

Images of Women in Canadian Literature:

The figure of woman as strong and competent is central to the Canadian tradition. Besides the traditional female archetypes such as earth mother and femme fatale, another significant feminine archetype is evolving in Canadian literature, that of the woman as hero, rather than "heroine," as central women characters have been traditionally termed.(1) The woman hero is not merely an adjunct to a man's world: she is not satisfied with the role of mother, mistress or wife. The qualities she displays are not solely those traditionally considered feminine, such as tenderness, passivity and intuition. She makes decisions and influences events, and evinces characteristics usually considered masculine, such as courage, aggression and ambition.

Woman as Hero

by

Lorraine McMullen

In Canadian fiction there are a number of novels in which the woman not only is the hero, but undergoes the same pattern of adventures which the archetypal male hero traditionally has undergone. She ventures on a mythical quest or journey, usually alone. For the woman hero, this journey usually implies, to some extent at least, a voyage of self discovery. It may be an entirely internal journey. As with the male hero, her journey may include a meeting with a "light" (Apollonian) or dark (Dionysian) person of the

opposite sex, perhaps with both. If we are to speak in Jungian terms, these figures may be seen as functions of the animus, in the same way that women the male hero meets may be seen as functions of his anima. Also, the hero traditionally meets a guide of the same sex; and finally, like the male hero, she descends into the underworld and returns wiser or freer; this descent and return symbolize death and rebirth.

Novelists I shall discuss to demonstrate this thesis include Martha Ostenso, Morley Callaghan, Margaret Laurence, Ethel Wilson, Margaret Atwood and Constance Beresford-Howe.

We shall begin with the earliest of the novels and the youngest of the heroes. The novel is Martha Ostenso's Wild Geese (1925); the hero is seventeen-year-old Judith Gare. Judith is the only one of the tyrannical Caleb Gare's four children with the courage to oppose him. Her name is suitably chosen. Like the Biblical Judith who decapitated Holophernes and liberated the Jews, (2) Judith very narrowly misses freeing her family from Caleb's bondage when she heaves a well sharpened axe at his head.

There is an intriguing reversal of sex roles among the Gare children. The older boy, Martin, is gentle, submissive and frail. Judith is physically big, strong, aggressive and determined. She continually opposes her father's will, while Martin, with the rest of the

family, accepts his domination. Lind Archer, the young teacher who has come to board with the Gares, functions as the traditional guide for Judith--helping her to develop her feminine qualities which have been suppressed in her angry attempts to withstand her father's pressure, giving her the friendship and support none of her family offers, and finally arranging her escape to marry her lover, Sven Sandbo. Sven is the "dark man" in Judith's life who arrives back on the neighbouring farm at the opportune time, when Judith can no longer tolerate her life at home, and so he provides an escape for her. Judith's passage through the underworld begins when her father ties her hand and foot to the barn floor after her attack on him; this incident is the physical counterpart to the psychological oppression which follows, as he threatens to have her jailed for attempted murder if she tries to leave. It is Lind Archer who brings her out of the apathy and despair into which she sinks at this time.

Judith does not go through the inner quest of some other heroes we shall be discussing. Her quest is basically external with, of course, psychological overtones, and her trials are largely physical--ranging from being tied in the barn to being forced to work endless hours in the fields. Her quest ends with freedom. Overcoming obstacles set up by her own family--her mother's determination to keep her home, her sister's lack of compassion, as well

as her father's continual oppression-- she escapes from the farm to the marriage she wants and she is free.

It is in later novels that we see the more internal quest, the search for self-realization--often in conjunction with an external voyage away from a specific place or person or to a specific location. Ethel Wilson's Swamp Angel (1954) provides us with an example of the female hero who undertakes a journey which is both external and internal. Maggie Lloyd starts on her journey to free herself from an insupportable marriage. She is not an escapist, for she does not seek to escape from life or responsibility, only from a humiliating and reductive relationship. Swamp Angel, then, begins where Ibsen's Doll's House ended--as Maggie walks out the kitchen door.

Her journey takes her from Vancouver to the interior of British Columbia, while spiritually she is also taking a journey into herself. She stops at a village significantly named Hope and remains there for three days, which the narrator describes as "like the respite that perhaps comes to the soul after death,"(3) a very obvious reference to her dying to her previous life. From here she goes forward to face a series of tests and obstacles seemingly requisite to her entry into a new life.

