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THROUGH THE BUBBLE:
A STUDY OF THE THEME OF IDENTITY
IN THE NOVELS OF W. O. MITCHELL

by

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Through the Bubble: A Study of the Theme of Identity in the Novels of W. O. Mitchell" submitted by Bruce Potter in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

W. O. Mitchell refers to the "events, people, and atmosphere" in his fiction as forming an "illusory bubble" through which he presents some "transcending truth" about the human condition. This thesis explores the world which Mitchell creates in his four major novels: *Jake and the Kid*, *Who Has Seen the Wind*, *The Kite*, and *The Vanishing Point*, by tracing the thematic pathway of one of Mitchell's truths--the individual's struggle for identity.

The overall theme discloses two basic types of identity which the characters in Mitchell's novels must establish if they are to survive in the world, and both *self-identity* and *social identity* are discussed as necessary functions of the human condition. Through an awareness of nature, characters realize their own place in the natural cycle of life, and by understanding and accepting their roles in the "living whole," individuals develop a self-identity which gives them freedom and confidence. While individuality is a prime factor in identity, it is also evinced that without human interaction man's identity is incomplete, and the need for the individual to develop a social identity which allows him to function as part of a community is emphasized as the completing factor in a full identity.

This thesis discusses the two problems of identity as they confront the central characters in Mitchell's four novels, and attempts to broaden the thematic pathway by showing how the author sustains his

central theme by the inclusion of secondary characters whose problems of identity both parallel and augment the central discussion.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the title of this thesis I have tried to incorporate the concepts of form and content: two basic literary viewpoints from which one might examine the works of a particular author. The idea of an "illusory bubble" as the form of a given work is W. O. Mitchell's own term and in a conversation with Donald Cameron he has referred to his approach to writing and the relationship between form and content:

To me the only justification for art is that this particular narrative, these particular people, shall articulate some transcending truth that transcends region and transcends a given time, and that it shall have meaning and significance that transcends the actual in the world of the many. You get into this thematic thing. It's quite often sententious, as so often themes are in art: that all men are created equal, or all men are created unequal, or pride is a fine thing . . . People have said these things for centuries. It's not a new truth or a fresh truth, but it's the first time this truth has been filtered through this particular artist, in this particular part of the world, at this particular point in time. It isn't the truth that's important so much as the illusory journey to that truth, through the artist's illusion bubble.¹

The bubble which Mitchell creates to enclose his "truths" is composed of various literary techniques which he uses to sustain his illusion. As he has stated, the writer is something of a magician who produces the bubble "in a sleight-of-hand fashion with symbols, with events, with people, with atmosphere."²

Within the world designed by Mitchell are several thematic pathways along which one might explore the various "transcending truths" the author has attempted to deal with through his art. These pathways are never straight and clear however, for Mitchell's own theory of literature demands that they be artistically designed in order that the reader may participate in the journey through the bubble. Mitchell has quoted Professor Salter, his "mentor" when he was "learning to write" as advising:

"Make damn sure *you* know what it is that you are trying to say with these people and with these events and with this bubble you're building, but for God's sake don't let it be said. Let that belong to the creative partner who comes to it. Let him think he's discovered it."³

Although Mitchell received an admonition from his creative writing coach not to fall into the error of stating his theme too conspicuously, Salter apparently did not clearly state an alternative. Instead, Mitchell quotes him as having provided a simile which his artistic temperament has since interpreted to form his own particular filtering of truth:

"You know, Bill, really the theme should not be inartistically clear and didactic. You know what it's like? It's a lot like a hidden football play . . . People are in the stands and they look down; they don't understand football, they don't know what the play is, but there's one thing they sure as hell know: something very important is going on down there."⁴

In this thesis, as Mitchell's "creative partner," we will explore the nature and progress of one of the author's thematic pathways as it winds its way through the "illusory bubble" of his work. The theme chosen is one which runs through all of Mitchell's

novels and thus serves to link the works together as one large creative whole. Identity is a primary concern to Mitchell, who has commented on the writer's need to express his own particular identity in his work:

To me, the main justification for art is that it grows out of the unique and individual human being, and that when the art experience happens between a creative artist and a creative partner, it is probably the closest a human can ever come to truly crossing a bridge to another human. Now if on one side of the bridge the artist is not working out of his own individual identity and experience there's nothing for the reader to cross to.⁵

In the above passage Mitchell has referred to two primary concepts involved in the theme of identity. The "unique and individual human being" raises the question of *self-identity*, while the necessity for individuals to construct bridges of understanding between themselves refers to the idea of *social identity*. In the novels to be discussed here, both types of identity are to be explored in relation to the characters inhabiting Mitchell's illusory bubble.

Because the term "identity" may be interpreted in several different ways, something must be said concerning its specific use in this thesis. Obviously every human being has some form of physical identity due to the mere fact of existence; we all occupy space, have unique characteristics, and come into contact with others. However, in Mitchell's novels individuals seem to be searching for some meaning in their lives, and this desire for *awareness* of oneself becomes central to the concept of identity. In this discussion therefore, the term "identity" refers to the individual's search, utilizing both his intuition and intellect, for understanding and acceptance of his

own being and of his relationship with others who form the society in which he lives. Occasionally, characters will appear in the novels who have realized their self-identity and are consequently no longer searching for its attainment. They still have problems, however, in maintaining that identity. The obstacles encountered by such characters are often the same as those which confront individuals still involved in the search, and thus their struggles become linked. Generally it is the problem of the aged to maintain an identity which society feels the individual is no longer capable of sustaining, while at the other end of the cycle the young are actively searching for something which the same society feels they are not yet able to understand. Young and old are therefore similarly frustrated in their desires either to find or keep their identities. Between the two extremes of age are characters who have assumed an identity with which they are dissatisfied, and their quest for true identity turns them backward in time to their youth when the false identity became established. Such middle-aged characters as David Lang in *The Kite* and Carlyle Sinclair in *The Vanishing Point* are therefore involved in attempts to rediscover their true identities.

The problem of self-identity centres around the individual's desire to learn about his own particular place in the human cycle of existence, and he must first learn what that cycle is. In addition to physical identity, the understanding of the natural cycle leads towards a spiritual identity as he realizes that he is part of a universal whole. The inward search for self-identity therefore does

not lead to egocentricity but rather to an awareness of a universal existence. Characters such as Brian O'Connal in *Who Has Seen the Wind* actively search for self-identity, and find themselves moving inward away from the world only to finally arrive at a point of harmony with the same world. The movement away thus curves back upon itself.

While the individual is occupied with the search for self-identity, the problem of social identity is an ever-present reality which must be dealt with in order to develop a balanced identity. As Mitchell has stated, bridges must exist between individuals if full understanding is to be accomplished. In his novels he presents a number of characters who have reached a level of self-awareness without establishing a useful social identity. The Bens in *Who Has Seen the Wind* are extreme examples of individuals lacking a balanced identity.

The two groups in which the individual may establish a social identity are the family and the community, and in order to function within these groups effectively, he must somehow develop a social identity which reflects his own self-identity. Without such harmony, the individual faces eternal conflict as his two identities clash. The exploration of theme thus involves a discussion of the attempts of various characters to understand their own individuality and to discover how they can utilize that self-awareness in relation to others.

Although the theme of identity may appear as an element in all of Mitchell's works, including plays and short stories, it is only his novels which are to be dealt with here. Because the novel allows

a writer to develop more fully his illusion of characters and events, the theme of identity is allowed the time and space it requires to ripen to maturity. Not only does each individual novel sustain the theme more fully, but when one views all of Mitchell's completed novels as an aggregate, it can be seen that the theme of identity itself expands and matures along with the writer's own identity as an artist.

Having enunciated the thematic pathway to be followed, it is necessary to make certain comments about the novels through which the theme of identity is to be traced. The *Literary History of Canada* lists the following six published books by W. O. Mitchell: *Who Has Seen the Wind* (1947), *The Alien* (1953), *Jake and the Kid* (1961), *The Black Bonspiel of Wullie MacCrimmon* (1962), *The Kite* (1962), and *The Vanishing Point* (1972).⁶ Of these works, only four can be considered complete, published novels. Mitchell first wrote *The Black Bonspiel of Wullie MacCrimmon* in 1950, and it was soon thereafter adapted for stage presentation. In 1962 it was published in book form by a Calgary firm,⁷ the edition consisting of fifty-four pages bound in soft cover. It is the story of a shoemaker, Wullie MacCrimmon, who challenges the devil to a curling match and beats him. The narrative is sparse, with an emphasis on dialogue. Because of its limited size, scope, number of characters, and lack of what M. H. Abrams terms "sustained and subtle exploration of character,"⁸ this work is best classified as a short story or novelette and will not be included in the discussion of Mitchell's novels.

The other work which is not to be included as a major item of this discussion is *The Alien*, an incomplete novel which Mitchell only published in part. Catherine McLay has outlined the history of *The Alien* as follows:

In 1953 Mitchell completed *The Alien*, a novel which won the MacLean's Fiction Award for 1953. From September 1953 to January 1954, *MacLean's Magazine* published installments which covered about one sixth of the novel. But it never appeared in book form, for Mitchell withdrew it and it remained in the back of his mind for some twelve or thirteen years.⁹

While *The Alien* itself was never fully published, it was eventually reworked and became *The Vanishing Point* in 1973. It is because of Mitchell's own dissatisfaction with *The Alien* as a statement of his theme that the decision has been made to exclude it from major consideration. Although mention has been made of a difference existing between the central character as he appears in each novel (see footnote page 129), in Mitchell's own words *The Alien* does not state the author's true feelings about his theme and may be excluded from further discussion:

About fourteen years ago I worked on a novel, very close to when I thought it was finished, and then I was unhappy with it. I returned to it several times over a period of about five years or more--it became a King Charles' head with me--and then about four years ago suddenly I realized that what had grown, indeed, said No. It ended with despair, and while the piece of work had grown to say No, I myself hadn't; and this is what crippled it so terribly for me.¹⁰

The four remaining novels, comprising the true core of Mitchell's work in the form of the novel, are to be considered in chronological order but a further note as to the dating of one of the works is

important. Just as the characters in Mitchell's novels are to be discussed as growing in awareness of their identities, so too must the writer's ability as an artist be traced from his earliest to his latest works in order to outline the growth of his own artistic identity. For this reason I have chosen to begin the journey through the bubble by discussing *Jake and the Kid*. Although the novel was not published until 1961, fourteen years after *Who Has Seen the Wind* first appeared in 1947, it does represent an artistic awareness dating back to 1942 when the first "Jake and the Kid" stories began to appear in Canadian journals and as a popular CBC radio series. In the later novel Mitchell does not attempt to develop his theme or characters beyond their original form, and for this reason the novel properly belongs to his earliest period. In *Jake and the Kid* many of the symbols, characters, and settings of his later works make their first embryonic appearance in the formation of his illusory bubble, and the novel thus serves as an important introduction to his later emergence as a major Canadian novelist.

To summarize, the novels *Jake and the Kid*, *Who Has Seen the Wind*, *The Kite*, and *The Vanishing Point* will be discussed in that order, and the theme of identity will be the pathway linking the novels together as a developing statement of the author's consciousness concerning a basic human problem.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

¹ Donald Cameron, "W. O. Mitchell: Sea Caves and Creative Partners," *Conversations With Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1973), pp. 51-52.

² Ibid., p. 59.

³ Ibid., p. 59.

⁴ Ibid., p. 54.

⁵ Ibid., p. 51.

⁶ Carl F. Klinck, ed., *Literary History of Canada*, Vol. 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), pp. 223-224.

⁷ W. O. Mitchell, *The Black Bonspiel of Wullie MacCrimmon* (Calgary: Frontier Publishing, 1962).

⁸ M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 110.

⁹ Catherine McLay, "The Vanishing Point: From Alienation to Faith," manuscript copy, p. 2.

¹⁰ Donald Cameron, op. cit., pp. 61-62.

CHAPTER TWO

JAKE AND THE KID

In the novel *Jake and the Kid* we step into Mitchell's illusory bubble at the town of Crocus, Saskatchewan, sometime during the Second World War. Here we first encounter the two basic ingredients of Mitchell's created world: the social environment of the town, and the surrounding natural setting of the prairie. In subsequent novels the name of the town may change, and the natural setting may move from the Saskatchewan prairie to the Alberta foothills, but the meaning and presentation of each remain similar. The theme of social identity emerges as central characters come into contact with the social setting of the community, and the natural cycle of life occurring on the prairie presents a panorama of existence which must be internalized by the individual seeking self-identity.

