

The University of Winnipeg

The Child and Death in  
the Fiction of Margaret Laurence

by

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree  
of Master of Arts

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## Abstract

Almost every one of Margaret Laurence's novels and short stories explores some aspect of the concept of death as it develops in an individual's experience from childhood to adulthood, and shows how this concept shapes the individual's understanding of life.

While reference is made to certain of Laurence's short stories, essays, and books for children, this thesis examines the death motif in relation to the following works: This Side Jordan, The Stone Angel, A Jest of God, The Fire-Dwellers, A Bird in the House, and The Diviners. Each work is examined with four major considerations in mind: the child's early concept of death, the child's first experience with death, the interrelation of birth and death, and the individual's coming to terms with life and with death.

The conclusion relates Laurence's understanding of death to her concept of interrelation of past, present and future, and traces the development of the theme and presentation of death throughout her works. Also examined are the increasing subtlety of insight and the increasing emotive effectiveness of the works and the writer as she matures as an artist.

I acknowledge, with thanks, the three people who played key roles in this endeavour: Peter Janzen, who first aroused my interest in the study of English literature; Dr. Walter E. Swayze, whose knowledge and advice throughout this thesis were invaluable; and, perhaps most of all, my husband Will, whose patience and encouragement sustained me during this past year.

Nothing here is of the dead.  
Quietly I walk, wind-cloaked,  
Hearing the rain's promise  
That this land will be my immortality.

Peggy Wemyss  
Vox, 18, No. 3 (Graduation, 1945), 32

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## Abbreviations

References using abbreviations are to the following editions:

Fiction by Margaret Laurence:

- TSJ This Side Jordan. New Canadian Library, No. 126.  
Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976, Pp. 282.
- TT The Tomorrow-Tamer. New Canadian Library, No. 70.  
Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970, Pp. 244.
- SA The Stone Angel. New Canadian Library, No. 59.  
Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968, Pp. 308.
- JG A Jest of God. New Canadian Library, No. 111.  
Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974, Pp. 202.
- FD The Fire-Dwellers. New Canadian Library, No. 87.  
Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973, Pp. 308.
- BH A Bird in the House. New Canadian Library, No. 96.  
Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974, Pp. 207.
- JQ Jason's Quest. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970.
- D The Diviners. New Canadian Library, No. 146.  
Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978, Pp. 467.
- ODC The Olden Days Coat. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart,  
1979.

Non-Fiction by Margaret Laurence:

- TNV "Time and the Narrative Voice." The Narrative Voice:  
Short Stories and Reflections by Canadian Authors.  
Ed. John Metcalfe. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd.,  
1972, Pp. 126-30.

- HS Heart of a Stranger. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976, Pp. 219.
- TYS "Ten Years' Sentences." Margaret Laurence: The Writer and Her Critics. Ed. William New. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1977, Pp. 17-23.
- TI Canadian Writers on Tape. Interviewer: Earle Toppings. Toronto: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1977.

Works by Other Writers:

- CJ Nancy Bailey. "Margaret Laurence, Carl Jung and the Manawaka Women." Studies in Canadian Literature, 2, No. 2 (Summer 1977), 306-21.
- ML William H. New, ed. Margaret Laurence: The Writer and Her Critics. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1977, Pp. 224.
- MW Clara Thomas. The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence. New Canadian Library, No. 131. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976, Pp. 212.
- TV Joan Hind-Smith. "Margaret Laurence." Three Voices. Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1975, Pp. 1-60.
- WML John Sorfleet, ed. The Work of Margaret Laurence. Special Number of the Journal of Canadian Fiction, 27 (1980), Pp. 182.



## Chapter One

### Introduction

The theme of death is one of the most notable features of the fiction of Margaret Laurence. What is especially striking about this theme, aside from the author's skillful portrayal of death, is that in virtually every instance, death affects a child in some way. From Johnnie Kestoe's unwilling presence at his mother's deathbed in This Side Jordan to Morag's baffled exclusion from the death of her parents in The Diviners, each protagonist has some childhood experience with death. Even some of Laurence's children's books deal with death; while Jason's Quest considers the death of a community (from boredom), The Olden Days Coat examines death and aging from a perspective suitable for a child's understanding of the phenomenon. It is my thesis that the individual's later attitudes towards death and life are a direct result of this childhood exposure to death, and that the search for self-knowledge and acceptance--so common in Laurence's characters--hinges on the individual's acceptance of mortality, of death as a part of life.

On first reading Margaret Laurence's fiction, I was especially aware of her treatment of death, and of the significance of death to the child. This impression was further corroborated

through the discovery of an interview between Margaret Laurence and Earle Toppings. When Toppings questioned Laurence on the events that influenced her work, her reply was precise:

I think the things that probably influenced my writing to a great extent were the number of deaths in the family. . . . It seems to me that there were a number of deaths in the family and my childhood seems to me to be sort of signposted by these events. . . . most kids don't realize when they're very young that they themselves are going to die. I was never in the slightest doubt about it.<sup>1</sup>

(The last comment echoes Stacey MacAindra's concern for Ian in The Fire-Dwellers (FD,215).) At another point in the interview Laurence comments on A Bird in the House: "It was only through writing these stories that I began to see how deeply I was affected by [death] as a kid."<sup>2</sup> Joan Hind-Smith comments on the effect of death on the writer: "It was also about the time of her mother's death that she began to make up stories, even before she was old enough to write them down. By the time she was in Grade 3 she was writing them down and in Grade 5 she had scribblers filled with poems and stories."<sup>3</sup> This behaviour is reflected in the stories which Vanessa is always inventing in A Bird in the House, as well as in Morag's writing as a child in The Diviners.

The importance of death in the experience of the child is

not unique to Margaret Laurence or her characters. Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross has done an extensive study of attitudes towards death in her book On Death and Dying. She comments on the general attitude of man towards death: "Death is still a fearful, frightening happening, and the fear of death is a universal fear even if we think we have mastered it on many levels."<sup>4</sup> According to Kubler-Ross, an integral part of our inability to accept death is our association of death with guilt. "In simple terms, in our unconscious mind we can only be killed; it is inconceivable to die of a natural cause or of old age. Therefore death in itself is associated with a bad act, a frightening happening, something that in itself calls for retribution and punishment."<sup>5</sup> This attitude towards death is transferred from the adult to the child, so that he or she is aware only of the negative or traumatic aspects of death. Kubler-Ross writes: "Pediatricians have less work with acute and life-threatening situations but they see an ever increasing number of patients suffering from psychosomatic disturbances and from adjustment and behavior problems,"<sup>6</sup> and she attributes a large part of this phenomenon to the fact that "Few people feel comfortable talking to a child about death. Young children have different concepts of death and they have to be taken into consideration in order to talk to them and to understand their communications."<sup>7</sup> One cannot help wondering just

how many of the protagonists' problems in Laurence's fiction might have been avoided had someone taken the time to talk with or listen to the children's fears and concerns about their experience with death.

Kubler-Ross divides the child's concept of death into four categories based on the age of the child; and although the age groups do not always coincide with the age of the character within Laurence's fiction, the similarities in the experience and the resulting concept of death are striking. Kubler-Ross writes that the young child is concerned only with separation. Up to the age of three, death is not a "permanent fact . . . . It is as temporary as burying a flower bulb into the soil in the fall to have it come up again in the following spring."<sup>8</sup> This inability to comprehend the permanence of death is comparable to Vanessa's attitude, at ten years of age, towards Grandmother Connor's death in "Mask of the Bear" in A Bird in the House. Vanessa says, "I did not fully realise yet that Grandmother Connor would never move around this house again" (BH,80).

The next stage which Kubler-Ross describes regarding the child's concept of death is also apparent in a number of Laurence's works. Somewhere between the ages of three and five, death becomes associated with mutilation. Kubler-Ross writes:

It is at this age that the small child begins to mobilize, to take his first trip out "into the world," the sidewalk trips by tri-cycle. It is in this environment that he may see the first beloved pet run over by a car or a beautiful bird torn apart by a cat. This is what mutilation means to him, since it is the age when he is concerned about the integrity of his body and is threatened by anything that can destroy it.<sup>9</sup>

The fear of mutilation is obvious in The Stone Angel, in the teen-aged Hagar's reaction to the baby chicks in the garbage dump--"the chicks, feeble, foodless, bloodied and mutilated" (SA,27). This image continues to haunt Hagar, even at ninety. The fear is present in The Fire-Dwellers in Stacey's memory of a mutilated gopher which she saw at eight or nine years of age (FD,167), and in Duncan's reaction to injuring himself--his concern for the "integrity" of his body: "Nail sticking out of the wall--didn't see it--it was rusty too will I die Mum?" (FD,117). Finally, and most effectively, the fear of mutilation and death is employed in The Diviners in Morag's association of the memory of the gopher with the death of her parents:

She knows they are dead. She knows what dead means. She has seen gophers, run over by cars or shot, their guts redly squashed out on the road. . . . Morag does not know how much of their guts lie coiled like scarlet snakes across the sheets.

(D,16)

The next stage in the child's concept of death deals with death as a person--a bogey-man. Kubler-Ross describes this stage: "After the age of five death is often regarded as a man, a bogey-man who comes to take people away; it is still attributed to an outward intervention."<sup>10</sup> The bogey-man is present in the memories of a number of Laurence's protagonists. Hagar describes him as "the creature I believed to inhabit the unused closet in my room. . . . a slime-coiled anaconda with the mockery of a man's head, and jeweled eyes, and a smug smile" (SA,117-18). For Rachel the bogey-man takes the form of gaunt horsemen or cloaked skeletons of the apocalypse (JG,32), or becomes associated with her memories of her father and his macabre relationship with the corpses. "I know he is lying there among them, lying in state, king over them. He can't fool me. He says run away Rachel, run away, run away. I am running" (JG,19). Stacey, too, associates death with her impression of the corpses in her father's mortuary. "I used to imagine the dead men below in the mortuary, conjure them up on purpose so they wouldn't take me by surprise" (FD,215).

The child's final concept of death--the concept which he takes with him into adulthood--forms in late childhood. Kubler-Ross describes this final stage: "Around the ages of nine to ten the realistic conception begins to show, namely, death as a permanent biological process."<sup>11</sup> This stage is not quite as apparent in Margaret Laurence's fiction, because her protagonists

tend to deny death. Initially, they refuse to approach it realistically, and therefore they do not accept it as a "permanent process." Essentially, what the protagonists achieve in their coming to terms with life in the course of the various works, is a final acceptance of death--a final ability to look at it realistically. Kubler-Ross writes that children "should be listened to and allowed to ventilate their feelings, whether they be guilt, anger or plain sadness."<sup>12</sup> In all the novels considered here, the only person who encourages a child to speak of death, to discuss his or her feelings, is Stacey in The Fire-Dwellers. All the rest are forced to repress their fears and doubts about death, and for this reason their acceptance of death is not forthcoming until they are able to deal with their fears in a mature manner.

The similarities between Margaret Laurence's characters' concepts of death and the concepts outlined by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross are uncanny at some points. This is not to say that Laurence was aware of Kubler-Ross or her writing on death. Rather, it is to point out the universality of Laurence's characters and their experiences with death. In his introduction to The Work of Margaret Laurence, John R. Sorfleet writes on Margaret Laurence's contribution to literature and to the world:

Laurence has helped people (of more than one generation) to look at themselves again, to

adjust their perspectives, and to go forward in life with a little more self-knowledge, humanity, and resolution. This is Margaret Laurence's real significance: her work has entered our lives and enlarged us by the experience.<sup>13</sup>

An integral part of her significant contribution is the widely shared experience of death found within her work--partly due to her ability as an artist, and partly due to her own childhood experiences with death.

Another element within the fiction of Margaret Laurence which contributes to the universality of her work is the similarity between her concept of maturation and Carl Jung's process of individuation. Laurence writes out of personal experience and imagination, and long before she was aware of Jung as a source of influence, her works had been illustrating the same features of human experience that Jungian thought illuminates. Some critics maintain that as she became aware of Jung's concepts, Laurence adjusted hers to coincide more closely with his. Nancy Bailey writes: "While the earlier women--Hagar, Rachel and Stacey--represent only aspects of Jung's concept of personality, Morag Gunn, the protagonist of the last novel . . . goes through a process of development which corresponds closely to Jung's full process of individuation."<sup>14</sup> This may be the case; initially, however, the maturation of her fictional characters is derived



through the personal experience of the writer herself.

The similarities between what Jung labels individuation and the maturation of the protagonists within Laurence's writing are striking. The description of individuation as "the conscious coming to terms with one's own inner center . . . or Self"<sup>15</sup> seems an especially apt appraisal of the mental development of these characters. Jung describes the process: "The hero's main feat is to overcome the monster of darkness: it is the long-hoped-for and expected triumph of consciousness over the unconscious."<sup>16</sup> The monster of which Jung writes is the dark side of the personality--the unconscious. The psyche's conscious and unconscious elements are described by Frieda Fordham: "The unconscious aspect of the psyche is different from, but compensatory to the conscious. In Jung's view the conscious mind is 'based upon, and results from an unconscious psyche which is prior to consciousness, and continues to function together with, or despite consciousness.'<sup>17</sup> What one must do to achieve individuation, then, is to integrate the conscious and unconscious elements of the psyche. There are varying degrees of success in this integration process, as Dr. Marie-Louise von Franz notes:

. . . this larger, more nearly total aspect of the psyche appears first as merely an inborn possibility. It may emerge very slightly, or it may develop relatively completely during

one's lifetime. How far it develops depends on whether or not the ego is willing to listen to the messages of the Self.<sup>18</sup>

If the process of individuation is to be complete, "one must surrender consciously to the power of the unconscious, instead of thinking in terms of what one should do, or of what is generally thought right, or of what usually happens."<sup>19</sup> And the way to do this "is to turn directly towards the approaching darkness without prejudice and totally naively, and to try to find out what its secret aim is and what it wants from you."<sup>20</sup>

In the case of Laurence's characters, a large part of the darkness which must be accepted and understood is the death experience which so affected them as children. Because of this threatening experience, the characters experience a retarded development. They are unable to achieve complete maturation, or individuation, because they are afraid to accept what has happened, and to progress further. Jung describes this protective device: "Our differentiated consciousness is in continual danger of being uprooted; hence it needs compensation through the still existing state of childhood."<sup>21</sup> The individuals remain, in essence, emotional cripples until they can assimilate the experience with death into their consciousness. Once this experience has been faced, once the individual is able to let the dead rest

in peace, the acceptance of life, and one's own mortality, is possible. Nancy Bailey calls this coming to terms a "realization of the whole self":<sup>22</sup> "The unconscious areas of the self have to be recognised and opened up before the goal which Jung termed 'individuation' can be achieved."<sup>23</sup>

Margaret Laurence describes her pre-occupation with death in her article "Where the World Began," in a passage describing the cemetery near her home town of Neepawa:

The dead lived in that place, too. Not only the grandparents who had, in local parlance, "passed on" and who gloomed, bearded or bonneted, from the sepia photographs in old albums, but also the uncles, forever eighteen or nineteen, whose names were carved on the granite family stones in the cemetery, but whose bones lay in France. My own young mother lay in that graveyard, beside other dead of our kin, and when I was ten, my father, too, only forty, left the living town for the dead dwelling on the hill.<sup>24</sup>

The feelings of grief and loss are apparent in this passage, and it is largely having experienced such feelings that enables the author to portray them so convincingly in her works. What is a persistent and inherent part of the fiction, then, is obviously relevant to the author's experience, as evidenced by this passage and by her statement to Earle Toppings, and is central to the experiences of readers who find Jung's ideas illuminating.

It is surprising that no other study of the child and death in the fiction of Margaret Laurence has been published to date. The subject is an obvious one, considering Laurence's fiction and her background; and its examination proves to be rewarding. In the following chapters, each novel<sup>25</sup> is examined with four major considerations in mind: the child's early concept of death, the child's first experience with death, the interrelation of birth and death, and the individual's coming to terms with life and death. Each work is examined separately in chronological order, so that the theme of death can be appreciated within each novel, and within the framework of Laurence's development of the theme in her writing considered as a whole.

## Notes to Chapter One

- 1 Laurence, TI.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Joan Hind-Smith, TV, p.7.
- 4 Elisabeth Kubler-Ross M.D., On Death and Dying (London: Tavistock Publications, 1969), p.4.
- 5 Ibid., p.2.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid., p.157.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid., p.158.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 John R. Sorfleet, Introduction, WML, p.8.
- 14 Nancy Bailey, CJ, p.306. In addition to Nancy Bailey's article, a number of others have been written on the similarities between Jung's and Laurence's concepts of maturation. Although the article by Theo Q. Dombrowski, "Who is This You? Margaret Laurence and Identity," University of Windsor Review, 8, No. 1 (Fall-Winter 1977), 21-38, is not really written in terms of Jungian concepts, his description of the search for identity is similar. "Laurence presents the self caught in the middle ground between antithetical forces . . . . to achieve a cumulative sense of the way in which such lack of certitude reflects on the very nature of identity" (p.36). Dennis Cooley's paper "Antimacassared in the Wilderness: Art and Nature in The Stone Angel," Mosaic, 11, No. 3 (Spring 1978), 29-46, explores the Jungian dimensions of the novel in terms of Hagar's movement towards personal wholeness. Cooley comments, "Laurence presents Hagar in strongly

Jungian terms, even though she apparently has never read Carl Jung" (p.32). In her article "Finding the Mother: The Individuation of Laurence's Heroines," WML, 151-66, Angelika Maeser describes the women protagonists' quest for self-knowledge and acceptance in a male-gendered reality, defining the individuation process as a discovery of the Mother within the self of each of Laurence's heroines. She sees one of the central problems of the heroines to be "The creation of a death-fearing culture that is more cruel with its props drawn from spurious religious comfort" (p.156).

<sup>15</sup> Marie-Louise von Franz, "The Process of Individuation," Man and His Symbols, ed. Carl G. Jung (New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1976), p.169.

<sup>16</sup> Carl G. Jung, "The Psychology of the Child Archetype," Essays on a Science of Mythology: The Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis, ed. Carl G. Jung and C. Kerényi, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p.86. Although this is an interesting essay in terms of the Jungian concept of the myth, it deals mainly with the child hero's adventure, whereas my thesis deals with the hero as an adult, with reference back to childhood experiences. For this reason the paper is, largely, irrelevant to the study except for some general statements.

<sup>17</sup> Frieda Fordham, An Introduction to Jung's Psychology (London: Penguin Books, 1954), p.16.

<sup>18</sup> Von Franz, p.163.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.165-66.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.170.

<sup>21</sup> Jung, p.82.

<sup>22</sup> Bailey, p.310.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.309.

<sup>24</sup> Margaret Laurence, "Where the World Began," HS, p.217.

