

**Women in the Mirror: Women Writers
and Women's History in the Prairies, 1945-1970**

by

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Women in the Mirror: Women Writers and Women's History

in the Prairies, 1945 - 1970

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary historical scholarship on the post-World War Two period for the Canadian prairies has tended to focus on political and/or economic history. While women's history has not been completely ignored, there are currently few systematic studies which attempt to incorporate gender, race, ethnicity and class as essential elements of female experience in the West. This study attempts to clarify the major dynamics which shaped women's lives during this relatively recent period.

Women's prairie novels constitute the most important primary source material. While the debate on the relationship between history and literature is generally ignored in Canadian historiography, several theories maintain that literature can be a valuable historical source. The first chapter addresses these arguments, suggesting ultimately that novels reflect dominant social ideology, although mediated through literary forms. The following chapters examine women's prairie literature from the 1940s to the 1960s. They chronicle a transition in the perceptions of women's role. This transition is ultimately linked to broad social, economic and political changes occurring not only in Western Canada, but across the country: in particular, increasing numbers of both single and married women in the paid labour market; and, the beginning of the second women's movement.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to those people who provided relentless support over the past few years: they included my family - Audrey, Harvey, Kenton, David, Rodney, and Bradley; my friends, Karen and Jodie; and Chad, who was simply always there

"My body is words."

Madeleine Gagnon
"My Body in Writing"

"Re-vision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction - is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us."

Adrienne Rich
"When We Dead Awaken:
Writing as Re-Vision"

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approval page	p. ii
Abstract	p. iii
Dedication	p. iv
Quotes	p. v
Acknowledgements	p. vi
Table of Contents	p. vii
Chapter one	
Introduction	p. 1
Chapter two	
Women's prairie novels of the late 1940s	p. 26
Chapter three	
Women's prairie novels of the 1950s	p. 52
Chapter four	
Women's prairie novels of the 1960s	p. 84
Chapter five	
Conclusion	p. 115
Bibliography	p. 125

CHAPTER ONE*Introduction*

To date, there has been little systematic analysis of women's history in the period after the Second World War in Canada. In the prairies specifically, historical scholarship has tended to focus on political and/or economic history.¹ Certainly women's history has not been totally ignored; but, like a half-finished puzzle, the few works available provide an incomplete picture due to their limited focus on certain topics or locals. There is yet to be an all-encompassing study which incorporates gender, race, ethnicity and class as essential elements of female experience in the West. A good point of entry to the history of women in these years is found in prairie literature. Although largely ignored by Canadian historians as legitimate source material, novels can offer valuable insights into women's interpretation of their social roles. Prairie authors like Olive Knox, Nell Parsons, Patricia Blondel, Christine van der Mark, Gabrielle Roy, Vera Lysenko, Adele Wiseman, Nell Parsons and Margaret Laurence, among others, demonstrate a progression in prairie women's concerns and interests from the mid-1940s to the end of the 1960s. This progression is signalled, not only by an

1. See: John Foster, *The Developing West* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1983); Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairie: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984); Douglas R. Francis and Howard Palmer, *The Prairie West: Historical Readings* (Edmonton: Pica Pica Press, 1985); Dr. Roger Gibbons, *Prairie Politics and Society: Regionalism in Decline* (Toronto: Butterworth and Co., 1980); W.L. Morton, *Manitoba: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957).

evolution in the way female protagonists are portrayed, but is also revealed in the kinds of narrative techniques which women authors utilize. Ultimately, these works offer the opportunity to fill in a few more pieces of the puzzle in prairie women's history.

Post-WWII Historiography - Prairie Women's History

There have been few major works in Canadian women's history on the post-WWII prairies. In a recent bibliographical essay on the subject, Susan Jackel noted that "...one looks in vain for concerted discussions of prairie women's history as a discrete and self-conscious field of study."² A notable exception is Meg Luxton's *More Than a Labour of Love*, a local analysis of women and labour in Flin Flon, Manitoba over three generations (1927-1977).³ While an excellent materialist study of women, her work does have a limited usefulness. The focus is on a company town, dominated by the mining industry. Understandably, the study does not incorporate any of the rural and agricultural sectors which are so much a part of the prairie experience. Many other works on women's history during this period are national in perspective and approach. Pat and Hugh Armstrong, for example, have done important work on women

2. Susan Jackel, *Canadian Prairie Women's History: A Bibliographical Survey* (Ottawa: CRIAW Press, 1987), p. 2.

3. Meg Luxton, *More Than a Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work in the Home* (Toronto: Women's Educational Press, 1980).

and labour since WWII.⁴ The second feminist movement has also received much attention.⁵ The survey text, *Canadian Women: A History* by Alison Prentice et al,⁶ is valuable for its chapters after the Second World War, but like the other works mentioned is limited in detailed regional analysis of Western Canada.

Prairie women's history, then, is still largely an open field, with much potential for research. For recent decades, though, research can be difficult due to the nature of primary source material available. Personal sources like letters, diaries and oral histories are not widely accessible, and the study of cultural artifacts like newspapers and magazines may blur regional, ethnic or class variations.⁷ Considering this, novels can be an invaluable tool in accessing the history of women on the prairies. Not only is there a rich and diverse canon of prairie literature, the subject matter is often "...private, domestic, personal, confessional."⁸ Women wrote their

4. See: Pat and Hugh Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986); Pat Armstrong, *Labour Pains: Women's Work in Crisis* (Toronto: Green Dragon Press, 1984).

5. See: Nancy Adamson et al, *Feminist Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988); Margaret Anderson, *Mother Was Not a Person* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1972); Maureen Fitzgerald, *Still Ain't Satisfied! Canadian Feminism Today* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1982).

6. Alison Prentice et al, *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988).

7. *Ibid.*, p. 294.

8. Dick Harrison, "Across the Medicine Line: Problems in Comparing Canadian and American Western Fiction" *The Westering Experience in American Literature: Bicentennial Essays*, L.L. Lee and Merrill Lewis, eds. (Bellingham:

immediate experience of being female into their fiction. Yet, despite this potential as an historical source, novels remain under-utilized and occupy a tenuous position in historiography, whether British, American or Canadian.

Canadian Prairie Literature - A Source for History?

Attempts to wed history and literature as disciplines have generated considerable controversy. In Britain, this debate tends to focus upon the social history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including novelists like Dickens, Austen or the Brontë sisters.⁹ In both Canada and the United States, debate has often centered upon the literature of the West.¹⁰ Beyond more traditional literary interpretations of prairie novels, Canadian historian Gerald

Western Washington University, 1977), p. 54.

9. See: Patricia Otto Klaus, "Women in the Mirror: Using Novels to Study Victorian Women" *The Women of England: From Anglo-Saxon Times to Present*, Barbara Kanner, ed. (Connecticut: Archon Books, 1979). (This also contains a useful bibliography); Christopher Kent, "'Real Solemn History' and Social History" *Jane Austen in a Social Context*, David Monaghan, ed. (Ottawa: The Macmillan Press, 1981); Andrew Blake, "The Place of Literature in Victorian Literary Culture" *Literature and History*, vol. 11, no. 2 (Autumn 1985), pp. 203-216.

10. See: Jeanie McKnight, "American Dream, Nightmare Underside: Diaries, Letters and Fiction on the American Frontier" *Women, Women Writers and the West*, L.L. Lee and Merrill Lewis, eds. (New York: Whitson Publishing Co., 1979); Barbara Meldrum, "Images of Women in Western American Literature" *Midwest Quarterly*, 17 (April 1976), pp. 252-267; June Underwood, "Western Women and True Womanhood: Culture and Symbol in History and Literature" *Great Plains Quarterly*, 5 (Spring 1985), pp. 93-106.

Friesen¹¹ is unique in his attempt to establish a link between literature, history and myth.

In Canada, studies by Dick Harrison, Laurence Ricou, Edward McCourt, and to a lesser extent W.H. New and Henry Kriesel, provide a substantial canon of literary criticism interpreting the meaning of literature in the prairie West.¹² The dominant theme behind each examination is a recognition of the importance of the physical landscape, or what Gerald Friesen has described as the environmentalist approach. McCourt, whose 1949 *The Canadian West in Fiction* pioneered studies in prairie literature, claims that even the worst of this literature "possesses a characteristic flavour born of the artist's involvement with the physical environment which makes a stunning impact on the transient visitor and haunts the native, however far he may wander."¹³ Harrison, Ricou, New and Kriesel echo this.¹⁴

11. Gerald Friesen, "Three Generations of Fiction: An Introduction to Prairie Cultural Fiction" *The Prairie West: Historical Readings*, R. Douglas Francis and Howard Palmer, eds. (Edmonton: Pica Pica Press, 1985).

12. Dick Harrison, *Unnamed Country* (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1979); Laurence Ricou, *Vertical Man, Horizontal World* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1973); Edward McCourt, *The Canadian West in Fiction*, revised ed. (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1970); W.H. New, *Articulating West* (Toronto: New Press, 1972); Henry Kriesel, "The Prairie: A State of Mind" in *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, Eli Mandel, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

13. McCourt, *The Canadian West*, p. 125.

14. For example: Harrison claims that "The land was a challenge not only physically but psychologically...." (Harrison, p. ix); Ricou states "The basic image of a single human figure amidst the vast flatness of the landscape serves to unify and describe Canadian prairie fiction." (Ricou, p. ix); New writes that Canadian authors "have inevitably responded to the physical landscape"

While the emphasis on the environmentalists is consistently on the physical landscape of the prairies, women are not completely ignored. Female authors like Nellie McClung, Martha Ostenso and Margaret Laurence are usually incorporated into critical analysis. The problem is that the works by Harrison, Ricou, McCourt, Kriesel and New rarely bring gender to the forefront of discussion.

The single major work which incorporates women, novels and the West is Carol Fairbanks' *Prairie Women: Images in American and Canadian Fiction*.¹⁵ She examines fiction which records the experience of first-wave and second-wave immigrants, prairie towns, native women and the prairie born and bred. Her purpose is to challenge the often negative image of women as victims:

Prairie women describe the nature of female work and many varieties of gender roles. Women's prairie fiction also reveals a pervasive optimism rarely found in the works of men; many writers repeatedly insist that women can survive and frequently thrive on the prairies; at the very least, they acquire roots and lessons that sustain them in later life.¹⁶

Fairbanks' work is important because not only does she define traditional images of women to the present day, she also legitimizes these images as having historical significance.

(New, pp. xi-xii) while Kriesel sees that "all discussion of the literature produced in the Canadian West must of necessity begin with the impact of the landscape on the mind." (Kriesel, p. 257). This is not to deny that the physical landscape is important to the general analysis of prairie literature.

15. Carol Fairbanks, *Prairie Women: Images in American and Canadian Fiction* (London: Yale University Press, 1986).

16. *Ibid.*, p. 252.

However, like Canadian literary works on the prairies, her work has its limitations. Fairbanks, Harrison, Ricou, McCourt, New and Kriesel are professors of literature, not history. Even though these authors can be sensitive to historical and social context, the material is explained from a literary point-of-view. As John Fleming indicates the perspective of the literary critic and the historian is different in that the critic must in the end be obliged to explain the literature to the audience.¹⁷ The historian has a separate agenda. History discovers the actions and/or ideas of people in the past with the purpose of greater self-knowledge in the present.¹⁸ This necessarily shifts the focus in interpretation.

The best work produced on Canadian prairie literature from an historical perspective is Gerald Friesen's short article "Three Generations of Fiction: An Introduction to Prairie Cultural History."¹⁹ Beginning with images of the West as portrayed by Robert Ballantyne in the mid-nineteenth century up to modern authors like Robert Kroetsch, W.O. Mitchell and Margaret Laurence, Friesen finds the major images of the West moved from a pastoral ideal to a West wholly mythologized. He argues that "...there is a coherence in prairie literature, not merely in relation to its own

17. John Fleming, "Historians and the Evidence of Literature" *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. IV, no. 1 (Summer 1973), p. 102.

18. R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1946), p. 10.

19. Friesen, "Three Generations of Fiction," pp. 650-660.

developing forms... but in relation to place, society and history."²⁰ This article is an excellent example of the potential of literature to provide insight into history.

However, the relationship of art to life (or literature to history) is considerably more complex than Friesen's work suggests. There are literary critics (in the Canadian context including Eli Mandel and George Bowering) who argue a formalist or aesthetic position that literature depends less on the environment and more upon traditional literary forms and pure imagination. George Bowering has stated "Serious writers know that the content of their work is no reality - all content is made up or referential."²¹ On the other hand, a considerable body of theory maintains that the correlation between literature and history is meaningful and important. There are several approaches which are potentially useful in developing a methodology with respect to using literature as a primary source; disciplinary affinity, the history of ideas, and Marxist literary theory encompass the major parameters.

Disciplinary Affinity

The first approach focuses on the disciplinary affinity between literary and historical study and incorporates

20. *Ibid.*, p. 650. R. Douglas Francis takes a similar position in his recently published *Images of the West: Responses to the Canadian Prairie* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1989).

21. George Bowering, "That Fool of Fear: Notes on A Jest of God" *Canadian Literature*, 50 (Autumn 1971), p. 41.

theory by Robert Scholes, Russell Nye and Hayden White. These theorists stresses the essentially creative nature of both disciplines.

Robert Scholes phrases this debate in terms of the relationship between fact and fiction. He argues that fact (from the Latin *facere*) means "a thing done" while fiction (from *fingere*) means "a thing made." Scholes argues that a thing done has no real existence once it has occurred, even though it may have consequences or leave records. Fact must become "a thing made" (or fiction) before it can have any permanence.²² History is the common ground where fact and fiction interact. According to Scholes, history itself has two meanings; "History can mean both the events of the past and the story of these events: fact - or fiction."²³ Hence, historians examine the past and write the fiction which becomes history.

Russell Nye also affirms the disciplinary affinity between literature and history in his essay "History and Literature: Branches of the Same Tree."²⁴ Nye argues that generations ago, history and literature served a similar function in interpreting human behavior and experience.²⁵ However, an untimely divorce of these two disciplines came with the rise of "scientific history" in the late nineteenth

22. Robert Scholes, *Elements of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 1-2.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

24. Russell Nye, "History and Literature: Branches of the Same Tree" *Essays on History and Literature*, Robert Bremner, ed. (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1966).

25. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

century. Driven increasingly into a methodology ideally impartial, precise and objective, history denied its affinity to literature. Nye's purpose is to re-marry these disciplines. For example, he argues that both the historian and the artist use language symbolically, especially with respect to metaphor, to expand and elaborate meaning.²⁶ Further, both history and literature record internal and external experience. They attempt to gain insight into the quality, mood, tempo and personality of life in their complete re-creation of time and place.²⁷ Finally, both history and literature involve a creative act:

Something exists, after the historian and the literary artist have been at work that has not existed before - an insight into human motivation, a metaphor that adds meaning to experience, a reason for an event, a perception for a relationship, a cause for an effect.²⁸

Obviously, there are limitations to this collaboration. The historian's interpretation must be limited to "facts," while the author is not so restricted. But although the author has artistic license to manipulate empirical data, the literal, factual and temporal world can be captured in this process.²⁹

Pushed to the extreme, this mode of argumentation can include the metahistorical theories of Hayden White, especially from his work *Tropics of Discourse*. White's perspective not only establishes a connection between

26. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

history and literature, he argues this association is inherent within our language.

White begins with the assertion that the historian's craft, like the author's, is ultimately creative, subjectively imposing form and meaning upon the past. Further, this creation by the historian is specific to mythic structures which they have inherited from their society:

the historian must draw upon a fund of culturally provided mythoi in order to constitute the facts as figuring a story of a particular kind, just as he must appeal to that same fund of mythoi in the mind of his readers to endow his account of the past with... meaning or significance.³⁰

The story may be in the structure of romance, comedy, satire or tragedy depending upon the perspective of the historian. These "interpretative strategies" signal a complicated framework which also incorporates modes of explanation, ideology, and linguistic tropes. For example, White argues an historian like Ranke uses comic, organic and conservative modes of interpretation generated primarily from a synecdoche master trope.³¹

White does not argue that all correlations work neatly for every historian. Nevertheless, he has been criticized for choosing historians who over-emphasize the symmetry of

30. Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 60.

31. Gregor McLennan, "History and Theory: Contemporary Debates and Directions" *History and Literature*, vol. 10, no. 2 (Autumn 1984), p. 152.

his model.³² Further, the actual details of the "tropic" model are in dispute including the interpretative strategies, degrees of coherence about modes of articulation, and linguistic definitions.³³

However, the work of Scholes, Nye, and White raise a couple of fundamental points. Each author is useful for breaking down the scholarly distrust which many historians have about information from a literary origin. By emphasizing the similarities between these disciplines, they expose both as essentially literary and creative. Further, as Nye argued, literal, factual and temporal information may find its place in literature. After all, it is in the author's best interest to make the novel convincing. However, this kind of information is a tenuous source for the historian, as it is easily manipulated to suit the author's purposes. Considering this, the history of ideas offers a more reliable theoretical position for utilizing novels as primary source material.

The History of Ideas

The history of ideas position sees literature as historically useful in so far as it exposes the writer's thoughts and beliefs, whether consciously or unconsciously. In the Canadian context, S.F. Wise was at the forefront of the conceptualization of intellectual history based upon his

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*

work on sermon literature. Wise describes the Canadian intellectual historian as:

concerned primarily with the interrelationships between ideas and actions, and therefore the intellectual commonplaces of an age; its root notions, assumptions, and images will be of more significance than the study of coherent bodies of abstract thought.³⁴

The "intellectual commonplaces" can be drawn out from literature to provide valuable insight into the author and their community.

Thus, Morroe Berger in *Real and Imagined Worlds* can affirm that "Fiction has also revealed how people have thought about themselves and other matters, such as God, the family, politics and race."³⁵ Even many writers see this to be true. Canadian author, Margaret Laurence, continually maintained that fiction can offer important insight into society. She argues:

Writers of serious fiction are almost always, in some way or another, consciously or unconsciously, expressing their own times. This is true of historical fiction just as it is true for the writing of history itself, for our perceptions and therefore our interpretations are formed by the community in which we grow up... In one way fiction may be viewed as history, just as recorded history may be viewed as fiction.³⁶

34. S.F. Wise, "Sermon Literature and Canadian Intellectual History" *Canadian History Before Confederation: Essays and Interpretations*, J.M. Bumsted, ed. (Georgetown: Irwin-Dorsey Ltd., 1972), p. 254.

35. Morroe Berger, *Real and Imagined Worlds: The Novel and the Social Science* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 186-187.

36. Margaret Laurence, "Ivory Tower or Grassroots? The Novelist as Socio-Political Being" *Canadian Novelists and the Novel*, Douglas Daymond and Leslie Monkman, eds. (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1981), pp. 251-252.

Like the advocates of the disciplinary affinity approach, Laurence recognizes that both history and fiction, by virtue of their essentially creative origins, similarly reflect wider social and cultural attitudes.

To carry this argument further, Rachel Blau DuPlessis in *Writing Beyond the Ending* argues that novels are the symposium of social "scripts" which guide sequences of action and response, meaning, and ways of organizing experience. These scripts indicate strongly mandated practices of learned behavior which are culturally and historically specific.³⁷ When studying novels it is essential to see the subject matter and narrative structures as the apparatus of wider social ideology:

Any literary convention - plots, narrative sequences, characters in bit parts - as an instrument that claims to depict experience, also interprets it. No convention is neutral, purely mimetic, or purely aesthetic.³⁸

Thus, novels reflect wider social scripts (a similar concept to Wise's "intellectual commonplaces"). And these modes of social behavior are expressed and realized in the kinds of narrative strategies that novelists use. A close correlation exists between ideology, history and literary convention. But, what is missing from this analysis is a recognition of the role of class in the production of literary art.

37. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 2.

38. *Ibid.*

Marxist Literary Theory

Marxist literary theory offers an awareness of literature as a class-based genre. This school of thought has its strongest legacy from the work of Georg Lukács in his *The Theory of the Novel* and *The Historical Novel*.³⁹

The Marxist approach to literary theory has several general tenets. First, artistic activity (through its place in the superstructure) is seen to be conditioned historically through a division of labour and the economic structure of society; "Literature therefore reflects objective social, economic and political forces although mediated by artistic forms and conventions."⁴⁰ Second, cultural development is dictated by economic factors and class struggle.⁴¹ Literature reflects the basic and necessary momentum of capitalist development through typical characters or events. Character types emerge out of the author's awareness of progressive (ie. socialist) change. For Lukacs, this meant the decline of bourgeoisie realism (the pinnacle of the European novel form) after 1848 with the escalating hostility of the bourgeoisie to the proletariat. The overall effect was the reification of the writer and the disintegrating of literary forms into naturalism and subjectivism. In concrete terms, this meant

39. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, Hannah and Stanley Mitchell, trans. (London: Merlin Press, 1962); Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, Anna Bostock trans. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971).

40. Alan Swingwood, "Marxism and Literary Theory" *Literature and History*, no. 2 (Oct. 1975), p. 46.

41. *Ibid.*

that artists like Balzac, Stendel and Tolstoy were seen as the epitome of bourgeoisie realism, and modern writers like Kafka and Joyce were rejected.⁴² Third, for Lukács literature should reflect a "totality" or the "objective, outer world" over the psychological nature of humankind.⁴³ Finally, literature portrays man as organically bound to society and history; "Realism, with its concrete depiction of time, events and human actions was thus able to render 'the present as history,' to situate man within an historically evolving social, economic and political totality."⁴⁴

As the major theorist for Marxist literary criticism, Lukács' work does present problems. It is difficult to utilize a theory which damns all modern literature as "naturalist" and "subjective." Quite rightly, Lukács has been accused of judging literature according to his socialist yardstick by which "great literature" is also seen to espouse "progressive" values. Further, his methodology at its crudest is to compare parts of the novel with external history (or the search for the "sociological equivalent") earning a reputation from literary critics for insensitivity to text.⁴⁵ However, Lukács is influential for his recognition of the artistic forms of literature as well as

42. *Ibid.*

43. Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 90.

44. Swingwood, "Marxism and Literary Theory," p. 46.

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

his analysis of literature as situated within a materialist framework.

Marxist literary critics like Alan Swingwood have attempted to modify Lukács' extreme theoretical tenets. By reviewing Marx's social theory, Swingwood reformed Marxist literary theory. The first point Swingwood wants to stress is Marx's affirmation that creative thought can be autonomous from the dictates of the political economy:

The relation of 'base' and 'superstructure' is not to be understood, therefore in terms of a simple *reciprocal* interaction of ideas and economy in which the dominant contradiction, the contradiction between capital and labour, finds its expression automatically in philosophy, literature and art. The general and dominant contradiction in capitalist society between the private nature of economic production and its social, collective character takes its specific historical form through a variety of political, social and cultural determinations.⁴⁶

This point is important when considering the relationship between history and literature. It indicates some flexibility on the part of the author as an active agent to choose their subjects and be critical of wider social norms, while at the same time generally reflecting bourgeoisie society. This flexibility granted to the artist bypasses the judgmental approach which characterizes the work by Lukacs.

As suggested by both Lukács and Swingwood, it is paramount to see literature within its own developing forms:

The important point is not the tracing of 'influences' in an abstract manner but studying the ways in which a particular writer absorbs a tradition and from it develops his own authentic voice, his ideas, his view of man, for what he creates from proceeding influences will

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

be one of the most significant clues to a complete understanding of his work.⁴⁷

Hence, literary tradition must be a part of any analysis of the relationship between literature and history.

A Methodology for Using Literature as a Primary Source

A review of the diverse approaches to the correlation between history and literature suggests a working methodology. To begin with, it is important to understand that the relationship between history and literature is very complex. While the literary artist and the historian may share certain aspects of technique, history has specific limitations. Also, while searching for empirical "facts" may be a tenuous platform from which to examine history, the theory that literature can reveal wider social scripts is potentially very useful. The ideological constructs behind a novel are inserted both consciously and unconsciously, with the author as an active agent. Finally, the materialist theory of literature can also offer insight into this question. It is important to see the role and place of literature in a mature capitalist society, while recognizing at the same time that it is not bound simplistically by this same relationship. Literature can be critical of dominant social values while at the same time often affirming capitalism. However, as Swingwood points out, it is not enough to assert that social structures find their place in

47. Diana Laurenson and Alan Swingwood, *The Sociology of Literature* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1971), p. 79.

novels. It is also important to see literature as a process, with its own literary tradition, which also operates to structure and elaborate the author's message.

The connection between literature and history must then be seen primarily within two conceptual strategies. First, with respect to the relationship between art (literature) and society, where art is seen to reflect "intellectual commonplaces" or social ideology paradoxically both particular to the individual author and general to bourgeoisie society at large. Second, literary creativity must be seen within the traditions of its own developing forms as a genre, whether romance, realism, epic, or science fiction, among others.

Romance and Realism in Women's Prairie Novels

The literary conventions of romance and realism dominate women's prairie literature⁴⁸ after the Second World War. As

48. By women's prairie literature, I mean a novel written by a woman which is set on the prairies, either Alberta, Saskatchewan or Manitoba (all prairie novels written by women during this periodization are included in this study). Ideally this also means that the writer has spent some time on the Canadian prairies, although this could not be verified for every author. There is one major exception. Not all of the works by Margaret Laurence are set in Manitoba. For example, *The Fire Dwellers*, and parts of *The Stone Angel*, are set in Vancouver. But it is difficult to think of Laurence as anything other than a prairie writer. She herself admits that the prairies sneak into every one of her Canadian works:

When one thinks of the influence of place on one's writing, two aspects come to mind. First, the physical presence of the place itself - its geography, its appearance. Second, the people. For me, the second aspect of environment is the most important, although in

suggested by both DuPlessis and Swingwood, all literature is written within a larger context of a literary tradition whose constructs can influence characterization, plot, setting, etc. Hence, understanding the tenets behind literary conventions is essential to understanding the meaning which the author transposes into his or her text.

The literary tradition of romance was transported to the Canadian scene from Britain in the late nineteenth century. The romance plot had undergone considerable transformation by this time, moving from its classical form into the often trashy, sentimental novels which proliferated during the nineteenth century and afterward. As the romance plot is so prominent in many novels studied here, it is worth examining its constructs in some detail.

The novel form of the romance is an unique artistic tradition. In the standard courtship or marriage plot, the ultimate goal is marriage and a safe home where the woman is mistress.⁴⁹ This goal can be very problematic though, hindered through bad or malicious advisors, poor judgement, flattery or seduction.⁵⁰ There are only two options for the conclusion: one, the heroine receives her reward of a rich

everything I have written which is set in Canada, whether or not it is actually set in the Manitoba, somewhere some of my memories of the physical appearance of the prairies come in.

See Margaret Laurence, "Sources" *Margaret Laurence*, William New, ed. (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1977), pp. 13-14.

49. Rachel Brownstein, *Becoming a Heroine: Reading About Novels About Women* (New York: The Viking Press, 1982), p.

39.

50. *Ibid.*

husband and a happy marriage; or two, the heroine is seduced and dies.⁵¹ Given the limitations of this plot, the characters are predictably formulaic:

The paradigmatic hero is an overreacher; the heroine... is overdetermined. The hero moves toward a goal; the heroine tries to be it. He makes a name for himself; she is concerned with keeping her good name.... A hero is extraordinary, exempt from the rules of society; a heroine must stick to the social code and then some.... A heroine must be perfectly well-behaved, well-spoken and well-spoken-of. She must be just like the other girls and also she must be better, to be signalled out once and for all by the best of men.⁵²

This narrative formula first began with Richardson's *Clarissa* (1759) and became a standard format for thousands of novels which followed, the best including the works of Jane Austen, George Eliot, and the Brontë sisters.⁵³

The romance plot has several characteristics. Domestic novels separate love and quest for the female hero. They tend to stereotype gender differences, and consequently advocate a rigid division of labour. They favour heterosexual ties over bisexual or homosexual relationships, and place an aura around the couple which is seen as the

51. *Ibid.*, p. 81. The female hero is a central character whose activities and personal growth invite narrative attention and/or authorial interest. A heroine is the primary object of male attention. A quest is a progressive or goal-oriented search with stages and/or obstacles which in general involves self-realization or mastery. See Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, p. 200.

52. *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

53. Rosalind Miles argues that it was the work of Charlotte Brontë which led to the situation where the romance plot became "the female form," or the literature written by, about and for women. See Rosalind Miles, *The Fiction of Sex: Themes and Functions of Sex Difference in the Modern Novel* (London: Vision Press, 1974) p. 57.

epitome of personal and narrative success.⁵⁴ In short, "...the romance plot, broadly speaking, is a trope for the sex-gendered system as a whole."⁵⁵ Not surprisingly then, the romance generally signals very conservative and rigid social roles for women.

Canadian realist fiction developed later than romance and first appeared in the prairies in the 1920s with the publication of Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* (1925), Robert Stead's *Grain* (1926) and Frederick Philip Grove's *Settlers on the Marsh* (1925). Desmond Pacey hypothesizes that the reason why Canadian realism first appeared on the prairies is due to a "...distinctive pattern of life which could be clearly differentiated from that of Europe and even from that of the United States, and where the conditions of pioneer life were so forbidding that it was almost impossible to idyllicize them."⁵⁶ Like romance, realism itself is a literary tradition with its corresponding set of conventions.

Ian Watt, in his examination of the literature of Defoe, Richardson and Fielding, sees the origin of formal realism in the origin of the novel form itself. First, realism favours the individual whose own experience provides the

54. DuPlessis, p. 5.

55. *Ibid.*

56. Desmond Pacey, "Fiction 1920-1940" in *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*, Carl Klink, ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 676.

only standard of truth within the context of the novel.⁵⁷ Second, realism demands that plot be acted out by particular people within a specific historical and social context (hence, rejecting plots dictated by mythology, history, legend or previous literature).⁵⁸ Third, characterization is essential, demanding personal identity as identity of consciousness through temporal and causal time.⁵⁹ This involves a juxtaposition of past and present self-awareness, often achieved through memories or flashbacks. Perhaps most importantly, formal realism attempts to present an authentic picture of reality and individual experience.⁶⁰ As Robert Scholes indicates "The realist's truth is a bit more general and typical than the reporter's fact."⁶¹ Hence, as a literary plot, formal realism is considerably more flexible than romance, especially with respect to female roles. For example, a realistic novel may focus on a heterosexual couple, but it is less likely that the couple will live "happily ever after."

57. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), p. 13.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 32. This point is not intended to imply that the romance is completely false or fictitious in its portrayal of reality. Romance novels can and do incorporate different degrees of authenticity, although this is tempered by the demands of the formula. In this study though, the prairie novels of the late 1940s incorporate vivid scenes of domestic violence against women which are not evident in the realistic novels of the 1950s or the 1960s.

61. Scholes, *Elements of Fiction*, p. 9.

In her study of women's realistic fiction in the twentieth century, Rachel Blau DuPlessis has discovered several narrative strategies which female authors developed to counter the pervasive sex-typing of the romantic plot. Among these techniques are: female friendships and bonding (non-erotic); bisexual or lesbian liaisons; challenges to the social and ideological construction of gender, usually indicated in a conflict between social expectations and personal experience; lack of focus on the formation of heterosexual couple; and the affirmation of female quest.⁶² Although DuPlessis's study incorporates literature from Britain, the United States and Canada, her conclusions provide a useful tool for the study of women's prairie literature.

When examining the literature by prairie women after the Second World War, there is a definite transition in narrative techniques. In the late-1940s, the dominant literary convention is romance. However, this literary tradition gradually fades throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Realism is dominant by the 1960s, and its particular literary techniques indicate a rejection of the social implications of the romance format. This literary transition is intimately tied to social, economic and political changes which were occurring in Canadian society at this time, especially the movement of both single and married women into the paid labour force and the beginning of the second

62. DuPlessis, p. 5 and p. 163.

women's movement. Women's prairie novels demonstrate a transition in gendered perceptions of women's role as mediated through specific literary conventions. Ultimately, they offer a valuable insight into the intellectual history of women on the prairies from 1945 to 1970.⁶³

63. My periodization stops at 1970, or the publication of the report for the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. I wanted to observe the effect of the feminist movement on women's literature before the publicity and public policy which followed this report.

CHAPTER TWO

Women's prairie novels of the late 1940s

The immediate post-WWII period is characterized as a period of social conservatism, especially for women. Having entered the labour market in record numbers during the Second World War, women were then informed that they had to leave their jobs to allow returning soldiers to be integrated back into Canadian society. Public policy and mass media collaborated by re-affirming traditional female pursuits: marriage, keeping house, taking care of children, and looking beautiful and desirable. Women's prairie literature in this period espouses similar values. Utilizing a romance format, novels by Olive Knox, Nell Parsons, and Nancy [and Benedict] Freedman all describe sanctioned female social roles. There is a primary focus on marriage and the heterosexual couple; female protagonists are narrowly confined in gender-specific stereotypes. Christine van der Mark is both an exception and a part of the tradition. Her novel does not center upon a traditional wife and mother, but may be seen as an examination of the consequences for women who do not adhere to this role. Overall, these novels reflect the general acceptance by prairie women novelists that they belonged in the private sphere, fulfilling the role of wife and mother.

WWII and Afterwards - Social and Economic Conditions

World War II provided an unique opportunity for women to enter employment positions which had traditionally been the reserve of men. Previous to the war, young, single women would often work before marriage. If she was educated, occupations like nutritionist, social worker, nurse or teacher were respected positions. If she had little formal education, a woman could work as a domestic, laundress or waitress. Despite the fact that "women's unequal treatment was common knowledge,"¹ paid labour did provide the opportunity to expand social horizons and gain a modicum of independence before marriage.

The Second World War provided a significant change to this general pattern. As Canada went to war in 1939, organizations like the National Selective Service (NSS) and the federal Department of Labour prepared for the wartime mobilization of women. Consistent with the dominant ideology of the time, which made the home sacrosanct, recruitment strategy aimed first at young, single girls and last at married women with small children.² By June 1943, 255,000 women had joined the labour market in war industries.³ In rural areas, Women's Institutes assisted in organizing farm

1. Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939* (Markham: Copp Clark Pitman, 1988), p. 44.

2. Ruth Roach Pierson, "Women's Emancipation and the Recruitment of Women into the Labour Force in World War II," *The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History*, vol. one, Susan Mann Trofimenkoff and Alison Prentice, eds. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), p. 125.

3. *Ibid*, p. 128.

women's war services and agricultural production. Federal programs, such as the Amendment to the Income War Tax Act as well as the Dominion-Provincial Wartime Day Nurseries Agreement (both passed in Parliament in July 1942), significantly reduced social and structural barriers to mothers' employment.⁴

However, official propaganda stressed women's involvement in the war as patriotic duty, rather than economic necessity.⁵ NFB recruitment films for the Canadian military like *Proudly She Marches* (1943) and *Wings on her Shoulders* (1943) glorified women's patriotic, yet secondary and supportive roles.⁶ War ads in magazines like *Maclean's* stressed that women could be in the war industry and still be desirable. For example, an ad for Palmolive soap stated that no woman in a factory had to sacrifice her complexion for her country if she simply washed twice a day with their product; the ad ended with "I trust Palmolive to keep me lovely - for him."⁷ With this public emphasis upon women as

4. The manipulation of the Income War Tax Act provided a direct incentive for married women to work. Previous to the war, married women could earn up to \$750 before their husbands lost the married status tax exemption. After June 1942, this limitation was withdrawn completely for the duration of the war. The Dominion-Provincial Wartime Day Nurseries Agreement set up several nurseries in Ontario and Quebec during the war. This was a tremendous boon to those mothers who could take advantage of this limited service.

5. Ruth Roach Pierson, *"They're Still Women After All": The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), p. 44.

6. Yvonne Mathews-Klein, "How They Saw Us: Images of Women in National Film Board Films of the 1940s and 1950s" *Atlantis*, no. 4, vol. 2 (Spring 1979), p. 22.

7. M. Susan Bland, "Henrietta the Homemaker and 'Rosie the Riveter': Images of Women in Advertising in *Maclean's*

objects of physical beauty and patriotic duty, it is not surprising that once the war was over, women would be expected to return to the private sphere.

Despite the protest of various women's lobby groups across Canada, by 1945 80,000 women were expelled from war industries and thousands more were discharged from the service.⁸ Tax limitations on married women's labour were reinstated at levels lower than before the war⁹ and the federal government absolved itself of responsibility for wartime daycare by 1946. Not until 1967 would women again achieve wartime levels of labour force participation.¹⁰

The changes brought about by the war and its aftermath saw an immediate demographic effect upon women's lives. The age of marriage went down (from 25.4 in 1941 to 22 in 1961), the marriage rate soared (from 30/1000 in 1937 to 62/1000 in 1954 for ages 15-19), and the birth rate went up (from 20.1/1000 in 1937 to 28.9/1000 in 1947) in the post-WWII period.¹¹ Consistent with these widespread population changes, a woman's role as a wife and mother was emphasized.

Magazine, 1939-1950" *Atlantis*, vol. 8, no. 2 (Spring 1983), p. 76.

8. Alison Prentice et al, *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), p. 311.

9. At the end of WWII, government public policy aimed specifically at forcing women out of the labour market. To this end, the Amendment to the Income War Tax Act which had allowed married women to work without tax penalties (after June 1942) was reinstated. By 1946, women could only earn \$250 before their husbands lost their married status tax exemption, a ceiling which was \$500 lower than before the war.

10. Prentice et al, p. 311.

11. *Ibid.*

Significantly, media ads directed at homemakers constituted about 40% of all ads between 1939 and 1943. By 1950, ads directed at homemakers comprised 73% of all ads directed at women, showing an increase of 55.3% since 1943.¹² Women's magazines especially, reinforced images of women's rightful place; "In psychological terms... [they] enabled the harassed mother, the overburdened housewife, to make contact with her ideal self: that self which aspires to be a good wife, a good mother, and an efficient homemaker...."¹³ Part and parcel with this new focus on women in the home was an overwhelming desire for "the security and good times that had escaped [families] during the Great Depression and the Second World War."¹⁴ Consumption became increasingly available with the extension of credit and post-war prosperity. For women, their major prescribed roles after the Second World War were dominated by domesticity, reproduction and consumption.

A Social and Literary Conservatism

In the novels written by women in the prairies in the mid to late 1940s, conservatism prevailed. The novels by Olive Knox, Nell Parsons, and Nancy [and Benedict] Freedman, have striking similarities with regards to story formula and

12. Bland, p. 70.

13. Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (Toronto: Random Books, 1990), p. 64.

14. Veronica Strong-Boag, "Writing About Women" *Writing About Canada*, Jack Schultz, ed. (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1990), p. 190.

characterization. These features derive primarily from the romance format, which in terms of the possible literary modes available, is the most conservative with respect to women's roles. It is very suggestive that this mode is so prominent in the novels published immediately after WWII, especially since literary realism first made its Canadian debut in the prairies in the mid-1920s. If the novels are any indication, women were experiencing strong social pressure to remain within conventional social scripts.