Mitchell himself was born on the prairie, and recognizes its introspective effect upon the individual and the desire it creates to learn more about a larger whole:

The prairie does create mystics. When I was a kid in Weyburn, a town of about five thousand, we always were drawn out to the prairie on the edge of town, Saturdays and after four. Winter and spring, summer and fall, we would wander out there, generally for murderous purposes, drowning out gophers and shooting at jack-rabbits with a .22. Very early you were in touch with the living whole. You walked out onto the prairie, onto great areas of still-untilled land, with the prairie wool stuff, and I guess that makes mystics, people who, without being aware of it, in some strange way are in tune with wind and grass and sky.¹

While the natural environment is a place for introspection and self-identity inside a "living whole," the town reflects man's desire to stand together as a social unit against the harsher aspects of nature. Again Mitchell creates the environment out of his own recollections, and has commented upon the unique quality of the small town:

There's a lovely little line, I think it's in Saskatchewan, of what a friend of mine once called "the brave little towns." There's Steadfast, Saskatchewan, and Stalwart, Saskatchewan, there's a whole line of them. Then there are the regal aristocratic towns, there's a whole line in Alberta: Princess, Duchess, Consort.²

The secondary characters who inhabit the setting, and comprise the society of Mitchell's world, are drawn also from real life and they, like his entire bubble, are used to illuminate a more transcending truth:

Always the writer asks life to help him . . . in the first stages probably the life lumber he uses is tyrannically and exactly and literally autobiographical. I remember many years ago I went up into the forest reserve gathering cattle, and the foreman who rode along with us had the most interesting speech mannerism. We were riding along and he'd say, "That there, that's Roon Crik, say that's Roon Crik. You want bear, go up Room Crik. That's where you get bear, up Roon Crik," and I suddenly realized all over the world there must be people who've fallen into this speech pattern . . . Quite a few years later I had a barber in the "Jake and the Kid" drama series and the short stories, and suddenly it popped up . . . God knows how many different actual people you get this from to make up, so what you can say in the end about a community and about people is that every goddamn bit is the literal biographical truth, and the whole thing's a lie . . . The abstract or the universal has to grow out of the particular, it has to be done in a life manner.³

The novel *Jake and the Kid* introduces us to the milieu in which the theme of identity first appears in Mitchell's writing, and although it is perhaps a less developed work than his later novels, it is an important first step along the thematic pathway. Jake and the Kid, the central characters in the novel, portray the two extremes in the human cycle: youth and old age. The effect of age on their identities is central to the problems they encounter in the narrative, and because their struggles for identity have a common factor, Jake and the Kid are linked together in a mutual quest for identity. Because the Kid is young, his self-identity is not fully developed. Although he possesses a sensual awareness of his surroundings he has not learned to accept himself as part of a natural cycle containing many harsh realities of life. As the novel progresses, such awareness does grow within him however, and his ability to articulate parallels between human and natural phenomenon, and his acceptance of life's realities, indicates his maturity. The Kid's social identity is also affected by his youth, and his confrontations with authority at home, in the schoolroom, and within the community, result from the desire of others to fashion his identity according to their own desires. Gradually, he asserts his own identity as he matures.

His friend Jake is also faced with certain problems because of his age. Because he is old, society often attempts to dictate an identity which is in conflict with his own self-identity. He is, for example, told that he is too old to enlist in the army. Although he has developed his own personality and self-identity, the Kid's

mother also initially attempts to influence Jake's behaviour, and because of her actions Jake and the Kid are sometimes linked together as fellow conspirators asserting themselves in opposition to authority. Jake's problem is therefore one of maintaining his self-identity, and as he struggles to do so he manages to further define his social identity.

The relationship between Jake and the Kid itself undergoes a gradual development in the novel, and is due primarily to the Kid's maturation. At the beginning, the Kid idolizes Jake and assumes that Jake knows everything about everything. The faith he has in Jake's historical inventions brings the Kid into conflict with his teacher whose imagination is not as strong as Jake's:

All Miss Henschbaw knows came out of a book. Jake, he really knows. Jake ought to; he's done everything there is. He's fought all kinds of wars; the one with the boors in it, the last war. It was Jake took care of Looie Riel; Jake he made Chief Poundmaker give in at Cut Knife crick. The history books don't speak so high of Jake, Miss Henschbaw says; according to her, they don't mention Jake at all. She keeps saying Looie Riel and Chief Poundmaker were way before Jake's time. She believes everything she reads. (p. 3)⁴

The Kid's acceptance of Jake's rearrangement of history in accordance with his imaginative nature points out his lack of maturity at the beginning of the novel. By the conclusion of the novel however, the Kid will come to the realization that, although Jake's stories indicate his identity as that of a man to whom life is not a stale sequence of events to be recorded in dry books, the tales Jake tells are not literally true. When this happens the Kid will have learned a new awareness both of himself and of Jake.

The novel itself is structured to include three seasonal cycles in the lives of the characters living in and around Crocus. During each period the Kid experiences new feelings of awareness, and both his self-identity and his social identity grow. By encountering life's realities, he begins to see his place within the natural cycle, and the events and people he encounters gradually make him aware of his place within the community as well.

In the preface to *Who Has Seen the Wind* Mitchell outlines the "realities" of life which confront a young boy in his search for identity. Although the quest of Brian O'Connell for self-awareness in the later novel is a more active search than that of the Kid in *Jake and the Kid*, the preface still serves to introduce an important aspect of the world which the Kid must learn to know:

In this story I have tried to present sympathetically the struggle of a boy to understand what still defeats mature and learned men--the ultimate meaning of the cycle of life. To him are revealed in moments of fleeting vision the realities of birth, hunger, satiety, eternity, death. They are all moments when an inquiring heart seeks finality, and the chain of darkness is broken.⁴

In the opening chapter of *Jake and the Kid*, the reality of birth represented by the season of spring is revealed to the Kid, and the two extremes of birth and death are simultaneously presented. Although it is spring, the Kid is concerned with the possible death of his dog, and his inner emotional "death" is in sharp contrast to the picture of birth on the prairie:

Outside was spring everywhere, with a warm chinook whispering along our poplar windbreak stirring our windmill to creaking. Out on the prairie a million frogs in their sloughs set the soft night singing to beat anything. The whole darned Bald-headed prairie was alive with spring, and I wished I was dead. (p. 3)⁵

Unable to accept the possibility of death for something he loves, the Kid gradually withdraws into himself and experiences a feeling of alienation from the school society of which he is a part. His grief causes him to feel isolated from his classmates: "They didn't know what it was like to have their pup dead" (p. 11). At school the Kid is surrounded by the reminder of an even larger scene of death, for it is his task to present a speech in aid of the drive for refugee children in Europe. With Jake's urging the Kid finally manages to speak in front of the assembly, and his observation of the link between all living things is the first step in his maturity. By noting that "Calves and colts and chicks and pups, they're the same as kids" (p. 13), he has begun to place his own identity within the larger "living whole." His ability to speak in front of members of the community, and to recognize in the refugee children a loss at least equal to his own, indicates the Kid's growing social identity. However, at the conclusion of the episode when Jake convinces him that the dog has not died, but merely run off, the Kid is denied an acceptance of death as a pattern which can affect his own being. Because of the happy ending, the acceptance of the reality of death which is later to come to a character such as Brian O'Connell, is denied the Kid. His comment that "You can't do anything about

something that dies. You can't do anything about anything" (p. 12), indicates his lack of acceptance of the harshness of reality. Jake's desire to protect his young friend thus results in the lessening of reality, and an important awareness is lost which would have helped the Kid accept himself as part of the mortal cycle of life.

In the summer, the Kid learns a new awareness of the prairie from Jim Matthews, a farmer who is courting his Aunt Margaret. Matthews is a man whose own identity is closely linked to the prairie; his physical description is like that of a stalk of wheat:

Jim is very loose put together like he was joined with haywire. He's real tall, and the sun has yellowed his hair which is all the time flopping down over one eye. Jim has a kind of rough face so that he doesn't remind you of anyone else but him. (p. 17)

Matthews, the "Prairie Poet" (p. 27), is very much aware of his own identity in harmony with nature, and is able to articulate his thoughts about the prairie. With the Kid listening, Matthews personifies the prairie as "a blonde--straw blonde--my blonde" (p. 12), and carries his metaphor into the argument with his rival from the city whom he blames for having deflowered his mistress:

"And I've had about enough of listening to you bellyaching about the prairie, Dyer. You don't know prairie. You're like a lot of other folks that come to make a stake outta the prairie and get out as fast as you can. It's people like you give her a dry, cracked face with hot winds rollin' tumbleweed over. She was one hell of a lot different when my mother and father came out. She was rich then, and she was pretty." (p. 26)

In the contrast between Matthews and Bob Dyer, the well-dressed man from the city, the Kid is able to choose for himself which adult

best reflects his own feelings of identity, and prefers Matthews who later becomes his uncle. Matthews is a figure similar to Brian O'Connell's Uncle Sean in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, a man at home on the prairie and secure in his own identity. From Matthews the Kid develops a new awareness of his surroundings and shows a growing desire to learn. His friend Jake is not as articulate as Jim Matthews however, and when the Kid asks him a question after the episode, Jake is unable to provide an answer. The reply he does furnish stems from the same feelings as those exhibited by Matthews and shows the ability he possesses of communicating with the Kid at his own level:

One thing kept bothering me after that night. I asked Jake about it later. I'd been lying on my stomach, by the new lily pond, watching the breeze wrinkle over the top, and the minnows darting below, and I'd rolled over onto my back to get a good look at the sky. There was Jake above me, looking down. And that was when I asked him. I asked him how much bluing she took to get the prairie sky anyway.

"There ain't enough to do her," Jake said. "All the bluing on God's green earth won't do her." (p. 28)

Although the Kid has begun to develop a new awareness of his identity on the prairie, the face it has shown him has been only benevolent. In the winter he encounters another side to its nature, and it becomes a dangerous foe seeking his own death. As Christmas approaches, the Kid continues to see the prairie in its guise of friendliness, a playground for him and his new dog: "all lard-white . . . stretching wide to where the sky started, soft grey the way it is in winter" (p. 33). However, when he attempts to bring the kittens in from the barn at night, the prairie shows its ominous characteristic, and threatens death for the Kid lost in a snowstorm:

My legs were sinking right up to my knees in snow and I headed into her again. For all I knew now I was walking right through that black stinging blizzard, out onto the bald-headed prairie where Ma and Jake would find me in the morning--maybe not until next spring when the snow melted off. (p. 37)

Again the realities of birth and death are presented simultaneously as the Kid faces the possibility of his own death by rescuing the newly-born kittens. Although Jake once more dispels death by bringing him in from the storm, the Kid's stark description of the yard after the blizzard indicates a growing awareness of the presence of death in his world:

I could see right out the bedroom window Christmas morning; Jake cleared the frost off for me to look out. I could see our whole yard drifted with snow, the buildings bare, huddling around the edge; the windmill black against the sky. I could even see the rack, bare naked after the blizzard, wheels snow to the hubs. I wished I was dead. (p. 39)

In the fourth chapter of the novel spring once again returns, and the seasonal cycle is completed. During the preceding year the Kid's awareness of the natural environment has grown and he has come face to face with some of life's realities. But his reaction in the fourth chapter to Jake's courting activities suggests that he has yet to learn that the same sexual drive which gives life to things such as his kittens is at least equally as strong in humans. When Jake responds to the spring season by making signs of love towards Mrs. Clinkerby, the Kid is unable to understand the basic human emotion he is witnessing in Jake, and experiences loneliness and alienation similar to that which was felt earlier in relation to the loss of his dog. Now however, the Kid articulates his sense of isolation more clearly:

There was me, and I was just a fly on a platter, the way she is on the prairie when you have a real moonlit night; wherever you go there's the black rim of the prairie round you, and some real far-off stars over the top, and the wind in the grass like a million mad bees going all at once and everywhere. Just a fly walking across a black, flat plate. (p. 48)

When he rushes out of the house in tears thinking that his plot has failed to expose the true nature of Mrs. Clinkerby's personality, the wind becomes a symbol of all the emotional deaths he has felt, and parallels his own mindless confusion:

But I out the house. The wind caught me full in the face, drove the dust clear into the corners of my eyes; I could taste her gritty between my teeth. The whole sky was blown untidy with torn, black pieces of cloud, and the night was real fierce with breathing. The sound was coming from a million miles away, and she was after every living thing. She was having your father over in England; she was Jake letting Mrs. Clinkerby talk about your baby like that, and not having any time to drowned out gophers; she was awful! (p. 59)

It is the Kid's mother who helps him to accept the reality of Jake's desire for womanly love in this chapter, and her explanation that "Jake just wants a little attention . . . and has fewer springs to look forward to" (p. 51) helps him to understand that Jake has an identity which he must learn to accept. Based on his mother's observations of Jake's nature, the Kid's plan to expose Mrs. Clinkerby's true identity succeeds, and the incident not only gives him a new insight into human nature, but also provides him with a new respect for his mother and he is left "wondering whether maybe she was as smart as Jake" (p. 16).

