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NARRATION IN MARGARET LAURENCE'S MANAWAKA CYCLE

BY

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the degree of

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Dedicated with respect to the memory of
Jean Margaret Laurence (1926-1987).

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Introduction

During the decade 1964 to 1974, Margaret Laurence produced five books of fiction, four novels and a collection of short stories, all of which centre upon her fictional Canadian prairie town of Manawaka: The Stone Angel (1964), A Jest of God (1966), The Fire-Dwellers (1969), A Bird in the House (1970) and The Diviners (1974). My thesis is concerned with the Manawaka books as a cycle--a narrative whole--a unity that transcends their viability as individual novels. Any analysis of the complete cycle as narrative entails recognition of the texts collectively, as "narrative discourse" in Gerard Genette's sense of the term (Narrative 27), that is as a treatment of the cycle in its entirety as one signifying statement. Such analysis must necessarily be concerned with an intricate set of structural relationships: those within each novel between what contemporary critics call 'story' on the one hand and 'narrative' on the other,¹ and those that link the novels as synecdochal units in a narrative superstructure. The internal and recurring structure of the cycle, therefore, is my focus of investigation.

The new strategy should prove complementary to existing criticism of Margaret Laurence's fiction, since some interpretive critics have found the structure of the Manawaka novels from their earliest date of publication to

be problematic. Controversy has centered around a puzzling conflict in each novel between conspicuous patterning of narrative time and, simultaneously, realistic portrayal of the central character. Why is an interpretive critic troubled by enigmatic tone, and why does he fault 'form' when form is at odds with characterization? The answer lies in the philosophic roots of interpretive thought.

Interpretive criticism tends to privilege idea over expression in all literature, including narrative. In this view, language is a vehicle, or mode, that transmits pre-conceived abstract concepts. Form, to the interpretive critic, is in service to vision; it is a container for content. Laurence's narrative technique is thus, even to its kindest interpretive critics such as William H. New and Clara Thomas, difficult to defend. Other reviewers, even more intent upon assessing thematic content, reject Laurence's choice of 'form' entirely.²

A structuralist reading offers a strategy that enables us to by-pass the dilemma by reconceptualizing the notion of 'form.' When 'form' is no longer perceived to be part of a form/content dichotomy, the notion of separable 'content' dissolves. For the structuralist writing is discourse, the written equivalent of speech, in which ideas have no tangible shape before articulation. Structuralist thought, beginning with Ferdinand de Saussure, maintains that only an enabling set of conventions in language exists prior to enunciation, and that those codes are transformed into

meaning by the act of speaking/writing at the time the act occurs (Scholes 14). A field of meaning opens in that moment; the range of semantic and phonetic possibilities arises out of an author's specific word choice (diction) and word arrangement (syntax). To structuralists, therefore, the structure of discourse is inseparable from meaning, indeed is constitutive of it.

Mindful of this basic premise, a structuralist begins analysis by accepting the author's choice of narrative form. Then one goes on to investigate the significance of that choice. A repeated choice one learns to see not as random but as intelligible--the beginning of pattern. Accordingly my reading of the Manawaka cycle, informed as it is by structuralist thought, treats Margaret Laurence's recurrent features as signifiers of its internal structure. She consistently uses, we note, first-person narration in all the books despite disapproval of her efforts, and more importantly despite technical difficulties which she admits are serious.³ We recognize too her consistent use in all the books of a synchronic temporal pattern, and thirdly, her consistent placement of all the books in the same geographical and historical space. A structuralist reading would not construe such authorial choice as the equivalent of authorial intention, at least insofar as that intention may be located prior to the text. Rather, one considers the moment of writing to be the moment of narrative choice. In this view therefore the internal structures of discourse

will hold surprises for the author as well as for the reader.

