

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

IN SEARCH OF SELF: THE STUDY OF A CENTRAL
THEME IN MARGARET LAURENCE'S NOVEL,
THIS SIDE JORDAN

by

HERBERT GIESBRECHT

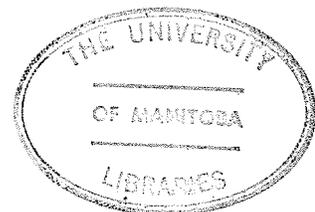
A THESIS

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the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

This study is concerned with the matter of a central, or controlling, theme in Margaret Laurence's fiction. More specifically, the study attempts to establish the thesis that a controlling theme - the search of the individual for self-understanding and self-acceptance - pervades and links all of Laurence's published novels.

The study opens, in chapter one, with a brief survey of critical opinion and comment on the major themes, as individual critics have perceived them, in Laurence's novels. Such a survey reveals the emergence of a limited consensus among critics that if any one theme is central to her fiction, it is the theme indicated above. This chapter also points up certain shortcomings inherent in the approach, or procedure, of these critics (viewed as a group) and the evident need for more rigorous analysis of the novels themselves. Such inductive analysis, it is contended, should (in contrast to the approach of most of the critics here reviewed) also take account of the subjective experiences and insights of other than main characters and should show the relationship among themes, in a given novel, in an endeavour to define, if possible, the dominant theme. Several general considerations which argue for the presence of the one central theme indicated above are also introduced in this first chapter.

A second chapter, really the heart of this study, undertakes a close and detailed analysis of Laurence's first novel, This Side Jordan. The centrality of the one theme, the individual's search for self-under-

standing and self-acceptance, is argued and illustrated in terms of the crucial experiences and insights of its various characters and in terms of the precise relationship of another theme (the movement of Ghana towards independence as a nation) to this central one.

A third, and final, chapter attempts to continue the argument for the dominance of this one theme in Margaret Laurence's fiction by analyzing, in a more curtailed manner, the key experiences and developing insights of (main) characters in three later novels: The Stone Angel, A Jest of God, and The Fire-Dwellers. The study concludes with the implied contention that the critical approach underlying the analysis of these four selected novels, if applied to the other (two) novels of Laurence, would yield further evidence in support of the thesis of this present study.

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Laurence is now generally recognized as one of Canada's most accomplished novelists. The story of such recognition may be pieced together from the pages of individual book reviews, essays in books and journals, recorded interviews with her, and even critical surveys (more recent ones) of Canadian fiction as a whole. Critics have, indeed, praised her work for a variety of reasons: they have commended her skillful management of time (historical as well as dramatic time) and of narrative voice, her vivid evocation of a particular geographical place and atmosphere, her convincing simulation of native speech and dialogue, and her sheer ability to write simple and effective prose. But most frequently they have returned, in their praise of Laurence as a novelist, to the concentrated strength and conviction of her characterization, particularly the characterization of her central protagonists. Minor characters in her novels may not always be convincingly portrayed, but about the strength and credibility of Laurence's main characters the critics have, by and large, very little doubt at all.

This insistent and intriguing concern of Laurence with the exploration of her key characters is only one of several clues which are guiding an increasing number of critics to the reasonable conclusion that her leading themes are all directly related to the individual's search (or struggle) for self-understanding, for personal growth, for a sense of personal freedom, for self-acceptance. Indeed, several critics - notably Clara Thomas and Walter Swayze - have ventured to suggest (what

I contend for more strongly in this present study, that one particular theme dominates and binds together the whole of her fiction. In any case, it is this recurring, though mostly superficial, interest in the matter of Laurence's central themes which points up the need for more thoroughgoing study of the entire question. For while the critics of Laurence often speak to the matter of her themes and (lately) even do so with a growing consensus in viewpoint, they do not often speak with the kind of critical clarity and persuasiveness which derive from rigorously inductive analyses of individual novels.

It is to this particular need for the more painstaking examination of her novels, from within, that my thesis addresses itself. This thesis does not presume, of course, to offer any definitive answers to the question of Laurence's central theme (s), but it does attempt to illustrate what I believe to be a very useful approach in the thematic study of her fiction. My procedure involves, basically, an inductive analysis of the crucial experiences and insights of the main and secondary characters and an analysis of the precise relationship of other (secondary?) themes to the main theme, in the novel This Side Jordan.

My study opens (in chapter one) with a brief survey of critical opinion concerning the presumed themes of Margaret Laurence's novels. This survey is intended to indicate both the degree of diversity and the measure of agreement among critics with respect to the matter of Laurence's major themes, and also to reveal certain shortcomings in their approaches (viewed as a group) to the subject at hand. The main body of my study (chapters two and three) argues for the centrality of one theme in Laurence's fiction: the individual's search for self-understanding and

self-acceptance. The argument is carried forward in terms of a close and detailed study, according to the approach indicated above, of This Side Jordan (Laurence's first, and much-neglected novel) and a more curtailed study of three later novels: The Stone Angel, A Jest of God, and The Fire-Dwellers.

This central and controlling theme is one which reflects a constant and salient concern in Margaret Laurence's personal (private) experience and one which reflects her own characteristic way of looking out upon, and interpreting, the experiences of people around her. It may be a thoroughly familiar, even commonplace, theme for a novelist to work at, and criticism could be levelled that its very prominence bespeaks a certain imaginative impoverishment in Laurence as a writer. Other Canadian novelists like Hugh MacLennan, Morley Callaghan, Gabrielle Roy, and Rudy Wiebe, it could be argued with some conviction, incorporate a wider variety of distinct and diverse themes in their fiction than Margaret Laurence seems able to do. Yet the fact remains that with her modulated and generally convincing treatment of this one broad theme, and of integral facets within it, Laurence continues to attract readers and to evoke the commendation of numerous critics. To deprecate Laurence's thematic interest and concern by describing it as too narrow and restricted in scope is therefore to miss both the essential point and the distinctive worth of her fictional achievement.

CHAPTER ONE: IN SEARCH OF A CENTRAL THEME IN THE FICTION OF MARGARET
LAURENCE: A REVIEW OF CRITICAL OPINION

There can be little doubt that Margaret Laurence is coming into her own as an accomplished and highly appreciated Canadian novelist of our time. Not only the literary and academic honors which have been accorded her during the last few decades but also the increased critical attention being devoted to the explication of her individual works and to the question of her stature among Canadian novelists, attest to this fact. Although, admittedly, no critical study of Laurence which might be justly described as definitive, in scope and penetration, has yet appeared, Clara Thomas' book, The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence, which builds upon and amplifies earlier studies of her,¹ represents at least a first and somewhat tentative step towards such a study. Thomas' book, it is to be hoped, will challenge other more penetrating critics to attempt such a study.

In 1977 many of the shorter critical essays on, and interviews with M. Laurence, prepared during recent years (1960 - 1975), were gathered up by William H. New for the "Critical Views on Canadian Writers" series in a collection entitled simply Margaret Laurence. What these critical voices, whether in consideration of a specific novel or short story or in consideration of some aspect of Laurence's fictional art as such, proclaim together (with very few exceptions) is that here is a writer with major talent whose creative roots and inspiration are deeply anchored in the Canadian context and whose strong and persistent concern, and achieved

¹Clara Thomas, The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975). Earlier studies of hers include Margaret Laurence (Canadian Writers, Number 3). Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969 and "The Novels of Margaret Laurence", in Studies in the Novel, Volume 4, Number 2 (1972), 154 - 64.

success, lie with the exploration of the inner lives of individuals rather than with the delineation of large-scale social or historical settings or with the skilful structuring and unfolding of suspenseful plots. What these critics and reviewers seem less commonly agreed upon, or else seem less capable of defining for themselves and others, is the precise kind and level of artistic success which Laurence has achieved in particular novels, and the precise themes which are embodied in her novels' constant concern with the troubled experiences of individuals who endure, learn from, and somehow survive these experiences. It may, of course, be premature for us to expect the sort of definite and assured conclusions on these matters which only the resolving perspectives of time can, as a rule, bring to us. Still "the new must be tested and appraised," as Stanley Read reminds us, "long before the passing of the traditional century, the term commonly fixed as the test of literary merit."² Or it may also be the case that we are asking too much of a novelist who has always remained more interested in the exploration and unfolding of human character as such than in the explication of very specific themes. Laurence's open confession, in her 1969 article, "Ten Years' Sentences",³ that she has never yet decided on a theme before commencing to write a novel seems to suggest as much, although other remarks of hers can be brought forward which argue for a sense of theme emerging and developing early in the course of her actual writing.

² Stanley E. Read, "The Maze of Life: the Work of Margaret Laurence," Canadian Literature, Number 27 (Winter, 1966), 5.

³ Margaret Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentences," Canadian Literature, Number 41 (Summer, 1969) 4.

Since it is with the matter of a central and controlling theme in Laurence's fiction as a whole that this paper is primarily concerned, it will be appropriate for me to begin with a rapid review of what critics who otherwise agree, at the most fundamental level, that Laurence's artistic strength lies in the portrayal and revelation of individual character, have suggested are the various themes of her novels. If we use New's widely-ranging collection of essays (referred to above) as our principal reference point,⁴ we note that in fact few critics and reviewers have considered the possibility of common or recurring themes in Laurence's fiction. The majority of them have confined their attention to the review of one work with occasional side glances only, sometimes, at other novels. Most have restricted themselves, moreover, to a discussion of main characters only (two or three at most), in the novel under review, and have not investigated the matter whether the theme, or themes, they suggest as dominant ones in that novel are further reinforced or amplified by the experiences of other (secondary) characters. One can readily understand why this should be so in the initial stages of study of a contemporary writer like Laurence and I make the point here, not to castigate these critics, but simply to emphasize that such restrictive approaches tend to inhibit one in the search for underlying or common themes in any writer's total work. Several critics, however, have ventured to survey Margaret Laurence's fiction as a whole, with respect to

⁴William H. New, editor, Margaret Laurence (Critical Views on Canadian Writers Series). Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1977. Nearly all of the critics and reviewers referred to in the above review of critical comment on Laurence's themes are included in New's anthology. The page numbers appearing (in parentheses) in the body of my thesis except where otherwise noted, refer to the relevant pages of New's book.

basic themes and common motifs, that is, and to them we refer last of all in the following review of critical comment.

Stanley Read links This Side Jordan, Laurence's first published novel, to her collection of African short stories, The Tomorrow-Tamer, with regard to theme. It continues the broad theme, he remarks, which unites the short stories: "the dying of the old way of life and the birth of the new" (p.48). Read renders this very general indication of theme more precise by commenting upon the common search of the main characters (both African and white), amid the confusing changes around them, for a life of dignity, security and meaning. Henry Kreisel, in his discussion of "The African Stories of Margaret Laurence," describes the broad theme of This Side Jordan as the "birth of self-awareness" (p.108) in the confused search of individuals for independence and freedom, and therefore as a "variation on the theme of self-discovery" (p.109). Kreisel does not elucidate Laurence's development of this theme, however, beyond its immediate reflection in the experiences of one character, Nathaniel Amegbe. He is not unaware of the 'birth of a nation' theme (Ghana), but considers it to be a secondary theme in the novel.

William H. New, in an essay concerned with The Stone Angel, makes passing reference (p.136) to This Side Jordan; he points up the search of its main characters (Nathaniel Amegbe and Johnny Kestoe) for their "own kind of independence." Although New deems This Side Jordan - and most other critics who have compared this novel with Laurence's later work would agree - inferior to the later novels, he recognizes its thematic significance in the anticipation of a recurrent theme. Sandra Djwa, in a comparative study of the fiction of Sinclair Ross and Margaret Laurence,

also refers briefly to This Side Jordan. She comprehends the novel as another parable illustrating the "growth of the human spirit into self-knowledge and freedom" (p.72), but grants more distinct moral and religious significance to the theme, as unfolded in the novel, than do either Read or Kreisel.

Joan Hind-Smith, whose more extended study of Margaret Laurence, in Three Voices, is rather more biographical than analytical in focus and thrust, does not attempt to define the theme(s) of This Side Jordan at all, but simply acknowledges the fact that the novel, when it first appeared, "marked the emergence of an important new writer."⁵ G.D. Killam, in contrast to Hind-Smith, offers a very close reading of the novel - perhaps the most penetrating essay written to date - in his introduction to the New Canadian Library edition (1976) of This Side Jordan.⁶ He too, while alluding to the theme(s) of (a) the impact of the past upon the present and (b) the struggle between idealism and practical necessity and (c) the difficulty of meaningful communication between individuals, concludes finally that the deeper thematic meaning of the novel is a "quest for understanding at the individual level."

Clara Thomas, in what is (despite all of its weaknesses) to date the most comprehensive study made of Laurence's work as a whole, The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence, also grants this first novel, as does Killam, a secure and significant place in the corpus of Laurence's published

⁵Joan Hind-Smith, Three Voices: The Lives of Margaret Laurence, Gabrielle Roy, Frederick Philip Grove. (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin and Company, 1975).

⁶G.D. Killam, "Introduction", This Side Jordan by Margaret Laurence. (New Canadian Library, No. 126). Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976 (date of introduction).

fiction. Thomas associates This Side Jordan with Laurence's other African tales in its exploration of the motifs of "exile" and the search for one's true "home," of "tribalism and community," but insists that its strongest inner "drum beat" responds to the theme of the "indomitable vitality and endurance of the spirit of man."⁷ And what was only faintly hinted at by William H. New, namely, that Laurence's first published novel already anticipates, in the contours of its characters' most significant experiences, a major and reiterated theme of all her fiction becomes a slightly stronger note in Thomas' latest critical work.

The Stone Angel - to turn now to Laurence's second published novel - has evoked more critical interest and attention, in every way, than This Side Jordan or, for that matter, any other of her novels. Although it may be too early to assess its precise rank among her novels, such critical consensus as has already emerged would assign to it first place in terms of the richness, subtlety, and credibility of its portrayal of characters at any rate.⁸ There is widespread agreement among the critics of Margaret Laurence - Paul Pickrel, Stanley Read, Honor Tracy, Barry Calaghan, Robertson Davies, Denyse Forman, Uma Parameswaran, Joan Hind-Smith, John Moss, J.M. Kertzer, William New, and Clara Thomas are all among them - that the dominant theme of The Stone Angel has something

⁷Clara Thomas, op.cit., pp. 49 - 59.

⁸This assertion may be rather too strong in view of increasing appreciation among some critics for the artistic complexity of Laurence's latest work, The Diviners. Still, critical opinion seems more agreed, taken as a whole, about the artistic unity and success of The Stone Angel than it is, to date, about the over-all artistic success of The Diviners.

to do with the inner struggles of a proud and self-willed individual who, in reflecting upon the failures and joylessness of her past life (personal and family life), seeks to comprehend the reasons for her joylessness and the true meaning of her life. Some, as do Davies, Pickrel, and Read, emphasize the anatomy of pride itself which this novel provides for us in such careful and convincing detail; others focus more sharply upon specific aspects of Hagar Shipley's inner experience which, while they derive directly from her proud stance, are yet clearly distinguishable from it. Thus, New suggests that an important question posed by the troubled experiences of Hagar is: how can a proud and isolated person come to know herself, and others, at deeper levels? New also introduces, into his discussion of The Stone Angel, the notion of the conflict between desire and reality, inner expectation and actual event, as another aspect of the internal experience of this proud individual, Hagar Shipley. Clara Thomas, and Denyse Forman and Uma Parameswaran, are more disposed to accentuate, in Hagar's experience, the agonized search of a proud and domineering woman for the sources of true freedom and joy.

In the case of Laurence's next novel, A Jest of God, pride as a major obstacle in the individual's struggle to see and accept her real self - here the individual (the main protagonist) is a younger and single woman, Rachel Cameron - is also involved in the thematic thrust of the novel, according to some reviewers at any rate. George Bowering is one who takes this view and elaborates it with both critical breadth and reasoned care. In his analysis the pride of Rachel Cameron is seen to be subtly related to both her inner and outer life - to her own troubled

dreams, inhibitions, and fears, as well as to her characteristic responses to her mother, to Calla, to Nick Kazlik, to her (dead) father, and to the townsfolk as such. D. Forman and U. Parameswaran, H. J. Rosengarten, S. Djwa, and C. Thomas are clearly not oblivious to the importance of this element of pride, in Rachel Cameron's personal dilemma, but attach more importance in their considerations of A Jest of God to the factor of Rachel's personal fears and to their various manifestations, and to their implications for her, in life. Bowering's analysis is, however, more incisive and penetrating than that of any of the others referred to here, in terms of its own defined parameters. However, only S. Djwa and C. Thomas - Djwa less knowingly so than Thomas, perhaps - go on to suggest that these experiences of Rachel Cameron (her struggles with pride and fear in the attempt to win through to a sense of personal freedom and confidence) provide another variation on the more general theme of the "growth of the human spirit into self-knowledge and freedom."

C. M. McLay diverges from the views of most other critics in fixing upon the sense of aloneness and isolation and the need (for Rachel Cameron) to accept this essential aloneness and mortality of the individual as necessary facts of life, as the central theme of A Jest of God. McLay's argument can in fact be almost wholly summed up in two or three key sentences from her essay, "Every Man is an Island":

Yet Rachel's acceptance of life is attributable to her acceptance of her central predicament, her essential aloneness. She cannot escape through dream, fantasy or nightmare . . . And with this comes the simultaneous realization that every one else is alone too, that even the closest human relationship cannot cross the barrier of self. (p. 177)

A Bird in the House, here viewed as a novel rather than as the

closely-knit collection of short stories which it in fact is, has not received much serious critical study. The few who have ventured to comment upon its overall structure and thrust suggest that what links these stories together thematically is, above all, the psychological growth of its young but acutely perceptive narrator, Vanessa MacLeod, who in the very process of daily observing those so very near to her (family members and near relatives), comes to understand both them and herself more deeply. Kent Thompson and Henry Kreisel, it is true, only hint at this conclusion, in their all too brief references to A Bird in the House, and George Woodcock declines to elaborate further upon a concluding, and intriguing, assertion: "until in the end the child moves into the age when those emotions become identical with hers, and the perceiver becomes the perceived" (p. 148). Clara Thomas, however, in The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence, develops this indicated theme with some fulness, even suggesting that the maturing experiences of Vanessa MacLeod directly reflect remembered stages of growth, as person and writer, in Margaret Laurence herself.⁹ Thomas' discussion also takes account of Laurence's skilful management of two narrative voices, her technique of "double exposures" (to use Thomas' phrase), in bringing together the earlier experiences of the younger Vanessa and the present understandings of the older Vanessa.