<sup>25</sup> The collection of stories called A Bird in the House has been considered along with Laurence's novels in this thesis, because each story deals with the same character, Vanessa McLeod, and her maturation. This collection, then, has been differentiated

from Laurence's other collection of short stories, The Tomorrow Tamer, in which each story is a completely separate entity, with different, non-recurring characters.

## Chapter Two

### This Side Jordan

Margaret Laurence's first novel, This Side Jordan, has evoked a variety of critical opinions, ranging from Mary Renault's gushing praise ("Miss Laurence has written a first novel of rare excellence. She has an impressive sense of the equatorial rhythms: the cruelty, the gay or the wistful resignation, the feckless humour, the splendid hymns"<sup>1</sup>) to Barry Callaghan's condemnation of the novel: "I suspect This Side Jordan was begun years ago, for it has all the weaknesses of a first novel worked on too long and too diligently. . . . The novel is really a device for a neat liberal message and is a mechanical rather than an imaginative production."<sup>2</sup>

On the whole, however, the novel was well-accepted, and was commended for its authenticity by the African literary world. In his introduction to the New Canadian Library reprint of the novel, G.D. Killam writes that Laurence "has gone as far as an outsider can go in rendering authentically the West African setting."<sup>3</sup> Patricia Morley also comments on this phenomenon: "The novel has been praised by African reviewers for giving 'a highly informed insight into Africa today' and for illuminating African problems and tensions 'in a striking and memorable way.'"<sup>4</sup> She cites



a number of reviews of the work in her article.<sup>5</sup> The novel has an established place in Laurence's work, then, and the importance of her African experiences and writing has been the subject of scholarly discussion.<sup>6</sup>

What one critic finds fault with is often the basis for another's praise. A point in question is the parallel treatment of the African and the colonial themes within the novel. Clara Thomas finds this treatment to be a negative feature: "In Mrs. Laurence's first excursion from short story to novel, there is a certain insistence of symmetry or balance, in plot and character, that in its origin is the just impulse to deal fairly and completely with each character, but in its effect seems sometimes to be contrivance."<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, Jane Leney terms it a positive trait of the writer and her work. "It is perhaps a measure of her sensitivity that she is able to write a novel with two points of view---one white, one African---and give them equal weight."<sup>8</sup> The parallel treatment does exist, however, and it must be considered in examining the significance of death to the child.

Although Johnnie Kestoe and Nathaniel Amegbe come from decidedly different backgrounds, and although their essential experience with death is not the same, there are a number of parallels in the boys' experiences and in their attempts to come to terms with life and death. Johnnie is forced to witness his

mother's death, while Nathaniel is called back from school for his father's funeral; in both cases the boys must deal with the death on their own. They are alone: Johnnie's father is a nondescript character; Nathaniel's mother is not mentioned at the time of the father's death. Further, they are outsiders in their societies: Johnnie is the son of an Irish immigrant living in a London slum; and Nathaniel is a boy caught between two worlds, tribal and modern, while belonging to neither. The most significant factor in the boys' experiences with death, though, is its lasting influence on their lives. In each case the parent's death is associated with the eternal damnation of that parent's soul, with each boy responsible, to a certain extent, for that damnation. This results in each boy's faith being shaken to its foundations. The two characters must come to terms with these deaths before they are able to regain any sense of faith in man, in God, and in life itself.

The death of Johnnie's mother leaves him a spiritual and emotional cripple. It is the deciding factor in his attitude to his father. Johnnie's initial recollections of his father are hardly complimentary, depicting him as a "slow-witted Irishman, a halfman with a bone disease, a limping clown who went by the name of Dennis Kestoe and who earned his two quid a week slopping out the Men's lavatories in the tube stations with bucket and rag" (TSJ, 5). This impression of the father figure deteriorates

significantly at Mary Kestoe's deathbed: "His father, the halfman, gutless as always, kept repeating over and over to his son that they didn't have money for a doctor, and he was afraid to call the priest because 'she done it herself'" (TSJ, 58). And so, after Dennis Kestoe "shambled out to find the priest, leaving the boy to sit beside [his mother] in the evening-filled room" (TSJ, 59), Johnnie's father is never mentioned again.

Similarly, the boy's impression of the mother figure is destroyed through his witnessing her death. His memories of her language are especially poignant:

. . . chiefly, the words he remembered from the time alone with her were not words either of obscenity or prayer. From amid the shuddering sobs and the animal paingrunting had come suddenly the clear Irish girl voice, surprised and frightened--'Oh God, my guts won't stop bleeding--what am I going to do at all?'  
(TSJ, 60)

There is no saving grace, divine or human, at the moment of death. The boy's compassion is not aroused; his response is one of fear. He is "terrified lest she realize he was there and cry out to him, to him who had nothing to give her in her need, not even his love" (TSJ, 59). This feeling of terror at the aspect of death, and the inability to love or feel pity, remain with Johnnie.

The death of Johnnie's mother is also responsible for the

destruction of his religious faith, when he is forced to decide his mother's spiritual fate in the eyes of the world. Physically and mentally exhausted, he is questioned about whether his mother made an Act of Contrition until he lies: "'I don't remember--she was yelling and yelling and then it was quiet. I don't know. . . I think she said it,' the boy whispered" (TSJ, 59-60). There is no divine punishment from above, "No flaming sword descended to cut him down" (TSJ, 60), and the boy is left empty and uncaring, spiritually: "He did not know if he had saved her from the deep pit and from the lion's mouth, that hell engulf her not. He did not know how they had finally settled the argument. She lay in consecrated ground and how she got there he did not care" (TSJ, 60).

Perhaps the most telling comment on Johnnie's loss of faith is the revelation of the continuing effect of this experience:

When he was a little boy, there was a night prayer he used to say, a prayer to the Mother of God. He never said that particular one again. But he dreamed it sometimes.

'O Mary, my dear Mother, bless me, and guard me under thy mantle---'

(TSJ, 60)

As his mother's death has destroyed his ability to love and to live, so has it destroyed his ability to have faith. He may have

saved his mother's soul from eternal damnation, but the cost of this action is his own faith. This identification of Mary the Mother of God and Mary his mother must be remembered later in the novel, when Johnnie finally comes to terms with himself, with death and life.

Although Nathaniel's age and background are different from Johnnie's,<sup>9</sup> Nathaniel's experience with death has similar repercussions in his religious faith, and in his attitude towards life. For Nathaniel, though, his father's death raises the dilemma of losing two faiths. He finds he can no longer accept the old, traditional beliefs of his people, while at the same time the new faith, Christianity, condemns his father's soul to eternal damnation. He is forced to choose between the two faiths, finding ultimately that he no longer believes in either of them.

Nathaniel is a person caught between two ways of life. He is brought up in the ways of his people, the tribal traditions and beliefs, yet he is sent to a mission school to be educated:

the boy had listened, he with the new name had listened, bored at first, indifferent, then frightened, until finally he came to take it for granted. The new name took hold, and the new roots began to grow. But the old roots never quite died, and the two became intertwined.  
(TSJ, 243)

The new faith is assimilated almost unconsciously, until he

returns to the tribe for his father's funeral and finds that he cannot escape the influence of his new lessons. He is aware that the other God, the God of the mission school, exists somewhere, "But He was far away. The Latin words were far away, and the altar and the wine-blood and the wafer that was a broken body. They were far away, and Nathaniel had come home" (TSJ, 30). He tries desperately to return to the ways of his people, participating in the funeral rites of his father "with a fervour that surprised the uncles" (TSJ, 28), but all in vain. When the elders comment that the mission school has not stolen his soul (TSJ, 31), he is faced with a sudden awareness that he no longer believes in the old ways, the old gods:

He knew then. . . .

Nathaniel's heart was gripped by a terrible love, a terrible fear.

'They have not stolen your soul,' the uncles repeated, satisfied.

And the boy had agreed, his aching body sweating and trembling lest the lie should strangle him and lest his father's gods should hear and slay him.

(TSJ, 31)

When his father's gods do not punish him, he takes his survival as an affirmation that the old ways are wrong.

With this recognition comes the awareness that, by the

standards of the new religion, his father had lived a damned life and died unredeemed. Nathaniel regards the damnation of his father's soul as his personal responsibility:

The Kyerema would not be acceptable to God.  
. . . . The Drummer would walk among the howling hordes of hell to all eternity, his dark eyes as haughty and unyielding as they had been in life.

Damned. The Drummer, damned. That had seemed very clear at the time. . . .

He, Nathaniel, had damned his father to that eternity. The father had been damned by his son's belief.

(TSJ, 28)

His reaction to this awareness of his responsibility for the damnation of his father's soul is anger at the new religion:

He had stood before the statue of God's crucified Son. And he had spat full in the Thing's face, his heart raging to avenge his father. But it did not work. For he believed in the man-God with the bleeding hands, and he could not spew that out of himself.

(TSJ, 31-32)

Again, and like Johnnie Kestoe, he waits for the God to punish him, but again there is no punishment forthcoming:

For a moment, before an altar that was both alien and as familiar as himself, his fear became panic. He waited,

waited, and the night chapel was a coffin. But God was sleeping. Or He had punishments more subtle than lightning. Nothing happened. . . .

(TSJ, 32)

Nathaniel finds that he is torn between the two religions, unable to free himself from both or to accept either one: "He had sold his birthright and now could not take up his inheritance" (TSJ, 227). He comments on his dilemma, "I was of both and I was of neither. I forgot one way when I was too young to remember everything of it by myself, without help. And I learned another way when I was too old for it ever to become second nature" (TSJ, 243). His confusion results in his inability to accept either way completely and, equally, to deny both ways--to live a life void of religious faith, or at least as void as he is able to make it: "He had been a fool. He could see it now. Now he was different. Both gods had fought over him, and both had lost. Now he no longer feared. . . . Except sometimes" (TSJ, 32).

The birth of their first child acts as a catalyst in the emotional maturation of Johnnie and Nathaniel. Previously they both associated birth with death: Johnnie because of his mother's failed abortion; Nathaniel because birth for him was remembered in terms of the tribal customs of the past. These memories of birth within the tribe have heavily negative connotations: "My son isn't going to be delivered by old women with dirty hands" (TSJ,



48), or "The stench of death is in our nostrils, and we pray to old bones. . . . the wife bleeds to death in birth. What can we do?" (TSJ, 159). Through their experience with the life-creating process of birth, however, both are able to free themselves from their negative associations of birth, and to accept its positive side. In doing this, each individual is able finally to accept life, while still acknowledging the reality of death.

Johnnie's childhood experience at his mother's deathbed provides an especially concentrated instance of the interrelation of birth and death; his first experience of death is united with his first experience of birth so that the two become fused within his mind. His recollection of this incident is summed up in the passage: "At first Johnnie had believed her sin to be suicide. It came as a surprise to him when he found out that she had not meant to kill herself but only the little blind humanworm in her" (TSJ, 58).

This results in Johnnie's revulsion at the abortion, at his mother, and at birth in general. He says, "The thought of himself issuing from that body--it had made him sick with disgust, as though he could never be anything more than a clot of blood on a dirty quilt" (TSJ, 59). He becomes an emotional cripple, maimed by this incident of his childhood, so that later in his life even his pregnant wife is repugnant to him and he tells her to lie

with her back to him so she will look like his wife: "But it was no use. He couldn't forget, even momentarily, how she looked from the other side, belly swollen nearly to her breasts. Like a cow's udder, blue-veined, heavy, drawn drum-tight with its contents" (TSJ, 57). Johnnie must accept death, birth, their interrelation, and their uniqueness in order to regain that part of himself which is destroyed at his mother's deathbed.

The healing process is initiated, in part, through Johnnie's experience with the black prostitute, Emerald. At the beginning, "He knew how he could hurt her. And he did" (TSJ, 231). When he has finished, he wants only to leave, but he looks at the girl and sees that she is bleeding. What takes place is a form of contact with suffering and with womanhood as a whole. His initial reaction is revulsion: "Johnnie retched. Then panic. Why should it be like that--and so much?" (TSJ, 232). The description of the bleeding prostitute is almost identical to the one of his dying mother with the allusion to the "clot of blood on a dirty quilt" (TSJ, 59, 232). This time, however, there is some human contact made--some tenderness and understanding:

She saw from his face that she had nothing to fear from him now. She looked again, more closely, as though surprised. Then--astonishingly--she reached out her hand and touched his. She smiled a little, her eyes reassuring him, telling him she would be all right--it was nothing--it would soon heal.

(TSJ,233)

This reaction is a direct contrast to his mother's screams of profanity and fear on her deathbed, "the shuddering sobs and the animal paingrunting" (TSJ, 60).

Johnnie comes to identify Emerald's suffering with that of women in general, and it is through her contact, her reassurance, that he is able to respond with an act of tenderness which he was incapable of making at his mother's deathbed: "He took her hand and held it closely for an instant. Then he stooped and picked up her crumpled green cloth from the floor. Very gently, he drew it across her body. It was all he could do for her, and for himself" (TSJ, 234). Afterwards, Johnnie's tears offer a release from the past, and he sobs "as he had not done for nearly twenty years" (TSJ, 234). The tears have a cleansing aspect, washing the bonds of the past away. Now all that remains for a complete recovery is his acceptance of life and of the future, and this acceptance is accomplished through the birth of his daughter.

With his wife's labour, Johnnie's original reaction of revulsion returns: "The writhing of her swollen body was almost more than he could stand. The time seemed forever, but it had been, in fact, less than six hours" (TSJ, 264). As the birth continues, however, the disgust which he experiences is replaced by love and concern: "Johnnie forgot his own repugnance. Now he felt only fear for Miranda, fear that he would somehow lose her, that she would not return from this pilgrimage which had already

taken her so far from him" (TSJ, 266). In the final stage of labour he is reduced to an attitude of total submission, "his head down on his outspread hands. He closed his eyes. He was shivering, as though with shock. Whatever unspeakable thing had come forth, he did not want to see it" (TSJ, 266); yet the moment he watches his child draw its first breath, the disgust, the pity, the fear--all vanish in that instant of the wonder of birth: "Johnnie Kestoe watched his child enter the breathing life that would be hers until the moment of death" (TSJ, 266).

The interrelation of birth and death is now moved from a negative to a positive perspective: Birth is now associated with life:

Then the blood. The placenta came away, and a torrent of bright blood followed. The sight of it did not sicken Johnnie, and for a moment he wondered why. Then he knew. Always, before, he had thought of blood only in relation to death.

(TSJ, 266)

And so, as birth becomes a positive thing to Johnnie, even though the possibility of death and suffering is always present, he is able truly to begin his life and to be at peace with the past. The naming of his daughter Mary can be seen as his final acceptance of all that was destroyed for him at the time of his mother's death--a peace offering to the past, to the memory of

his mother, and to his final acceptance of life and faith:

He did not know exactly why he wanted to call his child by her name. Reasons could be dragged up, no doubt, like the roots of swamp weeds, but he did not want to see them. Only one thing he felt sure of--the name was given not for her sake but for his own. He did not think he could explain.

(TSJ, 267)

Like Johnnie, Nathaniel must make peace with the past before he can begin to live fully; and like Johnnie's, Nathaniel's peace involves a coming to terms with his faith. The resolution of Nathaniel's inability to choose either his old faith or his new faith comes about through his acceptance of a personal form of Christianity. He comments: "I cannot have both gods and I cannot have neither. . . . My God is the God of my own soul, and my own speech is in my mouth, and my home is here, here, here, my home is here at last" (TSJ, 275). Through his modified faith, Nathaniel is able to make peace with the ghost of his father. His belief that the kingdom of God has "many mansions" (TSJ, 274) permits him to place his father's soul in heaven, and this enables him to accept the death of his father: "It is there that he dwells, honoured, now and always. It may be that I shall never see him again. But let him dwell there in peace. Let him understand. No--he will never understand. Let me accept it and leave him in peace" (TSJ, 274-75).

Nathaniel's coming to terms with his faith is related not only to his acceptance of his father's death, but also to his own coming to terms with the past as well. For Nathaniel's emotional maturation to be complete, he must accept the role of the past in his quest for the future. As with Johnnie, the birth of his child acts as an epiphany in his maturation: an acceptance of life and of the future, as opposed to death and the past.

For Nathaniel the interrelation between birth and death is an accepted fact in the tribal ways of his people. The forest, a symbol of the old ways, embodies this interrelation of birth and death: "The forest spills over with life and death. . . . death gives new life. . . . The forest is rank and hot and swelling with its semen. Death and life meet and mate" (TSJ, 104-05). Nathaniel recognizes the influence of the forest, the past, on his being: "The forest grows in me, rank, hot, terrible. The fern fronds spread like veins through my body" (TSJ, 105); however, he also recognizes the need to escape the dying past, and to be reborn within the present and the future.

The significance of the birth-death relation becomes apparent in Nathaniel's attempt to free himself from this past which is dead. The struggle is seemingly endless for Nathaniel, and he asks, "How many times have I cut the cord that fed me? How many times have I fought with the Mother to give me birth?" (TSJ, 100).

The birth of his son gains particular significance when considered in light of the interrelation of birth and death. Embodied within this birth are all the factors of Nathaniel's struggle to free himself from the past and to be reborn within the future. He recalls the old ways of childbirth, and uses these as reasons not to return to his people:

The child delivered in the hut where the dirty clothes are washed. . . . And if the birth was difficult, they would beat you, those old women, to force the child out. . . . And after it was born, for the eight days it would be nothing--a wandering spirit. No one knows if it plans to stay or go, so they ignore it. . . . So unless it's very strong, it dies.

(TSJ, 48-49)

Nathaniel's opinion of the birth of his child is that this birth, this child, is a symbol for him: "More than a safe delivery was the thought that if a child was started in the new way, it would be a favourable omen. The child would not go back, then. Its very birth would set the course of its life" (TSJ, 48).

The birth of the son, then, becomes an affirmation of life, of all the hope for the future that Nathaniel has. The child enters the world in the new way, and begins his life in the present, alive with the promise of tomorrow, rather than in the old way, where only the dead and dying ways of the past would be his legacy. Nathaniel shows his newborn son the world and vows,

"'You'll know how to make it all go well'" (TSJ, 281). The naming of the child Joshua symbolizes Nathaniel's acceptance of the new life for his son. Just as the Biblical Joshua had to cross the river to enter the Promised Land, so must Nathaniel's Joshua cross the river and learn to accept and benefit from the ways of the future. His last words in the novel are almost a prayer, a plea to his son to take that step into the future, to escape the stultifying aspects of the past as he, Nathaniel, was never able to do completely: "Joshua, Joshua, Joshua. I beg you. Cross Jordan, Joshua" (TSJ, 282).