Structuralist notions on the nature of narrative as an opposition between a system of conventions, or "langue," and a written or spoken narrative event, or "parole," are strikingly similar to Margaret Laurence's own conception of "form" and "voice" in her work.⁴ Her four essays on narrative, which were written concurrently with her composition of the Manawaka cycle, all focus upon structure and the inseparable nature of her work. Her novels, she insists, begin with "voice" ("Time" 156), not themes--which are a debatable afterthought even to her own mind, as she explains in "Ten Years' Sentences" (32). Further, Laurence disallows the application of any form/content dichotomy to her own fiction by dramatically relating her writing to the structure of a human body, thereby signifying the possibility of such a metaphoric development within the cycle itself. In "Time and Narrative Voice" Laurence writes

Theorizing, by itself, is meaningless in connection with fiction, just as any concept of form is meaningless in isolation from the flesh and blood of content and personality, just as a skeleton is only dry bone by itself but when it exists inside a living being it provides support for the whole creature. (156)

Seven years after publication of The Diviners Michel Fabre recorded Laurence's claim that the five books, which are

themselves individual wholes, constitute a larger whole, "indeed. . . a cycle," one that she had not at the outset consciously conceived as such ("Interview" 200).⁵ Her conviction on that point remarkably echoes structuralist thought.

My reading of the Manawaka cycle is informed in the main by Jonathan Culler, a structuralist whose theory emphasizes the critical importance of ambiguous nodes in a text. Secondly, Jacques Derrida's deconstructive emphasis on the play of meaning in language, his "différance,"⁶ challenges me to explore the language of the text more adventurously. Walter J. Ong's concept of expression as voice, and Paul Valéry's view of poetry as "dance," a view which I extend into narrative, also inform my thinking.⁷

Before proceeding with an outline of my analysis, I should make one final clarification of a seeming inconsistency in my application of theory. Whatever its advocates may say, a structuralist approach cannot avoid becoming interpretive. The irony of such practice does not escape other critics, nor structuralists themselves. "We are all New Critics," Culler admits in The Pursuit of Signs (3-5), and inheritors of New Criticism's "insidious legacy" that the critic's function is to interpret literary works. All the same, there are important differences between the two schools, differences in purpose, in emphasis, and in the eventual disposition of interpretations. The closed meanings of interpretive criticism reach toward a cognitive

goal. The structuralist sees each interpretation rather as a play in a field of meaning with its own observable purpose, a field in which internal ambiguities and paradoxes transform their own signification, but do not disappear.⁸

To focus this thinking on Laurence, we might note that a first reading of the Manawaka cycle invites an exploration of the text's basic opposition between its system and its realized expression at the surface level of narrative in each novel, because the novels are indisputably individual works of fiction. A second reading of the books, this one attentive to possible relationships between them, can discern a second, figurative, level of discourse--one that is meta-literary. On that level the code/event opposition centres upon narrative discourse itself. It does so, not by creating a parallel level of expression which is separate from realist narration, but by working through it.

Overseeing the meta-narrative is a master-narrator, one we might think of as a composite of the five narrating personae who speak separately in each novel. The master-narrator, who serves as one transcendent figure, works in the cycle at a level that co-ordinates what Genette calls "voice." Genette makes a distinction between narrative point of view and voice, between "who sees?" and "who speaks?" (Narrative 162,185-6). Hagar Shipley (The Stone Angel), Rachel Cameron (A Jest of God), Stacey MacAindra (The Fire-Dwellers), Vanessa MacLeod (A Bird in the House), and Morag Gunn (The Diviners), the cycle's

protagonists, are the characters who see, the ones whose point of view orients perspective ("focalizes" it, in Genette's terms). But--and it is here Genette's distinction becomes telling--theirs are not the only voices that speak, despite their first-person narrations. I contend that the voices of protagonists, which are subject to the narrator of each individual work, are finally answerable to the master-narrator's more subsuming though less conspicuous voice. The author of course is clearly distinct from the work she creates and therefore not identical to any narrator, even the most directive one.

Voice at all levels in Laurence's cycle is determined by the complex web of relationships which Genette terms "the narrating instance," the moment of enunciation in discourse.⁹ Additionally voice is determined by the narrating "level," and by the narrator's degree of "presence" (Narrative 227-231, 245).¹⁰ In A Bird in the House, for example, double temporality (between the narrator's moment and the protagonist's moment) in effect splits the narrating instance between the younger Vanessas who speak as "I," the older Vanessa who remembers, and the narrator who, on a higher level, co-ordinates omissions and parallels. The Fire-Dwellers and The Diviners split the narrating instance by another means--by establishing a free-floating relationship between narrator and protagonist, one which is established by the texts' oscillating use of first- and third-person pronouns. Yet the polyphony of narrating

voices in concert is not discordant. In the cycle, in the universe conducted by the master-narrator, multiple narration in individual novels becomes an "orchestration" of "parole."¹¹

This thesis, then, examines the Manawaka cycle at its figurative level--where the master-narrator functions. Under that jurisdiction, narrative's basic opposition between system ("langue") and enunciation ("parole") informs one primary symbolic set which I am calling the 'plaid' and the 'piper,' and which I analyze in chapters one and two, respectively. Supplementary sets, that arise out of the internal dynamics of a narrative figured as animate, I explore in chapter three.