Margaret Lawrence, in an essay "Time and the Narrative Voice,"

⁹This suggestion would seem to be confirmed by comments made by Margaret Laurence herself in the course of an interview transcribed by Clara Thomas. See "A Conversation about Literature: an Interview with Margaret Laurence and Irving Layton," Journal of Canadian Fiction, 1 (Winter, 1972) 65 - 9.

includes the above theme as one, at least, of several which - as she comprehends her own work - are conveyed within the stories of A Bird in the House. She remarks with specific reference to one of the stories ("To Set Our House in Order"):

It is actually a story about the generations, about the pain and bewilderment of one's knowledge of other people, about the reality of other people which is one way of realizing one's own reality, about the fluctuating and accidental quality of life, and perhaps more than anything, about the strangeness and mystery of the very concepts of past, present and future. (p. 159)

In the case of The Fire-Dwellers, some critics discover a more extended treatment of a theme already touched upon in The Stone Angel and A Jest of God: the difficulties involved in the struggling efforts of individuals to establish honest and meaningful communication between themselves and others who are necessarily involved in their lives. Diana Loercher would appear to be among these since her review concentrates largely upon Stacey MacAindre's deep need to relate more intimately to the members of her family and upon those "redemptive moments" in the family's experience when such intimacy is again rediscovered or even deepened. Loercher feels, however, that this novel is weakened, in its central thematic thrust, by the author's intrusion of extraneous topics such as "God, death, war, social injustice, etc." (p. 204). Joan Hind-Smith does not hesitate at all in asserting that "one of the universal themes in The Fire-Dwellers is the starvation of human relationships when there is no communication" (p. 46), but speaks of Stacey's continuing struggle to properly define and accept her role in life (as wife and mother) as a second and related theme. Douglas Spettigue also speaks of the "solitary self" in each of us which the experiences of Stacey

illustrate for us in an archetypal sort of way.¹⁰ Barbara Hehner is another who regards "the difficulty of achieving genuine communication between individuals" as one, but only one, of several themes which link all of Laurence's earlier Manawaka novels.¹¹

Allan Bevan also comments upon the "condition of aloneness" (p.207) which marks all of the characters in The Fire-Dwellers, but regards the individual's sense of aloneness and his (her) inability to relate to others easily as, once again, only one of several closely related themes. The novel, Bevan feels, is also about the frustrating discrepancy between external appearances and inward realities, and about the grim struggle, generally, of middle-class urbanites in our contemporary world.

D. Forman and U. Parameswaran return to the earlier suggestion of J. Hind-Smith that a major thematic motif in The Fire-Dwellers is the matter of discovering and coming to terms with one's essential role in life. "She (Stacey MacAindra)," they remark, "has been offered a chance to escape, to break the chains that bind her to a life of unending routine but only when Stacey realizes that she has this choice does she know that she will never give up her present life, no matter how unsatisfactory, for any other" (p. 100).

Clara Thomas sets these suggested thematic elements, in The Fire-

¹⁰Douglas O. Spettigue, Review of The Fire-Dwellers, Queen's Quarterly, 76 (Winter, 1969), 722 - 4.

¹¹Barbara Hehner, "River of Now and Then: Margaret Laurence's Narratives," Canadian Literature, Number 74 (Autumn, 1977), 40 - 57.

Dwellers, into a broader and unified perspective by incorporating them into a more fundamental theme: the individual's quest for a clearer recognition and more assured acceptance of his (her) own identity, whatever the particular context of his (her) situation or dilemma in life may be. Her analysis of specific fictional techniques used to convey these internal anxieties and aspirations of Stacey MacAindra serves to strengthen her argument for the centrality of this broader theme in the novel. She does not, however, examine the ways in which this formulation of the theme of The Fire-Dwellers is illustrated also in the experiences of characters other than Stacey.

Phyllis Grosskurth, like so many of the critics here under review, is frustratingly brief and sketchy in her discussion of the themes of The Fire-Dwellers. But one sentence early in her review, made in reference to the main character, suggests that she shares Thomas' view concerning the central theme of the novel: "Lonely, bewildered, frustrated, desperately trying to find the person she once thought she was - in other words, a waif caught up in the universal search for identity" (p. 194).

Margaret Laurence herself, on the other hand, does not perceive this sort of thematic unity in The Fire-Dwellers, if her remarks in a recent essay are to be trusted:

I had - or felt I had - perhaps rather too many interlocking themes to deal with, but these were all inherent in Stacey and her situation, so no one thread could be abandoned without weakening the total structure, and yet I was appalled at the number of threads...to me at the time they seemed multitudinous - the relationship between a man and woman who have been married many years, when the woman does not have any real area of her life which is her own; the frustration of Stacey in trying to communicate with Mac and her ultimate realization of his bravery and his terrible hangups in having to deal with his problems totally alone; the relationship between

generations - Stacey and Mac in relation to their children, as parents, and to their own parents as children; the sense of anguish and fear which Stacey feels in bringing up her kids in a world on fire; and also the question of a middle-aged woman having to accept middle age and learn how to cope with the essential fact of life, which is that the process of life is irreversible.¹²

Margaret Laurence's most recent novel, The Diviners, is evidently still something of a mystery to critics with respect to questions of both theme and form, although it has evoked considerable praise as such in Canada as well as abroad.¹³ Marge Piercy does not believe that The Diviners is an altogether successful novel and asserts, in what is itself (regrettably) only a very superficial and shoddy review of the book, that the "orphaned childhood in Manawaka" ("Memorybank movies") portions of the novel are livelier and more convincing than those parts which pertain to the events surrounding the middle-aged Morag of the present. She suggests, but only very vaguely so, that the major thematic thrust of the one sequence of episodes (the childhood of Morag Gunn) is the survival, amidst many obstacles, of a tough-minded and determined girl and that the thrust of the other (present-day) sequence is the gradual growth of a promising writer. The latter theme is conveyed, to use Piercy's own terms, in a rather "perfunctory" and "vaguely romanticized" manner (p. 213). Marian Engel is more charitable in her over-all estimate of the artistic worth of the novel, but her chatty article cannot settle upon any specific themes whatever!

¹²Quoted from Laurence's article "Gadgetry or Growing" Form and Voice in the Novel" (undated) in Clara Thomas, The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence, pp. 125 - 6.

¹³Some idea of the very widespread response to The Diviners, when it was first published (1974), may be gained from C. Thomas' bibliography (pp. 209 - 12) in The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence.

In contrast to both of these reviewers, Barbara Hehner and Allan Bevan discover a variety of themes in The Diviners. In an article which is really more concerned with the narrative structure of the novel than with its themes, Hehner nevertheless calls attention to what she describes as "Canadian literary themes" - the themes of communication between individuals and the "limits placed on personal freedom by family and ethnic background."¹⁴ These particular themes, Hehner suggests, "are given a more positive turn in this last novel of Laurence than they received in her earlier novels. Other thematic motifs that surface in The Diviners, according to Hehner, are "the search for a Canadian identity, the discrimination encountered by women, the unjust treatment of native people, and...ecology."¹⁵ The theme however, which Hehner considers a "major" one in the novel is the "process of myth-making" as it pertains to the experiences of exile and dispossession among individuals as well as groups.

Allan Bevan, in his highly favourable review of The Diviners, posits several interlocking themes: the inner nature and external impact and influence of "artist figures" (whether they be singers, writers, dancers, business men, diviners of wells or diviners of human nature), the power and significance of myth-making in human experience, the impact of the past upon the present and, above all, the growth in insight and self-acceptance and personal freedom of the individual who wrestles honestly and relentlessly

¹⁴ Barbara Hehner, op. cit., p. 41.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 41.

with himself (herself).

Hind-Smith reiterates some of the same themes (essentially) in her own consideration of The Diviners: the practical significance of cultural or family myths and the actual difficulty of distinguishing between truth and myth in human experience, and the personal necessity of coming to terms with one's own past. To these she adds a third theme (one included already in Barbara Hehner's list above): the dilemma and distress experienced by the dispossessed of our land (Canada). Hind-Smith's primary reference, here, is to the Metis characters in the novel; but by symbolic extension these "dispossessed" also come to include other excluded or despised groups, in our country as elsewhere.

Laurence's close friend, Margaret Atwood, describes The Diviners as a "large and complex book, an orchestration of themes as well as a collection of stories" (p. 39). Atwood sums up this medley of themes rather concisely in several statements:

On one level it's a survival manual, one woman's difficult attempt to live both as a woman and as a practising artist, a 'diviner'
On another level, The Diviners turns Manawaka upside down and inside out, revealing the seamy underside of that bastion of polite hypocrisy. On yet another level, it explores the need for ancestors, legends, a past that is meaningful both personally and culturally.¹⁶

These several themes are not further discussed by Atwood to show how they may be artistically linked to each other in the novel or how they may recapitulate themes enfolded in Laurence's earlier novels. This omission, once again, constitutes a serious limitation of her review from the point

¹⁶These particular statements, however, are not included in Atwood's article as reprinted in W.H. New's collection of essays; they appear in a modified report prepared by her for the Book of the Month Club News (September, 1974).

of view of those, at any rate, who (like myself) are interested in the question of basic and common themes in Laurence's fiction.

Tom Saunders, in a review of The Diviners written for the Winnipeg Free Press, is another critic who finds a plenitude of thematic "issues" in the novel, but who contends that running through all the diversity is a "recurring theme that holds everything together - the author's and her main characters' search for their roots while at the same time reaching for freedom and self-realization in their individual lives."¹⁷

Clara Thomas' study of The Diviners, in her The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence, is still the most extensive and instructive one available at present. Thomas also perceives a variety of interwoven themes and motifs in the novel, and is able to clarify their general relationship to each other and to illustrate the artistic devices used, and the kind of artistic success achieved, by Laurence in bringing these several themes and motifs together. She regards the narrative structure and devices in The Diviners as deliberately epic, in the author's intention, and as successfully framing the various facets of Morag Gunn's "pilgrimage" which, at its deepest and broadest level, is an "exploration of the meaning of a life, a quest, and, finally, the affirmation of a life's meaning."¹⁸ Thomas allows that all of the following thematic motifs may be present - the precise relationship of the past to the

¹⁷ Saunders' review, entitled "The Tie that Binds", appeared in the June 1, 1974 issue of the Winnipeg Free Press (p. 20).

¹⁸ Clara Thomas, op. cit., p. 168 ; see also p. 131.

present within individual experience, the sense of alienation within individuals and their struggling endeavours to draw nearer to others, the injustices suffered by dispossessed individuals or groups, the difficulty of distinguishing between fact and fiction (illusion) in human experience, the inward development of the writer (or "artist," as such), the tension between "inherited patterns" in life and personal freedom and responsibility - but these are only aspects, finally, of a larger, epic-like, theme and each motif embodies some felt aspect of that fundamental "search for home" which is Morag Gunn's deepest experience as a "journeying stranger." Indeed, Clara Thomas goes as far as to esteem The Diviners a distinctly religious epic, not unlike Milton's Paradise Lost in its over-all intention and effect, in which a "cumulative statement" is rendered "about the mysterious presence, not only of grace, but also of design within and through all the universe and its creatures."¹⁹ This rather idealized reading of the novel may be shared by very few other critics of Laurence's fiction, but Thomas advances it without any hesitation whatever.

Up to this point, my review of critical opinion with respect to themes and motifs in Margaret Laurence's fiction has taken account of her novels individually, not collectively. Several critics have also ventured to speak of more general themes as they pervade and dominate some, and possibly all, of her novels. The opinions and arguments of those critics bear special interest, of course, for one who (like myself) contends that one overarching theme permeates all of Laurence's novels and, in one way or another, subsumes or links the diverse and more narrowly -

¹⁹Clara Thomas, op. cit., p. 170.

focused motifs which have been proposed in the case of individual novels.

As early as 1972, the question of common themes - they described them as "refrains" and "echoes" in the title of their article - in Margaret Laurence's earlier fiction was raised by Denyse Forman and Uma Parameswaran. In this article Forman and Parameswaran suggest that a "refrain" (or thematic motif) which recurs in The Stone Angel, A Jest of God, and The Fire-Dwellers is that of "motherhood, the relationship between a woman and her children" (p. 86). While Rachel Cameron, in A Jest of God, continues to yearn for genuine motherhood, after a most disillusioning experience, and is left to wonder whether her "children" will always be "temporary" ones, Hagar Shipley, in The Stone Angel, comes to realize, too late, that her possessive and coercive mother-love has already damaged her sons and their prospects for happiness. Stacey MacAindra, on the other hand, in The Fire-Dwellers, is still very much in the throes of contending with three young children and an uncommunicative husband as a middle-aged and always anxious housewife. Forman and Parameswaran also speak of a recurring thematic note in the endings of these three novels: "there is no final resolution to life's predicament, that life has its moments of vision which spark a vital awareness in people but provide no automatic and instant relief" (p. 99). But it is the "struggle to know what is the optimum admixture of social conformism and individualism" and the "search for identity and personal freedom" (p. 86), in the experiences of the main characters in these novels, which are actually explored most fully in their article. And the lingering impression, perhaps an unintended one, conveyed by this latter

emphasis is that the authors do detect an underlying and connecting theme in the three novels reviewed which is not unlike the one which Clara Thomas proposes as the central theme of all Laurence's Canadian novels.

In the course of her study of Laurence's affinities (as novelist) with Sinclair Ross, Sandra Djwa also speaks of a broader theme that links at least four of Laurence's novels: This Side Jordan, The Stone Angel, A Jest of God, and The Fire-Dwellers. Because Djwa sets her discussion of Laurence and Ross into an ostensibly religious context, she formulates this theme as the "development of a new covenant with the self, mythically described as between God and man, and in a parallel sense, between man and the wider human community" (p. 82), but her analysis of the relevant experiences of the main characters in the indicated novels proceeds (at bottom) on psychological rather than religious considerations. Djwa acknowledges as much, in a sense, when she likens Laurence to the psychologist Carl Jung in her (Laurence's) tendency to "locate God in the human soul and to . . . define religion in terms of the Jungian 'numinous experience' which can lead to psychological change" (p. 81). These four novels of Laurence's, Djwa remarks towards the end of her essay, are all concerned, finally, with the "growth of the god-like spirit or psyche within the individual, a growth which is synonymous with self-realization" (p. 82). Set down in these terms, Djwa's conception of what she regards as a central theme in Laurence's fiction is - as seems to be true in the view of Forman and Parameswaran - akin to Thomas' understanding of it.

In his paper presented to the Third Annual Conference of the Canadian Council of Teachers of English (1970), Walter Swayze also

suggests the prevalence of a common theme in Margaret Laurence's fiction.²⁰ Taking issue with Laurence's own comment, in "Ten Years' Sentences," that the theme of the Canadian novels (survival of individualism) is different from that of her African works (the nature of freedom), Swayze asserts that her novels, taken as a whole, reflect only variations on a common theme, the theme, namely, that freedom and hope remain as long as the individual can experience his moments of vision, his awareness of freedom and responsibility, and his chance to survive.

William New, in his own introduction to the Margaret Laurence volume which constitutes the main reference point for this survey of critical opinion, suggests that in a sense all of Laurence's work can be read as a search of the individual for the "reconciliation" of contending elements within his (her) personality - forces of the mind and feelings of the heart, the urge to assess and organize personal experience and the urge to remain emotionally free and spontaneous, the impulse to become independent of one's ancestral roots and the felt need to come to terms with them. This is a tantalizing suggestion that deserves more comprehensive and penetrating study than it has received to date. New himself only alludes to it in this introductory essay which is intended to introduce the views of the critics included in his anthology rather than to develop his own suggestions. Nevertheless, that New's suggested theme has close affinities with the common theme projected by Thomas and

²⁰Walter E. Swayze, "The Odyssey of Margaret Laurence", Paper presented to the Third Annual Conference of the Canadian Council of Teachers of English, Hotel Fort Garry, Winnipeg, Manitoba, August 20, 1970.

Djwa, seems clear.

It is Clara Thomas, as indicated already, who provides us with perhaps the most deliberate projection, among these many critics and reviewers, of a central theme in Margaret Laurence's novels viewed as a whole. Already in her earlier work on Laurence, Thomas had moved towards the assertion of one theme underlying all of Laurence's novels published until 1969 (excluding The Diviners, therefore). She had remarked, in summing up the thematic thrust of Laurence's novels, that "an astonished wonder at the sheer, indomitable vitality of man, of nature and above all, of the spirit, is central to her perception and on it she builds with both awe and 'including laughter,' her patterns of meaning."²¹ In The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence, Thomas' assertion of a common theme becomes more explicit and precise. "'The spirit in the ascent'," she declares with great conciseness in the concluding chapter of her book, "is also the core and the containing theme of all Margaret Laurence's work."²² And in the same chapter (although excluding This Side Jordan from her view, this time) she explains her meaning more fully:

Each of these women is battered by events, but also moves of her own free will towards self-recognition, self-acceptance, and the awareness of a limited freedom. They are all intensely and introspectively aware of themselves, but the demons of self-dramatization, self-pity, and sentimentality do not obscure their vision or block their progress. They endure and they grow, gradually shaking off debilitating guilts and fears and learning to accept themselves as well as others with tolerance and love. That same journey is, of course, the necessary

²¹ Clara Thomas, Margaret Laurence, p. 59.

²² Clara Thomas, The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence, p. 189.

foundation of any individual's liberation.²³

Nevertheless, even Thomas' more comprehensive studies of Margaret Laurence do not investigate, in a rigorous and systematic manner, the emergence of this underlying theme, in either individual novels or in Laurence's fiction as a developing whole. Her several indications of this theme, though explicit enough in themselves (finally), strike one as intelligent flashes of insight which are inserted rather than argued towards. They do not derive, logically and cumulatively, from a thoroughgoing analysis of each of Laurence's novels.