The "River of Death" symbol has been in usage for some time. One of the more well-known occurrences of this symbol is found in John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress, in which physical death is symbolized through Christian's crossing the River of Death. Christian's despair at the hour of death is apparent in his lament: "Ah my friend, the sorrows of death have compassed me about, I shall not see the land that flows with milk and honey."<sup>10</sup> Nathaniel experiences a similar despair:

--There was a line from a funeral song, long ago:

'Thou speeding bird, tell father  
That he left me on the other side of the River--'

--Oh, my father, why did you leave me here? And what shall I do?

(TSJ, 244)



Nathaniel, too, must cross the river, from the side on which he was born, from "this side Jordan," to the other side. Just as Christian must experience a death of the physical self in order to attain a spiritual rebirth, so Nathaniel must experience a death of his old self so that he may be reborn into the promise of the future. The crossing of the river Jordan, then, becomes a symbol of rebirth--of overcoming death--for Joshua as well as for Nathaniel.

The novel is, perhaps, more optimistic than Margaret Laurence's succeeding works, and she comments on this feature of the novel in her essay "Ten Years' Sentences":

In This Side Jordan (which I now find out-dated and superficial and yet somehow retrospectively touching) victory for the side of the angels is all but assured. Nathaniel holds up his newborn son, at the end, and says "Cross Jordan, Joshua." Jordan the mythical could be crossed; the dream-goal of the promised land could be achieved, if not in Nathaniel's lifetime, then in his son's. This was the prevailing spirit, not only of myself but of Africa at that time. Things have shifted considerably since then.<sup>11</sup>

In spite of this felt weakness,<sup>12</sup> though, the work does contain all the major themes which Laurence has developed in her subsequent works. The role of the past in the individual's well-being, the struggle for survival, the need to come to terms with life, all are present in the novel in a primitive form which

matures as the writer's ability matures. This novel acts as an introduction to these themes, and it acts as an introduction to the theme of death and its effect on the individual, on the child. One of the major elements in the characters' coming to terms with life, is their coming to terms with their childhood experience of the death of a parent. In both cases this is achieved through their experience with the birth of their own children. Margaret Laurence has established the theme of death and birth in this, her first novel, as well as the other themes which so characterize her work.

One comment in closing, though, tells the most about this work in light of the concentration of this thesis on the child and death. Margaret Laurence dedicates the novel: "In Memory of my Mother Margaret Campbell Wemyss" (TSJ, Dedication). Her first novel, then, is dedicated to the memory of her mother, a woman who died when the writer was only four, and about whom Laurence can probably remember very little. Quite obviously, though, she was considerably affected by her mother and by her mother's death, if she cared enough to dedicate her first novel to her. Perhaps it is her own way of making peace with the experience of death in her past--in her childhood.

## Notes to Chapter Two

- <sup>1</sup> Mary Renault, "On Understanding Africa," ML, p.104.
- <sup>2</sup> Barry Callaghan, "The Writings of Margaret Laurence," ML, pp. 126-27.
- <sup>3</sup> G.D. Killam, Introduction to This Side Jordan, New Canadian Library, No. 126 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), p.4.
- <sup>4</sup> Patricia Morley, "Margaret Laurence's Early Writing: 'a world in which Others have to be respected,'" Journal of Canadian Studies, 13, No.3 (Fall 1978), P.17.
- <sup>5</sup> Patricia Morley cites the following treatments: Anthony Babalow, Review of This Side Jordan, British Columbia Library Quarterly, 25 (July 1961), p.34, Richard Le Fanu, Review of This Side Jordan, Transition (Kampala) 2,4 (June 1961), p.28, Ibrahim Tahir, "Anthropological Curiosity?," West Africa (November 9, 1963), p.1273.
- <sup>6</sup> Two such studies are Patricia Morley's "Canada, Africa, Canada: Laurence's Unbroken Journey," WML, pp.81-91. This work provides an interesting tracing of the influence of Africa on Laurence's writing, both of Africa and of Canada, with the thesis that Laurence's experiences in Africa were formative in her viewpoint of the world, and in her writing. George Woodcock, "Many Solitudes: The Travel Writings of Margaret Laurence," Journal of Canadian Studies, Vol. 13, No.3 (Fall 1978), pp.3-12. Woodcock traces the impact of travelling on the art of Margaret Laurence, and on the artist, with the thesis that without this travelling, she would not have developed into the writer she is today.
- <sup>7</sup> Clara Thomas, Margaret Laurence (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969), p.29.
- <sup>8</sup> Jane Leney, "Prospero and Caliban in Laurence's African Fiction," WML, p.69.
- <sup>9</sup> No ages are given for the boys at the time of their experiences with death, although one's impression is that Johnnie is young, approximately five to seven years of age, while

Nathaniel is in school and probably in the twelve to fourteen-year age group.

10 John Bunyan, The Pilgrim's Progress (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1978), p.198.

11 Margaret Laurence, TYS, p.19.

12 The optimism reflected in This Side Jordan is not a totally unqualified one. It is not, for instance, the naive optimism of Mammii Ama in "A Gourdful of Glory" when she sings:

Mammii Ama, she no come rich.  
Ha - ei: Be so. On'y one penny.  
She nevah be shame, she no fear for nothing.  
D' time wey come now, like queen she shine.

(TT, 243)

Life will continue pretty much the same as it has in the past for Johnnie and Nathaniel: they will confront the same problems as before. The Futura Academy will not change overnight just because Nathaniel has had some insight into the possibilities of the future. Nor will the Africanization of the textile plant proceed any more smoothly because of Johnnie's acceptance of the past. Victor Edusei will continue to have a cynical attitude towards life, just as Miranda and Aya will continue in their naive, almost ignorant, ways. There is not a particularly rosy future, but an acceptance of the present because the possibility of a better future exists.

## Chapter Three

### The Stone Angel

In the sense that self-knowledge is the essence of maturation, or the achievement of individuation, it would seem that Hagar almost fails to achieve that goal since her self-recognition comes so late--almost too late--in life. Clara Thomas writes, "We share in her last short and bitter struggle to maintain her independence; more important, we share in her halting, unwilling, rebellious journey towards self-knowledge and, finally, a limited peace."<sup>1</sup> The epigraph to The Stone Angel gives much insight into the character of Hagar and her attitude towards death:

Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.  
(SA,2)

Raging is precisely what Hagar does throughout the novel. It is both her strength and her weakness: her strength because it enables her to survive, and her weakness because it makes her life so empty of love and meaning.

At one point in the novel Hagar comments, "Now I am rampant with memory" (SA,5). The memories with which she "indulges"

herself are an important aspect of her character. Angelika Maeser comments on the role of Hagar's recollections that the narrative "deals with Hagar's sporadic flashbacks into the world of her childhood, adolescence and adulthood, in the course of which she frees herself from the restrictions that have prevented her from leading a more satisfying existence. Although it is too late to relive her life, she can and does reshape it imaginatively by coming to a realization of the forces which conditioned and bound her."<sup>2</sup> Whether the memories come through a conscious act of will, or whether they come unbidden and unwanted, they reveal a great amount about Hagar.

A surprising number of Hagar's childhood recollections are related to death. Her first memory, of her mother's death, occurs in the first paragraph of the novel (SA,3). She remembers walking in the cemetery (SA,4) and reading there when she was a bit older: "I used to walk out to the cemetery by myself sometimes, to read and get away from the boys" (SA,17); this is an unseemly place for a young girl to enjoy herself, but one in keeping with her need for "order." She remembers sneaking into Simmons' Funeral Parlour to look at the corpse of a dead baby (SA,11-12), and the need to return to the light of day--the real world--to be "safe and innocent once more" (SA,13). Her memories of ice-skating are clouded through her brother's accident and death

(SA,23-25), which is associated with the image of the dying baby chicks in the dump (SA,26-28). She is haunted by the "slime-coiled anaconda" image of the bogey-man who inhabits the unused closet in her room (SA,118), imagining it ready to pounce on her at any time, and this image is even recalled, threateningly, in her adulthood.

Yet, when she sees two children playing on the beach by the cannery, her memories--her impressions--are idealistic ones. She does not remember immediately the unpleasant episodes of childhood; at least for the moment she recalls the sensuous, physical aspects, the sheer joy of being alive:

Yet how I wish that I might have watched them longer, seen their quick certain movements, their liveliness, the way their limbs caught the sun, making the slight hairs shine. I was too far away to see that, actually, or to smell the dusty summer on them, the sundrawn sweat and sweet grass-smell that children have in the warm weather. I'm only remembering those things from years ago.

(SA,190)

This ideal memory in no way reflects Hagar's own childhood or adult life. Because of the attitude towards life and death formed during her childhood, Hagar lives a restricted, guarded life. As far as Hagar is concerned, death is something to defend oneself against; and she uses all the weapons she has at her disposal:

pride, stubbornness, and "strength." Unfortunately, by the time she is able to accept life and her place within it, it is too late for her to benefit from her enlightenment. She dies realizing what could have been, yet unable to change anything, to relive her life to compensate for the ways of her past.

Because of her mother's death at the time of Hagar's birth, birth and death become intricately interrelated for Hagar: she cannot think of birth without immediately associating death with it. When speaking of Bram's first wife she says, almost incredulously, "his wife had died of a burst spleen, nothing to do with children" (SA,46), and when preparing for Marvin's birth, she is certain that she will die while giving birth to her child: "What could I say? That I'd not wanted children? That I believed I was going to die, and wished I would, and prayed I wouldn't?" (SA, 100). Hagar's ultimate comparison of birth and death processes, however, is her imagining death to be similar to rebirth in another world:

When my second son was born, he found it difficult to breathe at first. He gasped a little, coming into the unfamiliar air. He couldn't have known before or suspected at all that breathing would be what was done by creatures here. Perhaps the same occurs elsewhere, an element so unknown you'd never suspect it at all, until--Wishful thinking. If



it happened that way, I'd pass out with amazement. Can angels faint?

(SA,307)

And so the cycle is completed for Hagar: birth leads to death and death leads, ultimately, to a form of re-birth--a time of peace and acceptance, when pride and stubbornness are no longer necessary. In fact, Nancy Bailey comments, "Only in death does she find access to this unconsciousness and its freedom which should and could have been hers in life."<sup>3</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Hagar will not admit any feelings of guilt about her mother's death; however, these denied feelings are always present just below the surface. In the first paragraph of the novel she refers to her mother as the one "who relinquished her feeble ghost as I gained my stubborn one" (SA, 3). Hagar is almost too careful to point out that no one blames her for the death; yet she is sensitive to innuendoes and the possibility of double meaning: "It seemed to me then that Matt was almost apologetic, as though he felt he ought to tell me he didn't blame me for her dying, when in his heart he really did. Maybe he didn't feel that way at all--how can a person tell?" (SA,24-25). Even her father's attitude towards the death produces ambiguous feelings within her: "Father didn't hold it against me that it had happened so. I know, because he told me. Perhaps he thought it was



a fair exchange, her life for mine" (SA,59). Hagar, unable to accept the absence of blame, admits, "It seemed so puzzling to me that she'd not died when either of the boys were born, but saved her death for me" (SA,59). The question of guilt and blame is again mentioned near the end of Hagar's quest for self-knowledge, when she comments, "Why is it always so hard to find the proper one to blame? Why do I always want to find the one? As though it really helped" (SA, 264). She identifies with "any creature struggling awkward and unknowing into life" (SA,94), as she herself had struggled into the world, and though she refuses to acknowledge any feelings of guilt on her part, her stubbornness and pride are almost acts of defiance in the face of any accusations or weaknesses which may surround her.

Death for Hagar becomes a frightening monster--something waiting to overcome the individual in a moment of weakness--and this concept of death is a direct result of her exaggerated concern for strength. She comments on her childish imaginings:

Something threatens me, something unknown and in hiding, waiting to pounce, like the creature I believed to inhabit the unused closet in my room when I was a child, where no one ever went and the door was never opened. I used to lie in bed and picture him, a slime-coiled anaconda with the mockery of a man's head, and jeweled eyes, and a smug smile.

(SA,117-18)

This unknown creature continues to haunt Hagar throughout her life. As a mother she describes her fear of the darkness, and it bears a striking resemblance to her childish concept of death: "For me, it teemed with phantoms, soul-parasites with feathery fingers, the voices of trolls, and pale inconstant fires like the flicker of an eye" (SA,205). Even in her old age, when she is confronted with her mortality, the childhood memory of the bogeyman returns. In her childhood the creature was destroyed when she discovered that the only things behind the closed door were a pair of shoes, a chamber pot, and a few spiders (SA,188). Her fear of her own death cannot be dispelled quite so easily. She explains, "It's better to know, but disappointing, too. I wonder now if I really want to fling this door wide. I do and I don't. Perhaps the thing inside will prove more terrible even than one's imaginings" (SA,118). The only way to dispel her fear of death is through her ultimate acceptance of it, an impossible action throughout most of her life. The result of this inability to accept her own mortality--this denial of the power of death--produces a woman who is unyielding in her strength, but impoverished of any emotional fulfillment in life.

Hagar's fear of weakness and death becomes especially apparent at Daniel's deathbed when, delirious with fever, he calls for his mother. When Matt asks Hagar to impersonate her mother and

comfort Dan, her reaction is one of horror:

All I could think of was that meek woman I'd never seen, the woman Dan was said to resemble so much and from whom he'd inherited a frailty I could not help but detest, however much a part of me wanted to sympathize. To play at being her--it was beyond me.

(SA,25)

Her fear, her repulsion, her pride--all combine to make it impossible for her to bend enough to offer even a moment of compassion for her dying brother, to show what she considers to be any weakness on her part: "'I can't, Matt.' I was crying, shaken by torments he never even suspected, wanting above all else to do the thing he asked, but unable to do it, unable to bend enough" (SA, 25).

The memory of the baby chicks which haunts Hagar throughout The Stone Angel is strangely connected with her brother's death. It acts as an epiphany which returns to her mind even in her old age--an image of the helpless dying chicks, and the deliberate "mercy" of Lottie Drieser:

The chicks, feeble, foodless, bloodied and mutilated, prisoned by the weight of broken shells all around them, were trying to crawl like little worms, their half-mouths opened uselessly among the garbage. I could only gawk and retch . . . .

[Lottie] took a stick and crushed the egg-shell skulls, and some of them she stepped on with the heels of her black patent-leather shoes.

(SA,27-28)

These chicks and their fate become an integral part of Hagar's concept of death. Intermingled with the repulsion and the distaste at the spectacle of the chicks is her fear of their weakness. There is a sense of distaste at their weakness, similar to the distaste with which she regarded Daniel's weakness: "It must have been mind over matter, for he cultivated illness as some people cultivate rare plants. Or so I thought then" (SA,21-22). The chicks are unattractive to Hagar because they embody qualities which she dislikes; however, Lottie's action is equally revolting to her sensibilities: "It was the only thing to do, a thing I couldn't have done. And yet it troubled me so much that I could not. . . . I am less certain than I was that she did it entirely for their sake. I am not sorry now that I did not speed them" (SA,28). She recognizes in this act of "compassion" the same selfish motive which forced her to deny any compassion to her own dying brother.

The chicks are Dan, weak and unattractive, and Hagar's denial

of Dan's life is comparable to Lottie's action, her denial of life to the suffering chicks. Hagar comments: "At the time it stung me worse, I think, that I could not bring myself to kill those creatures than that I could not bring myself to comfort Dan" (SA, 28). For this reason the image of the chicks remains with Hagar even though she is successful in eliminating any responsibility or guilt for Dan's death from her conscious memory.

There is some recognition on Hagar's part of the cost of her pride and strength--a sense of waste, of tears unshed, words unspoken, and relationships which might have been. She recalls her feelings at the time of Bram's final illness:

Looking down at him, a part of me could never stand him, what he'd been, and yet that moment I'd willingly have called him back from where he'd gone, to say even once what Marvin had said, and with as much bewilderment, not knowing who to fault for the way the years had turned.

(SA,183)

She still might have made amends for their life--their mistakes--but she finds she is unable, she has waited too long. At John's death there is a similar sense of waste: "All the night long, I only had one thought--I'd had so many things to say to him, so many things to put to rights. He hadn't waited to hear" (SA,243).

The final price of her strength becomes apparent at John's

death when the last of her ability to feel is destroyed completely: "I found my tears had been locked too long and wouldn't come now at my bidding. The night my son died I was transformed to stone and never wept at all" (SA,243). And so with her approaching death, when Hagar wants to talk--to communicate her thoughts to someone who should be close to her--she finds she is unable to:

I'm choked with it now, the incommunicable years, everything that happened and was spoken or not spoken. I want to tell him. Someone should know. This is what I think. Someone really ought to know these things.

But where would I begin, and what does it matter to him, anyway?

(SA,296)

It is not until she is able to come to some sort of acceptance of death that Hagar can free herself of the restrictive pattern of her life. Ultimately, it is John's death which she must come to terms with. Joan Hind-Smith writes, "John's death is the most terrible of all Hagar's terrible memories, because she knows that the most beloved being in her life has been indirectly destroyed by her."<sup>4</sup> When Hagar mistakes Murray F. Lees for John and apologizes to him, she is unknowingly making the first step towards accepting death--and accepting life; and when Lees accepts the apology he relieves Hagar of the feelings of responsibility

which have plagued her:

I've spoken so calmly, so reasonably. He can't in all conscience refuse what I've said. I wait. At last I hear his voice. An inexplicable sound, a grating, like a groan or a sob. I grow anxious, and think he may still be angry. But when he speaks, his voice is not angry at all.

"It's okay," he says. "I knew all the time you never meant it. Everything is all right . . . ."

I sigh, content.

(SA,247-48)

With this forgiveness Hagar is finally able to let John die in peace, which accounts for the feeling of loss the next morning. For her, it is as though John has just died: "But why do I feel bereaved, as though I'd lost some one only recently? It weighs so heavily upon me, this unknown loss. The dead's flame is blown out and evermore shall be so" (SA,249-50).

It is because of Mr. Lees' action, and Hagar's acceptance of Johns' death, that she is finally able to begin to live--to show some signs of her humanity and her own emotions--and it is towards Mr. Lees that she is able to take the first step in human contact--understanding:



Impulsively, hardly knowing what I'm doing, I reach out and touch his wrist.

"I didn't mean to speak crossly. I--I'm sorry about your boy."

Having spoken so, I feel lightened and eased. He looks surprised and shaken, yet somehow restored.

(SA,253)

She has no recollection of Lees' role as John in her hallucination, but she realizes that somehow he and her feeling of loss are interconnected: "I am left with the feeling that it was a kind of mercy I encountered him, even though this gain is mingled mysteriously with the sense of loss which I felt earlier this morning" (SA,253).

As her strength and anger fade, Hagar begins the process of accepting death and life. When she hears the results of her X-rays, she finds that she is able to resign herself, finally, to the inevitability of her death: "Odd. Only now do I see that what's going to happen can't be delayed indefinitely" (SA,254).

