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Margaret Laurence's Women: Isolation and Survival in the Manawaka Sequence
Ženské postavy Margaret Laurencové: izolace a přežití v cyklu Manawaka

BAKALÁŘSKA PRÁCE

Vedoucí bakalářské práce (supervisor):
Mgr. Miroslava Horová, PhD
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Zpracovala (author): Zuzana Ondová
Studijní obor (subject):
Anglistika – amerikanistika

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Abstract

This bachelor thesis examines the theme of isolation and survival in *A Jest of God* (1966) and *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), the second and third novel in Margaret Laurence's Manawaka sequence, on the background of Margaret Atwood's book *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972). At a time when Canadian literature was a nebulous term, Atwood identified the notion of *survival* as the common, unifying theme in literary works produced by writers across the vast country, with victims, death, terror and isolation as the accompanying motifs. She defines the concept as multi-faceted, distinguishing the external/physical survival found in early Canadian explorer writing and the internal/psychological survival common in later fiction writers. Furthermore, based on the argument that as a colony, Canada is inherently victimized, she proposes a system of four Victim Positions into which we can categorize Canadian protagonists.

Margaret Laurence (1926-1987) is considered one of the fundamental figures of the English-Canadian novel. In the Introduction I provide insight into the socio-cultural climate of the time period and the bleak state of Canadian publishing industry at the time. Since Laurence's works are tied to the Manitoba prairie, I touch on the significance of regionalism in understanding Canadian culture and the impact of region on artistic vision. I also introduce the concept of Atwood's Victims Positions.

In Chapter 2 I introduce Atwood and the aspects of *Survival* that are crucial to the analysis of Laurence's female protagonists. I approach the theme of isolation with Atwood's concept of the Rapunzel Syndrome, which, on her Canadian terms, means that the tower and Rapunzel is oftentimes the same for her inability to communicate with the outside world. Since Laurence's women all go through processes of self-discovery, I regard them as explorers of the self who are, however, always and unavoidably, chained to their heritage. I also apply Atwood's three-generational portrait of familial relationships, which portrays isolation between generations. I provide further background on the life of Laurence, who traveled the world before she came back to her Canadian roots and focused her imaginative talents on the theme of spiritual survival, mythologizing her native region as Manawaka.

In Chapter 3 I delve into *A Jest of God*, studying Rachel Cameron as a Rapunzel who is detached from the outside world to the point that she perceives herself as an object or animals. I analyze her emotional repression as a consequence of her Scottish Presbyterian background and the legacy of her mysterious, silent father who ran a funeral parlor in the house. Her old-

fashioned mother, Mrs. Cameron, functions as the Wicked Witch/Selfish Mother figure as well as the rigid Grandmother of Atwood's generational pattern, imposing her principles on others. With her arrested emotional development, Rachel is stuck in Atwood's position of the Child. Her Rescuer, Nick Kazlik, appears as a summer fling that is doomed from the start, however, his sexual awakening of Rachel opens her up to vulnerability. Rachel's release from her tower comes as a strangely symbolic re-birth when her assumed pregnancy turns out to be a tumor.

Chapter 4 analyzes *The Fire-Dwellers*, the story of Rachel's older sister Stacey Cameron MacAindra, who lives in Vancouver with her husband and children. As a Rapunzel in the role of a housewife approaching the age of 40, Stacey feels trapped both in her house and her body. The external world plays a role in this narrative set in an urban environment, as Stacey contemplates her identity stripped of the domestic role. She wants to escape the inside in every sense – the house, the 39-year-old body, the voices in her head – and head to the uninhibited wilderness up north. The Wicked Witch is represented by her mother, Mrs. Cameron, and her conforming ideas of womanhood, as well as Stacey's husband, Mac, who is a stereotypical masculine character, representative of urban middle-class of the 1960's. Stacey encounters her Rescuer in the harbor when she ventures out of the house. Though he provides the momentary release that she needs and offer the physical escape of her fantasies, Stacey, bound by motherhood, realizes she cannot leave her children for good.

Keywords: Margaret Laurence, Manawaka, survival, isolation, Canadian literature, prairie literature

Abstrakt

Táto bakalárska práca sa zaoberá témou izolácie a prežitia v cykle Manawaka od Margaret Laurencovej, konkrétne v románoch *A Jest of God* (1966) a *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), na pozadí príručky Margaret Atwoodovej, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972). V čase, kedy bol výraz kanadská literatúra pomerne nejasný pojem, Atwoodová identifikovala *prežitie* ako centrálny koncept spájajúci kanadských autorov naprieč krajinou, ktorý je navyše často sprevádzaný motívmi obetí, strachu, smrti a izolácie. Atwoodová tento koncept definuje ako mnohotvárný, pričom rozlišuje externé/fyzické prežitie, ktoré prevažuje v skorších dielach zaoberajúcich sa bádáním novej kolónie a vnútorné/psychologické prežitie typické pre neskorších autorov beletrie. Autorka argumentuje na základe myšlienky, že Kanada je vo svojej podstate v roli obeť, keďže vznikla ako kolónia. Pozoruje všade prítomnosť obetí a vyvodzuje štyri typy, do ktorých vieme kanadských literárnych hrdinov a hrdinky zaradiť.

Margaret Laurencová (1926-1987) sa zviditeľnila cyklom Manawaka v šesťdesiatych rokoch, a teda v období, ktoré bolo zásadné pre vývin modernej kanadskej literatúry. Dnes je aj táto Margaret považovaná za jednu zo základných postáv kanadského románu písaného v anglickom jazyku. V úvode nahliadam do sociálno-kultúrnych aspektov tejto doby, vrátane bezútešnej situácie, v ktorej sa nachádzal kanadský trh s knihami. Keďže dielo Laurencovej je neoddeliteľne späté s jej rodným regiónom, ktorým je préria na juhu provincie Manitoba, nevynechávam rolu regionalizmu v chápaní kanadskej kultúry. V úvode taktiež predstavujem Atwoodovej typy obetí, keďže v závere na základne nich hodnotím hlavné hrdinky.

V druhej kapitole sa venujem Margaret Atwoodovej životu a impulzu, ktorý predchádzal nápadu publikovať *Survival* a z príručky vyberám body, ktoré sú kľúčové pre analýzu Laurencovej hrdiniek. K téme izolácie pristupujem s konceptom Rapunzel Syndrómu, ktorý sa podľa nej v kanadskom ponímaní vyznačuje tým, že samotná žena často symbolizuje vežu, v ktorej je uväznená, pretože nie je schopná komunikovať svoje pocity so svetom okolo. Všetky hrdinky v cykle Manawaka prechádzajú procesmi sebapoznávania, avšak zisťujú, že sú navždy a neodvratne viazané k svojmu pôvodu. Využívam Atwoodovej model trojgeneračných rodinných portrétov, podľa ktorého vieme rodinu Cameronových charakterizovať. V tejto kapitole pridávam informácie o živote Laurencovej, o tom ako precestovala svet predtým ako sa vrátila do rodnej Kanady a začala sa sústreďovať na tému spirituálneho prežitia, pričom na základe svojho rodiska vytvorila mýtické mestečko Manawaka.

V tretej kapitole sa začínam venovať románu *A Jest of God*, ktorého hlavná hrdinka Rachel Cameronová sa dištancuje od sveta okolo seba natoľko, že samú seba vníma ako predmet alebo rôzne zvieratá. Jej potláčané emócie analyzujem ako odraz presbyteriánskej výchovy ako aj jej záhadného, roky mŕtveho otca, ktorý aj počas života preferoval tichú spoločnosť mŕtvych vo svojom pohrebnom ústave. Rachel staromódna mama si zakladá na tradícii a predstavuje tak postavu Zlomyseľnej Čarodejnice/Sebeckej Matky, ktorá Rachel drží uväznenú. Zároveň plní aj rolu zanovitej Starej Mamy podľa Atwoodovej konceptu kanadských rodín v literatúre. Rachel je emocionálne zaostalá, čo ju drží v pozícii Dieťaťa. Nick ako Záchranca v Rachel prebudí citovosť, ktorá slúži ako odrazový mostík k vyslobodeniu z izolácie. Jej vyslobodenie prichádza v symbolickej scéne znovuzrodenia, kedy sa dozvedá, že nie je tehotná, ale má v tele nádor.

Štvrtá kapitola je zameraná na román *The Fire-Dwellers*, príbeh Rachel sestry Stacey, ktorá žije vo Vancouveri so svojím manželom a deťmi. Ako Rapunzel v úlohe ženy v domácnosti, Stacey sa cíti uväznená vo svojom dome i v tele. V tomto románe hrá vonkajší svet dôležitú rolu, pretože Stacey rozjíma nad svojou identitou mimo rolu manželky a matky a možnosť na útek vidí vonku. Snaží sa uniknúť pred vnútorným svetom v každom zmysle slova a odísť do neobývanej divočiny na sever od mesta. V úlohe Zlomyseľnej Čarodejnice je opäť pani Cameronová, ktorá dcéry vychovávala so svojimi zastaranými predstavami o správaní žien, ale aj Stacey manžel, Mac, ktorý reprezentuje stereotyp muža strednej vrstvy šesťdesiatych rokov. Stacey stretáva svojho Záchrancu v prístave. Hoci jej Luke poskytuje všetko, po čom túži, vrátane vysneného úteku do divokej prírody, Stacey si uvedomuje, že nemôže opustiť svoje deti.

Kľúčové slová: Margaret Laurencová, Manawaka, prežití, izolace, kanadská literatúra, préríjní literatura

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1 Introduction

*"[...] deep down, between cultures within the nation, there sounds a note in much of our literature which we can recognize as ours."*¹

Canadian literature is notorious for its air of mystery. What is it? What makes Alice Munro's Nobel-awarded short stories Canadian? Does anyone reading *The Handmaid's Tale* give Margaret Atwood's nationality a second thought (or any at all)?

Although contemporary Canadian authors are regularly shortlisted for international literary prizes, the conversation on what it means to be a Canadian writer persists. In addition to uniformity and regionalism, diversity and internationalism have entered the discussion, represented by recent literary works of international renown. *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* (2016), Madeleine Thien's complex generational novel that depicts the events of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, was shortlisted for The Man Booker Prize. Eden Robinson captures Aboriginal experience and culture in her magical realism set in British Columbia. Miriam Toews' story of a teenage girl stifled in a small Mennonite community in Manitoba, *A Complicated Kindness* (2005), has become a modern-day classic with both Canadian and international accolades. Alice Munro is celebrated for her depiction of the mundane universalities of human life, the features of Southern Ontario Gothic intriguing mostly to the scarce academic eye. The short-story collection *That Time I Loved You* (2019) by Hong-Kong born Carriene Leung offers a very Munro-like glimpse into the daily life of immigrants in a Toronto suburbia in the 1970's as seen through the eyes of a Chinese-Canadian girl coming of age. Undoubtedly, there is no shortage of diverse female voices but it has not always been like this. In fact, not too long ago there was nobody to look up to at all.

Margaret Atwood was born in 1939 and graduated high school in 1957. When talking about her beginnings as a writer, she emphasizes three things: 1) the lack of an established literary tradition, 2) essentially zero attention dedicated to Canadian writing in school curricula, and 3) the meagre state of Canadian publishing industry. In an interview with *Iowa Journal of Literary Studies* Atwood explains that she honed her craft by reading extensively, and when she started writing poetry at the age of sixteen, she emulated the likes of Poe,

¹ Malcolm Ross, "The Imaginative Sense and the Canadian Question," *An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 11.1 (1977): 7, JSTOR.

Wordsworth and Byron. When she discovered T.S. Eliot later at university, the modernist features seeped into her writing too. In the late 1950's there were only a handful of fellow aspiring writers at the University of Toronto and certainly no writers' workshops or supportive writing groups. As a young woman in the mid-twentieth century Atwood was not concerned with the restraints of her sex but rather her nationality: "[So] the focus of my young writing career was not 'I can't do this because I'm a woman,' but 'this is rather daring for me to be doing as a Canadian; will I be able to get away with this?'"² In high school, she was taught one Canadian poem without any particular explanation. During her undergraduate degree, Atwood genuinely believed that to become a writer, she would have to move abroad like the generation before her did.³

Stephen Henighan's article "Writing in Canadian: The Problem of the Novel" traces the emergence of the Canadian novel. Early Canadian writing consists largely of poems and travelogues illustrating the new country and its environment, often meant for Britons considering the move across the Atlantic.⁴ In *Survival* Atwood describes *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852), a guide to settler life in Canada by Susana Moodie, as a collision of the author's British Wordsworthian faith and the hostility of Canadian nature.⁵ Moodie's sister Catherine Parr Traill put together a collection of personal journal entries titled *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836), and, notably, the first Canadian novel is attributed to a woman, too. Frances Brooke published *The History of Emily Montague* in 1769 in the form of an epistolary novel. Besides a romantic plot, the novel presents the relations between the English, French and Native cultures in Quebec at the time. Henighan explains that the literary quality is generally agreed to be low but these works are still studied for historical detail. As he sums it up, most writing of the nineteenth and early twentieth century is concerned with the documentation of the realities of rural Canada rather than a way of expressing humanity in any distinctive way.⁶

What connects these earliest works with the novels of the twentieth century is the fact that they were written for a foreign audience. According to Hanighen, the country's publishing industry was pretty much non-existent well into the 1960's. Canadian writers knew that if they

² Shannon Hengen and Joyce Meier, "Interview with Margaret Atwood," *Iowa Journal of Literary Studies*, Vol. 7.1 (1986): 5, University of Iowa Institutional Repository.

³ Hengen and Meier, "Interview," 5.

⁴ Stephen Henighan, "Writing in Canadian: The Problem of the Novel," *Hungarian Studies in English* Vol. 21 (1990): 80, JSTOR.

⁵ Atwood, *Survival*, 51.

⁶ Henighan, "Writing in Canadian," 80.

were lucky enough to get published, their books would deck the shelves of New York and London bookstores but only a few copies would see the light of day in Canada and even fewer would actually be read by Canadian readers. Authors did what they had to do, and it is not surprising that such alienating conditions of the craft lead them to descriptive explanations of reality, rather than "using this reality as an imaginative point of departure."⁷ An average London reader, interested in local color and the exoticism of a far-away territory across the Atlantic as well as, presumably, the realities of everyday life, had to have everything about small-town Canada handed on a silver platter, no detail left out. Ignoring foreign audience was self-sabotage. In his psychological novel of prairie isolation set during the Depression, Sinclair Ross' *As For Me and My House* offers a journal of a minister's wife in a small town. Ross did not bother to provide the instruction for an imaginary foreign reader. Admittedly, it is true that the town of Horizon is never explicitly stated to be located on the Canadian prairie, either. *As For Me and My House* is now canonized as one of the keystones of the English-Canadian novel but Ross is rumored to have sold a mere six copies in 1941 when the novel was first published.⁸

When discussing the emergence of modern Canadian literature, we must pay attention to the socio-political changes of the mid-century as well. As Henighan phrases it, Canada was never an empire, albeit historically and geographically close to two.⁹ The gradual movement towards independence brought about a transformation - colonial bonds with Britain faded, economic relationships with the United States were formed.

The Dominion of Canada, a self-governing entity within the British Empire, was established on July 1 1867 but the road towards independence was still long and slow. During World War I, military forces fought as a distinct Canadian unit for the first time in history, and British Canadians believed it to be their duty to fight for their motherland. Come Second World War, however, Canadian men were not as enthusiastic to leave for the battlefields again. The sacrifices made in the name of the Empire surged nationalistic feelings, and Canada began to demand independence. The British Parliament passed The Statute of Westminster in 1931 granting legislative autonomy to self-governing dominions unless the dominion required British interference. During the Suez Crisis in 1956, Canada flat out

⁷ Henighan, "Writing in Canadian," 80.

⁸ Henighan, "Writing in Canadian," 81.

⁹ Henighan, "Writing in Canadian," 81.

refused British calls for invasion of Egypt, acting as a peacemaker in the conflict. In 1982 the Canada Act brought the process of patriation of the Constitution to an end, withdrawing the power of the British Parliament to alter it.

The state of the country's culture remained grim until the 1960's. Writers of the 1950', including Margaret Laurence, left the country but the combination of post-war economic boom and the rise of nationalism changed that. During the 1960's, Henighan explains, Canada continued to prosper, the university system expanded and a sense of nationalism grew. The adoption of the maple leaf flag in 1965 and the celebrations of the centennial of the Confederation at Expo 67 in Montreal roused patriotic feelings. Funding of the arts was increased and publishing houses multiplied, now committed to promoting Canadian writing. Toronto became the centre of English-Canadian publishing and Canadian literature started being recognized as a serious field of study. However, Canadian English began losing its defining linguistic features in the 1970's when cable television intensified the influence of American pop culture. In urban areas, speakers were dropping the (stereo)typical tonal raising in diphthong pronunciation and an increasing number of people chose US vocabulary over Canadian words. Interestingly enough, that was also when writers began to find their literary voices.¹⁰

One of the components of any discussion of Canadian culture is the matter of national versus regional identity. According to Janice Fiamengo in *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature* the majority of scholars view regionalism as a defining feature of Canadian culture, which is by nature difficult to define as the country is founded on a bi-cultural origin. Shaped by such environment, artists are believed to retain their "primary imaginative allegiance to specific regions rather than to the whole country."¹¹ Critic George Woodcock proposed that Canadian writing has always been intrinsically regional, an assertion that is supported by Northrop Frye as well. In the preface to *The Bush Garden* (1971), Frye writes that the imagination of a prairie writer is bound to evolve differently from that of someone raised on the Newfoundland shores of the Atlantic. It must be noted, though, that during periods of heightened national consciousness, regionalism was seen in a negative light as a fragmentary device. A newfound interest in it was brought by the post-1988 era of free

¹⁰ Henighan, "Writing in Canadian," 80.