The general impact and implications of this quick survey of critical opinion would seem to be that, while much vagueness and uncertainty of view still prevail, a measure of consensus is gradually emerging which suggests that if any one theme does pervade and dominate the whole of Laurence's fiction, it is the broad theme that involves, in a variety of particular contexts, the individual's search for self-understanding and self-acceptance and for meaningful survival in a troubled world of change. And it is my own conviction that this growing consensus gives expression to an entirely sound and defensible position concerning the thematic content and impact of Laurence's fictional works regarded as a body. The validity of this conviction (or assumption) needs to be argued and illustrated in more rigorous and compelling terms than has hitherto been the case.

There are some general considerations, apart from the views of critics on the matter, which argue for the prevalence in Margaret Laurence's

²³Ibid., p. 193.

fiction, of the central theme suggested above. And it may be well for me to advance these general considerations before returning to the indicated need for a more rigorous analysis of Laurence's novels themselves. One of these general considerations, intimated earlier, is the obvious fact that Margaret Laurence's compelling interest and inspiration in the writing of fiction has been a distinctly psychological one from the beginning. By this assertion I mean, for one thing, that Laurence, as novelist, has always been more intrigued (finally) by the inner processes and experiences of her characters than by the external occurrences which surround and affect them. By it I mean, also, that Laurence's persistent explorations, in fiction, of the ways in which individuals act and react, reflect upon their own experiences and knowingly change in the midst of them, have been closely linked to her own search for self-understanding. Subjective support for this general contention may certainly be gathered from Margaret Laurence's own remarks, set down in various articles and recorded interviews across the years.

Laurence's repeated admissions, when asked to comment upon the actual process involved in writing a novel, that individual characters, not events or themes or narrative plotting, come first and abide with her constantly until the story is completed, all point in the direction of the above contention. In "Ten Years' Sentences," to cite one specific example, in attempting to assess the changes which have actually occurred in her fictional writing, Lawrence confides that she has, if anything, "become more involved with novels of character and with trying to feel how it would be to be that particular person" (p. 23). Other changes

have come - a stronger concern with form in writing, a more individual idiom and way of thought, a slightly more pessimistic view of life generally -, but it is this passionate interest in the psychology of character that has remained constant and uppermost for her as a writer of novels.

Her forward to her own recent collection of essays, Heart of a Stranger, reiterates the same point:

For what we are trying to do is to understand those others who are our fictional characters, somehow to gain entrance to their minds and feelings, to respect them for themselves as human individuals and to portray them as truly as we can.²⁴

Even when she is concerned with the handling of specific fictional techniques (mainly), as she is in "Time and the Narrative Voice", Margaret Laurence returns repeatedly, and excitedly, to this notion of entering her own characters imaginatively and reliving their experiences with them. And she acknowledges again, in the latter essay, that "this means of writing fiction oriented almost totally towards an individual character is obviously not the only way, but it appears to be the only way I can write" (p. 157).

In her article "Sources", Laurence testifies to the close affinity between her fictional interest in the development of character and her personal quest for self-understanding and self-acceptance in quite unambiguous terms. Her article opens with a striking quotation from Graham Greene:

The creative writer perceives his world once and for all in childhood

²⁴Margaret Laurence, Heart of a Stranger (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), p. 12.

and adolescence, and his whole career is an effort to illustrate his private world in terms of the great public world we all share . . . ; (p. 12)

it then illustrates the essential truth of Greene's statement in terms of her own fictional endeavours. "For the writer", she asserts, "one way of discovering oneself, . . . lies through the exploration inherent in the writing itself" (p. 12). The crucial experiences of all the main characters in her novels, Laurence concedes, are somehow related to her strong interest in her own past and to her struggling attempts to come to terms with that past. Nevertheless, only one of her novels, she insists, is really autobiographical in nature, namely A Bird in the House.

A second general consideration which argues for the centrality of this particular theme in Laurence's fiction viewed as a whole, pertains to the nature of her interest in narrative form and voice. Though she has, as she tells us in "Ten Years' Sentences", become increasingly more concerned with form as such, it is those aspects of fictional form and technique which enable her to portray the inner activity and growth of her (main) characters - their interactions with the recollected past and with personal anticipations of the future, their changing insights into themselves and subjective appraisals of life - more vividly and convincingly, which concern her first and foremost.

Once again it is her article "Time and the Narrative Voice" which confirms such a contention in its insistence on the "paramount importance", for her, of the "treatment of time" and the "handling of the narrative voice" (p. 156). In her analysis of two stories from A Bird in the House she endeavours to show how the creation of authentic narrative (speaking)

voices for Vanessa MacLeod, as the younger and (then) the older Vanessa, and how the choice of certain portions of the past (personal, family, and ancestral) which Vanessa must recall for us in order to illuminate her growing insight into others and into herself, were most crucial concerns and achievements for her in the writing of A Bird in the House. These illustrations from A Bird in the House, Margaret Laurence makes clear in this article, are indicative of her approach generally, and her various experiments with technique - whether minor deviations from the usual first-person narrative stance or minor variations upon the usual flash-back device - are attempts (finally) to bring the inner life and growth of her principal characters into sharper focus for her readers.

Barbara Hehner, in the course of an extended discussion of Laurence's narrative techniques generally, also comments briefly upon this rather conspicuous connection between thematic interest and fictional techniques. Hehner remarks:

The first-person technique provides Laurence as a writer with the feeling that she is sharing another person's mind while, by strictly limiting the point of view of each novel, it conveys to the reader Laurence's conviction that human beings are hopelessly isolated from each other.²⁵

Hehner points out both the strengths and weaknesses of Laurence's preferred techniques in writing, giving special attention in the article to her latest novel (The Diviners), and comes to the conclusion that her last novel, in consequence of Laurence's attempt to exploit fully all she hitherto had learned about these techniques, carries far too many obtrusive narrative

²⁵ Barbara Hehner, op. cit., p. 42.

devices within it! What particularly interests me at this stage is Hehner's observation that Lawrence's narrative devices (whether always entirely successful or not) are knowingly linked, in the author's mind, to her endeavours to capture the "inner voices" of her characters and to convey their subjective experiences and discoveries to the reader with a sense of convincing reality.

On both sides, then, of her actual work as a novelist (content and form), Margaret Laurence betrays a constant and fundamental preoccupation with the subjective experiences and development of her leading characters. And it is her characters' struggles for greater self-understanding and self-acceptance, and their acute awareness of these struggles, which call forth her most intense and inspired efforts. This second consideration, I contend, also argues (on general grounds) for the dominance of the above indicated theme throughout Laurence's fiction.

Nevertheless, it is primarily to the close and perceptive examination of individual novels that we must look for persuasive conclusions on the question of a central theme in Laurence's fiction regarded in its entirety. Such examinations need to take note, I repeat, not only of the crucial experiences and discoveries of Laurence's central protagonists - as is the case with very nearly all of the critics and reviewers included in my introductory survey of opinion - but also of that which happens to her secondary characters. Moreover, such analyses need to consider the kinds of connections which may exist among apparently distinct themes and sub-themes in a given novel. It may turn out that these several themes, or sub-themes, can be logically subsumed under a larger theme which effec-

tively projects the meaning of the novel as a whole. And once again, very few of the critics reviewed above have explored the possibility of such thematic connections with critical interest and care.

It is my purpose in this study to defend the thesis that a central theme pervades, and holds together, the entire body of Laurence's fiction and this by examining one novel of hers in considerable detail, and several other novels more summarily, along the lines indicated in the preceding paragraph. I have selected This Side Jordan for rather detailed study in order to demonstrate, if I can, that already here, at the very beginning of Laurence's fictional career, this broad theme of the individual's search for self-understanding and self-acceptance is present and binds together the most significant experiences and discoveries of its characters. My examination (in chapter two) of This Side Jordan attempts to establish the centrality of the above theme in terms of an analysis of the experiences and insights of the characters (main and secondary) themselves and in terms, also, of an analysis of the relationship that obtains between the one theme, the movement of Ghana towards political independence, and the other theme, the individual's progress towards self-understanding and self-affirmation. The need to begin with This Side Jordan, in our search for an underlying and integrating theme in Margaret Laurence's fiction, is rendered all the more conspicuous by the fact that critics have so largely ignored it, both as a novel in its own right²⁶ and as a novel that possibly bears close thematic connections with Laurence's later novels.

²⁶Clara Thomas and G.D. Killam are in fact the only two critics who have, insofar as I know, discussed it with any fullness at all.

CHAPTER TWO: THE THEME EXAMINED IN THIS SIDE JORDAN.

In This Side Jordan, Laurence's first published novel, the theme of self-discovery and self-acceptance within individual experience is by no means merely a marginal one which must be laboriously searched out and skillfully retrieved from the hidden crannies of symbolic imagery or the subtle nuances of spoken dialogue. The theme asserts itself on every hand and emerges readily from a consideration of the salient experiences of all the major and some of the secondary characters as well.

This indicated theme has its conspicuous counterpart in the public aspirations and struggles towards political and cultural independence of Ghana, which country provides the larger, and mainly external, setting of the novel. Indeed the two themes - or motifs - are not merely juxtaposed but deliberately interlaced so as to reflect and reinforce each other in a variety of ways within the context of the novel. But while the broader setting of This Side Jordan is vividly and authentically conveyed in terms of the political and cultural situation of Ghana as a nation, just prior to her independence (in 1957), its primary and persistent thrust remains the internal experience of the individual - his often troubled yet unavoidable journey towards (and sometimes away from) self-understanding and self-acceptance. Clara Thomas, in her recent book, The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence, has expressed my own conviction in this matter in very concise terms: "the foundation strength of This Side Jordan ... is Margaret Laurence's passionate insistence on the

dignity of the individual. This is the solid inner drumbeat of the novel."¹

Laurence's choice of the particular historical situation which provides the broader framework within which the characters of This Side Jordan move and have their being, was a wise one. Her own rather intimate knowledge of Ghana enabled her - to state an obvious fact here - to comprehend more accurately the thoughts and feelings of its people, the characteristic features of its culture (in city and village), and the essential nature of the conflict which the movement towards political independence created for both Ghanaians and the colonial Englishmen in Ghana. The choice was a wise one, further, in that it allowed her to relate developments within the experience of the nation as a whole to developments within the experience of the major characters themselves in ways which frequently set the latter into more dramatic relief for us. One might, of course, argue that the relationship between these concurrent developments, in This Side Jordan, has not been rendered with the kind of precision, or profundity, that fully satisfies the sociologist or social philosopher. Nevertheless, the author's attempt to establish a meaningful connection between these parallel developments does achieve more than ordinary success, from an artistic perspective, time and time again.

The suggestive connotations of the novel's title, a short phrase borrowed directly from the biblical text (in Joshua 1:15), are expressly indicated and further developed in a variety of ways so as to leave no doubt about this intended connection between the two themes. Even to

¹Clara Thomas, The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), p. 58.

those only casually acquainted with the Scriptural text surrounding "this side Jordan", the phrase recalls an ancient and long-enslaved people's journey towards a promised land and its struggling and yet hopeful endeavours to take full possession of it. The people of Ghana are caught up in a pilgrimage towards political freedom and national identity and well-being which bear conspicuous, if mainly surface, similarities to the journey of ancient Israel towards nationhood.

Margaret Laurence projects Ghana's audacious but awkward pilgrimage towards the realization of her long-sustained dream in a variety of contexts and by a variety of means, some of which are admittedly more intrusive and inartistic in their over-all effect than others. She suggests both the unsteadiness and inevitability of this journey towards a new Ghana by juxtaposing old and new - that is, old and new attitudes and modes of behaviour in the life of contemporary society. A first instance of this kind of juxtaposition appears in the opening pages of the novel. West African "highlife", in city restaurant and nightclub for instance, has acquired a new tempo, a new restlessness; "ancient drums could no longer summon the people who danced here".² But, Laurence adds,

the old rhythms still beat strongly in this highlife in the centre of Accra, amid the taxi horns, just as a few miles away, in Jamestown or Labadi, they pulsed through the drums while the fetish priestess with ash-smearred cheeks whirled to express the unutterable. (p. 3)

Her vivid and parallel description of the "climate of change" in the Englishmen's "Club" (in chapter 8) is another instance of Laurence's en-

²Margaret Laurence, This Side Jordan (London: Macmillan and Company, 1961), p. 2. All succeeding references apply to this edition of the novel.

deavour to set the old and the new side by side:

The Club was the last sanctuary of whitemen, yet even here the present climate of change was apparent.

It might have been all right in the old days, when everyone knew everyone else and the Club was a gathering place of the clan. The exiles of three generations had met here to drink and to mourn the lost island home for which they longed but to which they did not want to return until they were old. One could almost see them, those mythical men, sitting here on the stoep where hibiscus flowers drooped half-asleep and the niim branches shushed throughout the hot quiet night. (p. 140)

The old and the new in Ghanaian society are suggestively linked, by way of contrasting references to past and present, on the part of the characters themselves. James Thayer, the aging and increasingly disillusioned manager of Allkirk, Moore and Bright, reflects upon the African as he once was (in the hinterland) and now is (in the modern city):

When I first came here, . . . insolence was practically unheard of. Even today, the bush African is all right. If his belly's full, that's all he's worried about. But when they move to the cities - look at them! They get cheeky as the devil, and every boat-boy thinks he has a right to a Jaguar. That's Free-Dom for you. (p. 7)

Thayer ruefully remarks, on another occasion, upon the changes which Africanization threatens to intrude into their Textile Branch:

You'd hardly believe how small it was when I came here. A few bolts of cloth - most of it striped, I recall. All but one, yellow and brown, patterned like leopardskin. D'you know, we still sell that pattern? We had only one clerk, and he could hardly write his own name. We used to administer a smart kick to his backside when he made mistakes - he learned pretty quickly, I can tell you. There was no nonsense in those days. An African did what he was told. And now - they want to run my department. Well, I won't have it. I promise you that. (p. 92)

At the other extreme, we find Miranda, Johnnie Kestoe's wife, engaging the reluctant Nathaniel Emegbe in conversation at the exhibition of landscapes in the British Council Building:

I think these exhibitions are a good idea . . . It must do something to encourage African artists. There aren't many yet, are there? Of course, it's no wonder. The early missions must have done a great deal to wipe out indigenous art here. By forbidding image-making, I mean. (p. 42)

Her well-meaning but tactless comment to Nathaniel again suggests old and new attitudes, among Englishmen particularly, towards African art in this instance.

Nathaniel's own aspirations and hopes are sometimes intertwined with backward glances into the world of his childhood and youth. These intersections of past and present, in Nathaniel's reflecting mind, are represented so as deliberately to suggest not only the changes which he is undergoing in his personal life but also the cultural and political transition which the country (Ghana) as such is experiencing. Indeed, the optimistic conclusion of the novel rests heavily upon this parallelism between Nathaniel Amegbe's personal progress, and the progress of Ghana as a nation, towards self-understanding and self-affirmation (identity and independence).

The old and the new in contemporary Ghana are also conjoined in the revealing presentation of what, at first sight, appear to be only small incidents in the course of everyday life. For example, a Ghanaian boy - ordinarily very diffident in such circumstances - musters up enough courage to ask the aloof Englishwoman, Cora Thayer, for a dance (at the Wyoming Nightclub) and endures the anticipated rebuff with unexpected self-assurance and dignity. A second example: when the news that the London Office has ordered a "speed-up policy of Africanization" for the Allkirk, Moore and Bright firm (Textile Branch) leaks out to the African clerks, we are told that they

could scarcely conceal their jubilation. Nothing was openly spoken. But a snatch of highlife tune was whistled, and an answering snicker, soft as rain, pattered through the room. (p. 93)

Again, when Kojo, the stores clerk at the firm, is insulted by the personnel manager (Bedford Cunningham), he does not respond with the usual attitude of defiance or sullen hatred:

. . . this time it was different. Kojo looked patient, indifferent, almost bored. Johnnie knew, with sudden sick certainty, that Kojo could handle Bedford's job quite easily, if he were given the chance. (p. 137)

The tense confrontations between Nathaniel and his uncle (Adjei Boateng), in connection with the latter's attempt to persuade his nephew to return to the district of his birth and to become clerk to an African chief, constitute another incident in the course of which old and new ways are powerfully juxtaposed (chapter six). It is scenes such as these, describing very ordinary occurrences in themselves, which often provide more dramatic and convincing glimpses of a "changing Ghana" than do the very explicit conversations of Englishmen and Englishwomen about the gloomy implications of the Africanization program, for their firm and for themselves.

Margaret Laurence conveys the political inexperience and naiveté of Ghana, in its journey towards nationhood, largely through the disparaging remarks of English "colonials". Of course, these comments by Englishmen betray their own kinds of prejudice and pride. Bedford Cunningham, in conversation with his wife Helen and Johnnie Kestoe, remarks with obvious delight in the telling:

Speaking of the well-known African cluelessness, the other day I found one of my clerks reading a speech of Nkrumah's. So I said to him, 'now, Quansah, tell me truthfully - what the devil do you think you're

going to get out of Independence?' You won't believe this, but I swear it's absolutely true. He said, 'I have been told, sah, that every citizen of the new Ghana will own a car. I would like an Opel Kapitan.' What can you do with a chap like that? (p. 9)

And James Thayer, in angry response to the London Office word about speeding up the Africanization of his firm, shares his appraisal of "these Africans" with Johnnie Kestoe:

I know Africans, Johnnie. Trustworthy, efficient men who can handle an administrative type of job - they just don't exist.

But if they did exist - even if they did exist, by God, I wouldn't have them! I've been here for over thirty years and I never thought I'd see the day when common bush Africans (p. 91)

Johnnie, the accountant at the Allkirk, Moore and Bright firm, is another Englishman who comments negatively upon the political unrealism and ignorance of the Ghanaians generally. He sums up his feelings on the subject in one explosive outburst, after the dismal failure of the two boys who had been recommended to him by Nathaniel: "It's the way they all talk. How you people can prattle about Independence" (p. 204).

Johnnie's reaction to the people themselves and to their expectations of independence seems less subject to a personal sense of threat or fear of failure than is the case with either Bedford or James and to that extent it represents a more objective reaction, it may be added.