The Kid's ability to draw parallels between man and nature, an insight which helps him realize his own closeness to the environment, surfaces again in the following chapter. He recognizes the closeness of identity between an old man and his farm in the description of "Old MacLachlin's Farm:"

I commenced to think how a farm can get old just the way a human being does, just like Old Mac with his grey hair and his mustaches like a couple of grey old bundles either side of his mouth. All Mac's buildings had got grey, real grey. (p. 61)

The prairie's incursions against the old man's farm present yet another reality of life to the Kid, and although it is spring on the prairie the duality of its personality shows him again that birth and death exist simultaneously:

She's sure awful what a prairie can do to a yard that won't fight back; choke her with weeds; pile her with dust; there isn't any fence can stand up to a prairie long. (pp. 61-62)

As the prairie threatens to overcome the untended farm of Old Mac, the duality of human nature is also at work to surprise the unwary. The greedy Sam Botten (a prototype of Bent Candy in *Who Has Seen the Wind*) is planning to profit by the old man's injury. The Kid, who until now has been protected from the evil inherent in society, is presented with the malevolent side of human nature:

Nobody ever got the best of Sam. He's one of the kind doesn't go to the trouble of owning any land; he's got two tractors and a couple of combines so he can seed seven or eight sections a year. He does her on shares, and he's got crops spread clear over Crocus district; whenever anybody's hard up, Sam he's right there to put in a crop. The other fellow always gets the short end of the deal. (p. 64)

The Kid sees the similarity between Botten and nature's other side, and describes him in terms of a heartless prairie animal:

Sam Botten was just like a coyote, tricky. Take the way he was all the time chewing, even when he didn't have a chew of tobacco, like he never had enough to eat; and the way he was all the time looking at a person over his shoulder. (p. 74)

In witnessing how Jake helps Old Mac by thwarting the plans of Sam Botten, the Kid is presented with a scene evincing the power of the good in human nature to overcome the evil. Like life on the prairie, human nature presents both facets of its personality. Jake's actions also teach the Kid that men must stand together to resist the malevolence of both prairie and human being, and in helping Old Mac, Jake demonstrates the need for social identity.

In the fall the Kid meets another city-dweller, Mr. Godfrey, who has come to Crocus both to visit Molly Gatenby and to collect folklore: "I'm looking for liars" (p. 92) he tells Jake. Godfrey is seen by the local residents as out of place in Crocus, for his identity has been shaped in the city, and the Crocus society at first does not accept him. But Godfrey finally shows that he too understands the prairie although his thoughts are enunciated in a different manner than customary for the people of Crocus. In many ways Godfrey is a forerunner of school principal Digby in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, and the Kid says "He could have been a consolidated school principal" (p. 91). As a man scientifically interested in life on the prairie, Godfrey is able to explain the place of man in the natural environment:

"This is a hard country," said Godfrey, "I don't have to tell you that. There are--drouth, blizzards, loneliness. A man is a pretty small thing out on all this prairie. He is at the mercy of the elements. He's a lot like--like a--"

"Fly on a platter," I said. (p. 100)

The ability of the Kid to supply the missing simile for Godfrey reflects his growing awareness of his place in the natural environment, and from Godfrey he learns that such awareness can be based on detached reasoning as well as intuition. Furthermore, it is Godfrey who explains the meaning behind the exaggerated stories such as those told to the Kid by Jake:

"These men lie about the things that hurt them most. Their yarns are about the winters and how cold they are in the summers and how dry they are. In this country you get the deepest snow, the worst dust storms, the biggest hailstones. . . .If a man can laugh at them he's won half the battle. When he exaggerates things he isn't lying really; it's a defence, the defence of exaggeration. He can either do that or squeal." (pp. 100-101)

Godfrey's understanding of, and ability to enunciate, the character of the men and women who form the Crocus society is yet another lesson in the education the Kid receives from people he meets, and the effect helps to strengthen his growing awareness of his place in relation to both the prairie and to society.

In the winter the Kid's awareness of others is seen to expand even more. His schoolteacher, Miss Henschbaw, is in danger of losing her job when the villainous school board chairman, Mr. Ricky, tries to have her fired. Jake once again is brought in to help Miss Henschbaw, but this time it is the Kid who recognizes that such aid is required. The conflict which had been developing between the Kid's love for Jake,

a figure from whom the Kid has been learning an imaginative perception of history, and the formal teachings of Miss Henschbaw and her books, begins to subside as the Kid becomes aware of Miss Henschbaw's identity as a human being. It is the Kid who first notices the teacher's grief in the schoolroom and then convinces Jake to lend a hand in rescuing her job:

Her head came up. A hunk of her grey hair had come out and it was hanging down by her ear. Her face was streaky. Her eyes were just as red as the Santa Clauses sort of marching along the top of the blackboard. (p. 81)

The Kid describes Miss Henschbaw to Jake as "a lonely old maid" (p. 82) who had lost a lover in the same battle in which he had once fought. When Jake is thus made to realize the similarity between himself and Miss Henschbaw (they are both lonely and have "fewer springs to look forward to") his own outlook broadens. Because it is the Kid who brings the problem to the attention of Jake, he demonstrates a new growth and maturity. He is no longer dependent upon Jake for all his opinions, and his own identity is beginning to be felt in their relationship. At the town meeting which finally endorses Miss Henschbaw, the Kid is seen in an active social role, and joins with the town in ousting Mr. Ricky. Although he is still young, his presence is being felt in the larger social relationship as well.

By the end of the second seasonal cycle in chapter seven, the Kid's identity has begun to develop due to his increasing maturity. He has realized that others have much to teach him in addition to Jake's tutelage, and has accepted new ways of perceiving and articulating his environment. In the relationship with Jake he has taken a step towards

partnership rather than idolization, and has demonstrated to the town that he is willing to join into their society. The following spring, when the Kid attempts to take yet another step along the road to identity which he has now initiated, it is his mother who stands in his way, and until she too becomes aware of the Kid's growth, his search for identity is thwarted.

When Jake takes the Kid to a spring auction he falls in love with a colt. In the young horse the Kid sees a symbol of freedom and nature to which he responds:

I never said to myself, I want him. It was quicker than thinking, quick as a gopher down a hole. I wanted him so bad I hurt, the funny kind when you can't tell where you hurt but you sure know you do. I could feel the spring chinook soft at my nose and hear it in my ears. It was whispering in the long grass at the side of the pen! It had come clear across the prairie to me and my buckskin colt. (p. 107)

When Jake and the Kid begin to break the colt in June, the Kid is slightly injured. His mother's ensuing interference based on her concern for his safety becomes a barrier to the Kid's sense of identity. The horse represents a freedom which must be tamed, but the Kid's freedom of identity is really the issue underlying the episode. Jake attempts to make the mother see that there is a parallel between the two events when they discuss the colt:

"That horse is wild," Ma said.
 "He's doin' jist fine," Jake said. "The Kid and the horse is doin' jist fine."

Ma's desire to have the Kid protected from harm is perhaps due to her inability to let go of something which has so long been a part

of her own identity. While the Kid was younger, he was in fact an extension of her identity, and as he begins to develop and assert his own identity, that part of her identity becomes lost to her. The Kid describes her first reaction to the Horse as being due to her background as a schoolteacher, a label he has associated with needless authority, and he fails to understand the deeper significance of her fear:

I thought how upset Ma was when we brought him home from the auction sale in town. She wanted me to have a horse all right, but not a colt that wasn't even broke. She had in mind a nice gentle school pony, she said. "I want him to get to school and back in one piece, Jake." Ma comes from down East; she's scared of horses. She used to be a schoolteacher. (p. 119)

Although the Kid wishes to "break" the colt, it is not freedom and individuality which he desires to take away from it. He does not want a "nice gentle school pony." What he does want is that the horse be his companion in a free-spirited ride. When he rides the pony he feels in tune with nature and experiences a new excitement:

I could hear the saddle creaking and my own blood hammering in my ears. The wind we made was at my mouth, filling my cheeks and blowing them out. I sat back, and it was just like waves washing and lifting me to the tune of his gallop. . . . All around us was the bald-headed prairie with the air soft and warm and the sky lifting up without a cloud in sight. (pp. 126-127)

When the Kid's mother finally realizes the closeness of the relationship between her son and the colt she sides with Jake and the Kid to renege on the sale of the horse to Mr. Ricky. Just as the relationship between Jake and the Kid has begun to change as the Kid develops his own sense of identity, the kinship between mother and son begins to take on a new dimension as she accepts the facts of his own

growth and desires.

In the summer a similar conflict between mother and son emerges, and marks a more important stage in their relationship. As the tenth chapter opens we see that the Kid has been maturing physically as well as emotionally, evinced by the fact that the barber no longer needs to increase his height in the chair: "he doesn't put that board across any more" (p. 132). When Jake and the Kid accept the challenge of a horse race between the colt and Doc Toovey's horse, each does so for his own reasons of identity, and in attempting to stop the race Ma again becomes a barrier to identity. The race is really an assertion of maturity for the Kid, a test of his progressing manhood. Because of the betting involved, Ma stops the first race; but the constant prodding of Doc Toovey forces Jake to accept another race. Jake and the Kid are then linked together as fellow conspirators as they try to hide their actions from the authority of Ma. In her anger at the two upon discovering their deceit she yells at Jake and the Kid as if they were both small children:

"Jake!" That was Ma, with her face all red and her eyes brighter than anything. Jake saw Ma and he swallowed and kind of ducked. She grabbed me by the arm, hard. "You've deliberately disobeyed me, son!" (p. 140)

As Jake has pointed out however, there are "two kinds of a sinner" (p. 138), and when Ma hears that Doc Toovey has cheated in the race, her own sense of morality is insulted and she sides with Jake and her son against Toovey, actually throwing the next challenge at him herself. By allying herself so firmly with Jake and the Kid, Ma enters a new phase of identity with her son. No longer is she the protector of

an infant, but rather the parent of a maturing son. The elation The Kid feels while riding the final race thus reflects more than mere triumph over the winning of the event, and becomes indicative of a new sense of freedom and identity:

You should of felt Fever under me that second race! He ran smooth, with his silver mane flying and his neck laid out. He ran like the wind over the edge of the prairie coming to tell everybody they can't live forever--slick as the wind through a field of wheat--slicker than peeled saskatoons . . . He's the only horse can make my throat plug up that way and my chest nearly burst. (p. 142)

It is important to note that the Kid again refers to the symbol of mortality in the wind which "tells everybody they can't live forever." His earlier use of the term (p. 59) had come at a time of despair and loneliness, and the message of death was frightening. Now, he indicates that he has learned to accept something new about mortality, and his reference to the symbol at a time of elation and freedom shows he is less afraid of death's symbol. The Kid's growing identity protects him from such alienation and fear.