¹¹ Janice Fiamengo, "Regionalism and Urbanism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature*, ed. Eva-Marie Kröller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 261.

trade when it was felt that globalization might be a threat to cultural distinctions.¹² Where the United States are known as *the melting pot*, Canada has a reputation for being a more heterogeneous *cultural mosaic*, with a bi-cultural foundation and multicultural prospects. Fiamengo explains that in a contemporary understanding of it, the term region extends to the social, historical, economic and cultural characteristics of a place.¹³ Regional voices, such as Margaret Laurence, capture the complexities of their regions, while responding to national issues as well. In 1972, Atwood aimed to look for a connecting theme among those responses.

She was ten years into her career as a published author when *Survival: A Thematic Survey of Canadian Literature* came out and the book caused a bigger stir than she could have imagined. Atwood was not aiming to write a historical overview nor a close reading of select authors. She took it upon herself to identify the recurring pattern of Canadian literature, "a single unifying and informing symbol."¹⁴ Part of the process was proving that there was a distinct Canadian literature with its own concerns, not just a knock-off of British, American and French tradition, which seemed radical to many at the time. As Atwood explains, history and culture were treated as things that happened somewhere else and Canada, therefore, remained an unknown territory for its own citizens.¹⁵ She proposed that literature is not just a reflection of a nation but a map that guides its people toward national consciousness as well. The book discusses Canadian literature around the central pattern of survival, with victims, terror, deaths and failures as the accompanying motifs. Atwood herself describes the concept as very multi-faceted and adaptable:

A preoccupation with one's survival is necessarily also a preoccupation with the obstacles to that survival. In earlier writers these obstacles are external - the land, the climate, and so forth. In later writers the obstacles tend to become both harder to identify and more internal; they are no longer obstacles to physical survival but obstacles to what one may call spiritual survival, to life as anything more than a minimally human being.¹⁶

¹² Fiamengo, "Regionalism and Urbanism," 261.

¹³ Fiamengo, "Regionalism and Urbanism," 262.

¹⁴ Atwood, *Survival*, 31.

¹⁵ Atwood, *Survival*, 18.

¹⁶ Atwood, *Survival*, 32.

Furthermore, Atwood famously proposes Victim Positions, based on the argument that that as a colony, Canada is inherently a collective victim. She distinguishes four positions:

1. To deny the fact that you are a victim
2. To acknowledge that you are a victim but to explain it as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the Dictates of Biology etc.
3. To acknowledge that you are a victim, but too refuse to accept it as inevitable
4. To be a creative non-victim, achieved through artistic activity or a ex-victim who has been rid of the causes of victimization¹⁷

According to Atwood, 9 times out of 10 in Canadian literature of the four decades she surveyed, we hit protagonists who are victims, whether they deny it or accept it as their fated existence.¹⁸ Canadian victims of this period face the climate, the Depression, the War and their own self – sometimes all at once.

Indeed, we cannot overlook the different connotations in francophone culture. Atwood points out that in French-Canadian contexts the theme, *la survivance*, takes on a unique layered meaning which entails cultural, linguistic, and religious survival under English dominance. As a more cohesive but minor community, the French experience a more intense feeling of terror of what awaits in the rest of the country. However, she also admits that her knowledge of French-Canadian writing at the time, although read in the original, was rather superficial.¹⁹ A lot has changed over the past almost 50 years as Quebec sovereignty movement emerged, and two independence referenda took place. This thesis, however, is not concerned with the French question. While the matter of cultural survival is pertinent to the Métis family living on the outskirts of Manawaka, my focus is on what Atwood refers to as spiritual survival of the female protagonists coming from Scottish settler backgrounds.

Margaret Laurence has been referred to as the godmother of Canadian women's writing and even as the most important novelist of the formative period of Canadian literature of the

¹⁷ Atwood, *Survival*, 36-8.

¹⁸ Atwood, *Survival*, 39.

¹⁹ Atwood, *Survival*, 217-8.

late 1960's and early 1970's.²⁰ As an engineer's wife, she spent over a decade of her life abroad before she returned to Canada and began writing about the complexities of her native region. She crafted Manawaka as a reflection of her own Manitoba hometown, and through the five female narrators in the sequence she mastered the intersection of the local, the national and the universal. Laurence's women are explorers who head out on identity quests, both internal and physical. A sense of dissatisfaction runs through the sequence; as the protagonists face their personal realities they go through processes of alienation and self-discovery, often including an encounter with death. With images of empty dusty landscape and the small town's social hierarchy firmly in place, the prairie setting itself is isolating.

The female protagonists oscillate between Atwood's proposed Victim Positions as they struggle with the socio-cultural conditions of their time, location and the events of their lives. In *The Stone Angel* (1964) 90-year-old Hagar Shipley recounts her life story marked by loss and grief which result in a state of emotional detachment. The protagonist of *The Fire-Dwellers* (1966), Stacey MacAindra, is a Manawaka expat living in Vancouver, while her sister Rachel Cameron remains in the native small town, her own frustrations captured in *A Jest of God* (1969). At the age of 40, Vanessa MacLeod from *A Bird in the House* (1970) revisits the events of her childhood, both the family's economic survival during the Depression and her own desire to escape the stifling atmosphere of the house. Morag Gunn of the cumulative work *The Diviners* (1974) even moves overseas, only to come back to Canada years later to write fiction much like Laurence herself did.

Both Margarets have undoubtedly been pivotal in the making of modern Canadian literature. The aim of this thesis is to examine the theme of isolation and survival in the Manawaka sequence. Because of the scope of a BA thesis, my analysis focuses primarily on two novels of the cycle, *A Jest of God* and *The Fire-Dwellers*. Despite their differences in character and location, the sisters, Rachel and Stacey, can be analyzed in terms of Atwood's Rapunzel Syndrome, which in a traditional sense is a story of a young woman imprisoned in a tower and rescued by a handsome man. In Canadian fashion, Laurence's women are reaching middle-age, they are unable to communicate and thus unable to break out of the confinement. The women are conditioned into certain behavioral patterns by their Scottish Presbyterian parents, whose relationship was, too, defined by isolation rather than expressions of love. Due

²⁰ Coral Ann Howells, "Writing by Women," in *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature*, ed. Eva-Marie Kröller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 220.

to their inability to speak out, Rachel and Stacey constitute their own towers of isolation, while the men they meet provide only a momentary escape. Consequently, the protagonists have to cope and survive on their own. I also take into account the prairie town as a place that the characters internalize as a state of mind, and consider Stacey and Rachel in terms of Atwood's Victim Positions.

2 The Two Margarets

2.1 Margaret Atwood

True to her name originating from the Old English *atte wood*, Margaret Atwood spent much of her childhood in remote Canadian woods. Although born in the country's capital Ottawa, her father's career in forest entomology led the family to his research station in the backwoods of northern Quebec every spring. In autumn they returned to pass the coldest months either in Ottawa, Toronto or Sault Ste. Marie. Atwood was 6-months-old when she was first taken into the woods in a packsack and 12-years-old when she finally attended a whole year of school full-time. In an interview by Robert McCrun for *The Guardian* she emphasizes the wilderness aspect of her childhood experiences: "Don't even think rural. That implies farms. No, we're talking *in the woods*. A settlement of about six houses [...]. No electricity. No running water."¹

In another interview, "Light in Wilderness," Atwood describes how free time was spent in such a remote environment. Save for a couple of hours of homeschooling, the children were left to their own devices. Obviously, the options in Quebec bush were scarce: there was no television, no friends to play with, and no events to go to. The radio was not reliable and only meant to catch up with news from the war anyway. Books became a vital source of entertainment and education, as well as a creative pastime. Atwood's older brother taught her to read and the two of them created their own comics. They built a world of superhero flying rabbits equipped with spaceships and balloons, smiling in the hand-drawn pictures.² In *Survival* she recalls her reading choices, how she read anything from Donald Duck and Captain Marvel to Edgar Allan Poe and naturalistic animal fiction. Her primary concern was entertainment; she was not formally taught about Canadian literature or aware of a distinct national identity. However, through her ample reading, Atwood found that fantasy escapes felt foreign in a way that stories of animals fighting for survival in wilderness did not. Gothic mansions and mossy dungeons may have existed somewhere but it was nowhere near her Quebec woods.³

¹ Margaret Atwood, "Margaret Atwood Interview: Go Three Days Without Water and You Don't Have Any Human Rights. Why? Because You're Dead," interview by Robert McCrun, *The Guardian*, Nov 28 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/nov/28/margaret-atwood-interview>

² Margaret Atwood, "Light in the Wilderness," interview by Robert Potts, *The Guardian*, Apr 26 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/apr/26/fiction.margaretatwood>

³ Atwood, *Survival*, 30.

Atwood says that as a young reader she was "learning what to expect"⁴ from Canadian writing. In many of the books she read, such as *Alice in Wonderland*, the return from a strange dangerous place to a safe, familiar one is possible, even guaranteed. In Charles G. D. Roberts' *Kings in Exile* (1910), a Canadian novel about animals in the wild, it was not, however; dangers awaited in the real world with no certainties. In Ellsworth Jaeger's survival guide *Wildwood Wisdom* (1945), Atwood found tips and live-off-the-land recipes that used ingredients both familiar and readily available to her. No one called these books Canadian and she admits later that she would not even have cared if they did.⁵ However, by the time she received Robert Weaver and Helen James' anthology *Canadian Short Stories* (1952) in high school, Atwood was not surprised by the content of such a collection, explicitly labeled Canadian. A pattern was emerging in her mind. Once again they were stories of animals on the run, up against humans, against nature itself: "This was a world of frozen corpses, dead gophers, snow, dead children, and the ever-present feeling of menace, not from an enemy set over against you but from everything surrounding you. The familiar peril lurked behind every bush, and *I knew the names of the bushes*."⁶ Through the recognition of the geography, as a reader Atwood began to perceive literature as a mirror and a map. She found a reflection of her environment in books and, in turn, started forming a mental map of Canadian writing and its place in relation to all the other literatures she was familiar with, a process she deems key to understanding of a country's national literature.

Atwood completed her BA in English in 1961 at the University of Toronto, where Northrop Frye was one of her professors. It was he who advised her to pursue further education while she built her writing career to avoid the fate of the starved artist. In 1962 she acquired her master's degree at Harvard University and continued to pursue a PhD there with a thesis on English metaphysical romance that she never finished. During her graduate studies, her focus was on Puritan history and the literature of the American Revolution. She was intrigued by the period of the revolution because it reminded her of where Canada stood at the time. As she explains in The Guardian interview with Potts:

For me, as a Canadian, at a time when we were thought not to have any literature, it was very interesting to go back to a time in American

⁴ Atwood, *Survival*, 30.

⁵ Atwood, *Survival*, 29.

⁶ Atwood, *Survival*, 30

history when they were thought not to have any, and there were people going about building it, and the great masterpiece, *Moby-Dick*, appeared and was immediately sneered at and scoffed at and dismissed: it wasn't resurrected until the 1920s.⁷

Canadian classics have had a similar fate, only their resurrection came later in the century. We have mentioned the fate of *As For Me and My House*. The novel that originally sold a mere six copies was saved from oblivion by chance, when McClelland and Stewart reprinted it for The New Canadian Library series in 1958. Malcolm Ross, a professor of English, approached publishing houses with the idea for such series with the intention to provide access to reading materials to his students and the hope that it would spark academic research into Canadian literature.⁸ Turned down by Macmillan, Ross succeeded at McClelland and Stewart, and the series was launched in January 1958.

When asked if drama has a special place in Canadian literature, Atwood deadpans in the interview with *The Iowa Journal*: "Special? Well it's another one of those things there wasn't very much of until the late '60s."⁹ The first Shakespeare she ever saw on stage was performed by a four-man theatre group called Earle Grey at her high school. Theatre groups like them went around schools to perform the plays that were on the final exam that year, and students even got to play minor parts in them. For Atwood, there was one great positive in it because it made her feel that art was accessible, not intimidating: "[...] you didn't feel there was a huge barrier between art and yourself. Art was just what Earle Grey was doing on the stage of the high school, and therefore you could do it too."¹⁰ When she casually announced to her fellow female students at Harvard that she was an aspiring writer, they were surprised. They viewed writing as a very courageous venture, an attitude Atwood attributes to the difference between the countries' literary traditions. Her American classmates felt they were competing with Melville and Fitzgerald, among many other men. Atwood, on the other hand, had no literary deities hanging over her. The Canadian writing community during the 1950's and 1960's was

⁷ Potts, "Light in the Wilderness."

⁸ Henighan, "Writing in Canadian," 80.

⁹ Hengen and Meier, "Interview," 8.

¹⁰ Hengen and Meier, "Interview," 8

small and welcoming of anyone who read Canadian literature, and even more so of anyone who had the guts to write.¹¹

According to McCrun, there were only five novels written by Canadians published in the country by Canadian publishers in 1960.¹² Atwood's first poetry collection *Double Persephone* came out a year later and it is no surprise that at such a time and in a family of scientists, a career in a different direction was deemed more rational. Atwood looked back on the publication of *Survival* in 1999 in an essay titled "Survival, Then and Now," where she also touches on the bleak state of Canadian publishing industry in the 1960's. A novel did well when it hit a thousand copies, while poetry collections were a success with a couple hundred sold coast-to-coast. A few years into its existence, Anansi, the small Toronto-based publishing house she was under was in the red and to keep afloat, they started publishing user-friendly guides on all kinds of topics. The idea for a thematic guide to Canadian literature was born out of the two most frequent questions Atwood received on book tours in places that often lacked bookstores. Audience members asked: "'Is there any Canadian literature?' and, 'Supposing there is, isn't it just a second-rate copy of real literature, which comes from England and the United States?'"¹³ She pitched the idea at the Anansi meeting, intending the book as a guide for a layman audience, for all those people looking for an answer and more Canadian books to read. Fortunately, the late 1960's saw a shift in the public interest in Canadian culture. In its first year *Survival* sold 30,000 copies, ten times the estimated number. "Suddenly, Can Lit was everybody's business,"¹⁴ Atwood remarks.

In summary, this was an era when Canadian literature was just starting to come into its own. The authors we celebrate today, including Atwood and Laurence, were not educated in the country's literary history and any efforts to do so were inhibited by the lack of reading materials, anyway. Starting from 1958, the New Canadian Series made the literary texts widely accessible in paperback and the socio-political events of the following decade gave rise to a sense of national consciousness required to initiate conversations on literary identity. By the end of the 1960's, Margaret Laurence had published three of the Manawaka novels. Alice Munro's debut collection came out in 1968 and received the Governor General's Prize

¹¹ Hengen and Meier, "Interview," 7

¹² McCrun, "Go Three Days Without Water."

¹³ Margaret Atwood, "Survival, Then and Now," *Macleans*, July 1 1999
<https://archive.macleans.ca/article/1999/7/1/survival-then-and-now>

¹⁴ Atwood, "Survival, Then and Now."

for Fiction. Canadian poetry proliferated as well, with Eli Mandel and Leonard Cohen coming into increasing prominence. Mordecai Richler, an eminent Jewish author, returned to Canada from exile in 1972, and repeatedly wrote about the Montreal neighborhood he grew up in. Atwood herself published five poetry collections and one novel in the 1960's, followed by her sophomore novel, *Surfacing*, in 1972, the year *Survival* came out.

Between 1965 and 1975, Canadian writers suddenly saw an incentive to stay home and write for Canadians. They were getting published and promoted and, most importantly, their own people were reading them. What is more, as Atwood's book tours showed, they had questions. When a guide like *Survival* becomes a runaway best-seller, there is something noteworthy in the general public's interest in their nation's literature. If timing is everything, Atwood hit it just right.

2.2 Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature

Even so, the guide's best-selling triumph came as a shock to Atwood. Canadian writing was often treated as a joke, an oxymoron, and a bore. Farley Mowat, a fellow writer, warned her that she would become a target – and she did. Some critics were affronted, voicing their dissent with the thematic approach, which they viewed as reductive, simplistic, and a little too versatile. In particular, Frank Davey, who comments on the guide in "Surviving the Paraphrase," argues that Atwood, among others at the time, was "not interested in writing as writing."¹⁵ He feels that the use of language, form and structure is overshadowed in favor of catchwords (such as survival and victimization), consequently moving Canadian literary critique towards "paraphrase of the culture and paraphrase of the literature."¹⁶

Atwood never seemed to regret her method in writing the book, though. In the decades following the publication of *Survival*, she was often asked how she would change her approach were she writing (or re-writing) the guide at that given time. Even in 1999 the answer was clear to her for two reasons. For one, she acknowledged that Canadian literature was in a wholly different place than it had been 30 years earlier. She knew she would not have needed to write anything like *Survival* because few would seriously argue against the existence of Canadian literature anymore. In addition to that, given the quantity and diverse range of books published in the country by the turn of the millennium, it would have been

¹⁵ Frank Davey, "Surviving the Paraphrase," *Canadian Literature: A Quarterly of Criticism and Review*, 70 (1976): 6, Canlit.ca

¹⁶ Davey, "Surviving the Paraphrase," 6.

impossible to write a guide like that at all.¹⁷ In 1972 it was possible and, as the overview of the situation pre-1965 suggests, also inevitable.