Maggie demonstrates characteristics and interests usually labelled masculine. First of all she is an excellent fisherwoman and an unusually skilled maker of

flies for fishing, an art her father had taught her. This skill is important as it provides the money to escape from her husband, Eddie Vardoe, to whom she is housekeeper, sex object and ego booster, but not a human being. Also, she reverses the stereotyped male-female pattern by rescuing a man in distress. Yet, despite these "masculine" qualities and activities, Maggie possesses the more characteristically "feminine" traits of gentleness, helpfulness and kindness. She is sexually attractive. She is motherly to the Gunnarsen's young son, Alan. She excels in the traditional female art of cooking. In her combination of the masculine and feminine, Maggie approaches the androgynous ideal.

The elderly and eccentric Nell Severance is Maggie's mentor, the traditional sage who comes to the aid of the hero. She is also Maggie's alter ego; both Maggie and Nell have been trapped by the past and both must free themselves from it to go on: Maggie to a new life, Severance to death. They are linked by Severance's gun, the Swamp Angel; Nell sends the gun to Maggie to throw away after her death and Maggie writes to Nell when she receives it: "I am so sure that our ability to throw away the substance, to lose all yet keep the essence is very important" (p. 129).

Maggie's adventures include physically rescuing Mr. Cunningham from the lake, materially rescuing the Gunnarsen lodge from imminent failure, and spiritually rescuing Vera Gunnarsen after her

abortive attempt at suicide. Of the tests and obstacles Maggie meets, Vera is the most difficult. Vera is a stereotype of the woman who sees herself solely in relation to her husband, who cannot relate to other women, and sees any capable, attractive woman only as a rival--to be watched, resented, envied and suspected. When she sees that by driving Maggie away she has alienated her husband she attempts to drown herself, and ironically, it is to Maggie she turns for help.

By the conclusion of the novel, Maggie has overcome a series of obstacles and has decided to remain with the Gunnarsens where she will continue to be a support to them, individually and as a family, and to the running of the lodge. She has confronted her past and in accepting its tragedies has learned to lose all but keep the essence, as she tells Nell Severance.

Maggie is a hero seeking to tread a very difficult path. She involves herself with others, recognizing as Nell says in their last conversation, "No Man is an Island, I am involved in Mankind," (p. 150) and yet at the same time she accepts her own isolation realizing, "I am alone and, like a swimmer, I have to make my way on my own power. Swimming is like living, it is done alone" (p. 99).

The Book of Eve (1973) presents us with as unlikely a hero as we shall find. Eva Carroll is a seventy-year-old, middle-class housewife who walks out of her

forty-year-old marriage carrying Wuthering Heights, a poetry anthology, blood-pressure pills, glasses and "warm old-woman underpants." Like Maggie Lloyd she leaves without a word of farewell. Unlike Maggie she leaves without any preparation whatever. Why does she leave so precipitously? She tells us that it was "the cold white autumn light pouring through the landing window as I climbed up with the tray. It seemed to bleach the stairway into something like a high white cell. The night before on TV I'd seen cells like that in Viet Nam or somewhere, for political prisoners. You saw them crouched at the bottom of narrow cages, looking up at the light. I've never had a political conviction in my life, unless you count being bored by politics. But there I was just the same. Under bars."(4)

Eva moves into a different world when she moves into a basement apartment just two miles from her home. The first morning she says, "I opened my eyes into a perfect, self-centred bliss without past or future, and rejoiced in everything I saw" (pp. 6-7). Nevertheless, Elysium turns into Hades--for this is a dark dingy subterranean world in which she must come to grips with her past, which is revealed through a series of flashbacks, and to some understanding of herself and acceptance of the present and her new life. She, too, passes through a series of tests--physical illness, psychological illness, loneliness, the temptation to return. And is helped through these trials by a forty-seven-

year old, Hungarian Czech refugee named Johnny, who is an educated factory worker and gourmet cook; he would be as unlikely to have turned up in her previous middle class existence as would "old Tom," the battered neighbourhood cat she adopts, and to whom Johnny bears a distinct resemblance. Johnny is a fittingly exotic dark haired Dionysian figure. There is some reversal of the usual sex roles in the relationship between Johnny and Eva; for Johnny is the cook who whips up magnificent meals; he is the one who wants to settle down and place his Wilton carpet on her basement floor; he is twenty-three years her junior.

The cycle of the seasons helps define Eva's progress. She has left home in late September and undergoes her series of trials through late fall and winter. In spring, appropriately, she emerges from her underworld, signified by the opening of the door from her cave-like apartment to the outer world. It is Johnny who, after much struggle, succeeds in freeing the door which had been jammed shut for years, just as it is Johnny who helps her free herself from her past, to become a new person. What Maggie Lloyd always knew, Eva learns finally from her experiences; that the "perfect self-centred bliss" she felt at first is not the answer, that even at seventy one cannot opt out of life, but must get involved with others. As she so cryptically puts it finally, "I never cared much for paprika and I hate Wilton carpets. But happiness

isn't the point you see, any more than virtue was when I left. . ." (p. 169).