This same summer, the Kid is witness to an identity problem in which he does not play an active role. But as narrator, he is able to describe the situation, and his inclusion of the incident in his narrative indicates an awareness of what is happening in the community. In the chapter "The Princess and the Wild Ones," the identity problems of the very young and the Indian are linked together. Moses Lefthand, a Blackfoot Indian, has been asked by the Reception Committee to greet the visiting Princess Elizabeth, dressed in what society feels is his native garb of feathers. Lefthand however, no longer feels that

such dress represents his true identity, and refuses. His social identity as an Indian is in conflict with his own sense of identity which he considers to be "Canadian:"

"We'll dress proper--like Canadian citizens. Kid's too big to go in a *yo-kay-bo* on his ma's back anyways. I'm not paintin' myself. I'm not a spectacle. We don't wear moccasins no more. So they better get some Indians for that kinda stuff. Beads. Feathers. Porcupine quills. Green paint. That kinda stuff . . . The Lefthands are Canadian just like other people. One hundred per cent altogether Canadian. We quit. They better get real Indians," (p. 161)

Mitchell explores the identity problem of the Indian in much greater depth in his later novel, *The Vanishing Point*, but it is interesting to note that at this early stage he has already drawn the parallel between the Indian's search for identity and the similar problem faced by the very young. While Moses Lefthand is attempting to assert his own sense of identity in a social setting which prefers to define it for him, his young son Lazarus is being similarly ignored in the schoolroom. In choosing who is to greet the princess with flowers, Miss Henschbaw has not considered the youngest members of the class. In pleading his son's case, Moses is really making a plea for his own identity:

"You know what that is?" Moses leaned over her desk.
 "They got no rights, your little Grade Ones. Minors. Just little minor group in your school, huh?" Miss Henschbaw didn't say anything. "Poor little Grade Ones," Moses said sad. "Can't give flowers. Can't take a crack at it. Poor little minor Grade Ones group." (p. 169)

Finally, when young Lazarus is allowed to present his own flowers in addition to the bouquet already given, they are a symbol of the identity both of the Indian and of the young:

They weren't big floppy asters or golden glow or dahlias that won the flower show. They were Buffalo Beans he'd picked off of the prairie and Indian paintbrush and Brown-eyed Susans. He had them tight in his fist. They were wildflowers. (p. 171)

There is no true resolution of the identity problems faced by Moses and his son at the conclusion of the chapter, for each remains somewhat apart from the societies in which they exist. Lazarus has presented his flowers *in addition to* those presented by white society, drawing even more attention to his alienation; and Moses remains an Indian in a white world, trying desperately to become white himself. However, the presentation of the flowers does indicate an assertion of individuality which may eventually lead the Lefthands to find and balance their conflicting social and self-identification.

The action of the novel's final chapter takes place in the spring, thus completing the third seasonal cycle in the narrative, and providing an even larger cycle as the framework for the entire novel which had also begun in spring. In this chapter the Kid is given an intellectual reason for the intuitive respect he has always had for Jake, and because that lesson is initiated by Miss Henschbaw, the conflict between the Kid (and his ally Jake) and the teacher is finally resolved.

When the town decides to choose a "Golden Jubilee Citizen" who will be "the one person Crocus couldn't have done without during the last fifty years" (p. 176), Jake attempts to explain to the Kid that the man chosen should not be exceptional, but rather someone who reflects the true identity of the town, a person who has been part of the society rather than above it:

"Way I see it--when they tell you to pick your Golden Jubilee Citizen, I figger they mean somebody a person wouldn't think of offhand. Somebody that's bin goin' along, doin' his job so you--well--sort of like you was holdin' up a lantern an' there he is--Crocus Golden Jubilee Citizen. Bin there all the time--till your lantern shone on him an' showed what he was really like." (p. 176)

Jake's observation shows that he understands the true nature of the seemingly special identity to be highlighted in the award, which is not really "special" at all but merely an example of an individual with a well-developed social identity which makes him part of the whole. The Kid decides that the award should be presented to Jake, but his reasons are founded upon imagination instead of reality:

I guess it was along about March this spring, after I been chewing away at that essay, it suddenly dawned on me who ought to be Crocus Golden Jubilee Citizen. Like Jake said, it was like I held up a lantern and there he was in the circle yellow light: the man that made Looie Riel say uncle three times--once in English, once in Cree and the third in French; the man that built the country; the man that invented hay wire; far as I was concerned the man the country couldn't have got along without. Jake Trumper--the Golden Jubilee Citizen and our hired man. (p. 177)

After the Kid turns in his essay, Miss Henschbaw points out to him that truth must supplant fiction: "Truth . . . is like a pure spring welling from the ground" (p. 179). Although he has been forced to face the fact that the tales which Jake tells are not true, the Kid does not lose his faith in his friend and insists Jake is still "the greatest livin' human bein' I ever knew in my whole life" (p. 180). Miss Henschbaw, moved by the Kid's outburst of emotion, admits that intuition can often be as valid a guide to understanding as is

reason: "Then your choice is as valid as mine would be . . . There are other crystal springs" (p. 180). In her rewriting of the Kid's essay she uncovers another side of her own identity, and she provides a lesson to the Kid who sees his own respect for Jake articulated in a new way:

"His genesis roves the world. He comes from Ontario, Galicia, Poland, Bohemia, Ukraine; he comes from south of the border, from Ireland, Wales, Scotland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Holland, Belgium. He wears flat-soled boots, has chores in his blood, straw in his overall bib and binder twine in his heart . . . His name is Jake Trumper." (p. 183)

Miss Henschbaw's revised essay echoes Jake's own thoughts as to the way in which a choice for Jubilee Citizen should be made. Rather than describing Jake's uniqueness, the teacher has depicted Jake as a representative of all hired men, one part of a social whole. Jake's own reaction to the knowledge that Miss Henschbaw has been responsible for the articulation of his own thoughts is one of total surprise. Like the Kid, Jake has found that "book learning" and natural intuition gained through a life on the prairie, can arrive at the same conclusion by following separate paths. At the end of the novel he and the Kid are linked together in a new awareness of truth, and Jake's reaction clearly shows the amazement he feels upon the discovery that he is never too old to learn:

Once before I saw Jake looking that way. It was the time he knocked down nine grey Canada honkers in Tincher's smooth-on barley field and Axel Petersen walked in on him. That was two years ago, the fall Jake had forgot to get his licence. Axel Petersen is game warden for Greater Crocus District. (p. 184)

Although the novel *Jake and the Kid* is thematically focussed around the growing identity of the Kid, it has already been stated that there are also important aspects of Jake's identity which are presented in the novel, many of which have surfaced in the discussion of the Kid. In many ways Jake's problems correspond to those of the young, as evinced in such events as the attempt of the Kid's mother to prevent Jake from chewing tobacco and gambling, exercising the same authority as she uses over her son, and Miss Henschbaw's insistence that both Jake and the Kid refrain from rampant imaginings about history. Jake's old age prevents him from asserting his own identity, and it is society which dictates that he is to be held back from such things as going to war. As the Kid notes, it is not a real physical disability which the town recognizes, but rather a prejudicial, unthinking attitude towards age itself which keeps Jake out of the war:

Jake isn't so fussy about Hitler, and Mussolini, and Japs; it's too bad those fellows in Crocus figure Jake's too old to fight. They're not right. Jake may look old; his hair's grey all right, but that hasn't spoilt his aim any. He's as good as he ever was. I never saw Jake miss a gopher, or a crow, or a skunk yet; they're a way smaller than dick-taters. (p. 4)

Prevented from displaying both his social and self-identity in the armed services, Jake chooses to assert his identity right where he is. The need to prove himself still capable as a useful individual explains his constant battles to protect others who are somehow weakened. He protects and rescues the Kid on several occasions, outwits Mr. Ricky three times (twice to save the Kid's colt and once

to protect Miss Henschaw), guards Old Mac against Sam Botten, and feels the need to accept the challenge and beat Doc Toovey in the horse race. Perhaps the greatest challenge of all, and one in which Jake is almost defeated, occurs in the eleventh chapter entitled "The Day Jake Made Her Rain." When Old Man Gatenby insists that Jake cannot possibly cause rain to save the entire community from the drought, Jake stubbornly talks himself into a position of no return and must accept the challenge:

"You ain't old nothin' cept a whoppin' jag a lies--
Sheetlightin' Trumper."
Jake's Adam's apple was going up and down like a bucket
in a well.
"Ef I wanted to rain," he said, "why I could do her right
now."
"I'm callin' you," Old Gate said. . . .
"I'll rain," Jake said. (p. 147)

As Jake explains to the Kid, his identity is at stake in the issue, for unless he can make it rain the town will laugh at him and be convinced that they were right about his old age diminishing his abilities: "Kid, I guess there's worse things than havin' folks laff at you, but I don't know what they are" (p. 149). By finally using dry ice to seed the clouds, Jake produces rain, and in keeping his secret from the town he establishes himself even higher in their eyes than he had anticipated:

Up went the Reverend Cameron's long arms and he shouted,
"The Lord be praised!"
Old Man Gatenby's mouth came shut like a gopher trap.
"The Lord nothin'!" he yelled. "Sheet-lightnin' Trumper!"
(p. 156)

Jake's need to perform the impossible because society has told him that he is too old to be useful, is similar to the urge Daddy Sherry feels in *The Kite* to swing from a trapeze in exultation of his own identity. Old age is a factor not in the development of identity, but in the maintenance of an identity which others choose to ignore. Because of his old age Jake must, and seemingly does, perform the impossible just to be recognized as an individual still full of life.

To summarize the theme of identity as it appears in *Jake and the Kid*, it can be said that Mitchell has presented a number of problems which he develops more fully in the works which follow. The problems of youth and old age, linked together because of conflict with society's perspective, are central to the novel. Jake is a similar character to Daddy Sherry in *The Kite*, and Mrs. MacMurray in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, all of whom must battle the clock in order to maintain their identities. The Kid presents the problem of youth caught between society's authority which attempts to create its own conception of identity, and the lure of nature's call to individuality and freedom. Later characters such as Brian O'Connell in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, Keith Maclean and the young Davie Lang in *The Kite*, and the young Carlyle Sinclair in *The Vanishing Point*, all are subject to similar problems of identity and embark upon the same quest for self-awareness as does the Kid. In addition to introducing the problems of identity for the young and old, *Jake and the Kid* also refers to other problems which appear in later novels. Outsiders such as Miss Thompson and

Digby in *Who Has Seen the Wind* who enter the community and must struggle to be understood, are represented in *Jake and the Kid* by Mr. Godfrey, "the liar hunter" who understands the town but initially fails to receive much understanding in return. Problems of physical alienation and identity due to race are also introduced in the novel, and mention is made of Wing, the Chinese Cafe owner who reappears as Wong in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, and Moses Lefthand, whose identity as an Indian is a central problem in *The Vanishing Point*. These and other less central characters make their first appearance in *Jake and the Kid* only to be more fully developed in later novels. The setting and the characters thus combine to produce the illusory bubble which Mitchell continues to expand upon as his own identity as an artist-magician develops, and although *Jake and the Kid* may often appear to contain "a large measure of sentimentality,"⁶ as Margaret Laurence has given as her reason for labelling it a "Canadian Classic . . . for children,"⁷ the novel reveals more important dimensions when viewed as the start of a thematic pathway which becomes a deeper and more significant artistic statement as it moves along.

The role of nature in relation to identity becomes increasingly important in later novels, and *Jake and the Kid* serves to introduce many of the techniques Mitchell uses to maintain a constant link between man and nature. It has already been noted that such characters as the Kid's uncle, and Old Mac, have been metaphorically described as possessing physical features identifying them with nature. Other examples of similes which serve as reminders of the parallel between

the patterns of nature and man are; Molly's eyes that "put you in mind of those violets that are tangles up in prairie grass" (p. 9.), the "long, thin horse face" of the auctioneer (p. 106), Jake jumping "like a jack-rabbit" (p. 110), Doc Toovey's eyes which "put you in mind of oat seeds" (p. 133), and the Indian's hair "putting you in mind of those chrysanthemums" (p. 158). While the physical links between man and nature are a constant reminder of the "living whole," Mitchell also introduces the symbol of the wind to coincide with human emotion and spiritual identity. Although the wind is used in this manner most effectively in the novel *Who Has Seen the Wind*, it is important to note that in *Jake and the Kid* the wind makes its first appearance as an "emotional" element of nature which is used to reflect the emotion of the central character and thus more firmly establish the link with the natural cycle. For example, when the Kid is experiencing happiness and is in harmony with himself, the wind is used to signify his mood: "a warm chinook" (p. 3), "a long soft sound" (p. 34), "just like soda pop" (p. 93), "a spring chinook" (p. 107), and "a breeze" that lifts up tufts of hair and "breathes them along" (p. 173); but the wind can become "choking cold" (p. 35) or "real fierce across the prairie" (p. 51) when he is feeling alienated or uncertain of himself. In his preface to *Who Has Seen the Wind*, Mitchell suggests that "Many interpreters of the Bible believe the wind to be symbolic of Godhood,"⁸ and in *Jake and the Kid* it can be seen that the author has already begun to recognize the wind as an aspect of spiritual identity.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

¹ Donald Cameron, "W. O. Mitchell; Sea Caves and Creative Partners," *Conversations With Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), p. 61.