Atwood found that the general problem with teaching literature in Canada was that it put emphasis on the personal and the universal, thus neglecting the national and the cultural. In the guide she stresses that Canadian content is not equivalent to Canadian literature. As a matter of fact, many of the recurring patterns that she examines are universal but it is the characteristic way writers handle them that constitutes those works as Canadian. The grand triumph of Canadian protagonists tends to be a halting breakthrough, a small personal victory: “Our stories are likely to be tales not of those who made it but those who made it *back* from the awful experience [...]. The survivor has no triumph [...] but the fact of his survival; he has little of his ordeal that he didn’t have before, except gratitude for having escaped with his life.”¹⁸

On the whole, Atwood likens Canadian writing to a gloomy landscape with a few little points of light, such as a flower or a fire; the overpowering shades of grey, of course, representing the tone of Canadian literature up until 1970.¹⁹ Still, she claims that “having bleak ground under your feet is better than having no ground at all,”²⁰ because “any map is better than having no map as long as it’s accurate, and knowing your starting points and your frame of reference is better than being suspended in a void.”²¹

What happens next once you have discovered your tradition? Atwood sees two possibilities: on the one hand, future writers are not required to subscribe to it at all costs, nor should they defiantly discard it. Traditions can be explored, used as a point of departure towards new ways of seeing, imagining and, in the end, writing. On the other hand, as Atwood phrases it, “you don’t knock Faulkner for not being Jane Austen.”²² Recognizing a tradition does not make one less critical or more prone to praise Canadian literature just because it is Canadian and had once been thought to be non-existent. If anything, the identification of the tradition should fine-tune one’s critical reading skills, and, ultimately, teach readers to “read the products of the tradition *in terms of the tradition itself*.”²³

¹⁷ Atwood, "Survival, Then and Now."

¹⁸ Atwood, *Survival*, 33.

¹⁹ Atwood, *Survival*, 245.

²⁰ Atwood, *Survival*, 246.

²¹ Atwood, *Survival*, 246.

²² Atwood, *Survival*, 238.

²³ Atwood, *Survival*, 238.

This thesis does not question Atwood's argument or her approach to the survey of Canadian literature. Margaret Laurence's Manawaka sequence is a product of the tradition that Atwood deals with in *Survival* and my focus on isolation of women is, likewise, thematic. As I explain more in depth later on, when Laurence started working on her Canadian fiction, her focus shifted to the more pessimistic tones of inner survival. Despite the universalities of human life being a very prominent domain of her writing, Laurence was very much aware that, first and foremost, she was writing for a Canadian audience. She perceives the country through her own lens marked by the social, cultural and historic complexities of the Manitoba prairie. These are the aspects that may be overlooked by international readers, yet judged and appreciated by Canadians.

2.2.1 Here and There: Literature as a Mirror and a Map

In the introductory chapter of *Survival*, Atwood refers to a scene in *Buffalo Jump*, a play by Canadian playwright Carol Bolt, where a high school teacher makes his students learn the names of the wives of Henry the Eighth. As they recite them in class, there is a protest march happening outside the window but he tells the students that they are not in school to watch parades. For Atwood this sums up the approach that she experienced as a young student: "History and culture were things that took place elsewhere, and if you saw them just outside the window, you weren't supposed to look."²⁴ She saw the wives as a stand-in for foreign elements flowing into the country, implying that "here" had always been inferior to "there," Britain in particular.²⁵

The geographical expanse of the country echoes in the problem to understand Canadian culture as a homogeneous unit, which brings regionalism into play. Atwood proposes that Canada, as "a state of mind, as the space you inhabit [...] with your head,"²⁶ was at the time a strange territory. To get to know it as such, some further questions had to be asked: What is this place in relation to other places? How do I find my way around it? How did I get here?²⁷ All in all, it implies that one is lost and needs guidance, some point of reference. Atwood suggests that to be able to establish any national identity, literature must be studied thoroughly and comparatively because "to know ourselves, we must know our own literature;

²⁴ Atwood, *Survival*, 18.

²⁵ Atwood, *Survival*, 18.

²⁶ Atwood, *Survival*, 18.

²⁷ Atwood, *Survival*, 17.

to know ourselves *accurately* we need to know it as part of literature as a whole."²⁸ She describes its function with two concepts: a map and a mirror.

Atwood asserts that readers see a reflection of themselves and their surroundings in literature and if a culture lacks such mirrors, it travels blind. If a lost person needs a map to see where he or she is in relation to the rest of the territory, then similarly, citizens of a country must be familiar with their "here" if they are to survive. She argues that literature is "a map, geography of the mind, [...] a product of who we [the nation] are and where we have been"²⁹ as a unit. There are, of course, reflections of Canada in foreign writing, too. It is often depicted as a hunting ground or an uncorrupted, beautiful but empty land where one goes to escape civilization.³⁰ However, an overview of Canadian writing paints a different picture – namely the bleak one with the consuming shades of grey we have mentioned above.

In an interview with *Iowa Journal of Literary Studies* Atwood claims that Canadian literature provides hope for people from small, forgotten places, "such as farm kids in Iowa."³¹ Even though the United States is a powerful empire with a well-defined "here," it is possible to get lost in its largeness outside of big urban centers. In the mid-west or down in the Deep South, people are more likely to question who they are and how they (do not) fit in. Few would have thought that Munro would turn Wingham in Huron County, Ontario with a population just under 3,000 into a literary place recognized worldwide. Both Munro and Laurence are often compared to Faulkner for their detailed portrayal of small towns and Atwood even refers to him as the most influential writer for Canadians because he took a remote space no one paid attention to and transformed it into a literary place.³²

Similarly, Laurence has been praised for mythologizing her native Neepawa in the Manawaka sequence. She creates a detailed topography that mirrors the social hierarchy and the moral values of the townspeople. The contrast of a closely integrated community with the vast open prairie surrounding it allows her to capture both the isolation and the small-town scrutiny of the place. On the hill above the town, there is a cemetery and a dumpsite. Both are important settings that frame the series and, moreover, set an atmosphere of death and rot over the town. Manawaka is Laurence's mirror and her map, assigning significance to the

²⁸ Atwood, *Survival*, 17. Emphasis mine.

²⁹ Atwood, *Survival*, 19.

³⁰ Atwood, *Survival*, 16.

³¹ Hengen and Meier, "Interview with Margaret Atwood," 8.

³² Hengen and Meier, "Interview with Margaret Atwood," 8.

prairie particular “here.” Through their native myths, the local population comprised of mainly Scots, Ukrainians and Métis people know where they personally had come from and where in the community they belong. When the characters look back into the past, they are bound to find a settler, but the female protagonists themselves can be read as explorers. For them, however, the obstacles of exploration come from within.

2.2.2 Explorers of the Self

The railway tracks running through the town repeatedly make an appearance, either as a symbol of the social hierarchy or to remind the protagonists of a world outside of Manawaka, one they believe to be inherently better. Rachel in *A Jest of God* looks out of the window listening to the summer night on the prairie: “In the far distances, the unreal places beyond ours, I can hear a freight train. [...], the sound all prairie kids grew up with, the train voice that said *don’t stay don’t stay just don’t ever stay – go and keep on going, never mind where.*”³³

All Manawaka protagonists venture out. Hagar in *The Stone Angel* is made to go to university although she is set on marrying a farmer 14 years her senior to rebel against her father who is a proud Highlander and a self-made man, stubborn in his principles. Later in life she lives in Vancouver, and during her final exploration she wanders the wilderness of nearby woods, just like her Biblical counterpart did in Beersheba. Stacey in *The Fire-Dwellers* leaves for Vancouver at 19-years-old, and her sister, Rachel, the heroine of *A Jest of God* does so in her mid-thirties, slightly less idealistic but hoping for the better nonetheless. Vanessa in *A Bird in the House* triumphantly, goes to university, set on becoming a writer. Morag of *The Diviners* moves around Canada, until she finally makes it all the way to London and Scotland in search of her origin, only to realize that the small town is her true home. Laurence’s women reflect two patterns: 1) they are explorers of the self and 2) unable to shake off the defining influence of their origin.

While early Canadian writers shared their experience with the new environment in journals and travelogues, later writers went back to the theme of exploration with characters of their imagination. Atwood identifies a common motif of “unearthing the buried and forgotten past,”³⁴ which generally leads to a settler figure. All of Manawaka sequence

³³ Margaret Laurence, *A Jest of God* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1989) 173-4.

³⁴ Atwood, *Survival*, 112.

intertwines, to some extent, personal history in the form of tales and songs with the collective history of the country; an aspect of Laurence's writing that plays an instrumental role in the characters' construction of identity.

Both figures, the settler and the explorer, experience the land they encounter in a different way. Settlers strive to impose civilization on the natural order of things they encounter. Explorers, on the other hand, leave rational order behind. In Canada, adventure takes them into the harsh North, deep forests or treacherous mountains and as they explore the unfamiliar, they uncover aspects of themselves they did not previously know. Explorer figures usually head out on quest for their own sake, set off by an impulse to explore the unknown Canadian "here" beyond the small portion they are familiar with. In a figurative sense as *exploration of the self*, personal identity functions an unknown land. Unsurprisingly, the quest of such explorers in Canada usually does not amount to much – the explorer either does not find anything significant or heads toward his or her own demise. The narratives may include death caused by natural forces but even if they do not, Canadian protagonists rarely return from their expeditions with their skin intact, be it literally or figuratively. What matters is that they survive.³⁵

Atwood dedicates one key chapter to the descendents of explorers and settlers. Canadian writing abounds with family portraits and she pinpoints a distinct Canadian approach to writing them. If the family in the United States is a skin to shed, then in Canada it's a trap. In American literature, the American Dream inevitably involves abandoning one's family, preferably as soon as possible. Once you are out, the pursuit of happiness may be as mobile as the frontier. An American hero is always expected to leave, to transcend their origin and make something more out of life by their own hard work. In Canada, Atwood claims, family is a trap, for the protagonist feels the need to escape just as much but is unable to fully get away. The sense of entrapment is counterbalanced by the need to survive, which is threatened when the alternative to the trap of family is the cold, unknown land.³⁶

Since three-generational portraits are the most common in Canadian literature, Atwood distinguishes three distinct roles: the domineering Grandparents, the crippled Parents, and the Children. The grandparents may or may not be the settlers. While the settler imposes order on the land, the grandparents use their force of will against future generations. They are rigid,

³⁵ Atwood, *Survival*, 114.

³⁶ Atwood, *Survival*, 131-2.

isolated figures with an unbending will and a set of old-fashioned principles that they feel have been lost in modern society and to its detriment. They attempt to rule and police the morals of others, while believing in the importance of religion and hard work.³⁷ Their children, the middle generation, try to break away from them. They lack the attachment to the land but they have internalized the guilt imposed by the Grandparents. They are set on moving to a town or a big city, however, they lack the strength of their parents, resulting in vague, crippled characters who do not achieve any great success.³⁸ Their children, in turn, strive to escape both generations. They want to live but they have a hard time making it happen, feeling the pull to go places even further away than their parents ever dreamt of going, such as, ironically, back to Europe.³⁹

Laurence's short story collection *A Bird in the House* captures this pattern in the most straightforward way. The 12-year-old narrator, Vanessa, represents the titular bird trapped in a family of adults. Her maternal grandfather and her paternal grandmother represent the rigid first generation, "like a brontosaurus running headlong into a tyrannosaurus"⁴⁰ should they ever confront each other. Grandfather Connor's primary reaction is to angrily criticize everyone around him, only displaying humanity belatedly at his wife's funeral. Grandmother MacLeod asserts that "God loves order"⁴¹ and obstinately believes herself to be a lady. As a young bride, she was promised a comfortable life, which she grew accustomed to and, consequently, cannot let go of the asst. Even when the Depression hits the family hard, she refuses to accept the new reality, ordering linens and silver. Her complaint that "no one bothers these days, too lazy, I suppose"⁴² is countered by Vanessa with a harsh "too broke."⁴³ Vanessa's father is scarred by World War I, where he watched his brother Roderick die. In the 1930's he is barely able to support the family even as the local doctor because the townspeople pay him in potatoes and chicken. The mother, Beth, is a former nurse now stuck in the house as a mother. Her sister, on the other hand, refuses marriage just for the sake of escape, which keeps her confined to her father's tempers. The family makes it through the Depression but it takes a great amount of hard work and frugality. Vanessa manages to leave

³⁷ Atwood, *Survival*, 134.

³⁸ Atwood, *Survival*, 135.

³⁹ Atwood, *Survival*, 136.

⁴⁰ Laurence, *A Bird in the House*, 49

⁴¹ Laurence, *A Bird in the House*, 49

⁴² Laurence, *A Bird in the House*, 49.

⁴³ Laurence, *A Bird in the House*, 49.

the town but upon her comeback to Manawaka twenty years later, she laments: “I had feared and fought the old man, yet he proclaimed himself in my veins.”⁴⁴ The trap of the family Atwood describes is clearly inescapable in this instance.

This sums up Laurence’s approach to family although in other works, Laurence plays around with the pattern making it less straightforward. In *The Stone Angel*, Hagar’s father is an exemplary grandfather figure. As a young woman, she rebels against him but the inability to break away from the patriarchal principles he imposed turns her into a rigid Grandmother figure herself. It is perhaps even more interesting in *A Jest of God* where emotionally stunted Rachel remains a child well into her thirties, living under the same roof with her mother who monitors her every move. It is only when Rachel lets herself display vulnerability that she is able to break out of the entrapment of the house and turn the roles around. Her sister Stacey in *The Fire-Dwellers* recalls her youthful expectations that were never fulfilled. As a parent on the verge of 40, she has no aspirations; feeling trapped in the routine of a housewife. Still, Manwaka comes back to her in memories.

Hard as they try, Laurence’s characters are never able to fully detach themselves from their families. Ancestry continues to manifest itself in the women’s identities, contributing to their isolative existence.

2.2.3 Ice Women and Rapunzels

When Atwood first read *The Stone Angel*, she wondered why it was that strong women in Canadian fiction were always old and battered, going through life with clenched teeth. In the guide she refers to *The White Goddess* by Robert Graves, who divides women into three mythological identities: 1) the Diana/Maiden figure of a young girl; 2) the Venus figure, goddess of love, sex, and fertility; and 3) the Hecate figure, goddess of the night, witchcraft and the underworld.⁴⁵ Atwood points out that there is a notable absence of Canadian Venuses. Nature as a woman is a common metaphor in Canadian writing and just like nature, women of Canadian fiction tend to be cold and ruthless, oftentimes frozen in place before they attempt to explore their self.⁴⁶

Atwood identifies the Rapunzel Syndrome as a common pattern of fiction aiming to portray “real” women with ordinary lives. There are four primary elements:

⁴⁴ Laurence, *A Bird in the House*, 191.

⁴⁵ Atwood, *Survival*, 199.

⁴⁶ Atwood, *Survival*, 200.

1. Rapunzel: the main character
2. the Wicked Witch who has imprisoned her (grandparents, parents, husband)
3. the tower she is imprisoned in: the conventions of society (symbolized by her house, marriage or motherhood)
4. the Rescuer: a handsome man who provides a mere momentary escape

Atwood points out that in Canadian fiction, Rapunzel and the tower she is trapped in are one and the same. They wall themselves up, all the while holding themselves back from liberation:

What is Canadian about the local exemplars [...] is their difficulty in communicating, or even acknowledging, their fears and hatreds; they walk around with their mouths like clenched fists. If they fit any of Grave's categories, they probably are women who would rather be Dianas or Venuses but find themselves trapped against their will inside Hecates. [...] These heroines have internalized the value of their culture to such an extent that they have become their own prisons.⁴⁷

Isolation is a rite of passage for Laurence's women. For Morag in *The Diviners* and Vanessa in *A Bird in the House*, it is for the most part a result of circumstance – orphaned at the age of 4, Morag is raised by people of a very different socioeconomic status, the local garbage man Christie and his wife Princess "Prin" Logan. Vanessa, on the other hand, grows up in a well-respected family, she just happens to be the only child among stubborn grown-ups affected by World War I and the Depression. For Hagar, Rachel and Stacey, however, their isolation is self-inflicted, deepened by pride and fear. Unlike the traditional damsels in distress, these women are past the heyday of youth, not especially beautiful or sensual, and the process of their release is far from action-packed. Focused on what it is like to be in the

⁴⁷ Atwood, *Survival*, 209.

head of her characters, Laurence's writing is primarily inward-looking, the particularities of it are shaped by the prairie, by her ancestry and her experience of Africa.

2.3 Margaret Laurence

Margaret Laurence was born as Margaret Jean Wemyss in the summer of 1926 in Neepawa, Manitoba into a Scottish-Irish family. According to Clara Thomas in *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*, following the unexpected death of her mother in 1930, Laurence's aunt, Margaret Simpson, moved over from Calgary to take care of the 4-year-old child and the two of them found a special bond in literature. The aunt-turned-step-mother was exceptionally smart, an esteemed schoolteacher, renowned for passing appreciation of literature on to her students. She played a pivotal role in the foundation of the public library in Neepawa as well as in the early recognition of Laurence's writing talent.⁴⁸ Much like her Manawaka heroines, Laurence dreamt of getting out of the small prairie town. In 1944, a scholarship to United College in Winnipeg was her ticket out. She graduated in 1947 with a degree in English, and went on to work as a reporter for *The Winnipeg Citizen* before she moved abroad.

The events of Laurence's early life are important to understand what kind of a writer she became. Thomas writes that as a university student, Laurence had a reputation for a dynamic personality and a commitment to both literature and social causes. Growing up in the 1930's and coming of age around the time of World War II, Laurence was acutely aware of social structures, and this concern runs through her works.⁴⁹ Although she infuses her fiction with autobiographical elements, she is not bound by them either. Many of her characters are outsiders, and Laurence does well writing as an outsider looking in, too, as long the subjects of her writing have been in her vicinity at point or another. As Thomas puts it, Laurence "does always write from within a circumference [...] of her place, her time, and her life – and no others."⁵⁰ Laurence spent a considerable amount of time abroad and it was crucial in the making of her as a writer.