A passage in A Jest of God, which I read as instructive for approaching all of the novels, directs my perspective and enables me to bring the structural symbols into focus: "I have no middle view. Either I fix on a detail and see it as though it were magnified. . . or else the world recedes or becomes. . . an abstract painting" (85). In keeping with this perspective my own study alternates between close-up investigation of language patterns and panoramic over-views of the cycle's design, using as general strategy a focal distance sufficiently removed from characterizations and themes to detect narrative structure and movement.

Accordingly in chapter one I focus upon the synchronicity of each work, most apparent in the

interlocking grids of discourse. This approach renders story and narrative present in a "now" that is occurring outside of time--on a temporal plane which includes each protagonist's past and future. The grids of intersecting story-lines and of narrative time-lines become concretely visual through print variations and sub-titles in the cycle's later novels: The Fire-Dwellers and The Diviners. In both works "anachronies," as Genette calls temporally displaced segments in a discourse (Narrative 35), are visible as juxtaposed blocks of narrative. When we view the texts together as a cycle, the grid design of each novel does not extend laterally, or sequentially; it layers over one historical and geographic space--Manawaka. The cultural and literary codes framed by Manawaka, the layered grids of narration, and the text's countless references to "plaid"--all of which I soon will speak more fully--serve collectively to identify 'plaid,' a seemingly static configuration, as the text's primary symbol for "langue."

The 'piper,' as a symbol of the cycle's enunciation, acting inside of time, derives from 'plaid' in the same way that "parole" derives from "langue." "Parole" thus "transforms" system into embodied voice (I am adopting Jean Piaget's sense of "transformation"),¹² into a human figure that, as we have noted, Laurence's essay does present as a possibility. Consequently, each work becomes synecdoche, as the 'plaid's' substance and the colours of its spatial lines re-form into the piper's shadow (in The Stone Angel), into

her bones (in A Jest of God), into her flesh and blood (in The Fire-Dwellers). A Bird in the House foregrounds the 'piper's' developing imagination, and The Diviners sees her at work.

The conclusion of this thesis summarizes the synthesis achieved in the Manawaka cycle through its subsuming structure. In my reading, Margaret Laurence's work primarily manifests the actual artistic process in her kind of story-telling. But through the verbal play within it, and the narrative movement of that process, her narrative extends beyond existence as autonomous art to encompass her own authorial identity, and her social and ethical concerns.

Chapter One: The Cycle as a Synchronic (Spatial) Construct.

Analysis of the Manawaka cycle from a synchronic perspective places the whole system, as a functioning totality, into view at one point in time. In this approach, diachrony is minimally significant; temporality of the story-line, narrative causes and effects, and historical concerns about evolution of the cycle as a series of novels are not at issue. This treatment of texts--as synchronic--historically received an impetus when anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss first recognized that methods used in geological observations are applicable to cultural phenomena. He demonstrated that a synchronic reading allows the analyst to see clearly, as a spatial construct, the network of relations at work within narrative discourse (Culler, Pursuit 26-30). Structuralist notions about the value of a synchronic view derive, of course, from Ferdinand de Saussure's earlier work on linguistic theory. Saussure initiated the structuralist concept of a basic opposition between the text as "langue" and the text as "parole" (Norris 25), the former a synchronic system, the latter a diachronic act within that system. This chapter explores my first perspective on the internal structure of the cycle's text as "langue," and its corresponding figuration as 'plaid.'

We note at the outset that there is a sense in which the temporal arrangement of narrative within each of Margaret Laurence's novels invites a synchronic perspective.