² *Ibid.*, p. 57.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

⁴ W. O. Mitchell, *Jake and the Kid* (1961; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1974), p. 31. All subsequent references from this edition.

⁵ W. O. Mitchell, *Who Has Seen the Wind* (1947; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1974), preface.

⁶ Margaret Laurence, "A Canadian Classic?" *Canadian Literature*, No. 11, Winter 1962, p. 69.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁸ W. O. Mitchell, *Who Has Seen the Wind*, preface.

CHAPTER THREE

WHO HAS SEEN THE WIND

The novel *Jake and the Kid* introduced the two basic ingredients of Mitchell's illusory world: the prairie and the town. In *Who Has Seen the Wind* these two environments, the natural and the social, take on a deeper and more significant meaning in relation to the theme of identity which is developed around the central character, young Brian O'Connell. Brian's growing awareness of his own identity is exhibited by his expanding consciousness of the natural world. Through nature, he begins to see a universal pattern of which he is a part, and it is this gradual knowledge of his own point in time and space within a universal and spiritual universe that defines his growing self-identity. However, Brian also must learn that, just as the natural world, represented by the prairie, is a setting which fosters individuality and growth, it is also an environment which can become hostile, and can also easily accommodate alienation and death. For this reason the individual must become part of a stronger group, and thus must develop a position within the social community. In so doing, he soon realizes that the community also possesses a dual nature, and often seeks to destroy individuality by totally absorbing self-identity into social identity. The constant conflict and balance between the two settings--the prairie which allows individuality yet can turn the individual so totally into himself that he becomes insane, and the

community that offers physical and mental solace but induces suffocation of self-identity--are used to activate the theme of identity. While attention is focussed throughout the novel on the central character, the pivotal problem is often enunciated through secondary characters, and although our attention is ever upon the growth of Brian O'Connell, the identity problems faced by other figures are essential in comprehending the overall development of theme.

The novel itself is divided into four parts. In each section we encounter Brian at a different stage in his continuing physical and mental maturity, at intervals of approximately two years. In Part One he is four years old and virtually unaware of the "realities" which life is to present. At the beginning he possesses no real identity other than that which his physical presence as a member of a family group gives him, and in the opening scene he is alienated from even this role and is "imagining himself an ant deep in a dark cave" (p. 4).¹ The cause of Brian's feelings of isolation and alienation is the attention being diverted away from him towards his younger brother, who is ill. Because his only identity as the focus of attention and affection of the family has been taken away from him for the moment, he invents his own new identity as an ant. Along with his new identity, and just as unreal, comes an imagined hatred for the family which has ignored him:

He hated his mother and his father and his grandmother for spending so much time with the baby, for making it a blanket tent and none for him. Not that he cared; he needed no one to play with him now that he was an ant. He was a smart ant. (p. 4)

The realities of life are at this point merely Benign imaginings of which he has no true understanding. Death has no real meaning, and so he is able to wish it upon his grandmother without a qualm:

He would get Jake Harris, the town policeman, after her. He hoped Jake would bring his policeman's knife and chop her into little pieces and cut her head off, for making him go outside to play. (p. 5)

Similarly the wind, symbolic of spirituality in the novel, although described as "delicately active about his ears and nostrils" (p. 5), goes seemingly unnoticed by Brian, a further indication of his obliviousness to another kind of reality, that of the spiritual universe. In sharp contrast to the lack of effect the wind has on Brian, symbolic of his inexperience, is the description of the mark it has left on school principal Digby whom Brian encounters on his way to the church: "His skin had the weathered look of split rock that has lain long under sun and wind" (p. 7). Such an outer "weathering" is an indication of a similar internal maturity, and suggests that Digby is a man of experience.

While the true sign of spiritual presence goes unnoticed around him, Brian again allows his youthful imagination to lead him away from reality. Forbsie has told him that "God lives right in town" and is "all grapes and bloody" (p. 7), and Brian therefore decides to visit him. When he finds that "God isn't anywhere around" (p. 9), his observation becomes ironic, for on his way he has passed a "dust-devil" of wind (p. 8), and at the church itself a "fervent whirlwind" passes by (p. 8). Although these signs of spirituality, which once they are understood will lead towards his sense of

self-identity, are now revolving about Brian without his consideration, he does for the first time experience an awareness of the prairie;

He looked up to find that the street had stopped. Ahead lay the sudden emptiness of the prairie. For the first time in his four years of life he was alone on the prairie.

He had seen it often, from the veranda of his uncle's farmhouse, or at the end of a long street, but till now he had never heard it. The hum of telephone wires along the road, the ring of hidden crickets, the stitching sound of grasshoppers, the sudden relief of a meadowlark's song, were deliciously strange to him. (pp. 10-11)

The new awareness Brian is developing marks an important point in his quest for identity, as he is now beginning to pay closer attention to the physical messages that his senses are receiving. Once he is able not only to receive such information, but also to question its meaning, he will have made an important leap towards self-realization. For the present, however, he has only reached the stage of acceptance as described in his first encounter with the young Ben who appears before him: "Brian was not startled; he simply accepted the boy's presence out here as he had accepted that of the gopher and the hawk and the dragonfly" (p. 11). His first true insight comes to him once the young Ben leaves, and in a moment of clarity he thinks that "God . . . must be like the boy's prairie" (p. 12). The simile, however, is spontaneous and unsustained, and he has not truly understood its meaning. Although that night he again thinks of the young Ben and the prairie and feels "a stirring of excitement within himself" (p. 21), soon after he again reverts to childish imagination and envisions God as a "man standing . . . about as high as a person's knee" (p. 32).

Brian's invention of "R. W. God" stems again from his feeling of alienation from his family and his loneliness while his friend Forbsie is ill. When his father substitutes the puppy for Brian's fabrication, and then must take it away to placate the grandmother, Brian is for the first time introduced to the realities of birth and death. The baby pigeons at Forbsie's cause him to begin questioning "How did they get in there?" (p. 52) to which his father explains the process of birth. Then when he attempts to bring home a baby pigeon and accidentally kills it, he asks "Why does it happen to things?" (p. 57). His questioning about the cycle of life begins his journey towards self-awareness, and by the end of Part One he has begun to experience the burgeoning "feeling" which represents his quest into the unknown:

The boy was aware that the yard was not still. Every grass blade and leaf and flower seemed to be breathing, or perhaps,whispering--something to him--something for him. The puppy's ear was inside out. Within himself, Brian felt a soft explosion of feeling. It was one of completion and culmination. (p. 59)

The author's technique of juxtaposing the identity problem of another character, Reverend John Hislop, with that of Brian, further develops the theme of identity in the first section. While Brian is beginning his quest towards identity, Hislop is losing a battle for his place in the community. The cycle of birth and death is thus repeated in the waxing and waning of two identities. Close attention is drawn to this connection by Mitchell's mixing of incidents involving each character in the final two chapters of the section. The sixth chapter opens with Hislop reading a letter from the Ladies' Auxiliary,

headed by Mrs. Abercrombie, protesting his earlier combined church service. While Hislop is beginning to come into conflict with that side of the community seeking to force him into submission and sacrifice his self-identity in favour of a conforming social identity, the scene is shifted to Brian who is walking towards his friend's house with the puppy he must give up to please his grandmother. The two characters are thus linked in a pattern of loss as society imposes its authority upon them. At the end of this scene, Brian first cries in the coal room and then is left in a state of lonely submission to a force he cannot control: "When he was through, he went up to bed" (p. 51). His emotion is parallel to that of Hislop who is left in the following short scene in the same attitude of hopeless retirement to his bedroom after learning that the church elders would not support him: "Rather dazedly Mr. Hislop bade his elders goodnight" (p. 51). Both characters have come into conflict with an authority which denies them individuality, and both have looked to their "elders" for support. Brian's father fails to support him in the conflict with his grandmother, just as Hislop's church elders refuse to help him against Mrs. Abercrombie.

In the next scene, Brian's isolation and loneliness continue to grow, and his mother does not allow him to play with his baby brother while the rain keeps him indoors. His feeling of alienation deepens and the description of him at the end of the sixth chapter is identical with that of Hislop, for Brian "went back to the dining room window and looked out at the rain again" (p. 54), while Hislop

and Digby "stood silently side by side looking out at the rain" (p. 55).

The juxtaposition of events continues into the concluding chapter of Part One, and to the scene of frustration and despair is added the picture of Brian's Uncle Sean, who is fighting a battle with the elements. As nature, in the form of a too late rain, lets him down, he vents his own frustration against the farmers who refused to listen to his pleas for methodical farming: "Goddam them! he cried" (p. 56). Attention is then briefly focussed upon Hislop sitting in his study with his letter of resignation in his hand, and then immediately to Brian holding the dead pigeon in his own hand. The three scenes of death so closely coinciding in this manner, carefully construct the conflict in the novel between social and self-identity. Uncle Sean, an individual living on the prairie, requires the help of other farmers in order to complete his plans for farming methods which will allow physical survival. But when he reaches out for help, he is ignored. Similarly, Hislop needs a congregation to sustain his role as minister. He finds though, that the community will only accept him if he denies his own identity and becomes subservient to authority. And Brian, whose only social identity is defined by his family, is swallowed into that group and subject to their direction. When he is made to feel alienated from even this position, he has no self-identity to turn to, and thus experiences loneliness and isolation. In all three settings: the prairie, the town, and the family, the individual is seen to

face conflict caused by the duality inherent in each environment.

On the prairie, individuality is often attained by one who becomes fully a part of the environment, and thus allows his identity to be defined by the prairie itself. In his own way, the young Ben is therefore as totally swallowed into his environment as is Brian within the family, or as Hislop would be if he allowed the community its way. By allowing the setting to determine identity, the individual denies his own self-identity. The two characters who do not appear in Part One to be incorporated into the overall identity of the setting are Uncle Sean and Principal Digby. Sean, while living on the prairie, does not allow himself to become a part of something which will define his identity. Instead, he asserts himself by attempting to control the environment with his farming techniques. He therefore is defining himself both as a part of the prairie, yet separate from it as an individual. Additionally, he is aware that he needs the help of others to establish and nurture his own identity. He thus realizes that both his self-identity and social identity must function in order for him to survive in his environment.

Digby, whose environment is the community, does not allow the town either to force him out (as it does Hislop), or to define his identity. As he explains to Hislop, the individual must find the strength to stand against the environment:

"The trouble with you," said Digby, "is that you're too thin-skinned. You're tender. That's no good if you're a minister--or a schoolteacher. You've got to be tough--good and tough. I'm tough. You're not." (p. 54)

Both Digby and Uncle Sean emerge in Part One as characters in conflict with settings which pull the individual from opposite directions. The prairie upon which Sean lives is a force tending to turn the individual within himself and thus overbalance his identity in favour of a selfhood that, as in the case of the young Ben, makes contact with other human beings difficult. Digby's town exerts a similar pressure, but one which desires the denial of self in favour of society. Both environments will have their effect on the growth of Brian O'Connell, and his ability to develop a balance between social and self-identity will depend upon his own growing awareness of both environments and their corresponding effects upon his identity.

In Part Two of the novel, Brian is six years old and ready to begin school. He now appears eager to learn, and decides that "He would find out all about things" (p. 65). To his family however, he is still the nicknamed "Spalpeen" (scamp) and is to be protected from harm. "He's so young" (p. 66) his mother says as he goes to school for the first time.

Brian's first real contact with the social world comes when he enters the Lord Roberts School, and he immediately finds himself in conflict with authority. His teacher, Miss MacDonald, must enforce rules which Brian does not understand. As he wanders out of his desk, she orders him to sit down, but Brian has never experienced authority outside the home and disobeys: "She wasn't his mother; he wasn't hurting anything; he wasn't doing anything

wrong" (p. 69). What Brian fails to comprehend is that "wrong" to society is often synonymous with "different," and his simple misdemeanor soon becomes a more serious offence to authority when, in his confusion, he shoots his teacher with a water pistol. Brian's breaking of social rules results in his being sent to higher authority, and he must appear before Digby, the school principal. Digby, however, is a man who himself refuses to relinquish his entire identity to the social order, and although he is the representative of authority within the school, his own sense of the power it wields against the individual causes him to recognize in his words the deeper significance of their meaning. When he begins by saying to Brian "We're only trying to--to--" (p. 71), he cannot help thinking to himself:

What were they trying to do? He'd talked it over enough with Hislop when he'd been here. Each year a new crop. Teach them to line up six times a day, regulate their lives with bells, trim off the uncomfortable habits, the unsocial ones--or was it simply the ones that interfered with . . . ?" (p. 71)

Still attempting to reach Brian with the stale questions he has been forced to use for so long, he ends up inwardly replying to his own queries:

"You want to get along with people. You want to grow up to be . . . " An individual whose every emotion, wish, action, was the resultant of two forces: what he felt and truly wanted, what he thought he should feel and ought to want. Give him the faiths that belonged to all other men. (p. 71)

Because Digby has witnessed the viciousness that unthinking authority can exert upon individuals such as his friend Hislop, he

is unable to believe in the correctness of authority for its own sake. He finally turns from attempting to reach Brian in this manner, and instead probes for something which the boy will be able to comprehend;

What would the boy understand?