At the age of 22, she married Jack Laurence, a civil engineer who was in charge of a dam project in the British Protectorate in Somaliland. The couple left Canada for England in 1949, relocating to Somaliland a year later. In 1952 they moved to Gold Coast, where they stayed until 1957, departing shortly before it gained independence as Ghana early in the year. The

⁴⁸ Thomas, *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1975) 8.

⁴⁹ Thomas, *The Manawaka World*, 13.

⁵⁰ Thomas, *Manawaka World*, 8.

family spent the following five years in Vancouver until the couple separated in 1962, and Laurence headed to England, where she and her two children resided for over ten years - one year in London, the rest in Penn, Buckinghamshire.

For the tenth anniversary of *Canadian Literature: A Quarterly in Criticism and Review* in 1969, Laurence wrote an essay “Ten Years’ Sentences,” looking back on the past decade of her life. Ten years earlier, at the age of thirty-two, she received a letter from an American publisher claiming that their chief reader felt “reasonably nauseated”⁵¹ by the internal monologues of her debut novel *This Side Jordan* (1960). This and the following two books she published, a short story collection *The Tomorrow-Tamer* (1963), and a work of non-fiction, *The Prophet’s Camel Bell* (1963) all draw on her experience in Africa. In the essay she claims that nothing has been as influential to her as the years spent on the continent.⁵² She wrote the texts in the period of British colonialism coming to an end, and though she would not call the books entirely optimistic, she does capture the hopefulness of the era. Notably, Laurence acknowledges in the essay that through those seven years, she always wrote from the position of an outsider. She terms her relationship with Africa a love affair that could never have become close family. She was aware that for Africans, she and her work were treated with “little more than polite tolerance.”⁵³

When Laurence left the continent for good, she felt she was not competent to write about it at all anymore but the “nauseating” internal monologues were to stay. Back in Canada in the early 1960’s, she began working on the first novel of the Manawaka cycle, *The Stone Angel*. In “Ten Years’ Sentences,” she makes a point of the fact that she moved to Africa in her late twenties, declaring the youthfulness and blind faith of that age imprinted in her early writing. In 1962 Laurence was thirty-six, and things were shifting, although she was not particularly aware of it at the time. She thought of Hagar’s life story in *The Stone Angel* as one of freedom, only to later recognize it as a tale of survival:

Perhaps an obsession with freedom is the persistent (thank God) dance of the young. With *The Stone Angel*, without my recognizing it at the time, the theme had changed to that of survival, the attempt

⁵¹ Margaret Laurence, “Ten Years’ Sentences,” *Canadian Literature: A Quarterly of Criticism and Review* 41 (Summer 1969), 10, canlit.ca.

⁵² Laurence, “Ten Years’ Sentences,” 11.

⁵³ Laurence, “Ten Years’ Sentences,” 11.

of the personality to survive with some dignity, toting the load of excess mental baggage that everyone carries, until the moment of death.⁵⁴

As for the switch to Canadian writing, she says that once she started *The Stone Angel*, it was a smoother process than ever before. Whereas with her previous works Laurence felt like she was writing *about* a foreign land, now the novels felt just like novels.⁵⁵ On top of that, she was moving towards pessimism, much more interested in the internal battles of her characters.

According to Thomas, Laurence was so intrigued by the storytelling tradition of the Somali people that she set out on the painstaking process of finding, transcribing and translating the folktales and poems to immortalize the imaginative heritage of a culture without a written tradition. As the first step, she had to convince the local Somali people to share the tales with her, as a foreigner as well as a woman. With the help of two scholars, the translations were published as *A Tree For Poverty* in 1954.⁵⁶ Both in translating and writing fiction set in Africa, Laurence relied on the writer's ear for the particularities of speech foreign to her, but in conceptual terms, where a certain way of thinking was concerned, she could not tell how close she was. With Hagar and Manawaka, she "had the pleasure of coming home in terms of idiom."⁵⁷ Writing her first Canadian woman, she found Hagar's voice familiar, even if it was much older, a voice women that came before her. In the following four works, she gave voice to her own generation

2.4 Manawaka as a Mirror and a Map

By the time Laurence started publishing the Manawaka sequence, Canadian literature already had an established tradition of prairie realism. It emerged in the 1920's with authors such as Martha Ostenso and Frederick Philip Grove, contrasting earlier regional idylls with accounts of life on the harsh land. Fiamengo notes in "Urbanism and Regionalism" that the genre continued to thrive and evolve, consequently inspiring considerable critical reactions, through the century. Northrop Frye, Henry Kreisel and other critics were supportive of the idea that writing is shaped by the environment of the author, thus transforming place into a state of

⁵⁴ Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentence," 14.

⁵⁵ Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentence," 13.

⁵⁶ Thomas, *Manawaka World*, 28-9.

⁵⁷ Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentence," 13.

mind.⁵⁸ Laurence, with the portrayal of the prairie as a complex, social setting that goes beyond mere geographical fact is deemed a champion of experimental prairie realism. The prairie is, according to Fiamengo, “all-absorbing, [...] expansive and isolating.”⁵⁹ The genre depicts characters that internalize the isolation of the land and, as a result, deal with isolation and emotional repression. Historical events are portrayed from a regional perspective, most notably the settlement of the prairies, World Wars and the Depression. Questions of human resistance, sexuality and religion come up as well, controversial against the conservative values of rural communities.

Laurence spent twelve years of her writing career with the interconnected characters of Manawaka. In *Heart of a Stranger* (1976), a collection of essays chronicling her travels, Laurence insists that the town is not strictly a copy of her hometown: “Manawaka is not so much any one prairie town as an amalgam of many prairie towns. Most of all, I like to think, it is simply itself, *a town of the mind*, my own private world [...].”⁶⁰ She does admit that the topography of it draws on her hometown, Neepawa. Growing up, she found the land beautiful but, she admits, the loneliness and the isolation of the prairie made her crave an escape.⁶¹ However, the older Laurence got, the more she realized that no matter how far she travelled, the small prairie town located in the south of Manitoba was “where the world began”⁶² for her and forever formed her vision, both as a human being and, crucially, as an artist.

A small town setting is nothing exceptional in Canadian literature. As mentioned earlier, the Manawaka sequence works in terms of Atwood’s view of literature as a mirror and a map of a nation with its careful social, racial and cultural distinctions of the region. As a mirror, Laurence takes it one step further, making the structure of the town itself reflective of its inhabitants. Thomas describes the intricacy of the town:

Manawaka is a fully realized, three-dimensional, imagined town of breadth, and depth, and of history and corporate personality. We can orient ourselves to its social structure, as to its streets and buildings. Through the stories of its people, we can make connection with the

⁵⁸ Fiamengo, “Regionalism and Urbanism,” 268.

⁵⁹ Fiamengo, “Regionalism and Urbanism,” 269.

⁶⁰ Margaret Laurence, *Heart of a Stranger* (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 2003) 7.

⁶¹ Laurence, *Heart of a Stranger*, 7.

⁶² Laurence, *Heart of a Stranger*, 169.

present and the past of the people of Canada [...]. Manawaka [...] constantly reveals beneath the surfaces the fourth dimension of time and the timeless, of men and women as the victims and prisoners of the institutions they have made for their own survival, [...].⁶³

Furthermore, Thomas discusses Manawaka in relation to the rest of the world. Even though it is a powerful setting that shapes the characters, it has no control against global events – the Depression and the World Wars affect the prairie town, too. The men go to the wars, women go to college, many head for “the city,” which can mean both Winnipeg and Vancouver. As Thomas concludes, all these outside places are depicted as faraway and vague, as if Manawaka existed in isolation.⁶⁴ In such a vast land like Canada, closed communities naturally create a strong sense of belonging, and the people inevitably construct the town’s personality.⁶⁵ The town is a tribe, a hierarchy of social relationships, and it serves as a complex and dramatic literary setting, highly suitable for explorations of human identity. Authors have used it to examine who people seem to be in as defined by the social role assigned to them and who they really are deep down.⁶⁶

In Laurence’s Manawaka sequence, the characters’ social standing is always indicated by the location of their house. The railroad is a vital landmark, connecting Manawaka with the rest of Canada, while simultaneously dividing the community. Throughout the five works, Manawaka and Vancouver are set as polar opposites, “the town” of tradition and confinement versus “the city” of freedom and opportunity. In *Divining Margaret Laurence: A Study of Her Complete Writings*, Nora Foster Stovel reads Manawaka as a *moralized landscape* since the town’s topography mirrors the social and moral values of its people. Most prominently, the railway tracks function as a marker of the class divide. Throughout the sequence, the characters often refer to the right and wrong side of the tracks to describe someone else’s place in the community:⁶⁷

⁶³ Thomas, *Manawaka World*, 187.

⁶⁴ Thomas, *Manawaka World*, 179.

⁶⁵ Thomas, *Manawaka World*, 175.

⁶⁶ Thomas, *Manawaka World*, 176.

⁶⁷ Nora Foster Stovel, *Divining Margaret Laurence: A Study of Her Complete Writings* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008) 195.

Hill Street, so named because it was on one part of the town hill which led down to the valley, where the Wachakwa River ran [...]. Hill Street was the Scots-English equivalent of The Other Side of the Tracks, the shacks and shanties at the north end [...]. Hill Street was below the town; it was inhabited by those who had not and never would do good. [...] Hill Street - dedicated to flops, washouts, and general no-goods, at least in the view of the town's better-off.⁶⁸

On the hill looming over the town, there is a cemetery adjoining a dump, one collecting the deceased people of Manawaka, the other the objects they leave behind. The angel statue towering over the cemetery was made in honor of Regina Shipley, Hagar's mother who died in labor. For Hagar's father, Jason Currie, a proud pioneer running his own business, it is also an immortal proclamation of his dynasty in Canada. The expensive marble angel, "doubly blind, not only stone but unendowed with even a pretence of sight,"⁶⁹ is Hagar's duplicate. In childhood, she makes sure to never cry in front of her dominating father, not even when her brother dies. The process of Hagar's emotional detachment peaks when John, her favored son, dies: "The night my son died I was transformed to stone and never wept at all."⁷⁰ Over the years the angel is "toppled over on her face,"⁷¹ altered by "winters or lack of care, [...] askew and tilted,"⁷² like the lonely aging woman. Born from her mother's death, Hagar rejects emotional vulnerability early on, opting for isolation and hardness. She suffers alone in silence, like the statue at the cemetery, until she recognizes her own pride. When wandering the woods of Vacouver, Hagar encounters a stranger, Murrey Lee, and the two connect over the experience of losing a son. When she cries and reaches out to touch him, releasing a lifetime of emotions, Hagar relinquishes the stone angel as her double.

Morag in *The Diviners* is brought up by the local scavenger Christie Logan, a poor but honest man who is content with his subaltern role in the community. According to Stovel, he can be interpreted as a Christ figure, as he collects the town's sins, from empty bottles to aborted babies.⁷³ As an orphan, Morag feels she is a nuisance, and the town regards her as

⁶⁸ Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1985) 36-7.

⁶⁹ Margaret Laurence, *The Stone Angel* (London: Apollo, 2016) 1.

⁷⁰ Laurence, *The Stone Angel*, 237.

⁷¹ Laurence, *The Stone Angel*, 173.

⁷² Laurence, *The Stone Angel*, 299.

⁷³ Stovel, *Divining Margaret Laurence*, 195.

white trash but the location of the Logans' house "halfway up the hill"⁷⁴ shows her belonging to both the hill as well as the valley. Down by the river she connects with the Tonnerres, the Métis family living on the very margin of Manawaka (due to their status as "halfbreeds" speaking only broken English and a patois that is "neither Cree nor French,"⁷⁵ which alienates them from the Cree in the surrounding area. Vanessa in *A Bird in the House* straight up admits that they do not belong among white Manawakans).

The Wachakwa river valley lies in its own realm, beyond the distinction of the right and wrong side of the railway. There is rich greenery and mysterious atmosphere. When Morag wanders there in *The Diviners*, she describes the scenery: "Bushes are everywhere – silvergreen wolf willow, chokecherry, pincherry, and a jungle of unnamed unknown bushes. [...] Another few steps and then the ravine. Why come here when it is really spooky? Eerie. Eerie."⁷⁶ It is a place children are not supposed to visit, and as the home of the Tonnerres, it indicates their outsider status. They fit neither with the Scots and Ukrainians of Manawaka nor with the Cree living on the reservation outside of the town, the Galloping Mountain. Moreover, the valley symbolizes the realm of the natural and the untamed, in a side-glance at the Romantic conceptualization of wild nature, as emphasized by the sexual scenes that Laurence sets there. Stovel even refers to it as "a source of [...] fatal attraction."⁷⁷ In *The Stone Angel* Hagar's marriage to a valley farmer gets her disowned because she throws her father's ideals overboard. For Morag in *The Diviners*, the valley sets off a passionate on-and-off relationship with Jules Tonnerre, the father of her daughter. Rachel's affair is less heated and much more short-lived but the valley is fatal for her, too. It is the place where she, finally, allows herself to be vulnerable.

⁷⁴ Laurence, *The Diviners*, 37.

⁷⁵ Laurence, *A Bird in the House*, 108.

⁷⁶ Laurence, *The Diviners*, 139.

⁷⁷ Stovel, *Divining Margaret Laurence*, 195.

3 Isolation and Survival in *A Jest of God*

3.1 Rachel Cameron as a Rapunzel

Rachel Cameron is a 34-year-old single schoolteacher. She lives with her mother in an apartment above the Manawaka funeral parlor that her father, Niall Cameron, used to run. Brought back to the small town after her father's death fourteen years earlier, she lives a lonely life under her mother's scrutiny, with no friends or romantic experience, until a summer affair with her former classmate, Nick Kazlik. Although a doomed love story from the start, the experience of vulnerability is transformative for Rachel. The summer sees her emergence from the tomb of the Cameron house towards the decision to take charge of her life.

Thomas sees *A Jest of God* akin to a psychiatrist's casebook: "[...] everything comes through Rachel's consciousness and because her mind is so completely, believably, neurotically obsessed, she cannot really see the world around her, or the people in it. [...]"¹ From the beginning we are caught in Rachel's head, a choice that was essential to Laurence to convey the story. In "Ten Years' Sentences" she explains that she was aware of the limitations of such an inward-looking novel. The scope of the text is narrow, but then again, so is Rachel's life and Laurence found that her story could not have been written any other way.²

In an analysis of the novel, "Every Man Is an Island: Isolation in *A Jest of God*," C. M. McLay points out that even minor characters in Manawaka suffer from isolation, not just the protagonists. The old seek out company - Rachel's mother holds regular bridge nights at the house and old men gather outside on the steps of the Bank of Montreal and the Queen Victoria Hotel. Only the young appear resistant to loneliness, as they naturally still spend most of their time grouped together.³ Watching them, Rachel ponders: "They seem like a different race, a separate species, [...]" (JG, 8). She regards 16-year-old girls that she used to teach in the same way, as "another race, Venusians" (JG, 18). However, then she reconsiders, turning her view around and putting *herself* into the position of the otherworldly one: "This is their planet. They are the ones who live here now" (JG, 18). Similarly, when she stumbles

¹ Thomas, *Manawaka World*, 90.

² Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentences," 14.

³ C. M. McLay, "Every Man Is an Island: Isolation in *A Jest of God*," *Canadian Literature: A Quarterly of Criticism and Review*, no. 50 (1971): 58.

upon a teenage couple in the field behind the cemetery, Rachel claims to be “the intruder” (JG, 85). She lives in isolation because she feels out of place everywhere. The role assigned to her in the town and the inner workings of her mind establish a double identity bordering on schizophrenia. The voices in Rachel’s head are loud but as an adult woman, she has none to speak out with.

In “That Fool of a Fear: Notes on *A Jest of God*” George Bowering declares that the overly critical reviewers of the novel fail to understand the significance of Rachel’s mind. We are immediately introduced to a state of mind which he argues to be completely removed from Manawaka: “[...] the town is holding her by circumstances opposed by her mind.”⁴ From the opening scene we get a sense of dissociation from Rachel. Laurence starts the novel with a children’s rhyme that takes the protagonist back to her childhood and the idea of the city as a place to die for emerges:

The wind blows low, the wind blows high,
The snow comes falling from the sky,
Rachel Cameron says she’ll die
For the want of the golden city
She is handsome, she is pretty
She is the queen of the golden city (JG, 7)

A paragraph later, she interrupts the text with another children’s song: “Spanish dancers turn around / Spanish dancers, get out of this town” (JG, 7). Manawaka is an insular place, where tradition leaves no space for anything strange, such as Spanish dancers. In line with the town’s rejection of the exotic, Bowering’s essay brings up the character of Lee Toy, a Chinese man who has been working in Manawaka for four decades, “but in a kind of secrecy, living alone in the rooms above the café” (JG, 61). As a matter of fact, even Nick, Rachel’s paramour of Ukrainian descent, seems exotic to her, just like the Tonnerres, the Métis family in the valley, do.⁵ In the predominantly Scottish town, Ukrainians are seen as a divergence, the two groups “oil, [...], and water” (JG, 71). In conversation with Nick during one of their

⁴ George Bowering, “That Fool of a Fear: Notes on *A Jest of God*,” *Canadian Literature: A Quarterly of Review and Criticism*, no. 50 (1971): 42, Canlit.ca.

⁵ Bowering, “That Fool of a Fear,” 44.

moments together, Rachel proposes that, growing up, the people at “his end of town” seemed freer to her: “Not so boxed-in. More able to speak out. [...] In my family, you didn’t get emotional. It was frowned upon” (JG, 94). This strict stratification in a town like Manawaka, and the many ethnic and religious fault lines dividing it further, attest to the social critique underpinning the finer implications of Laurence’s work and highlight the central concerns of isolation played out across multiple levels.