However, Laurence qualifies this rather general indication of Ghanaian naiveté about the realization of political and cultural aspirations by means of occasional suggestions of individual sagacity and insight. Certainly the Englishmen are not permitted to speak the only, or even the last word on the matter. Victor Edusei, the Oxford-trained journalist, though a nationalist in his own curious way, is perhaps typical

of that small group of enlightened Ghanaians who know that the achievement of political independence will not be the instant and adequate answer to all of the country's political and social problems. Early in the novel, he reminds Nathaniel, who is rather depressed by the reminder, that the Ghanaians are altogether too much a "race of dreamers". He remarks, in very confident tones:

One of these days we'll wake up and find that the trains have stopped running - no one could fix them. We just hoped they'd keep going by themselves. The farmers will still be using machete and hoe, while the people starve. And we will say in astonishment - 'But it's a rich country - where is the food?' The city will be piled six feet deep with the backwash from the sewers. The spitting cobra and the spider will be happily nesting in the Assembly buildings, and we will be sitting there gabbling about Ghana the Great (p. 52)

On another occasion, as Nathaniel lectures him about his need for a suitable wife, Victor comments upon Ghanaian ignorance in a similar vein:

You wait until after Independence. You'll see such oppression as you never believed possible. Only of course it'll be all right then - it'll be black men oppressing black men, and who could object to that? There'll be your Free-Dom for you - the right to be enslaved by your own kind. You can see it happening already. (pp. 117-8)

Nathaniel himself, though politically less astute than his friend Victor, is also vaguely aware of this prevailing naiveté among his countrymen. He muses upon his neighbours - mostly slum-dwellers - in the decaying suburb of Accra:

They went to the ju-ju man to get charms for curing, but never mind. Most of them were illiterate, shrewd and naive, suspicious and gullible. Any political shyster could move them with luxuriant promises. But never mind. They were strong. They would do something, do something. (pp. 45 - 6)

But Nathaniel comes to perceive the truth - and the perception of it is an important element in his personal struggle for greater self-under-

standing and self-fulfilment - that the political pilgrimage of his people will require a proper appreciation of their cultural and religious past and a proper integration of this appreciation with the acceptance of necessary changes (both political and cultural) in the country's present. But more on this matter later in the chapter.

Margaret Laurence is careful to intimate in This Side Jordan that ignorance or naiveté about the political process is not the only obstacle which hampers the Ghanaians in their movement towards national independence and identity. Lack of self-confidence, manifested in a variety of ways - sometimes alternating uncertainly with flashes of pride in typically human fashion - is another obstacle with which the Ghanaian people must contend. Nathaniel's first encounter with the Kestoes at the art exhibition, and his response to the unexpected question of Miranda Kestoe about his impression of a specific painting, may serve as an illustration here. Laurence comments thus on the feelings which accompany Nathaniel's response to Miranda's somewhat intimidating question:

Nathaniel felt awkward. He did not really like the picture. He had agreed only because he had been taken by surprise and could not think of anything else to say. He wondered now if the man thought he was one of those Africans who automatically agree with Europeans.

'Oh no, sir, not at all,' he said hastily. 'I assure you - I thought the picture was very good. I thought so before this lady asked me.'
'You would,' the European said rudely. (p. 41)

There is little doubt that this incident is intended to illuminate the personal struggle of Nathaniel first of all; but the author's use of the generic terms - "Africans" and "Europeans" - would suggest that it is also illustrative of the experience of Nathaniel's countrymen generally. In-

deed, this sense of insecurity, self-doubt, or anxiety afflicts most of the Ghanaian characters in This Side Jordan (Lamprey, the Highlife Boy, is an obvious exception), although some of them are more successful in hiding their uneasiness than others, and Laurence's regular though not obtrusive insistence upon this fact, in her portrayal of their experiences, is an implied comment, surely, on the mood of the Ghanaian people as a whole. The author's reflection upon the frustrated desires of Nathaniel and of Kumi and Awulatey, after the collapse of their contrived plan to secure jobs for these two boys at the Textile Branch, is as explicit as can be on this matter of Ghanaian insecurity and self-doubt, although it is also a comment upon Ghanaian egotism and covetousness as further obstacles to be overcome in the journey towards national identity and maturity.

So many desires. Kumi and Awulatey's desire to have jobs that were big and important. Nathaniel's desire to create a place of belonging for those who had no place. The desire to do something, be somebody. The desire to be God and the desire to wear a silk shirt.

How could the whiteman know? He could not know. He had everything. For him, tomorrow was now. How could he know what it was to need a mouthful of the promised land's sweetness now, now, while you still lived? (p. 208)

But Ghana's difficulties, in this pilgrimage towards national independence and identity, do not derive from the various shortcomings, the failings, of her own countrymen alone. The way in which Europeans in Ghana have, over the years, inhibited a proper self-regard among the native Ghanaians for their own religious and cultural heritage, by either deprecating it outrightly or more subtly distorting its true worth and meaning for them, constitutes another major impediment for them. Margaret

Laurence leaves the reader in no doubt about this fact. There are times, as a matter of fact, when the author - as it appears to me - is scarcely able to hide her personal feelings of annoyance and disgust beneath the surface of her generally restrained art. Her satirical allusion (in the midst of a description of the Englishmen's Club) to the "long-dead tamers of a continent" (p. 140), her more than amusing account of an American's eager but clumsy attempts to study the language of the drum (p. 145), her ironic references to Miranda Kestoe's uncomprehending appreciation of African folklore for its quaintness (mainly) and foolish attempt to supply a "sociological" explanation of Ghanaian "corruption in high places" (chapter 9), her obviously dissenting reference to the Christian denunciation of African polygamy (p. 133), her pointed inclusion of the "stout black Gideon Bible" as part of the background (in the Wyoming Nightclub) for Johnnie Kestoe's brief sexual encounter with a village prostitute (p. 228), her aside in which Nathaniel's education in Catholic mission schools is described as an experience in which he has "eaten faith and fear and the threat of fire" (p. 28) - these are all instances in which the author's personal sentiments are only thinly-disguised or not disguised at all.

These instances of obtruding personal sentiment aside, however, Laurence is generally successful (in the artistic sense, that is) in conveying the seriousness of this particular impediment for the Ghanaian people in their movement towards independence and identity. She suggests the precise character of this impediment in her portrayal of the Englishmen who comprise the administrative personnel at the Allkirk, Moore and



Bright firm - James Thayer, Bedford Cunningham, and Johnnie Kestoe - and of their individual relationships and/or reactions to the Africans with whom they must interact daily. The obligation to apply the new "Africanization policy" to their firm as a whole - a minor crisis for both James and Bedford, if not quite that for Johnnie - only intensifies the outward expression of a deep-seated antipathy towards the Africans and of a general contempt for their aspirations towards national independence and identity. On one occasion Bedford gives bitter and cynical expression to his antipathy in the privacy of his office. He is talking to Johnnie about the recent order from Head Office (London) to speed up Africanization here, and offers him a drink while doing so:

'Nonsense! Never too early, when our black brethren are making history. Drink up. To Africanization, to the black keys and the white, old boy, to Ghana, to the star that is rising over Africa -.'

He set his glass down gently on the desk. 'Isn't it an absolute bugger?' Bedford said. (p. 93)

Bedford gives frequent, and more public expression to this basic antipathy when he scolds, and freely insults, the African clerks whenever the supposed need to do so strikes him. Both Bedford and James find it very difficult to identify meaningfully with the Ghanaians in respect to their political aspirations, social needs, or cultural travail during this period of transition.

For Bedford's wife, Helen, the African people hold even less interest, let alone affection. She confides to Johnnie Kestoe:

It's all in the same pattern. The sea, the sun, the storms, that snake the other day, even the people. Cruel and hard and menacing.
(p. 122)

Cora Thayer is no less detached, inwardly, from the world of the Africans. The interior of the Thayer bungalow reveals the nature of her attitude; in respect to the furnishing of their home she had told her husband in most emphatic terms that "Africa was not to enter here at all" (p. 126). And the interior of her mind, which she discloses in a moment of intimate conversation with Johnnie about her hopes and fears, reveals the same truth to us. Laurence, in authorial comment upon her disclosure to Johnnie, remarks:

Cora had waited patiently to reap the harvest of her exile. And now even that meagre fruit seemed likely to be destroyed by a storm she had never foreseen and would never comprehend. (p. 130)

Neither woman, being thus inured within a life of unhappy bondage to self, is able to extend either sympathy or counsel to the Ghanaians in their struggle towards political and cultural emancipation.

Johnnie, a younger man than both James and Bedford and one who has arrived in Ghana much more recently, is not beset by quite the same kind of long-practised antipathy towards the Africans, but his natural arrogance, as "whiteman", is just as pronounced as theirs until a sense of personal weakness and defeat overwhelms and humbles him. His wife, Miranda, as I have intimated earlier, is the one "Englishman (woman)" in This Side Jordan who tries hard to understand and appreciate the Africans around her, although the ineptness and unrealism of her efforts to do so are mildly satirized by the author, at least often enough to evoke misgivings in the reader's mind about the abiding usefulness of these efforts either to herself or to the Africans whom she encounters.

In a variety of ways, then, the reactions and relationships of

these Englishmen suggest how the presence of the European "overlord" in Ghana has complicated the pilgrimage of its native people towards independence and a more satisfying experience of identity. Here, as with her delineation of the African characters, Margaret Laurence has sought to grant the principal characters in This Side Jordan something of a typical quality without thereby reducing, insofar as possible, the general effect of distinct individuality in characterization. She has made an attempt to have the characters reveal (individually and in interaction with each other), not only their personal struggles and individual movement in respect to self-understanding and self-acceptance, but also aspects of the collective struggle of a people and of their common journey towards national independence and identity. She has interwoven the two kinds of movement in order to suggest that much the same fundamental forces are operative in both movements and that progress in the one (national) movement is directly related to progress in the other (personal) movement. This suggested relationship - if indeed it correctly represents Laurence's own intention in the novel - may actually reflect an oversimplified view of the more complex connections which ordinarily obtain between societal and individual development and change. Nevertheless, the endeavour to bring these two movements together in this way does enable Laurence to create a stronger semblance, if not always the full reality, of artistic unity - unity of theme and structure - in the novel.

It is necessary for me to shift direction slightly, now, in order to fix attention more precisely upon the other, and dominating, theme

of This Side Jordan - the struggle and survival of the individual in his journey towards (sometimes away from) greater self-understanding and self-affirmation.

This quest of the individual for a truer or firmer understanding and acceptance of self, or for a securer sense of personal identity, marks the recorded experience of all the principal characters in This Side Jordan, as far as the author's artistic intention is concerned at any rate. In the actual experience of these characters, of course, the quest is sometimes not a fully self-conscious one but one which, like an undercurrent in open waters, runs far beneath their overt actions and decisions. This is not to say that Laurence's delineation of this personal quest is equally detailed or equally impressive for all of the main characters. It is Nathaniel Amegbe and Johnnie Kestoe who are granted the forefront of the stage in this drama of personal struggle and survival and whose inward development holds our attention most firmly in virtue of the coherence and sheer intensity of the author's portrayal of them. The other principal, and some of the secondary, characters as well - Miranda Kestoe, James Thayer and Bedford Cunningham (and their wives), Aya Amegbe, Jacob Abraham Mensah, Victor Edusei, and Lamptey - all have similar stories to tell (wittingly or unwittingly) about themselves, but here the author's "voice" usually becomes less audible in tone.

The personal quest of individual characters in This Side Jordan is not always a successful one, of course, in the sense that it results in a more wholesome integration of self or in a more joyous acceptance of

life. For some of the characters - for Nathaniel and Aya, and Johnnie and Miranda, for instance - the quest does take this course. For Mensah, it may take this course as well; the promise of better things to come is at any rate suggested in his case (chapter 15). In the case of the Thayers and Cunninghams, the quest becomes a largely futile one because of certain obstacles inherent in themselves. Edusei's quest represents a unique situation in that it involves considerable (even somewhat cynical) self-knowledge from the beginning; it incorporates a more positive acceptance of self, and of the circumstances of life around him, only later. And in the instance of Lamptey, the "Highlife Boy", the quest seems stalemated almost from the outset; he seems determined to retain his characteristic attitudes and lifestyle, come what may.

Margaret Laurence's representation of Nathaniel's struggle for a better understanding of himself and of his countrymen, and for greater assurance concerning his own proper role (in both personal and public contexts), is surely one of the major artistic merits of This Side Jordan. Laurence has succeeded, from both psychological and artistic points of view, in taking a very ordinary African - "a little man of every day", to use Clara Thomas' phrase - and in setting him forth with enough vividness of detail and probability of action (despite occasional lapses into the shadowy world of melodrama) that he becomes the central and most revealing character in the novel. Even in her portrayal of Johnnie, clearly the most fully-developed portrait among the "English" characters, Laurence does not succeed in conveying the vital essence and meaning of this personal struggle towards self-understanding and self-acceptance with the

same effectiveness.

One may trace out Nathaniel Amegbe's personal struggle, his quest for a clearer understanding and more secure affirmation of self, in respect to several contexts of relationship and experience without thereby detracting from the essential unity of characterization which marks Laurence's portrayal of him. As Laurence presents him, Nathaniel is a rather average sort of schoolmaster with aspirations and dreams for achievement and success in his profession; he is a young husband who has married an uneducated and naive village girl (Aya) and is painfully aware of the differences in experience and outlook which separate them; he is also a concerned citizen who shares - with more insight than most of them, perhaps - the political hopes of his countrymen but who also shares their prejudices against the "Englishmen"; and he is, finally, a religious being who must come to terms with the gods of his own past and the forces which inevitably affect his inherited (and acquired) beliefs and moral attitudes. In each of these four realms of experience, Nathaniel contends against specific obstacles which derive from both personal weakness and outward circumstance, gains increased insight about himself and others in the process, and above all makes distinct progress towards a stronger sense of self-acceptance.

As one who had himself failed the Secondary School Certificate (Overseas Cambridge) examination and is now, in consequence of that fact, teaching in a third-rate private school which cannot possibly hope to pass government inspection in its present condition, Nathaniel possesses something less than normal confidence in his own teaching abilities. Of

course the seriousness and diffidence associated with his kind of temperament do not make matters easy for him as schoolmaster. But a number of other factors have conspired to render his situation more difficult than ever, even intolerable at times. The presence of Lamptey, an irresponsible colleague who teaches English literature at the school but whose heart is usually elsewhere - in the excitement of Ghana's night life, hence the nickname, the "Highlife Boy" -, is a minor yet constant irritation to Nathaniel. The vain and overbearing manner of Jacob Abraham Mensah, the school's principal, oppresses him even more. Mensah is an individual who relishes his position of authority, even in so inglorious a school as Futura Academy, with uncommon delight and who exploits Nathaniel's sense of insecurity at every opportunity. All too often Nathaniel is made to "grovel apology" for remarks which, for one reason or another, seem inappropriate or insubordinate to the principal. Mensah is a man over against whose blatant opportunism and materialism the struggling idealism of Nathaniel appears rather helpless, most of the time. Moreover, Mensah is reluctant to discipline his students lest they leave the school; the practical consequences with regard to classroom behaviour and academic achievement generally are neither to Nathaniel's nor to the school's advantage.

Not seldom, the thought of escaping from so insufferable a situation and looking for a teaching post elsewhere crosses his mind, but (to borrow Laurence's own words) "however small and grimy his niche, Nathaniel did not feel capable of leaving it now" (p. 26). And thus Nathaniel labours on, oppressed by irritations without and fears within - sometimes

feeling very foolish for having these fears and yet somehow remaining en-
chained to them.

This is Nathaniel's situation from one point of view. There is, however, another side to the picture which Laurence presents of him as schoolmaster. Nathaniel teaches history at Futura Academy and is particularly excited about one history course which he has himself introduced into the school's curriculum: "African Civilizations of the Past." In the teaching of this one course, Nathaniel is able to hold the attention and interest of his students, "his own fire breaking through his anxiety." His passionate interest in the subject is not a merely academic one but one which has its origins in earlier feelings of resentment against the white man's usual deprecation of African ways and (on the positive side) in the personal ambition to do what he can to inspire greater self-respect and confidence among his own people:

There must be pride and roots, O my people. Ghana, City of Gold,
Ghana on the banks of the Niger, live in your people's faith.
Ancient empire, you will rise again. And your people will laugh,
easily, unafraid. (p. 22)

This is a course, Nathaniel is convinced, which embodies, in the very teaching of it, a valid *raison d'être* for his career and a promise of better things to come, better things for his countrymen and for himself. It is a course in the teaching of which he can give tangible expression to his idealistic dreams and in the study of which he may discover helpful clues with respect to his own quest for profounder self-understanding and self-fulfilment. Victor Edusei, the Oxford-educated journalist, may laugh at Nathaniel and argue that "there were no African civilizations of the past worth mentioning", Johnnie Kestoe may insist

that "this much-vaunted culture" of the Africans "never existed", and Mensah may pretend to an appreciation for Ghana's cultural past only when it suits him to do so and otherwise display open scorn for Nathaniel's naive idealism, but Nathaniel is not to be put off by any of these reactions. As far as he is concerned, Ghana can become a great nation, can truly inherit the earth again, only insofar as she knows and appreciates her own cultural and religious heritage and learns properly to integrate the core of that heritage with such changes (political and social) as are bound to come to a nation moving towards political independence. How such integration might best be achieved and how much in that heritage might be safely jettisoned are crucial questions which lie at the very heart of Nathaniel's religious struggle, a struggle which despite his general reverence for the piety of his forefathers, involves elements of serious doubt both about their "faith" and about the "Christian faith" conveyed to him during mission school days.

Nathaniel comes to perceive that he must experience a greater measure of competence and security in his teaching career if he is to achieve a stronger sense of self-confidence and satisfaction as a person. His absorbing interest in Ghana's past cannot, in and by itself, furnish that necessary feeling of competence and security as a schoolmaster. He has still to contend, daily, with so many seemingly resistless obstacles - his own temperamental diffidence, Mensah's oppressive behaviour, the mean status and reputation of his school and the misunderstanding of his kinfolk (particularly Adua, his mother-in-law, and Adjei, his uncle) concerning his work as a teacher in the big city.