"Have you a dog, Brian?"

There was a flicker of the boy's eyes. That was it.

"He does what you tell him. You expect him to do what you want him to. A dog isn't much good if he won't do what he's told." (p. 71)

Once Brian has left his office, Digby is still concerned about what he has had to tell Brian, for in his explanation there still remains the problem of submission to authority. Brian's visit causes him to think about his "perennial problem" (p. 73) with the young Ben, the boy who refuses to let any part of himself be controlled by authority. Young Ben's assertion of self-identity is so strong that Digby "had wondered often if the Young Ben were a child" (p. 73). As he thinks about the boy, he also reflects upon the boy's father, whose position of alienation to the town is parallel to his son's in the schoolroom:

The feeling of helplessness flooded over him as he thought of the Ben, the boy's father; the drunken, irresponsible and utterly mindless Ben, always at odds with some rule, law, or convention; shooting prairie chicken out of season or without a license, running his still, completely unaware of the demands of family or community. (p. 73)

The Bens represent the extreme to which Digby's own thoughts about the need to question one's social identity can be carried. While he is aware that total submission is to be questioned, he also knows that the kind of total refusal of the Bens to form any sort

of societal entity is equally questionable.

The growing attraction Brian feels for the Young Ben symbolizes the development of his self-awareness, for the Young Ben is part of the prairie. This "strange attraction" (p. 85) is described as "the wild and natural candor of one prairie creature looking at another" (p. 86). The first "empirical evidence" of this "extrasensory brotherhood" (p. 86) comes when Brian again confronts the authority of Miss MacDonald. The two extremes of identity represented by Young Ben and the teacher are drawn into conflict over Brian when the Young Ben threatens Miss MacDonald with a knife (p. 86). Brian, however, is unaware of the significance of the event, for he is too worried about the teacher's comment that "The Lord punishes little boys who don't wash their hands and then say that they did" (p. 89). Up until this time, Brian's conception of God had been based on his own innocence, and his thoughts had been of a benevolent and friendly companion. Now, however, he becomes afraid of the vengeful being described by his teacher, and he feels alienated from God. The wind, which earlier had corresponded to his feelings of harmony with God, now changes to parallel the new emotion:

He listened to the rising wind that night as he lay in bed with Bobbie. The brass weather stripping on the doors of the house vibrated mournfully through the darkness again and again. Brian lay wide-eyed, filled with awful guilt, and--much worse than that--with the fear of promised punishment. (p. 92)

Experiencing alienation in both his spiritual and social identities, Brian has only nature and his family to turn to. Both

join forces to quell his disturbed sense of isolation:

He had slept with his mother the next night, and she had told him again that God was a kindly being uninterested in frightening little boys; but it was not until he had looked from the breakfast room window to a yard covered with freshly fallen snow, and to rimed trees and hedges twinkling in the sunlight, that the frightening conception of an avenging God had been replaced by a friendlier image borrowing its physical features from Santa Claus, its spiritual gentleness from his father. (p. 96)

Brian's winter experience with the harshness of society and its image of a vengeful God cause an awakening within him the following spring. His childhood innocence partially erased by his encounter with society, he is able to begin the development of a true spiritual identity in tune with nature. The "turning point in Brian O'Connell's spiritual life" (p. 104), is the Sunday morning he looks carefully at the spirea leaf:

As he bent more closely over one, he saw the veins of the leaf magnified under the perfect crystal curve of the drop. The barest breath of a wind stirred at his face, and its caress was part of the strange enchantment too.

Within him something was opening, releasing shyly as the petals of a flower open, with such gradualness that he was hardly aware of it. But it was happening: an alchemy imperceptible as the morning wind, a growing elation of such fleeting delicacy that he dared not turn his mind to it for fear that he might spoil it, that it might be carried away as lightly as one strand of spider web on a sigh of wind. (pp. 104-105)

Having expected the social setting at school to be the place where he "would find out all about things" (p. 65), but instead experiencing alienation from society's authority, he turns inward seeking his self-identity in relation to a more universal presence. This intuitive "feeling" of excitement and harmony returns to Brian several times in Part Two of the novel, and although he believes

that "unrelated things" (p. 120) cause its appearance, in fact he is in each case experiencing incidents involving the cycle of life within which his own identity is developing. The wind no longer goes unnoticed by Brian, and is now something to which he responds: "The wind could do this to him, when it washed through poplar leaves, when it set telephone wires humming and twanging down an empty prairie road . . . " (p. 120). The feeling again returns when Brian witnesses the death of the gopher on the prairie, and takes on "a new, frightening quality" (p. 125) as he recognizes that nature has within its cycle the power to destroy as well as nurture:

Prairie's awful, thought Brian, and in his mind there loomed vaguely fearful images of a still and brooding spirit, a quiescent power unsmiling from everlasting to everlasting to which the coming and passing of the prairie's creatures was but incidental. (p. 126)

By the time he is eight years old, Brian has begun to search actively for the meaning inherent in his experiences. "The feeling" is the result of intuition, to which he is attempting to bring reason in order to understand its significance. In his refusal to enlist the help of his family and friends in his quest, Brian is recognizing that there is something within him, his self-identity, which is linked to his new awareness, and that society must be distanced from this part of himself:

All summer, with a perseverance uncommon in a child of eight, he had set about a secret search for the significance of what he now called "the feeling." He often wondered if others--his father, his mother, his grandmother, Bobbie, Fat, or Art--suspected. Somehow, he felt, the thing would be spoiled if he were to let anyone know about it; he hoped with all his heart that this would not happen. (p. 166)

Although Brian has begun to sense his own part in the universe, and has realized that birth and death are linked together in the cycle that also contains his own being, the harmony he feels is soon broken. His understanding of the natural order is shaken when he sees a two-headed calf, a sign that deviance exists within the cycle he thought so perfect. The two-headed calf is empirical evidence that living things can be out of synchronization with the natural as well as the social order. He thinks that "it isn't right" (p. 174), and his feeling is disrupted:

Why did there have to be a two-headed calf? Now he was farther away from it than ever. He'd never know. There'd be no use in even trying to find out. (p. 175)

While the reality of birth has somehow been twisted in the cycle Brian has begun to recognize, he is also made aware of a new aspect of death. Previously, death had come to him at a distance so that he could maintain an objective attitude. Now however, he experiences it more closely, and its menacing quality is shocking. After his dog is run over by a wagon, Brian experiences a new sense of physical and spiritual loss, and the reality of death confuses him:

Somewhere within Brian something was gone; ever since the accident it had been leaving him as the sand of an hourglass threads away grain by tiny grain. Now there was an emptiness that wasn't to be believed. (p. 178)

By the end of Part Two, with Brian eight years old, a new level of awareness has been reached. He has begun to search actively for his self-identity as part of a spiritual and natural cycle. However, his conception of that cycle as a perfect and harmonious universe, has changed. The knowledge that death can seemingly erase life,

and that birth does not necessarily produce perfection, results in confusion as to his own place within such a universe.

While Brian's attention has been centered upon deviance and death in the natural world, similar events have been occurring in the social order. The old Ben, who attempts to show some outward sign of social identity, and thus seems to accept a role in the church, proves by his later actions that he really "had not changed" (p. 145). Like the two-headed calf, the Ben is a deviant from an otherwise orderly system, and therefore cannot long exist within the social environment. Just as the two-headed calf must die, having only momentarily existed so out of place, the Ben is soon cast out of his artificial social role when his exploding still evinces his deviant state.

The case of Wong, the Chinese cafe owner, is similar to the Ben's in his lack of social identity, for he has developed his own self-identity instead, and after the death of his wife "turned to Stoicism that told him the world was upsetting and could take from him" (p. 139). Wong's physical differences have in no small part aided in his feeling of alienation from the community, and the response such differences elicit from society is evinced in the way in which Mrs. Abercrombie causes the birthday party for the Wong children to turn into a display of ostracism. The Wongs are, in effect, two-headed calves in a world which does not allow deviance. The town will no more accept their physical deviance than it will the psychological variation of the Ben.

Like Wong, Doctor Peter Svarich is an immigrant, but his physical appearance does not so noticeably reveal his foreign origins. "Ashamed of his foreign birth" (p. 132) he chooses to hide his Ukrainian ancestry in order to establish a social identity within the town. However, his attempt to mask his self-identity causes him to become "Brittle . . . unable to adapt" (p. 141) and in his endeavour to change his true identity he loses much of himself.

On the other hand Digby, whose increasing introspection and feeling of alienation might have caused a certain withdrawal from society, has been brought back to the world by the arrival of Miss Thompson, the new schoolteacher. "Digby had changed" (p. 144), and his physical appearance which might have alienated him further if allowed to become opposed to convention, improves with new clothes. The importance of appearance to the community is reflected in the sermon delivered by the new minister, Mr. Powelly: "Community Cleanliness Next to Community Godliness" (p. 145). Digby does, however, continue to define his intellectual social identity in opposition to that desired by Mrs. Abercrombie, the real social leader. In combining with Miss Thompson to support the Wong children when the town refuses to allocate funds, he is emphasising that a social order must exist in order to provide such help to individuals in need, but refuses to accept the opinion of Mrs. Abercrombie that help be limited only to those whom she defines as a part of the community.

The problems of social identity just described exist in the older segment of the community of which Brian is yet too young to become fully a part. In the school, really a microcosmic reflection of the same social order, he has attempted to fit into a social identity, and because it is not really one which is based on his own self-awareness, but rather on survival under authority, his attempt (like that of the Ben) is too artificial to last long. By suppressing his individuality, Brian had sought to ease the conflict in school, but the description of his actions indicates that the truce is to be temporary, and his growing self-identity will eventually cause the conflict to arise anew:

In his first few months of school, things had gone well enough for Brian; actually, like all children after the first blush of individuality at three, he was malleable and would remain so until perhaps the age of eight, when he would again try to impress his personality upon the world he had come to dissociate from himself. So it was that he learned easily to put up his hand when he wanted to leave the room . . . He learned to stand up when he answered Miss MacDonald, to line up with the boys at noon, at recesses, and after four. (p. 86)

In contrast to Brian's attempt at artificial harmony, the Young Ben makes no such effort to submit to authority, and refuses even to participate with the other members of his group:

The Young Ben played no games with the other children; he did not bother with agates in marble season, and would take no part in organized team games . . . School was an intolerable incarceration for him, made bearable only by flights of freedom which totalled up to almost the same number as did the days he attended. (p. 144)

The Young Ben emerges as an individual with no social identity whatsoever, and when Brian discovers that the boy is "linked in some

indefinable way with the magic that visited him often now" (p. 125), he is recognizing that part of himself which is to be kept separate from society's intrusions and close to nature. Unlike the Young Ben however, Brian also manages to maintain contacts with others: his friends, his family, and authoritative figures such as Digby and Miss Thompson. While he is actively searching out his self-identity, he never quite loses sight of the need to allow others within his sphere, and thus maintains a certain balance in his life.

In Part Three, Brian is nearly ten years old and enters a new stage of his quest in which he learns more about the cycle of life. Death becomes more real to him as he must face the reality of his own father's death, and the aging of his grandmother. The reality of birth also confronts him in a new and frightening way, and he thus must accept himself as part of a very human cycle.

As the section opens, Brian becomes linked to his grandmother in a way which illustrates the cycle of life that is to be made clearer to him as he progresses. As he sits on the porch in midsummer, he imagines the feeling of swimming in the river: "Through the damp afternoon he could almost smell the river now" (p. 182). Above him in her room, his grandmother is similarly imagining smells and sights from her past: "the richness of animal smells from sweating horses soothed her" (p. 183). Brian, whose life is just beginning as he gradually matures to the point where he will assume his full identity, is using his imagination to dream of the future when he will once again swim in the river; his grandmother, whose identity is lapsing

due to old age, is using hers to recall happier times when she was younger. The cycle of life is also the cycle of waxing and waning identity. In the family, Brian has yet to establish himself fully. He is still labelled by nicknames which identify him to others, and is now called "Chirp" (p. 181). His grandmother meanwhile is no longer physically able to maintain her place within the group, and her sickness and old age are moving her towards the time when she will be treated in the same manner as the baby (Bobbie) once was. Her place within the family is described as "an extracurricular membership in the family, a majestic withdrawal now" (p. 196).