A part of this acceptance is seen in her memories of Bram. She finds her opinions of him considerably mellowed, and she is even able to speak with pride: "'He was a big man, too,' I say. 'Strong as a horse. He had a beard black as the ace of spades. He was a handsome man, a handsome man'" (SA,272). Bram gradually replaces John in Hagar's dreams (SA, 275), and finally comes to

represent the light at the end of the tunnel--the light waiting for her on the other side of the door, in the darkness. It is Bram whom Hagar seeks when the darkness threatens to overcome her dreams:

The light is on beyond that open door.  
If I reach it, someone will speak. Will the  
voice be the one I have been listening for?

What keeps him? He could surely say  
something. It wouldn't hurt him, just to say  
a word. Hagar. He was the only one who ever  
called me by my name. It wouldn't hurt him to  
speak. It's not so much to ask.

(SA,284-85)

The final understanding comes to Hagar as she listens to the minister singing "Old Hundredth" in the hospital:

I must always, always, have wanted that--  
simply to rejoice. How is it I never could?  
I know, I know. How long have I known? Or  
have I always known, in some far crevice of my  
heart, some cave too deeply buried, too con-  
cealed? Every good joy I might have held, in  
my man or any child of mine or even the plain  
light of morning, or walking the earth, all  
were forced to a standstill by some brake of  
proper appearances--oh, proper to whom? When  
did I ever speak the heart's truth?

(SA,292)

She sees the waste caused by her pride and her unbending nature--  
her fear of weakness, of death, of life:

Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched. Oh, my two, my dead. Dead by your own hands or by mine? Nothing can take away those years.

(SA,292)

This recognition of the barrenness of her pride and strength brings Hagar to her final admission of weakness--her admission of her fear of death. It is this fear which has crippled her throughout her life--the fear embodied in her mother's death, the fear present for her in all forms of weakness or emotion. Because she has recognized the errors of her life, and has come to accept them however painful they may be, she is able to perform her two ultimate acts of acceptance--her admission of weakness--

I can't say it. Now, at last, it becomes impossible for me to mouth the words--I'm fine. I won't say anything. It's about time I learned to keep my mouth shut. But I don't. I can hear my voice saying something, and it astounds me.

"I'm--frightened. Marvin, I'm so frightened--"

(SA,303),

and her act of compassion towards Marvin when she tells him that he was a better son than John was:

I see I am thus strangely cast, and perhaps have been so from the beginning, and can only release myself by releasing him.

It's in my mind to ask his pardon, but that's not what he wants from me.

"You've not been cranky, Marvin. You've been good to me, always. A better son than John."

(SA,304)

She is unable to acknowledge the truth of this statement to herself, but at least she recognizes her motive behind the words when she calls it "a lie--yet not a lie, for it was spoken at least and at last with what may perhaps be a kind of love" (SA,307). This is as close as Hagar ever comes to admitting that she loves someone. When Marvin comments to the nurse that Hagar is "a holy terror" (SA,304), she is at peace with herself, and ready at last to die: "Listening, I feel like it is more than I could now reasonably have expected out of life, for he has spoken with such anger and such tenderness" (SA,305).

With her acceptance of her life, and the mistakes she has made, Hagar is able to accept death in a way which was never previously possible. Unfortunately, her acceptance comes too late to be of much benefit in her life time. She cannot amend the ways of her past, and she is unable to relive her life as she might have it. There is, however, a limited optimism, or as Margaret

Laurence has termed it, a "modified optimism"<sup>5</sup> about Hagar's fate. As Joan Hind-Smith comments in Three Voices:

Although Hagar never achieves her potential or the rewards she longs for, Margaret Laurence makes it plain that life exists in the struggle, not in the achievement--and Hagar is never dulled or bowed by the hardships and sorrows that besiege her. The book is a celebration of life, not in spite of its tragic nature, but because of it.<sup>6</sup>

Hagar's last action is a continuation of this struggle of life-- she will not "go gentle into that good night." William H. New describes her final struggle: "Her reaction to death is one both of defeat and triumph, for as earlier she has been continually surprised by the suddenness and shortness of life, so is she at last assured that death is 'quite an event.' She meets it as an event".<sup>7</sup>

I only defeat myself by not accepting her. I know this--I know it very well. But I can't help it--it's my nature. I'll drink from this glass, or spill it, just as I choose. I'll not countenance anyone else's holding it for me. . . .

I wrest from her the glass, full of water to be had for the taking. I hold it in my own hands. There. There.

And then--

(SA,308)

Whether this action is interpreted as an acceptance of life, of love, of all the "weakness" which Hagar denied within herself; or whether it is interpreted as the final grasping act of an incurably stubborn, often self-centred, old woman; the fact remains that this is her final action, and that it reflects, finally, her acknowledgement of life and death. It is the last moment of a woman who must finally face the darkness which she has tried to avoid all her life, and Hagar's actions are, most likely, more out of fear at this point than out of stubbornness. And yet, there is an element of hope in her action: even in the face of death Hagar strives for life. This is a final example of the indomitable nature of Hagar Shipley, and the final incomplete sentence of the novel gives the reader a sense of continuation. This may not be the end, but a new beginning on a different level. What happens after death is always open to speculation.

## Notes to Chapter Three

- <sup>1</sup> Clara Thomas, MW, p.61.
- <sup>2</sup> Angelika Maeser, "Finding the Mother: The Individuation of Laurence's Heroines," WML, p.152.
- <sup>3</sup> Nancy Bailey, CJ, p.309.
- <sup>4</sup> Joan Hind-Smith, TV, p.33.
- <sup>5</sup> Margaret Laurence, TYS, p.23.
- <sup>6</sup> Hind-Smith, p.34.
- <sup>7</sup> William H. New, Introduction to The Stone Angel, New Canadian Library, No. 59 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), p.x.

## Chapter Four

### A Jest of God

and

### The Fire-Dwellers

A Jest of God and The Fire-Dwellers are considered together in this chapter because the protagonists, Rachel Cameron (JG) and Stacey MacAindra (FD), are sisters. Throughout the course of the novels, they allude to one another, each with evaluations which vary considerably from what the other believes to be true. While Stacey worries about a diet to lose weight, Rachel thinks, "Stacey takes after Mother, and in consequence has a good figure. Or had. I haven't seen her since the last two were born" (JG,11). Rachel sees Stacey's existence as the ideal state of being--husband, home and family: "It's all right for Stacey. She'd laugh, probably. Everything is all right for her, easy and open. She doesn't appreciate what she's got. She doesn't even know she's got it" (JG, 99). Conversely, Stacey thinks of Rachel as being the clever one (FD,8), while she considers herself to be "badly off with Grade Eleven" (FD,61) and enrolls in courses which sound classy but which she never completes (FD,4). Stacey sees Rachel as being free (FD, 149), while she is trapped by her responsibilities as a mother: "I



don't have any time to myself. I'm on duty from seven thirty in the morning until ten thirty at night" (FD,172).

The one thing that the girls do agree upon is the unfairness that Rachel is still trapped in Manawaka. Rachel thinks enviously of Stacey, "She knew right from the start what she wanted most, which was to get as far away from Manawaka as possible. She didn't lose a moment in doing it" (JG,11). Stacey thinks of Rachel, "When I think you're still there, I can't bear it" (FD, 8). Even with this attitude, though, Stacey is not willing to sacrifice too much of her time or herself for Rachel or her mother. When she learns that the two of them are moving to Vancouver, Stacey's reaction is basically a selfish one:

But the fact remains that Rachel has had her all alone all these years. We can have them over for Sunday dinners, I guess, and pray it won't be much more than that. That's a fine think to say about your own sister and mother, isn't it? But I can't help it, Mac.

(FD,303)

The most important reason for the two novels to be considered together, however, is that, since both Rachel and Stacey have the same background, they share the same childhood experience with death. Death for them is associated with their father's funeral parlour. From early childhood they are conscious of the inevita-

bility of death, and it affects their outlook on life.

In A Jest of God, Rachel confronts death every day of her life, and yet there is the sense that she initially denies its existence. She lives above the funeral chapel, while at the same time attempting to ignore the ever-present countenance of death. This sense of denial is common in Manawaka where even the flashing neon sign over the "Japonica Funeral Chapel" (JG,13) offers an image which is in keeping with the mass opinion regarding death. Near the beginning of the novel Rachel comments, "All that remains is for someone to delete the word funeral. A nasty word, smacking of mortality" (JG,13). At the end she is shown the new "Japonica Chapel" sign (JG,200), and hears Hector's explanation: "Everybody knows perfectly well it's a funeral establishment . . . so why say so? Lots of people aren't keen on that word" (JG, 200). The townspeople may continue to deny the presence of death, but Rachel, in the course of the novel, comes to accept the inevitability of death and, because she is able to do this, finally to accept life.

Rachel associates death with the shame she feels at being the undertaker's daughter, "the embarrassment of being the daughter of someone with his stock-in-trade" (JG,13). The sense of shame that develops in her childhood remains with Rachel throughout her adult life, making her a self-conscious, almost paranoid individual, un-

able to function without considering public opinion or appearances. For Rachel, death is unmentionable, and there is an underlying assumption that if one is successful in ignoring death, it will cease to exist. Rachel comments, "No one in Manawaka ever dies, at least not on this side of the tracks. We are a gathering of immortals. We pass on, through Calla's divine gates of topaz and azure, perhaps, but we do not die. Death is rude, unmannerly, not to be spoken to in the street" (JG,13).

Rachel's shame of death is further compounded by her parents' attitude towards death and towards her father's business. The funeral parlour is a place tinged with mystery and a sense of the macabre, referred to as "those rooms on the ground floor there, where I was told never to go" (JG,13). Her recollections of the place are dim and inaccurate, as memories from childhood so often are, and she explains, "I couldn't have been in here more than a couple of times in my entire life. He always said, when I hovered, 'This is no place for you'" (JG,120). Her mother gives the impression that death is dirty when she puts doilies on the furniture to protect it from her husband, "as though she felt his hands could never be clean, considering what he handled in his work" (JG,16), and she acts as an example to Rachel in her inability to accept the fact that she will die (JG,195-96). There is a similar sense of denial of death's existence alluded to in the

passage in which, as a child, Rachel seeks comfort following her dream of death: "The messengers of the apocalypse, the gaunt horsemen, the cloaked skeletons I dreamed of once when I was quite young, and wakened, and she said, 'Don't be foolish--don't be foolish, Rachel--there's nothing there'" (JG,32). Her mother's attitude of denial of the reality of death is similar; when Rachel mentions death her mother tries to shut it out: "She is clamped, rigid, protecting herself against all comers" (JG,196). They share even a feeling that death is, in some way contagious:

I imagined then that it was the efficacy of the dead he feared for me, not knowing in what way they might grasp and hold me, and I wondered how he himself could stay among them, by what power, and I feared for him, too. For a long time, whenever she said 'Your father's not feeling well', I thought that was why--because he'd caught something, a partial death, like a germ, from them.

(JG,120)

For Rachel, then, death becomes associated with shame and denial, and this reaction is retained into her adult years. The uneasiness she experiences at entering the funeral parlour is still there, and dreams of the place haunt her sleep:

The stairs descending to the place where I am not allowed. The giant bottles and jars stand there, bubbled green glass. The silent

people are there, lipsticked and rouged, powdered whitely like clowns. How funny they look, each lying dressed in best, and their eyes are glass eyes, cat's eye marbles, round glass beads, blue and milky, unwinking. He is behind the door I cannot open. And his voice --his voice so I know he is lying there among them, lying in state, king over them. He can't fool me. He says run away Rachel run away run away. I am running. . . .

(JG,19)

Rachel is, in a sense, "running" throughout the novel, and what she flees is her fear of her own mortality and of her father's almost sinister liaison with death. Further, as in a dream, she has the sensation of running but remaining constantly in one place. She always finds herself in the apartment above the funeral parlour, with the same doubts and fears. Until she is able to open the door in her dream, and confront the reality of death, she cannot stop running. She remains haunted by the shame and fear of her childhood conceptions of death.

For Stacey, too, death in The Fire-Dwellers is associated with shame and distaste as a result of her mother's attitude towards it. When seeking comfort or explanation for an early experience with death in the mutilation of a gopher, she receives only admonitions and a sense of denial from her mother:

Stacey Cameron, eight or nine, back from  
playing in the bush at the foot of the hill

that led out of Manawaka. There was this gopher on the road, Mother, and somebody had shot it with a twenty-two and all its stomach and that was all out and it wasn't dead yet. Please, dear, don't talk about it--it isn't nice. But I saw it and it was trying to breathe only it couldn't and it was. Sh, it isn't nice. (I hurt, Mother. I'm scared.) (Sh, it isn't nice.) (I hurt, you hurt, he hurts--Sh.)

(FD,167-68)

The unpleasant image of death and suffering is swept aside with the statement that it isn't nice; there is no comfort or explanation given. And so death in general comes to be associated with this image and with her father's business, his handling of death as an everyday occurrence.

Unlike Rachel, Stacey does not need so much to come to terms with her father's death. Because Stacey was older when her father was alive, she knew more about him, and about the events that shaped his life. While Rachel wonders, "What could have happened to him, all those years ago, to make him that way?" (JG,56), Stacey knows her father's war stories: "father's war. He spoke of it once, just once. . . . He told me about a boy of eighteen--hand grenade went off near him and the blast caught the kid between the legs. My dad cried when he told it, because the kid didn't die" (FD,6). Similarly, Stacey is more aware of the problems in her parents' relationship than Rachel is. Rachel finally

accepts her lack of knowledge: "Whatever it was that happened with either of them, their mysteries remain theirs. I don't need to know" (JG,198). But Stacey recognizes their problems--their inability to communicate or to understand one another--and remembers her mother "trying to open the mortuary door, which was locked. Niall--you come upstairs and quit drinking. I know what you're doing in there. I know you. And the low gentle terrifying voice in reply--You do? You really think you do?" (FD,44). Stacey, then, at least has some understanding of her parents and of her father's life and death. Her fear of death involves a fear of life. Miriam Packer puts it this way:

To live is to risk--to risk wanting, to risk feeling, to risk mourning and hoping--to flirt with the dangerous fires of life and yet not to be devoured by them. One of the central statements in Laurence's Manawaka novels is related to the inevitability of life's dangers and losses, and yet the persistence of life's rewards and joys.<sup>1</sup>

She describes Stacey's fears: "She is afraid of fate, of the destructive powers which might suddenly take a vicious turn and destroy her tenuous hold on security on the life which--though so burdensome and consuming--is yet so precious to her."<sup>2</sup>

While Rachel's approach to death takes the form of denial, then, Stacey's attitude takes the form of self-defence: an open

confrontation. This awareness of death is a direct result of her childhood experiences, and of the world she lives in. Clara

Thomas describes the world of Stacey MacAindra:

Her environment is an apocalyptic world of sudden senseless death: the child run over at the corner of the street; Buckle Fennick, daring death, playing "chicken" with his diesel truck and finally dying when he confronts the driver whose will stays steady for a fraction of a second longer than his own.<sup>3</sup>

Stacey remarks on her defence against this world--this possibility of violent death: "as a kid I used to imagine the dead men below in the mortuary, conjure them up on purpose so they wouldn't take me by surprise, although in reality I never saw even one of them" (FD,215).

Stacey's childhood fantasies of the mortuary are, like Rachel's, carried over into her adult life. There is a difference here, though, in that, while Rachel seems incapable of escaping the effects of the mortuary until the end of the novel, Stacey has already taken the positive action of leaving Manawaka and the mortuary behind. She recalls her last glimpse of the mortuary:

After Niall Cameron's funeral, when Stacey was grown and had her own children, she went in, forced herself in, to banish the long-ago tenants once and for all, send them back to limbo



or even heaven, put them under that dutifully  
flower-prinked earth where they had lain  
years.

(FD,235)

She soon finds, however, that one cannot escape death.  
It is everywhere; even in the lives of her own children:

Ian thinks of death--how much? Some people  
don't know they're ever going to die until  
it happens to them, but Ian knows he's going  
to die. He knows that already. Was it  
Peter's death that taught it to him? Or has  
he known for a long time, in ways I don't know  
anything about?

(FD,215)

With the realization that her child faces the same things that she  
faced as a child, Stacey wonders if his reaction towards death is  
the same as hers once was:

Maybe he thinks of it as I've always thought  
of it, wondering what form it would take for  
me, what face it would wear, what moment in my  
time it would choose for our encounter, imag-  
ining it as sudden severed or seared flesh and  
then again imagining it as something to be  
fought for in senility when there isn't any  
strength for even that battle and they keep  
you going against your will on tubes and  
oxygen, the total indignity, imagining it in  
order to defeat it . . .

(FD,215)

In order to live full lives, Rachel and Stacey must both come to terms with death. In order to come to terms with death, Rachel must come to accept her father's death and his life. She never fully understands her father, and because his memory is so intermingled with the funeral parlour, she associates her father, or her misunderstanding of him, with death. She comments near the beginning of the novel:

It never occurred to me to wonder about him, and whether he possibly felt at ease with them, the unspeaking ones, and out of place above in our house, things being what they were. I never had a chance to ask him. By the time I knew the question it was too late, and asking it would have cut into him too much.

(JG,13-14)

It is Hector who helps Rachel to come to terms with her father's life and death. She asks him, "Why do you think he stayed, Hector? Did he like them?" (JG,123). Hector answers that her father probably "had the kind of life he wanted most" (JG. 124). Joan Hind-Smith writes, "It is Hector's opinion that it was not exactly the dead whom Rachel's father liked, but an absence of the living. A comparison between Rachel and her father hangs in the air. Is she, too, afraid to touch life?"<sup>4</sup> This is something that Rachel had not previously considered--that her father

could have changed his life had he wanted things differently:

The life he wanted most. If my father had wanted otherwise, it would have been otherwise. Not necessarily better, but at least different. Did he ever try to alter it? Did I, with mine? Was that what he needed most, after all, not ever to have to touch any living thing? Was that why she came to life after he died?

If it's true he wanted that life the most, why mourn? Why ever cease from mourning?

(JG,124-25)

It is this realization that helps Rachel on the path of self-recognition and acceptance. She sees that she will never know all the answers about her father, but his life was his own and he lived it his own way. With this awareness she is able to let her father die in peace. When she returns to the funeral parlour, she can sense the change--more in herself than in the surroundings:

Everything looks just the same, but now it does not seem to matter much that my father's presence has been gone from here for a long time. I can't know what he was like. He isn't here to say, and even if he were, he wouldn't say, any more than Mother does. Whatever it was that happened with either of them, their mysteries remain theirs. I don't need to know. It isn't necessary. I have my own.