The accumulated burden of these obstacles renders him prey to moral temptation. Encouraged by Miranda Kestoe to do so, Nathaniel visits her husband in his office and timidly asks him about the possibility of getting a couple of his "best" students into the textile firm as clerk apprentices. Nathaniel is obliged to be slightly less than honest when he assures Johnnie that the students he has in mind are "keen and ambitious" boys when in fact they are among those who failed their examinations. He again oscillates between truthfulness and dishonesty when he informs Mensah about his contemplated plan; while he (Nathaniel) opposes Mensah's scheme to develop this plan into a profitable "sideline" which might help them secure government acceptance for the Academy, he fails to tell Mensah that he has several boys in mind for the clerking jobs who have, in fact, failed. But he becomes thoroughly and inexcusably dishonest when he allows the gifts of the boys (Kumi and Awuletey) to determine his selection of them for these jobs.

Margaret Laurence's vivid depiction of Nathaniel's inner struggle with temptation and of his elaborate rationalization of the need to surrender to it renders the entire experience authentic. The depiction suggestively links the sin of Nathaniel - succumbing to bribery - to certain sins of his forefathers in days when "men were bought and sold as though a thing could be owned by another" (p. 190). But more important in terms of the broad theme of my discussion, it reveals the confluence of several motivating impulses which pertain directly to Nathaniel's deeply-felt need for a sturdier sense of self-confidence and personal status:

He had often thought that if he could afford to dress better, his classes would show him more respect. . . . The boys' subtle flattery, that of placing him in the same category as a chief, had not escaped him. He knew it for what it was. (p. 191)

I will be somebody. Not a fish, not a spider on the wall, but a man among men. I will do something - you will see. (p. 192)

The desire to do something, be somebody. The desire to be God and the desire to wear a silk shirt. (p. 208)

But the utter collapse of Nathaniel's plan to get the boys, Kumi and Awuletey, hired by the Textile firm, and Johnnie's merciless denunciation of him for referring these two "incompetents" to him, only inject an overwhelming sense of failure and humiliation into his consciousness. The journey from this stage of humiliation and dishonour to that of escape, by way of an evening interlude with his "Highlife Boy" friend and a novice prostitute at the "Weekend in Wyoming", is only a short one for Nathaniel now. Yet in the course of this short journey he also finds occasion, even urgent motivation, to reflect seriously upon basic matters - upon the past suffering (mostly at the hands of the invading "whitemen") and past sins of his own people and upon his own sins, the very immediate sins of dishonesty, selfishness, and hatred. It is particularly such reflection, engendered and intensified by the distress of personal humiliation, which brings to him deeper insight into self and therefore also genuine humility of spirit and the boldness of faith.

He finds it possible to assess himself more realistically and, beyond that, to address himself to Mensah with much more self-assurance. He is able to tell Mensah, in no uncertain terms, what the educational enterprise at Futura Academy really amounts to, from his own vantage point

as indeed from any sensible man's perspective:

The boys were no good for anything. What could they do? They'd only been given dreams here, only dreams, do you hear? Don't you know anything? (p. 269)

The surprisingly charitable and sane response of Mensah to Nathaniel's "hard words" and to his asserted resignation from Futura Academy, revealing more insight now about his own capabilities and role as principal and about Nathaniel's potential contributions as schoolmaster, finally induces Nathaniel to stay on.

At a deeper level, of course, Nathaniel's decision to stay on as teacher is the outcome of a new confidence in himself both as person and as schoolmaster, and of a new hope for the future:

What if things had gone wrong once? They need not again. Now he would have power here, power to change things. And he would change, himself. At heart he was an honest man. (p. 272)

Nathaniel Amegbe's experience with respect to his relationship and role as husband marks out a trajectory which is rather different, in its general shape, from that suggested by his experience as schoolmaster. This time it is Nathaniel who is the more confident and aggressive one and it is his wife Aya who is the more anxious and diffident one. One major reason for this difference in attitude and behaviour is obvious enough: Nathaniel is the better educated one who has quickly recognized some of the defects inherent in the ancient ways and wisdom of his people and who is trying hard to make his way into the contemporary world of the city, while Aya, even at twenty-four, is still very much a child of the village and rather apprehensive about adopting the changing life-style of her urban neighbors. Aya's urgent need, just now, is to be

understood and supported patiently by her husband, particularly with respect to her fear in having their expected child born in a city hospital. The author's comment on this difference between them is very pointed:

Aya was twenty-four, but she did not seem to have changed at all from the sixteen-year-old he had married. Nathaniel was glad she had not grown older in appearance. But she had not grown older in mind, either. There had been less difference between them eight years ago than there was now. (p. 47)

Nathaniel's reasons for wanting the child to be born in a city hospital are not clear, certainly not convincing, from Aya's point of view. It is Nathaniel's secret expectation, actually, that if their child is born here, it will not go back to village-life and will be more likely to appreciate and share his own dreams of a new and proud Ghana, the Ghana of the future. But Nathaniel's dreams about the future are not precisely Aya's dreams.

Aya's religious conservatism and naiveté, reflected in a variety of ways, frequently exasperate her husband. On the other hand, Nathaniel's more questioning spirit frightens her. And the lingering visit of Adua, Aya's stern mother, only increases the tension between them, for Adua had a way of "unravelling", with her all-too-ready advice, "whatever understanding and knowledge of the new ways he patiently wove into her" (p. 70). It is Adua's insistent plea, that they (Nathaniel and Aya) return to the place of their birth, which creates something of a crisis for Nathaniel. This crisis moment is one of explosive anger, at first:

No! It is for him [the child] that I stay! No! Do not talk of it any more. You hear? No more! (p. 73)

Later that night it is re-echoed in a troubled dream, a dream in which he

encounters the "devil" (p. 74), is afflicted by his curses for forsaking his own parents, and calls upon "gods" who will not or else cannot answer to his calls. Only "King Jesus", who finally appears in the dream dressed like a King of Ashanti, seems able to cross the "river" in order to help him. The precise significance of this vivid dream, for our understanding of Nathaniel's inner experience at this point may not be entirely clear, but one may assume that it is intended to suggest a more penetrating and agonizing review, on Nathaniel's part, of his own religious past.

In any case, Nathaniel now begins to see, and to acknowledge to himself, that he too is still attached to his past in a number of ways, and that while his own manner of coming to terms with the past may be quite different from Aya's, her approach may in fact be as valid as his, in the end. Certainly Aya's words, conveyed to her husband (shortly hereafter) in explanation of her delight in the children's stories told by her Aunt, Akosua, would suggest as much: "You do not understand. After he [our child] is born, I will be different, different, different, all my life, until I die" (p. 85). Still, Aya's naive comprehension of the Christian religion and her naive fondness for the ways of the "evangelical church" (p. 107) which he detests continue to annoy Nathaniel. He gives expression to his frustration in these words: "She would never change. Never. The country might go on, leaping century after century overnight. But Aya would remain the same" (p. 108). Nathaniel is again disposed to chide her concerning her shortcomings and to tell her what she ought and ought not to do. Her angry retort stops him short and makes him realize, rather

suddenly, that he cannot continue to advise an adult wife as though she were only a child: "He did not want to tell her what to do. It was not right. He knew it" (p. 109). The reaction is only one of several which all manifest a growing awareness, on Nathaniel's part, that his relationship to Aya must change, must include more gentleness and tolerance of spirit, and a deeper appreciation of her individuality if it is to bring abiding happiness to both of them.

Another instance of such more mature and sympathetic responses to Aya is Nathaniel's reaction to her compliment extended at the end of a socially awkward evening spent with mostly Englishmen at a European cocktail party. Aya assures Nathaniel that, despite his feelings of discomfort and annoyance, he has conversed intelligently, and "well", with people:

'Yes', she said, 'You have something to say.' He looked at her, unaccountably moved by her determination. He did not want to receive this kindness from her, but he could not stop himself. 'Do you really think so?' he said. Aya nodded and turned away, but not before he saw the tears in her eyes. (p. 149)

At first glance, Nathaniel's desire to console himself at the Wyoming Nightclub with the delights of sexual indulgence with a prostitute (after the failure of his endeavour to get his two African students hired by the Allkirk, Moore and Bright firm) would seem to contradict the above contention concerning Nathaniel's movement towards a greater appreciation for Aya, as wife and individual, but this only at first glance. Nathaniel's social behaviour at the "Weekend in Wyoming" reflects self-consciousness and a sense of unreality throughout, despite his own best efforts to relax and to enjoy the evening. And when Lamptey finds a way to rescue him from

an accidental and yet humiliating embroilment with Johnnie Kestoe (which develops during the course of the evening), Nathaniel feels very much relieved. Of course, he feels a sense of guilt as well - guilt in the fact, particularly, that an innocent girl (Emerald, the novice prostitute) had to be "sacrificed" (p. 227) to secure his own redemption from further indignity and distress at the hands of Johnnie Kestoe. His ensuing sense of personal defeat and shame, associated with both his dishonesty as schoolmaster and his moral lapse as husband, - these supply further evidence (if further evidence is needed) that the intended dalliance of the evening is the expression of a deeply-felt disappointment and dismay rather than the expression of a disaffection for, or disloyalty to Aya.

Later, Nathaniel's reluctant participation in an "evangelist church" service, in deference to the wishes of his wife, affords an opportunity for silent reflection upon his own religious past and - this rather unexpectedly - for momentary release from earlier feelings of "doubt and shame" (p. 248). While he cannot fully appreciate Aya's intensely personal identification with the mood of the service, he discovers that the same service also speaks to him, albeit in its own way, of a new "River" (chapter 13) which he and their expected child must cross before they can successfully reach the promised land. In other words, we may infer that Nathaniel is slowly learning to comprehend and to appreciate, insofar as he can at the time, the religious attitudes and experiences of his simple-hearted but devout wife.

When the pains of child labour come upon Aya and Nathaniel per-

ceives her renewed fear of going to the city hospital, he is suddenly, and overwhelmingly, ashamed of his own pride in insisting that the child be born there. When he brings Aya to the hospital he is already very anxious about her physical and emotional state. He is much reassured, therefore, by the nursing sister's words to him: "You did right to bring her here to have the baby" (p. 252). The brief stay in the hospital proves to be an enlightening, if also somewhat frightening, experience for Aya. She discovers that here too, in this strange and forbidding place, human affection and human rejection are felt and suffered as intimately and intensely as anywhere else. It is Aya's unwilling encounter (in the maternity ward) with Miranda, ironically enough, which provides something like a moment of truth for both her and Nathaniel. Both realize - Nathaniel perhaps more keenly so than Aya - that they are themselves quite capable of responding to kindness (offered rather awkwardly by Miranda) with personal rejection and resentment, and that "whitemen", however much they may hide or deny the fact, also need to feel the answering affection of individual "blackmen."

On the other hand, Aya's strong reaction against the obtrusive kindness of Miranda - she shares the experience with her husband in intimate conversation, later - engenders a certain pride in Nathaniel's heart, pride in the awareness that Aya does after all possess greater inner strength, strength of personal identity and dignity, than he had earlier surmised. The shared experience and the acquired insight (particularly on Nathaniel's part) serve to bind husband and wife together more firmly in the bonds of marital understanding and affection.

The naming of their son, it is true, is more Nathaniel's doing than it is the outcome of a joint decision. The name which Nathaniel selects for his son - Joshua - is clearly an expression of his restored faith in a new future - a new future for them as family and a new future for their country. The name is nevertheless one which was suggested to him during his earlier participation in the service in the "evangelist church" to which Aya had invited him; this simple fact he cannot deny. And the excitement of her husband's restored faith, manifested so fervently in the presence of their new-born son, Aya is able to perceive and share, although she may not yet be able to comprehend its deeper levels of content and motivation. The birth of Joshua, therefore, functions as a climactic episode in This Side Jordan which both betokens Nathaniel's renewal of confidence in the future, and marks a higher level of mutual understanding and acceptance as achieved by Nathaniel and Aya within the relationship of marriage.

One may add here - although this observation is perhaps not immediately pertinent to my theme (progress in the individual's pilgrimage towards greater self-understanding and self-acceptance) - that the marriage relationship of Nathaniel and Aya becomes symbolic, in a larger sense still, of the painful union between past and future, for the Amegbes as a family and also for their countrymen as a nation. The problems which Nathaniel and Aya face as a young married couple who have recently moved into a large urban center, and the struggles which they undergo in an effort to adjust successfully to each other and to each other's shifting understanding of various matters in this new setting, are problems and struggles which are directly related to their own gradual release

(individually and together) from the tenacious hold of a powerful and sometimes intimidating past and to their fumbling attempts to find their proper place in the new Ghana. Their experiences in the narrower context of the husband-wife relationship, therefore, image forth also their experiences as a young family that must link the lingering past to the emerging future in some satisfying way. Their experiences as a family may be regarded as a symbolic paradigm, in some respects at least, of the experiences of their fellow Ghanaians, and of their country as a whole in the painful movement from colonial status to the status of independence with appropriate honour and dignity.

But Nathaniel's inner progress towards higher reaches of self-understanding and self-acceptance may also be examined from a third vantage point: his experience as a citizen, or compatriot, in a country which is about to become politically independent. Of course, the fact of close interrelationship among these several roles and realms of Nathaniel's experience needs scarcely to be emphasized. The convergences between Nathaniel's experiences as schoolmaster and as compatriot, as might well be expected, are especially frequent.

Among his own people Nathaniel represents an individual who is enlightened beyond the average citizen and whose political aspirations and anticipations for his country are somewhat more realistic, therefore, than the latter's. Nevertheless, in his outlook and attitude as compatriot, Nathaniel is less astute and less worldly-wise than someone like Victor Edusei, the university-educated journalist, this partly in consequence of his limited contact with the actual world of politics and partly in con-

sequence of his native idealism. In his view, meaningful patriotism is an outlook and attitude which can emerge only from a proper study and appreciation of the history and heritage of one's own people. He is therefore very eager to teach his students at Futura Academy a course like "African Civilizations of the Past" and feels very much like a "preacher" and a "prophet" (p. 22) when he is in fact teaching it. He is discerning enough to realize that simply and unthinkingly to reject one's past, whether it be the political or the cultural past (and for him these two aspects of one's history are necessarily intertwined), is not the way to prepare for national independence. He also realizes, with ever-increasing insight into the matter, that it will be difficult properly to integrate such appreciation for the nation's past with the necessary acceptance of new ways and new attitudes which a changing Ghana inevitably introduced to its citizens.

He is convinced, on the one hand, that there must be a wholesome pride in the hearts of his people, a strong sense of having roots within a history and a culture that have their own distinctive kind of glory. And yet he often wonders whether he can "teach these citizens of the new Ghana anything at all" (p. 21) in respect to these matters which are so important to him. He is not very pleased, on the other hand, with some aspects of that glorious heritage - with his people's persisting concern with the healing power of old bones and with their confidence in the strategems of fetish priests, for instance. These elements at times make him feel ashamed of and angry with his own people. And yet Nathaniel's feelings about even such dubious elements are not merely, not simply, those of shame and anger, as his tour of the market place (in

Accra) with Miranda Kestoe makes so very plain (chapter nine). Nathaniel becomes obviously ill at ease during this otherwise leisurely tour of the market as Miranda questions him about the medicine stalls, - particularly about certain piles of rotten bones. He resents her excessive curiosity about the healing merits of these old bones, for he prefers not to dwell upon this specific element in the old religious and cultural ways of his people. He himself now views the ancient practice of praying to old bones for health and well-being with some disdain. Still, he cannot regard this practice of his people with the easy detachment of an outsider like Miranda and it is for this reason also that he resents her insistent questioning about the matter. For while his own people's childlike trust in the efficacious power of old bones may now seem to have been a misplaced one, Nathaniel can never quite forget that this practice too was once an integral part of the living and unimpaired culture of a proud people.

Concerning the slumdweller of his own city suburb (Accra), Nathaniel also has mixed feelings: he knows that they are politically naive and that any "political shyster could move them with luxuriant promises" (p. 46). Yet he feels that there is also a native strength, a basis for hope in the future of Ghana, contained somewhere within them. The practised opportunism of Mensah, the easy indolence of his colleague Lamprey, the diliberate irresponsibility (initially) of his friend Edusei, the selfish bickerings of neighbours like Yiamoo (the tailor) and Ankrah (the carver of elephants) - these commonly observed kinds of behaviour among his fellow-citizens do not encourage Nathaniel in his idealistic hopes and dreams for the future of Ghana. Nevertheless, he continues to

nurture these hopes and dreams within himself and to struggle with their practical implications in terms of the personal response to be made, finally, towards his own particular past and in terms of the response to be made by his people towards their common past.

Part of Nathaniel's initial dilemma, in this struggle as a compatriot who desires the very best for his fellow Ghanaians, is his lingering sense of guilt about his personal rejection of certain elements in his cultural past and his occasional misgivings about the rightness of his course, a course which seems to be taking him further away from that inherited past, in some respects at least. Another aspect of his dilemma is his realization that he is not free, really, to like whom he will among his people. While he feels a sense of comradeship towards some of them, from others among his people (who may in fact be more closely tied to him in terms of tribal kinship) he feels more distant. Affection and patriotic sentiment are not always spontaneous responses among brethren in the flesh, he perceives, nor can they be called forth and controlled at will. This unhappy realization, entirely compatible though it is with the ordinary realities of human behaviour, only complicates matters for him.

Nathaniel's antipathy towards Ankrah, the sly woodcarver, who comes from his own native province of Ashanti, and surge of friendliness towards the unruly tailor, Yiamoo (a Togolander), are a case in point. His unfriendly endurance of Adua (his wife's mother), who mingles needed assistance to his wife with unwanted advice for himself, affords another, sometimes amusing, instance of this perplexing experience for Nathaniel.