The novels published by prairie women writers from 1945 to 1949 all deal intimately with issues like courtship, marriage, domesticity, child-birth and child-rearing in the homestead situation, occasionally mediated through race and ethnicity. Most of the novels have strong romantic elements signalled primarily by their focus of the heterosexual couple:

No matter what notion of the sex-gender system one uses to explore the relation of women and men, and of women to society, the reproduction of these relations in consciousness, in social practice, and in ideology turns especially on the organization of family, kinship, and marriage, of sexuality, and of the division of all sorts of labor by gender. The point at which these basic formations cross, where family meets gender, where the division of labor meets sexuality, is the heterosexual couple... social order centers on that couple.¹⁵

The staple of the romance novel, the heterosexual couple, is an essential part of patriarchal control over women. And romantic novels single-mindedly pursue this objective. They imply that a good marriage based upon love, respect and

15. DuPlessis, pp. 1-2.

trust should be the ultimate achievement for every woman. Surprisingly enough, this message remains unchallenged despite several graphic incidences of domestic violence and blatant misogyny.

Women's Portrayal in Novels in the late 1940s

Romance - Knox, Parsons, Freedman

Olive Knox's *Red River Shadows* (1948) is based upon actual historical documents which recorded the settlement of the Red River in the early nineteenth century. The novel operates within a love triangle, the central story line focussing on the rivalry between Jean Ritchot (a French Canadian voyageur) and Stanley Bowman (a secretary for the Governor) over H el ene LeStrange.

H el ene is stereotyped femininity; she is young, beautiful, moral, kind and devout (as a French-Canadian, she is a strict Roman Catholic). She stands out amongst the other settlers journeying to Red River; "Jean's glance found H el ene... her clear profile showing beneath her blue bonnet. Her fragile beauty was like a challenge to his masculinity...." (p.3) Like the voyageur Jean, Stanley immediately decides he must also court her, and is victorious during Jean's absence at a buffalo hunt. The choice proves disastrous for H el ene, as Stanley proves to be as petty, cowardly, mean, drunken and vengeful as Jean is shown to be generous, brave, kind, pious and forgiving.

Hélène's poor choice of a mate is the consequence of hasty judgement and a fatal flaw: worldliness. She is willing to sacrifice her fledging love for Jean for material comfort and class status:

Hélène glanced toward Jean... It was too bad he was almost penniless. She liked his looks, the reckless light in his eyes and his impetuous manner when he spoke. Then she blushed at the worldliness of her thoughts. But why shouldn't she think about worldly things? After all, she wanted a home and comforts. Love wasn't everything... or was it? (p.5)

In fact in the context of the romance, love is everything, and Hélène must now endure several years of marriage to a man she despises. The logic of the narrative undermines the importance which economics can play in a decision to marry, since for a woman her material well-being is determined by her husband's socio-economic status.

Childbirth and child care are an important part of women's lives in Red River colony. Motherhood is shown to be essential for happiness, a biological determinant required for the completion of female identity. This is clearly demonstrated with Aunt Pauline:

Only in her eyes could ...[one] glimpse the grief that was always with her because she had been denied motherhood. Still, she had not stifled her *instinct* for maternity. All her life she had been mothering other people's children." (p. 4) (my emphasis)

For Hélène, her daughter Martha fills her with "pure delight" (p.94) and she focuses most of her attention to her child's care and upbringing. Her daughter makes Hélène's life with Stanley bearable.

Misogynist attitudes towards women are most often expressed through Stanley, although usually with male consensus. H el ene suffers much psychological abuse at his hands. However, Stanley's most reprehensible attitudes are exposed with respect to native and half-breed women. He uses his racism against "savages" to justify his use of mixed-race women as sexual objects. Typical is a conversation between Stanley and some visiting English lords:

"Being a monk in this country is a waste of time," [Bowman] said with a wink at his friends. "Besides, having an Indian wife is good business. All her relatives bring you her furs."

"...If one has no scruples, the hunt need not be just the buffalo then, I take it," said Lord Whitney, his face almost beardless, and his blue eyes feverishly bright.

"Scruples? Fah!" Bowman spat on the floor. "They're honoured... even at the pleasure of one night." (pp. 152-153)

This is a classic case of racism used to justify political, economic and sexual exploitation.

In the climax of the novel, the demands of the romantic formula are finally fulfilled. Michael, Jean's lifelong friend, finally kills Stanley thus saving Jean the moral and ethical burden of doing this himself. Jean and H el ene are finally united, she having now learnt that excessive material wealth is meaningless in comparison to love and a happy marriage. Despite the fact that H el ene has spent most of the novel subject to demeaning patriarchal domination, the institution of marriage survives relatively unscathed. The ending sanctifies marriage but also insists upon the importance of the proper choice of mate. If marriage is for

love, the novel suggests there is no greater *telos* for women.

The novels by Nell Parsons and Nancy [and Benedict] Freedman differ slightly from this marriage plot in that their heroines spend most of the narrative married to the men they love. The tension within the novels comes from the attempt to resolve obstacles to a "happy" marriage. More precisely, the main objective of the heroine is to become the object of the hero, to be an appropriate wife. Fundamentally, this demands major sacrifices to the heroine's individual identity.¹⁶

Nell Parsons' *The Curlew Cried* (1947) is set on a remote homestead in Saskatchewan in 1908. Many of the details in this romance are reminiscent of Parsons' autobiographical *Upon a Sagebrush Harp* (1969). Her own family moved to a small homestead near Weyburn, Saskatchewan in 1907. *The Curlew Cried* discusses similar physical hardships, but the novel's conclusion provides the hopeful ending which Parson's family never quite achieved.

The narrative centers upon Lane and Victoria (Sewell) Jarvis, recently married after meeting on a steamship travelling from England to Canada. Victoria had actually made the voyage to marry a childhood sweetheart, Harry Watts, but fell in love with Lane Jarvis on sight. They are

16. Interestingly enough, changes to the identity of the female protagonist in both these novels also includes a transformation in their names. Victoria is called Tory by Lane as "the prairie is no place for a Victoria." (p. 21) Katherine is called Kathy, or more commonly Mrs. Mike.

both physically extraordinary. Victoria is beautiful, emotional, desirable, innocent yet strong. Lane is equally as attractive with a "handsome face," "powerful, vibrant voice" and "black, fathomless" eyes. They represent an ideal of the masculine and feminine, their characteristics strongly gender-stereotyped.

The greatest tension in the novel comes from Lane's mysterious past, which he refuses to discuss with Victoria. This secrecy slowly poisons their relationship. Significantly, Lane escapes most of the responsibility for the deterioration of their marriage. Rather, Victoria feels responsible because she does not hold to her promise of "A marriage of faith" (p.32) to Lane. She must come to a position of total acceptance of his past, present and future for their marriage to survive.

Further, Victoria's British upper-class upbringing has left her ill-prepared for the life of a pioneer housewife. Her inadequacy is clearly demonstrated through her attempts to use fine English china, rather than more practical dishes, for their everyday meals. She finds the day-to-day work difficult and has trouble adapting to the cycle of cooking, cleaning, gardening, baking and butter making. She also sees the prairie environment as exacting, hostile and threatening.

The difficulties between Lane and Victoria are exacerbated by her negative reaction to the prairie lifestyle. Tension increases when Harry Watts suddenly

reappears, now wealthy and successful, to establish a love triangle as a rival for Victoria's attention. Watts provides the catalyst for increased domestic violence between Lane and Victoria, although there has been an undercurrent of violence against women throughout the novel.

There is a disturbing scene where Lane and Victoria are having a verbal argument which escalates into what can only be described as wife rape. It occurs after Victoria has been deliberately flirting with Harry Watts, determined to punish Lane for her physical and psychological suffering. It is worth quoting in some detail:

Tory's resentment flared. "Perhaps it is too late to make a fool of myself, about three years too late!"

He jerked her about to face him then. His hands were hard upon her rigid shoulders.

"Too late?" His voice was savage with jealous anger. He jerked her again, hard against his chest. She felt a tremor in his arms as his dark, tormented face came down over hers. He kissed her, but there was no tenderness in the kiss. It was brutal and savage and it forced her head backward against his arm, while his lips went on demanding. "Too late, eh?" He repeated fiercely.

"Lane, Lane, you're hurting me!" She tore her lips from his at last and pushed him back. She had gone too far, she thought wildly. Fear surged in her again.

"Hurting you?" His lips were upon hers again, bruising with a brutal passion which surged from the wild jealousy within him....

"Stop, stop!" she cried, fear sharpening her voice. She tried to jerk out of his arms but he held her hard. The grip of his long and powerful arms hurt and bruised her flesh. Impotent tears stung her lids. Her strength was as nothing compared to his. She felt it go out of her and could not call it back.

"Stop?" Lane laughed savagely. The sound was harsh against Tory's ears. He stripped the muslin frock away from her shoulders while she fought against his strength ineffectually.

"Oh, don't," she cried weakly. But he would not relent. (pp. 160-161)

While the term "wife rape," and the publicity and legislation which have followed it, is a relatively recent phenomena¹⁷, what is significant about this quote is the recognition by the author that men can and will abuse the power that they have in marital relationships. As Diana Russell explains, the phenomena of rape in marriage must be seen within the context of the patriarchal family which recognizes the father as the social and economic head of the family.¹⁸ Concurrent with this is "the idea that females are the property of males... more specifically, they are seen as the *sexual property of their husbands.*"¹⁹ (author's italics) Lane's rape of Victoria is triggered by the sexual threat of Harry Watts, and he responds to his jealousy by reaffirming his "right" to his wife's body.

Lane's wife abuse is placed within a context of widespread domestic violence. At the Prader's, their closest neighbour, there are many references to wife battering. Sime Prader is violent and abusive to his young wife Melsie. Finally driven to desperation, she kills Sime while in labour; life and death become symbolically intertwined.

While the story of the Praders tends to blunt the

17. Diana Russell's *Rape in Marriage* (1982) was the first book published in North America to focus exclusively upon rape in marriage. However, Susan Brownmiller also included a discussion of this subject in her excellent work, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* which was first published in 1975. See: Diana Russell, *Rape in Marriage* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1982); Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975).

18. Russell, *Rape in Marriage*, p. 4.

19. *Ibid*, p. 3.

seriousness of Lane's behavior, in fact the level of domestic violence indicated in this novel could also suggest the pervasiveness of male abuse of power. Although Parsons does not mention any domestic violence in her autobiography, it is reasonable to assume that she had seen or heard about it in other prairie families. The physical hardship, economic uncertainty and isolation associated with farm life could undoubtedly become ingredients for violence.²⁰

The climax of the novel comes with a raging prairie fire, which destroys the Jarvis homestead and acts as a healing purge. Victoria and Lane become reconciled; Tory pledges "steadfast faith." (p. 244) It is important to realize that for this marriage to work, it is Victoria who must conform completely; "... it was she who must make adjustments and changes, she who must adapt herself to life with Lane...." (p.42) By the end of the novel, the transition is complete, as Victoria becomes completely resigned to her life in Saskatchewan. The romantic fantasy is fulfilled, and despite the serious marital problems which have plagued Lane and Victoria's marriage for almost four years, the ending is irrationally optimistic.

20. It is difficult to know how pervasive wife battering is on the prairies within this historical context. Recent national studies suggest domestic violence occurs in one out of every ten Canadian households. In rural areas, this problem is exacerbated by economic dependence on the husband, inclement weather, poor transportation and a lack of anonymity. All these factors can make it difficult for a battered woman to seek help. See Molly McGhee, *Women in Rural Life: The Changing Scene* (Ontario: Ministry of Agriculture and Food, 1984), pp. 33-34.

Mrs. Mike by Nancy [and Benedict] Freedman is very similar to *The Curlew Cried* in that it is a story about the adaptation a woman must make to be successful in her marriage. *Mrs. Mike* received much press attention when it first appeared in February 1947. The novel became the twentieth-anniversary selection of the Literary Guild of America, and appeared on several best-seller lists. While the novel is written by two American authors, it is a fictionalized biography based upon the real life experiences of the main heroine, Katherine Mary Flannigan.²¹

Unlike many other romance-type novels, this story does not spend a lot of time with physical description, although both Katherine and Mike Flannigan are attractive. Mike is a member of the North West Mounted Police, and patrols the area north of Calgary, Alberta where Katherine is visiting her uncle. He is certainly the most eligible man in the neighbourhood and begins to court Katherine soon after she arrives. Although she is young (only 16 years old), she agrees to marry him and return with him to Hudson's Hope.

The rest of the narrative turns on whether or not Katherine can accept her new life in the prairie north. After a particularly horrifying experience with a burning

21. For their work on *Mrs. Mike*, Nancy and Benedict Freedman were included in the 1947 edition of *Current Biography*. They also received an honourable mention in a *Life* magazine article on new and upcoming U.S. writers which featured none other than Truman Capote. See: *Current Biography: Who's Who and Why*, Anna Rothe, ed. (New York: H.W. Wilson Co., 1947); John Chamberlain, "Young U.S. Writers" *Life* (June 2, 1947).

barn, Katherine tells herself "If you love Mike, you'll love the things that go with him. And if you can't love them, you'll understand them - and until you do you'll fight to understand them in yourself...." (p. 82) This is Katherine's vow and her challenge for the rest of the novel. Like Victoria Jarvis, Katherine attempts to be the object of her husband, to adapt so that their marriage will be successful.

There are not many details about women's work in this novel, but there is a strong focus on childbearing and childrearing. As in *Red River Shadows* especially, children are important; "I touched the baby and touched Mike. My family, I thought. I was so happy." (p.153) As with many other female characters, motherhood is an essential part of Katherine's conceptualization of her social role.

Sarah Carpentier, the Cree midwife who assists Katherine with her labour, represents one of two pervasive images of aboriginal people, especially in pioneer literature. Sarah is knowledgeable in native lore and medicine, and she is a valuable asset to the community. It is common to see native Indians portrayed with respect, even awe, because they have the skills to survive in the wild. This attitude generally signals an initial acceptance of native people and their culture.

Subsidiary to this, though, is the attempts of the white people to convert aboriginal people to white ways, especially under the cloak of religion. In Grouard, there is

a Christian mission which attempts to train native girls as proper young ladies. As part of their baptism into a new way of life, they are given Christian names and are forbidden to use their native names, language or customs. Native women especially are perceived as savage, dangerous, and/or promiscuous. As in *Red River Shadows*, aboriginal women are seen to be at a crossroads: one path leading to a difficult and immoral life as a squaw, while the other route offers redemption by the white man through Christianity. Mother Superior represents this ethnocentric attitude admirably;

"I wonder if you realize what the word *klooch*, as Johnathan used it, implies? Tragedy for our Mission-trained girls. The tragedy of filth, dirt, ignorance, and superstition. Our girls read and write. Can you turn them into pack animals, to live in tepees, to haul and lift all day for a man who kicks and beats them? You see the impossibility of it." (p. 178)

While Mother Superior obviously has little appreciation or understanding for aboriginal society, it does seem true that in this novel, native women are the brunt of a great deal of physical abuse. Ironically though, this abuse is at the hands of white, not native, men.

During Sergeant Mike's courtship, he took Katherine to a local dance. During the evening, a Scot named Bull MacGregor hit his native wife in the face, "a hard short blow" which left her lip bleeding and a purple welt on her cheek. A similar scene is repeated later in the novel at the household of a trapper named Joe Henderson; "Henderson reached for an empty bottle. He had thrown it at her [his native wife], and she was picking up the shattered pieces

before I [Katherine] realized what had happened. A cut over her eye bled onto her hands as she worked." (p. 85) What is surprising about these two scenes is Sergeant Mike's reaction. While Katherine becomes angry and aggressive, Mike is indifferent. Even though a N.W.M.P. officer, he sees domestic abuse as a private matter and usually does not interfere in an official capacity. It is interesting to speculate the role that race plays in this issue. One cannot help but wonder that if it were a white woman being cut, bruised or beaten, if the Sergeant's reaction would differ. Scenes like this also seem to play upon images of the "stoic" Indian who will endure hardship passively, suggesting ultimately a lack of agency on their part. From the information provided it is difficult to know why these native women stay in these abusive situations, as they are not given a voice to tell their own story.

Finally, after her two children die in a diphtheria epidemic, Katherine decides she has had enough. The climax of the novel comes with Katherine's decision to return to Boston to visit her family. Her relationship with Mike hangs on the question of whether or not she will return. But the trip to Boston provides Katherine with a renewed perspective. She sees city life, and her family, as preoccupied with petty concerns compared to the daily life-and-death challenges of the Northwest. She realizes that:

It was the country, the country I was homesick and longing for, that made him *Sergeant Mike Flannigan*. I'd been unjust, I'd been wrong. I knew it now, and I had

to tell him. I had to have his arm around me and his voice telling me the wonderful things about the stars and wolf dung. (p.296) (author's italics)

In much the same way as Victoria Jarvis, Katherine internalizes the blame for the problems in her marriage. It is just as legitimate to ask whether Mike should have given her some indication of what life in the Northwest would be like before he married her. Yet, the narrative does not allow this perspective, perhaps as a consequence of the first person narrative which focuses narrowly upon Katherine's point-of-view. Katherine and Mike are reunited, and as a consequence of the post-WWI flu epidemic, inherit three children as well. The family is re-established and the marital ideal is achieved once more. Katherine ends the novel happily married.

Romance/realism - van der Mark

Christine van der Mark's *In Due Season* (1947) is quite different from the other novels published in this period. First, it is a story about a strong, independent, and ambitious woman, who, though married, has largely divorced herself from men and runs her own farm. Secondly, while there are romantic elements in the novel, the narrative is more influenced by a realist documentary style.²² Even more interesting is the consequences for the portrayal of women. Although the main protagonist, Lina Ashley, transcends

22. Dorothy Livesay, "Introduction" to Christine van der Mark, *In Due Season* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1947), p. iv.

typical sex-typing, the price she pays for this is complete alienation from her family and the community by the end of the novel.

The story begins with an auction; the Ashley family (father Sym, mother Lina, grandfather Benjie and daughter Poppy) are moving north to Bear Claw, Alberta to begin a new homestead. It is the Depression era and poverty is pervasive. Sym has already left months before to purchase their new homestead. But he is unreliable, and Lina does not expect to see him for some time. Although Sym is gentle and kind, Lina has little respect for him, seeing him more as an hindrance to her overwhelming ambition.

Lina is a fascinating character among the traditional wives and mothers which dominate the other novels. Unlike the other female protagonists, she is not notable for her physical attributes. What is striking is her strength of character. She is strong, determined and hard, and could be included in Dick Harrison's description of a "prairie patriarch" or "a land-hungary, work-intoxicated tyrant."²³ She could also be part of Henry Kreisel image of prairie man as the "giant-conquerer," although his imagery of the male rape of the female earth brutally exposes his gender-bias.²⁴ Both Harrison and Kreisel see exploitation of the land as particularly male, but Lina is woman who intends to conquer:

Lina began to tear at the land with bare hands. (p. 36)

23. Harrison, "Unnamed Country" p. 90.

24. Kreisel, "The Prairie: A State of Mind," p. 261.

her chief concern had to be for the land. With Jack, she worked like a machine, scarcely stopping to straighten up or rest. They wrenched out great stumps and roots and prodigious rocks. Every inch of the rich soil must be fought for, with the heaving of shoulders and backs, and straining of horses. (p. 37)

For "prairie patriarches" there is a high cost for this kind of overwhelming devotion to the land. Like Caleb in Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* (1925) or Abe Spalding in *Fruits of the Earth* (1933), the consequence is alienation both from the land and in interpersonal relationships with family and friends.

