

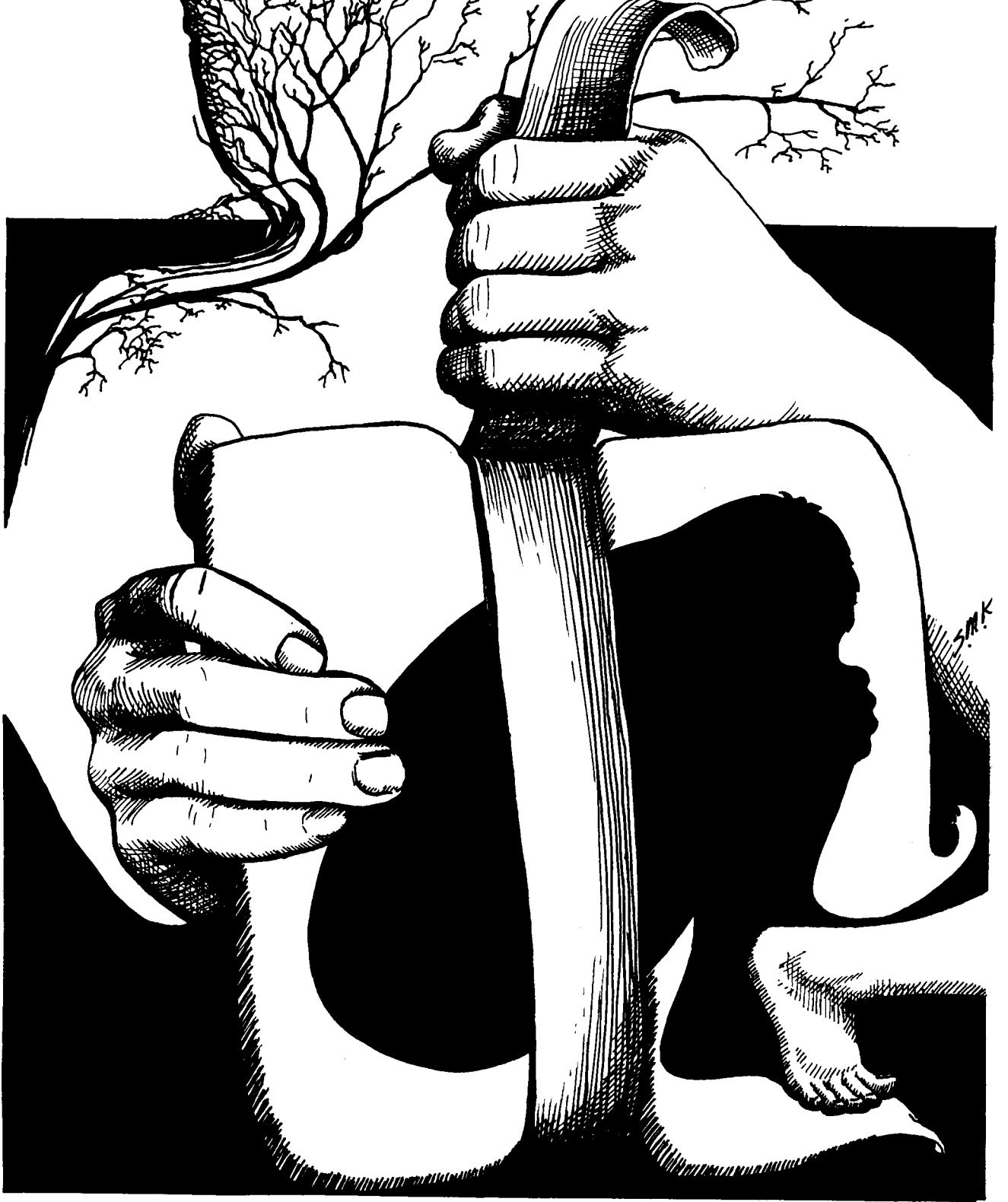
PUZZLED PATRIARCHS AND FREE WOMEN: PATTERNS IN THE CANADIAN NOVEL

by Joanne Hedenstrom

[Note: This article discusses a large topic in a few brief pages: this necessitates generalities and omissions for which the writer apologizes.]

Even a brief examination of Canadian literature makes it clear that Canadian women novelists are a distinct group within the whole of Canadian literature. The shared themes and similarity of images among them suggest that they are working within a definite tradition, although a tradition which is as yet undefined. To define that tradition will be to provide a new perspective upon the Canadian novel and to reveal a dramatic divergence between the novels of men and those of women in English speaking Canada.