When we first meet Peggy Sanderson of Morley Callaghan's The Loved and the Lost (1959), she has already left home and rejected class structures and racial barriers of conventional society. She is an anti-establishment figure from the outset. She moves among the blacks of Montreal's St. Antoine district and, like Eva, her home is a basement room in a shabby house well below the mountain. This is her underworld.

Peggy is a young woman who seeks and gives love, in the true sense of the word, and meets with anger and resentment from whites and blacks of all levels of society; for they cannot understand anyone attempting to transcend race and class. The blacks, with their primitive music, their night life, and their location below the mountain, provide the Dionysian element in her life. Jim McAlpin, the middle-class protagonist from the academic world, is the Apollonian figure. He seeks to change her life and is the one person who has an opportunity to save her. At one point Jim's colleagues suggest that he is Orpheus to Peggy's Eurydice:

"There she is lost in the dark underworld. Montreal's Plutonian shore. Like Eurydice. Remember the lady?

Remember? How did Eurydice die?"

"Bitten by a snake," Foley said.

"And certainly our little Peggy has

been badly bitten."

"So McAlpin becomes her Orpheus." (4)

This conversation effectively foreshadows the resolution. When Jim, doubting Peggy, leaves her and she is raped and murdered. Jim realizes his failure and the Orpheus-Eurydice parallel is recalled by these words at the end of the novel: "In a moment of jealous doubt his faith in her had weakened, he had lost his view of her and so she had vanished. She had vanished off the earth. And now he was alone." (p. 233)

The carved leopard and the little church Peggy shows Jim indicate two polarities of experience: the leopard suggests fierceness, power, lurking violence, sexuality; the church, simplicity, grace, love, the spiritual. For Peggy they go together. For Jim and for most people they are antithetical, as opposite as male and female. But Peggy sees and accepts an androgynous world in which both of these seeming opposites belong.

A comparison Jim makes between Peggy and Joan of Arc underlines her heroic character as well as foreshadowing her fate:

She, like Joan, lived and acted by her own secret intuitions. Joan had shattered her world, and Peggy shattered people too. Not only Malone, but Mrs. Murdock; even Foley. She would shatter all the people who lived on the mountain and the people who prayed on the mountain. Joan had

to die, he thought with a sharp pang, simply because she was what she was. And there had been terror in Peggy's face as Malone's hand reached out for her; she had sensed that there were many others like Malone, who would destroy her (p. 131).

Peggy is a hero who stands alone seeking to bridge the gulf between classes, races and sexes. But ultimately neither man or woman, upper, lower or middle class, black or white understands or accepts her. Everywhere she goes she causes jealousy, resentment, quarrels and confusion--"a fool saint" Robertson Davies might call her. Yet she is determined to be her own person. Working in a factory, living alone, she seeks love and finds hate. She never does capitulate to the conventional world which persecutes her, but she must pay for her intransigence. Because she is viewed from the outside throughout the novel, she remains an elusive figure and we are given more of a portrayal of society's reaction to an outsider than we are of Peggy herself.

In Margaret Laurence's A Jest of God (1966), Rachel Cameron's voyage is internal, a voyage from childhood to maturity at the age of thirty-four.

Rachel is a neurotic spinster school teacher living with her mother in small town Manawaka. Her distorted view of reality can be seen in her relationship with her mother; her school principal, her students and her co-worker and friend

Calla Mackie. Her affair with Nick Kazlik initiates the change which takes place within her. In order to meet with Nick, Rachel must withstand her mother's neurotic threats. This is the first step in her journey--in leaving her childhood, leaving home. Prior to meeting Nick, Rachel had been replacing love and sexuality in her life with a fantasy world peopled with exotic princes in far off lands. Nick is a bridge between this fantasy world and reality. He has some elements of her fantasy--he is dark, Slavic featured, of Ukrainian background, foreign to her Scots Presbyterian world. There is an unreal element in their relationship, too, for Rachel dreams of marriage and children, whereas it is all too apparent that for Nick she is a temporary diversion for the summer. Yet Nick is the catalyst through whom Rachel develops her capacity to reach outward to others, to give and receive love. Nick, with his foreignness, darkness and sexuality, is the Dionysian figure in Rachel's experience.