(JG,198)

When Hector and Rachel discuss her father, they both know that it is really herself that she is speaking about when she says, "He probably did do what he wanted most, even though he might not have known it. But maybe what came of it was something he hadn't bargained for. That's always a possibility, with anyone" (JG,199). Hector asks Rachel if she is sure that she is talking about her father and Rachel admits, "No, I guess not, or not only" (JG, 199).

As Rachel's acceptance of death is embodied in her acceptance of her father's death, so her acceptance of life is an acknowledgement of the possibility of life, and ultimately death, within her. When she suspects that she is pregnant with Nick Kazlik's child, she is torn between her inhibiting fears and her desires to give birth to a child--to give life to something. There is a sense of the miracle in her realization, "I could bear a living creature. It would be possible" (JG,163). Her fears of social reprisal make the possibility of having a child unthinkable: "I can't bear it, that's all. It isn't to be borne. I can't face it. I can't face them" (JG,165). On the other hand, she cannot picture herself destroying this life within her: "I am not going to lose it. It is mine. I have a right to it. That is the only thing I know with any certainty" (JG,173).

It is not until Rachel determines to give birth to the life

within her that she discovers she is harbouring a non-life--a form of death. It is ironic that during the doctor's examination Rachel thinks of the child's causing her death: "And now I think for the first time that maybe it will kill me after all, this child. Is that what I am waiting for? Is that what is waiting for me?" (JG,179). Yet, when she is told of the tumour, her reaction is one of panic: "Oh my God. I didn't bargain for this. Not this" (JG,180). She has lost the possibility of life within her and is confronted with the possibility of death, all in one instant. Through her confrontation with death, though, comes the recognition of just how shallow and pointless her life has been: "All that. And this at the end of it. I was afraid that I might become a fool. Yet I could almost smile with some grotesque lightheadedness at that fool of a fear, that poor fear of fools, now that I really am one" (JG,181). She can face her own death at this point, more than she can accept the life she has lived. She recognizes the "non-life" she has had, and when she has recovered, she is impressed with the necessity of living--of having more than mere existence. She accepts this realization, this challenge that life has become for her.

Through this acceptance of life, and through her coming to terms with death, Rachel is able to begin to "live" at last. She is able to take her own initiative, to control her own life, to

override her mother's whining and self-centred approach to life, and even to accept the fact that her mother will die eventually, no matter what pains they may take to delay the inevitable: "It isn't up to me. It never was. I can take care, but only some. I'm not responsible for keeping her alive. There is, suddenly, some enormous relief in this realization" (JG,195). There is the sense that, as Rachels put it, "I am the mother now" (JG,184).

Clara Thomas comments on the significance of this realization:

"The words she murmured under anaesthetic, become real to her. They are her key to a degree of freedom and an acceptance of herself as she is, no tragic heroine, but an ordinary foolish mortal. . . . Her choices are human and humanly limited, but she does have choices and she makes one of them--the decision to move."<sup>5</sup>

And so Rachel stops "sending out [her] swaddled embryo wishes for nothing to happen" (JG,186), and is prepared for the possibilities of the future:

I may become, in time, slightly more eccentric  
all the time. . . .

I will be different. I will remain the  
same. . . . I will be lonely, almost certainly.  
I will get annoyed. . . . I will be  
afraid. Sometimes I will feel light-hearted,  
sometimes light-headed. I may sing aloud,  
even in the dark. I will ask myself if I am  
going mad, but if I do, I won't know it.

(JG,201-02)

A part of Rachel's acceptance of life is her awareness that she may always be alone--"It may be that my children will always be temporary, never to be held. But so are everyone's" (JG,201). Stacey MacAindra has the husband and children that Rachel lacks, and this provides an interesting contrast in terms of the maturation of the two women. Stacey, too, must learn to accept the fact that her children are only temporarily hers, and cannot be denied their own lives.

Not all individuals are emotionally crippled through a childhood experience with death. Stacey's inability to adjust is counterbalanced by her children's first encounters with death and their consequent adjustment to it. Each of Stacey's children encounters death and deals with it emotionally, in his or her own way. Although the long-term effects of their experiences are outside the scope of the novel, the short-term effects are enlightening and hint at the possible future manifestations of the experience in their lives, and the attitude towards life and death that each child develops. Unlike her mother, Stacey at least attempts to communicate with the children, to help them understand and cope --rather than avoiding the subject by saying that it isn't nice. This is especially difficult at times, because the children are not always willing to speak to her about their thoughts and feelings.

For Ian the first encounter with death is through his friend's being hit by a car. At first there is a sense that this new phenomenon which he cannot understand will be minimized and perhaps will disappear, if he denies its significance: "Can't you just shut up about it? He was dumb, see? Nobody but a moron would run out into the avenue after a football. It doesn't happen that easy unless guys are pretty dumb" (FD,116-17). Ian soon finds, however, that he can no longer deny the presence of death when he is involved in a near-accident similar to Peter's fatal one. Duncan describes the incident:

He bawled. He never bawls, does he, Mum? But he did. I saw him. . . .

A bunch of us kids were playing out on the Crescent after school, and Ian went out on the road after the football, only he didn't see this car coming, and it just missed him. He said he didn't want to play any more and when I went to look for him, he was in the basement, bawling.

(FD,214)

Ultimately, it is Duncan's near-drowning which helps Ian to accept the inevitability of death. His reaction to the accident is more open than the anger and denial so obvious in his first encounter with death: "Ian does not say anything. He turns away because he does not want Stacey or the university student to see



his face. But Stacey sees that his shoulders are shaking with his dry sobbing, which he has to deal with himself" (FD,294). When they return to the beach Ian is at peace with himself, with the sea, and with the possibility of death: "Ian. If Duncan goes to the sea, Ian will keep an eye on him. But he doesn't want to be responsible. I don't blame him. Maybe he only thinks it would be an insult to Duncan, to watch over him" (FD,297). He has a long way to go, and probably additional encounters with death to contend with before he has fully matured, but he has made a positive start in his acceptance of death as a part of life. He is able to continue living in the presence of possible death, without letting fear cripple him or paralyze his emotional development.

The death of Ian's friend has little apparent effect on Duncan; however, it becomes obvious that he is aware of the possibility of death, when he cries more from fear than from pain, "Nail sticking out of the wall--didn't see it--it was rusty too will I die Mum? Ian says you die if it's rusty" (FD,117). The sense of Duncan's denial, his not wanting to associate with death or the possibility of death, become apparent in the incident in which Matthew, the boy's grandfather, falls on the stairs. The accident reminds Duncan that his grandfather is an aging human being who will die one day. This reminder of mortality is some-

thing which Duncan cannot or does not wish to accept: "Duncan looks once again at Matthew. . . . Then he looks away, as though he has witnessed something not intended for his eyes" (FD,280).

It is his own near-drowning which helps Duncan to accept the inevitability of death. There is, at first, still a sense of denial--a sense that the incident can be filed somewhere in the back of the mind where it will disappear into the past. But when Mac makes the simple comment, "Next time you better watch out for your footing" (FD,296), the words "next time" trigger a forced acknowledgement of the situation:

This is not something that Duncan has previously considered. Stacey, standing in the doorway, examines his face and wonders if he has taken for granted that the sea and himself will in the future no longer be on any kind of terms.

(FD,296)

Duncan must acknowledge the presence of the sea--the possibility of death and his own mortality: "After a while, as though it is something he knows has been laid upon him and which he cannot deny, he walks by himself along the wet reaches of the sand down to the sea" (FD,297). He accepts and faces his own mortality by going into the sea which has almost claimed him (FD,298), and there is a sense that, as he wades into the sea, so will he wade

into his life, his future. Duncan has made the initial step in acceptance of death. Like Ian, he has a long way to go in maturation, but he has made a healthy start.

Katie's first encounter with death, in the episode of Mrs. Fogler and the goldfish, produces a reaction of fear and bewilderment, more at the spectacle of Mrs. Fogler, than at the actual fate of the goldfish. Stacey describes Katie's condition: "She has stopped crying, but her voice is strained and there is a kind of bewilderment in it" (FD,208). Katie tells Stacey the story:

Mrs. Fogler was kneeling beside the table where the fishbowl is, and she was holding Jen on a chair, I mean she had her hands on Jen's shoulders and wouldn't let her get down, and Jen was sort of squirming to get away and Mrs. Fogler was making her look. And the big goldfish had killed the other one and it was . . . .  
(FD,208)

The confusion she feels is not a result of the goldfish's death, for she questions Stacey about Mrs. Fogler, not about the unkindness or harsh reality of nature.

The underlying fear of death becomes apparent only after Mrs. Fogler's suicide attempt, and then it is a fear of losing those close to her that Katie exhibits, a fear of the uncontrollable, undeniable aspect of death. Katie's reaction to the suicide attempt progresses from a casual manner, "Under the flippancy of her

voice there seems to be an undertone of something else, perhaps fear" (FD,273), to an element of concern, "Oh well, that's the usual gimmick, isn't it? . . . . You never read the papers? Mum-- will she be all right?" (FD,273), and finally to her fear for her own mother. Her words are hesitant, with an almost pleading quality: "Mum? . . . Don't ever pull that stunt [pause] like she did [pause] will you?" (FD,273).

Katie's imminent acceptance of death and of life is apparent in her ability to comfort Stacey in her distress (FD,273). Stacey recognizes this strength in her daughter, and she feels that Katie's strength and acceptance will pull her through, that she will survive and come to terms with life and death without letting them overwhelm her: "One day she will have to take over as the mother" (FD,273).

Because Jen is unable to express any of her thoughts throughout the novel, the effect of her first encounter with death is difficult to measure and must be surmised from her subsequent actions. It would appear from her initial reaction to the goldfish incident (FD,208) that once the uncomfortableness of the situation has passed, Jen seems to return to her normal self, leaving Stacey to wonder exactly what effect, if any, the episode had on her: "What's it done to Jen? Maybe nothing; maybe something I'll never know, something concealed, some unknown fear that'll be part of

her mental baggage from now on. . . . She doesn't look upset. How can you ever tell what's going on in anybody else's head?" (FD, 209-10).

Again, it is Duncan's near-drowning which ultimately makes some impact on Jen when she is left, momentarily forgotten, on the beach to witness her brother's "death," and to witness her mother's fear and grief. Again, no description is given of the probable panic that goes on in Jen's young mind; all is given from Stacey's perspective. But the image of the little girl on the beach is, perhaps, more effective than words could ever be in this instance (FD,291). The only clue given of the effect of the incident on Jen is that she is even more quiet, more speechless than usual (FD,295); even her babylike gibberish has stopped momentarily.

Whatever the long-term effect of the incident may be, the short-term effect is that Jen begins to speak. It is significant that Jen begins to speak just as Stacey finally comes to terms with herself as she is:

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

Stacey goes back into the house. Jen is in the kitchen and has dragged a chair over to the sink, climbed up on it and filled her plastic teapot from the tap. She holds it up for Stacey to see.

Hi, Mum. Want tea?

Stacey stares. Then, quickly, she recovers and manages nonchalance.

What did you say, Flower?

Want tea, Mum?

Why--yes, thanks, Jen. I'd love some.

(FD,298-99)

Jen, in the course of her short life, has had to adjust to more than the average child might be expected to, and the act of speaking exhibits her adjustment to her experiences and her acceptance of them. Her speech may have been slow in coming, but it is, nonetheless, a positive step forward in life and in Jen's coping with life.

In The Fire-Dwellers, then, all the children come to terms with their first encounter with death in their own ways. There is a sense that the children have adjusted to the threat of death more readily than Stacey has, for she has reached adulthood without being able to come to terms with her own mortality or her own fears. She comments at one point, "I'm frightened to death of life" (FD,244), whereas the children have accepted death as a

part of life, without letting their knowledge of death cripple them emotionally.

Stacey describes her state of fear and paranoia as an example of "pre-mourning" (FD,11). She has recurring flashes of her family in danger, hence the motif of the "Ladybird" nursery rhyme (FD,3). She tries to imagine what form death will take for her, "imagining it in order to defeat it" (FD,215). At one point she wonders:

What'll it be like to die? Not able to breathe? Fighting for air? Or letting everything slide away, seeing shapes like shadows that used to be people, nothing real because in a minute you won't be real any more?

(FD,129)

She thinks of the worst possible things that could happen, and yet she is always unprepared when something terrible does occur. She is unprepared for Ian's friend being hit by a car, and can only panic, "running crazily, until she reaches the big dark-green frame house with gabled roof and screened front porch" (FD, 13). She is unprepared for Katie and Jen's episode with the goldfish (FD,208-10), for Buckle's death (FD,231), and for Duncan's near-drowning at the beach (FD,291). In spite of her efforts to shield herself and her family, then, the reminders of death keep intruding into her world, in the news broadcasts, and in her own

everyday life. Allan Bevan comments that this "awareness of the ever-present threat of death helps to create the hell in which Stacey lives."<sup>6</sup>

Stacey's problem, primarily, is that she wants to cope, to live a full life, but she is unable to because of her fear of mortality. She cannot accept that she will age and die, that she will not always be present to protect her children, that her children will not always be near to her protection. Essentially, what her fears amount to is a desire to stop time, to protect her little world from the ravages of time and reality. This, of course, is impossible. She cannot stop time, and she cannot protect her children from the realities of life, from growing up.

One of the first moments of insight into herself which Stacey has is the realization that "everything will be just fine when I'm eighteen again" (FD,175). There is a feeling that the past was a better time--she was young, and free, and attractive, whereas now everyone appears to be able to cope with the world so much better than she. Her neighbour, Tess Fogler, is always beautiful and poised:

Tess is still in her housecoat, but being tall and slender looks as though ready to receive the Peruvian ambassador. Tess's hair is honey-blond and even this early in the day is done in a flawless French roll. . . .



. . . How does she always look so. . . .  
(FD,5)

Her husband's boss, Thor, is the picture of assurance:

. . . he carries himself carefully straight as though he practices [sic] every morning in front of a full-length mirror. . . . His features have clearly been sculptured by an expert, and his hair is silver. Above the out-jutting jaw and the young face, the silver hair forestedly flourishes, a lion's share of it which he tosses imperially back as they walk along a slippery hall.

(FD,38-39)

Even her husband accepts the responsibilities of family life and his job without question or doubt:

It's real. His acceptance of the responsibilities he took on long ago when he never suspected what they might mean. He doesn't intend it to be a gun at my head. Or if he does, in some crevice of his mind, he doesn't know.

(FD,64)

Those around her all appear to be able to cope, while Stacey is filled with self-doubt and fear.

It is not until she realizes that others are filled with the same doubts--the same fears and questions--that she realizes she

is not alone as she seemed to be. When Tess attempts to commit suicide, Stacey is shocked, unbelieving: "How many things added up? But I didn't get the message either. Why didn't I? I always envied her for being so glamorous. I couldn't see anything else" (FD,271). When she discovers that Thor is really Vernon Winkler, a child that everyone used to laugh at when she was young, she is amazed that he is probably afraid of her because she might have recognized him:

God of thunder. Vernon Winkler. . . . How can I tell Mac, and what will I say? You've been scared by a strawman. How could anybody say that? If we're scared, at least there is some dignity in being scared of genuine demons. Aren't there any demons left in hell? How in hell can we live without them?

(FD,269)

She finds, too, that Mac has doubts about himself, about his abilities. And yet in the face of these doubts, he continues to cope with his problems: "Odd--Mac has to pretend he's absolutely strong, and now I see he doesn't believe a word of it and never has. Yet he's a whole lot stronger than he thinks he is. Maybe they all are. . . . Maybe even I am" (FD,285).

As Stacey discovers that others are having just as much trouble coping with life as she is, she begins to come to an acceptance of herself. She realizes that she cannot stop time, or re-

turn to the past; that time continues, that people change and things happen. She begins to face the realities of life, and, ultimately, of death:

The fun is over. It's been over for some time, only you didn't see it before. No--you saw it all right but you couldn't take it. You're nearly forty. You got four kids and a mortgage. . . . It would be nice if we were different people but we are not different people. We are ourselves and we are sure as hell not going to undergo some total transformation at this point. . . . I can't stand it. I cannot. I can't take it. Yeh, I can, though. By God, I can, if I set my mind to it.  
(FD,289)

She realizes, also, that she cannot protect the children from everything--that they will have to face the world just as she did. Stacey says:

It's partly fear of the unknown, this, with me. But it scares me all the same. I don't know what to tell Katie. I have the feeling that there isn't much use, at this point, in telling her anything. She's on her own, so help her. So help her. At least my mother had the consolation of believing herself to be unquestionably right about everything. Or so I've always thought. Maybe she didn't either.  
(FD,302)

She may be thinking about Katie; however, the thoughts could be

applied to all of her children--to all of her life.

With this discovery and acceptance of her life--this realization that it will go on no matter how she tries to alter or escape from it--Stacey is able to confront her own mortality. As with Rachel, there is no "happy ending" for the dilemmas of life. Instead, there is a recognition of what life is all about: "Will the fires go on, inside and out? Until the moment when they go out for me, the end of the world. And then I'll never know what may happen in the next episode" (FD,307). The doubts, the fears, the everyday occurrences will continue. In the meantime all she can do is to continue to cope as best as she is able. With the acceptance of these facts of life and death, she is able for the first time, to consider her own mortality as a definite possibility. She now looks on death and recognizes its inevitability.

No one is indispensable. Maybe not, but it's myself I'm thinking about, as well as them. If I could absorb the notion of nothing, of total dark, then it would have no power over me. But that grace isn't given. My last breath will be a rattle of panic, while some strange face or maybe the known one hovers over me and says Everything's all right. Unless, of course, it meets me with violent quickness, a growing fashion.

(FD,307)

Stacey's ability to accept the inevitability of death, then,

also makes her able to accept her life, past, present, and future. Stacey's admission, that "Maybe the trivialities aren't so bad after all. They're something to focus on" (FD,307), is really not so different from Rachel's "I will ask myself if I am going mad, but if I do, I won't know it" (JG,202). Both will focus on the little things, more or less, and let the big things take care of themselves. Margaret Laurence comments on the fates of Rachel and Stacey:

Each finds within herself an ability to survive--not just to go on living, but to change and to move into new areas of life. Neither book is optimistic. Optimism in this world seems impossible to me. But in each novel there is some hope, and that is a different thing entirely.<sup>7</sup>

## Notes to Chapter Four

- <sup>1</sup> Miriam Packer, "The Dance of Life: The Fire-Dwellers," WML, p.124.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.127.
- <sup>3</sup> Clara Thomas, MW, p.117.
- <sup>4</sup> Joan Hind-Smith, TV, p.38.
- <sup>5</sup> Thomas, MW, p.86.
- <sup>6</sup> Allan Bevan, Introduction to The Fire-Dwellers, New Canadian Library, No. 87 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973), p.xii.
- <sup>7</sup> Margaret Laurence, "A Place to Stand on,": HS, p.17.