The tradition of Canadian women novelists, as distinct from the tradition of Canadian male novelists, has not yet been discussed in criticism. Margaret Atwood has suggested, in Survival, that women are inclusive, that is, welcoming all forms of life, having a feeling of oneness with the natural world and that men are exclusive, attempting to keep fecund nature outside the garrison walls or farm fence; that women represent curvilinear space patterns and that men represent rectilinear space patterns which they attempt to impose upon both women and nature. She also discusses Canadian literature's bumper crop of Hecate-Crones and Diana-Maidens and the concomitant lack of "good" Venuses. But she does not



pursue the implication that these characteristics might appear more predominantly in novels either by women or men, or whether there is, indeed, a feminine (and conversely masculine) tradition in the Canadian novel.

In fact, her suggestions do apply to the novels of Canadian women and men. Novels by Canadian women are more "inclusive" and empathetic with nature; novels by men are more "exclusive" and their characters do tend to impose rigid patterns upon their women and their land. Indeed, the attempt of the male-created hero to impose a patriarchal order upon his land or his woman is a pattern which the female-created heroine in Canada resists and escapes. Also, while there is a bumper crop of Hecate-Crones and Diana-Maidens in Canadian literature, the treatment of these female figures differs according to the sex of the author. In an article titled "Rating the Chauvinists on the Richler Scale," Myrna Kostash writes:

Women write about women in a way that few men ever have. They look behind the mythologies of wifery and motherhood, love and sex, work and art, and expose the everyday realities, some brutal, some ecstatic, of feminine life. Realities so often represented as trivial by male writers. They expose, too, female characters such as

mothers, virgins, spinsters and adulteresses with an unconventional compassion and identification.

. . . . Without these novels and stories and poems, you would think that Canada was a nation of remarkable men, with a few Earth Goddesses, Tempresses, and dishwashers thrown in to keep the action going. (1)

But these differences in male-female perception patterns and the characterization of women characters are only the tip of a particularly Canadian literary iceberg, indicating a more basic divergence between these two groups of novelists, a divergence of theme and philosophy which suggests that there are two novel traditions in Canada. This very large topic can be treated only briefly below.

While it is agreed that the heroines created by men are often losing figures, trapped by the circumstances of their lives, it is important to note that the masculine protagonists created by Canadian men are also rather hopeless figures. Somehow, Canadian women write novels that express the possibilities of growth, the achieving of a happier personal world, while male Canadian authors seem unable to break out of a set pattern of grim alternation between hope and defeat, described by Atwood in Survival as the escape-survival-escape-survival cycle. These masculine novels are character-

ized by a lack of hope, a certain weary puzzlement that things are not as they should be but there is little hope of change. Deviance or defiance, so often a creative force in the novels created by Canadian women, is a destructive force in the novels of Canadian men.

Interestingly, the domestic situations or life situations created by both male and female Canadian authors are similar: it is simply that the conditions the male novelists describe their heroes as imposing are exactly the conditions which women novelists portray their heroines as escaping. Thus, while the woman's novel is concerned with freedom, the masculine novel is concerned with disillusion. These are the "free women" and the "puzzled patriarchs" of Canadian literature.

In Lives of Girls and Women, Del Jordan's mother tells her,

There is a change coming I think in the lives of girls and women. Yes. But it is up to us to make it come. All women have had up till now has been their connection with men. All they have had. No more lives of our own, really, than domestic animals. (2)

The phrase "domestic animals" has more reality in the fiction of women than is generally recognized. Certainly English Canadian women novelists of the twentieth century have seen their

heroines in situations of domestic and claustrophobic captivity. Judith Gare of Wild Geese is used as a work horse and tied in the barn. The heroine of Surfacing fears being leashed to door knobs and bed posts. Morag, in The Diviners, is trapped in a tower, and Eva, in The Book of Eve, is caught in a marriage house of coughing clocks and Anglican conventions. Or the heroine may be caught in a more pervasive way, by a thousand conventions, caught as Maggie says, in Swamp Angel, in "a situation light as a cobweb, strong as a prison, sillier than a poor joke." (3)

Unable to accept the limitations of their defined role, Canadian women have created heroines whose main goal is to somehow expand that role, to ask for greater freedom in movement or in emotional range, or to try desperately to escape the role altogether. These heroines are examining their world, assessing it, and often "surfacing" through it. Maggie escapes at the beginning of Swamp Angel, Judith Gare doesn't escape until the end of Wild Geese, Hagar does not surface or metamorphose until the end of The Stone Angel, yet all three women are moving positively forward to a position of strength, understanding and an ability to cope with life as they find it.