But his frustrating encounter with his uncle, Adjei Boateng, who visits Nathaniel in order to draw him back to the province of his birth, illustrates this aspect of his dilemma more dramatically and significantly. Adjei uses every sort of argument and appeal of which he is capable to persuade Nathaniel that he has an obligation to return to Asante. Among them is the powerful appeal of affection and respect for his own people and the prospect, as Adjei articulates it, of seeing Asante become again "what it once was" (p. 102), a nation strong with the strength of former kings. But Nathaniel is unable to share his uncle's vision since he wants his people to become "something more" (p. 102) than they once were, indeed to become an integral part of a new and more enlightened Ghana. Nevertheless, his uncle's accusations of disloyalty to his people and of uncertainty about his own future stick in Nathaniel's mind and greatly distress him. Nathaniel wants very much to appreciate Adjei and his concerns about family and people, but the differences in viewpoint which separate them make such a response almost impossible for him at this stage. How is one who clings to high ideals of national unity and identity but who has considerable difficulty appreciating many of his own "kinfolk" (in the narrower as well as the broader sense of the term) to make an effective contribution towards the realization of his ideals? This is part of Nathaniel's dilemma as he struggles to understand and to accept what it means to be a true compatriot among his people.

There are, among the white men with whom Nathaniel is acquainted, a very few - like Miranda Kestoe - who do attempt to help, or at least to reassure him in this struggle as compatriot. However, Mrs. Kestoe's well-

intentioned but often glib answers to difficult questions, particularly in respect to the progress of Ghana towards nationhood, do not satisfy him; they reflect intellectualized and generally naive responses rather than hard-won insights born of personal searching and painful struggle. The majority of Nathaniel's English acquaintances are not sufficiently close to him or else are not sufficiently concerned about him as a person even to offer such help to him. They are far too much caught up with their own struggles for vocational survival (James and Bedford) or for vocational advancement (Johnnie), or else they are entirely imprisoned (Cora Thayer and Helen Cunningham) in a personal dream-world which has but few connections with the hard realities of contemporary Ghana.

Nevertheless, it is Nathaniel's encounter with a "whiteman", as it turns out, which contributes most significantly to his inner enlightenment and growth as compatriot among his own people. It is the humiliating exposure of Nathaniel by Johnnie, when he discovers how the former has fallen prey to bribery and dishonesty (in the Kumi - Awuletey affair), which suddenly removes the scales from his eyes and enables him to see with devastating clarity that he, like his people, is a creature in whom both "innocence and evil" reside (p. 209). He perceives, in feverish reflection upon the whole affair, that by scheming to accept the offered bribes he had created a fearful snare for himself, even as his African people had, in years gone by, "forged the links for their own chains" (p. 209) by allowing European slavers to lure them into tribal warfare against each other with the promises of military aid, gold, or even Christian salvation.

It is a curious mixture of strong hatred against the English intruders and strong pity for his own people which punctuates Nathaniel's further brooding upon the past sufferings of his African people. But it is a pity, this time, which arises from a sharpened awareness that both good and evil impulses have motivated his people throughout their history, even when they suffered at the hands of outsiders, and therefore it becomes a more realistic basis for the kind of patriotic sentiment which will enable him to serve his countrymen wisely and usefully in the difficult days which lie ahead. A little later, while visiting his wife just after she has given birth to a son, Nathaniel has occasion, once more, to glimpse the evil present within himself. He perceives, more clearly than hitherto, that he is as much prejudiced against Miranda Kestoe as his illiterate wife is. But he has opportunity, on the same occasion, to perceive very clearly that a rejected Miranda can feel the same "humiliation and anguish" (p. 263) that he feels when a Johnnie Kestoe rejects him. It is precisely this sort of insight, arising from the travail of painful experience, which proves the beginning of wisdom for Nathaniel and the beginning of a more generous acceptance of both white man and fellow African. One dares to surmise, at any rate, that it is this large-heartedness as compatriot which is an important part of Nathaniel's vision for the future when he speaks the thoughts of his own heart to his infant son: "You'll know how to make it work. You'll know how to make it all go well" (p. 281).

These three facets of Nathaniel's journey towards greater self-understanding and self-acceptance, towards a firmer sense of identity and

fulfilment, which I have attempted to isolate in the preceding pages, focus upon his relationship to and role among other people - as schoolmaster, husband, and compatriot. But all three aspects of this relationship, as I have intimated earlier, are closely linked to and are expressions of, his basic struggle simply as a moral and religious being who must come to terms with his own conscience and with his own "god", whoever he turns out to be, and according to his best understanding of him. It is not at all easy to define the shape of, and to give a name to this basic struggle of Nathaniel. Perhaps the significance of Nathaniel's own name, according to the biblical analogue (cf. Gospel of St. John 1:47-48), affords a helpful clue here.³

Certainly it is as an essentially honest and guileless individual, like unto the biblical Nathaniel, that Margaret Laurence first presents Nathaniel Amegbe to us. In respect to this one character trait - other specific traits aside just now - Nathaniel may be contrasted, to his own distinct advantage, with most of the other characters in This Side Jordan. Nevertheless, like his biblical counterpart, Nathaniel is not without weakness and sin, and has much to discover about himself and about his true "god" before he achieves inner peace and a sense of hopeful

³There are numerous suggestions in the novel - at pages 57, 106, 146, 148, 242-3, 267, and 274, for instance - that proper names, and the giving of proper names to others, are functionally significant in a variety of ways. Nathaniel's naming of his new-born child, the final action in This Side Jordan (p. 281), is of course the most conspicuous illustration of this fact. Nathaniel's bright hopes for the future - personal and vocational - are embodied in the name "Joshua" which he assigns to his son.

purpose.⁴

Margaret Laurence makes a good deal of the small dishonesties of Nathaniel in order to accentuate, by implied contrast, the fundamental and overriding honesty of his struggle towards a fuller measure of self-understanding and self-acceptance. Nathaniel's frequently polite and smiling responses to Miranda when, in actual fact, he feels much more like scowling or ignoring her altogether, constitute one prominent example of such minor dishonesties:

He smiled. False Nathaniel. He wanted only to scowl, as Victor would have done. There was honesty in that. But he smiled. (p. 146)

Nathaniel fingered his glasses. The memory of his lie about the rheumatism made him unable to think of an excuse now. Why did he not tell her the truth? . . . He did not know what to say. (p. 155)

Nathaniel's resigned or conciliatory responses to the unrealistic and opportunistic suggestions of Mensah provide another example. He finds it difficult to remain entirely honest with so overbearing a headmaster. Mensah remains fully aware of Nathaniel's basic integrity, but continues to look for ways to get him to compromise it or else pours scorn upon it:

'Naturally, naturally,' Jacob Abraham's voice was acid overlaid with oil. 'I had forgotten. You're our honest man eh?' (p. 26)

Other examples involving Nathaniel's responses, on occasion, to Aya and to close relatives of the family (Adua and Adjei) might be cited here. More often than not, however, his fundamental honesty in both attitude and action is not at all in question. His characteristic weaknesses and failings lie elsewhere; they are associated with such things as

⁴One may recall Christ's statement to Nathaniel in this connection: "You shall see greater things than these." (Gospel of St. John 1:50)

prejudice and pride (not a blatant but a culpable pride nevertheless), fear and anxiety, impatience and anger. When, therefore, Nathaniel's acceptance of the boys' bribes and consequent deception of Johnnie Kestoe in regard to the potential usefulness of these boys does emerge in the novel, we are more than a little surprised. The entire action runs counter to the general impression of basic integrity which we have gained of him thus far. Still, it is the moral shock created by his act of deception, not its economic and vocational implications, which affects Nathaniel most deeply and permanently. Unlike James Thayer and Bedford Cunningham who, it seems, find it impossible to face themselves with utter honesty, and unlike Lamptey and Edusei who commit themselves to personal lifestyles which involve some knowing self-deception at the core, Nathaniel allows the basic integrity of his character quickly to reassert itself. He humbles himself, after an initial period of intense anger and hatred, acknowledges and deeply regrets his lapse into dishonesty, and so finds it possible to accept himself at a deeper level and also to sympathize more genuinely with other sinners among both his own people and the intruding white men.

Indeed, it is precisely this element of fundamental integrity, thus tested and reestablished in the fires of humiliating experience, which allows Nathaniel to make the progress which he does make, in each of the several roles and relationships which I have considered in the middle section of this discussion, towards the larger goal of self-understanding and self-fulfilment. It is his utter frankness with Mensah, we recall, which finally draws the confession from Mensah that he needs an honest

teacher like Nathaniel at Futura Academy. The effect of this confession upon Nathaniel, as schoolmaster, is one of strong reassurance and exhilaration:

What if things had gone wrong once? They need not again. Now he would have power here, power to change things. And he would change, himself. At heart he was an honest man. (p. 272)

It is Nathaniel's open confrontation with Aya, particularly in respect to her personal need to participate in the revival meetings at the evangelist church and in respect to her fears of going to the city hospital, which turns her heart towards him and knits the two together more firmly in marital understanding and affection. And it is his honest acknowledgement of his own propensity for evil - for prejudice, partiality, selfishness, and pride - which renders him a wiser and more generous compatriot in the end despite the intervening period (fortunately very brief) of uncertainty about whether to return to the province of his birth (Ashanti) or to stay in the city.

Finally, it is Nathaniel's deep-buried need to be honest with himself and with others which best explains his intense religious conflicts and searchings for the true "god of his soul" (p. 275). Often these religious conflicts are first precipitated by some fervent discussion or dispute with others, but the agony and outcome of these conflicts are his own. A fruitless and characteristically intimidating conversation with Mensah early in the novel (chapter two) sets him thinking about the religious experiences of his youth: the gods of his father whom he had largely rejected, and the God-man (Jesus) in whom the mission school had taught him to believe but who had not been able, any more than the ancestral gods of his people, to prevent his father's death. Nathaniel con-

cludes that both the gods of his people and the Christian's God had fought for his soul and that both had lost.

A heated dispute with Adua, who urges him to return to his own people and to the faith of his people, brings on a fearful nightmare in which Nathaniel wrestles with the devil (Sasabonsam) (chapter four). The devil accuses him of having rejected his parents and curses him. Nathaniel then calls upon the gods of his parents but receives no response; only Jesus the Redeemer, seen as a gold-clad King crossing the River Jordan on a horse, seems to hold out some hope for him in this state of anguish. The dream testifies, surely, to the honesty of Nathaniel's religious quest, but the fact is that it still leaves him very much confused.

The intense brooding that follows Nathaniel's humbling encounter with Johnnie Kestoe (chapter 12) includes a great deal of sheer anger and hatred, but the deep need to be cleansed of such hatred also surfaces in his consciousness at the last. The suggestion is made that both his moral conscience and his "King" (Jesus Christ?) require such cleansing of him (p. 212). Nevertheless, while the need for repentance and peace are half-way acknowledged here, the actual experiencing of these spiritual blessings comes a little later when, on his way home, Nathaniel stops in at his own church (chapter 15). In a quiet moment, before the ebony Madonna in the church, Nathaniel confesses the most urgent needs of his heart and is encompassed by a spiritual mood of forgiveness, acceptance and peace. It is now, during this brief tryst with the "Mother of all men" (p. 274), that Nathaniel first experiences a kind of spiritual home-coming and first discovers his true God, who is neither the God of his fathers nor the God of the Christian white men but the "God of his own

soul" (p. 275). This moment of spiritual epiphany constitutes a deeply satisfying fulfilment of his religious quest - for the time being at any rate. Without doubt, he has come a long way in the meandering course of his spiritual odyssey from that earlier moment when to "have no gods" whatever seemed to him to be the most desirable state of the human soul (p. 69).

This dominating theme of the individual's progress in self-understanding and self-affirmation, so amply developed in the portrayal of Nathaniel Amegbe, is variously reinforced - sometimes, however, only re-echoed - in the salient experiences of other characters in This Side Jordan. Johnnie and Miranda Kestoe constitute an obvious and interesting counterpart to the Amegbes and provide a convenient starting point for an exploration of this theme as it pertains to these other characters.

Johnnie and Miranda Kestoe are a more cultured and enlightened couple, obviously, than Nathaniel and Aya Amegbe and manifest some of the more typical attitudes and attributes of the English colonials - their public self-assurance, exclusiveness, and condescending or at least patronizing attitude towards the Africans, although with less offensiveness in the manifestation (certainly in Miranda's case) than marks the behaviour of their friends the Thayers and Cunninghams. They are a young couple, however, like the Amegbes, and do not feel nearly as secure about their future at the Allkirk, Moore and Bright firm nor about their relationship to each other (as husband and wife) as the earliest chapters of the novel would seem to suggest. Despite their apparent self-confidence in public places, neither Johnnie nor Miranda understands himself (herself) or the other partner well enough to come into possession of a firm sense of acceptance until - as in the experience of Nathaniel (particularly)

and Aya - certain painful occurrences bring to them the needed insight and stimulus.

Johnnie's strong need to know and to accept himself more confidently is first hinted at in chapter three of This Side Jordan. It rises to the surface of his consciousness, repeatedly, in the course of night-musings upon his own unhappy childhood:

His name. John Kestoe. What proved identity more than a name? If you had a name, you must exist. I am identified; therefore, I am. If they say 'who are you?', you know what to reply. It makes for convenience. It might as well be a number, but numbers are harder to remember. (p. 57)

His sense of insecurity, about his vocational future in particular, is reflected also in his scheming to get the old guard (Thayer and Cunningham - p. 139) replaced and himself promoted, if he can, by introducing Africanization at his firm in his own way and even apart from their directives if necessary. The confidential conversations with Cameron Sheppard (the visiting representative from the firm's Head Office in London) concerning Africanization policy at Allkirk, Moore and Bright reassure Johnnie concerning his future at the firm, at least for the moment. Laurence describes Johnnie's reaction to the new confidence which Sheppard has placed in him, thus:

Johnnie took the card. The dead voices were still. Now there was only his own voice, shouting inside him, shouting his identity. (p. 174)

Yet this temporary reassurance has been won too easily. Both the real anguish of Thayer about his own inability to accept Africanization, revealed to Johnnie in a moment of sudden insight (on Johnnie's part) (p. 179), and the disappointment and disgust of Miranda when she discovers the true motivation of her husband's eager cooperation with Sheppard, ex-

pose the selfishness of his own heart to Johnnie and unsettle him profoundly. Of course, Nathaniel's ill-managed endeavour to help him introduce Africanization among the clerks, at a most crucial time, irritates him as well. Johnnie's ravaging assault upon the unpractised prostitute girl, at the Wyoming Nightclub shortly hereafter, is his way of temporarily repressing a sense of guilt, perhaps also his way of having some sort of momentary revenge upon his offended wife. Yet his discovery of the prostitute girl's actual virginity and sexual naiveté and her kindly response to him despite the "indignity and pain" (P. 233) which he has thrust upon her, subdue Johnnie's proud and angry heart. Faintly reminiscent of the Gospel incident in which another repents of his act of betraying an innocent One, Johnnie turns from this scene of betrayal in order to weep tears of shame and sorrow, alone (p. 234).

Johnnie proves the sincerity of his repentance by beginning to confess his deed to Miranda on the morning of the next day and is quite overwhelmed by her accepting response. She does not wish to hear his confession out, but wants only to "accept" without any of her customary probing. It is a response from her which, as the author indicates explicitly, Johnnie had looked for "so long" (p. 236).

Miranda's own undefined sense of insecurity derives from her very limited contact, hitherto, with the world of harsh realities. Until now she has viewed "almost all of life", to use Laurence's words, "from the old-watercolour world of Branscombe Vicarage" (p. 54). She is very eager, however, to fill this void of inexperience by seeking to assist her husband in his career. Her over-zealous efforts to help Johnnie are those

of an idealist and bring her into unexpected conflict with her more realistic husband. Nathaniel is even more aggravated by Miranda Kestoe's well-meaning but misguided attempts, by her using him as the educative means, to comprehend the Ghanaian people and their culture. Only gradually, as her high-minded endeavours (to assist and to comprehend) repeatedly miscarry, does she learn simply to accept the fact of her own inexperience without resenting it and does she learn that it is personal trust, more often than intellectual analysis or exhortation, which unlocks the gates of communication and affection between individuals. Her remarks to Johnnie, at the time when both the bribery of Nathaniel and the dishonest scheming of her husband are revealed to her at one fell swoop, disclose a newly-gained humility and wisdom:

'I don't know,' she said. 'I don't know how much is enough to show what anyone is like.' . . .

'All the things Cameron needed to know,' Miranda finished. 'All the things he couldn't have found out himself because people only reveal those things to someone they think they can trust'. (pp. 217 - 8)

The birth of a child - something which Miranda had wanted much more than her husband, originally - becomes an occasion for both to assert a new confidence in themselves and in each other. Johnnie feels an inexplicable and yet positive urge to name their daughter after his own mother (Mary), and Miranda, to his surprise, offers her glad assent to the name. Miranda now seems able to comprehend and to appreciate Johnnie's desire to come to terms with his own unfortunate past. At this stage, certainly, the prospect for a more realistic and satisfying relationship between husband and wife appears bright.

In the case of the other Englishmen among the principal characters

of This Side Jordan - the Thayers and Cunninghams - the theme of the individual's journey towards self-understanding and self-acceptance is indicated mainly in a negative sense and is not developed appreciably. James Thayer and Bedford Cunningham both emerge, almost immediately, as very troubled individuals despite the seniority of their positions at the Textile firm. An obvious reason for their new uneasiness is the introduction of Africanization, a policy which both resent and the feasibility of which they seriously question. Evidently both had first come out to Ghana, not so much as high-minded imperialists who were very eager to bear the 'white man's burden' in a British colony, but as individuals, simply, who were looking for economic security and at least the taste of personal success. Ghanaian nationalism and Africanization policies only present serious threats to the realization of these, their personal goals. It is not surprising that these two men - even more so their wives - feel rather like exiles much of the time,⁵ and that they plan to return to their "lost island home" (p. 140) after retirement.