The duration of 'first narrative,' which in Gérard Genette's sense refers to the level of narrative that establishes a temporal base-line from which anachronies occur (Narrative 48), is brief in all five books, and almost non-existent in A Bird in the House. Even Vanessa MacLeod's return visit to Manawaka "twenty years later" is anachronic. Yet remembered time is present in each book, a phenomenon that has intrigued W.H. New, George Bowering, Barbara Hehner and other Laurence scholars.¹ Through recollections, the personal histories of Hagar Shipley, Morag Gunn and Vanessa in a way become immediate or coterminous, that is, removed from time into a spatial dimension that in a sense includes a live past and an active future. Similarly, in the novels focalized through Rachel Cameron and Stacey MacAindra, brief 'first narrative' expands synchronically through interpolated interior monologues that narrate the protagonist's present fears and dreams. Laurence herself is well aware of such structuring in her books for she stresses the importance of "immediacy" ("Gadgetry" 83), or of what I am calling 'synchronicity,' to her work. She writes that her technique of using recollections is "an expression of the feeling which I strongly hold about time--that the past and the future are both always present, present in both senses of the word, always now and always here with us" ("Time" 156).

To Laurence then "presence" is synchronic or spatial. Working from that premise, I am arguing that the novels, as

works within the cycle, align as a layered whole upon one synchronic plane, pinned there by one historic moment. Through each protagonist's recollections some twenty-five to thirty years later, each work makes present the moment in time when the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders paraded through the streets of Manawaka, the moment just before that regiment (the one to which many Manawaka boys belonged) shipped out to face disaster at Dieppe. Margaret Atwood has noted the thematic significance of this event in all the Manawaka novels as it runs "like a tragic leitmotif through the lives of her [Laurence's] characters" (22). In my reading the event forms a juncture or a pivotal point which anchors the cycle's structure, temporally and spatially.

At both levels of narrative discourse--as stories, and as particular tellings of those stories--the master text structures into a grid of interlocking narrative threads. The cycle's spatial construct of woven tales is readily apparent at the first level. In each novel, the protagonist's dominant story line is intersected by the secondary story lines of characters with whom she interacts; and the same characters reappear, as if from some actual world, in the differing perspective of other protagonists in other novels in the set. A synchronic approach to the cycle enables us to catch a panoramic view of the entire network of interactions that occur between generations of families--such as the Camerons, the MacLeods, the Tonnerres, and the Kazliks. Critical responses to the network differ.

Allan Beven in his interpretive introduction to The Fire-Dwellers notes that Manawaka's complex interrelationships compare to the ones existing in William Faulkner's created world, his Yoknapatawpha County. My structuralist perspective disregards entangled chronology to focus instead upon junctures between the cycle's story lines.

Junctures (that is, significant encounters between characters at the points where their story lines cross) prove to be visually comparable, regardless of their kind or intensity. Intersections are consistently brief and sharply delineated; and, more importantly, do not (or cannot) substantially alter the characters. Exchanges among Laurence's characters, whether hateful, indifferent or loving, seem only to accentuate their innate personalities. To illustrate the point, we follow one typical secondary storyline as it weaves through the main story lines in four books. Piquette Tonnerre's life (her line) intersects with that of Hagar in The Stone Angel (through Piquette's grandfather), with that of Stacey in The Fire-Dwellers (through Piquette's sister Val), with that of Vanessa in A Bird in the House (Dr MacLeod treats Piquette's tubercular leg), and with that of Morag in The Diviners, for it is she who witnesses Piquette's death. We note, however, that neither Hagar's kind of disdain, nor Stacey's indifference, nor Vanessa's friendly overtures, nor Morag's compassion have the capacity to alter Piquette's course. Just as the

lines that enter junctures in plaid emerge intact out of brief and sharply defined intersections, so secondary characters encounter primary ones, interact briefly, and then proceed along unchanged paths.

The larger text or meta-text weaves its second grid of interlocking narration more subtly than the threads of its interwoven stories. Laurence explains part of her construction in "Time and the Narrative Voice," in which she visualizes the dominant flow-lines in her novels as "horizontal" (157). She differentiates their direction from the flow-lines of the short stories in A Bird in the House. Those she sees as moving "very close together but parallel and in a vertical direction." In Laurence's words, "Each story takes the girl Vanessa along some specific course of her life and each follows that particular thread closely, but the threads are presented separately, and not simultaneously" (157). In the logic of Laurence's argument, the collection of short stories centered upon Vanessa becomes visible as an incomplete grid, as self-sufficient, lengthwise threads only--the warp without the woof--since the text consists solely of "vertical" lines. The "horizontal" base-line of narrative in Vanessa's present, one that might stitch them together, is absent.