The opening scene of *A Jest of God* introduces Rachel alone, lost in memory as she stares out of the classroom window. She listens to schoolchildren chanting the skipping rhyme, the same one she used to skip rope to twenty-seven years earlier. The rhyme sets her off into a daydream of what was and what could have been. As she comes out of it, she worries about becoming the local “eccentric” (JG, 8). As Thomas puts it, at the beginning of her journey Rachel is, both literally and figuratively, “walled in by glass from even the illusion of freedom”⁶ that the children playing outside represent. The songs indicate the conflicts that are essential to the novel. Rachel starts off caught up in her mind between a number of realms: life and death, love and loneliness, dream and reality, childhood and adulthood, Manawaka and the outside.

In the first-person narrative, Rachel seems awfully displaced from her own body as well, referring to herself as an object she watches. In her own eyes, she is “the thin giant She behind the desk” (JG, 7) sitting in front of the classroom. She frequently observes herself in the mirror as “this giraffe woman, this lank scamperer” (JG, 81), with a “featureless face” (JG, 159), “the crane of a body” (JG, 121) and a myriad other grotesque comparisons. She even thinks of her body as a house that her summer lover, Nick, “inhabits” (JG, 153). When she believes herself to be pregnant, she thinks of the embryo in this pattern, too: “It is lodged there now. *Lodged*, meaning it is living there. I’ve given it houseroom” (JG, 179). This view of the body underlines Rachel’s passivity, at the same time playing into Atwood’s idea that Canadian Rapunzels do not recognize their bodies as theirs.⁷ Similarly, Hagar’s body is warped by old age and Stacey’s by fat which she despises. Rachel’s perception of herself reflects the grotesque, dejected view she has of everything around her.

This outsider point of view is present in her “waking nightmares” (JG, 24) as well. She finds escape neither in the past, nor in dreams and erotic fantasies. Although located on “the

⁶ Thomas, *Manawaka World*, 80.

⁷ Atwood, *Survival*, 210.

good side” of Manawaka, the Cameron house has an eerie, secluded look. Housing the town’s funeral parlor in the basement, it is surrounded by dark spruce trees that shut the sun out, and the Gothic feel of the place is accentuated at night. For Rachel, every day “dies with sleep” (JG, 65) but before she can rest, she is haunted by visions. One portrays her stuck on a spinning ferris wheel, unable to do anything:

Tonight it's hell on wheels again. [...] The night feels like a gigantic ferris wheel turning in blackness, very slowly, turning once for each hour, interminably slow. And I am glued to it, or wired, like paper, like a photograph, insubstantial, unable to anchor myself, unable to stop the nocturnal circling. (JG, 24)

This scene evokes the feelings of dissociation and lack of control over one’s life, and one’s own body – the images Rachel uses, of “paper” and “photograph” highlight her sense of “insubstantiality” and marginalization, but also her being stuck in a recurring nightmare “unable to anchor” herself. The other scene is a sexual fantasy that is clearly recurring as well and, notably, always takes place in a faraway, sheltered but wild, natural place, as if the civilized part of life, as seen in the previous dream, represented penury, and the natural surroundings, such as the forest, represented a form of freedom:

A forest. Tonight it is a forest. Sometimes it is a beach. *It has to be right away from everywhere. Otherwise she may be seen.* The trees are green walls, high and shielding [...]. She cannot see his face clearly. His features are blurred as though his were a face seen through water. She sees only his body distinctly, his shoulders and arms deeply tanned, his belly flat and hard. (JG, 25, emphasis mine)

The fantasy ends in orgasm, which is immediately followed by real, conscious guilt: “I didn’t. I didn’t. It was only to be able to sleep” (JG, 25). Right after that, the round of that night’s visions culminates with Rachel going downstairs to her father’s mortuary, the place of “smooth silence where no lights or voices are, [...] only the silent people” (JG, 25). Upon hearing her father’s voice in the dream telling her to leave, Rachel runs outside to the street where her mother says a prayer. Rachel finds solace in her mother’s presence and “the spruce

trees [...], hemming in and protecting” (JG, 25). In the same manner, on another night, Rachel has an explicit sexual dream set in an Egyptian oasis. Laurence leaves the final sentence unfinished, again insinuating orgasm. This fantasy ends with a shift to a dark image, too: “The night is a jet-black lake. A person could sink down and even disappear without a trace” (JG, 65). These dreams clearly attest to Rachel’s longing for escape but also to her strong ties with the familiar, represented by the appearance of her mother and the soothing presence of the trees near the family home.

Rachel admits that she has pushed away people who tried to connect with her. When she returned to Manawaka from college fourteen years earlier, she broke off a brief affair with a local farmer who pursued her. A colleague from school, Calla Mackie, frequently offers to spend time with her. When asked to accompany her to the Tabernacle of the Risen and Reborn, Rachel reluctantly goes. This episode makes the fears captured in her nighttime visions a reality, as Rachel loses control over her actions. As a result, she begins to find her voice.

Laurence’s use of language in this scene, too, evokes sexual images. At first, Rachel, as per usual, wants to escape but there is no way out from the middle of the row, the room “like some crypt, dead air and staleness, deadness, silence” (JG, 37). However, she is, too, soon captivated by the minister’s “creamy” (JG, 39) voice. As the tabernacle scene progresses, the preacher speaks of “ecstatic utterances” (JG, 40) caused by “that deep and private enjoyment” (JG, 40), followed by a hymn that says: “In full and glad *surrender* / I give myself to Thee” (JG, 41). The man beside Rachel “moans gently, moans and stirs” (JG, 42), his pulse “throbbing” (JG, 44), and right after that, Rachel herself rises and experiences “the release” (JG, 43), which leads her to speak in tongues. In this situation Rachel recognizes herself as an individual that is suddenly both seen and heard: “Mine. Oh my God. Mine. The voice of Rachel” (JG, 43). Afterwards, she goes to Calla’s apartment, where the woman confesses her feelings for Rachel and kisses her. Shocked and angry, Rachel runs for the safety of home.

Rachel claims that she “can’t bear watching people make fools of themselves” (JG, 34), which is how she perceives the happenings at the Tabernacle, too. As she sits silently, she considers the congregation fools, embarrassed by their public display of emotion. Notably, her erotic fantasies are always set in foreign places, in a secluded setting where she is reliably out of sight. The face of her lover is blurred, and, presumably, he cannot see hers clearly, either. After all, even Rachel describes her own face as featureless. The male body in the fantasy is unobstructed, while Rachel’s is not mentioned at all. The grotesque descriptions of

herself as an object or an animal that appear throughout the novel draw attention to Rachel's failure to accept her complicity. At this stage, she lacks agency, and her consciousness is haunted by situations which she cannot control. The Tabernacle episode brings this fear, as well as the fear of vulnerability, to life. The erotic fantasies fade into death, even hell if we read the movements downwards as such. Love and death are both inherently uncontrollable, which is terrifying for someone like her. Rachel runs home from Calla's apartment, just as she runs from her father's mortuary in the dream, finding comfort in the familiar - her mother's voice and prayer. However, the entire Cameron household represents Rachel's tower, with the mortuary and the Presbyterian upbringing. Death is in Rachel's origin; she is a representative of the living dead, voiceless, at least outwardly.

When analyzing Manawaka as a moralized landscape in *Divining Margaret Laurence* Stovel also argues that the town houses are portrayed either as coffins or memorials.⁸ The Camerons live on Japonica Street, located on "the good side of the tracks." After the death of Niall, the business is sold but the house remains a funeral parlor. From the outside the house and its surroundings echo the isolation, constructing Rachel's tower: "Around our place the spruce trees still stand as I remember them forever. No other trees are so darkly sheltering, shutting out prying eyes or the sun in the summer, the spearheads of them taller than the houses, the low branches heavy, reaching down to the ground [...]" (JG, 19).

Growing up, the Cameron girls were not allowed to step into the basement, nevertheless, the sense of decay permeates the whole house. On the few occasions that Rachel snuck in, she believed that the dead "might grasp and hold" (JG, 126) her. As for the parents, the two occupied the house in "tomb silences,"⁹ Niall a drunk hiding away downstairs with "the silent company" (JG, 62) and "his own special embalming fluid" (FD, 5). Like Grandmother MacLeod in *A Bird in the House*, Rachel's mother loves order. Mrs. Cameron makes sure the house is tidy every night before she retires to bed, "as if no frail or mortal creature ever set foot in it" (JG, 21). Rachel is aware that her parents had given up speaking intimately long before she was born and Mrs. Cameron admits that "he was never one to make many demands" (JG, 96) upon her, which she did not mind considering the nature of his job. When Niall was alive, she would even cover the arms and backs of chairs with crocheted doilies to

⁸ Stovel, *Divining Margaret Laurence*, 198.

⁹ Margaret Laurence, *The Fire-Dwellers* (New York: Knopf, 1969) 21.

protect the furniture from his touch marked by death, “as though she felt his hand could never be clean” (JG, 96).

Despite the pervading presence of death in Rachel’s personal life, in a town like Manawaka it is not to be spoken about publicly among the Scots: “No one in Manawaka ever dies, at least not on this side of the tracks. We are a gathering of immortals. We pass on, [...]. Death is rude, unmannerly, [...].” (JG, 19-20). Mrs. Cameron saves her finest nylon nightgowns gifted from Stacey for the hospital, so she dies “demurely” (JG, 104), looking her best. Rachel describes her father’s job as painting and prettifying of “the [...] dried shell [...] for decent burial” (JG, 8). Hector Jonas, Niall’s successor in the funeral parlor, understands that as a businessman, he sells relief and “modified prestige” (JG, 129). McLay deems this the peak of the Manawakan refusal to face death. It is a denial of reality through appearance, an attempt to negate death by making it look like life.¹⁰ Similarly, both Rachel and her mother deny reality by concealing their real selves behind a façade so as to be decent, resulting in a kind of half-life, or life-in-death.

In the small town, people are concerned with proper appearances in both death and in life. Mrs. Cameron goes to church every Sunday and the service is a stark contrast to the Tabernacle episode. Rachel claims it would be shocking if the Reverend “should suddenly lose his mind and speak of God with anguish or joy, or [...] pray with fierce humility” (JG, 47). Even the church’s Jesus is “pretty and clean-cut, [...] no inconvenience, no gore, no pain, [...]” (JG, 47). In McLay’s words, the Presbyterians are expected to show up on the regular, yet only their “protective coverings”¹¹ are allowed. It does not look good not to attend but neither does bright attire or uninhibited behavior. As he observes, the congregation of the Pentecostal Tabernacle approaches religion as a momentary break from isolation of the individual. The people find connection in their belief and in the contact with God. Rachel, however, regards the exhibitionism of the service as indecent foolery, for it embodies her greatest fear that is public exposure of her innermost self.¹²

In religious matters Rachel is, once again, caught in the middle. She only attends church out of habit and convenience to avoid her mother’s lectures. She doubts the existence of God, although she does address Him sometimes out of desperation. As an undertaker, Mr. Cameron refused to go with them, which Mrs. Cameron thought unacceptable for a man in his position.

¹⁰ McLay, “Every Man is an Island,” 63.

¹¹ Bowering, “That Fool of a Fear,” 51.

¹² McLay, “Every Man is an Island,” 66.

However, Rachel understands that the concept of immortality must have appalled him. Interestingly, one Sunday while at church, she wonders if her mother's belief is genuine at all: "She's never said. It was not a subject for discussion. [...] I suppose she takes it for granted that she believes" (JG, 47). During one of their dinners early on in the novel, Rachel confesses that she does not even know the exact age of her mother because it is a topic that Mrs. Cameron holds "as unmentionable as death" (JG, 21). With a mother who navigates life based on what is appropriate and a father who preferred the silence of the dead to his own family, the inability to communicate defines the Camerons, situating each member within their own isolated world., confined to their own mind.

Rachel fits Atwood's concept of the Rapunzel Syndrome as characterized in Chapter 2.1.5. She is her own tower and remains stuck because of her insurmountable difficulty to communicate with others. However, Atwood's assertion that Canadian Rapunzels fail to even acknowledge their fears and hatreds does not fully apply here. While Rachel is not able to communicate it, she makes it clear that being "laughable" (JG, 25) is her biggest fear. Even though she is her own tower, we can look at it as threefold, distinguishing the internal and external facets. First, it is Rachel's mind. She is mentally removed from the present, both in her daydreams recollecting her childhood dream of "the golden city," as well as the nocturnal visions located in strange settings. However, as Laurence's heroines always are, Rachel is inescapably tied to Manawaka and her ancestry. The isolation is to some extent a result of her Presbyterian upbringing, which establishes the external facets of the tower: the Cameron house and the town itself. Atwood argues that Rapunzels "have internalized the values of their culture."¹³ The interior of the house Rachel grew up in is kept orderly, emotionless, untouched; just like Rachel and her mother are. The mother, Mrs. May Cameron, needs to be examined to further understand Rachel's character.

3.2 The Wicked Witch: The Selfish Mother

"Sometimes I wonder what I'll do when Mother dies. Will I stay or what?" (JG, 20) Rachel wonders over dinner, indicating the power Mrs. Cameron's holds over her life. In the analysis of *The Fire-Dwellers* in *Women in Exile and Alienation: The Fiction of Margaret Laurence and Anita Desai* Kaptan Singh defines the role of mothers in shaping their daughters' identity: "Girls imitate their mothers and even the 'great tradition' is transferred to them through their

¹³ Atwood, *Survival*, 209.

mothers. The mothers behave as agents to caution them to behave according to the code and conduct of the patriarchal norms.”¹⁴

In view of the above, we can examine Mrs. Cameron’s role in two ways: on the one hand, she emblemizes the wicked witch or the selfish mother who has imprisoned her Rapunzel daughters. On the other hand, in terms of Atwood’s idea of family as a trap, Mrs. Cameron represents the domineering settler generation. She fits perfectly the following part of Atwood’s definition of the settlers/Grandparents: “They are grimly religious and more than willing to police and censor the morals of others. They rule [...] their children with a rod of iron. [...], their cosmic rigidity goes far beyond the strength necessary to build and sustain a pioneering community.”¹⁵ Rachel’s role as the Child is emphasized by Calla addressing her in conversation either as kid or child.

In her old age, Mrs. Cameron is a self-absorbed, guilt-tripping hypochondriac. Church, hair salon appointments and bridge nights with her dwindling group of friends are the few sources of pleasure and companionship she has. With a tricky heart, she spends most of her days resting inside the house, reliant on Rachel whom she keeps under surveillance. However, Mrs. Cameron does enjoy indulging in the superficial: “She takes pride in wearing only fine-denier nylons and never sensible shoes. Her hair is done every week [...], and the frames of her glasses are delphinium blue and elfin” (JG, 21). For bridge nights, she flaunts lace tablecloths, silver trays and the Spode china.

Mrs. Cameron’s life at present is very restricted but Rachel makes it clear that it had never been much different, a consequence of her Presbyterian background and the times she grew up in. Helen Buss writes about Mrs. Cameron’s character in *Mother Daughter Relationships in the Manawaka Works of Margaret Laurence*:

Rachel and Stacey from the beginning of their lives are exposed to May Cameron’s philosophy of what is ‘nice’, especially what is ‘nice’ to say. In addition to directing her girls only to express the ‘nice’

¹⁴ Kaptan Singh, *Women in Exile and Alienation: The Fiction of Margaret Laurence and Anita Desai* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016) 69.

¹⁵ Atwood, *Survival*, 134.

thoughts and feelings May has adopted a self-protective martyr role that allows for little real communication.¹⁶

As mentioned earlier, Rachel does not know her mother's exact age or anything about the depth of her belief beyond the fact that it would not look good if they stopped attending church. Their conversations revolve around where Rachel is going, what time she will be home and the occasional Manawaka gossip. One night at dinner, Mrs. Cameron shares that Cassie Stewart moved out of town because of an illegitimate pregnancy. Mrs. Cameron regards the situation as "a heartbreak for her mother" (JG, 64) since Cassie is expecting twins and refuses to put them up for adoption: "That's the awful thing. [...] She might consider her mother and how it'll be for her" (JG, 64). A single mother of twins is as strange and unwelcome in Manawaka as the Spanish dancers of the children's rhyme. So is a disabled child looking unusual, causing ruction at church: "It's a disgrace. They shouldn't let him in, don't you think so, yourself, Rachel?" (JG, 49). Rachel concurs, but, internally, she is angry, signaling a slight diversion from her mother's uptight and unkind principles.

Mrs. Cameron's preoccupation with the external looks of things is reflective of her old-fashioned concern with what is right in the eyes of others. Laurence never states concrete dates but we gather from the text that the Camerons got the house sometime after World War I, when their Niall returned to Canada from Europe. Rachel and Stacey thus must have been born in the 1920's, like Laurence herself. Mrs. Cameron would likely advocate that a woman is meant to produce a child – indeed, under the right circumstances so as to not become a source of disgrace for the whole family. She taught Rachel and Stacey that virginity is "a woman's most precious possession" (JG, 96) and her own lack of interest in physical contact with Niall can be explained as the belief that procreation is the only purpose of human sexuality – a purpose she had fulfilled. Learning the news about Cassie, Mrs. Cameron "thanks [her] lucky stars" (JG, 64) that she never had to worry about her daughters tarnishing *her* reputation in the town. She lives in her conservative bubble, never letting on any emotion, unless it is to turn herself into a victim of Rachel's actions. The most confessional bit we get from her slips out toward the end of the novel while she is falling asleep: "[...] she murmured

¹⁶ Helen Buss, *Mother Daughter Relationships in the Manawaka Works of Margaret Laurence*. (Victoria: University of Victoria, 1985) 33.

something so fretfully that I wondered how many thousand times she'd stabbed herself with it. *Niall always thinks I am so stupid*" (JG, 193).