The metaphor of the farmer as a machine is traditional within the Canadian prairie canon. As Dick Harrison observes, "The effect of mechanization, of farming becoming 'an industry...' is, in classical marxist terms, to further alienate prairie man [or woman] from the land. This process in turn affects the relations of the people involved and even their basic humanity."²⁵ Lina's ambition soon alienates her closest neighbours, the Olenski's. In order to secure a hayfield from them, Lina makes a grueling trip in the dead of winter to Bridgeville, several miles away. She loses her temper when the land agent tells her she is too late:

He went on making marks in his book. But a woman's furious shouting filled the room. "You count them days over, you damn blockhead!"

The eyes of the grey man widened. He saw before him a big woman, almost grotesquely dressed, her eyelids red-rimmed from the cold, her face coarsened by wind and weather. With blazing eyes and clenched fists she bent over the desk. The papers shook in his hand as he studied them again, carefully, making figures on the pad... he said humbly, "I beg your pardon, Madam. You are on time after all." (pp. 118-119)

25. Harrison, p. 105.

It would be difficult to travel much further from the images of femininity presented in the other novels. Lina's transformation is frightening and she loses a bit more of her humanity with every conquest. Eventually she secures the entire Olenski farm, taking advantage of a hunting accident which has left Mr. Olenski injured. This act is enough to finally drive Sym from her, appalled that she would use their misfortune for her personal gain.

One of the most interesting aspects of this novel is Lina's relationship with her daughter Poppy. Popular opinion states that Lina is a bad mother, expecting the young, delicate Poppy to work as hard as she does herself. She is constantly told she is "too hard" on Poppy, that Poppy needs "A little bit of loving." (p. 49) Still, van der Mark does not allow Lina to appear so one-dimensional. Lina can also be very maternal with her child; "She took off the child's wet things, and wrapped the little girl in a quilt, feeling a great tenderness for her. How she was growing!" (p. 164) Despite these moments, Lina and Poppy become increasingly alienated from each other, the focus of their mutual hostility centering upon a mixed-breed named Jay Baptiste.

After Poppy lost both her beloved father and grandfather, she relies increasingly upon Jay for comfort and support. Their bond is described quite romantically, reminiscent of the relationship between Catherine and

Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* (1847).²⁶ As Tudor, a friend of the family notices, their connection is so intimate as to preclude words:

Tudor became increasingly aware, too, of the understanding between the children. He had noticed it first when Lina inquired if Poppy would like something to eat. An unspoken question and answer had passed between the boy and girl. It was if she had asked, "Are you hungry?" And he had answered, "Very hungry." It was almost uncanny, the silent messages they flashed across at each other. Something unchildlike in their understanding of one another, Tudor thought. (p. 177)

Lina does not see this connection until Poppy is a teenager, and by this time it is too late. Despite Lina's best efforts to stop their courtship, Poppy eventually elopes with Jay.

Lina is typical to the other homesteaders in her complete contempt for native people and mixed-breeds. Throughout the novel, Lina spouts racist cliches; natives are "useless bums," "dirty," "good-for-nothing," "drunk." However, *In Due Season* is extraordinary for its sympathetic portrayal of the Metis from their point-of-view. There is a poignant moment when Jay and Tudor discuss the situation of the Metis. Jay laments that his people are continually diseased and dying, that as a breed he is "A dog." (p. 293) Christine van der Mark, through Jay, indicates how racist and ethnocentric attitudes on the part of white people can become tragic self-fulfilling prophecies.²⁷

26. This is a concept expanded from a similar suggestion by Dorothy Livesay in the Introduction to the novel. See Dorothy Livesay, "Introduction" to Christine van der Mark, *In Due Season*, p. iv.

27. Christine van der Mark was interested in improving the standard of living for the Metis people. In an article published in *Saturday Night* in 1948, she recommended the

There is also an increasing contrast between Jay and Lina, as rivals for Poppy's devotion. Jay, as suggested by his last name Baptiste, is wise, even spiritual; "His every attitude was one of grace." (p.292) (my emphasis) Lina, on the other hand, is losing touch with her soul, alienated from the land and those around her. Tellingly, in the final scene in the novel, as she learns that Poppy has left with Jay, she sits down to milk "mechanically." (p. 363) Her determination, ambition, and devotion to the land have withered her humanity and left her isolated.

Conclusion

The images of women presented in these novels are rich and suggestive. The romantic motif is strongly present in the three works by Parsons, Knox and Freedman. Not surprisingly, the images of women which appear in these novels are very traditional. They represent an ideal of femininity through strongly sex-stereotyped characteristics. Consequently, the women protagonists are confined in a rigid division of labour, preoccupied with domestic work, childbearing, and child-rearing. Even Lina Ashley must cook, clean, mend, and bear children, though she sees this as an inconvenience compared to her real work in the field. In

construction of hospitals on reserves, designed and operated by the Metis themselves. She felt this was the only way to counter the high levels of tuberculosis prevalent among their people. See Christine van der Mark, "Save Our Metis People by New Brand of Aid" *Saturday Night*, vol. 63 (April 24, 1948).

this respect, Lina is closer to the reality of women and farm labour on the prairies which often demanded flexibility in female roles.²⁸

The level of domestic violence is shocking. Psychological and physical abuse of varying degrees pervade the romantic novels in this period. What is depressing about this violence is its general acceptance by the characters involved. This implicitly permits the institution of marriage to avoid any criticism or questioning. It is assumed that when "Mr. Right" is found, the heroine has achieved personal *telos*.

Race is a significant factor in many of the novels. Treatment of native people by whites runs the gamut from acceptance and respect to contempt and attempts at assimilation. Unfortunately, native women themselves rarely have a voice in these novels. They are literally silent, seen only through white eyes.

The actions and thoughts of the female protagonists in these novels of the late 1940s clearly demonstrate a social script or ideology which saw women within specific sex-typed roles, primarily as wives and mothers. The pervasiveness of the romantic motif led women deliberately to a psychological and social expectation that their greatest individual happiness lay within the heterosexual couple, within a good marriage. This is consistent with popular expectations of

28. Seena Kohl, *Working Together: Women and Family in Southwestern Saskatchewan* (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), p. 33.

women after the Second World War, when social pressure and public policy demanded women to relinquish their wartime labour to returning veterans and retreat to the private sphere.

CHAPTER THREE*Women's prairie novels of the 1950s*

The 1950s represent a continuation of the public emphasis on domesticity and motherhood for women which began right after the Second World War. However, underneath popular projections of the "Happy Housewife," a tentative revolution was beginning. Women were returning to the labour market in increasing numbers: not only single women, but married women as well. Against public censure and inadequate daycare, married women were committed to ensuring their standard of living. This tentative rebellion against the status quo found its expression in the cultural tradition of the prairies. While the romantic motif is still strongly present, there is an increasing transition to the realistic mode. Hence, the novels written by prairie women at this time reveal a greater diversity of roles for their female characters. In the novels of the late 1940s, women were primarily wives and mothers; in the novels of the 1950s, women are often shown as professionals and labourers. There is correspondingly less focus on the heterosexual couple and the institution of marriage itself is treated more critically. There is greater awareness of the social definition of gender, exposed particularly when the literature approaches the socialization of young girls. Overall, the images presented of women in the 1950s indicate

greater dissatisfaction with the public definition of their position in Canadian society.

Women's lives in the 1950s

The 1950s saw intense social pressures brought upon women to confine them to a limited sphere. Mass media in particular engaged in projecting few options for women beyond marriage and motherhood:

Advertisements aimed at the single young woman counselled her on how to catch a man, and glamour was decreed her most highly prized attribute. The 1950s were the decade of Yves St. Laurent's 'New Look,' the sweater girl, and Marilyn Monroe.¹

Given the competition for marriage partners, women took advantage of a variety of recently developed feminine products to increase their desirability; this included disinfectants, padded bras, soaps, cosmetics and sanitary napkins.² Ads for consumer products promised women fulfillment with marriage.

Once a woman wed, there was the expectation for her to keep her husband happy, to run the household efficiently, and to bear children and care for them. In particular, contemporary psychological theory sided with pro-family advocates to stress reproduction; "As Freudian views about women became more widespread in the 1950s, as did the psychosomatic approach to medicine, doctors stressed the importance of women's reproductive and maternal roles."³

1. Prentice et al, *Canadian Women*, p. 308.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, p. 309.

Suddenly, maternity was deemed essential for good mental and physical health. Greater acceptance of the Freudian emphasis on the crucial early stages of child development also placed added stress upon the mother. Popular child-rearing texts like Dr. Spock's *Baby and Child Care* (1945) were part of an increasing trend in child-centered care; "The caregiver in Spock is a monitor of her child's development as well as a self-scanner, obliged to have 'a natural, easy confidence,' 'encouraged to be firm,' at times, but always readily available for a baby-mother interchange."⁴ Not only did this heighten the responsibility to the mother, it largely ignored variables of class, race and ethnicity.

Demographically, this emphasis on home and family continued to see productive results. The percentage of women ever-married (ie. married, divorced, separated, widowed) increased from 88.3% in 1951 to 90.5% in 1961.⁵ The size of families expanded dramatically.⁶ In rural areas, this trend coincided with technological advancements in farm equipment:

4. Nancy Weiss, "Mother, the Invention of Necessity: Dr. Benjamin Spock's *Baby and Child Care*," in *History of Women in North America: Course Reader*, Dr. Anita Clair Fellman, ed. (Burnaby: Simon Fraser University Press, 1985), p. 43.

5. Ellen Gee, "The Life Course of Canadian Women: An Historical and Demographic Analysis," *Social Indicators Research*, vol. 18 (1986), p. 266.

6. *Ibid.* There was a general decline in families which had none or one child between 1951 to 1961 (a reduction of 32.3% to 29.3% and 23.5% to 20.2% respectively). Correspondingly, the greatest increase in family size occurred in those homes with three to four children (an increase of 10.9% to 13.4% and 5.8% to 7.5% respectively). See Warren Kalbach and Wayne McVey, *The Demographic Basis of Canadian Society* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1971), p. 355.

In the 1950s as the push toward mechanization and specialization of the farm began, farm women were encouraged to return to the home, their field labour no longer viewed as important [as it was during WWII]. A wife who did not work outside the home or in the field was a symbol of affluence and status.⁷

However, underneath the public projection, and the demographic realization, of women as wives and mothers, a tentative revolution was taking place. Women, especially married women, were gradually moving into the paid labour force. Between 1951 and 1961, the proportion of working married females almost doubled, moving from 11.2% to 22.1%.⁸ The highest participation rates occurred with young, recently married women aged 20-24, with a decline at age 30-34 years, which coinciding with childbearing and rearing; as McVey and Kalbach put it "... the presence of young school age children exert[ed] a depressing effect on the labour force participation of mothers."⁹ However, after children had grown and become more independent, married women tended to move back into the labour market, generally after 45 years of age.¹⁰ This was in direct opposition to public opinion which believed women - especially married women and mothers - should stay put in the home.¹¹

7. Lois Ross, *Harvest of Opportunity: New Horizons for Farm Women* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1990), p. 6.

8. Kalbach and McVey, p. 274.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 275.

10. *Ibid.*

11. As Prentice *et al* note "By the end of the 1950s, it should have been clear that women were in the workplace to stay. Instead, what was mainly noticed was the continuing emphasis on women's role in the home." See Prentice *et al*, *Canadian Women*, p. 316. Unfortunately, I found no public opinion polls which measured popular opinion of single or married women in the workplace in the 1950s. However, in

The kinds of jobs available had not changed drastically from the inter-war period. According to data compiled from Armstrong and Armstrong, the leading female occupations for 1951 included stenographers and typists, maids and related service workers, graduate nurses, waitresses, tailoresses, schoolteachers, and telephone operators.¹² Often sex-typed and segregated as female labour, these occupations were characterized by low skill requirements, low pay, low status and low rates of unionization.¹³

A Tentative Questioning of Prescribed Female Roles

There was an increasing dichotomy between public images of women's role, and the social and economic reality of many women's lives. Undeniably, the role of wife and mother was paramount. However, privately the interpretation of what this meant was beginning to undergo revision. The novels written by women in the prairies reflect this re-interpretation of women's social script. The romantic motif is not as prevalent as in the novels of the late 1940s. While the novels by Williams and Lysenko are strongly within the romantic tradition, other novels by Russell, Taylor and Cormack contain competing elements of both realism and romance. And novels published near the end of the 1950s by

1960, 93% of the Canadian population believed it was wrong for a mother with young children to work outside the home. See Gertrude Robinson, "The Media and Social Change: Thirty Years of Magazine Coverage of Women and Work" *Atlantis*, vol. 8, no. 2 (Spring, 1983), p. 97.

12. Armstrong and Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto*, p. 34.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

Wiseman and Roy are realistic in approach. In other words, the novels of the 1950s have a much greater breadth in subject. In these works there is considerable diversity in female roles, especially with regard to paid labour; women are teachers, nurses, or factory workers. There is also one newspaper editor, a store owner, a professional performer and a writer. There are three main protagonists who end their respective novels without experiencing either marriage or childbirth. This fact alone is revealing, and indicates a movement away from the heterosexual couple which so dominates the novels of the 1940s. Matrimony itself is treated more critically and divorce plays a greater role with dysfunctional couples. Also, the entire life-span of women is exposed in some detail, including the early socialization of young girls, to the increased marginalization of older women who can no longer achieve societal ideals of female youth and beauty. In the novels of the 1950s, there is a more honest discourse about women's lives and a real indication that the "Happy Housewife" was perhaps not quite so happy.

Women's Portrayal in the Novels of the 1950s

Romance - Williams, Lysenko

The novels by Flos Williams and Vera Lysenko have the strongest romantic motifs in terms of plot and characterization. They are traditional in perspective, but

still offer a greater variety in their interpretation of female roles than the novels of the late 1940s.

Flos Williams' *Fold Home* (1950) came out to mixed reviews in 1950.¹⁴ The story centers around the family of Lady Mackenzie and is set on her ranch near Calgary, Alberta just after the Second World War. The plot centers on whether or not Lady Mackenzie will sell this ranch to an oil exploration company to cover mounting debts (advocated by her two spoiled children, Janet and Arthur), or if she will keep the ranch as it is (as desired by her lover Trevor and her other son Ian). The story is complicated by a visiting English dignitary (Lord Brooke), his wife (Lady Gwen) and secretary (Constance Howard). Despite its cynical and sophisticated tone towards relationships, by the end of the novel there are no less than three weddings planned.

The most ideally romantic relationship occurs between the son Ian and Constance Howard (Lord Brooke's mistress for the past twelve years). Typically, they are both physically very attractive, and fall in love at first sight:

[Constance] looked through a side door... to where a man was forking manure. He stared at her in silent surprise, the fork suspended.

"Oh!" cried Constance, startled, and then gazed as open-eyed and silent as the man. He stood in a golden haze of dust motes.... Beneath his broad brow, his hazel eyes and thick lashes were as golden as his hair. Though not tall, the perfect bone structure of his face and his

14. Of the two book reviews I found, one was a scathing condemnation and the other was full of praise for William's artistic accomplishments. See: Elizabeth Wallace "Recent Canadian Fiction" *Queen's Quarterly*, vol. 57 (Winter 1950-51), pp. 585-586; J.E.P. "'Out' West" *Saturday Night*, vol. 66 (Jan. 30, 1951), p. 27.

strong tanned body stripped to the waist, gave an impression of size and strength....

"You look so amazing - like a golden statue out there from within the dark barn. No wonder I was speechless."

The man shoved his fork with deliberation into the pile of manure and came slowly towards the girl. His mobile lips were smiling in wonder...

"And you, of course, are Ceres, the Goddess I worship," he said softly. (p.82)

Frankly, when one meets the love of their life on a pile of manure, one would think the situation could only get better. In fact, their relationship does have its obstacles. Ian must reconcile himself to the fact that Constance is "no sweet young English Miss." (p. 116) Surprisingly, he is able to overcome the double standard of sexuality, an improvement over the traditional romantic formula which demands either female chastity or the death of the heroine for her seduction by another man.

Lady Mackenzie, and her proposed nuptials, is even more unusual within the romantic context.¹⁵ She is a widow and considers herself "old." Unfortunately Williams never provides her chronological age. But what is interesting about this scenario is Williams' deliberate attempts to undermine this variable by affirming Lady Mackenzie's physical beauty:

Her face was remarkably free of wrinkles. The fine bone structure of her face with its high cheek bones had

15. Lady Mackenzie in *Fold Home* is a half-breed. Her mother was the daughter of an native chief and her father was a Scottish trader. But her racial heritage rarely seems important. She is beautiful, wealthy and has a high social status (in fact is considered part of an Albertan aristocracy). There is some reference in the novel to some race snobbery which she experienced in Ottawa, but this can be seen as more of a commentary on eastern Canada.

taken care of that, but the tell-tale neck told her years.... Her tawny arms were still as lovely as a girl's, and her figure was good. (p.6)

Physically Lady Mackenzie does not conform to unflattering stereotypes of older women, but this is not to suggest that she is still sexually active. When Lady Mackenzie considers marriage, it is because "Companionship was sweet, as one grew older." (p.32) It seems Williams cannot contemplate Lady Mackenzie as sexually aggressive, undoubtedly due to the North America's narrow association of sexuality with youth.¹⁶ In fact, Lady Mackenzie agonizes over the question of whether or not she should remarry. She fears public censure and ridicule, and her hesitation indicates the depth of social regulations surrounding the combination of old age, sexuality and marriage.

While marriage is still the ultimate goal for most of the characters in this novel, there is some improvement over the typical romantic formula. The female protagonists are women who are mature and independent. This factor increases the tension between their fictional experience and the romantic ideal. Despite unsuccessful and painful relationships in the past, these female heroines maintain considerable faith in marriage. Even Janet, who has been married and divorced twice, ends the novel searching for that perfect man. In the final pages, she rejoices in a new career as a hostess for a cruise liner because she "...would

16. See Leah Cohen, *Small Expectations: Society's Betrayal of Older Women* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1984), pp. 34-35.

meet dozens of eligible men, interesting men, with money and position." (p.252) As with earlier romantic novels, there is a relentless faith in the socially-sanctioned couple.

Vera Lysenko's *Yellow Boots* (1954) and *Westerly Wild* (1956) both have strong romantic formulas, although *Yellow Boots* fulfills the expectations of this formula while *Westerly Wild* does not. Of the two novels, *Yellow Boots* is the more interesting in that it is the first novel published in this period which has a major female protagonist where ethnicity is an essential factor of experience.¹⁷ Lilli Landash is Ukrainian, and as a female this heritage has a profound effect upon her life-choices.

Ethnicity is a flexible term, but here refers to two characteristics: first, the language, traditions, country of origin, attitudes and food patterns; and second, a minority status based upon ethnic lines.¹⁸ Both of these definitions are applicable to *Yellow Boots*. The novel is filled with rich description of Ukrainian heritage: rituals, festivals, stories, feasts, superstitions and traditions. The Landash family are also an ethnic minority within the larger

17. There were female protagonists, who carried an ethnic heritage with them in novels earlier than *Yellow Boots*. Victoria, in *The Curlew Cried*, is British and Hélène, in *Red River Shadows*, is French Canadian. However, both these characters cannot be said to be a part of an ethnic minority in the Canadian context. There is no discussion of any transposed ethnic traditions, and the pioneer situations which they are a part of seems to preclude dominance by any single ethnic group.

18. Danielle Juteau-Lee and Barbara Roberts, "Ethnicity and Femininity," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, vol. XIII, no. 1 (1981), p. 1.

Canadian context. Their heritage provides them with an unique identity which separates their farming community from others in Manitoba.