## Chapter Five

### A Bird in the House

A Bird in the House has a unique place in the fiction of Margaret Laurence; Kildare Dobbs describes it as "a kind of Canadian portrait of the artist as a young girl."<sup>1</sup> Dobbs writes, "A Bird in the House is a sequence of stories that explores themes of death and disillusion as they impinge on the mind of a child."<sup>2</sup> In a taped interview Laurence confirms this analysis of the stories within this collection, calling them "the only autobiographical fiction I have ever written. But most of these stories are more or less as it happened to me as a child and these deaths come in. . . . and it was only through writing these stories that I began to see how deeply I was affected by this as a kid."<sup>3</sup> The stories within the collection deal primarily with Vanessa McLeod's maturation as she comes to terms with her past through an acceptance of her grandfather and, ultimately, through an acceptance of her own self and her mortality. In her book The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence, Clara Thomas comments on the autobiographical nature of this work:

Her [Laurence's] own growth from a child's awareness of the small, tight world of family to an adolescent's understanding of the widening circles of the world around her is

paralleled by Vanessa McLeod's. The deaths of her own parents, the changes made first by loss and grief and then, inevitably and relentlessly, by the practical circumstances of her life, are present in Vanessa's story, certainly not in exactitude of detail, but certainly in truth of spirit.<sup>4</sup>

In her early childhood Vanessa is able to use her imagination and creativity to keep the reality of death separate from her reality as a child. Because her father is a doctor, Vanessa is conscious of the presence of death and suffering in the world, yet she tends to romanticize it. By fictionalizing death Vanessa is able to remove it effectively from the real world and into a make-believe world where it can pose no threat to her.

A good example of Vanessa's use of this defense mechanism is found in "The Sound of the Singing," when she speaks of Mr. Pearl, whom her father is treating: "He's dying with pneumonia. I'll bet you he's spitting up blood this very second" (BH,16). She is suddenly overwhelmed by the real possibilities of what she has said, and turns immediately to the protection of fictionalizing the incident:

Did people spit blood with pneumonia?  
All at once, I could not swallow, feeling as though that gushing crimson were constricting my own throat. Something like that would go well in the story I was currently making up. Sick to death in the freezing log cabin, with



only the beautiful half-breed lady (no, woman)  
to look after him, Old Jebb suddenly clutched  
his throat--and so on.

(BH,16)

By turning the incident into a story, Vanessa puts a safe distance between herself and reality. From this vantage point, she is able to act as a spectator of death without becoming involved. This defense mechanism has the added benefit that, if the story gets too near to home or becomes too real to Vanessa, she is able to stop the story at any point she wishes. Old Jebb never actually has to die. She can leave him in a state of suspended animation indefinitely with her "and so on," or she can alter the story so that the outcome suits her purposes: Old Jebb could experience a remarkable recovery.

For this reason, death as a reality means little to Vanessa. Even the sources of her imagined concept of death are removed from her real world, her romantic fabrications being derived from the only major literary work available to her, the Bible:

I was much occupied by the themes of love and death, although my experience of both had so far been gained principally from the Bible, which I read in the same way as I read Eaton's Catalogue or the collected works of Rudyard Kipling--because I had to read something . . . .

(BH,64)

The death scenes in her writing are far removed from the possibility of death within her sphere of existence:

Yet the death scenes had an undeniable appeal, a sombre splendour, with (as it said in Ecclesiastes) the mourners going about the streets and all the daughters of music brought low. Both death and love seemed regrettably far from Manawaka and the snow, and my grandfather stamping his feet. . . .

(BH,65)

She is basically untouched by the reality of death; for as long as she is able to look on death as a fantasy, or as a piece of her own imagination, it cannot touch her. Once death ceases to be an abstraction for her, though, her fiction has no power to protect her from the reality of death.

The story "The Mask of the Bear" provides an interesting example of the child's first encounter with death in direct contrast to her abstraction of death. Because Vanessa is so successful at isolating herself from the reality of death, her first encounter with it comes as a shock to her. Her entire world is shaken and her understanding of life and reality is affected. She comments, "I had not known at all that a death would be like this, not only one's own pain, but the almost unbearable knowledge of that other pain which could not be reached nor lessened" (BH, 80-81).

At this point in her life Vanessa is unable to accept the reality or the finality of death. She says, "I did not fully realise yet that Grandmother Connor would never move around this house again, preserving its uncertain peace somehow" (BH,80). It is the reactions of those who are near to her which affect Vanessa even more than the death. She cannot visualize the reality of death for herself, but she can see its effect on those who mean something to her. She sees for the first time a break in her grandfather's stern exterior, and it terrifies her:

Then, as I gazed at him, unable to take in the significance of what he had said, he did a horrifying thing. He gathered me into the relentless grip of his arms. He bent low over me, and sobbed against the cold skin of my face.

I wanted only to get away, to get as far away as possible and never come back.

(BH,79-80)

In her mother's arms she is able to cry, but the questions and the sense of disbelief remain:

My mother held out her hands to me, and I ran to her. She closed the door and led me into the living room. We both cried, and yet I think I cried mainly because she did, and because I had been shocked by my grandfather. I still could not believe that anyone I cared about could really die.

(BH,80)

Her Aunt Edna's reaction to the death is disconcerting to Vanessa, because she experiences a helplessness, or a sense of powerlessness in the face of grief. She has no way to lessen the pain and can only watch as her aunt cries: "Then she put her head down on the table and cried in a way I had never heard a person cry before, as though there were no end to it anywhere" (BH,81).

Her experience with death destroys Vanessa's ability to romanticize it, and to separate it from herself. She still seeks escape in her romantic fabrications from Ecclesiastes, but the reality of the situation will not let her be freed of the presence and the incongruity of death. She describes her attempt at her own personal funeral service for her grandmother:

I intended to read the part about the mourners going about the streets, and the silver cord loosed and the golden bowl broken, and the dust returning to the earth as it was and the spirit unto God who gave it. But I got stuck on the first few lines, because it seemed to me, frighteningly, that they were being spoken in my grandmother's mild voice--Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not.

(BH,83)

"The Mask of the Bear" deals with Vanessa's first actual encounter with death, although she had been near to death on another occasion. The birth of her brother in "To Set Our House in Order"

provides a startling example to Vanessa of the proximity of birth and death. She becomes aware of the possibility of losing her mother, of the dangers inherent in birth, and of an earlier episode of a sister lost at birth (BH,39,50), all in one traumatic occurrence. She wonders at life's accidents, yet is unable to understand them:

I thought of the accidents that might easily happen to a person--or, of course, might not happen, might happen to somebody else. I thought of the dead baby, my sister, who might as easily have been I. Would she, then, have been lying here in my place. . . . I thought of my brother, who had been born alive after all, and now had been given his life's name.

(BH,59)

Her secure world has been shaken, and there seems no way to restore it to its original order: "I could not really comprehend these things, but I sensed their strangeness, their disarray. I felt that whatever God might love in this world, it was certainly not order" (BH,59).

This sense of disorder, of confusion, is increased through Grandmother Connor's death; and in "A Bird in the House," it is heightened even more, so that as Vanessa understands less, she fears more. From her father she learns of her uncle's death in the war, and this adds to the pain which she has come to

associate with death:

Unexpectedly, that day came into intense being for me. He had had to watch his own brother die. . . . He would not have known what to do. He would just have had to stand there and look at it, whatever that might mean. I looked at my father with a kind of horrified awe, and then I began to cry. . . . I needed him to console me for this unwanted glimpse of the pain he had once known.

(BH,93-94)

It is into this world of doubt and fear that the sparrow enters. The sparrow, for Vanessa, represents the panicky, helpless feeling that she herself feels. She sees in the sparrow's frenzied movements her own attempts to escape, to find the answer, a similarity which fills her with a panic equal to the bird's:

I was petrified. I thought I would pass out if those palpitating wings touched me. There was something in the bird's senseless movements that revolted me. I also thought it was going to damage itself, break one of those thin wing-bones, perhaps, and then it would be lying on the floor, dying, like the pimpled and horribly featherless baby birds we saw sometimes on the sidewalks in the spring when they had fallen out of their nests. I was not any longer worried about the sparrow. I wanted only to avoid the sight of it lying broken on the floor.

(BH,102)

It is to this frightened and helpless young girl that Noreen says in her practical voice, "A bird in the house means a death in the house" (BH,102).

On her father's death, the initial reaction which Vanessa and her mother share is the need for comfort, for someone with whom to experience the pain of grief. When Vanessa awakens to her mother's weeping, her first impulse is to reach out, to touch, to share the grief almost physically by embracing and by being embraced:

I did not ask her, and she did not tell me anything. There was no need. She held me in her arms, or I held her, I am not certain which. And after a while the first mourning stopped, too, as everything does sooner or later, for when the limits of endurance have been reached, then people must sleep.

(BH,107-08)

The need to comfort and protect remains with Vanessa. She stays close to her mother because she "had the feeling that she needed my protection. I did not know from what, nor what I could possibly do, but something held me there" (BH,108).

The anger which Vanessa experiences is a natural part of her grief. Dr. Kubler-Ross writes that the witnessing of death always includes some elements of anger, and cites an example of this phenomenon: "The five-year-old who loses his mother is both blaming himself for her disappearance and expressing anger at her

for having deserted him and for no longer gratifying his needs."<sup>5</sup> Vanessa is considerably more than five years old at the time, but she is frightened, confronted with something which she cannot understand or control. In her grief she identifies Noreen with the incident of the sparrow, and with her own fear and helplessness. When she strikes at Noreen, then, she is really striking at her own feelings of inadequacy:

Looking at Noreen now, I suddenly recalled the sparrow. I felt physically sick, remembering the fearful darting and plunging of those wings, and the fact that it was I who had opened the window and let it in. Then an inexplicable fury took hold of me, some terrifying need to hurt, burn, destroy. Absolutely without warning, either to her or to myself, I hit Noreen as hard as I could . . . as though she were a prison all around me and I was battling to get out.

(BH,109)

It is her own lack of understanding which imprisons Vanessa, though, and she remains imprisoned until she can accept death and come to terms with life.

In Three Voices Joan Hind-Smith comments that "A Bird in the House is, among other things, Laurence's struggle to put [her grandfather] in his place, to clear herself of his domination,"<sup>6</sup> and Margaret Laurence comments on her grandfather's place in the work and within her consciousness:



The thing that interests me about the old man at this distance . . . . because I'm sure that he had an enormous influence not only on my life and my character and everything, but on my writing as well, and what happened when I wrote A Bird in the House--all those stories--was when I began them I still actively disliked my grandfather although he had been dead for many years. By the time I wrote the last story I no longer detested him. In fact in some kind of peculiar grudging way I knew that I loved him.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, the greatest factor in Vanessa's coming to terms with life and with death is her relationship with Grandfather Connor. The process by which Vanessa reaches this acceptance of her grandfather is remarkably similar to the Jungian concept of the psyche's acceptance of the Shadow in the individuation process. Marie-Louise von Franz explains the concept of the Shadow:

[The Shadow] represents unknown or little known attributes and qualities of the ego . . . . When an individual makes an attempt to see his Shadow, he becomes aware of (and often ashamed of) those qualities and impulses he denies in himself but can plainly see in other people.<sup>8</sup>

Vanessa sees within Grandfather Connor a number of characteristics which are undesirable, and which she will not admit to sharing with the old man. Ultimately, when she comes to accept her grandfather in "Jericho's Brick Battlements," she is also accepting the

darker side of her own nature--she is coming to terms with her Self, with the person she is. Dr. von Franz describes the necessity of recognizing one's Shadow, and coming to terms with it:

Divining in advance whether our dark partner symbolizes a shortcoming that we should overcome or a meaningful bit of life that we should accept--this is one of the most difficult problems that we encounter on the way to individuation.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the stories in the collection, the motif of Vanessa and Grandfather is developed to show Vanessa's maturation. From her earliest memories Vanessa finds herself to be at odds with the old man--disagreeing with him, unwilling to admit he is right, always rebelling at his overbearing nature. When she says, "Step on a crack, break you grandfather's back" (BH,5), Vanessa thinks in a typical child-like manner that her mother would appreciate the sentiment she expresses. She feels stifled within the atmosphere of the Brick House because it represents all that her grandfather stands for, and when forced to move there after her father's death, Vanessa feels trapped and negative: "I felt as though nothing favourable would ever be likely to happen again" (BH,174).

When Grandfather Connor shows signs of being human, in his grief for his wife's death (BH,79-80), as he had in his objection

at having to be his brother's keeper (BH,33-35), Vanessa is unable to respond to the man, even though she feels the same way. Here, her indomitable nature is similar to her grandfather's:

I looked again at my grandfather's face, and saw there such a bleak bewilderment that I could feel only shame and sadness . . . .

He was right. It was not fair. Even I could see that. Yet I veered sharply away from his touch, and that was probably not fair, either. I wanted only to be by myself, with no one else around.

(BH,35)

The recognition of her feelings of sympathy leaves her shaken; she must retreat to recompose herself, almost in the way in which Grandfather Connor periodically retreats to the basement for protection from the world and from any threatening change:

From his cave . . . the angry crunching of the wooden rockers against the cement floor would reverberate throughout the house, a kind of sub-verbal Esperanto, a disapproval which even the most obtuse person could not fail to comprehend.

(BH,62)

There are moments of insight, moments when she comes near to understanding and appreciating the old man. When Grandfather Connor retreats to his basement shelter after his wife's funeral,

Vanessa recognizes the necessity of this escape to maintain his image, his protective shield: "He was, in some way, untouchable. Whatever his grief was, he did not want us to look at it and we did not want to look at it, either" (BH,84). Similarly, when Vanessa discovers the old car in the stable she considers it to be her retreat from the pressures of the house, until the image of Grandfather Connor invades her retreat:

All at once I could hear that horn again, loudly, in my head, and I remembered something I didn't know I knew. . . . My grandfather was sitting straight and haughty behind the steering wheel. And the car was flying. . . . I was gazing with love and glory at my giant grandfather as he drove his valiant chariot through all the streets of the world.

(BH,178-79)

Vanessa is not prepared, at this time, to accept her grandfather for the man he is, and so she attempts to repress the memory and to deny the love which once existed:

I closed the door carefully. Then I climbed to the rafters and hauled myself back up into the loft. . . . The loft was easier to get at. There was more space here, really. It would be a better place to be mine than the garage below.

(BH,179)

It is Grandfather Connor's death which brings Vanessa's recognition of mortality to a head. She is unable to accept the fact that the man has died, or that he could die: "I was not sorry that he was dead. I was only surprised. Perhaps I had really imagined that he was immortal. Perhaps he even was immortal, in ways that it would take me half a lifetime to comprehend" (BH,205). The funeral service forces Vanessa to recognize her Grandfather, not the proud, impervious mask, but the man that was behind that mask. In "The Sound of the Singing," she describes his pioneer stories as dull, because she cannot reconcile the story to the image of her grandfather which she has formed in her mind:

I had been trained in both politeness and prudence, so I always said "Gee" in an impressed voice, but it did not seem very exciting to me. I could not imagine the store looking any other way than it did now, a drab place full of kitchen utensils and saw-blades and garden tools and kegs of nails.

(BH,10)

She is even surprised when Aunt Edna describes Grandfather as a pioneer (BH,23), and she abandons the novel she is writing: "If pioneers were like that, I had thought, my pen would be better off employed elsewhere" (BH,67). So when, during the funeral, the minister describes Grandfather as "one of Manawaka's pioneers"

(BH,204), it is as if Vanessa suddenly recognizes the man for the first time. It is then that she wants to show some feeling for the man:

Suddenly the minister's recounting of these familiar facts struck me as though I had never heard any of it before.

I could not cry. I wanted to, but I could not.

(BH,204)

Even the car gains new significance for Vanessa. Earlier in "Jericho's Brick Battlements" she describes the car in terms of her earlier impressions of her grandfather:

He had never driven it very much and had always taken great care of it. Perhaps he had thought it was too expensive to be used except occasionally. Or perhaps he had never grown accustomed to the fact that it could not be controlled by shouting.

(BH,177)

After the funeral she regards the car in terms of the man she has come to recognize as her grandfather: "I wondered what the car might have meant to him, to the boy who walked the hundred miles from Winnipeg to Manawaka with hardly a cent in his pockets" (BH,206). The image of the car is associated with the idea of the

immortality of Grandfather Connor, for Vanessa: "The memory of a memory returned to me now. I remembered myself remembering driving in it with him, in the ancient days when he seemed as large and admirable as God" (BH,206). The car, a symbol of Grandfather Connor's endurance and success, has aged now, as the "god" himself has aged and died:

The MacLaughlin-Buick had altered. Its dark brown paintwork had lost its lustre. The beige and brown striped plush of the seats had stiffened and faded. Rust grew on it like patches of lichen on a gravestone.

(BH,205)

There is no immortality, no lasting forever, either for cars or for man, no matter what precautions are taken.

It takes time for the complete acceptance of the ways of Grandfather Connor--the ways of life and death. There is no flash of insight or total knowledge. Instead, it is the result of an accumulation of thoughts over the years. The example of the bear mask is an appropriate one. In "The Mask of the Bear," Vanessa describes an incident which occurs in later life and which, at the same time, permits some insight into the past:

Many years later, when Manawaka was far away from me, in miles and in time, I saw one day in a museum the Bear Mask of the Haida

Indians. It was a weird mask. The features were ugly and yet powerful. The mouth was turned down in an expression of sullen rage. The eyes were empty caverns, revealing nothing.

(BH,87)

It is through this mask that Vanessa gains some sudden insight into her grandfather--the man who wears the bearskin coat--in an epiphany-like occurrence:

Yet as I looked, they seemed to draw my own eyes towards them, until I imagined I could see somewhere within that darkness a look which I knew, a lurking bewilderment. I remembered then that in the days before it became a museum piece, the mask had concealed a man.

(BH,88)

Uncle Terence is the first one to penetrate the mask of Grandfather Connor; the first to see that behind the brusque exterior was a man who just might have needed love and tenderness as much as anyone else, but who was unable to admit this need for fear that it would appear to be a weakness on his part--for fear that he might be rejected: "I don't believe Mother ever realized he might have wanted her tenderness. Why should she? He could never show any of his own. All he could ever come out with was anger" (BH,87). It is this inner man whom Vanessa



begins to recognize when she realizes that "the mask had concealed a man," just as it is the inner man whom she begins to recognize at the funeral.