Unlike her mother, Rachel is somewhat aware of the social conditioning of women to always "be nice." One day at school, she observes the class: "Interesting creatures, very young girls, often so anxious to please that they will tell lies without really knowing they're doing it" (JG, 11). One of the boys, James Doherty, is a problematic student whose free spirit Rachel secretly admires: "He goes his own way as though he endures the outside world but does not really believe in it" (JG, 11). James' academic results are poor, however, coming from a family of an auto-mechanic, his knowledge of cars and electricity is unparalleled for a 7-year-old. When skipping school, the boy wanders alone in the bushes of the Wachakwa valley on the outskirts of Manawaka. What is more, his mother allows the absences. Upon meeting Mrs. Doherty in person, Rachel is surprised at her reaction when James wriggles out of her casual, loving touch: "She smiles, not displeased that he wants to be his own and on his own" (JG, 56). James clearly does not fear isolation and the mother-child relationship is obviously nothing like the Camerons'. Driven by fear, Rachel's mother does not hide her disapproval of Rachel's decisions. Without her younger daughter, Mrs. Cameron would be left completely alone and so she does not hesitate to manipulate Rachel emotionally to keep her close. As McLay sums up Mrs. Cameron, "under her foxiness, her calculated emotional appeals and demands, lies a terrible fear of isolation and desertion which is the lot of every human being, even mothers."¹⁷

According to Atwood's concept of the three-generational family portrait, Rachel and Stacey should be in the role of Parents. Childless Rachel, however, is more suitable for the position of the Child. It is obvious from her interactions with Mrs. Cameron as well as her stunted emotional development. When she gets home from work later than usual, Mrs. Cameron immediately inquires, worrying about her daughter's health. On another occasion, coming back from a date with Nick at night, Rachel sneaks in quietly like a teenager: "Mother is awake. Of course. [...] What if she sees me like this, disheveled? [...] Into the bathroom, quickly, to re-do my make-up and hair" (JG, 100). Additionally Rachel's bedroom is the same it has always been, "girlish, [...] old-fashioned" (JG, 22). The two live on Rachel's salary, yet she knows that her mother would condemn re-furnishing the room as a waste. Rachel reflects on her situation: "What a strangely pendulum life I have, fluctuating in age between extremes,

¹⁷ Thomas, *Manawaka World*, 78.

hardly knowing myself whether I am too young or too old” (JG, 64). Her placelessness in terms of age is also apparent when she is about to lose her virginity to Nick and expects him to take care of contraception: “I thought the man always would. Not so? Or not anymore? Any seventeen-year-old would have known that” (JG, 97).

Bowering agrees that Rachel’s identity really does fluctuate: while her mother treats her like a child, Rachel is aware of the approaching middle-age. She sees herself as an ageing spinster but behaves like an adolescent. The reader, too, perceives her as an emotionally stunted teenager, once again caught between two realms.¹⁸ Eventually Rachel comes into her own in a strangely symbolic scene, where motherhood also plays a key role. Before we get there, we need to explore the role of men in Rachel’s story.

3.3 The Rescuer

3.3.1 Nick Kazlik

In *Survival*, Atwood defines the Rescuer/handsome prince figure as a source of temporary escape: “In the original Rapunzel story the Rescuer is a solution and the wicked witch is vanquished; in the Rapunzel Syndrome the Rescuer is not much help.”¹⁹ In *A Jest of God*, Nick is the obvious Rescuer – Stovel opts for the comparison with the Sleeping Beauty, as Nick’s kiss leads to the awakening of Rachel’s consciousness.²⁰ Over the summer, she learns to live in her body, the one she previously regarded as a house for someone else.

A year older than Rachel, Nick is one of the sons of the Manawaka milkman. His identical twin Stefan died years ago of polio and Nick later moved away to go to university. Although the two attended the same school, Rachel and Nick had never been close because Mrs. Cameron taught her daughters not to play with Ukrainian kids. Rachel herself perceived them as “rawboned” (JG, 69) with “almost tangible scorn” (JG, 69), yet more fun than the Scots on her side of the tracks. At present, Nick is a high school teacher in Winnipeg, back in Manawaka for the summer to help his ageing parents.

On their first date, the pair drives to the Wachakwa valley and Rachel provides a dramatic description of the environment, deathly and somewhat darkly sexualized rather than simply romantic: “The darkening sky is hugely blue, gashed with rose, blood, flame pouring from the volcano or wound or flower of the lowering sun. [...] Black tree trunks, contorted,

¹⁸ Bowering, “That Fool of a Fear,” 54.

¹⁹ Atwood, *Survival*, 209.

²⁰ Stovel, *Divining Margaret Laurence*, 209.

arching over the river” (JG, 91-2). When Rachel gets home that night, she thinks: “All I will ever remember is that he arched over me like the sun” (JG, 156). This simile conjures up Rachel’s description of the Cameron house as shielded from the sun by spruce trees. The sun sustains life but it is somewhat temporary, like the presence of the Rescuer.

Rachel soon starts reaching out for physical touch. On their second date, it is she who initiates sex, secretly hoping that she might get pregnant. Later she is even bold enough to confess the longing to Nick who replies: “I’m not God, I can’t solve anything” (JG, 154). Rachel clearly sees the affair as an escape from her isolated self. As McLay puts it, the momentary escape the Rescuer typically provides is in this case in “the moment of union, flesh, skin, bones, blood [are] connected but only for this moment.”²¹ Similarly, McLay continues, Rachel longs for pregnancy, so that she can “escape her isolation as a separate being.”²² She contemplates the matter further when Nick asks her if she would like to have a twin. Nick professes how annoyed he used to be when the people of Manawaka constantly treated him and his brother as one although they were not identical twins: “I wanted to be completely on my own” (JG, 90). Rachel, on the other hand, wonders if twinship would provide “constant communication [...] as though your selves were invisibly joined,” (JG, 90) assuming that “you’d never feel alone” (JG, 90). The affair with Nick marks a development – Rachel shows a degree of vulnerability and she reaches out instead of running off scared. Nevertheless, as a woman, one that has been single her whole life, Rachel is still waiting for someone else to rescue her. One might wonder how James’ mother would act if she had a daughter behaving the way he does.

Nick suffers from the expectation to be his “phantom twin.”²³ His father, Nestor Kazlik, addresses him as Steve, the dead brother, which is a consequence of Nestor’s senility, the Manawakan denial of death and the fact that Stefan was the favored child, willing to take over the family business. Rachel eventually realizes that she, too, constructed an idea, Nick’s “phantom twin”, in her head: “We talked sometimes, and I tried to hear what he was saying but I’m not certain that I did hear. I may have heard only the guarded echoes [...]” (JG, 160). Because of her inability to communicate with the outside world, Rachel only talks to him in her mind. She replaces her nocturnal fantasies with ideas of marriage with Nick, living in their own house near Galloping Mountain. She comes to realize, however, that the Nick she

²¹ McLay, “Every Man is an Island,” 60.

²² McLay, “Every Man is an Island,” 61.

²³ Stovel, *Divining Margaret Laurence*, 207.

talks to internally is as much a figment of her mind as the shadow prince in her dreams was. Rachel begins to understand his complexity and by the end of the summer, she is able to acknowledge that Nick has “his own demons and webs” (JG, 197) that may not have anything to do with her.

When Nick opens up about his father’s expectations, they are at the Kazliks’ place and he quotes Jeremiah 12:8: “I have forsaken my house – I have left mine heritage” (JG, 116). In the following chapter, Rachel goes downstairs to the mortuary in the middle of the night, where she discusses her father with Hector. According to McLay, this sequence of events is instrumental to the novel.²⁴ Nick is, too, burdened by his Manawakan identity and the principles and delusions of his parents. His awakening of Rachel extends to her recognition of ancestry as inescapable, which leads Rachel to the funeral parlor to confront the ghost of her father. As it happens in Canadian literature, the breakthrough moment brings reconciliation with facts of life.

3.3.2 Hector Jonas

Back home on Japonica Street the night of Rachel’s visit to the Kazlik farm, she observes herself in the mirror and for the first time, recognizes her body as a human, living one: “I look in the mirror and see I’m there. [...] My blood runs in actual veins, which is as much of a surprise to me as to anyone” (JG, 124). Still, she does not think her body would be capable of gestating life: “To grow a child [...] and have it born alive? Not within me” (JG, 124). Seeing that Hector’s light is still on, Rachel heads downstairs to the Funeral Chapel. Stovel points out that this scene captures the moment when Rachel’s inner and outer voice finally intersect.²⁵ It takes courage for her to head downstairs – the terrifying, forbidden space - in the dead of night and knock on Hector’s door. When he opens, she even demands: “Let me come in” (JG, 125).

There are two key moments in this interaction that contribute to Rachel’s survival. Hector offers another perspective on her father, suggesting that he had exactly the kind of life he wanted for himself. Rachel questions “Did he ever try to alter it? Did I with mine?” (JG, 131). Later Hector plays the organ and sings for her, which moves Rachel to tears, an outburst that Stovel regards as significant as Hagar’s in *The Stone Angel* or as Rachel’s first orgasm that

²⁴ McLay, “Every Man is an Island,” 64.

²⁵ Stovel, *Divining Margaret Laurence*, 216.

summer.²⁶ The song recalls the “golden city” from the children’s rhyme that opens the novel: “There is a happy land/Far far away/Where saints and angels stand/Bright, bright as day” (JG, 133). Rachel expects to feel ashamed for the display of emotion eventually, but she does not in the moment. Now aware that she can change the course of her life, the “golden city” resurges as a possibility. Rachel climbs the stairs back to the upstairs apartment, composed, taking them “one by one, only one” (JG, 134), ready to confront her mother should she awaken. This is a contrast to the nightmare early in the novel, where she could not see her father but could hear his voice. Terrified she ran out to her mother singing and saying a prayer. She reaches a turning point, one that, in McLay’s words, “relinquishes her hold upon the past and the dream of her father, not as he was but as she wanted him to be.”²⁷ It is a necessary step towards a free future.

3.4 Release

As I discussed earlier, Rachel’s life is very much defined by death. The Freudian juxtaposition of love and death, previously in Rachel’s dreams re-appears in reality, in the daylight in her affair with Nick. The first time they venture to the valley and kissing escalates, Rachel is hesitant to go further for two reasons. To begin with, she has no sexual experience but she hides that, voicing instead her concern about being out in the open, to which Nick counters: “it’s as private as the grave” (JG, 96). Another time he observes: “I never realized you could see the cemetery so well from here” (JG, 155). Furthermore, when Hector shows her around the funeral parlor, renovated after Niall’s death, he leads her “like a bride up the aisle” (JG, 132). This juxtaposition of love and death peaks when Rachel’s period is eleven days late and she assumes that she is pregnant.

While happy at the idea of having a child, Rachel immediately frets over the pain her mother will feel, “ashamed, wounded, hysterical, [...] not able to hold her head up forever after” (JG, 166). As she always is, Rachel is caught in the middle, between the judgments of Manawaka and her own personal wants. She dreams of absolute independence – instead of getting rid of the fetus, she wants to “get rid of everything, and belong to myself, and not have to consider anything else” (JG, 169). Eventually she decides to exert power over her life by suicide, the ultimate way out.

²⁶ Stovel, *Divining Margaret Laurence*, 217.

²⁷ McLay, “Every Man is an Island,” 65.

McLay pays attention to the minor ways in which Rachel constantly fights for survival over the course of the summer.²⁸ She is glad to have bought a white raincoat because it makes her “almost luminous” (JG, 35) to drivers at night. She enjoys the occasional cigarette but never in bed – “people have set fire to themselves that way” (JG, 61). The most overt choice of life over death comes when Rachel rejects suicide. She plans to down whiskey and sleeping pills – fourteen of them, symbolically, one for each year in Manawaka since her coming back from college. The choice of her father’s alcohol and her mother’s pills is, according to Stovel, yet another instance of Rachel’s inability to remove herself from her origins.²⁹ The capsules, however, end up getting thrown out of the window in a moment of reflection on the finality of such a decision: “At that moment, when I stopped, my mind wasn’t empty or paralyzed. I had one clear and simple thought. *They will all go on in somehow, all of them, but I will be dead as stone and it will be too late then to change my mind*” (JG, 177). Earlier that same night, Rachel listens to the sound of the train going through Manawaka and, subsequently, recalls the summer when the family holidayed out of town at Galloping Mountain. Then, she decides that she wants to reunite with her sister in Vancouver. Rachel begins to see herself as part of the outside world, something she was not capable of at the beginning of the novel. Her transition towards vulnerability serves as a means to finally phase out of isolation.

Rachel, however, is carrying death, not life, and therein lies the titular jest of God. Dr. Raven, aptly named for a bearer of such news, informs Rachel that she is growing a benign tumor, not a fetus. Faced with the information, Rachel hears her inner voice, “that voice of some woman mourning for her children” (JG, 187). Stovel explains the biblical reference – Laurence’s protagonist parallels Rachel of Genesis and Rachel of Jeremiah who demands “give me my children” and later weeps for her exiled sons.³⁰ As a second grade teacher, Rachel refers to her students as “my children” (JG, 17) and she even tells Nick that she would like to have his baby, thinking in her mind the biblical “give me my children” (JG, 154). She mourns the yearly loss of students, the inevitable dissolution of their relationship: “This year’s children will be gone, [...] no connection left, only hello sometimes in the street” (JG, 60). Rachel cannot be a mother yet for she is still in the role of the Child. One of the novel’s

²⁸ McLay, “Every Man is an Island,” 65.

²⁹ Stovel, *Divining Margaret Laurence*, 217.

³⁰ Stovel, *Divining Margaret Laurence*, 217.

climactic moments comes after the tumor removal when, still under anesthetic, she mutters: “I am the mother now” (JG, 191).

The roles have reversed; Rachel, the daughter of the silent undertaker, has been liberated. Leaving the hospital in Winnipeg, she feels “slightly dazed at the sudden concrete presence of the outside” (JG, 198). As the Mother figure now, Rachel takes control over the family, making a final decision without discussing it with her mother. Rachel’s rebirth in the bizarre situation is given emphasis by her assertion “I wasn’t quite myself” (JG, 192) and Mrs. Cameron reproaching: “Rachel, you’re not yourself (JG, 199). This is when Rachel has informed Mrs. Cameron that they both will be moving because she has been accepted for a job in Vancouver. Mrs. Cameron, on the other hand, is acting like a child: “You’ve turned really nasty and mean [...]. It’s not fair” (JG, 200). Rachel now refers to Mrs. Cameron as “my elderly child” (JG, 208). On her last visit to the funeral parlor, she accepts the mystery that was her father as an unalterable and undecipherable, long-lost fragment of the past: “I can’t know what he [Niall] was like. He isn’t here to say, and even if he were, he wouldn’t say” (JG, 205). West bound, Rachel recognizes and accepts the unpredictability of the future: “Where I’m going, anything may happen. Nothing may happen. [...] It may be that my children will always be temporary, never to be held. But so are everyone’s” (JG, 208-9).

At last, Rachel has been freed. Her long-awaited assumption of agency has been effected by the removal of the tumor. Its benign condition is key not only for Rachel’s actual survival but also on a psychological level, as she assumes the role of the mother. At long last, Rachel takes charge of her life, moving to “the golden city” of the nursery rhyme, planning to partake in life rather than watching it from her closed window.

4 Isolation and Survival in *The Fire-Dwellers*

4.1 Stacey Cameron MacAindra as a Rapunzel

The Fire-Dwellers takes place over the course of the same summer like *A Jest of God*, the concurrence indicated by the fact that the letter Stacey sends to Manawaka is the same letter Mrs. Cameron reads aloud to Rachel. At the age of thirty-nine, Stacey Cameron MacAindra feels alienated from her husband of sixteen years, her four children and even herself. Desperate to re-connect with her uncommunicative husband, Stacey lives the routine of a housewife in loneliness. She leads endless inner dialogues with herself, bombarded by the news of current affairs and beauty expectations, all the while drawn back in memory to the happier moments of her youth. Like her sister, Stacey has a short-lived summer fling that provides both a momentary escape, but Stacey must return home and face her life as it is.

As I mentioned at the beginning of the previous chapter, Thomas defines *A Jest of God* as a novel framed by the limitations of Rachel's neurotic consciousness. In *The Fire-Dwellers* the outside world plays a bigger role. Thomas comments again: "Her [Stacey's] consciousness is invaded at all times, from all sides, by her own demands upon herself, by others' demands upon her [...], and by the appalling, unremitting pressures of our world's immediate communication systems."¹ Set in the sprawl of Vancouver, the outside world naturally feels much more present here than it does in Manawaka. Hence, in part because of this, Laurence's narrative technique in *The Fire-Dwellers* is vital and different from its predecessor in key ways. While *A Jest of God* required the limited perspective of a first-person narrative, the story of Rachel's older sister calls for a larger scope. However, Laurence did not want the entire novel to be written in the third person, either, so she went for a combination of perspectives. She explains her creative approach in "Gadgetry or Growing: Form and Voice in the Novel":

The main need was for some kind of form which would convey the sense of everything happening all at once, simultaneously. [...] Narration, dreams, memories, inner running commentary – all had to be brief, even fragmented to convey the jangled quality of Stacey's life. [...] a certain amount of external narration was necessary, [...] for

¹ Thomas, *Manawaka World*, 115.

she [Stacey] was not the shut in and withdrawn person that Rachel was.²

Influenced by TV, Laurence was aiming for an “audio-visual”³ effect. The novel combines fantasies, always in italics, capitalized news headlines and unquoted dialogues. Stacey’s stream of consciousness is interrupted by memories, which are set to one side of the page to indicate that they are invading fragments “flashing in and out of her mind while she is doing other things [...]”⁴ This experimental narrative concept makes *The Fire-Dwellers* a transgressive read.