As a female, Lilli both suffers and benefits from this heritage. Ukrainian society dictates a very confining role for women. As a young girl, Lilli worked as a helper in the kitchen or on the farm, learning the skills of a good farming wife. Her schooling is discouraged because it is assumed that as a female, she does not need formal education. Ukrainian culture also sanctions unmitigated patriarchal authority; her father is a strict and brutal disciplinarian. As Lilli grows older, her father sees her primary utility in terms of a marriage alliance to a nearby farmer, Simon Zachary. Zachary is a cruel man, and the popular rumor is that he killed his previous wife by beating her to death. When Lilli tries to protest this terrifying betrothal, her father replies:

"`You will do as I say or else- ' He doubled his hand into a fist, and shook it at her. `I will take you to him, if I have to drag you by the hair, in the sight of all.'" (p. 195)

His complete indifference to her wellbeing liberates Lilli. She rebels against Ukrainian gender roles, and her father's all-encompassing authority, and leaves for Winnipeg.

While women's role in Ukrainian culture is demonstrated as unnecessarily confining, her Ukrainian heritage does provide Lilli with a culture to nurture her imaginative and creative soul. The stories of her grandmother, the smell of

Ukrainian feasts, the colour of an Ukrainian celebration allows Lilli to develop a deep appreciation and empathy for ethnic and racial diversity. She has a beautiful singing voice, and her success as a performer in Winnipeg stems from her ability to artistically capture the folk songs from the prairie mosaic.

The romantic elements of the novel swing into full force when Lilli arrives in Winnipeg. After working as a maid and factory labourer, she discovers the Winnipeg Folk Choir led by Matthew Reiner. Matthew is groomed for Lilli as a life-mate almost from the first minute she sees him. Although considerably older, he is an academically trained musician who immediately begins her professional supervision. What he has in knowledge and experience, she matches in enthusiasm and innate talent. They plan to marry as the novel closes.

There are several options which are presented to immigrant groups once they arrive in Canada:

Some keep their native culture alive by erecting linguistic barriers between themselves and the cosmopolitan community surrounding them. Some achieve social and psychological stability by bending to Canadian customs in part while preserving native folklore and beliefs. Some largely abandon the ways of the fatherland in favour of the North American within two generations.¹⁹

It is debatable to see where Lilli Landash stands with regards to this. Natalia Aponiuk, in "The Problem of Identity: The Depiction of Ukrainians in Canadian

19. Eric Thompson, "Prairie Mosaic: The Immigrant Novel in the Canadian West," *Studies in Canadian Literature* (Fall, 1980), p.242.

Literature," sees Lilli's marriage to a white, Anglo-Saxon male as easily accessible assimilation and a rejection of her heritage.²⁰ However, this interpretation ignores that Lilli intended to marry a local Ukrainian boy, but was prevented by a family feud. Further, Lysenko's novels are always a celebration of ethnic traditions. Her non-fiction *Men in Sheepskin Coats: A Study in Assimilation* (1947) warned against the loss of Ukrainian culture within an industrialized North America.²¹ For Lilli, her life choices travel a fine line between ethnicity and femininity, the two major determinants of her experience.

Westerly Wild, the second novel written by Lysenko, is concerned less about ethnicity and more about romance. Julie Lacoste is a highly educated, cultured and beautiful teacher who arrives in a small prairie town of Fair Prospect, Saskatchewan in 1937. She is immediately attracted to the wealthiest farmer in the area, the handsome Marcus Haugen. The artistic influence of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) is almost embarrassingly obvious. Like *Jane Eyre*, Julie is an instructor; she is artistic, passionate, and morally upright. Like Mr. Rochester, Marcus is a landowner with a suspect past; he is arrogant, moody, and morally

20. Natalia Aponiuk, "The Problem of Identity: The Depiction of Ukrainians in Canadian Literature" *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, vol. xiv, no. 1 (1982), p. 50.

21. Thompson, "Prairie Mosaic," p. 256. It is surprising that in a recent article reviewing Ukrainian literature in Manitoba, Lysenko's fictional novels were not mentioned at all. See Watson Kirkconnell, "Ukrainian Literature in Manitoba," *Mosaic*, vol. 3, no. 3 (Spring, 1970).

questionable. Marcus continually makes obscure references to that fact that Julie will be his salvation. Finally, it is revealed that Marcus has an insane wife almost in his attic (she lives on the second floor), and the crux of the romance turns on whether or not Julie will still accept him.

This is where the similarity to *Jane Eyre* ends. There is no "Reader, I married him." Julie decides she must leave the community, and her future is open. Her identity remains intact because she will not compromise her moral principles. In other words, the heroine refuses to become the object of the hero. Ironically, it is Marcus who dies for thwarting the romantic ending:

Marriage celebrates the ability to negotiate with sexuality and kinship; death is caused by inabilities or improprieties in this negotiation, a way of deflecting attention from man-made social norms to cosmic sanctions.²²

The day after Julie leaves, Marcus is killed while exercising his Clydesdale horses during a chance storm. It is perhaps a challenge to the romantic formula to turn its conventions upon the male protagonist, to undermine man-made social norms. At the very least, this is a denial of the "happily ever after" ending.

Romance/realism - Russell, Taylor, Cormack

Sheila Russell's *The Living Earth* (1954) is a wonderful novel set in a very isolated community named Mud Creek, probably in post-WWII Alberta. There are two main female

22. DuPlessis, p. 4.

protagonists, a district nurse named Paula Hoode and a teacher named Agnes Miller. While the novel has a fairly conventional ending in the romantic vein (both women plan to marry), it stands out from many of the other works of the 1950s in its honest portrayal of human relationships.

Paula Hoode, beautiful and well educated, not only has to adjust to the high expectations of a district nurse in an isolated area, she must also deal with unwanted sexual attention from a married colleague, Philip Jerome. This attention creates an awkward triangle between Paula, Philip, and his wife Rosa. Although Paula is attracted to Philip, she rejects his attentions due to her own code of ethics and her compassion for his wife. In fact, in the face of his appalling behavior, Paula and Rosa become friends; "The kind [of friends] who open their hearts and their minds to each other *and stand by each other.*" (p. 176) (my emphasis) Rather than co-operating in sexual rivalry, they undermine the situation through female bonding.

Paula is a somewhat typical heroine, so it is Agnes Miller who is the real treasure of this novel. She is an older woman, abrupt, authoritative and professional. But Agnes is coming close to menopause, and due to the absolute association between women, marriage and motherhood, the approach of this change of life has thrown her into an emotional crisis:

For the first time in adulthood, reason had forsaken Agnes. While outwardly she moved with her customary appearance of indomitability, inwardly she had succumbed

to demoralizing despair. The future was unbearably without purpose, and looming immediately before her was ... menopause. The symptoms were unmistakable now and had assumed an obsessive significance for her. They embodied in her mind the end of all hope of achieving the satisfaction of normal womanhood. (p.211)

It is very revealing that for Agnes the ability to procreate is essential to be "normal," to be an independent, career woman presumably "abnormal" or "unnatural."

Part of Agnes's difficulty is that she cannot express emotion, belying common stereotypes of women as passionate, affectionate and loving. In her own mind, she links this to a deprived childhood. She was an orphan, and never really accepted her foster parents as representative of a family; "Surely it wasn't surprising that she couldn't love, for she had never really been loved. She had never received the caresses and endearments that were the birthright of a normal childhood." (pp. 145-146) This doubt about her own emotional capabilities causes her to drive away a possible suitor named Carl Gunderson, a local lumber magnate. It is not until Agnes visits her dying foster mother (who inadvertently reveals her love for Agnes) that she is able to return to Mud Creek and accept Carl as her husband. By this time, however, Agnes has moved past menopause and can no longer have children. The ending of the novel suggests that this problem will be dealt with through adoption. Still, notwithstanding the fact that Agnes will find a way to achieve her goal of a family unit, it is suggestive that she will not be the biological mother and is still desirable as a wife despite this. It could be expected that the young,

beautiful Paula would find a mate; it is something else when it is "old," not-so-beautiful Agnes.

The Living Earth is noteworthy as the first novel of this selection to provide some forum to examine the variables of race and gender. Rosa Jerome's mother was Cree and her father was Scottish. Through her memories, it is revealed that her father instilled a deep insecurity about her mixed-blood heritage; her negative socialization became augmented by the racism she did experience, until she developed an "abnormal sensitivity" about the colour of her skin.

Her feelings of inferiority prevent her from having a healthy relationship with her white husband, Dr. Philip Jerome. Their marriage is strained to the breaking point by his occasional substance abuse (both alcohol and narcotics), as well as his repeated infidelities. In fact, it is when Rosa becomes pregnant that she finds the strength to leave Philip and begin divorce proceedings:

She had known that she must be stronger and more fearless on her child's behalf than she had ever been able to be on her own. He must not be condemned to an inferior status or to an in-between world as she had been. She would raise him here with her mother's people where he would be respected and loved. She would not expose him to the blind snobbery or the benevolent patronage or the bland stupidity of the white race - or for that matter to a home where insecurity and resentments between his parents would tear him in half. (p. 298)

Her character is essential in exposing a sympathetic interpretation of the experience of a half-breed woman, as well as the harsh reality of an unhappy marriage. Unlike

previous native or half-breed women (in *Mrs. Mike* especially), Rosa is angry, an active agent. She responds to her situation and takes control, although still ultimately confined by variables of race and gender.

Gladys Taylor's *Pine Roots* (1956) is the story of early homesteaders in Swan River, Manitoba. The story centers upon Harry and Mary Trelawney and their family, although also intersects with several other families in the area. Like *Mrs. Mike* and *The Curlew Cried*, this novel is interested in Mary's attempt to adapt to the homestead situation.

Mary's difficulties in pioneering is metaphorically represented in her hatred of trees, especially pine trees. Symbolically, Mary resigns herself to the prairie when she allows her granddaughter to be named Pine. By this time, however, she is a widow and there is no opportunity for her to share fully in the pioneering life which her husband loved. In this way, Mary is a much more tragic figure than either Victoria or Katherine.

Like *The Living Earth*, *Pine Roots* also provides insight into the difficult lives of native and half-breed girls. Willow Mackenzie is a half-breed and continually challenges the ethnocentric attitudes which would demean her. She expresses her anger at the way local lumberjacks treat native and half-breed women:

"They rush and snatch at us as though we had no feeling. They do not care if they hurt our arms or pull our clothes. They think we are just part of the bush, a part they don't have to work so hard to get." (p. 160)

Defiantly, she marries a white man (James Trelawney), flaunting dominant social mores which keep individual racial groups in separate camps. Almost immediately, racism from his family, even within James, begins a war of attrition against their relationship. James demonstrates his ultimate rejection of her mixed-race heritage when he refuses to touch their infant son, born with brown skin. This action drives Willow to commit suicide before another unwanted child is conceived. Her death clearly captures the sometimes overwhelming difficulties of race and gender in an ethnocentric and androcentric world.

Pine Roots, like the earlier pioneering novels of the 1940s, also has considerable violence against women. At the center of this violence is Jerry Browning. Taylor is unusual from other female novelist in that she attempts to explain the roots of his mysogyny. As a child, Jerry despised the maids who suffered the lecherous attentions of his father, and also despised his mother for ignoring these same transgressions. By the time he was an adult, he despised women, and men, who submitted to power and domination:

Jerry Browning despised women for two reasons: for yielding to him and for not yielding. He saw weakness in one, virtue in the other - and he hated both. He despised men and women alike, for their goodness, their kindness, their tolerance or whatever other quality in them made them his prey. And he was merciless in preying on them. (p. 19)

Obviously women are more vulnerable, both physically and psychologically. Not only do they often have less strength, they are often culturally conditioned to be submissive to

men. Further, as "All rape is an exercise in power,"²³ it is not surprising that by the end of the novel, Browning horsewhips his mistress (Sue Blakely), rapes one woman (Theresa Leday)²⁴ and attempts to rape the widowed Mary Trelawney. While his business ventures are destroyed by an angry mob, it is telling that this destruction is for crimes against other men, and not for his abominations against women. As in the other novels, this kind of violence is generally tolerated and legal action is never taken.

Barbara Villy Cormack wrote two books in the 1950s, *Local Rag* (1951) and *The House* (1955). Both novels could be labeled as primarily documentary realist, with some romantic elements. Neither novel has any particular plot. For the most part, the images of women from these novels are very traditional.

Local Rag is narrated from the perspective of an older newspaper editor named Emily King. The structure of the novel comes from the narrator sifting through old editions of her local newspaper, the *Crossroads News*, in the small prairie town of Crossroads, Alberta. The newspaper was first begun in 1906 by her father, and covers the time period through to WWII. Emily highlights the small excerpts with her own memories and interpretation of events.

23. Brownmiller, p. 256.

24. It is suggestive that Theresa Leday, although white, is known as "a bad half breed," meaning she is sexually aggressive. While Taylor does not go so far as to suggest she gets what she deserves, the double standard of sexuality effectively silences her after the rape.

Of course, Emily's own life is included in much of the commentary. This includes her family life, schooling, work at the newspaper and her friends, particularly Margaret Hungerford. Interestingly, Emily (who is about 40 years old) has never married and clearly does not intend to at this "late" age. She is content with her job as the writer and editor of the local rag. Unfortunately, there is no reason provided for why she has not wed, although it is noteworthy that she never expresses regret for not marrying, nor does her spinster aunt, Letty.

Margaret Hungerford is also an interesting character whose story highlights the difficulty of a young woman who bears an illegitimate child. The local community goes through its period of moral indignation, but is generally willing to forgive the transgression. What is unusual is Margaret's personal response: first, she develops an obsessive commitment to deny herself any happiness; second, she distrusts and despises men. Margaret's first reaction is understandable in the context of the novel. Given the double standard of sexuality, Margaret is expected to be a virgin when she marries, to be sexually desirable but not sexually available. She internalizes the blame for her pregnancy and wants to punish herself for the crime she feels she has committed. Her second response is another matter. Her wholesale hatred of men is something new in this literature. In the other novels, there were women who hated individual men, but never a situation where men were despised on the

basis of their gender. Past novels suggest that it is far more socially acceptable to record misogyny rather than misandry. Margaret's distrust of men is seen as unnatural and extreme by the community. Given this, it comes as no surprise that by the end of the novel, Margaret has turned around in her opinions and plans to marry a local farmer.

Cormack's *The House* also has very little plot. The novel is about four families who live on the same homestead outside of Greentree, Alberta between WWI and WWII. The most constant characters are Joe and Mary Culver who live next door and who also stay in the House for a period.

Mary Culver is a very traditional mother-figure. Cormack actually sets up a biblical simile on the first page which links the House to God, with Mary and Joe(sph) undoubtedly the contemporary representatives of that ancient couple. This allusion is not developed much beyond this. Still, Mary does seem to hang onto the aura of the Virgin Mother; "Plump and matronly already at twenty-four, Mother she was called then and all her life to follow, though she was never to bear a child." (p.12) Here Mother is a idealized term, referring not to Mary's ability to reproduce, but general female qualities of loving, caring and nurturing.²⁵

25. As Jane Mills points out in *Womanwords* "For every definition of *mother* or a mother-combination term which contains connotations of love, respect and reverence there seems to be another connoting fear, hatred or disrespect." With Mary, or for that matter any other mother figures in the novels of the 1940s and 1950s, female authors generally do not recognize this ambiguity. Jane Mills, *Womanwords* (London: Virago Press, 1991), p. 171.

In contrast to Mary, Gertrude Carter re-introduces the question of women who are more ambitious than their husbands, similar to Lina Ashley in *In Due Season*. Gertrude is continually frustrated that her husband is not as successful as the other men she might have married; "if only Mike wasn't such a flop, and such a softie. It made her furious, especially when she considered all the other chances that had been hers." (p.196) Her restless energy switches from her gentle husband to a local German immigrant once the Second World War begins. He becomes an easy scapegoat for the problems generated by the Depression and the war, and inadvertently her hostility drives him to commit suicide. There is a public inquiry (where the Culvers are accused of harbouring a spy), but Gertrude's suspicions are proved unfounded and she is led away by her husband, subdued and weeping. It is interesting that these ambitious women seem to be punished in some way for their aspirations. While Lina ended *In Due Season* spiritually bereft, Gertrude is publicly humiliated. This seems to suggest that women should be content with the social and economic status dictated by their husbands.

Realism - Wiseman, Roy

Adele Wiseman's *The Sacrifice* (1956) won the Governor General Award for Fiction in 1956 and is an important novel within the Canadian literary canon. It is the story of a Jewish family in exile from Russia who come to Winnipeg,

probably after WWI. The story is dominated by male protagonists, with specific allusions to the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac; literary criticism has dealt with this in detail, so it will not be discussed here.²⁶ Less common, though, is an examination of significance of the female characters.

The women in *The Sacrifice* are generally very traditional figures. They do not have the depth of characterization of women-centered novels. Patricia Morley, in "Engel, Wiseman, Laurence: Women Writers, Women's Lives," is extremely critical of the portrayal of women in this novel:

The protagonists... are male, and women appear in conventional roles such as the gossiping landlady, the faithful wife, the loyal daughter-in-law, the sensual and immoral woman, the unmarried virgin, giggling adolescents, and hysterical female factory workers. The view of a chauvinistic society, that man must work and study while women should care for the home, that a man must 'make his own decisions with God's help' while a woman should be subject to her husband, seems to belong to the author's view, perhaps at a subconscious level.²⁷

26. See: Robert Thacker, "Foreigner: The Immigrant Voice in *The Sacrifice* and *Under the Ribs of Death*" *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, vol. XIV, no. 1 (1982), pp. 25-35; Russell Brown, "Beyond Sacrifice" *Journal of Canadian Fiction* (16), pp. 158-162.; John Moss, "Adele Wiseman, *The Sacrifice*" *A Reader's Guide to the Canadian Novel*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1980, pp. 378-380; D.G. Jones, *Butterfly on Rock* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), Chapter six; Helene Rosenthal, "Spiritual Ecology: Adele Wiseman's *The Sacrifice*," *Writers of the Prairies*, Donald Stephens, ed. (Victoria: Morriss Printing, 1973), pp. 77-88.

27. Patricia Morley, "Engel, Wiseman, Laurence: Women Writers, Women's Lives" *World Literature Written in English*, vol. 17, no. 1 (April, 1978), p. 157.

While much of this criticism is valid, much of it is also unfair. In the first place, Morley bases the bulk of her analysis through a comparison of this novel to Wiseman's second work *Crackpot* (1974), even though the latter novel was written eighteen years later. By the early 1970s, there was a great deal of attention paid to women's issues in the media, so it hardly seems surprising that *Crackpot* is more feminist in perspective. Secondly, it is debatable whether or not Wiseman, consciously or unconsciously, advocated that a woman should stay at home under the patriarchal thumb. Here Morley seems to associate Wiseman's personal opinion with Abraham's sexist views. However, much of the conflict in the novel stems from the clash between the traditional Old World view of Abraham and the progressive New World view of his son Issac. There is one scene in the novel where Abraham and Issac are arguing about the role of women. Issac denies Abraham's biological determinism and states:

Nowadays a woman can think about the same things a man thinks about. She can go out and make a living too. We don't think about women as our inferiors any more. Marriage is a partnership. Each one gives what he can.
(pp. 110-111)

It is just as legitimate to argue that Wiseman is progressive, even revolutionary, in her views about women given the historical (and Canadian) context. *The Sacrifice* is the first prairie novel published after the Second World War which makes such a blatant statement for the equality of women both in the public and private spheres.

Issac's wife Ruth is the first married woman to work within the paid labour market, realistically mirroring the larger social and economic changes of the time. When Ruth is widowed, she takes over the economic responsibility for her aged father-in-law and young child by arranging to manage a store. For a minor character, she is independent, self-sufficient and responsible, and transcends traditional sex-stereotypes.