All of these heroines emerge from their houses as they would emerge

from a cocoon. Since the woman and the woman's role have long been identified as one, when heroines discard their houses they also discard something that has been a part of themselves. Leaving their homes they emerge from old behavioral patterns and must develop new ones: escape for the heroine created by English Canadian women, must also be a metamorphosis. As Margaret Atwood writes:

The real struggle is the struggle of the Diana, capable of freedom, and of the "good" Venus, capable of love both maternal and sexual, to find a way out of the rigid Hecate stereotype in which she finds herself shut like a moth in a chrysalis. (4)

The heroine must go through stages of growth that are like transformations; escape in the novels in an action that allows the heroines to realize their essential personalities, metaphorically like the butterfly in the cocoon, the moth in the caterpillar, or as in Bear, the antelope in the mole. (5)

Thus the heroines shed weight (Sarah Bastard, Bear, Edible Woman, Lady Oracle, Book of Eve) shed skin (Bear, Noman) shed old, tattered clothes (Hagar in Bram's clothes in Stone Angel) or shed prosperous middle-class clothes (Book of Eve, Swamp Angel, Sarah Bastard, Surfacing, Edible Woman, Bear, Diviners).

They shed their humanity to become an animal, vegetable or mineral being (Surfacing, The Sun and the Moon) or shed this world for another in religious or spiritual ritual: (MacEwan's Julian, Noman, and King of Egypt, King of Dreams.) But they all evade a traditional domesticity, and by doing so, discard a part of their former selves. Appropriately, these novels are rife with images of bursting, birthing, surfacing. "I have an odd sense of being reborn," (6) writes Lou to the Director, her significantly named former lover in Bear. "Everything is waiting to become alive," (7) thinks the heroine of Surfacing. Maggie, in Swamp Angel, experiences a re-birth of the soul and Lilly's final transformation, in Wilson's Lilly's Story, is "the re-birth of a free woman." (8)

This is not the treadmill escape described by Atwood's Survival. Since women's novels emphasize growth, there is a discarding of the original problematic situation altogether. These heroines do not go from the frying pan into the fire, they leave the frying pan and get off the stove. As Sarah Porlock puts it, they give up the "competition to see who would make the best lady Jesus." (9) They are alone. They are different. They suffer for it but they can't change it without accepting the old roles, which they refuse to do. Eventually they accept and even feel a triumph

in their new circumstances. For these heroines, there is life after domestic death.

Thus the novels of English Canadian women usually move toward a culmination that is hopeful and positive. Their heroines usually have discarded home, possessions, the acceptance of average society. But they have gained something more vital to them. As Maggie writes to Nell Severance in Swamp Angel, "I am so sure that our ability to throw away the substance, to lose all yet keep the essence is very important." (10) And when Maggie asks Nell Severance how she will manage alone, Nell retorts, "How'll I manage!" I managed in Troy!"

In contrast to the rather triumphant air of the women novelists, hope in the novels of English speaking Canadian men seems dim. Life is never that much fun. Usually it is a lot of drudgery, requiring sheer dogged endurance. The heroes may have business plans or artistic goals but they often fail. Their personal lives ring hollow. The hero is often on a treadmill going down. Things don't get better for Father Dowling (Such is My Beloved), for Kip Cayley (More Joy In Heaven) or Jim McAlpine (The Loved and the Lost.) Peggy Sanderson (literally The Loved and the Lost) cannot be a free woman, in fact she is brutally raped and murdered for trying. Judith Hearne cannot be a

free woman, she must live an alcoholic life of religion constricted spinsterdom. Nor do things get better for Snit Mandolin in Ryga's Hungry Hills or for Danny Mulcahy in Sears's Lark in the Clear Air for whom life "is several shades of unrelieved brown." (12) Mr. and Mrs. Bentley (As For Me And My House) proceed grimly through their marriage as Abe Spalding (Fruits of the Earth) proceeds grimly through his fields. There is no escape for these characters and little pleasure. As Snit Mandolin thinks in Ryga's Hungry Hills,

You could not leave this place. Once you were here, you were here to stay. This you always remembered. . . . Parents fought their children, because they were only additional mouths to feed. Men lusted for their wives, then beat them after the storm subsided, for even the most fleeting pleasures of life are dearly paid for. Here, there was nothing with which to pay, and pleasure, like anger, was a burden. You tolerated your neighbours and your family, but you could never love them. For love was sacrificed and you sacrificed all when you were born to the hills. (13)

There is no escape for this hero and there is certainly no happiness, no love. Landscape is barren and life is barren.