Margaret Laurence makes some attempt to differentiate between James and Bedford in respect to the personal struggle for self-understanding and identity. Nevertheless, these two individuals, as far as their common struggle is concerned, tend to merge into one rather blurred picture. James (a former squire) is supposed to be the more practical-minded and strong-willed one of the two, and Bedford (a former major), a more romantically-disposed individual who has to "make do with the mediocre

⁵See pp. 6, 120-3, 126-30, 140 and 280 for several explicit references to the exile syndrome as manifested in the mentality of the Thayers and Cunninghams.

present", but who seeks to create fine impressions for the benefit of the public, as long as this is possible (p. 10). Bedford has more reason to feel insecure, one might argue, since he is not the senior administrator of the two, and since he is hampered by alcoholic tendencies. But a stubborn inability to accept the fact of Africanization and a spirit of fearful anxiety about the future plague James as much as Bedford. Johnnie remarks to Miranda concerning James' situation: "It isn't that he won't change. He can't. He's too old, and he feels too strongly on the subject" (p. 139). On the occasion of Cameron Sheppard's visit from the London Office, Johnnie reflects on James' first reaction to the visit:

James' hands that had danced a ballet of anxiety, the anxiety of an old man who had created only one thing with his life and now stood to lose it. And the massive knight clutching in his hands not a sword to go with armour, but a child's paper cup full of his consolation and his grief. (p. 172)

And when James shares his feelings of helpless rage about Cameron in intimate conversation with Johnnie, the latter sees James' actual position even more clearly:

James did not seem aware of the extent to which he was exposing himself to another's eyes. But Johnnie, shocked into sharp vision by the Squire's tears and by the pain in the old man's voice, saw for the first time what James' true position here had been. Bumbling and pompous, the Squire would likely have spent his life as a mole-like ledger-keeper, had he stayed in England. But here - here he had walked on Mount Olympus. He had dispensed justice as he saw it - rewards for the compliant ones, punishments for the unruly. A frail and balding Jupiter, he had paced his temple in time of riot, waving an old army rifle, subduing and chastening his erring children. (p. 179)

When Bedford's end, as far as his job at the Textile Branch is concerned, comes - he is released by order of the London Office - he greets it with his characteristic mood of sad disillusionment (p. 238). But James remains as unrealistic as Bedford in continuing to hope, even after

the news of Bedford's release gets to him, that the London Office will reverse its decision on Africanization. A final glimpse of James comes through Johnnie's own eyes, once again; it is a glimpse which confirms our impression of Thayer's continuing incomprehension of himself and of his situation:

As he [Johnnie] left, he noticed that James had picked up one of the fragments of mammy-cloth once more. The Squire was turning it over and over in his hands, and his unseeing eyes were fixed on the printed clocks. (p. 240)

As dramatic portraits of individuals which are interesting in themselves, Laurence's delineation of James and Bedford does not succeed; yet these portraits, taken together, do offer a suggestive comment, on the negative side, upon the predominating theme of This Side Jordan as I have defined it in these pages.

In her representation of Jacob Abraham Mensah, Laurence succumbs to the temptation, occasionally, of over-dramatizing a pretentious, pompous, and mendacious individual, as ass in lion's skin, as it were. She resorts to imagery, in her descriptions of his appearance and behaviour, which bears crudely melodramatic force:

The headmaster still hovered, like an absurd, gigantic mud-wasp - vacillating over the choice of nest. (p. 27)

He stood huge in front of Nathaniel's desk, like a giant whose dignity is half ridiculous or a clown whose absurdity is sometimes transformed into nobility. (p. 61)

Jacob Abraham was like Ananse, the Giant Spider, who, full of conceit and cunning, drew in the unsuspecting to his web. (p. 62)

Indeed, Mensah's public attitude and educational antics provide for a few moments of comic relief in a novel in which this artistic component is in rather short supply.

But even here, in the depiction of Mensah's inner development as a person, Laurence feels obliged to illustrate her dominant theme again. Despite all his bold posturings as an administrator who pretends that Futura is an Academy with a bright future, Mensah is really a man who is unhappy and anxious about the pitiful situation of his school. He endeavours to convince himself, and Nathaniel, that a variety of purely makeshift improvements will quickly elevate the status of the school and place it among the government-approved institutions. Nathaniel is reminded, by these spurious and futile gestures of Mensah, of a familiar maxim of his people: "'God is growing cocoa.' Not the people. God. One did not have to do anything except sit and wait for it to happen" (p. 64). However, when a genuine crisis is finally created for Mensah by the angry resignation of Nathaniel (his most useful teacher), he is not able to discharge his customary show of effrontery but responds in a mood of honest meekness:

Nathaniel could not understand. Then it occurred to him that the man was being genuine. Jacob Abraham really did care about the school. Underneath the cheating and the self-deception, he wanted it to be something.

'Shall I tell you?' His voice was amiable. 'Shall I tell you why I want you to stay? Because you are a sincere man, Amegbe. You have said hard things to me just now. And to my mind you are not as clever as you might be. But you are sincere and hard-working. That is not so easy to find. Yes, and you are honest.' (p. 271)

Mensah now acknowledges that he very much needs Amegbe, to serve as "an interpreter" for himself of changing ways in society and to serve as the school's "guide in a new land, its ferryman across Jordan" (p. 273). This reluctantly-given admission represents a decisive step forward in Mensah's movement towards greater self-understanding and self-acceptance and there-

fore also a more realistic basis for a limited degree of educational improvement, at any rate, at Futura Academy.

Unlike Mensah or Nathaniel, Victor Edusei, the Oxford-educated journalist, has few illusions about himself or his career or the future of his country. He has already become a cynical realist, one who takes curious delight in annoying Johnnie Kestoe with veiled threats of making his job insecure for him and in flaunting his attachment to the good-time girl, Charity Donkor, before his sensitive friend Nathaniel. After he finally decides to marry this irresponsible and uneducated woman (having already made her pregnant), Victor divulges the matter to Nathaniel with such temerity and flippancy of spirit that the latter is quite confounded by it (chapter six). Nathaniel, being the striving idealist that he is, finds it extremely difficult to understand how an educated and rather talented man like Victor can deliberately cast all discretion to the winds, as it seems to him, and marry so unpromising a woman. And in his frustration, Nathaniel accuses Victor of having fallen prey to sheer cynicism of spirit.

Victor appears to confirm the truth of the charge by responding to it with an angry outburst against Nathaniel's naive optimism concerning the political future of Ghana. But he has been shaken by Nathaniel's charge, nevertheless, and in a moment of intimate confession, he reveals his deeper psychological need for Charity: 'You won't understand, boy,' he said quietly, "but I'm fond of that woman. You see, whatever I do, she'll think it's great!" (p. 118) This remark of Victor, in the context of his entire exchange with Nathaniel, reveals that he is more concerned about attaching

himself to an ardent woman who offers some promise of satisfying his personal needs for affection and security than he is about marrying a respectable (or "been to") girl who can perhaps help him to achieve higher social status but cannot minister to his deeply-felt psychological needs in the way that Charity Donkor presumably can.

On the one hand, it might be argued that Victor's attitude here reflects a stronger sense of independence, and less domination by the sort of cheap bourgeois mentality which marks so many of his aspiring countrymen. On the other hand, it might also be argued that Victor here gives evidence of more inflexibility of spirit, more stubborn resistance to needful shifts in personal outlook and action, than does his friend Nathaniel, and that he is, to this extent, less mature than the latter at this stage in his experience. Nathaniel at least allows his liberal idealism to be tempered, from time to time, by sharp infusions of realism which arise from his growing knowledge and acceptance of self. Victor, in contrast to Nathaniel, will not permit any words of idealistic counsel to soften or modify his hard-nosed realism - even a little. He is not about to return to the old ways of his fathers; but neither is he disposed, it seems, to take advantage of the new ways in order, simply, to advance himself socially or economically (see chapter six).

Later, however, the offer of an administrative post (by Cameron Sheppard) which involves further Africanization of the Allkirk, Moore and Bright firm does interest Victor Edusei (p. 279), and he accepts it with some eagerness despite his full awareness that the position will put him alongside Johnnie Kestoe, whom he so thoroughly dislikes! This particular action of Edusei - and it is the novel's last reference to him - signifies

that he is not nearly as pessimistic, after all, about the political and economic future of his country as his characteristically derogatory remarks heretofore seemed to suggest. This action of Edusei, it may be argued, moreover, bespeaks a more mature attitude, finally, with respect to his own inner development as a person. His customary mood of non-chalance and cynicism - perhaps only surface behaviour masking an underlying sense of insecurity that has persistently plagued him despite his more advanced education and obvious talents - seems likely to be replaced, now, by a stronger sense of personal identity and more seriousness of purpose generally. He has become willing, at any rate, to work towards Africanization in his own country amid obviously unpleasant circumstances and with some sincere hope of personal achievement and success.

One other, among the secondary characters, who deserves a few comments in this consideration of the dominating theme in This Side Jordan is Lamptey, the "Highlife Boy." Margaret Laurence does not provide any intimate glimpses for us of Lamptey's inner experience. She is content to stay, in her delineation of him, with the uncomplicated impression first conveyed to us (in chapter two): a carefree and indulgent bachelor-colleague of Nathaniel who is more interested in the sensual pleasures of city night-life than in the sober responsibilities assigned to him at Futura Academy. Lamptey's "jazzy irreverence" (p. 19) and irresponsibility sometimes annoy Nathaniel no end, but his irrepressible gaiety and "easy charm" (p. 21) win his affection at other times. With the students Lamptey is always popular despite his actual incompetence as an instructor in English.

Yet it is Lamptey's impulsive kindness and innate shrewdness which rescue Nathaniel from the consequences of a threatening entanglement with Johnnie Kestoe, on the night of his intended dalliance with a prostitute at Wyoming Nightclub. Nathaniel is grateful for Lamptey's extended kindness in this moment although he cannot respect the man for his undisciplined and libertine style of living, a lifestyle in which he is already firmly entrenched. Lamptey remains, from Nathaniel's viewpoint and from ours as well, an individual who, although he understands and accepts himself tolerably well, does not seem destined to advance towards any nobler goals in life, whether these be mainly psychological or distinctly moral in nature. In this particular respect he stands somewhat apart from the other (both principal and secondary) characters in the novel.

CHAPTER THREE: THE THEME EXPLORED MORE BRIEFLY IN THREE LATER NOVELS.

The necessary limits to which I must restrict this study do not permit an equally detailed examination of the other novels of Margaret Laurence in my endeavour to defend the thesis that one central theme - the individual's quest for self-understanding and self-acceptance - pervades and integrates meaningfully the entire body of her published fiction. They do permit, however, a more abbreviated analysis of the significant experiences of the main characters in several of her novels. This more restricted analysis can at least suggest, in broad strokes, how the approach underlying my examination of This Side Jordan might be applied to the other novels.

The present chapter therefore is concerned with three novels only - The Stone Angel, A Jest of God, and The Fire-Dwellers - and is confined to a consideration of the inner experiences and insights of their main characters only; secondary characters are not considered except incidentally. Moreover, the matter of the precise relationship of other (secondary?) themes and motifs, in each of these three novels, to the one theme which I posit as the central and controlling theme for Laurence's novels as a whole, is not explored to any extent. A few hints and suggestions are projected at some points, but these do not constitute an ordered discussion of the matter.

In The Stone Angel, Laurence deliberately restricts the main context in which the theme of the individual's progress towards self-understanding and self-acceptance is explored to the recollected experiences

and acquired insights (or lack thereof) of Hagar Shipley. Here, in contrast to the situation in This Side Jordan, the novel moves very much less frequently from the internal experience or viewpoint of one character to that of another character. It is the substance of Hagar Shipley's personal experience - how she comes to understand more clearly and, finally to accept (though only in part) important truths about her own personality, and role and destiny as woman, wife, and mother - and the substance of her personal viewpoint - how she comprehends and interprets, at different stages in her life, the actions and attitudes of other individuals around her - which so largely predominate in The Stone Angel and which give to it its distinctive shape and quality as a novel. Even how other characters come to know and accept themselves more realistically is conveyed, as a rule, by means of Hagar's own impressions and intimations, prejudiced though these always must be, not by the characters themselves.

Hagar Shipley's personal pilgrimage towards self-understanding and self-acceptance is delineated with fine psychological insight and artistic competence. A variety of factors and forces which have helped to shape her personal being and outlook and to make her what she is now, are introduced and skillfully incorporated within Hagar's growing understanding of herself and of her destiny. Like Nathaniel Amegbe in this regard, Hagar must contend with the dark and mysterious forces of a given hereditary past and with certain inherent weaknesses of character and disposition. In The Stone Angel, however, these forces are explored more closely and with greater psychological acumen.

Hagar's dispute with her past takes more serious and exacting account, than is true in the delineation of Amegbe's struggle with his

own past, of the powerful influence which a parent (father, in Hagar's case) can exert upon his child's character, disposition, and outlook. In This Side Jordan, it is true, Amegbe must come to terms with certain traditions and beliefs inherited from his tribal and "mission school" past, which are no longer as firmly settled in his mind as they once were, and must come to terms with certain social and vocational expectations of his father and next of kin which do not accord with his own aspirations. But Amegbe's struggle with his past does not involve, as directly nor as intensely, the specific temperaments and attitudes of people belonging either to his immediate family or to his more distant past. In Hagar's case, the sternness and severity, the spirit of self-reliance and proud intransigence, of her father (Jason Currie) are forces which she strongly resents at first, against which she reacts (consciously and subconsciously) during a good part of her life, and which she at last recognizes as forces that have become an unwanted and yet ineradicable part of her own character and conduct.

Hagar's unfortunate marriage to Brampton Shipley, a rather coarse-grained and shiftless sort of person, is partly motivated by her father's obvious contempt for him and by his unsolicited advice on the kind of man she is to marry. This fact (pertaining to her motivation in marriage) she realizes more clearly in retrospect. Her suppressed hostility towards her father and continuing difficulty in accepting him, even in memory, also explains (in large measure) her almost habitual surliness of manner. Only when she discovers that her father has left, in his will, most of his accumulated earnings to the town (Manawaka) rather than to her and brother

Matt, does she begin to realize that he had been disappointed by his children's rejection of his values and that he had had his own dreams - dreams for a continuation of the "family dynasty." This realization softens her attitude towards him a little, but it is the utter failure of her marriage to Brampton which first enables her to understand both her father and herself more realistically.

Certain traits in Hagar's character also hamper her in the progress towards deeper levels of self-understanding and self-acceptance. At its most basic level, one of these faults of character, pride, finds its counterpart in Nathaniel Amegbe's situation. In Hagar's case, pride is a more complex and invidious fault which is both more difficult for her to recognize, in all of its tangled manifestations, and more difficult to conquer. Hagar's pride - this is also true to some extent in Amegbe's experience - is intertwined with a certain temperamental reserve about the open display of intimate feeling. This fact renders it very difficult for her to give visible evidence to impulses of affection and appreciation, or also to impulses of fear, even within the context of family relationships involving her husband, sons, and daughter-in-law. Hagar's cold reserve towards, even suppressed contempt (at times) for Brampton only drives the two further apart, and her unkind desertion of her husband comes as no surprise to him or to the reader.

This assertion about Hagar's reserve needs some qualification and correction with respect to the relationship between Hagar and her favoured son John. Because she holds the younger son so dear and ensconces all of her hopes for a better future in John's progress and eventual

career, she finds it possible to break through her customary reserve and to give tangible expression to her fondness for him. The selfish impatience and sheer possessiveness of her love, however, betray her into coercive attitudes which (alongside other contributing forces) further alienate John from her and drive him back to a now estranged father. Hagar's sense of disappointment is quite overwhelming at this point. Nevertheless, it is the painful experience of following her son to the home and bedside of a rejected, now almost senile, and dying husband and of seeing John give himself over to the frivolous Arlene Simmons and, finally, to an utterly meaningless death, which proves an even greater assault upon her stubborn pride.

These experiences are, in a sense, only preparatory for Hagar. More sudden and decisive enlightenment about her spirit of self-sufficiency, about her undue concern about external appearances, and about her sharply critical and coercive manner, comes to her during the less troubled moments of a retreat (or is it an escape?) to Shadow Point and, later still, during a brief visit with Pastor Troy in her hospital room. These are not the only moments of self-revelation for Hagar. But, like Amegbe, Hagar must suffer the anguish of severe disappointment and bitter self-humiliation before she is able to see, as with new eyes, the essential darkness that lies within herself, to see that family background and fateful happenings do not entirely explain the course of her inner experience, but that moral reaction and moral decision are also crucially involved. She must suffer a great deal of bitter pain before she learns to appreciate the nature of John's blind and rather helpless struggle towards a securer

sense of personal identity and his unpretentious affection for Brampton, and before she can appreciate Marvin's unassuming goodness and extend that special gesture of blessing to him for which he has waited so long.

Still, these gained insights, coming as late in life as they do, do not enable an aged and inflexible Hagar to finally accept herself, and to accept the course of events which have affected her so painfully, with the kind of freedom and unfettered joy which are young Amegbe's experience in This Side Jordan. Her acceptance of self is a partial and rather stoical one at best, one destined to remain overshadowed, it seems, by a melancholy regret about the many "incommunicable years" of her life and about "everything that happened and was spoken or not spoken" during those years.¹

In A Jest of God, Laurence is again occupied, at the most general level, with the theme of the individual's uneasy and frequently painful struggle to discover himself (herself) and to properly direct the course of his (her) life. The primary context, for purposes of her narrative and thematic intentions in this novel, is the situation of a fairly young and still unmarried woman, Rachel Cameron, who yearns for the intimate experiencing of physical and social love and for the personal freedom of an independently-directed life, but who is hampered in her search for this kind of love and freedom by forces which lie both within herself and outside herself. Her temperamental reserve and social awkwardness, her fear of the uncontrolled display of inner feeling (a trait which reminds us very much of Hagar Shipley), her reluctance to speak her true mind in

¹Margaret Laurence, The Stone Angel (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964), p. 296. All further page references apply to this edition of the novel.

the presence of people who possess some special authority or who exhibit an authoritarian manner - these are all internal obstacles which constantly hinder her progress towards the desired goals of heterosexual love and personal freedom. These various inhibitions and anxieties all find expression, in a sense, in her overwhelming fear of making a fool of herself among people. Unlike her sister Stacey (now in Vancouver), whom her mother favours beyond herself, Rachel cannot break out of her cage in order to emancipate herself personally and socially.

Obstacles which may be described as more or less external to her are the dominating, over-anxious, and slyly coercive ways of her self-centered mother (May Cameron) and the ever inquisitive and censorious spirit of self-respecting neighbours (friends of her mother, mostly), who value social propriety and religious respectability above all else.