Laiah, the local prostitute, is also much different from past female characters. While there have been many women with "loose morals" in the other novels, none have been given such prominence. As a prostitute, Laiah is automatically on the social and economic fringe of society. She is repulsive to Abraham, not only for her open sexuality but also because of her denial of motherhood. Given the narrative perspective of the novel, Laiah is chiefly seen through Abraham's eyes. But it is dangerous to trust his opinion uncritically. Laiah is manipulative, cheap, and pathetic. Still, underneath her sexual attraction to Abraham, sits a very real desire to be integrated back into her community: "...on the High Holidays she would go with him to the new synagogue they were building in the heights, to worship before the miracle Torah that her stepson had saved. She would sit with the richest women in town." (p. 297) Driven into prostitution by poverty and persecution, it is understandable that Laiah would want to end her ostracism through a legitimate marriage. Ironically, her death is as

much the result of her vulnerability as a social outcast, as it is in the service of the larger themes of sacrifice in the novel.

The novels of Gabrielle Roy fit in very well to the larger patterns found in this decade. On the one hand, there are female characters which are very traditional. On the other hand, there is some questioning on whether or not marriage and children can provide happiness for every woman.

Gabrielle Roy's *Where Nests the Water Hen* (*La Petite Poule d'eau*, 1951) is a beautiful story about a French Canadian family who live on an isolated island in Manitoba. The story is based upon Roy's own experience as a teacher in the same area, as revealed in "Mon Heritage du Manitoba."²⁸

The main female protagonist, Luzina Tousignant, is at the center of the narrative. Obviously with her, as with Lilli Ladash, femininity and ethnicity meet to form her experience. Many of Roy's novels focus on a female protagonist and "...the predominance of the Royan female character closely resembles the *Quebécois* myth of the powerful and protective maternal figure."²⁹ Luzina is a devoted mother to her large family. In one scene, when she escapes her housework to listen to her children's school lesson, she scolds herself: "What kind of woman was she so

28. Gabrielle Roy, "Mon Heritage du Manitoba" *The Fragile Lights of the Earth: Articles and Memories, 1942-1970*, Alan Brown, trans. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), pp. 143-155.

29. Paula Gilbert Lewis, *The Literary Vision of Gabrielle Roy: An Analysis of Her Works* (Birmingham: Summa Publications, 1984), p. 59.

to neglect her duty! To each his task in life: to the teacher, the explaining; to the children, the learning; and to her, Luzina, the serving of them all." (p. 76) As this passage reveals, motherhood is often an act of duty and obligation.

In fact, the novel begins with Luzina's annual holiday to give birth to another baby at the closest hospital. Given that the family is Roman Catholic, they do not use birth control. It is revealing that every year in her confession to the Capuchin, she confesses the burden of relentless childbirth:

Each year in the same place Luzina blushingly confided to the Capuchin that she did not yield with entire submission to the demands of the married state... She would have wished the babies to come at somewhat longer intervals.... She summed up the situation: "Understand Father, the children I already have I would not exchange for all the gold in the world, but I should almost like it better not to have so many." (pp. 220-221)

Although a tentative questioning of the Christian "Go forth and multiply," it is still a challenge to a patriarchal religion which demands such a limited role for women.

The two female teachers who come to Little Water Hen provide a stark contrast to Luzina's maternal role. Both are career women, the young, pretty Mademoiselle Côté just beginning her teaching career, the older, spinster Miss Rourke nearing her retirement. What is interesting about these characters is the ironic contrast in their approach to teaching. M. Côté is enthusiastic about her new career; "...so this was it, her first school, the bottem step in

what she looked upon as the most meritorious, the most exalted of careers." (p. 68) Miss Rourke, however, has the bitterness and cynicism of twenty-five years of teaching all over Manitoba. Her disillusionment though, seems more the result of her individual idiosyncrasies, and not the consequence of her dedication to a career over a family. Overall, these two women represent a different option to the narrow social role which Luzina embodies.

While Luzina may undertake a tentative questioning of her role, the female characters of *Street of Riches* (*Rue Deschambault*, 1957) often fundamentally question patriarchal structures. The story is narrated primarily from a young French-Canadian girl named Christine, growing up in a French-Canadian community in St. Boniface, Manitoba. The collection of eighteen stories is semi-autobiographical, revealing key events which contribute to Christine's socialization and development as a writer.

A few of the stories, such as "A Piece of Yellow Ribbon," "My Pink Hat" and "The Jewels" are related to Christine's socialization as feminine, a process which often focuses on a materialistic desire for pretty things. In "The Jewels," the reader is exposed to Christine's experimentation with clothing, make-up, jewelry, and high heels, the trappings of the desirable woman. Interestingly enough, this process is enough to turn Maman into a

feminist, bitter and angry about the socialization process of young girls³⁰:

When you come right down to it, there is no equality between men and women. The lovely virtues - loyalty, frankness, straightforwardness, admirable simplicity - you insist on for yourselves, whereas you esteem women for their wiles, their flightiness. And that's bad first of all for yourselves, who are the first to suffer from it, and for women whom - it would seem - you enjoy keeping in a state of artful childishness. (pp. 128-129)

Maman, a traditional and loving mother, exposes some deep contradictions in society's expectations of women. Roy clearly reveals how socialization shapes women to perpetuate their dependence upon men.

Maman also reveals the often serious cost of marriage and motherhood for women. In "The Gadabouts," Christine's mother rankles at the limitations which her family places upon her:

Maman told me that she would like to be able to go whenever and wherever she might choose. Maman told me that she still longed to be free; she told me that what died last in the human heart must be the liking for freedom.... Maman quite frequently spoke to me of such notions, perhaps because I was too young to see anything wrong in them, perhaps also because she had no one else to whom she could speak of them. (p. 49)

During her husband's absence, Maman actually succumbs to her craving to travel despite her serious misgivings at leaving her children. She takes her youngest child Christine, and they train across Canada to visit old friends and family. This is something she must do "to be a better wife," to be able to resolve her personal identity with the social expectations of a wife and mother. As in "To Prevent a

30. *Ibid.* p. 88.

Marriage," Maman questions whether or not she made the right choice in marrying at all. The frequent suggestion that Maman is less than satisfied with the traditional social role she fulfills, is a clear attempt to demythologize the pervasive message that wifedom and motherhood are essential to a woman's personal happiness.

Conclusion

The novels of the 1950s explore the social roles prescribed to women and often find them wanting. It seems as though women committed themselves to house and home in the immediate post-WWII period, but by the 1950s there is some questioning on whether or not this commitment provides real fulfillment for women. Many of the novels have endings which deny marriage as the goal for women: *Westerly Wild*, *Local Rag*, and *Street of Riches*. Further, many characters in the novels find subtle, and not so subtle, ways of challenging the patriarchal definition of femininity: there is Maman who sees women kept in a state of "artful childishness"; there is the burden of childbearing for Luzina; there is the spinster Emily King; there is the divorce of Rosa. Even in the case of violence against women, these novels progress beyond the works in the 1940s. Men who are violent to women are shown to be bad men, even though they are not publicly punished for their actions against women. At least there are no situations where this violence is excused.

These novelists participated in a tentative revolution underneath a media blitz which perpetuated their limited sphere. Through their female protagonists, they experimented with different characters, different scenarios, different lives. While undeniably, there are many women characters who perpetuate typical female stereotypes, what is surprising is the number of characters who go beyond these stereotypes.

CHAPTER FOUR

Women's Prairie Novels of the 1960s

The 1960s saw a revision in the way women perceived themselves in Canadian society. While media images of women doggedly focussed on the private sphere,¹ the social and economic changes begun in the 1950s continued to gain momentum. Women swelled the ranks of the labour market, and became increasingly frustrated with the gender discrimination which kept them confined to specific occupations and levels of management.² The major tenets of society were coming under critical scrutiny, and women were an essential part of this process. New feminist organizations lobbied for greater federal recognition of women's situation and this culminated in the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1967.

The novels written by prairie women mirror these wider changes. Magnifying patterns begun in the 1950s, female protagonists continued to challenge the patriarchal definition of their place. This challenge is exposed in the kinds of narrative techniques which these authors utilize which include references to lesbian and female sexuality, a

1. See: Gertrude Robinson, "The Media and Social Change: Thirty Years of Media Coverage of Women and Work" *Atlantis*, vol. 8, no. 2 (Spring 1983), pp. 87-111; Susannah Wilson, "The Changing Image of Women in Canadian Mass Circulating Magazines, 1930-1970" *Atlantis*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Spring 1977), pp. 33-44.

2. Naomi Black, "The Canadian Women's Movement: The Second Wave" *Changing Patterns: Women in Canada*, Sandra Burt, ed. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988), p. 81.

focus beyond the heterosexual couple, woman-to-woman bonding, among others. As indicated by Rachel DuPlessis, each of these strategies provide an explicit denial of patriarchal society, "a writing beyond the ending."³ By rejecting many of the conventions of the typical female romance, these works provide more social roles and demystify marriage and motherhood as the epitome of female self-realization.

Women's Lives in the 1960s

The 1960s was a period of both quiet continuity and tumultuous change for Canadian women. On the one hand, the vast majority of women still experienced wifhood and motherhood as part of their major life transitions. On the other hand, for the first time since the suffragists of the late 19th and early-20th centuries, many women were publicly challenging these gendered roles. The result was greater awareness of the consequences of being born female.

For the most part mass media projected traditional images of women in the home. Gertrude Joch Robinson found that media was oblivious to women's participation in the labour market and the economic restructuring of the family:

Over the past thirty years [from 1950-1977] there were only 597 articles in the three women's magazines [Good Housekeeping, Ladies Home Journal, Chatelaine] and another 449 in the general news publications [Time,

3. DuPlessis, p.5. This is DuPlessis' expression for those narrative techniques which reject the standard romance format and ending: marriage or death.

Reader's Digest, Maclean's] for a total of 1,046. This constitutes 7% of all content in women's magazines and 5% in the others. Topics such as children, health, home, food and beauty continue to make up the principle women's agenda to which about 80% of all women's magazine content is devoted.⁴

These findings are also confirmed by Susannah Wilson in her study of fictional heroines in Canadian mass magazines from 1930-1970. Her study found that mass media virtually ignored employed married women and "Career-maintenance was seldom integral to the plots of magazine fiction....."⁵ As in the 1950s with the "Happy Housewife," mass media attempted to reinforce traditional female roles in defiance to actual socio-economic change.

As suggested by the Robinson article, the major demographic change occurring at this time was the movement of both married and single women into wage labour. Between 1961 and 1971 there was an increase from 22.1% to 37.0% of married women in the employment market.⁶ This constituted an extension of 15.4%.⁷ Combined with the percentage of single women also working, women comprised 39.9% of labour force participation in 1971.⁸ However, the kinds of employment which women received typified their position in the paid labour market as job-ghettos. Women's paid work remained confined within the same employment categories they had dominated since WWII.

4. Robinson, "The Media and Social Change," p. 92.

5. Wilson, "The Changing Image of Women," p.39.

6. Kalbach and McVey, p. 274.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Armstrong and Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto*, p. 19.

Women were also moving in greater numbers into post-secondary education. Universities became more accessible through lower tuition, student loans/grants, and expansion in the number of universities (including York, Simon Fraser, and Trent). The contradiction between their increased educational opportunities and women's position in the labour market became increasingly unacceptable.⁹ There were two major grievances which women focussed upon. First, women had recognized that they were excluded from male rights and privileges, especially in the employment market where a "glass ceiling" prevented women from reaching meaningful levels in management or participating in certain professions.¹⁰ Second, women felt disadvantaged because of their gender, exemplified in difficulties with the double-day, violence against women, and lack of recognition of their role in the private sphere.¹¹

Political activism was increasing in campuses across the United States and Canada. The student movement, influenced by the native- and civil-rights movements, protests against the Vietnam war, and Quebec's struggle for self-determination, all culminated in a questioning of the basic tenets of North American society.¹² Feminist organizing in the student movement was largely influenced by a Marxist

9. Nancy Adamson et al, *Feminist Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.38.

10. Black, p. 81.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Adamson et al, p. 38.

analysis from a gendered perspective. This level of activism was informal, depending heavily upon "consciousness-raising" and the ideological mandate "the personal is political." The prairies saw the first socialist-feminist organization in Canada: the Saskatoon Women's Liberation (SWL).

At another level, there was organizing by mainly liberal feminists interested in lobbying government for change. The premier women's organization in the second wave feminist movement, Voice of Women (VOW), was formed in 1960 as a peace organization. However, by 1964, its mandate of issues had grown to include biculturalism, women's health and safety issues, and the legalization of the distribution of birth control information.¹³ A Committee for Equality for Women (organized by Laura Sabia) began to lobby the federal government for a royal commission on women in the mid-1960s. This was appointed in 1967:

The key period for the second wave of the Canadian women's movement was the years 1967 to 1970. The activities of the royal commission in this period resulted in a significant increase in public awareness of women's situation. The same period produced women's liberation and radical feminism in Canada. These latter groups, which drew substantial public attention, can take much of the credit for directing attention to such crucial women's issues as equal pay, abortion and violence against women. The groups themselves were crucial in the cooperative efforts that got such issues both onto the agenda for public policy and into the consciousness of individual women.¹⁴

13. Increased knowledge and access to birth control (including the newly developed Pill) in the 1960s caused a decrease in fertility across Canada. This occurred in spite of federal laws which forbade the display and market of contraceptives until 1969. See Prentice *et al*, *Canadian Women*, p. 322.

14. Black, p. 89.

The Royal Commission on the Status of Women released its report in 1970. It provided 167 recommendations for public policy to address gender inequality in Canadian society. These recommendations were based upon four major precepts: first, women should be allowed to work outside the home; second, child care was the joint responsibility of the mother, father and society; third, women deserved special treatment due to childbearing responsibilities; and fourth, gender discrimination in the labour market required affirmative action.¹⁵ The Royal Commission marked a significant change in the way gender inequality was addressed in Canada. Soon after the report was published, the federal government set up the Secretary of State, Women's Program to allot funds to women's issues. Gender inequality became a public issue.

Each of these changes meant that women's lives would be profoundly different from generations of women before them. Unlike the inter-war period:

Women's roles were no longer ordered sequentially - work - marriage - family - but increasingly intertwined. Marriage, once the greatest dividing line in women's lives, became a less significant event since it no longer involved the end of employment and almost immediate initiation into motherhood. The role of wife and that of mother became increasingly distinct; it was now possible to be one but not the other.¹⁶

15. Florence Bird, chair. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada* (Ottawa: Queen's Press, 1970), p. xii.

16. Prentice et al, *Canadian Women*, pp. 341-342.

A Feminist Revolution and a Literary Revolution

The prairie novels of the 1960s mirror the wider social, political and economic changes which were occurring. It is not that the novels suddenly begin to espouse radical feminist doctrine and call for the abolishment of patriarchy. In fact, the majority of the major female protagonists are still wives and mothers. However, within the context of literary development, there are some significant changes. The novels of the 1960s extend the process of denying romantic conventions which began in the 1950s. Especially in the realist novels of Gabrielle Roy and Margaret Laurence, there is a profound questioning of the gendered position of women in the prairie West.¹⁷ These novels express the promise of the feminist revolution in a revolution in female consciousness demonstrated through evolving narrative strategies: women-to-women bonds; homosexual and individual sexuality; a double consciousness between social expectations and personal experience; a lack of focus on heterosexual couple; a denial of ageism with respect to older women; and the re-affirmation of the quest for female protagonists. These narrative strategies indicate

17. While women poets and writers began to proliferate on the national scene in the 1950s (including Miriam Waddington, P.K. Page, Jay Macpherson, Margaret Avison, Pat Lowther and Phyllis Webb), it was not until the 1960s that they received a supportive environment; this was due to both the women's movement and the general flowering of Canadian literature as a whole. This group included not only Roy and Laurence, but also women writers like Marian Engel, Alice Munro, Audrey Thomas, and Margaret Atwood. See Shelagh Wilkinson, "By and About Women" *Changing Patterns: Women in Canada*, pp. 208.

the continuation of the breakdown of patriarchal hegemony, with women beginning to imagine their own life process independent of male support or approval.

Women in the Novels of the 1960s

Romance/realism - van der Mark

Christine van der Mark's *Honey in the Rock* (1966) is the only prairie novel in the 1960s with strong romantic elements. The narrative is set in the middle of the Depression in a small prairie town called Ulna, the urban focal point for a community of German Brethern-in-Christ farmers. This is a story about the courtship and marriage of the five Leniuk daughters. Prolet is the first to go, marrying a local storekeeper Nathan Zimmerman, after exactly one date. Next is Sarah, whose character is reminiscent of Lina Ashley in van der Mark's first novel. She is a strong, independent woman who has waited several years for her intended, Gottlieb Zwick, to propose. When she discovers him with the local prostitute, she leaves him and marries another suitor. Leota marries Reuben Zwick, and eventually Naomi marries Gottlieb after she becomes pregnant with his child. Fenna, the youngest daughter, is the only one who does not marry happily. For some time she has been in love with the local preacher Philip Jebson, but the arrival of a new teacher named Dan Root makes for a confusing love triangle. When Dan refuses to make a commitment to Fenna, she marries Philip instead. For the bulk of the novel she is

desperately unhappy and starved of affection. When she discovers that Philip plans for them to do missionary work in India, she commits suicide in despair, the traditional fictional consequence for the poor marriage choice.

The role of ethnicity in this novel is expressed most clearly in religious faith, a strict protestantism.¹⁸ For the women specifically, this translates into a moral obsession with protecting their reputation until they are safely married and under the sexual protection of their husbands. This is combined with a fervent desire for domesticity and children. As Sarah put it, "I want my own home and my own babies!" (p. 139) Unlike Lina Ashley, in *In Due Season*, these women are very feminine, very traditional, very romantic. With the exception of Fenna, the novel reaffirms the romantic ending whereby the happily wed couple is smoothly integrated into the community.

Realism - Blondal, Roy, Laurence

Patricia Blondal's *A Candle to Light the Sun* (1960) was her second novel,¹⁹ published just a few months after Blondal died from cancer.²⁰ The novel is based upon her own

18. Thompson, "Prairie Mosaic," p. 254.

19. For a discussion of the larger themes in this novel, see: Laurence Ricou, "Twin Misunderstandings: The Structure of Patricia Blondal's *A Candle to Light the Sun*" *Canadian Literature*, no. 48 (Spring 1980), pp. 58-72; John Moss, *A Reader's Guide to the Canadian Novel*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987), pp. 24-25.

20. Her first novel *From Heaven With a Shout* was not published until 1963, although it had appeared in serialized version in *Chatelaine* in the 1950s as "Strangers in Love."

hometown of Souris, Manitoba, covering the timespan of the Depression and the Second World War. It is one of the few novels written by women in this period which does not have a female protagonist as the main character.²¹ However, the immoral and eccentric excesses of many of her characters caused *Maclean's* magazine to ask "Is it Canada's Peyton Place?"²² This question is somewhat justified, given the context of prairie literature at the time. *A Candle to Light the Sun* is extraordinary in its presentation of sex and sexuality. But, for the most part, the female characters are common to other prairie literature.

This is the first novel to present a woman leaving her husband (a minister no less) for another man. Solveg is an interesting character in that she decides she is too unconventional to stay in her first marriage. She also presents a twist on the traditional mother figure. Faced with her daughter's persistent hostility about her new marriage, Solveg withdraws emotionally:

The more bitterly Lilja treated her, however, the kinder Solveg became, for she sensed that Lilja did not believe that a parent could stop loving a child. With childish arrogance she believed that blood love could be flayed and starved and still live and Solveg, with a kind of habitual protectiveness, did not want her to discover

21. Other novels not incorporated into this study which have male protagonists which dominate the narrative are Norma Sluman's *Poundmaker* (1967) and *Blackfoot Crossing* (1959) as well as Anne Macmillan's *Levko* (1956). In these novels the role of the female protagonists is minimal, playing small parts as wives, mothers, daughters. They provide no enlightening information.

