. 156.
16. Ibid. p. 144.
22. Ibid., p. 246.
25. Arnold and Davidson, ‘Cages and Escapes in Margaret Laurence’s *A Bird in the House*, *Journal of Canadian Studies*, p. 93.