While the heroines of Canadian women are able to discard their limitations,

or break through such life-denying circumstances, the protagonists created by Canadian men are learning their limitations and often dying from them. Those heroes and heroines created by men who do try to escape, that is to rise above limitations of familial and societal roles, are destroyed. The principles which cause a hero or heroine to defy society lead to unhappiness or destruction. Callaghan's heroes and heroines die for their principles with alarming consistency. Athanase Tallard, in MacLennan's Two Solitudes, upholds and acts upon his principles but he is ruined by them. Abe Spalding, in Grove's Fruits of the Earth, has principles but he fails to live his life or to know his wife. Jerome, in Watch That Ends the Night, has principles but after years in Nazi concentration camps he returns to Canada only to teach others to "live their death." (14) In contrast women novelists' major characters tell how they learn to "live" their life.

Whereas women's heroines in English-speaking Canada are busily casting-off unhappy domestic relationships, the heroes or heroines created by men in English-speaking Canada are grimly hanging on to such relationships. If a familial status quo is lost, it is bitterly lost, as it is in MacLennan's Two Solitudes or Callaghan's They Shall Inherit the Earth. Athanase Tallard and Andrew Aikenhead (aching-

head) both endeavor to maintain their unhappy families in spite of all adverse circumstances. Despite betrayal by friends, family and business associates, they end as isolated men still trying to forge a link with their families. One cannot fail to add Abe Spalding, "isolated in his own house," (15) and the Bentleys to this list. Kroetsch's Johnny Backstrom, in Words of My Roaring, maintains a home which means nothing to him and to which he emotionally gives nothing. Yet the ending of the novel suggests no change. It is a characteristic expression of the dogged and grim endurance of masculine novels. "It was blistering cold in the wet night, I have never been so alone. But I had a duty and I couldn't stop; somehow I would have to begin, "My dear friends, rain" (16)

Death is as frequent in these novels as are birth and re-birth in the novels of women. When Michael Aikenhead (They Shall Inherit the Earth) is waiting in the hospital for his son's birth, he sees instead death all around him. In contrast, the heroine of Margaret Atwood's Surfacing sees the death of her father as an expression of life: ". . . they think I should be filled with death, I should be in mourning. But nothing has died, everything is alive, everything is waiting to become alive." (17) Thus, the theme of the novels by English Canadian men, rather than being re-generative, is de-

generative. Something is wrong in the world as these characters know it but they can only respond with a weary puzzlement and grim endurance.

What can be concluded from the above discussion? First, that escape and metamorphosis is a dominant motif in the novels of English-speaking Canadian women. Second, that this escape and metamorphosis (deviance or non-conformity leading to self-determination) is a creative force in the novels of English-speaking Canadian women and a destructive force in the novels of English-speaking men. Third, and following from the above, that the novels by English-speaking Canadian women authors are more hopeful and positive in their philosophy than are the novels of English-speaking Canadian men.

Finally, it is clear that "free women" and "puzzled patriarchs" do not work well together. The very circumstances the male authors impose upon their characters are the very circumstances women authors depict their characters as escaping. Eva's house of coughing clocks and Anglican conventions is not so very different from Mrs. Bentley's but Eva leaves it. Generally, if a novel portrays a troubled life or relationship, the Canadian woman's novel will see that relationship discarded and the life improved, while the man's novel will see the negative circumstances continued --unless they end in violence. In Margaret Atwood's terms, the "creative non-victim" in Canadian literature is the "free woman" of English Canadian women novelists; the "puzzled patriarchs" are, at best, survivors.

NOTES

1. Myrna Kostash, "Rating the Chauvinists on a Richler Scale," Macleans Magazine (January, 1974), p. 75.
2. Alice Munro, Lives of Girls and Women (Signet, 1974), p. 146-7.
3. Ethel Wilson, Swamp Angel (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1954), p. 105.
4. Margaret Atwood, Survival (Toronto, Anansi, 1972), pp. 209-10.
5. Marion Engel, Bear (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1976), p. 12.
6. Ibid., p. 19.
7. Margaret Atwood, Surfacing (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1973), p. 159.
8. Ethel Wilson, Lilly's Story (Toronto, Macmillan, 1952), p. 255.
9. Marion Engel, Sarah Bastard's Notebook (Paperjacks, 1968), p. 52.
10. Ethel Wilson, Swamp Angel, p. 129.
11. Ibid., p. 152.
12. Dennis Patrick Sears, Lark in the Clear Air (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1974).
13. George Ryga, Hungry Hills (Toronto, Longman, 1963), pp. 18-19.
14. Hugh MacLennan, The Watch that Ends the Night (Signet, 1959). This is a paraphrase of Jerome's statements on pages 341-343 of this book.
15. Frederick Phillip Grove, Fruits of the Earth (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, NCL, 1965), p. 200.
16. Robert Kroetsch, Words of my Roaring (Toronto, Macmillan, 1966), p. 211.
17. Margaret Atwood, Surfacing, p. 159.