22. Laurence Ricou, "Introduction" to Patricia Blondal's *A Candle to Light the Sun* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1960), p. viii.

that such love did not exist... She approached her daughter with a vague sense of duty.... [and] she felt no real guilt in this. (pp. 158-159)

This is a departure from the way that the mother-child relationship has been approached in other novels. Most other novelists have assumed that motherhood means love for their children. Blondal differs in treating this relationship as a dynamic between two people, hence a situation subject to change. It is part of the process of exposing motherhood as a socially-constructed role.

This novel is distinct in its fairly graphic discussion of sexuality. In the literature of the 1940s and 1950s, sex and sexuality are taboo subjects. Beyond kissing or embracing, women authors simply did not deal with the emotional or physical realities of sexual fantasy, individual sexuality or sexual experimentation. It is only in the 1960s that there is an approach towards an honest discussion of this subject.

Phoebe Yeates, married and a mother, provides a stark example of sexual exploitation in the service of sexual fantasy. She models naked for the local town clerk Reese Todd, in exchange for having the water kept on in her house:

"Can you get those on?" Todd asked. A pair of old-fashioned pumps with French heels, long pointed toes. Phoebe was proud of her legs and feet, still good, not a vein or callus. She unlaced her oxfords and put the shoes on. The old man sighed. "Now, Mrs. Yeats, that mirror. Stand there and undress. As if you meant it." She undresses slowly, hanging her housedress and corset and bloomers over a straight-backed chair. "No, leave the stockings and shoes." Across her slack abdomen the straipe of four pregnancies. Her big breasts sagged nearly to her waist. "Now walk around." She walked. "Now you may dress and get my breakfast...." (p. 38)

This passage is notable for two reasons. First, it is the first mention of any kind of sexual fantasy or perversity. Second, this paragraph is a vivid representation of power between class as demonstrated in power between the sexes. Mr. Todd orders Phoebe to put on the shoes, take off her clothes, walk and make him breakfast. And Phoebe does this because her family, her children, need running water. Social control and sexual control become mixed in a very explicit way, with gender as the main dynamic: the male represents social and personal power, control, wealth, and sexual need; the female represents submission and exploitation, obedience, poverty and sexual fulfillment.

A Candle to Light the Sun also has the first reference to lesbian sexuality. Its appearance is unexpected and has no obvious relationship to plot. It is made by Professor Philips during a humorous anecdote about a fellow colleague:

Alice had never been the quite the same since her first year at Knox when, young, she... had developed a great joyous affection for a fey girl who wrote fey poetry... One day Alice had opened the fey girl's door and found her stretched naked on the bed with a potato chip on each round pink nipple, a potato chip on her umbilicus and a neat little heap of potato chips on her pubis, while, kneeling beside her, an Amazon from the track and discus team nibbled delicately on the potato chip on the left. Alice had been a long time recovering. (pp. 188-189)

This kind of narrative is unique in the context of the prairie literature of the post-WWII period. References to lesbian sexuality are extremely rare simply because female homosexual love is beyond the confines of male control; "Lesbian sexuality is dangerous to institutional

heterosexuality and thus to every variety of patriarchy."²³ It is also notable that this particular passage is far more explicit than other love-making scenes in the novel between heterosexual couples. Although it is difficult to know Blondal's rationale behind this scene, the appearance of lesbian sexuality, however fleeting, is still a challenge to romantic definitions of sex and love.

Gabrielle Roy's *The Road Past Altamont* (*La Route d'Altamont*, 1966) is a continuation of her semi-autobiographical work of the 1950s, *Street of Riches* (*Rue Deschambault*, 1957). Like the earlier work, it is a novel which chronicles events in Christine's life which were important to her development as a woman and a writer. Like the other novels in the 1960s, it indicates the decline of the control of male-centered ideology, especially through the emphasis on woman-to-woman relationships.

The novel begins with the poignant story "My Almighty Grandmother." Roy mentions in her essay "Mon Heritage du Manitoba" that if her grandmother had lived now "...amid the preoccupation with self-fulfilment for women, my grandmother would likely be director of some big business or heading up a Royal Commission on the status of women."²⁴ Her grandmother is a strong, independent woman, who resists the idea that she must be taken care of. It is important to see

23. Eve Zaremba, "Shades of Lavender: Lesbian Sex and Sexuality," *Still Ain't Satisfied: Canadian Feminism Today*, Maureen Fitzgerald et al, eds. (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1982), p. 91.

24. Roy, "Mon Heritage du Manitoba," p.145.

age as a continuum, that there are levels of being old.²⁵ Unlike the female protagonists Lady Mackenzie and Agnes Miller, in *Fold Home* and *The Living Earth* respectively, Mémère is close to the age when she needs to be cared for and can no longer live independently. Christine is confused by her grandmother's physical deterioration, her "total impotence":

I cannot describe the derangement I experienced at hearing my mother, old as she seemed to me at the time, speaking with this child's word to someone who could no longer eat or drink alone.... It was rather as if Maman were taking care of a baby. But does one ask a baby, does one say to it, "Your conscience is clear, isn't it? You've always done your duty. Why should you fear?(p.27)

Roy clearly demonstrates the child-like dependance of the very old. Mémère's physical deterioration brings the relationship between her, Maman and Christine into sharper focus. They become three generations of women, at different stages in the life-cycle. Each will have individual experiences, but also a common bond through their gender. "My Almighty Grandmother" foreshadows powerful woman-to-woman bonding in "The Road Past Altamont."

In "The Road Past Altamont" Christine assumes the role of caring for her aging mother, just as Maman did for Mémère. But, there is a difference. For Maman, Christine has the opportunity to do those things which Maman could never do because she married young and had a family; "...even now I dream of an infinitely better person I might have been

25. Barbara Frey Waxman, *From Hearth to Open Road: A Feminist Study of Aging in Contemporary Literature* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), p. 8.

able to be." (p. 135) She wants Christine to travel, to be a teacher, to write if she wishes. Maman, in fact, becomes an amalgamation of three generations of women, for as she lives vicariously through her daughter, she also becomes aware of how much she is like her mother. As she grows older, her mother's personality became clearly evident:

...with the first disillusionments of life, I began to detect in myself a few small signs of the personality of my mother... and I fought against it. Only with middle age did I catch up with her, or she caught up with me... We give birth in turn to the one who gave us birth when finally, sooner or later, we draw her into our self. From then on she lives in us just as truly as we lived in her before we came into the world. (p. 129)

In Maman, mother, daughter, grandmother all come together in a relationship which Roy defines as particularly female. While Christine's father figured prominently in *Street of Riches* in the 1950s, in this later work Roy concentrates much more exclusively on the relationship between Mémère, Maman and Christine.

Christine, in these stories and *Street of Riches*, has known she wanted to be a writer, especially in the short stories "My Whooping Cough," "The Voice of the Pools," and "To Earn my Living." In this light she is an interesting protagonist because rather than imagining she will marry and have children, she is quite certain she will have a career. In "The Road Past Altamont," she travels to Europe "in search of myself." (p. 144) This focus on the "I" is quite different from past novels. As has been indicated before, marriage and family often results in the sacrifice of self

to some degree. In this novel, at least, Christine has already gone beyond this, to focus on her own personal development, or a kind of quest. Ironically, this does not involve a rejection of a potential suitor, but a rejection of her mother who would have Christine stay closer to home.

Prairie literature in the 1960s definitely belongs to Margaret Laurence. With the publication of *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969) and *A Bird in the House* (1970), she is the most prolific female prairie writer since the Second World War. Her "Manawaka world"²⁶ is an appropriate conclusion to this study in that her novels incorporate several narrative strategies which evolve the traditional portrayal of women in literature.

Laurence's novels cover five families over four generations, and like many prairie novelists, she deals intimately with the question of ethnicity. Her protagonists all grow up in Manawaka, a small community in Manitoba consisting mainly of Scottish Presbyterian and Ukrainian settlers. There are Metis as well. Her major female protagonists are all descended from a Scots Presbyterian ethnic heritage, a heritage characterized by pride, repression, puritanism and patriarchy:

Laurence's heroines, Hagar Shipley of *The Stone Angel*, Rachel Cameron of *A Jest of God*, Vanessa MacLeod of *A Bird in the House*, and Stacey MacAindra of *The Fire-Dwellers*, struggle to escape from the harsh, repressive culture of their small town, and from the self-

26. This phrase is borrowed from Clara Thomas' *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975).

repression which inhibits them as inheritors of this distorted tradition, which is equally repressive of women and of ethnic minorities.²⁷

Ethnicity in Laurence's novels can be both a positive and negative force. On the one hand, this heritage makes her protagonists strong. On the other hand, it also represses their identity by fixing them within rigid, gender-defined roles. Each protagonist must deal with this heritage in some capacity.

A *Bird in the House* was written as individual short stories throughout the 1960s. This work is semi-autobiographical and chronicles the adolescence of a young girl named Vanessa MacLeod. There are many similarities to Christine in Gabrielle Roy's *Street of Riches* and *The Road Past Altamont*. Both stories are told from the perspective of an older, mature protagonist who reminisces about key events in their childhood past. Both novels are set in Manitoba, and the female protagonists have strong sense of their ethnic identity. Both girls will eventually become writers. In Roy's work, Christine's father is often away due to his work with the federal Immigration department, while in Laurence's stories, Vanessa's father dies when she is quite young. And finally, both protagonists have intimate relationships with their mothers.

Unlike Christine, Vanessa must cope with the overwhelming influence of her Grandfather Connor. He is

27. Lorraine McMullen, "Ethnicity and Femininity: Double Jeopardy," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, vol. XIII, no. 1 (1981), p. 58.

opinionated, stern, proud, and a dominating patriarch over all the women: Grandmother Connor, Aunt Edna, Vanessa's mother Beth and Vanessa herself. While Grandmother Connor occasionally exerts some authority, for the most part "Acceptance was at the heart of her." (p. 72) She is a placid, quiet woman, the perfect foil for her husband.

Once Vanessa's father Ewen dies, Vanessa and her mother move into Grandfather Connor's house, although it is considered more of an imprisonment. Both Aunt Edna and Beth often retreat to the kitchen to provide mutual support. For Aunt Edna, given the limited educational and occupational opportunities in Manawaka, marriage is the only way out. Grandfather Connor reinforces this traditional route; "he couldn't for the life of him see why she didn't get a man for herself and get married like every other decent woman." (p. 167) Aunt Edna is in her mid-thirties before she marries a local C.P.R. man, largely encouraged by her sister Beth:

"It's just that you've been keeping house for Father all this time, and you've had so little life of your own. It's just that it would be wonderful if you could get out."

"What about you?" Aunt Edna said. "How are you going to get out?"

"It's different for me," my mother replied in a low voice. "I've had those years with Ewen. I have Vanessa and Roddie. Maybe I can't get out. But they will." (p. 172)

Like Maman, Beth counts on the fact that her children will have a different life from her own. As with Maman, her daughter provides a clean slate, an opportunity to live life in a different way. She saves for Vanessa to go to college:

"When I was your age," she said, "I got the highest marks in the province in my last year high school. I guess I never told you that. I wanted to go to college. Your grandfather didn't believe in education for women, then." (p. 187)

Vanessa will be able to escape the repressive social roles which prevented her mother from realizing her ambitions. While traditional literary criticism has usually focused on the influence of Grandfather Connor, Vanessa's relationship with her mother is equally important. As in *The Road Past Altamont*, there is a wisdom passed from generation to generation of women:

I remembered saying things to my children that my mother had said to me, the cliches of affection, perhaps inherited from her mother. *It's a poor family can't afford one lady. Many hands make light work. Let not the sun go down upon your wrath.* (p. 190) (author's italics)

The strong mother-to-daughter relationship makes this collection of short stories part of the process towards an independent women's fiction.

Race and racism are a pervasive undercurrent in most of the Manawaka novels. The Metis Tonnerre family are a constant reminder of the poverty and marginalization of native and half-breed peoples in contemporary Canada. In *A Bird in the House*, Piquette Tonnerre spends a summer with Vanessa and her family at the lake, but is beyond Vanessa's understanding; "she remained as both a reproach and a mystery to me." (p. 115) It is only when Vanessa meets Piquette as a young adult about to marry "an English fella" that she begins to understand a bit of her world; "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." (p. 117) Piquette does not achieve her integration into the community. Her marriage fails, and she returns to "a world of alcoholism, poverty and death in Manawaka."²⁸ Like Willow in *Pine Roots*, dominant attitudes towards race and gender prove insuperable.

According to Barbara Frey Waxman, Laurence's *The Stone Angel* marked the beginning of a new literary genre in North America called the *Reifungsroman*, or the fiction of ripening. This new literary mode details the aging process for women. It specifically challenges common stereotypes and myths about elderly people and attempts to generate a sympathetic awareness for the difficulties of aging for women, especially in a society which values women chiefly for their youth, beauty and reproductive capabilities.²⁹

The *Reifungsroman* have several general characteristics. It is often confessional in tone. There are themes of both physical and psychic pain, dealing with loneliness, isolation, self-doubt, feelings of uselessness, combined with depression over loss of physical and mental abilities. The narrative structure is often fluid, incorporating dreams, flashbacks and ramblings. The point-of-view is often first-person, intertwined with stream-of-consciousness or

28. Leslie Monkman, "The Tonnerre Family: Mirrors of Suffering," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, vol. 27 (1980), p. 145.

29. Waxman, pp. 38-39.

third-person limited omniscient which allows sympathetic identification with the aging self. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is commonly a journey in self-knowledge and self-development.³⁰

There are two narrative lines in *The Stone Angel*. One story line tells of ninety-years old Hagar's resistance to entering the Silverthreads nursing home, against pressure from her son Marvin and his wife Doris. The other narrative line chronicles Hagar's youth, marriage, childbearing, separation, and death of her son John. As Laurence explains "All Hagar's memories are touched off by something which occurs in the present, and I think this is legitimate and the way it really happens."³¹ This narrative structure allows the reader a contrasting perspective on Hagar as an old woman to Hagar as a young girl.

Obviously, it is in the present-tense narrative that the insights into woman and aging are most apparent. Hagar despises the physical deterioration of her body: her bowels knot; she passes wind; and, she wets the bed. It is difficult to have pride when one cannot control one's bodily functions. She hates her dependence upon Doris, and her criticism of Doris seems to rise proportionately to her lessening self-esteem. The first-person narrative works particularly to Hagar's advantage in this case. The reader

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

31. Margaret Laurence, "Gadgetry or Growing: Form and Voice in the Novel" *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, no. 27 (1980), p. 57.

only sees Doris from Hagar's point-of-view. In fact, from Doris' perspective Hagar could be a very difficult person to care for, but the reader's sympathy largely remains with Hagar.³² Further, Hagar also resents her lack of privacy, even in her own home. Still, institutionalization at Silverthreads promises even less privacy, more like a "barracks." Hagar would also have to leave most of her personal possessions as well, and this is difficult for her to accept:

I couldn't leave them. If I am not somehow contained in them and in this house, something of all change caught and fixed here, eternal enough for my purposes, then I do not know where I am to be found at all. (p. 36)

Unlike most women of her generation, Hagar has purchased her own property and she derives a great deal of pride of ownership and independence from this fact. Hagar simply has been different from most women since she was a young girl.

The novel reveals very early in the narrative that Hagar has a spirit which chafes at the narrow social roles which women are confined to:

An overheard conversation between her father and Auntie Doll makes her second-class status as a woman clear: "Smart as a whip, she is, that one. If only she'd been-" The gap here clearly signifies male, taking on more force because it remains unsaid, an unattainable impossibility for Hagar. Her identity comes from being his daughter, his property....³³

32. Waxman, p. 159.

33. Diana Brydon, "Silence, Voice and the Mirror: Margaret Laurence and Women," *Crossing the River: Essays in Honour of Margaret Laurence*, Kristjana Gunnars, ed. (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1988), p. 191.

As a Scottish Presbyterian, Hagar has also inherited more than her fair share of pride and repression, qualities which affect her relationships with men all her life: Jason Currie, Bram Shipley, John and Marvin. Her ethnic heritage causes Hagar to be as cold as her metaphorical namesake, the stone angel.

It is a personal triumph for Hagar that she is able to come to a greater understanding of herself and her mistakes in the few weeks before her death. In a pivotal scene, with the sympathetic Murrey Lees, she is able to confess her role in John's death, release her nascent guilt and receive redemption. Hagar also makes her peace with Marvin and lays to rest most of her personal ghosts before her own death. That Hagar comes to such self-awareness so late in life is unusual for prairie women's fiction, and is key to the *Reifungsroman* tradition; "The antiquated dichotomy between youth's intensity, emotional abundance, and capacity for growth and age's blandness, paucity of feeling, and stagnation collapses... [before] Hagar."³⁴ As the premier novel of the *Reifungsroman* genre, *The Stone Angel* represents a direct challenge to ageism and to male definitions of what admirable and desirable women should be.³⁵

34. Waxman, p. 181.

35. Other *Reifungsroman* novelists which followed Margaret Laurence included authors like Doris Lessing, Elizabeth Taylor, Barbara Pym, Paula Marshall, and Caro Spenser. For a thorough discussion of each of these novelists see Barbara Frey Waxman, *From Hearth to Open Road* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990).

Rachel Cameron in *A Jest of God* is another female protagonist who, through the time frame of a single summer, attains much personal growth and self-awareness. Her female quest allows her to achieve self-development, independent of any male support. As Judy Kearns argues:

The concern of the novel is woman in society, her nature and her ability to handle personal relationships and to control her destiny within the limitations imposed by that society....³⁶

Rachel is a thirty-four years old schoolteacher in Manawaka, her home town. She is feeling the pressure (at least in her own head) of being this old and unwed. She is terrified of becoming a "spinster" and is trapped in every sort of way; by her own insecurities and fears (Laurence describes Rachel as a potential hysteric);³⁷ by her bullying mother; by social conventions and expectations.

Rachel is insecure about many things, but especially her appearance. She often compares herself to animals: a giraffe, a crane, a greyhound or ostrich. Rachel sees herself as too tall, too clumsy and too thin, falling far short of the social ideal of what women should be. This makes her, at times, depressed or defensive.

Her mother Mrs. Cameron is manipulative, using her tricky heart to keep her daughter in her control.³⁸ She is a good representative of the Puritanical ethos of Manawaka.

36. Judy Kearns, "Rachel and Social Determinism: A Feminist Reading of *A Jest of God*," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, vol. 27 (1980), p. 103.

37. Laurence, "Gadgetry or Growing," p. 58.

38. Patricia Morley, *Margaret Laurence*, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), p. 94.

She is driven by her concern for appearances: her house is meticulous; her clothing is conservative; her church is sterile. Yet she is pathetic as well. When Rachel hears her comment that her husband thought she was silly (p. 193), it is a painful reminder how confining social roles have diminished her as well.

Subtle suggestions throughout the novel reveal how socialization confines and controls women. Watching her female Grade two students, Rachel observes "Interesting creatures, very young girls, so often anxious to please that they tell lies without really knowing they're doing it." (p. 11) Even at this young age, these girls are learning the skills they need to function cooperatively and submissively within a sex-defined system.