In “Margaret Laurence and the City” W. H. New remarks that Laurence once admitted that urban imagery took more writing effort, for she was a small town person who did not feel at ease in cities. Despite this, she spent considerable amount of time in urban environments and they have made their way into her fiction as well. As mentioned earlier, Laurence described Manawaka as “a town of the mind,” her private world shaped by the particularities of southern Manitoba. The complex social hierarchy and set of moral principles that we get in Manawaka are not replicable in a multicultural urban setting such as Vancouver. However, Laurence applies her knack for social thinking in a different way, focusing on the gendered struggles of a lonely housewife. Throughout the Manawaka sequence, “the city” stands as the counterpart to “the town” – Vancouver represents Rachel’s “golden city,” a destination that brings “evolution” (JG, 208). Morag in *The Diviners* likens Toronto to “Paradise”⁵ – that is, before she actually gets there. As New notes, Laurence uses urban settings to illustrate “divisions between mind and body, conflicts involving freedom and servitude, [...] dissatisfaction deriving from internal tensions [...]”⁶

Stacey’s experience of Vancouver falls perfectly within these dichotomies. With a housewife as the heroine, modern society is filtered through the vision of a middle-aged suburban mother, who fears life. Stacey deals with an identity crisis – on the one hand she feels entrapped in the family house and her role of the homemaker; on the other hand, she does not know who she is when stripped of those roles. Making the outside world more

² Quoted in *Manawaka World*, 125.

³ Quoted in *Manawaka World*, 126.

⁴ Quoted in *Manawaka World*, 127.

⁵ Laurence, *The Diviners*, 163.

⁶ W. H. New, “Margaret Laurence and the City,” in *Margaret Laurence: Critical Reflections*, ed. David Staines (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2001) 60.

significant than in *A Jest of God*, Laurence sets the ground for the battle of the internal and external self that Stacey goes through. In “Ten Years’ Sentences” Laurence defines the protagonist:

She's not particularly valiant (maybe she's an anti-heroine) but she's got some guts and some humor. [...] She is concerned with survival, like Hagar and like Rachel, but in her case it involves living in an external world which she perceives as increasingly violent and indeed lunatic, and trying simultaneously within herself to accept middle age with its tricky ramifications [...].⁷

Stacey leaves her hometown at 19-years-old, ecstatic to have “shaken the dust of Manawaka off herself at last” (FD, 5), heading first to Winnipeg for a business course, later re-locating to the west coast. Two decades later, she resides in a Vancouver suburb on Bluejay Crescent with her husband Clifford “Mac” MacAindra and their four children. Vancouver is not depicted in as much detail as Manawaka but the descriptions that we do get are indicative of Stacey’s struggle as much as the topography of her hometown is in the other texts. Stacey has not visited Manawaka in seven years, yet she still believes that strangers on the street are able to read her as a small-town girl: “Nearly twenty years here and I don’t know the place at all or feel at home. Maybe I wouldn’t have, in any city [...]. I always think they might think it’s obvious I’m from a small town” (FD, 5). While at the beginning of *A Jest of God*, we immediately feel Rachel’s mental detachment from Manawaka, here, Stacey experiences the opposite – Manawaka returns to her in memory – but Stacey thinks, wrongly, of the past as a separate entity that does not define the present self.

The isolation of a metropolis is different than that of a small prairie town. Walking the streets of Vancouver, Stacey describes in vivid detail the morning commotion of strangers downtown. The suburb, however, is not much more intimate. Looking out the window at night, Stacey assumes: “Out there in unknown houses are people who live without lies, and who touch each other” (FD, 81). The MacAindras’ neighbor, Tess Fogler, who regularly looks after baby Jen, is always perfectly put together, “done up like a Christmas present” (FD, 167). Stacey envies her skinny figure, but she cannot help wondering “what’s actually inside” (FD,

⁷ Laurence, “Ten Years’ Sentences,” 15.

167). Tess' suicide attempt comes as a shock to everyone, even her husband, who is astounded by Tess' beauty, but admits that he has no idea "what the hell she ever wanted" (FD, 247). The narrative technique allows for the contrast of dialogue and the unspoken inner commentary in all its honesty, revealing the conflicts of the mind and body.

As a housewife spending most of her time inside the family residence, Stacey refuses to move houses, feeling that "her own veins and skin cells seem connected with this one" (FD, 26). She does not know Vancouver at all and, in turn, not even herself. To her, Stacey Cameron and Stacey MacAindra are two distinct identities she encompasses and Laurence reflects this conflict in the external world: "In the distance the mountains form the city's walls and boundaries, [...] as though this place belonged to two worlds, two simultaneous seasons." (FD, 64) She ventures into the unfamiliar by getting off the bus near the waterfront, an area she does not know, and decides that "it is time she learned" (FD, 4). Watching the old men sitting around a cenotaph downtown, Stacey interprets their unintelligible words as "memories, perhaps, or curses against now" (FD, 4), which is an apt description of her own battle.

The memorial is significant in two ways. If death defines Rachel's story, Stacey's is characterized by the ubiquity of war. The encounter of the memorial marks the moment Manawaka resurfaces in Stacey's mind as she is immediately reminded of her dead father, the undertaker, and the one time he spoke to her about the horrors of World War I. Later we learn that Stacey's only remnant of Niall is a tin flask and a revolver, both souvenirs of the war. Her husband keeps quiet about his own experience from World War II and, on top of that, Laurence does not ignore the ongoing Vietnam War, using radio, newspapers, television newscasts, pamphlets and peace marches to remind us of the global events of the time period. Death is present, not directly affecting the MacAindras, but lurking closely to the point that Stacey feels there is "doom everywhere" (FD, 52), waiting to hurt her children.

Hand in hand with the theme of war goes the fire motif that is apparent from the title. In "Gadgetry or Gorwing," Laurence herself describes Stacey as a woman trying to navigate motherhood "in a world on fire."⁸ Once again the text opens with a children's rhyme, which illustrates the imagery of the novel and Stacey's paranoia: "Ladybird, ladybird/Fly away home/Your house is on fire/Your children are gone" (FD, 1). Stacey cannot escape fires: she sees them in the "beautiful fire red hair" (FD, 227) of her children, on the news, in her own

⁸ Quoted in *Manawaka World*, 126.

temper. The story of Piquette Tonnerre who burned with her children in the family shack in Manawaka keeps haunting her. In one of her nightmares, she finds herself in a forest fire, facing a suspension bridge over a deep ravine and the decision to save only one of her children - "Stacey's choice,"⁹ as Stovel writes.

With a housewife as the protagonist, domesticity plays an instrumental part. Stacey burns herself literally in the kitchen when she puts her hand on the red-hot electric stove and interprets the wound as "[her] brand of stigmata" (FD, 127), a symbol of the sacrifices she makes for the family. A biblical reference to 1 Corinthians 7:8-9 comes up when she watches Jen in the bath the evening she cheats on Mac for the first time. Her stream of consciousness reveals that she is feeling remorseful for going out and leaving her child with a neighbor. However, inner promises to never leave the house again are futile, for Stacey knows she is going to act on her needs:

I thought at the back of my head somewhere that I could only do it once, and then all demons would be laid to rest, laid in both meanings. [...]. Better to marry than burn [with passion], St. Paul said, but he didn't say what to do if you married *and* burned (FD, 191).

Stacey feels both *burned out* by the everyday routine of a suburban mother, while secretly *burning desire* for someone new. Sixteen years into the marriage, she is unsatisfied both emotionally and sexually, which makes her wonder what it would be like to be with someone else. As a fulfillment of her own needs, Stacey thinks of adultery as "mine only, related only to me, nothing to do with them" (FD, 191). Stacey's curiosity and regret about "all the men I'll never make love with" (FD, 16) supports Atwood's claim that Rapunzels in Canadian literature are women who would rather be sensual Venuses or maiden Dianas but they find themselves stuck in the role of Hecates.¹⁰

Thus, Atwood's idea that Canadian heroines feel trapped in their bodies applies again. Thomas is apt in her observation that both Rachel and Stacey focus on the negative, however, Stacey's sense of herself is more stable. Where Rachel sees grotesque inhuman reflections in the mirror, Stacey views herself with painful honesty – as Thomas puts it, she is "acutely,

⁹ Stovel, *Divining Margaret Laurence*, 221.

¹⁰ Atwood, *Survival*, 209.

constantly, but also reassuringly aware of the corporeal self.”¹¹ The beginning of the novel sees her getting up in the morning, catching a reflection of her body in the full-length mirror on the bedroom door: “Everything would be all right if only I was better educated. I mean, if I were. Or if I were beautiful. [...] but for hips like mine, there’s no excuse. I wish I lived in some country where broad-beamed women were fashionable” (FD, 2). The “corporeal self” is crucial to Stacey’s plight. She suffers from an inferiority complex imposed by beauty standards but as a middle-aged mother of four, she must accept the inevitable changes of the female body and the point of no return. The body is her prison as much as the MacAindra house is as it conceals “her other selves” (FD, 102), the inner voices, which she cannot liberate for her inability to communicate.

Stacey sometimes she thinks of herself from an outsider’s point of view but in a different way than her sister does. Stacey perceives herself as part of ongoing life around her, absolutely delineated by her domestic identity. When a young girl sits on the bus besides her, Stacey wonders:

What’s she seeing? Housewife, mother of four, this slightly too short and too amply rumped woman with coat of yesteryear, hemlines all the wrong length [...], lipstick wrong color, and crowning comic touch, the hat. Man, *how antediluvian can you get?* [...] I still have this sense of some monstrous injustice. *Under this chapeau lurks a mermaid, a whore, a tigress* (FD, 7).

Her mind immediately goes back in time to when she was still Stacey Cameron, recalling the Saturday nights she used to spend in Manawaka’s Flamingo Dance Hall dancing with boys. She wishes to be eighteen again at Diamond Lake, the site of her happiest memories. As Stacey MacAindra, she is defined by motherhood and marriage, and, as the following excerpt shows, she has no independent identity anymore: “It would be nice to have something of my own. I can’t go anywhere as myself. Only Mac’s wife or the kids’ mother. [...] It’s easier to face the world with one of them along. Then I know who I’m supposed to be” (FD, 85-6). Stacey does not belong in Manawaka anymore but neither does she feel a sense of belonging in Vancouver, which emphasizes the divide of her life into young/old and inner/outer that

¹¹ Thomas, *Manawaka World*, 119.

Laurence extends to the narrative technique. While Rachel is looking for a voice and Stacey is confronted by the double Cameron/MacAindra voices simultaneously, at their core, the sisters' situations do not differ much, as they come from the need to find a voice to communicate with the world outside of themselves.

In *Survival* Atwood claims that one of the versions of Rapunzel's tower in Canadian literature is constructed by social conventions, "symbolized usually by her house and children, which society says she must not abandon; [...]"¹² In "Poetic Redress: Her Body, Her House," Debra Dudek argues that Stacey's body and the house are one and the same since they both represent the private self. She discusses the stereotypical notion of the domestic sphere as female and the public sphere as male, proposing that a modern woman needs to imagine "other possibilities beyond this dualism."¹³ Furthermore, Dudek points out that the times Stacey relates herself to another being, it is always one living outside of modern society, or, at least, on the margins. In the excerpts quoted in the previous paragraph we see Stacey compare herself to a tigress (jungle) and mermaid (water). In the harbor she admires seagulls "free-wheeling" (FD, 7). She listens to the voices of media, searching for herself in the pages of magazines, however, as Dudek words it, "prevailing ideologies, which structure the world, do not reflect herself back to her."¹⁴

Thus, Stacey ideates a place of exile beyond the social structures and ideologies of 1960's Vancouver, a place where she can exist free of the mother/wife label. However, her imprisonment is twofold, in both instances a consequence of gendered social conventions.

4.2 The Wicked Witch

According to Atwood's definition of the Rapunzel Syndrome, the Wicked Witch figure can be represented by both parents as well as the husband. In Stacey's case, alongside Mrs. Cameron I also examine the role of her husband, Mac, because he represents a stereotypically masculine character, whose lack of communication skills and the adherence to gender norms keeps Stacey isolated.

¹² Atwood, *Survival*, 209.

¹³ Dudek, "Her Body, Her House," *Great Plains Quarterly* (Summer 1999): 183. Digital Commons at University of Nebraska. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1588>

¹⁴ Dudek, "Her Body, Her House," 185.

4.2.1 The Selfish Mother

Singh's definition in Chapter 3.2 established the role of Mrs. Cameron as an agent that cautions her daughter to comply with the conventions of patriarchal society. The analysis of the character proved that Mrs. Cameron functions as such, particularly as the Grandmother figure of Atwood's concept of the three-generational portrait. As Atwood adds, each successor of the clan can act out their own "variant of the family curse."¹⁵ Stacey cannot get through to her husband, just like her mother couldn't get through to Niall. As a result, Stacey picks up her father's daytime drinking habit to ease the pressure she feels. Overall, Stacey fits Atwood's position of the Parent:

Parents (the middle generation) try to escape. They may move from farm to a town, or from a town to a big city. [...] they do not often make a great success of their lives. They lack the will [...] and the metallic strength of their parents, but they have been unable to replace it with anything more positive and attractive. They are somehow crippled, they are vague, lacking in definition [...].¹⁶

Stacey's suburb is much like Manawaka in that proper appearances matter: "These lies will be the death of me sooner or later, [...]. *It's a disease I've picked up somewhere*" (FD, 28, emphasis mine), Stacey laments as she recalls a fake nicety aimed at her neighbor's new house plate that she did not really like. The "disease" is, of course, a legacy of her mother. From the Manawaka fragments we discover that Stacey was a typical teenage girl, eager to dress up and meet boys at the local dance hall. Any signs of vanity and selfishness, however, were unwelcome in the Cameron household. Unconcerned with anything beyond surface level, what Mrs. Cameron perceived as vanity was actually the almost universal female concern for one's beauty, or lack thereof:

Every time Stacey ran down the stairs from the apartment above Cameron's Funeral Home, [...], she paused in flight [...] and sneaked a glance into the mirror [...]. *Stacey, Stacey, vanity isn't becoming.*

¹⁵ Atwood, *Survival*, 134.

¹⁶ Atwood, *Survival*, 135-6.

[...] the voice that never tired of saying how others ought to be. And Stacey would be off, to laugh and talk so loudly in the juke-box loud café that no one would guess she cared about her ugliness. (FD, 15)

On another occasion, when Stacey was fourteen, Mrs. Cameron lectured that the bright-red lipstick she was wearing made her “the sort of girl people wouldn’t respect” (FD, 40). As a teenager Stacey actually rebels against her mother’s notions, which brings Mrs. Cameron to tears, but their relationship lacks mutual understanding. Even in adulthood, as a parent herself, Stacey is unable to be honest with her mother. Writing home, she pens a short, superficial letter describing the children as “pretty good generally these days” (FD, 135). She takes a break to imagine admitting the truth: “I wonder what would happen if just for once I put down what was really happening? [...] She’d say to Rachel, *I can’t think what Stacey can possibly mean*” (FD, 136).

Stacey professes a will to live that is unlike the rest of the Camerons and flees the tomb-like house as soon as she can. However, as the middle-generation, she does not achieve any paramount success, not even in her twenty years in “the jewel of the Pacific Northwest” (FD, 4). She struggles with parenting because she does not uphold the strict principles of her mother but, then again, she has not established her own, either. She actually sees herself as a bad mother and a bad wife. Under Mac’s pressure, she worries her emotionality will ruin the boys and she worries even more about all the bad things that might befall Katie as a young woman. However, Stacey does not attempt to restrain her. She lets her daughter live in spite of the fear, trusting Katie on the grounds that “she’s probably a damn sight more principled than I am at this point” (FD, 148). She mocks her own lack of integrity when a hairdresser wants to make sure about the subtle hair color change Stacey requested: “And I looked in the damn mirror and said – *Uh, well, I guess maybe not*. Not even the strength of my neuroses, if you would believe it” (FD, 136).

For most of her life, Rachel is too timid to let an uncontrollable emotion slip out. Stacey, on the other hand, has always had an explosive nature, which Mrs. Cameron tried to tame: “My mother used to say: *Stacey, you have a terrible temper – you must learn to bank your fires*” (FD, 192). Stacey has internalized her mother’s values and this one in particular is significant to her character, as it has molded her relationship with Mac.

4.2.2 The Husband

Mac is a stereotypically masculine character. He works hard to provide for the family as a salesman of Richalife, a company selling vitamins, disguised by marketing strategies as “richness [...] a quality of living” (FD, 130). He deems it “a load of crap” (FD, 233) but for fear of unemployment at the age of forty-three, as well as the fact that it is highest-paying job he has ever had, he stays. As the breadwinner, he considers the practicalities – life in the city with a mortgage and four kids, one soon ready for university. When his boss leaves for Montreal, Mac accepts the vacant manager position even though he considered quitting, so that the family can eventually move into a bigger house. He is a victim to the rising consumerism that came with Canadian economic boom in the 1960’s and the expectations it imposes on the middle-class.

Emotionally reserved, Mac keeps his trauma from the World War II well concealed for decades even from Stacy. He is a son of a minister, Matthew, and a mother who “always went by what he said” (FD, 61). Mac chastises Stacey for being too soft on the boys, telling Duncan: “You can’t go through life bawling your head off, [...]. You’ll never get to first base if you can’t learn to control yourself” (FD, 107). When Buckle Fennick (Mac’s best friend from WWII, who takes Stacey for a drive and, afterwards, to his apartment, which Stacey flees when he masturbates) tells him that Stacey begged him to sleep with her, Mac believes him without listening to what she has to say. However, his own affair with a 20-year-old secretary is justified because it happened “only once” (FD, 220) and “it wasn’t what she needed” (FD, 220). The night they argue about the Buckle incident, Mac “makes hate” (FD, 147) with Stacey but it is not the first time he has “his hands clenched around her collarbones and on her throat” (FD, 147) when they get intimate. For him, sex and emotions exist as separate entities and, as we see from his comment above, he imposes such views on his young son as well.