The novels, unlike A Bird in the House, are structured by the presence of both kinds of "flow-lines" in Laurence's sense, indeed creating a grid. In each novel the dominant flow-line is bisected by "anachronies" (recollections,

dreams, interpolations) which function as the short stories do in A Bird in the House--as the warp or "vertical" threads of narrative fabric. Both Hagar and Stacey comment upon the corresponding linear quality of the lives (lines) of those around them. "Parallel lines that never met," Hagar thinks as she listens to John converse with his half-sister Jess (Stone 195); and Stacey recognizes, as she watches the "unbending" males in her family, that stripes or "parallel lines" are not enough because they "cannot ever meet" (Fire 265, 176). The cycle's narrative discourse as an entity, with its five books layered synchronically, becomes a grid of immeasurable complexity, but one that retains its precise linear arrangement. The presence of such linearity in The Stone Angel's arrangement of memory segments distressed some early critics of Laurence. Leona Gom, for example, in 1976 charged Laurence with misuse of the associative memory process, unfair criticism, I note, in light of the structural imperatives upon the novel.

Recognition of the spatial construct formed by interlocking stories and narrative leads us away from such distress to the next step in analysis of the cycle as "langue," which is to investigate the systems within the text that shape and characterize its design. We note that two codes are at work--one cultural, the other literary--each supporting and restricting the cycle's macrostructure (the pattern of narrative) and its microstructure (the language in use). The cultural code, I

contend, is the leading convention in Laurence's cycle, and one whose roots lie deep in Manawaka. It is that connection which leads me to identify the text's figuration of "langue" as plaid.

In so identifying the construct, I do not discount disparate views in other studies about the shape of individual novels. Clara Thomas for example sees time and the river in The Diviners as a continuum, a "Yoruba Symbol" (Manawaka 132), and Ildikó de Papp Carrington sees narration within that novel as "labyrinthine" (163). For Thomas narration in The Fire Dwellers works like an "eye," or a "fast-shuttering camera" ("Novels" 63, 65); and S.E. Read sees The Stone Angel wrestling with "the Minoan maze that is life" (44). Diverse interpretations of design do enrich the play of meaning that emerges when we examine the five books as one discourse. More importantly however concrete structural details can give substance to generalized interpretive insights such as David Blewett's assessment of the Manawaka world as the "primary unifying feature" in the cycle (31). Blewett's observation has structural as well as thematic validity.

Margaret Laurence describes Manawaka as a fictive Canadian prairie town--"a town of the mind. . . an amalgam of many prairie towns" (Heart 3)--and two features of the town, she explains, influence her work: its geography and, more importantly, its people. From a structuralist perspective, how does the importance of "place" as geography

translate into a cultural code that shapes the cycle's synchronic structure? For one thing, the physical appearance of the prairie, as seen by an eye in the sky, resembles plaid. The flat plane is neatly sectioned into blocks of black soil and green fields, or into black fence-lines and shelter belts on white snow, depending upon the season. This notion is not wholly fanciful, for we have the following passage from Heart of a Stranger in which Laurence describes her view from an aircraft: "[Y]ou. . . know you are above the prairies, because you look down and see how vast the farms are, the great sweep of that land divided into sections and quarter sections, and the soil that rich true black. . ." (140).

But "place" is more than physical features; geography also relates to the history and economics of a community. When we view historical and economic events panoramically rather than sequentially, the stark contrasts we have noted in the prairie landscape parallel the swiftly changing extremes of prairie climate that in turn bring swiftly changing swings between prosperity and depression. The one swift change that fixes Manawaka into history (even as it anchors the cycle in time) comes in the shift from peace to war, the contrast between a ceremonial parade and the aftermath of Dieppe.