Major trials Rachel must face in her quest for maturity are her desertion by Nick, her supposed pregnancy and her mother's powerful inhibiting influence. She rejects the escape routes of suicide and abortion as solutions to her pregnancy and accepts all the trials implicit in being unmarried and pregnant in a small town at the age of thirty-four. Her voyage through the underworld of hospital and anaesthesia is the ultimate step in her journey to maturity and freedom. Her new found adulthood

is heralded by her words spoken under anaesthetic, "I am the mother now." When Rachel leaves hospital she says that she feels, "like a freed prisoner . . . slightly dazed at the sudden concrete presence of the outside." (6) Now finally she is free, she is outside. She has come out of the fantasy world of exotic princes and the hypocritical, equally unreal world of pretence inherited from her mother and the neurotic world of her own distorted relationships with others. Small wonder that she is "slightly dazed at the sudden concrete presence of the outside."

Rachel meets a woman adviser in the person of Calla who is generous, kind and eccentric. Calla has the courage to disregard public opinion and be her own person, but Rachel is unable to benefit from this example. Later, when she believes she is pregnant, Rachel goes to Calla for support--this is significant, for the first time she can reach out for help.

What heroic qualities does Rachel possess? None at all at first. But through her experience she develops some--she learns courage, decisiveness and the willingness to accept responsibility. Her quest, which she thought a quest for husband and children, propels her into a very different one, an ordeal through which she achieves self respect and the capacity to love and therefore to understand others, and the maturity which, along with love, motherhood implies.

The unnamed protagonist of Margaret Atwood's Surfacing (1972) is journeying to her former home. She is also journeying from the city back to nature, from civilization to the primitive, from present to past, from illusion to reality. Thus her quest functions on multiple levels other than the ostensible one--a search for her missing father, and becomes primarily a journey into herself. As she plunges into the lake she dives into the depths of her own being. Finding the body of her father in the lake jolts her into an awareness of the reality about herself which she has been suppressing, of the truth she could not face:

It was all real enough, it was enough reality for ever, I couldn't accept it, that mutilation, ruin I'd made, I needed a different version.(7)

She is referring, of course, to her abortion and recalls now the actual events which she has thus far successfully transformed in her mind into "a different version"--marriage, a child and divorce. Now she accepts the truth and the responsibility for her action:

I could have said no but I didn't; that made me one of them too, a killer. After the slaughter, the murder, he couldn't believe I didn't want to see him any more; it bewildered him, he resented me for it, he expected gratitude because he arranged it for me, fixed me so I was as good as new; others, he said wouldn't have bothered. Since then I'd carried that death around inside me, layering it over, a cyst, a

tumour, black pearl; . . . (p. 145)
She does not surface from this underworld until she has deliberately become pregnant to replace her lost child, has communicated with her dead parents, destroyed everything linking her with the artificial life she can no longer tolerate and identified herself with the animal world. Finally, cleansed through suffering, she re-enters her own time and place to begin anew.

These heroes are a motley crowd indeed --ranging in age from seventeen to seventy, in occupation from factory worker to farmer to teacher to commercial artist, and including housewives; in marital status they include the single and the married, those who want to marry and those who want to get out of marriage.

What is most intriguing is not their diversity so much as their similarity. All of these women are heroic in their qualities and in their actions, and all undertake a journey or quest with varying degrees of success. None of them is a stereotype--all have stepped out of the mould--all are individuals. All find themselves flouting convention; Judith runs away from home, Maggie and Eva walk out on their husbands, the protagonist of Surfacing rejects the cliché-ridden, artificial world of the seventies, Peggy ignores social structures, Rachel casts off her role of dutiful daughter. None is seeking the conventional goal of today--money, power, a successful marriage, social

prestige. For none of them is a man or the usual male-female sexual relationship the primary objective.

What, then, do they seek? They seek, first of all, freedom. At its most primitive level Judith Gare seeks physical freedom. Most seek psychological freedom--the freedom to achieve and express their own identity. Often they

must first discover what this identity is. For all of them, in fact, their journey becomes a learning process, through which they discover truths about themselves and their world, and the role they must play in this world. Their journey is always a difficult one. But the freedom and sense of self worth that are achieved make it well worth the price.

NOTES

1. I use the term "hero" as defined by Carolyn Heilbrun in her study, Toward a Recognition of Androgyny, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973).
2. Old Testament, Book of Judith, 10:1 - 13:10.
3. Ethel Wilson, Swamp Angel (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, NCL edition, 1962), 40. All page references will be to this edition.
4. Constance Beresford-Howe, The Book of Eve, (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1973), 1-2. All page references will be to this edition.
5. Morley Callaghan, The Loved and the Lost (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, Laurentian Library Edition, 1970), 135. All page references will be to this edition.
6. Margaret Laurence, A Jest of God (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, NCL edition, 1974), 185.
7. Margaret Atwood, Surfacing (Toronto: General Publishing Co., Paperjacks edition, 1973), 143. All page references will be to this edition.