The final acceptance of Grandfather Connor comes when Vanessa returns to Manawaka twenty years later. Her return is, in a sense, a pilgrimage, a search for faith or a reaffirmation of faith. She knows that the trip might have some significance for her, but she is not sure what the significance will be: "I went alone. It would have no meaning for anyone else. I was not even sure it would have any meaning for me" (BH,206). At the same time, there is a sense of finality about the trip: "I sensed that this would be my last sight of it, for there was nothing to take me there any more" (BH,206). She returns to the Brick House for one last time--the house that was the base of her grandfather's pride, the symbol of his success, the source of his protection. There is a sense that, if anything should proclaim the man's immortality, this house should do so. Vanessa remarks, "I did not look at Grandfather Connor's grave. There was no need. It was not his monument" (BH,207). But, like the man and the car, the house shows signs of aging, of decay with the passing of time:

The house had been lived in by strangers for a long time. I had not thought it would hurt me to see it in other hands, but it did. I wanted to tell them to trim their hedges, to

repaint the window-frames, to pay heed to repairs.

(BH,207)

Her attitude to the new occupants is exactly what Grandfather Connor's would have been, had he been able to return to his monument. The house is slowly declining, and yet immortality is not impossible.

Grandfather Connor lives on through his children. He continues from generation to generation through memory. It is this realization which brings Vanessa to her final acceptance of Grandfather Connor, and of life and death: that who and what one is will continue through time, even in the face of death. And so the collection of stories ends with this acceptance, and acts as an introduction to the theme of the continuum of time which is developed in The Diviners. Vanessa concludes her maturation and her acceptance with the observation, "I had feared and fought the old man, yet he proclaimed himself in my veins" (BH,207). Ultimately, then, Vanessa accepts the knowledge that she too will die and yet that she too will go on living, through others, as Grandfather Connor continues to live through her.

The way in which Margaret Laurence treats her mother's death in this collection of stories is interesting. It is understandable that her real mother's death is not mentioned: the woman died

when Laurence was only four years old, and in a loving family atmosphere the grief and pain of that loss would heal quickly. It is her stepmother who appears in A Bird in the House in the person of Vanessa's mother. It is, therefore, Laurence's stepmother's death which is alluded to in "Jericho's Brick Battlements."

What is unusual is that, considering the detail with which Margaret Laurence treats each death within the book, Vanessa's mother's death is mentioned in only one brief paragraph, and her feelings about this death are summed up in one sentence: "Of all the deaths in the family, hers remained unhealed in my mind longest" (B),206). This seems a surprisingly brief treatment of a death which should be one of the most moving experiences in her life. Perhaps Vanessa has not gotten over it quite as much as she thinks; therefore it is still a subject too near, too painful to write about. And if this is so for Vanessa, the same could be true for Laurence. This would explain, in part at least, why the writer avoids any extensive treatment of the loss of her stepmother, in A Bird in the House, the book which she describes as being her most autobiographical work.

## Notes to Chapter Five

- <sup>1</sup> Kildare Dobbs, Review of A Bird in the House, Saturday Night (August 1970), p.26.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Laurence, II.
- <sup>4</sup> Clara Thomas, MW, pp.96-97.
- <sup>5</sup> Elisabeth Kubler-Ross M.D., On Death and Dying (London: Tavistock Publications, 1969), p.4.
- <sup>6</sup> Joan Hind-Smith, IV, p.47.
- <sup>7</sup> Laurence, II.
- <sup>8</sup> Marie-Louise von Franz, "The Process of Individuation," Man and His Symbols, ed. Carl G. Jung (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1976), p.174.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.184.

## Chapter Six

### The Diviners

The Diviners is Margaret Laurence's last novel in the Manawaka series. It is seen by some to be the resolution of the series, and of Laurence's view of life.<sup>1</sup> The feeling of disorder and chaos, so prevalent in the earlier novels, is now overcome through the evolution of the concept of time which gives the work a greater sense of direction. This concept of time is central to an understanding of Laurence's work, and will be examined in greater detail in the next chapter in which the development of the concept will be examined throughout Laurence's works, with its culmination in the The Diviners. The work is not without its critics but, according to some, The Diviners is the epitome of Laurence's abilities as an artist. Melanie Mortlock writes:

The critical consensus on The Diviners seems to be that it is an ambitious work with some serious stylistic flaws. It undoubtedly lacks the compelling forcefulness that the powerful character of Hagar brings to The Stone Angel. And yet, with its reflective and somewhat wistful tone, The Diviners comes closer than any of Laurence's other Canadian novels to achieving her artistic goal.<sup>2</sup>

Morag Gunn may not be the most powerful or colourful character in the fiction of Margaret Laurence; however, of all the characters discussed so far, none must deal with a first encounter with death quite as traumatic as the one which confronts Morag, the child, in The Diviners. Her first personal experience with death is at the age of five, when her parents die of infantile paralysis (D,16). This initial experience is followed by Christie's story of the baby's body in the dump and then by Eva Winkler's abortion when Morag is older; by Morag's witnessing Piquette's death scene in the charred house; by the deaths of various friends at Dieppe; by the deaths of Prin and Christie; by the deaths of Jules' various brothers and sisters; and finally, by the death of Jules.

It is Morag's first experience, though, which has the most lasting effect on her because there is so much that remains unexplained. She does not understand what death is, or why her parents should die the way they did. She does not understand why she cannot see them, or why they leave her alone in the world. There remain only the questions, the misunderstanding, and the fear. Nancy Bailey comments on the effect of the deaths on the child, and the child's more or less forced emotional development, when she observes that "Morag's quest for selfhood begins early and abruptly as a result of the accident of her parents' death."<sup>3</sup>

Morag's concept of death is primarily of death as mutilation. The only experience with death that she has had up to that time is with a dead gopher, so that when she is told that her parents have died, this concept of death is immediately applied to her parents:

She knows they are dead. She knows what dead means. She has seen dead gophers, run over by cars or shot, their guts redly squashed out on the road.

(D,16)

She is not permitted to see her dead parents: "And so of course Morag does not know how much of their guts lie coiled like scarlet snakes across the sheets" (D,16). In this instance, what the adults consider to be "protection" of the child is really no better than Johnnie Kestoe's forced exposure to his mother's death in This Side Jordan, because so many of the child's questions are ignored and left unanswered. Here, the unexplained horror of death which Johnnie encounters is countered by the imagined horror of death which Morag conjures up in her mind with the only tools available to an impressionable child. The horror of the possible form of death would have been much alleviated with some patience and understanding on the part of the adults present. As it happens, Morag's concept of death is left unresolved and frightening to the child.

For years she does not know what form death took for her

parents, and this lack of knowledge bothers her. When she speaks with Christie about the aborted baby that he buried in the dump, Morag wonders to herself, "What is dead, really?" (D,76), and always the gopher image is not too far off. A few moments earlier when Skinner Tonnerre offers to show her how fast he can skin a gopher, "Morag shudders. No--please. Not a gopher. He will do it and she will throw up" (D,73). The image is even applied to the child's concept of Jesus's crucifixion:

It was really God who decided Jesus had to die like that. Who put it into the head of the soldier, then, to pierce His side? (Pierce? The blood all over the place, like shot gophers and) Who indeed?

(D,77)

And so death becomes associated with the mutilated and dying bodies of gophers in the child's abstraction of death.

Because of her inability to assimilate her parents' death, Morag is left empty, frightened, and unable to grieve: "She stares unblinking, like fledgling birds when they fall out of their nests and just stare" (D,16). The image of the bird fallen from its nest is especially haunting when one considers how Morag has been shaken from her secure childhood world, and into a world which is incomprehensible. The episode is comparable, as well, to man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden. One instant she is in a home



with parents, "a safe place. Nothing terrible can happen there" (D,9) and shortly afterwards she must leave that home forever: "Morag does not look back, but she hears the metallic clank of the farm gate being shut. Closed" (D,17). She can never return to the world of her childhood, and even her imaginary friends disappear: "Cowboy Joke and Rosa Picardy and the others are not here now. They have gone away. For good. Once and for all" (D,17).

Her first encounter with death, then, leaves Morag totally alone in the world. Her parents are gone. Her imaginary friends are gone. There is even a sense that her childish faith in God is gone: "Morag is talking in her head. To God. Telling Him it was all His fault and this is why she is so mad at Him. Because He is no good, is why" (D,17). Anger is the only emotion which survives from her confusion, and it is anger which she feels even years after her parents' deaths when Christie takes her to the cemetery to visit their graves: "I was raging because he'd made me go. And now I no longer know whether I was furious at Christie, or at them for having gone away, or whether I was only afraid and didn't know that I was" (D,18). The long-term effects of this experience are obvious in Morag's adulthood. She comments:

Now I am crying, for God's sake, and I don't even know how much of that memory really happened and how much of it I embroidered later on. I seem to remember it just like that, and yet, each time I think of it,

are there new or different details? I recall it with embellishments which don't seem likely for a five-year-old.

(D,17-18)

The details may be additions from later years; however, the negative effect of the experience is real and lasting for Morag. She remarks: "I remember their deaths, but not their lives" (D,19).

This experience plays a great role in Morag's attitude towards her life: her fear to admit her need for people and yet her definite desire to be loved and needed, her need to live an independent life, and yet her great fear of being completely alone in the world. All of these factors shape Morag, making her into the person she becomes. Through coming to terms with death--with some sort of acceptance of death and life--she is finally able to free herself of her past experience, and yet to remain conscious of the place which that past has had and will always have within her being. This development can be traced directly through her differing reactions to death as she encounters it throughout her life.

Morag's attitude towards Prin throughout the novel is ambiguous. She is torn between shame of the woman, and recognition of her worth, summing up her emotions as "past love and present repulsion" (D,173). The feelings of guilt at her neglect of her

step-parents are especially apparent when Morag returns for Prin's death and funeral. She recognizes the legitimacy of her need to leave Manawaka and make a life of her own, but she sees that there is a difference between leaving the town, and leaving the people who loved her: "Had it been wrong to want to get away? No, not wrong to want to get away, to make her getaway. It was the other thing that was wrong, the turning away, turning her back on the both of them" (D,248). She is filled with guilt at her ingratitude to the woman who "gave Morag her only home" (D,252), and this guilt, this awareness of what her life has become, suddenly overwhelms her at Prin's funeral. She has a momentary feeling of isolation--of panic at the life which confronts her: "And now here, in this place, the woman who brought Morag up is lying dead, and Morag's mind, her attention, has left Prin. Help me, God; I'm frightened of myself" (D,253). The old doubts return, and Morag sees that the protected existence she has built for herself in the city with Brooke is, like Prin's shield of fat, useless in the end. She must face the world; she must face life and death.

Similarly, as Morag matures and moves towards some understanding of life and death, her attitude towards Christie changes. Initially, Christie is nothing more to Morag than the "Scavenger" (D,31). She cannot see past his clothes and his appearance:

His teeth are bad and one is missing at the front but he never tries to hide it by putting his hand over or smiling with his mouth closed, oh no, not him. He always wears a blue heavy shirt, and overalls too big so they fall around him and make him look silly.

That is the worst. How silly he looks. No. The worst is that he smells. He does wash. But he never gets rid of the smell. How much do other people notice? Plenty. You bet.

(D,36)

Yet later, when she tells Pique about the man and remembers the way he looked and smelled, it no longer seems such a significant factor in her opinion of him: "He used to wear the same old overalls, always, and that embarrassed me and I used to think he stank of garbage, but now I'm not sure he did and I wonder why I thought it mattered, anyway" (D,367). Instead, her memories of Christie the Scavenger are replaced by those of Christie the story teller, with his tales of Piper Gunn and his people:

He had very blue eyes, Christie did, in those days, and when he was telling a tale, his eyes would be like the blue lightning and you would forget his small stature, for at those times he would seem a giant of a man.

(D,367)

Christie becomes as legendary a figure as the characters in the stories which he told Morag. It is this final recognition of Christie which Morag accepts at his funeral when the piper plays

over his grave, "Christie's true burial" (D,403). It is only after Morag has come to accept Christie, and the past which he tells stories about, that she is able to let him go, to accept his death:

And Piper Gunn, he was a great tall man, with the voice of the drums and the heart of a child, and the gall of a thousand, and the strength of conviction.

The piper plays "The Flowers of the Forest," the long-ago pibroch, the lament for the dead, over Christie Logan's grave. And only now is Morag released into her mourning.

(D,403)

Clara Thomas comments: "The movement from this great climax . . . . marks an emotional levelling out, a consolidation for Morag . . . . she is moving on through a series of affirmations, resolutions, and acceptances."<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, it is through Jules that Morag arrives at a deeper acceptance of and insight into death. When he is dying, Morag's fears of death are lessened through a recognition that death is not necessarily the violent ugly end which she has so often associated it with in the past--the dead gophers, the aborted babies buried in the Nuisance Grounds, the untimely deaths of Jules's brothers and sisters, or even the helpless suffering of Prin and Christie. For Jules, death is an end of suffering: "With them, it was somebody's fault or everybody's fault, and it started

a long way back, but with me, it's just bad luck. I had some luck in my time. It's run out, that [sic] all"(D,445). Jules fears his death--fears the unknown--and yet he comes to accept it, and even meets it on his own terms rather than waiting for it to take him (D,447).

One of the most important features of Jules's death is that it enables Morag ultimately to accept her own parents' death. When her parents died, Morag was left with a sense of betrayal, of abandonment. With Jules's death--with his desire that Pique not see him in his ill condition--Morag comes to a sudden realization of what her own parents went through in their illness and death: "They had wanted to see her; they had not wanted her to see them. The gaps in understanding, the long-ago child wondering what was being kept from her, why they did not want to see her" (D,447). With this realization, Morag is finally able to understand her parents' death, to let them die in peace. She was not abandoned as she thought she was, and this recognition gives the mature Morag a sense of inner peace.

An integral part of Morag's coming to terms with life is her acceptance of her place in the pattern of time--an understanding of the importance of the past before one can live in the present, or face the future.<sup>5</sup> This requires an acceptance of the fact that Pique represents a part of the future, while Morag is becoming

a part of the past: "Would Pique's life be better or worse than Morag's? Mine hasn't been so bad. Been? Time is running out. Is that what is really going on, with me, now, with her? Pique, harbinger of my death, continuer of life" (D,290). The continuum of life is guaranteed through Pique and through her songs, just as Morag was the guarantee for Christie's future, for his part in the passage of time:

Morag could not speak for a while. The hurts unwittingly inflicted upon Pique by her mother, by circumstances--Morag had agonized over these often enough, almost as though, if she imagined them sufficiently, they would prove to have been unreal after all. But they were not unreal. Yet Pique was not assigning any blame--that was not what it was all about. And Pique's journey, although at this point it might feel to her unique, was not unique. (D,441)

Morag recognizes that Pique is the guarantee of the future for Jules, as well--that she represents some hope for the future of the whites and the Metis--when she wonders: "Would Pique create a fiction out of Jules, something both more and less true than himself, when she finally made a song for him, as she would one day, the song he had never brought himself to make for himself?" (D,449).

This, ultimately, is what Morag comes to terms with in life and death--the sense of life as a continuum. As she was given her

role through Christie and his stories, so Pique must find her place in life to ensure the continuation of Morag's and Jules's life, to ensure, in a sense, their immortality.

The image of divining is an especially meaningful one in relation to one's acceptance of death and life, and not without parallels within the process of individuation. The similarity between Marie-Louise von Franz's description of the innate ability of the individual to come to terms with himself and Royland's description of teaching A-Okay to divine is striking. Dr. von Franz writes:

This larger, more nearly total aspect of the psyche appears first as merely an inborn possibility. It may emerge very slightly, or it may develop relatively completely during one's lifetime. How far it develops depends on whether or not the ego is willing to listen to the messages of the Self.<sup>6</sup>

Royland explains:

It's something I don't understand, the divining . . . . and it's not something that everybody can do, but the thing I don't usually let on about is that quite a few people can learn to do it.

(D, 451-52)

Each character, then, is a diviner in his own right--divining some meaningful truth about life.



However, in order to become a diviner--to learn about life--each character has had to learn about death first. It is impossible to divine, it would seem, unless one has come to terms with death in some form. Involved within this image is Christie's ability to divine truths about humanity through garbage. He calls this ability "the gift of garbage-telling" (D,75), and although Morag does not think much of his gift at the time, years later she recalls the incident and sees it in a different light: "Christie, tell the garbage--throw those decayed bones like dice or like sorcerers symbols. You really could see, though. What about me?" (D,412). Yet, underlying this ability to unveil the truths about humanity is the painful consciousness of death. Christie would not be the man he is in the novel--would not be the Scavenger--had he not experienced the death and destruction of the war:

There we are, getting ready to fire old Brimstone, and a shell explodes so christly close to me I think I'm a goner. The noise. Jesus. And then the air all around me is filled with . . . .

Well, then, with bleeding bits of a man. Blown to smithereens. A leg. A hand. Guts, which was that red and wet you would not credit it at all.

(D,91)

The fear and pain of the war leave a permanent imprint on Christie

so that the memory is relived again and again, everytime he gets "the shakes": "Christie holding Colin in his arms. Colin probably eighteen. Eighteen. Amid the shellfire and the barbwire and the mud, crying" (D,206).

Jules's ability to find and express the truth lies within his music. The pain, both physical and emotional, that he contains so well (D,445) and the consciousness of the deaths of his brother, his sisters and his father all undergo a kind of metamorphosis within him, to be released in the form of his music, so that "all the things he could never bring himself to say in ordinary speech, have found their way into the song" (D,346).

Royland experiences the deaths of both his wife and his faith before he becomes a diviner. After his wife's suicide because of himself, Royland loses his faith:

Drowned herself. I guess she couldn't put her hand to an easier way, that moment. She was scared of me. Scared to come back. Scared not to come back. Didn't believe I'd change any. And maybe I wouldn't have.

.....

Don't believe in hell now, and haven't for some years. But maybe that's just a way of saying that if I did believe in it, I know one man who'd be bound there for sure.

(D,241)

And so, having experienced death (through his wife's suicide) and

damnation, Royland turns from being a "rip snortin' Bible-puncher" (D,240) to being a diviner, because it "Seemed better to find water than to-- . . . Raise fire" (D,241).

Morag, too, is a diviner. Like Peggy Wemyss and Vanessa McLeod after their experience with the death of a parent or parents, Morag becomes a searcher for truth through her writing. She sometimes doubts her ability (D,412), but she knows she must make the most of it if she is ever to learn the truths about life, if she is ever to come to terms with death, with her own mortality: "She would never know whether [her magic tricks] actually worked or not, or to what extent. That wasn't given to her to know. In a sense, it did not matter. The necessary doing of the thing--that mattered" (D,452).

In order to arrive at the truth, each individual must experience death and turn into the Self, to come to terms with who one is, and to accept oneself and one's mortality and the transient nature of life. As with Royland, the gift of divining--of understanding life--is temporary, to be passed on to the next in line when the time is right:

The inheritors. Was this, finally and at last, what Morag had always sensed she had to learn from the old man? She had known it all along, but not really known. The gift, or portion of grace, or whatever it was, was finally withdrawn, to be given to someone else.