One can scarcely separate the more important influence exerted by Manawaka's people upon the text's cultural code from the secondary influence of place. The prairie's

extraordinarily harsh beauty demands an equally paradoxical temperament from its people in order that dwellers might survive in it with what Laurence, in "A Place to Stand On," calls "dignity" (Heart 6). Accordingly, her Manawaka fiction works internally to develop a perspective on its people. As an individual, each protagonist looks outward from a place within the set of conventions and values held by one cultural group--the Scots-Presbyterians of Manawaka. The beliefs and temperaments of individuals in that group, embodied in the text's characters, parallel the demanding and rewarding quality of Manawaka, as place, a parallel discussed in some detail by Patricia Morley (Margaret 82-83).²

In varying degrees each central character is bound and strengthened by her heritage as that code makes itself available to her in a system of knowing or valuing. Shaping the lives of Hagar, Rachel and Vanessa, especially, is a restricting code of "manners" and "masks." When Hagar is too tired to "fence" verbally, she retreats into "manners": "Stalemate. Politeness is the only way out. What would we do without these well-thumbed phrases to extricate us?" (Stone 121). Such masks enable various members of Laurence's world to play the tense game of family ritual: the bearish presence of Vanessa's grandfather, Mr. Connor, for instance, seems to keep family members in line as he presides over Sunday dinners. Artificial manners within Vanessa's family, and the family's "fortress" mentality

(Bird 3), parallel the tensions that prevail in Manawaka's cemetery--a cultivated garden that must be pruned and tended as prairie weeds encroach upon its neat borders. The "mannered" family and the "mannered" cemetery are in turn analogous to the neatly sectioned, fenced prairie soil and to the grid's orderly, disciplined design.³

A second code arising from a pervading consciousness of death binds each protagonist into isolation. This consciousness links to a puritan belief in personal responsibility for one's own salvation--if one is fortunate enough to be of God's elect. There are no compromises, no soft edges, in such belief. Each individual life is perilously isolated, a condition explored by C.M. McLay in her study of A Jest of God. Such detachment is structurally analogous to each character's separate narrative thread, and also to the loneliness and danger of existence on the prairie (Piquette and her children burn in their shack in winter, Bram Shipley nearly dies in a blizzard, and Dan Currie dies as a result of falling through river ice).

Characters cannot change the fact of essential isolation and peril, but they can alter the quality of their own lives by re-sorting the mix of fear, courage, pride, generosity and willfulness within them. Structure manifests the characters' personality differences in the varying width and texture of each narrative thread. For example, the isolated lives of Rachel and Hagar are bound in story and in figure by "barbed wire," just as Manawaka as place is so

bound. But Rachel's line is narrow ("inturned" is Laurence's word) and taut ("Ten Years'" 32), restricted by her own inhibitions.⁴ Stepping through a "barbed wire fence" (of fear and pride) for a sexual encounter with Nick Kazlik symbolizes for Rachel the magnitude of her effort to breach her puritan code (Jest 84). The tension is enacted again narratively in Rachel's unwilling submission to her own fearful fascination with Calla's ecstatic religious practice. In contrast, aggressive Hagar's flow-line is broad and bold. Yet fear fences Hagar, too, into her own unbreachable isolation and she sees herself (in a code that Rachel figuratively transgresses) as "a fenced cow meeting only the barbed wire which ever way she turns" (Stone 53).

In further contrast, it is the texture rather than the dimensions of Stacey's flow-line in The Fire Dwellers that distinguishes it from Hagar's. Stacey's band broadens through her inherent loving generosity, not through combative pride and rage. Yet the same puritan fear of imminent doom that fences Hagar and Rachel also constrains Stacey, a fear made concrete by the immanent possibility of destruction in Stacey's violent world.⁵

The awareness of mortality that underlies each protagonist's inherited beliefs produces a second structural characteristic which further differentiates narrative threads. In the face of 'present' crisis,⁶ individual threads toughen to varying degrees within the fact of restricted bounds and essential separation. A spirit of

independence, a battling spirit, strives to create a survival zone where each can live, "temporarily" (Fire 277), with dignity. Characters with productive lives (signified by strong narrative threads) are shaped so by adherence to a code that stresses enterprise and hard work. That code is at work when Morag succeeds in earning a living as a writer, and when Hagar earns a house; and, ancestrally, when Hagar's father, Mr. Currie, and Vanessa's grandfathers, Mr. Connor and Mr. MacLeod, pioneer successful businesses.

The negative side of entrepreneurial aggression shows clearly in its effect upon weaker members. Dominant personalities (dominant and therefore horizontal narrative threads) tend to overpower subordinate characters (vertical story-lines) at junctures that are brief and confrontational. Throughout the series breaks that occur at junctures are cutting and decisive: Hagar leaves Bram abruptly; and Morag severs her marriage suddenly to Brooke Skelton. The break is equally swift, but amiable, between Morag and Dan McRaith, and Morag's contact with Jules Tonnerre is significantly intermittent--that is, subject to a series of clear breaks.