A large part of the novel also deals with social conventions regarding female sexuality as "Sexual taboos figure prominently in Manawaka attitudes."³⁹ As a young girl of sixteen, Rachel can remember her mother re-affirming the sexual double standard by telling her that virginity was "*A woman's most precious possession.*" (p. 96) (author's italics) Like her mother, Rachel has difficulty accepting her sexuality:

When Mr. Cameron the under-taker had been alive, Mrs. Cameron had put doilies on all the furniture so that his corpse-touching hands would not touch the place of her habitude. She apparently felt the same way about his touch on her body, an interesting fear of the touch of both death and life, a double fear that her daughter has picked up. It is only after she allows herself to be

39. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

touched, and after she inaugurates the touching, that she takes some open-eyed control of her own life...."⁴⁰

In her affair with Nick Kazlik, Rachel is able to come to a healthy acceptance of her own sexuality, beyond the guilt which often followed her masturbation or sexual fantasies.

Her relationship with Nick also allows her to come to terms with her friendship with Calla. Early in the novel, after Rachel becomes hysterical at the Tabernacle of the Risen and Reborn, Calla makes a lesbian advance. Rachel's limited definition of sexuality cannot accommodate this, and she rejects Calla. However, her possible pregnancy forces Rachel to overcome her fear. For Rachel, this pregnancy is a threat to her whole way of life; a child born out of wedlock is a signal that the double standard of sexuality has not worked, and in a small town like Manawaka the penalty is social ostracism. As self-induced abortion or suicide are rejected as options, Rachel turns to Calla for help and, as a true friend, Calla does not turn her away.

The pregnancy is revealed ironically as a tumor, but this process has given Rachel the strength to actively make changes to her life. She decides to move to Vancouver:

Where I'm going, anything may happen. Nothing may happen. Maybe I will marry... Or maybe not... It may be that my children will always be temporary, never to be held. But so are everyone's. (pp. 208-209)

Rachel, at the end of the novel is still a spinster, and with one part of herself still craves marriage and children.

40. Bowering, "That Fool of a Fear," p. 44.

But another part of her has accepted that she can also live without this:

Laurence has thus created in *A Jest of God* a *bildungsroman* of a new kind, and her depiction of Rachel's growth to full personhood examines problems which have long been neglected or distorted as objects of literary interest - conflict between women, menstruation and possible pregnancy, conflicting feelings about motherhood, and female sexuality. Laurence explicitly evokes the operation of cultural stereotypes as an influence on her protagonist and thus portrays the perpetuation of this socialization without reinforcing those attitudes being internalized by Rachel.⁴¹

A Jest of God comes farthest in rejecting the literary stereotypes which plagued so many of the prairie novels since the Second World War. Rachel explicitly rejects her fantasies of "a knight in shining armor," and more than any other female protagonist, is willing to accept the consequences of this.⁴²

The setting for Laurence's *The Fire-Dwellers* is more obviously contemporary to the post-Second World War lives that women experienced in Canada: the suburbs, beauty parlours, Polyglam parties, T.V., pop psychology and fear of nuclear war. The main protagonist Stacey is a home-maker and a mother of four children. Her story highlights the

41. Kearns, "Rachel and Social Determinism," pp.119-120.

42. Just after the periodization of this thesis (between 1972 and 1974), female quest novels become quite prolific, undoubtedly fuelled by the atmosphere created by the second feminist movement. They include Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*, Gail Godwin's *Odd Woman*, Margaret Drabble's *Realms of Gold*, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, Lisa Alther's *Kinflicks*, and Dorothy Bryant's *Ella Price's Journal*. See Gayle Green, "Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*: The Uses of the Past" *Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Margaret Laurence*, Colin Nicholson, ed. (London: The Macmillan Press, 1990).

contradiction between the popular ideal of motherhood and wifehood, and her individual experience which is often characterized by confusion, dissatisfaction, and difficulty.

Like so many other women in the novels of this period, Stacey is concerned with her physical appearance, especially since she is approaching forty and can no longer achieve the ideal of youthful beauty:

Oh, Cleopatra. You old swayback. Four kids have altered me. The stretch marks look like silver worms in parallel processions across my belly and thighs. My breasts aren't bad, and at least my ankles aren't thick. (p. 21)

Yet, while Stacey despairs about the physical decline of her body, and vows to begin numerous diets, unlike her neighbour Tess she still maintains some distance from a total acceptance of social definitions of beauty. In particular, her description of the local beauty parlour in terms of science fiction provides a humorous social commentary:

The whole process is absolutely painless, here on Zabyul. The silver mechanism is simply fitted over the head, creating an impression of gentle warmth... One of the butterfly priestesses comes over, checks the controls. All set - the transformation is complete. She steps out....Her? This very young woman has her features, but altered, made finer, the shape of the bones incredibly beautiful under the cream-textured skin. Quick - Jartek will be waiting. (pp. 93-94)
(author's italics)

For her time, Laurence takes the rationale behind beauty salons and goes a few steps further. If women are willing to have facials, colours, and perms to be sexually desirable, the next step technology willing, is physical transformations. The boundaries between natural appearance and socially-constructed appearance becomes increasingly

blurred, providing an ironic statement of the extent which women have been conditioned to be sexually appealing to men.

Stacey is an attractive protagonist because she can be critical of expected norms of behavior. She confronts many stereotypes about women as wives and mothers. She often demonstrates how ambiguous motherhood is; "What if I hit one of them too hard sometime, without meaning to? Am I a monster? They nourish me and yet they devour me, too." (p. 20) While she loves her children, she also recognizes they have placed her within a very narrow sphere.

And yet, by the end of the novel, she manages to re-establish a sense of self. Part of this process is achieved through an affair, a re-affirmation of her powerful sexuality:

Sometimes I think I'd like to hold an entire army between my legs. I think of all the men I'll never make love with, and I regret it as though it were the approach of my own death. I'm not monogamous by nature. And yet I am. (p. 22)

Stacey is honest enough to recognize that although she is married, other men attract her. This serves to demystifying the heterosexual couple by exposing the doubts which can occur. Ironically, Stacey's affair with Luke Venturi ultimately acts to stabilize her marriage as she regains contact with that part of herself which is beyond the roles of wife-mother-housekeeper.⁴³ She is able to resolve the conflict between social expectations and her personal experience and individuality. As with Laurence's other

43. Thomas, *The Manawaka World*, p. 123.

female protagonists, Stacy comes to an affirmation of self, within but also beyond, sex roles.

The Fire-Dweller re-introduces the dynamics of race and gender in the person of Valentine Tonnerre. Stacey meets her during a walk in downtown Vancouver, and they have coffee together. Like so many Metis, Valentine's life is characterized by alcoholism, poverty, prostitution and drugs. Stacey cannot avoid her sense of responsibility, her participation in Manawaka's "invisible stabbing":

her presence is a reproach to me, for all I've got now and have been given and still manage to bitch on and on about it. And a reproach for the sins of my fathers, maybe. The debts are inherited and how could the damage ever be undone or forgiven?" (p. 241)

Stacey's problems seem petty in comparison to Valentine's tragedy, as their individual experience as women becomes ironically contrasted.⁴⁴ This process serves to highlight race as a negative variable which leads to social ostracism and marginalization in the Canadian context.

Conclusion

The novels of the 1960s provide many significant changes from the novels of the late 1940s and 1950s. While van der Mark's work is still clearly romantic, the works by Blondal, Roy and Laurence offer greater flexibility from this conservative literary mode, especially in their subject matter. Through an honest discussion of woman-to-woman

44. George Woodcock, "Prairie Writers and the Metis: Rudy Wiebe and Margaret Laurence," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, vol. XIV, no. 1 (1982), p. 19.

relationships, female sexuality (including lesbianism), a focus away from the heterosexual couple, and criticism of wider ideological constructions of gender, and the affirmation of quest, these novels provide many more options for women in terms of female identity. The extent which these novels go in re-defining femininity demonstrates clearly the undercurrent of the second feminist movement in the 1960s. The experiences of female prairies writers, although specific to region, was also part of larger social, political and economic change.

CHAPTER FIVE

Female Protagonists in Women's Prairie Novels, 1945-1970

In 1967, literary critic Clara Thomas published an interesting, if underdeveloped, article titled "Happily Ever After: Canadian Women in Fact and Fiction." In this article she argues that:

Fictionally, the model pattern has been the representation of the modest, capable, energetic wife and mother, bearing sorrows with fortitude and earning joy in her family's devotion and the achievements of her home-making. The most familiar variation of the pattern still within the structure of "virtue", has been the romantic rebel, revolting against her predestined "place", but so charming, or gifted or both, that *sometimes* an indulgent Providence has allowed her a happy ending.¹ (author's italics)

While Thomas' article surveys Canadian literature from the mid-nineteenth century, her observation fails to capture the complexity of women's fiction in the prairies between the Second World War and 1970. The romantic novels of the late-1940s and early-1950s especially, follow a pattern which presents the goal of marriage and motherhood as the apogee of female identity. However, from the late-1950s and the 1960s, there are women's prairie novels which deny this motif. This development is the consequence of socio-economic change. As women gained greater economic and social control of their lives, the cultural expression of literary female protagonists changed accordingly.

1. Clara Thomas, "Happily Ever After: Canadian Women in Fact and Fiction," *Canadian Literature*, vol. 34 (Aug. 1967), p. 43.

In the immediate post-WWII period, government policy and public media attempted to direct women into very rigid social roles. Women were expected to forget their war-time wage labour and return to the private sphere: cooking, cleaning, child-bearing, and child-rearing. The double effect of government manipulation and propaganda worked effectively: women left the labour market in droves; the age of marriage went down; and the marriage rate went up.

The conservative ethos found expression in several romantic novels published in the late-1940s and early-1950s. These works incorporate trademark characteristics of the romantic plot, which idealizes the heterosexual couple and stereotypes sex differences. This often required a sacrifice of self for the heroine, who strove to be the object of the hero. In the 1940s, novels like *The Curlew Cried*, *Mrs. Mike* and *Red River Shadows* presented heroines who perceived a happy marriage as their ultimate goal. Even a novel like *In Due Season* can be placed within this conservative context as its anti-heroine Lina Ashley is explicitly punished for her extraordinary individuality.

The novels of the 1950s reflect a more settled and established prairie landscape with small towns and cities. The romantic motif is strong, but there is a more critical manipulation of the genre. For example, a character like Constance Howard in *Fold Home* is not "punished" for her sexual experience, while Vera Lysenko's *Westerly Wild* turns the romantic formula on its head by having the male

protagonist die for the failure to achieve social stability in marriage.

Even the more realistic novels, while often focused upon the heterosexual couple, still provide greater variety in its social scripts for women. For example, Emily King of *Local Rag* is a spinster and lives outside of the control of men. She seems quite content to be a "career woman" and focus her energies to her local newspaper. In *The Living Earth*, post-menopausal Agnes Miller can still be attractive as a marriage partner. Ruth, in *The Sacrifice*, runs her own business and independently cares for her son. Questioning the status quo can be as inconspicuous as Luzina, in *Where Nests the Water Hen*, asking her priest if so many babies are necessary, or Maman in *Street of Riches*, raging at the socialization of young girls into frivolous, dependant women.

By the 1960s, the realist novels of this decade have profoundly shifted their perspective. In the novels of Gabrielle Roy and Margaret Laurence especially, the focus is upon the individual growth of the female hero, who attains a greater sense of self as subject. This is clearly indicated by the appearance of specific narrative strategies: woman-to-woman bonds; female and lesbian sexuality; challenges to the ideological organization of gender; less focus on the formation of the heterosexual couple; and the affirmation of the female quest. There are strong mother-daughter relationships in Roy's *The Road Past Altamont* and *A Bird in*

the House. Lesbian sexuality is mentioned in both Blondal's *A Candle to Light the Sun* and Laurence's *A Jest of God*, and there is greater awareness of female fantasies and sexual needs. Most of the novels of this decade have some awareness of the socialization of femininity, especially in the works of Laurence. There is disillusionment and difficulty with marriage, or it is ultimately unimportant to the narrative, in *The Road Past Altamont*, *A Bird in the House*, *The Stone Angel* and *A Jest of God*. Finally, *A Jest of God* can be seen as a female quest novel in Rachel's development to greater self-realization beyond the confines of male control.

The most logical explanation for these changes to occur in prairie women's novels is women's greater economic and political power, beginning in the 1950s and increasing steadily into the 1960s. Both single and married women moved persistently into the labour market, and although confined to specific job ghettos, this still resulted in many women having greater economic autonomy. In the 1960s, this demographic phenomena was joined by greater access for women to university education and increased participation in social activism. With the beginning of Voice of Women in 1960, women's feminist organizations proliferated rapidly, especially near the end of the decade. This increased social, economic and political power found a direct correlation in the cultural expression of female protagonists in the literature of the prairies. As Rachel DuPlessis puts it:

When women as a social group question, and have the economic, political and legal power to sustain and return to questions of marriage law, divorce, the 'coverte' status, and their access to vocation, then the relation of narrative middles to resolutions will destabilize culturally, and novelists will begin to 'write beyond' the romantic ending.²

Rather than opting for "bells or knells," female novelists in the 1950s and 1960s presented an expansion in the kinds of social scripts which define femininity.

The treatment of issues such as ethnicity and race vary from the late-1940s to the late-1960s. Most of the novels incorporate the rich ethnic and racial diversity of the prairie provinces to some capacity; Scottish, German, British, Ukrainian, Icelandic, Swedish, Scandinavian, Jewish, French-Canadian, Metis and Cree Indian characters appear sporadically. For women, the importance of this multi-cultural heritage varies from novel to novel.

The determinant of race is far more important for women in the novels of the 1940s than ethnicity. There are half-breed Metis and native Indian women as minor characters, and they generally fall into two groups. First, because most of these novels deal with a pioneer setting, native or half-breed women are admired for their knowledge and skills; the best example of this is Sarah Carpentier in *Mrs. Mike*. The other major group is the native or half-breed woman who suffers from racism, violence and misunderstanding. *Red River Shadows* exposes most clearly their sexual and economic oppression, while *Mrs. Mike* has scenes of domestic violence.

2. DuPlessis, p. 4.

Both expose persistent attempts at religious assimilation and a contempt for the native way of life. The pioneer novels demonstrate degrees of agency, for native or half-breed women can still withdraw into their tribes in defiance of ethnocentric hostility or exploitation. The Depression era *In Due Season* contemporizes the portrayal of native and half-breed people by revealing their social and economic marginalization.

In the novels of the 1950s, half-breed women are more prominent as major and minor characters. While Lady Mackenzie and her daughter Julie in *Fold Home* could just as easily be white as Country-born, half-breed women in *Pine Roots* and *The Living Earth* provide legitimate insight into the difficulties of being a racial minority. For characters like Rosa Jerome and Willow Mackenzie, attempts at integration into white society are characterized by degrees of failure.

In the novels of the 1960s, gender and race translates into an urban life marked by poverty, substance abuse, prostitution, degradation and pre-mature death. In the work of Margaret Laurence, Piquette and Valentine Tonnerre are characters who demonstrate the worst consequence of racism and cultural genocide. For women of colour, the double burden of race and femininity is often overwhelming in a society primarily ethnocentric and phallogocentric.

Ethnicity is not nearly as destructive for women as race. In the novels of the 1940s, ethnicity is not an

important variable as, with the exception of Hélène LeStrange, the main female protagonists are white and Anglo-Saxon. It is not until the novels of the 1950s that there is a serious consideration of the variable of ethnicity in female experience. In *Yellow Boots*, Lilli Landash is able to escape the socially repressive aspects of her Ukrainian heritage, using their cultural tradition for artistic fulfillment and fame. For the French-Canadians in Roy's work, ethnicity usually translates into a strong sense of family, confining female roles, and religious faith.

In the 1960s, Christine van der Mark's *Honey in the Rock* portrays how religious groups such as the Brethren-in-Christ define women's place very narrowly. Much the same is true for Laurence's Scottish Presbyterian protagonists. Generally, ethnicity coincides with patriarchy to limit severely women's place in the home. However, it is more flexible than race as ethnic minorities can either gather strength from their individual traditions or have the option for rejection and/or assimilation.

There is definitely a transition in the portrayal of violence against women during this period. It is the pioneer novels of the 1940s and 1950s like *The Curlew Cried*, *Mrs. Mike* and *Pine Roots* which demonstrate the most male violence including wife battery, wife rape, rape and assault. This kind of behavior draws different responses: Lane, in *The Curlew Cried*, escapes any criticism or condemnation; Sime Prader is murdered by his wife with his neighbours'

blessings; Jerry Browning, in *Pine Roots*, exposes a high level of tolerance in the community for his abuse of women. There is never any legal action taken against any of these men. It is surprising that in the realistic novels of the 1950s and 1960s, physical violence against women drops out of the narrative. It is difficult to know the reasons why, but it is perhaps important that, as women protagonists switched from being object to subject, they were no longer at the receiving end of a fist.

Literature as Normative

For the most part, this thesis has approached literature from one side of the coin, from the effect of society on cultural expression. But it is important to recognize that this relationship is reciprocal, that the social scripts of women which these novels portray can also have a role in shaping the way in which women perceive themselves.

Joan Rockwell's *Fact in Fiction* argues that literature can have a normative effect:

fiction is not only a representation of social reality, but also a necessary functional part of social control, and also paradoxically an important element of social change. It plays a large part in the socialization of infants, in the expression of official norms such as law and religion, in the conduct of politics, and in general gives symbols and modes of life to the population, particularly in those less defined but basic areas such as norms, values and personal and inter-personal behavior.³

3. Joan Rockwell, *Fact in Fiction: The Use of Literature for the Systematic Study of Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 4.

Rockwell sees social control or affirmation by the state through society's use of censorship or reward to novels which either offend or affirm dominant societal values.⁴ On an individual scale, normative effect can come from: a psychological sense of participation;⁵ the personification of acceptable forms of behavior;⁶ and, identification with a literary character.⁷ But it must also be recognized that this effect is limited by factors like: overall literacy in the population; selective perception on the part of readers; and the basic difficulties of publication and distribution.⁸

Nevertheless, it is most appropriate to see literature as part of a dynamic, part of a fluid movement of ideas, values and opinions between society, the writer, and the reading public. Because of this, novels can be a valuable primary source for the historian. As was argued by Morroe Berger, Margaret Laurence and Rachel DuPlessis, and was demonstrated in this examination of prairie women's novels, ideological templates do exist underneath the narrative which provide meaning and structure. But, it is important to recognize that literature can exist as social criticism as well as social affirmation of dominant norms. Following Swingwood, while novels generally advocate bourgeoisie values, they may criticize them as well. What was revealed

4. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

8. For an in-depth discussion of these practical aspects of literature, see John Hall, *The Sociology of Literature* (London: Longman Group, 1979).

in this study of women's prairie literature is the slow movement towards a women's fiction which provides an honest discourse on women's experience and advocates greater variety in their social roles.

On the first page of *The Fire-Dwellers*, Margaret Laurence draws attention to the mirror in Stacey's bedroom:

The full-length mirror is on the bedroom door. Stacey sees images reflected there, distanced by the glass like humans on TV, less real than real and yet more sharply focussed because isolated and limited by a frame. (p. 7)

The metaphor of the mirror is particularly appropriate for this study. Mirrors come in a variety of shapes and sizes, they are prolific in prairie women's fiction. They often act as a social referent for women. A woman who checks her appearance in front of the mirror checks to see if she is meeting a social standard of femininity and beauty. On the other hand, mirrors can also crystallize a sense of self, a sense of individuality. As the novels written between 1945 and 1970 indicate, there is a slow progression in the female protagonists of the novels from male-defined femininity to a woman-defined or individual femininity. If one believes that "The fiction makes us real,"⁹ this is an essential step for women to discover and to define their true self beyond the definitions provided by patriarchy.

9. Robert Kroetsch, "A Conversation with Margaret Laurence," *A Place to Stand On: Essays By and About Margaret Laurence*, George Woodcock, ed. (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1983), p. 54.

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