(D,452)

There can be no inheritance without death. And so the gift must be passed on so that others might live. Pique must use this gift to come to terms with her own life, to accept her part in the continuum. She must learn, as Morag has learned, to "Look ahead into the past, and back into the future, until the silence" (D,453).

## Notes to Chapter Six

<sup>1</sup> Much has been written on this work; however, little of it is truly relevant to the subject of this thesis. Some articles on The Diviners as a conclusion to the Manawaka cycle include: David Blewett's, "The Unity of the Manawaka Cycle," Journal of Canadian Studies, 13, No.3 (Fall 1978), 31-39; Cheryl Cooper's, "Images of Closure in The Diviners," The Canadian Novel: Here and Now, ed. John Moss (Toronto: NC, 1978), 93-102; Melanie Mortlock's "The Religion of Heritage: The Diviners as a Thematic Conclusion to the Manawaka Series," WML, 132-141; J.R. (Tim) Struthers' "Laurence's Ritual Epic Triumph," The London Free Press, 12 July 1975, 43.

<sup>2</sup> Mortlock, p.140.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Bailey, CJ, p.310.

<sup>4</sup> Clara Thomas, MW, p.163.

<sup>5</sup> The importance of the role of the acceptance of the past, present and future will be examined in greater detail in the next chapter.

<sup>6</sup> Marie-Louise von Franz, "The Process of Individuation," Man and His Symbols, ed. Carl G. Jung (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1976), p.163.

## Chapter Seven

### Conclusion

In her essay "Time and the Narrative Voice" Margaret Laurence writes: "In any work of fiction, the span of time present in the story is not only as long as the time-span of every character's life and memory; it also represents everything acquired and passed on in a kind of memory-heritage from one generation to another"<sup>1</sup>--in a continuum. This means that the past and the future are actively involved in the character's being at all times. They are always present, affecting the individual, shaping his attitudes and behaviour, making him the person he is. Laurence concludes her article: "It is the character who chooses which parts of the personal past, the family past and the ancestral past have to be revealed in order for the present to be realized and the future to happen."<sup>2</sup> The choice which the character makes involves a certain degree of self-knowledge on the part of the individual, and is the turning point in his or her coming to terms with life and, ultimately with death.

Much has been written about Margaret Laurence's concept of time--of the role of past, present and future in character formation.<sup>3</sup> What is of interest here is how this concept can be related to her use of death within her works. Each novel explores

the individual's understanding of the importance of past and future in the present; however, in each case this understanding is integrally associated with that individual's acceptance of death and of life. In her essay, "Margaret Laurence, Carl Jung and the Manawaka Women," Nancy Bailey writes:

The struggle to define the self so as to be able to live freely in the present, while conscious of both past and future, is a distinguishing mark of the Laurence heroine. In all the novels, the preciousness of the living present is emphasized by the presence of emblems of "the silence." Death inhabits the novels.<sup>4</sup>

In This Side Jordan birth and death are interrelated with the concept of the future and the past. Johnnie Kestoe's acceptance of his mother's death enables him to make peace with his past and at the same time enables him to face the future; and both of these actions are exemplified in his reaction to the birth of his daughter (TSJ,266). Similarly, the birth of Nathaniel's son, while representing the promise of the future, also represents the break from the past, his ability to acknowledge the ways of the past without letting them stand in the way of future growth, of progress. His coming to terms with past, present and future is exemplified in his final attitude towards his father's death: "It may be that I shall never see him again. But let him dwell there in

peace. Let him understand. No--he will never understand. Let me accept it and leave him in peace" (TSJ,274-75). He is finally able to accept that "It is the dead who must die" (TSJ,274), finally able to turn to the living and to the future.

Hagar must come to a similar knowledge of her life and past in The Stone Angel. She must accept her past in order to be able to face her own death; she must recognize the cost of her pride and stubbornness, her inability to rejoice (SA,292). With this recognition comes the final acceptance of the futility of pride, of equality in death:

'This here's the Currie-Shipley stone. The two families was connected by marriage. Pioneering families the both of them. . . .'

The both of them. Both the same. Nothing to pick and choose between now. That was as it should be.

(SA,306)

The acceptance of the past is essential to Hagar's acceptance of death as a form of re-birth (SA,307); however, it is her personal past, and not an ancestral past with which she must come to terms.

In A Jest of God the past which Rachel must come to terms with is her father's death. Through understanding her father's life, or his living death: "If it's true he wanted that life the most, why mourn?" (JG,125). Through this acceptance



Rachel is able to recognize the emptiness of her own life, and the possibility of her own death as embodied in the tumour. Finally, this acceptance of death and life, of past and present, enables Rachel to achieve the self-knowledge necessary to face the future: "What will happen? What will happen" (JG,201).

In The Fire-Dwellers Stacey's acceptance of the past, present and future can be traced in her acceptance of herself, of her life, and of the presence of death around her. She must accept the fact that the past is over, that it can never be recaptured, that it none the less remains a part of her always: "The truth is that I haven't been Stacey Cameron for one hell of a long time now. Although in some ways I'll always be her, because that's how it started" (FD,303). This ability to accept the past enables Stacey to come to terms with the present: "I can't stand it. I cannot. I can't take it. Yeh, I can, though. By God, I can, if I set my mind to it" (FD,289). It enables her ultimately to face the future, to accept her own mortality: "The fires [will] go on, inside and out[.] Until the moment when they go out for me, the end of the world" (FD,307).

Vanessa's maturation in A Bird in the House traces her coming to terms with life and death, directly related with her coming to terms with the past. The final understanding of death which Vanessa arrives at is brought about through her acceptance of

Grandfather Connor's death. In the course of the book this acceptance comes to represent an acceptance of the past as well as a reconfirmation of the future. During her grandfather's funeral, Vanessa comes to a sudden appreciation of the past in her recognition of who her grandfather really was (BH,205). Eventually this recognition enables her to accept her grandfather and his past as a part of her heritage; and at the same time to accept her own death and life, and the possibility of her own mortality and immortality. This acceptance is apparent when, twenty years later, she reconfirms the future in her reflection on the immortality of her grandfather--on the continuum of time, "I had feared and fought the old man, yet he proclaimed himself in my veins" (BH,207).

The Diviners is, perhaps, Margaret Laurence's most complex work in terms of the past, present, and future, because there are a number of interrelated time spans or levels to consider. Morag's acceptance of the past involves an acceptance of her own past, or in lieu of a known past, an acceptance of her invented past as embodied in the snapshots and memory bank movies. Central to this acceptance of her past are Morag's acceptance of her parents' death and the effect of these deaths on her life (D,447). On another level, Morag's acceptance of the past involves her coming to terms with the past which Christie tells her about in his tales. Her search for an ancestral past is completed when she

receives the plaid brooch from Jules, when she adopts it as her plaid, her pin: "What matters is that the voice is there, and that she has heard these words which have been given to her. And will not deny what has been given" (D,433). When Morag acknowledges Christie as her father (D,396), she accepts him and what he has come to mean to her: the man whose "eyes would be like the blue lightning and you would forget his small stature, for at those times he would seem a giant of a man" (D,367). This is the Christie for whom Morag mourns when the piper plays over his grave (D,403).

Finally, Morag's coming to terms with the past enables her to accept the future, to see her place in the continuum of life, and death. She must be prepared to give up her position for the next generation when "The gift, or portion of grace, or whatever it was, was finally withdrawn, to be given to someone else" (D,452).

In each case, in each novel or story, then, the acceptance of death as a part of life--of the continuum from past to future--is an essential step in the development, the self-knowledge of the individual. C.M. McLay's comment in her article "Everyman Is an Island: Isolation in A Jest of God": "It is only in facing death that we are able to assess life,"<sup>5</sup> can really be applied to all of Laurence's individuals. At the same time, however, the acknowledgement and acceptance of the inevitability of death are an

affirmation of life, a recognition of the value of life, and the need to take the utmost advantage of it: "the inexorable pressure of life on every individual in every society to grow and change. To refuse to do so is to choose death."<sup>6</sup> And related with this acceptance of death, this responsibility of life, is the appreciation of the role of past, present and future. Since The Diviners employs this motif so complexly and so intensely, it is fitting that Morag's words be used to sum up this interrelation: "Look ahead into the past, and back into the future, until the silence" (D,453).

As Margaret Laurence has matured as a writer, her concepts of past, present and future have become more pronounced, more definite. This development can be traced throughout her works.<sup>7</sup> The development of her presentation of death can be traced in a similar manner. A good example of this latter development is the treatment of Piquette Tonnerre's death as it appears in a number of works.

The short story, "The Crying of the Loons,"<sup>8</sup> which appears in A Bird in the House as "The Loons," was published in 1966, while The Fire-Dwellers appeared in print in 1969. In the short story the outcast nature of the Tonnerre family is described: "They did not belong among the Cree of the Galloping Mountain reservation, further north, and they did not belong among the

Scots-Irish and Ukrainians of Manawaka, either. They were . . . neither fish, fowl, nor good salt herring" (BH,114-15).

Leslie Monkman comments on the significance of the Tonnerres in the various works of fiction in which they appear: "The three generations of the Tonnerre family peopling the Manawaka fiction of Margaret Laurence . . . . [bring] to this series of works images of suffering and death, acceptance and endurance, that are integrally related to the experience of each of Laurence's heroines."<sup>9</sup> Piquette's life was one of trying to belong, of wanting to belong, but never of being able to, anywhere. Her attitude varied between one extreme of defiance, of not caring ("Who gives a good goddamn?" [BH,120]), to one of desperate hope: "For the merest instant, then, I saw her. . . . Her defiant face, momentarily, became unguarded and unmasked, and in her eyes there was a terrifying hope" (BH,124). She tries so hard to become a part of the society that shuns her, that she can only fail. Vanessa comments, "I could only guess how great her need must have been, that she had been forced to seek the very things she so bitterly rejected" (BH,125). Gradually, all hope is replaced by despair (BH,126).

Vanessa's acknowledgement of her part in the responsibility for Piquette's fate is apparent in her reaction to the news of the fire: "There was kind of a silence around the image in my mind of

the fire and the snow, and I wished I could put from my memory the look that I had seen once in Piquette's eyes" (BH,126). Ultimately, the fate of Piquette is epitomized by that of the loons, so that a sort of epiphany takes place in the image: "Perhaps they had gone away to some far place of belonging. Perhaps they had been unable to find such a place, and had simply died out, having ceased to care any longer whether they lived or not?" (BH,127). And so Vanessa concludes, "Piquette might have been the only one, after all, who had heard the crying of the loons" (BH,127).

In The Fire-Dwellers Piquette's death is described by her sister, Val:

They used to make red biddy down there. If I know Piquette, she was stoned out of her mind, most likely. The others were out. We had one of them big old wood stoves. Place caught on fire. She never got out. The kids either.

(FD,264)

The death serves as another reminder of death to Stacey, like the visions she has of newspaper clippings and television news flashes; but tied in with this reminder is the allusion to fire--the fires burning inside and out, the Lady Bird image, the dream of the trapped children. All these images unite within Stacey's mind as she hears of Piquette's and her children's fate: "Piquette and her kids, and the snow and the fire. Ian and Duncan in a burning

house" (FD,265).

The notion of responsibility on the part of the town, of the people, for the fate of Piquette and the others is again suggested in The Fire-Dwellers in Stacey's desire to apologize: "She would like to go back in time, to explain that she never meant the town's invisible stabbing, but this is not possible, and it was hers, too, so she cannot edge away from it" (FD,264), but this idea is not developed any further. Piquette and Val serve as reminders to Stacey that she has much to be grateful for, but otherwise the concept of the death is not broadened.

The most mature and touching treatment of Piquette's death appears in The Diviners. The attitude of Piquette--the hope and defiance--is expressed more feelingly in Morag's comments on Piquette's despair: "She has been arrested several times, like her father before her, for outrageously shrieking her pain aloud to whoever happens to be handiest" (D,158). The emotion is intensified through Morag's response to the incident, for she is the only person to mourn for Piquette: "Without warning, taking herself by surprise, she puts her head down on the desk and cries in a way she does not remember ever having done before, as though pain were the only condition of human life" (D,161).

The fire and the deaths, too, are given more significance through Morag's eyes. The image of fire and snow remains, but

now there are added details. Morag is aware of the conspicuous lack of emotion--"No one is crying" (D,158)--and the dull shock of Lazarus, his "face absolutely blank, portraying nothing" (D,159). This inability to feel, this numbness, is comparable to Val's toneless monologue about the fire in The Fire-Dwellers (FD,264). And there is another detail: "A sweetish nauseating odour" (D,159) which reminds Morag of "Burnt wood. Bois-Brûlés" (D,159). The image of "Bois-Brûlés" provides an epiphany similar to that of Piquette and the loons in A Bird in the House.

The collective responsibility of the townspeople, of the world, is brought into sharper focus through Jules's reaction to Piquette's death. Up to this point, her death has been viewed from the "other" side--the white people's reaction to the "Metis situation." Val's account of the incident in The Fire-Dwellers is noticeably void of emotion because she has reached the same point that Piquette had reached before her death when Vanessa describes Piquette in "The Loons," as "having ceased to care any longer whether they lived or not" (BH,127). Val even speaks of taking the "long trip" (FD,265), and her attitude is one of dull despair: "I don't give a fuck. Today tomorrow next week, it's all the same to me" (FD,266). In The Diviners Jules's reaction to Morag's recounting the tale is one of violent hate, in direct contrast to Val's numbed lethargy: "'By Jesus, I hate you,' he says in a low



voice like distant thunder. 'I hate all of you. Every goddamn one'" (D,275). Morag accepts her part in that collective responsibility, and attempts to amend the hurt of the past through naming their child Piquette Tonnerre Gunn (D,305). In this way she repays Jules for his part in enabling her to have a child, and she repays him in part for the loss of his sister.

The most significant contribution to the presentation of Piquette's death is Jules' song about her (D,429). This song sums up all the images of Piquette, her life and her death. The fire and snow image are repeated, providing graphic examples of the hope and despair of Piquette's life. Her eyes, her body, her marriage, all provide examples of the hopeless quality of her life. Ultimately, then, it is despair that defeats Piquette. She finally recognizes there is no escape from the role in which she was cast at birth, and with this realization all hope vanishes:

My sister's death  
 Fire and snow--  
 Burned out her sorrow  
 In the valley below.

(D,429)

"Piquette's Song" provides the final touch in the presentation of her death. Her pain in life and death are immortalized through Jules's composing a song about them, and through the song's passage

in time--from Jules, to Pique, to whomever Pique passes it on to in her life. Her heritage is completed: Piquette's death may have seemed pointless, but the song gives it new meaning in time--she will not be forgotten, and through her song the plight of the other Metis, as well, will be remembered.

And so it is that Margaret Laurence's presentation of death within her novels matures. With each incident of death, with each individual's coming to terms with death, the self-knowledge which develops in the individual gives new significance to death. Death may appear frightening and incomprehensible to the child, yet it is a major factor in the child's maturation, in his coming to terms with life. As the child matures emotionally, death takes on new meaning, giving life a new and fuller meaning in return. Similarly, as the author has matured, both emotionally and artistically, her concept of life and death has become enriched so that she is able to present them more effectively.

This ability reaches its peak in her presentation of the death and funeral of Christie Logan in The Diviners. From the moment of Morag's admission of her love for Christie in acknowledging that he has been a father to her, and his typically meaningful reply, "I'm blessed" (D,396), to the final moments of the piper playing the pibroch over his grave, Margaret Laurence succeeds in writing one of the most touching passages in literature. Clara

Thomas comments: "Christie Logan's funeral is one of the greatest of scenes in Margaret Laurence's work . . . . an unforgettable picture and unforgettable prose".<sup>10</sup> One cannot but agree with her. Indeed, the remainder of the novel is almost an anti-climax after that emotional peak.

It may be that Margaret Laurence's experience with death as a child paved the way for her characters' and her own coming to terms with life and death. The childhood experiences of the writer no doubt play a great part in her ability to present the child's reaction towards death and his changing concept of death as he matures throughout life. She is able to do this both subtly and movingly because she has experienced this dilemma, this maturation, herself, and so is able to get right inside the child's fears and the eventual understanding which arises. Clara Thomas writes:

The events, the circumstances, and the places of her past are particularly important to an understanding of both the "why" and the "what" of Margaret Laurence's writing. She does not confine herself to her own experiences, though many of these she has transmuted into her fictions. But she does always write from within a circumference that contains the imaginative experiences and perceptions congruent with one of her place, her time, and her life--and no others.<sup>11</sup>

Margaret Laurence's concept of writing as "an attempt always on the part of a writer to come to terms with oneself, with one's past, with one's childhood experiences and also with various emotional dilemmas in one's present life"<sup>12</sup> is an enlightening one to keep in mind when considering her characters' attempts to cope with life. She comments further on her concept of writing in "A Place to Stand On": "My writing, then, has been my own attempt to come to terms with the past. I see this process as the gradual one of freeing oneself from the stultifying aspect of the past, while at the same time beginning to see its true value."<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, the process is a positive one: an affirmation of life on the part of the fictional character as well as the writer herself. Her following comment could come from the mouths of all her protagonists in terms of the self-discovery they make in the course of the novels, in the course of their lives:

the act of writing itself is almost an act of faith and almost an act of hope and in a profound sense it's a kind of celebration of life. It's really saying at the heart of it -- life is very worth living and for God's sake let's make of it what we can.<sup>14</sup>

## Notes to Chapter Seven

- 1 Margaret Laurence, TNV, p.126.
- 2 Ibid., p.130.
- 3 Some examples of these studies would be Clara Thomas' MW which deals with Laurence's concern with the past; or Nancy Bailey's CJ which examines the struggle to define self so as to be able to live freely in the present, while conscious of the past and future; Cathy N. Davidson's "Past and Perspective in Margaret Laurence's The Stone Angel," The American Review of Canadian Studies, 8 No. 2 (Autumn 1978), pp.61-69, which shows how the character attempts to cope with the present and future by re-evaluating the past.
- 4 Nancy Bailey, CJ, p.307.
- 5 C.M. McLay, "Everyman Is an Island: Isolation in A Jest of God," Canadian Literature, No. 50 (Autumn 1970), p.63.
- 6 Clara Thomas, MW, p.113.
- 7 A study of this nature can be found in Nancy Bailey's CJ.
- 8 Margaret Laurence, "The Crying of the Loons," Atlantic Advocate. March 1966, Pp.34-38.
- 9 Leslie Monkman, "The Tonnerre Family: Mirrors of Suffering," WML, p.143.
- 10 Thomas, MW, p.163.
- 11 Ibid., p.9.
- 12 Margaret Laurence, TI.
- 13 Margaret Laurence, "A Place to Stand On," HS, p.17.
- 14 Margaret Laurence, TI.

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