However, Mr. Connor's battling against Vanessa indicates that the "vertical" flow-lines of subordinate characters in the 'plaid' of narration can on occasion be as broad and bold as the dominant "horizontal" flow-lines of battling protagonists, such as Hagar and Morag. As a second instance of this, a multiplicity of references to the Tonnerre family

signifies that their "vertical" flow-lines are prominent in the cycle's set of priorities, a sign confirmed at one point by a structural pun in which Jules participates: Morag and Jules take turns in the physically dominant sexual position (Diviners 342), forming a visual parallel to their story lines which interweave throughout The Diviners.

The particular juncture between Morag and Jules in Vancouver, one which The Diviners calls "a conscious defiance of death" (342), signifies further by the fact that it is a pun. The Manawakan sense of humour made spatially visual here--a particular wry jesting humour which Morley analyzes in some detail in her book Margaret Laurence--is a convention firmly grounded in Presbyterian belief, and spelled out for us in a line of the hymn Hagar chooses: "Him serve with mirth" (Stone 292). A "mirthful" attitude, like its equally effective alternate--anger--serves as a well-spring for the courage each protagonist needs to battle and to work for survival, and to bear the accompanying isolation, fear and pain. Visual puns in the 'plaid' possess "langué's" potential to erupt into the important jesting notes in the text as "parole," a dimension in discourse we will explore at greater length in chapter two. In "langué," punning as a convention takes its place among other features of a cultural code that indeed, as we see at this point, determines the larger design of the text, as plaid.

When we view the texts synchronically, we recognize that the separate and sharply contrasting straight lines of narrative, lines which vary in width and dominance so as to form distinctive blocks of discourse, arrange themselves in an interlocking pattern which resembles plaid. I contend that in every respect 'plaid' fittingly symbolizes the Manawaka cycle as "langue." We have noted that 'plaid' fully embodies the cultural values of Scots-Presbyterians and the demanding realities of a prairie landscape, as well as the layered grids of the cycle's discourse, and that the text pins all of these emphatically into place on one narrative plane by a parade of plaid-clad Highlanders. We will shortly discover that a second set of conventions (literary ones), and the language which underlies both codes, further substantiate my contention that the cycle's ordering system forms a 'plaid.'

Before pursuing the corroborating role of language, however, we must examine an opposing tendency within the cultural code. I have noted that threads in the narrative grid tend to remain separate and isolated except for brief intersections. A countervailing force tends to tighten the weave into 'fabric' in which contrasting lines juxtapose or, as Laurence phrases it, lives "reach out and touch others" (Heart 6). Paradoxically, it is the same cultural system which works to delineate the essential isolation of its members that also serves to enforce community cohesiveness. A strong sense of duty unites the staunchly independent

Scots-Manawakans into a "tribe" ("Ten Years'" 31), one that includes cautious association with Irish, English, Ukrainians and Métis. Exercising of one's tribal duty toward other Manawakans does not depend on physical presence in Manawaka itself; the code prevails wherever Manawakans meet. It requires more than clan loyalty; members must offer assistance when needed, share pain, and comfort one another.

Observing this code, Skinner shelters Morag in Toronto, and Valentine Tonnerre helps Stacey in Vancouver by identifying an imposter--Thorlakson, alias Winkler, of Manawaka. Stacey in turn reaches out to welcome her ailing father-in-law into the MacAindra household; and, also in Vancouver, a neighbourly Manawakan, Elva Jardine, reaches out to Hagar in hospital: "We gotta stick together, us old prairie farmers, eh?" (Stone 273). It is structurally significant that orphaned Morag, a dispossessed Scottish-Canadian who is linked in a social and historical chain of misfortune and oppression with the crofters of the Highland Clearances, and with the prairie's Métis,⁷ is the protagonist least bound into isolation by the Manawakan code of "manners," and paradoxically the most able to extend neighbourly assistance.

Recognition of the 'plaid' at the text's figurative level, and secondly, recognition that, as fabric, the 'plaid' symbolizes the duty of the Manawaka community to cohere, illuminates the significance of seemingly chance meetings between characters. Unselfish encounters, such as