Stacey’s fantasies, usually set in mysterious places, are always italicized in the novel. Interestingly, one of such fantasies involves the idea of not having warm dinner ready on the table whenever Mac gets home: “*Now listen here, sweetheart, want me to tell you something? There isn’t any bloody dinner and if you want any, why don’t you just go along and scramble yourself an ostrich egg? Why don’t you just do that little thing?*” (FD, 123). Then she, of course, proceeds to make dinner, joking that she is “a slut” (FD, 124) for not making a home-made dessert for the kids. Stacey recognizes that in the society she lives in, the fantasy of leaving home can remain just that, a fantasy never to be enacted upon.

In Manawaka, Stacey hated the silent atmosphere of the Cameron house. In one of her memories, she recalls the time she visited a remote cousin on a farm outside of the prairie town. Though she hated every minute of it, “the strangeness and loneliness” (FD, 21), she did not wish to return to “the tomb silences” (FD, 21), either. In the flashbacks Laurence reveals the sheer bliss of early romance, when Stacey and Mac liked “everything” (FD, 174) about each other and she could not believe “how fortunate [it was] to have her whole life settled once and for all, so ideally, at twenty-three” (FD, 47). As a newlywed, she thought “it [the silences] couldn’t happen to [her]” (FD, 38) but after sixteen years of marriage, Stacey and Mac came to resemble May and Niall:

I got married sixteen years ago and I thought he was Agamemnon
King of Men [...] only of course the view couldn’t last all that long
[...] can you imagine what it’s like to live in the same house with
somebody who doesn’t talk or who can’t or else won’t and I don’t
know which reason it could be (FD, 179)

When Mac gets home in the evenings, the conversations revolve around the kids and the house. Stacey’s attempts to discuss anything deeper are dismissed with some form of “no use in talking” (FD, 109). They lead dead-end conversations that, more often than not, border on fights. Carrying her mother’s “bank your fires” teaching with her, Stacey rarely says what she really means out loud, instead choosing words that will end the argument rather than blow it up into something bigger. She has a fear of destroying the family with her words, should she confesses how she really feels inside. When she goes driving along the highway with Mac’s best friend Buckle, Stacey regards herself a “traitor” (FD, 138) for talking about Mac when he is not present. Meanwhile, in her mind, she wills herself not to speak at all: “Shut up shut up shut up. If you don’t it’ll all come out and then... *The house is burning. Everything and everyone in it. Nothing can put out the flames. The house wasn’t fire-resistant. One match was all it took*” (FD, 138).

4.3 The Rescuer

Stacey’s Rescuer is a 24-year-old fisherman, Luke Venturi, who appears to her on a beach in Vancouver harbor. Stovel connects Luke’s name with one of the Evangelists, the healer of the

body, and the surname with adventure.¹⁷ With an Italian name, donning Indian Haida motifs, Luke represents an otherworldly creature of Stacey's visions. He writes science-fiction stories and moves around doing seasonal jobs, not committed to any routine in the city.

After another fight with Mac about the incident with Buckle, Stacey gets in the car and drives through the city at night, heading for the waterfront. She contemplates her parents' marriage as well as her own, aware that a night drive is but a temporary escape from her household duties: "Got to be there to get breakfast – the immutable law of something or other" (FD, 158). When Luke first speaks to her in the darkness, it is described as a sudden crash, a progression "out of the inner and into the outer" (FD, 159). In their brief fling, Luke provides every kind of momentary escape Stacey craves: physical, emotional, sexual. Planning to head northwards to Cariboo country, he even asks Stacey to join him in "the northern jungle" (FD, 205) of her escapist fantasies. Stacey realizes, however, that she cannot leave her kids.

Dudek notes that in her attempt to define herself outside of the MacAindra household, Stacey reinvents her identity by lying about her age, putting herself into the role of the sensual lover that she has not been able to be for years. Thus, with Luke in his shack on the coast, Stacey is "faced instead of defaced, offered identities instead of labels."¹⁸ In the heat of the moment, another strange experience occurs: "her thought processes switch off, and she is momentarily saying nothing inside herself" (FD, 184), but as soon as she leaves his coastal shack, she is once again the worried mother, Stacey MacAindra. In the fragments of her youth, she is always referred to as Stacey Cameron, as if it were someone else. Dudek writes that this attempt to separate inside from the outside is futile but Stacey is not yet able to realize that the two are inseparable."¹⁹ Laurence's approach to the inner/outer and young/old self shows that in modern society, the strict division of private sphere as female and the public sphere as male is outdated and impossible. For women, however, the young and the outer are linked, a source of considerable pressure to remain youthful and beautiful in the face of the world.

¹⁷ Stovel, *Divining Margaret Laurence*, 223.

¹⁸ Dudek, "Her Body, Her House," 185.

¹⁹ Dudek, "Her Body, Her House," 185.

4.4 Release

Water imagery runs through the novel alongside the symbolism of flames and historical and contemporary background of wars. While fires appear in Stacey's nightmares, water defines her daydreams. Stacey tries drowning her woes in drink, her father's habit. Niall thus leaves her older daughter with two destructive legacies: – the firearm from the war and a water flask that she fills with alcohol – “firewater,”²⁰ as Stovel phrases it. Waking up hangover, Stacey thinks: “Help. Water. Water. I’m dying of thirst” (FD, 100). This need is, indeed, more spiritual than physical. Notably, at the beginning of the novel, when Stacey gets off the bus downtown, she heads for the waterfront where she admires the freedom of the seagulls and this is the direction she chooses after the fight with Mac, too. In the bus scene, one of the creatures she identifies with is a mermaid. Later, Luke nicknames her “merwoman” (FD, 180) for the place where he found her. Through the fragments of memories, we find out that Stacey used to be a strong swimmer, and, more importantly, that her happiest moments are associated with lakes – the summer Niall took the family to Diamond Lake for holidays, and then, eight years later she lost her virginity there to a guy from Montreal. On her honeymoon with Mac, they went to Timber Lake as well. Years later on a family vacation, she threw her father's revolver there into the lake. Stacey references the Cold War, explaining that she kept the gun as the last resort to save her children if they “got damaged – or like burned –so they couldn't recover” (FD, 177). The ubiquitous threat of Cold-War-era nuclear annihilation is well represented here in Laurence's outspoken critique. The seemingly trivial neuroses of a middle-class, middle-aged suburban woman are therefore locked in a much broader framework of meaning.

Stacey's children are never in immediate danger of fire. However, disaster strikes towards the end of summer at the beach when Duncan, the 7-year-old son, almost drowns. Stacey interprets the incident as God's punishment for her actions, for wanting to get away from her family. “The sea pours from his nostrils” (FD, 265), while Stacey's sight is “extinguished by saltwater not from the sea” (FD, 267). This incident marks a change: Mac holds Duncan “almost cradlingly” (FD, 268) in his arms and even pays a compliment to Ian for handling the situation, which Stacey recognizes as “the most Mac will ever be able to say” (FD, 269). The youngest daughter, Jen, speaks for the first time and in conversation with

²⁰ Stovel, *Divining Margaret Laurence*, 221.

Katie, Stacey realizes that she is “a stranger in the now world” (FD, 275), just as Mrs. Cameron was a stranger in hers.

Stacey accepts that whoever she is, she is stuck with herself for the rest of her life, acknowledging that the division of the inside and the outside was not necessary: “I was wrong to think of the trap as four walls. It’s the world” (FD, 275). She is at peace with the facts that “the fires will go on, inside and out” (FD, 279) until the moment she dies and even then she has no way of knowing what happens next as she may well face the flames of hell. The night before her fortieth birthday, Stacey is at peace with her ageing body and the fact that she “won’t be twenty-one again” (FD, 280), hoping to live another forty years. Water, as a symbol of cleansing and rebirth, ultimately, stifles Stacey’s fires in an event of possible catastrophe. Rachel ends her journey in *A Jest of God* with a “a change [...] an evolution” (JG, 208) in front of her. Stacey survives reconciling with her life as it is, another instance of Laurence’s artistic subtlety in showcasing heroism of the everyday woman. Contrasted with her sister, Stacey’s triumph seems trivial. She “banks her fires,” as she always does, by herself, afraid of inflicting pain on others. She chooses not to be a selfish mother who leaves her family, accepting the point of no return with the hope that someday she will transfigure as the MacAindra matriarch.

5 Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God* and *The Fire-Dwellers*, the second and third installments of the Manawaka sequence, on the background of Margaret Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. In the milestone guide published in 1972, Atwood defines survival as the unifying pattern of Canadian literature written across the board, acknowledging its versatility and the gradual shift from bare survival in early travelogues to an internal, psychological take on the theme in later works of fiction. Based on this, Atwood argues that Canadian protagonists are, predominantly, victims whose great achievement is the fact of survival. Related to survival is the theme of isolation, which runs across Laurence's Manawaka cycle as the women's rite of passage towards self-discovery.

Since Laurence's protagonists are female, the thesis considers Atwood's notion of the Rapunzel Syndrome, which proposes that in Canada, Rapunzel and the tower are one and the same, confined to isolation by their inability to communicate and the internalization of inherited cultural values. A handsome prince appears, but his presence is merely momentary and Rapunzel must ultimately save herself. I also consider two other aspects Atwood defines in *Survival* that have to do with families, the first one being the inevitability of a settler figure. Writers of the twentieth century return to the theme of exploration in a figurative sense with protagonists as explorers of their identity. However, on their identity quests they are bound to encounter a pioneer figure that relocated to Canada. Canadian family portraits tend to be three-generational and, as a result, Atwood defines a three-tier hierarchy of roles: 1) the dominating, repressive Grandparents; 2) the vague, crippled Parents looking for an escape but usually not amounting to much; 3) the Children who try to escape both generations.

Family and location are fundamental facets of Laurence's Manawaka sequence. Literary scholars such as Kreisel and Frye agree with the notion that regionalism defines Canadian culture, arguing that geographical environment plays an instrumental part in forming the imagination of writers. Such assertions are definitely true in the case of Laurence, who traveled the world and lived abroad for extended periods of time, but came to realize that the prairie intrinsically shaped her perspectives of the world. Thomas deems the particularities of

her fiction “emphatically Canadian”¹ because of the fastidious depiction of the social, racial and cultural complexity of her region. Even in terms of geography, the prairie surrounding Manawaka is subtler and greener, not the stereotypically dusty, dry flatland, a reflection of the location of Laurence’s hometown in the south of Manitoba. The fictional town is constructed as “a town of the mind” and a moralized landscape that sets up the stringent social hierarchy of the enclosed community. On top of that, Laurence uses houses as emblems of their inhabitants, either as memorials or coffins, or, in the case of Rachel and Stacey, as towers of isolation.

Laurence gave voice to the experience of Canadian prairie women stating with Hagar in *The Stone Angel*, born in the late 1800’s. Womanhood and its biological, social, sexual and psychological ramifications play an important role in both *A Jest of God* and *The Fire-Dwellers*. The choice to analyze these two novels in particular is grounded in the fact that the protagonists are sisters, but their circumstances are widely different, allowing for a gender-involved and intertextually informed comparative reading. Stacey adheres to gender conventions, while her sister does not, yet both suffer from feelings of intense isolation nonetheless. Ancestry typically plays a significant role in Laurence’s writing as her protagonists take time to explore their roots on their identity quests. Admittedly, it is not as prominent in these two novels as it is in others in the cycle where the Highland Clearances and settlement in Canada are dealt with in more detail, but the past still fulfills its key role and both women come to recognize their background as an inseparable part of their identities.

The impact of Rachel and Stacey’s parents, Niall and May Cameron, is indisputable. In the tomb-like atmosphere of their house with the heavy symbolism mortuary in the basement, every member of the family exists in their own isolated world. As a high-principled, Scottish Presbyterian Grandmother figure, Mrs. Cameron polices her daughters in an attempt to impose order and these attempts are intensified by the conditioning on the basis of gender that teaches them to comply with the norms of society. Always concerned with proper appearances, she teaches Rachel and Stacey how look nice and respectable, which leaves them silenced and alienated from their family, community and themselves. Their father, Niall, the incommunicative recluse, teaches them silent isolation rather than confrontation, too. Stacey even picks up his drinking habit to deal with the emotions bottled up inside.

¹ Thomas, *Manawaka World*, 177.

To evaluate Rachel in terms of Atwood's Victim Positions, we need to focus on Position Two, Three and Four:

2. To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology (in the case of women) [...] or any other large general powerful idea. [...] your rebellion will be deemed foolish or evil even by you, and you will expect to lose or be punished, for who can fight Fate (or the Will of God or Biology)?²

Rachel is consumed by emotional repression, a result of Scottish Presbyterian upbringing as well as the mystery of their silent father, which are, effectively, both acts of Fate that she had no hand in. When looking for a way to rid herself of isolation, Rachel, as a woman, looks for a prince to save her, materialized in the character of Nick, and then even in motherhood, originally seen as the ultimate physical escape from the isolation of the individual. Her rebellion is proved foolish, literally, when Biology/Fate/God endow her not with pregnancy but a tumor. Such condition, however, is not unalterable; on the contrary, Rachel can, even must, fight back, which arouses her agency and moves her into the dynamic Position Three:

3. To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable [...]. This is a dynamic position, [...] you can move on to Position Four, but if you become locked into your anger and fail to change your situation, you might well find yourself back in Position Two.³

Now that Rachel recognizes herself as a victim (of her own fear, isolation as well as God/Fate/Biology), she refuses to accept the position as inevitable, therefore, successfully moving to Position Four: "[...] for those who have never been victims at all, or for ex-victims: those who have been able to move into it from Position Three because the external and/or internal causes of victimization have been removed."⁴ The removal of the tumor marks

² Atwood, *Survival*, 37.

³ Atwood, *Survival*, 37.

⁴ Atwood, *Survival*, 38.

the removal of victimization, signaling the moment that the familial roles in the Cameron household reverse. Rachel, so often defined by death, survives, finally able to assume agency over her life and her troublesome mother.

Stacey's feelings of alienation originate entirely from biology, which puts her in Atwood's Position Two. In her role of Rapunzel as a suburban housewife, Stacey is a victim of "the attitudes of society, symbolized by her house and her children, which society says she must not abandon [...]."⁵ Stacey's body and her house/tower are the same, as her feelings stem from the reality of the female body subjected to the ravages of time and four pregnancies. Her hidden desire for more sexual experience echoes Atwood's concept of Canadian Rapunzels as "women who would rather be Dianas or Venuses."⁶ Both sexually and emotionally unsatisfied, Stacey is so in conflict with the values she has internalized as a woman, opposed by her inner desires of leaving the mother/wife role behind, that she remains stuck in a vicious cycle of asking herself "how to get out?" However, the fear that punishment for her any kinds of liberating actions will be inflicted on the children prevents Stacey from acting out on her fantasies even when the opportunity to escape presents itself with Luke. The division of identity into inner/outer and young/old, reflected in Laurence's narrative technique throughout, is inherently female, too, as it emphasizes the specifically female pressure to look presentable, hiding the ugly realities (as we also see in Stacey's gorgeous and skinny but suicidal neighbor Tess). Laurence positions marriage and motherhood, and even middle age, as identity-transforming, as they distort youth and beauty, such seemingly invaluable assets in our society. As Atwood puts it, this Victim Position "is the fault of this large thing [biology and gender roles] [...] you can neither be blamed nor be expected to do anything about it."⁷ All Stacey can do is reconcile herself with the everyday, imperfect realities of her life and body to some extent, while acknowledging that they will continue to change and evolve until she dies.

In the stories of Rachel and Stacey, Laurence gives a powerful voice to the female experience of 1960's Canada, one that adheres to social conventions and one that does not. Interestingly, Rachel envies Stacey for living life right, while Stacey envies her sister's the freedom of childlessness, neither of them able to see beyond the surface to the isolating aspects of such opposing renderings of womanhood. The sisters live in isolation from each

⁵ Atwood, *Survival*, 209.

⁶ Atwood, *Survival*, 209.

⁷ Atwood, *Survival*, 37.

other as well, only keeping in touch with the occasional letter. It is not until each sister has resolved her own battle, accepting Manawaka as a part of her identity that they are able to reunite again for the first time in seven years.

The question of motherhood looms over both novels: for Rachel it seems for a while the cure-all to isolation; for Stacey it is the root cause of it. While Rachel comes to recognize that her surrogate children – her students - “will always be temporary, never to be held, *but so are everyone’s*” (JG, 209), Stacey, as a mother, does not yet realize this. Rachel’s resolution seems a little bit more triumphant than Stacey’s but, as her sister can attest, the golden city may not turn out to be golden after all. Rachel, heading out to explore the unknown land, accepts this unpredictability, just as Stacey accepts that her fires will go on, inside and out and as she asks God for another forty years of life.

A Jest of God and *The Fire-Dwellers* center the psychological survival of prairie women against the social conventions. In “Ten Years’ Sentences,” Laurence writes that Rachel’s emergence from the Cameron household is “a partial defeat, or looked at in another way, a partial victory.”⁸ Such a claim defines both novels as the protagonists emerge from confines of their self with the triumphant fact of survival, just like Atwood describes it in her guide. Laurence masterfully uses the themes of isolation and survival across multiple levels in the Manawaka sequence and across generations. With Laurence still celebrated a pioneer of Canadian women’s writing emerging from the formative period of the 1960’s, we can conclude that the Manawaka sequence stands the test of time. Laurence gives voice to the particularities of the female experience that transcend decades, as long as the established social conventions are still firmly in place.

⁸ Laurence, “Ten Years’ Sentences,” 14.

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