The several relationships in which Rachel Cameron is, and becomes, more intimately involved are not numerous; in this respect a parallel exists between the situation and experience of Rachel and that of Hagar. Yet the social world through which Hagar moves, in the course of her (mostly) unhappy experiences, is a larger and more varied realm than Rachel's. Rachel's actual world of experience does not extend much beyond the boundaries of Manawaka, her home town, although she is made to seem aware of a larger world beyond via the references to Nick Kazlik's employment in Winnipeg and to her sister's present residence in Vancouver. Nevertheless, Rachel's resolution to leave Manawaka for Vancouver (together with her mother), after the disappointment and humiliation of spirit experienced in the course of a brief love affair with

Nick Kazlik, is much more than an ill-tempered escape from a socially embarrassing situation. It is the expression, at least in part, of a generally positive and steadily-matured desire to break out of the confining yoke of small-town respectability and hypocrisy and to assert her own independence from people (including her mother) and their oppressive conventions. By way of contrast, Hagar's removal from Manawaka to Vancouver (for a time) is motivated mainly by bitterness of spirit and a selfish desire to achieve her own ambitions in and through the life of her son John. For reasons such as these, Rachel's movement from Manawaka to the larger and still strange world outside promises to be a more beneficial action for her in the end.

One intimate relationship in which Rachel is unavoidably involved is, of course, that with her widowed mother with whom she is obliged to live. It is a rather tense and oppressive relationship which renders the achievement of anything like social ease, in the presence of strangers or even of acquaintances, and the achievement of independence of mind and will, very difficult on her part. It is not merely the surreptitious ways in which her mother attempts to control and direct the course of her life, but also her mother's relentless concern about the requirements of social propriety, and the religious pretense which characterizes so much of her life, which irk and distress Rachel.

This domestic situation has its unpleasant, or at least complicating, implications for Rachel's relationship with Willard Siddley, the principal of the school in which she teaches, with Calla, her teaching colleague and casual friend, and finally, with Nick Kazlik, which latter

relationship turns out to be the central episode of the novel. Rachel cannot help feeling uneasy and insecure in her association with Principal Siddley and tends to suppress her real sentiments about student behaviour and discipline whenever these differ from his, and to suppress her anger towards him as well. She cannot help feeling uneasy, even annoyed, about Calla's undisguised and ungentle efforts to befriend her. Yet in the course of both of these relationships Rachel discovers (more significantly so in the case of the latter relationship) that her antipathy to the person involved is in fact prompted as much by obdurate pride as by temperamental diffidence or anxiety. Rachel's journey towards a more adequate understanding of herself and of others (here, Siddley and Calla), therefore, carves out much the same course as Hagar Shipley's, though Hagar's journey is clearly a more troubled and traumatic one for her.

It is perhaps Rachel's humiliating experience during the Tabernacle service (chapter two), when she finds herself speaking in tongues, which first confronts her with her own pride in most dramatic terms. She now perceives that she can no longer disguise her personal dislike of Calla (who had urged her to accompany her to the Tabernacle service) and begins to comprehend, also, that her uneasiness about the public display of feeling, and her mild contempt for Calla, are both rather akin to the "Scots pride" of her self-righteous mother, which pride she so very much condemns - silently if not openly.

But the Tabernacle experience is only a preliminary and rather minor phase in Rachel Cameron's movement towards greater self-understanding and self-acceptance. Her emotional involvement with Nick Kazlik, and its outcome, cause her to penetrate more deeply into still unfamiliar regions

of human character and experience both with respect to herself and to others. The usual casualness and carefreeness of Nick's manner, in her presence, interests and attracts Rachel as much as the fact of his strong masculinity. Perhaps her mother's expression of undeserved contempt for him - he is merely the son of Manawaka's milkman - also serves to fuel her desire to know Nick more intimately. She finds it possible to overcome something of her habitual reserve while she is with him and, indeed, is able to surrender herself to him freely in sexual love. Not only are natural desires for physical love and (even) for personal offspring awakened within the intimacy of this relationships with Nick, but Rachel's yearning for emotional freedom and for release from the dominating influence exerted by her mother is also given encouragement and scope. Even her oppressively-felt concern about social reputation, a concern mainly and most diligently nurtured within her by her mother, is strongly undermined by the intimate encounter with Nick. Her silent outcry, uttered within the confines of her own mind (after her first sexual encounter with Nick), supplies firm evidence of this fact:

Nick doesn't know - he doesn't know how I've wanted to lose that reputation, to divest myself of it as though it were an oxeye yoke, to burn it to ashes and scatter them to the wind.²

In the course of her brief romantic relationship with Nick, Rachel nevertheless comes to understand her own personality more fully and to comprehend more fully how family background and inheritance, and personal

²Margaret Laurence, Rachel, Rachel (New York: Popular Library, 1966), p. 83. All succeeding page references apply to this edition of the novel.

reactions to these, help to shape one's characteristic being and outlook. Beneath the surface of his assumed carefreeness, Nick - like Rachel herself - is struggling with a parent-child conflict and is searching for the personal serenity which only a resolution of this conflict (between father and son), and a fuller acceptance of himself, can bring. As Nick shares this more intimate struggle with her, Rachel learns to empathize, more effectively than heretofore, with another person and to view her own unsatisfactory relationship with her mother with more objectivity and maturity of spirit.

Nevertheless, it is the sharp disappointment and embarrassment which Nick Kazlik's unexplained departure for Winnipeg, and the (now) obviously transient character of his feelings evoke within her, that reveal Rachel's uncomely pride to herself. She who so much feared to make a public fool of herself among her own townsfolk, has now, and so readily, fallen prey to the greatest foolishness of all - the folly of naive self-deception - and cannot bear even the thought of it. This stinging blow to Rachel's pride enables her to share the humbling news of her distress with an otherwise unappreciated Calla and to receive her colleague's kindly understanding and sympathy. In the end, this ruthless revelation of her own pride serves Rachel positively as a stimulant to decisive action in the present and to more maturely-conceived hopes for the future. She confronts and startles her mother with a firm decision to leave for Vancouver and to take her mother with her over all objections.

There are a number of elemental truths about human action and human existence which Rachel Cameron comes to perceive with greater clarity and conviction: firstly, the course of human life is shaped by forces over

which man has little control (hereditary influences coming via character and disposition, parental attitudes and examples, chance happenings in the environment) as well as by personal desires and choices over which man does have considerable control; secondly, most people can come, despite obstacles of various sorts, to do what they really want to do in life although life throws up its own share of surprises for each one; thirdly, man can come to know a good deal about himself and about other individuals, which knowledge enriches personal life and grants it more stability and serenity, though there are always stretches of mystery about persons which remain such and which no amount of investigation or enquiry can unravel.

But perhaps the insight about human experience and existence which strikes Rachel most forcefully and which, at the same time, offers her the most reassuring hope for the future, is simply this: to make an utter fool of oneself is not necessarily the greatest calamity in life, that to become an utter fool may in fact be the means whereby hitherto closed doors to self-understanding and self-acceptance are opened in altogether new and merciful ways. This insight would seem to be the essential import of some of Rachel's final reflections in the novel:

Make me to hear joy and gladness, that the bones which Thou hast broken may rejoice. (p. 174)

God's mercy on reluctant jesters. And God's grace on fools. (p. 175)

In The Fire-Dwellers, her next published novel (1969), Margaret Laurence focuses more generally upon specific difficulties involved in the endeavours of individuals to properly understand and to accept themselves and each other, rather than on the search for self-understanding and self-acceptance as such. In this respect The Fire-Dwellers bears

considerable similarity, from a thematic point of view, to A Bird in the House except that in the former the focus is directed even more sharply towards one particular difficulty: the difficulty encountered by persons whose lives are otherwise closely intertwined in communicating, clearly and helpfully, with each other. The matter of communication - effective and not so effective communication - between persons (in both verbal and non-verbal ways) is no new motif for Laurence; it runs, like a coloured vein in a fragment of rock, through most of her novels - sometimes becoming more prominent and at other times less so. It assumes major significance, as a more explicitly developed motif, in The Stone Angel and (more especially) in The Fire-Dwellers. Stacey MacAindra, one of the two central characters in The Fire-Dwellers, is frequently made to give direct expression to this particular theme (or sub-theme) in her numerous reflections upon the nature of her relationship to her husband and family.³

The main forces which complicate, even unsettle, the marriage relationship between Stacey and Clifford ("Mac") MacAindra and make effective communication between them, as individuals, difficult are her strong need for emotional intimacy and his inability to share personal feelings freely and intensely with his wife and (for that matter) with other people

³A specific instance which may stand as representative of many others occurs early in the novel (Margaret Laurence, The Fire-Dwellers (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969):

Everybody should stop from time to time and explain what they mean. But none of us in this house do. (p. 69)

All succeeding page references pertain to this edition of the novel.

as well. Stacey feels confined - even trapped - in her situation since, apart from the usual responsibilities and anxieties of parenthood (and she is a very anxious mother), there is little in life that promises to provide a personal sense of emotional and social fulfilment for her. Clifford's insensitivity to her situation, and particularly to her need for open and sympathetic discussion of it with him, drives Stacey into a clandestine affair with young Luke Venturi, who gives her the hearing and emotional support which she very much needs at the time.

This theme of communication between persons - of both its difficulties and possibilities - is pursued in connection with a variety of other situations and relationships, including the relationship between Clifford ("Mac") and his own father (Matthew), Stacey and Luke Venturi, Stacey and her children (particularly Ian, a very quiet, cautious, and self-contained son), Clifford and his truck-driver friend, Buckle Fennick, and Tess and Jake Fogler (near acquaintances of the MacAindras). But it receives its central and most compelling elaboration within the context of Stacey and Clifford's marriage relationship.

Nevertheless, it is in the very course of Stacey and Clifford's struggles to communicate more effectively with each other, and to relate more intimately to each other, that they not only identify specific obstacles but also discover who they themselves are, as marriage partners and as individual beings. It is in Laurence's delineation of this gradual discovery and acceptance, of themselves and each other, that the familiar theme of the individual's quest for identity reasserts itself like a recurring movement within a musical sonata. A consideration of this particular delineation, in The Fire-Dwellers, is therefore entirely pertinent to

my broad thesis.

Part of Stacey and Clifford's dilemma is simply the matter of differences in their personalities. These differences are rather marked and hinder not only their efforts to communicate with each other (at deeper levels) but also their respective endeavours to properly understand themselves and the particular worlds in which they live and work. Stacey is something of a romantic creature at heart. This romantic streak within herself only intensifies her vague dissatisfaction with Clifford, with his job, and with her own role as wife and mother generally. Oftentimes she feels as though she has lost her own identity and independence:

The kids don't belong to me. They belong to themselves. It would be nice to have something of my own, that's all. I can't go anywhere as myself. Only as Mac's wife or the kid's mother. (p. 95)

This romantic outlook also renders her less patient in her relationship to Clifford than she might otherwise be, and less disposed to look beneath the surface in order to discover just what it is that makes her husband act and react as he ordinarily does.

This romantic part of her nature increases her natural anxieties about the development and welfare of her children (her "mother-hen" fears) and her tendency to feel jealous of other wives, like Tess Fogler, who seem to have all things so much better in hand. It also renders her more apprehensive about the changes occurring around and within herself and about her capacity to adjust to these changes. "I wanted to explain myself," she complains; "I still do. I'm not what I may appear to be" (p. 73).

The other element in Stacey's personality which complicates matters for her and for her husband is, of course, her strong need for emotional

and social interaction and intimacy. This is a need which Clifford (as husband) cannot possibly satisfy, being the emotionally reserved and self-contained man that he is, and her hints to him of this fact only cause annoyance, quarrels, and even deeper misunderstanding between them.

In addition to his temperamental reserve, Clifford's habit of demanding a great deal, of himself and of the members of his family, in terms of self-control and self-reliance also militates against any growth (for him) in self-understanding and against any growth in family intimacy. This compulsive urge to demand as much of his family and friends as of himself blinds him for a time to certain needs within the lives of his young sons, to the emotional needs of an older friend (Buckle Fennick), and to his own suppressed need for the emotional support of others.

But personality differences constitute only a part of Clifford's and Stacey's dilemma. As crucial as such differences, perhaps even more so, and yet inevitable conjoined with them, are the elements of pride, dishonesty, stubbornness, and fear which Laurence's earlier novels have already familiarized us with so thoroughly. These elements of human culpability may assume a variety of guises in the actions and reactions of Stacey and Clifford, but their ultimate effect upon the quality of their marriage and family relationship is always the same, undermining it in threatening ways.

Possibly a first crisis in this uneasy relationship surfaces when Stacey, stung and angered by the phoney and condescending manner of Thor Thorlakson at a "business party", brings humiliation upon her husband by talking rudely and drinking excessively. Part of the explanation for her unruly conduct is her honest disgust with the artificiality of Thor and of

the entire affair as such; but personal pride is also involved - pride, that is, disguised as desire (initially) to make an impression at the party and disguised (also) as desire to have her small revenges upon both Thor and Clifford. It seems clear that Stacey's dissatisfaction with Clifford is rooted not only in his unwillingness to share intimately with her but also in his continuing connection (despite her voiced disapproval) with something as dubious as Thor's "Richalife program."

A second major crisis is precipitated by the reported intimacy between Stacey and Buckle Fennick. Clifford's angry response, on this occasion, may be an expression of sexual jealousy at first, but beneath this surface reaction lies a great deal more: suppressed guilt feelings about his own emotional staidness and reserve, on the one hand, and a stubborn unwillingness to discuss his own past openly with Stacey, on the other. And while this crisis does not yet break down Clifford's unwillingness to share his past with her, it does bring the truth home to him forcibly that such unwillingness to share himself with others can (as in the case of Buckle Fennick) alienate and hurt others seriously.

But several further crises need to be weathered before these obstacles of pride, dishonesty, stubbornness, and fear are fully recognized and acknowledged, by both Stacey and Clifford, and before their relationship acquires the qualities of intimacy and security. One of these is the death (by way of a truck collision on the highway) of Buckle Fennick. This tragic happening jolts Clifford exceedingly, particularly the discovery that Buckle had cited him (Clifford) on his personal registration documents as next of kin - this despite the fact that Clifford had rather ignored his evident need for personal friendship, especially during the

last several months before his death. The event, and his brooding reflection upon it, break down Clifford's customary defences and enable him to give visible expression to his grief and to acknowledge (albeit hesitantly) his own deeper need for sympathy and understanding. But it enables him to do even more - to unfold to Stacey the story of his war-time experiences (with Buckle Fennick in Italy) and to humbly share with her the burden of his long-suppressed guilt. And this burden is simply his repeated failure, during those bygone days and also more recently, to extend to Buckle that demonstration of affection which he so manifestly needed. The purgation of soul which Clifford now experiences allows him to speak an honest and open word to her about his own failings as husband. Indeed, at this point in their respective pilgrimages, he seems to have become more unreservedly candid, in the business of intimate sharing, than Stacey herself.

This crisis also encourages Clifford (a little later) to become more honest, both in personal reflection and in open discussion with his wife, about his real sentiments concerning the entire Richalife venture and to acknowledge his desire to be involved in some more meaningful vocation - in "something that meant something" (p. 256). Such increasing frankness on Clifford's part shames Stacey into a spirit of humility and enables her to recognize her own pride more clearly, to recognize her own share of responsibility for the brittleness of their marriage relationship, and to view Clifford with more understanding and sympathy. Stacey begins to comprehend, now, why her husband has been so self-reliant and uncommunicative about many things and has preferred to handle some matters quite by himself. She compresses her discovery into these revealing words:

If he doesn't deal with everything alone, no help, then he thinks he's a total washout. (p. 257)

He, on the other hand, begins to understand how his own reticence and attitude of self-reliance have created doubts within Stacey about his felt need for her.

There are further disclosures which come to Stacey in the course of personal encounters with other individuals and impress her with the fact of her own blindness to the deeper realities which lie back of public appearances. The news of the collapse of Tess and Jake Fogler's marriage, for instance, catches her with utter surprise despite the fairly close acquaintanceship between Tess and herself. The actual facts concerning her father-in-law's earlier relationship with her husband and their direct bearing upon Clifford's characteristic behaviour as husband and father provide another such disclosure. Stacey can scarcely believe her ears when she hears from Matthew himself the admission that he had been altogether too demanding with his sons (including Clifford) and had always been afraid to become candid with his wife concerning his own religious doubts. Yet this open admission of personal error and weakness, on Matthew's part, only increases her respect for him and certainly helps her to appreciate Clifford more genuinely. Clifford, in turn, sensing Stacey's growing appreciation for him and his father's regret about past failures, is now able to understand and accept himself more positively. And so, within the relationship between Stacey and Clifford MacAindra as delineated in The Fire-Dwellers, the experiences of increased self-understanding and self-acceptance continually interact with, and further enlarge, the possibilities of understanding and accepting one another, at deeper levels.

A final crisis in the MacAindra family which contributes to Stacey's and Clifford's progress towards greater understanding and acceptance, of themselves and of one another, is the near-drowning of their son Duncan. Clifford's unmistakable anxiety and concern, on this occasion, his affectionate embrace of Duncan (something never done before), and his greater tenderness towards Ian (their older son) as well, are a new revelation for Stacey, once again. She perceives that her husband prefers to express his less visible love for family members in his own, and entirely legitimate, "language" (p. 296). This event, and the various insights accompanying it, again chasten her spirit at deeper levels. She acknowledges that it "was wrong to think of the trap as the four walls" of a home. The real trap, as she now perceives, is "the world" itself (p. 303). She finds that she can finally accept herself, and the conditions of life in which she finds herself, without regret and indeed with some measure of tranquillity.

The foregoing discussion, limited though it has had to be, nevertheless continues my argument, begun in chapters one and two, for the centrality of the indicated theme (the search of the individual for self-understanding and self-acceptance) in Margaret Laurence's entire body of fiction. A more detailed examination of the three novels discussed above, and of the other two novels not touched upon at all (A Bird in the House and The Diviners), if undertaken along the lines of my analysis of This Side Jordan, would, I maintain, yield further support for the contention that this particular theme holds a dominant place both in the mind of Margaret Laurence and in her created works of fiction. This is a

task, however, which I must leave to others. What has been presented in my study, it is to be hoped, constitutes one kind of framework in which the debate concerning Margaret Laurence's central themes may be profitably continued and perhaps eventually resolved.

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