The first reality Brian now encounters is birth. At the age of three, when his father had explained to him the birth of baby pigeons, he had easily accepted the natural explanation that "the father pigeon put them there [in the mother]" and "then the mother pigeon put the egg around it" (p. 52). He is unable to accept a similar explanation in the case of human birth however, and insists to his friends that "God sends them" (p. 200). When he is ridiculed for his naïveté, he realizes that he has failed to make an important connection between the human and animal cycle, and the new reality frustrates him:

For a long time Brian sat on the battered wicker chair by the sewing machine that served as a table. He would never know now, he thought disconsolately. It had slipped completely and forever through his fingers, the thing that was hidden like a hazy sun; it had got away for good and never again would the feeling well up in him like water slowly rising in a hole dug near the bank of a river. Art had spoiled it. He had spoiled it! (p. 202)

When the reality of human birth's similarity to animal birth is presented, Brian attempts to deny the parallel; "It wasn't right, he told himself as he continued down the street; humans were different . . . from animals." (p. 202).

Brian's self-identity is shaken by the fact that he is a part of a sexual as well as a spiritual universe. Lost in his "new uncertainty" (p. 205), he then almost immediately encounters the possibility that his father may die, and the feeling returns: "his throat was aching with unbelievable hurt--the feeling was in him" (p. 206). Again, both birth and death appear to Brian almost simultaneously, continuing encounters which become more real in their intensity and offer evidence of his own humanity.

When Brian is sent to Uncle Sean's while his father is taken to hospital, the theme of identity emerges in a new way, for he first sees the runt pig which his Uncle's hired man, Ab, is intending to kill. Brian may be identifying with the runt, feeling himself out of place in the world after his earlier experiences. When he cries "You can't kill my runty pig!" (p. 218), he is really pleading for his own life. He denies his own lesson on the prairie when the Young Ben mercifully killed the gopher that Artie Sherry was torturing, when he exclaims: "Killin' a thing's no favour!" (p. 220). Ironically, it is Annie, the housekeeper, who helps Brian save the pig. She too must feel that in so doing she is also arguing for her own self-identity, for she has a cast in her right eye which provides a physical difference from the world.

After the pig has been saved, Brian's gratitude to Annie leads him to attempt to change her appearance so that Ab will marry her. He again is unable to make the obvious connection between the animal and human worlds, and fails to understand that, just as he loves the runt pig for its individuality, Ab loves Annie for the same reason. In trying to change something of her identity, Brian almost robs Annie of her future with a husband. Finally though, the realization that people, like animals, can be loved for their individuality comes to Brian:

By the back porch where the runt pig lived in its apple-box home, Brian looked down. It would always be a runt, he decided, a shivery runt. It had no twist in its tail; it never would have. The world was a funny place. He loved his runty pig that wasn't good for anything. Ab was fussy about Noreen, the snuffiest cow in the herd, with her wheezing and coughing. Before Annie's eyes had been straightened he had . . .

Brian knew then. He ran to the house to tell Annie. (p. 224)

The knowledge that Brian gains in this scene is important to his self-identity. Earlier he had been afraid of the similarities between the animal and human worlds, and had wanted to believe himself sent from God in a more direct way than an animal. His new acceptance of himself as a human being and part of the same cycle of life, allows him to make the important simile between the runt pig and Annie. He is now able to associate the two worlds as one, and the knowledge that an individual can be loved for its differences in both the animal and human kingdom causes him to be unafraid of his own individuality. His new elation is short-lived however, for his first assertion of himself leads to the upsetting of a wagon in the farmyard, and he

decides: "He'd go home." (p. 229).

Others have failed to accept Brian's attempt to prove himself, and he retreats into isolation:

Delicious self-pity flooded his whole being as he walked down the road stretching and thinning ahead of him, the spidering telephone wires reaching to the far horizon. He'd go home and leave them; pretty soon they'd be running all over the farm, trying to find out what had happened to him. They'd look in the irrigation ditch for his body. (p. 229)

Alone on the prairie, Brian is once again alienated from the world. The image of the ant, which had been his disguise at the beginning of the novel, returns to symbolize his feelings of smallness and isolation:

A strange lightness was in him, as though he were separated from himself and could see himself walking down the prairie trail. It was as though he watched an ant crawling up a stem, or a fly moving over a broad ceiling. (p. 230)

As Brian's emotion builds, the wind seems to be draining him of his self-identity:

He was filled now with a feeling of nakedness and vulnerability that terrified him. As the wind mounted in intensity, so too the feeling of defenselessness rose in him. It was as though he listened to the drearing wind and in the spread darkness of the prairie night was being drained of his very self. (p. 231)

The next morning he faces another of the realities mentioned in the epigraph, and for the first time experiences hunger. The physical hunger which he feels is also a reflection of his spiritual hunger and loneliness:

And there was more than the trembling weakness of his hunger; there was an experience of apartness much more vivid than that of the afternoon before--a singing return of the feeling that had possessed him so many times in the past. (p. 232)

At the height of Brian's withdrawal into himself, he is given the news of his father's death. After the funeral a release of tension comes to him, and although he thinks that "nothing seemed any different" (p. 238), the death of his father has forced upon him a new knowledge of the cycle of life. Walking out onto the prairie which then is "ringing him and separating him from the town" (p. 240), and with the wind "all around him . . . in the grass with a million timeless whisperings" (p. 241); he reflects upon the cyclical pattern of life, and his own place in the long line of fathers who have preceded him:

A forever and forever sound the wind had, forever and for never. Forever and forever the prairie had been, Before there was a town, Before he had been, or his father, or his father, or his father, or his father before him. Forever for the prairie; never for his father--never again.

People were forever born; people forever died, and never were again. Fathers died and sons were born; the prairie was forever, with its wind whispering through the long, dead grasses, through the long and endless silence. Winter came and spring and fall, then summer and winter again; the sun rose and set again, and everything that was once--was again--forever and forever. But for man, the prairie whispered--never--never. For Brian's father--never. (p. 241)

Having begun to recognize that his identity as a human being places him within a cyclical pattern which ends with each individual, but continues for mankind in general, Brian is forced to give up much of his innocence of youth. He is aware "that things were different now" (p. 241), and his dawning maturity causes him to step out of his isolation and think of his mother. Now that his father is dead, Brian has a new identity within the family, and realizes that

his mother "needed him now" (p. 242). The sound of a meadowlark, a symbol that life must continue, helps awaken Brian to his new identity, and "a sudden breathlessness possessed him; fierce excitement rose in him" (p. 242), as he turns towards home "where his mother was" (p. 242).

The theme of identity centering around Brian in Part Three is primarily concerned with selfness. Brian has learned a great deal about birth and death as it is able to affect him in a more personal way. His self-doubts and uncertainties cause him continually to re-evaluate himself as a human being, and each time he isolates himself from others he seeks the prairie as a setting for his quest. Thus the prairie becomes a symbol of individuality and endurance, and its companion, the wind, is an ever-present reminder that the individual is also part of a spiritual universe which transcends place and time. By the end of the section, Brian has reached a stage of maturity, forced upon him by the realities he has witnessed, where he is able to accept and understand new things about his own identity and begin the movement towards a more outward identity. As William H. New points out in his article "A Feeling of Completion," Brian "realizes responsibility for others and a direction to take during his own life; . . . Aware of death, he is maturing; aware of some inevitabilities, he begins to accept what he cannot control."²

The theme of identity in Part Three does not concern only Brian O'Connell, for there are several other characters whose problems add to the overall development, and their struggles indicate that identity

is a problem reserved not only for the young. While the problems of identity thus transcend time, they also are not limited to place, for Mitchell is careful to show that such struggles exist on the prairie as well as in the town.

Out on the prairie, Saint Sammy, the "crazy man" (p. 188) who inhabits a piano box and preaches his own brand of fundamentalism, is attempting to maintain his own sense of self-identity. Sammy has withdrawn totally from society and exists in a harmony with nature in a way similar to the Young Ben. Warren Tallman, in his article "Four Windows on to a Landscape," sees Sammy's apparent madness as the final outcome in the attempt to assert self-identity over social identity: "an incarnation of the disintegration which is likely to overtake all but the most resourceful personalities when the individual self wanders beyond sphere of human community."³ However, Sammy finds that such withdrawal onto the prairie cannot end his struggle, for the evil aspects of the community reach out to him even there. As it happens, Bent Candy desires the horses Sammy is keeping, and eventually threatens his home on the prairie. No matter how far Sammy retreats into himself, there is always that side of the world which will attempt to impede his assertion of self-identity.

In town, the same evil force affecting Sammy is being turned against the Young Ben, whose theft of a rifle is proof of his contempt for society's rules. Digby finds himself involved when he pays the cost of Young Ben's mistake, but his action does not placate Reverend Pownelly, who insists that "for his own good" (p. 213), the boy should

be sent to reform school. In his attempt to help the Young Ben, Digby finds himself between the two extremes of identity. The Young Ben represents total individuality, the ego versus society; and Powelly personifies society's most extreme hostility towards such egocentricity, the desire to lock the individual away out of sight. Digby, the philosopher who wishes to examine the whole question of identity, is unable to encourage the minister to reply to his questioning of extremes:

"Is yours the Utilitarian viewpoint--the greatest happiness for the greatest number? Is it Stoic--the smallest? Do you follow Plato? Aristotle? Which side of the fence are you on? The empirical? The ideal? Do you perhaps sit on the top of it as a dualist? Do you feel that there is a continuous fence at all--pragmatist? Is Christ your--" (p. 213)

Powelly believes such questioning "a joke" (p. 213), and refuses to examine the reasons for his beliefs; but Digby's questioning indicates that the principal is a man who continues to examine his own identity, both self and social, and is facing much the same dilemma as Brian. The difference between the two quests lies in the method of search each utilizes to try to discover his own identity, and points out another central question in the novel, described by Mitchell as "a theme asking the question, What is the way to understanding? Is it through intuition or is it through reason?"⁴ Brian's "feeling" is a manifestation of the intuitive resource he employs in his quest, while Digby is able to bring reason to bear on his problem, and his path lies through the realm of philosophy. Digby and Brian seek the same goal in their desires to understand both self and

society, and their pathways thus run parallel.

In Part Four of the novel, depicting Brian at age eleven, a new sense of identity within the family comes to him. He is no longer labelled with nicknames which tend to describe him the way others wish to see him, but has begun a new identity both in their eyes and his own:

There was a new and warmer relationship with his mother now that he turned to her for some of the comradeship he had formerly shared with his father . . . She told Brian that he was the older of the boys, that he was head of the family now, and that she depended upon him. And there was in Brian a growing consideration for other members of the family. (p. 245)

As Brian's identity in the family increases with maturity and age, his grandmother's position correspondingly declines due to the same factors. In her old age, Mrs. MacMurray becomes subject to the authority of the family, especially Brian's mother, who limits her life "for her own good." Her growing sense of isolation and the shrinking of identity is depicted in her narrowed environment. Her room becomes her world, and the window her only view of the world in which her identity once thrived. Even this small perspective is denied her when her daughter, worried about drafts, continually pulls the window down:

She had tried to explain to Maggie, had tried to tell her not to pull the window down. It wasn't fair. The rippled pane had no right to distort the clouds, the leaves of the trembling poplar. When the world was completely through with her would be time enough to lose the sounds of the street below; the tack-hammer strokes of women's heels on the walk, hoofs dropping quick cups of sound, children calling. (p. 27)

The cyclical pattern of life is emphasised in the drawing together of Brian and his grandmother; and "as he got older his grandmother had come to meet him spiritually in her declining years" (p. 246). Somehow he recognizes that it is not the window which is dangerous to his grandmother's life, but rather the clock, which she thinks "had measured out little of her past life, and now thought it was going to dole out what was left" (p. 284). When Brian "killed it for her" (p. 284), and opens her window, his actions reflect a new acceptance of death on his part, for he realizes the inevitability of its outcome, and chooses to allow his grandmother a last affirmation of her identity before she dies. Afterwards, he accepts her death with "a gentler sadness more akin to nostalgia than to deep grief" (p. 290).

The new family relationships into which Brian is entering are a sign of his growth of social identity. He is beginning to accept others and in turn gain their acceptance. The relationship he continues with the Young Ben remains more a reflection of his inner being, and while he still feels an attraction for a being so removed from society and part of nature, Brian's social growth in areas outside his family draws his attention away from Young Ben. Their relationship, described as "a taciturn association, almost a communication of silence" (p. 247), is affected by Brian's participation in social activities:

With spring and baseball, Brian had drifted away from his association with the Young Ben, but seldom a week went by that he did not have momentary contact with him--at recess, noon, or after four. He was the only child in the school who spoke to the Young Ben or to whom the Young Ben spoke. (p. 247)

The attraction for the Young Ben is the "one thing that had not changed" (p. 247), since his father's death in Part Three. "The feeling" which has described his intuitive sense of self-identity, has not returned "since he had heard the meadow lark sing to him the day of his father's funeral" (p. 246). Brian's social identity, within the family and in community sports, has momentarily overshadowed his awareness of inner self:

In the two years since his father's funeral, he had seldom thought of the yearning that had harried him as long as he could remember. Fragments of remembrance would return to him from the past: the dimly recollected picture of a dead pigeon, a tailless gopher lying on the prairie, something about a dewdrop . . . " (p. 246)

In an attempt to regain his awareness, he goes out to the prairie to visit Saint Sammy "for the express purpose of recapturing the feeling" (p. 246). Sammy, however, is lost in his own world, and is too concerned with himself to help Brian, who returns "sadly home" (p. 247). A part of Brian's old feeling does soon recur, but it is the emotion he had felt when, having denied the authority of his earliest teacher, the fear of God had been an awesome fright to him. When Reverend Powelly delivers a sermon pertaining to the Old Ben's recent imprisonment for bootlegging, Brian again experiences his old fear:

For a moment Brian felt a return of the fright he had experienced years before, a sudden and physical fear of the Lord, who had stricken down the Ben. But at the same time he felt there was a wrongness in the Lord's punishment and with this he experienced a feeling of guilt at being upon the Ben's side rather than that of Mr. Powelly and the Lord. It was a feeling that deepened as the weeks followed. (p. 255)

Brian, who has begun to live in a social identity, is confused over the apparent conflict in his new awareness. His feeling that he is part of the community causes him to think that Powelly's authority in that environment must be accepted; on the other hand, the kind of individuality represented by the Ben is also a part of him to which he must respond. Until the apparent conflict between society and the individual is resolved, he will remain unable to balance his identity.

Much of the conflict involving identities comes to a climax during the storm which Saint Sammy calls down upon Bent Candy. Sammy whose dwelling place is the small piano box, the Ben who is locked into a jail cell, and Brian's grandmother alone in her room, are all portrayed in similar situations and struggles to maintain their identities. Sammy's home is threatened by Bent Candy, the Ben is punished by authority, and Mrs. MacMurray is overwhelmed by the attentions of her daughter. All three individuals are threatened in the exercise of their identity by the actions of others, and to each the storm represents the freedom they yearn for. During the storm, Brian is similarly in touch with his inner being, and responds as do they. Mitchell's juxtaposition of scenes involving the various characters again draws attention to the parallelling theme. Out on

the prairie, Brian and Sammy enter the piano box for shelter, and Brian "was filled again with that ringing awareness of himself" (p. 264). To Sammy, the storm is "the voice of the Lord" coming to free him from Bent Candy. The scene then shifts to the Ben in prison, and "For the first time in his jail term the Ben was still, standing in the center of his cell, his wild eyes up to the swirling darkness outside" (p. 265). Finally, attention is drawn to Mrs. MacMurray in her room, who "sat quite still in her rocker" (p. 265), listening to the wind outside.

The aftermath of the storm brings a certain resolution of the conflicts which have climaxed at its peak. Bent Candy allows Saint Sammy to stay in his piano box on the prairie, not because he firmly believes that the old man has indeed harnessed the power of the wind to carry off his barn, but because he begins to realize his own small power in relation to nature:

Candy turned to Saint Sammy; he looked into the old man's eyes, water-blue, mildly wild with a fey look which said that he was either child-like, senile, or gently insane. He looked at the squeezed intensity of Sammy's face, and he thought of the spreading fields of flax he had planted, even now thirsting for moisture; he thought of the years of drouth and rust and hail and the many wheat plagues which had touched him only lightly. He said: "You kin stay." (p. 266)

Mrs. MacMurray, who "seemed to have drawn new life from the storm" (p. 268), begins to come downstairs for meals, and appears less withdrawn in her last weeks of life.

Uncle Sean, whose reaction to the storm reveals "a strange jubilation" (p. 268), is described as "a calmer man now" (p. 269). Ab,

who had been trying to affect Sean's personality through religious conversion, gives up his attempt to change him, and instead "devoted all his attention to his wife and family" (p. 269).

From the aftermath of the storm in early summer, the narrative moves forward to the fall of the same year. The events which occur may still be described as happening in the storm's aftermath however, and the resolution of conflict continues. Perhaps the most interesting technique the author uses to link these somewhat later events to the earlier storm is the description of the final conflict between Mrs. Abercrombie and the schoolteachers Digby and Miss Thompson. As the schoolboard meets to decide Digby's handling of the Young Ben's case, Miss Thompson's reaction to events is described as an "emotional storm within her" (p. 278). The meeting itself does become a storm centre in which the kind of social authority represented by Mrs. Abercrombie threatens to remove both Digby and Miss Thompson from their positions as surely as Bent Candy's Barn had been swept away by the wind. Finally, however, the other members of the school board respond to Miss Thompson's charge that they all have within them "the heart of darkness" (p. 282), and it is Mrs. Abercrombie who is forced to resign. The resolution of conflict in the town, in which it is shown that the dark side of human nature reflects only one aspect of its composition, is similar to the change that occurs in the nature of Bent Candy out on the prairie. Furthermore, both situations are linked to the duality of the wind itself, which has the power both to destroy and to replenish.

The storm on the prairie has also been partially responsible for the resolution of conflict between the Young Ben and the authority of the school. After it ended, "The Young Ben was more restless than usual in school, and treated himself to a week of truancy" (p. 269), an act of disregard of rules which leads up to Digby's finally releasing him from school altogether. As the Young Ben stands in the schoolroom, "his eyes lost in the expanse of prairie stretching from the schoolyard edge to the distant line of the sky" (p. 269), Digby realizes he can no longer keep the boy in a place alien to his identity with the prairie. Earlier in the year, when Digby had visited the Bens to discuss Young Ben's truancy, he had seen the owl which the Old Ben had captured and placed in a cage. At that time he had realized that the owl was "Like the Young Ben" (p. 250) in its desire to be free on the prairie. Now, as he looks at the boy gazing out of his schoolroom cage, the sound of another bird free to live its own life on the prairie causes him to recall his earlier emotion:

Digby dropped the intricacies of percentage; the low hum of the classroom faltered and was stilled. A crow flying low over the schoolyard took that moment to repeat its deliberate call, each echoing caw diluting itself with more and more prairie stillness, withdrawing, fading to silence. (p. 269)

Released from his own cage, the Young Ben visits his father at the jail on the way home. Brian, who is walking with him, realizes that the Old Ben, too, is like the caged owl, as his description reveals:

The Ben's head, with its grey hair in tufts at either temple, appeared; then his hands with their chicken-foot knuckles and their spade nails clutched the bars. His eyes stared up to the Young Ben and Brian could hear the Ben's breathing, harsh with a shrill edge to its rhythm. The huskiness was familiar. (p. 270)

Although the Ben cannot free himself, he orders his son to "Let that there goddam owl go" (p. 271), and in so doing indicates his own awareness of the similarity between the loss of identity he has suffered at the hands of society, and that which he has forced upon the owl.

The death of Mrs. MacMurray in the winter brings to a conclusion most of the conflicts and problems of identity involving secondary characters. Brian, however, remains uncertain as to the meaning of all that he has encountered in life, and his quest for identity continues. The conversation he overhears between Digby and Milt Palmer makes him aware that he is not alone in his search for identity, and that other older and more knowledgeable members of the community are similarly seeking answers. Having just read the philosophy of Berkeley, Palmer is asking a fundamental question about his own identity:

Shoes, folks, churches, stores, grain elevators, farms, horses, dogs--all insidea me. You--the kids--this shop, insidea me--me insidea my shop; so that means I got me insidea me. Who the hell's me?" (p. 287)

Although Brian does not understand most of Palmer's description of the complicated philosophic argument, he does recognize a similarity between the confusion evinced in Palmer's frustration and questioning "Who the hell's me?" and his own quest for knowledge of his identity.

When he asks Palmer "You got a feeling?" (p. 287), the query represents his awareness of an important link between the two paths to understanding: reason and intuition. Although Digby thinks Brian is not "old enough" (p. 288) to fully understand how he might use reason to aid in his quest, he helps Brian by agreeing that "A person can do it by feeling" (p. 289), and Brian's self-doubt as to his ability to find himself through his own intuition disappears when he realizes that he possesses a strong tool to help in his search: "Then, I'm on the right track" he states (p. 289).

The hope that Brian gains from his conversation with Digby remains with him in the final scene of the novel, although two weeks after his grandmother's death he again begins to question the meaning of life and his own identity in a world which contains both death and life: "Why did people die? Why did they finish up? What was the good in being a human? It was awful to be a human. It wasn't any good" (p. 294). The ultimate answer to his question remains unanswered, but the final image upon which Brian focusses his attention symbolizes his place in a continuing world of human existence. The picture he sees is comprised not only of the prairie and nature, but also contains a sign of man's presence in the world and his desire to communicate:

He looked out over the prairie again.
All kinds of people had died. They were dead and they were gone. The swarming hum of telephone wires came to him, barely perceptible in the stillness, hardly a sound heard so much as a pulsing of power felt. He looked up at rime-white wires, following them from pole to pole to the prairie's rim. From each person stretched back a long line--hundreds and hundreds of years--each person stuck up. (p. 294)

Much of Brian's own identity is represented by the image, for the scene depicts the place of each individual (symbolized by the poles) within a unified social structure which stretches back through time and place. The telephone wires, symbolizing man's use of reason to communicate, not only carry electrical messages, but also hum from the action of the wind, representing spirituality and intuition. Although Brian does not fully understand the meaning of what is before him, he is now more certain that he will eventually find himself, and knows:

It had something to do with dying; it had something to do with being born. Loving something and being hungry were with it too. He knew that much now. There was the prairie; there was a meadow lark, a baby pigeon, and a calf with two heads. In some haunting way the Ben was part of it. So was Mr. Digby. (p. 294).

Finally, when Brian asserts that "Some day. The thing could not hide from him forever" (p. 295), his declaration signifies an inner recognition of his own ability to "understand what still defeats mature and learned men."⁵ His confidence is an assertion of his own self-identity.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

¹ W. O. Mitchell, *Who Has Seen the Wind* (1974; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1974), p. 4. Subsequent references from this edition.

² William H. New, "A Feeling of Completion: Aspects of W. O. Mitchell," *Canadian Literature*, No. 17, Summer 1963, p. 28.

³ Warren Tallman, "Wolf in the Snow Part One: Four Windows on to Landscapes," *Canadian Literature*, No. 5, Summer 1960, p. 11.

⁴ Donald Cameron, "W. O. Mitchell: Sea Caves and Creative Partners," *Conversations With Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), p. 61.

⁵ W. O. Mitchell, *Who Has Seen the Wind*, epigraph.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE KITE

In both *Jake and the Kid* and *Who Has Seen the Wind* we have encountered young central characters who have been searching for their identities in relation to the natural cycle and the community. Because of their youth, both the Kid and Brian O'Connell utilized their powers of intuition, rather than mature reason, throughout most of their quests until they eventually began to develop their intellectual capacities and initiate the process of balance between intuition and reason. In *The Kite* we are presented with a much older character, David Lang, who at age thirty-nine is still involved in a search for his identity, but has lost the youthful intuition which once guided him towards freedom and individuality, and now must face his quest armed primarily with reason. The novel is structured in such a way as to explain Lang's balance of reason over intuition, and early in the novel he recounts the episode of his youth which resulted in his loss of true identity. The search for identity involving an older figure adds a new dimension to the theme of identity, and for the first time we are presented with a *central* character resembling some of the earlier older figures such as Digby, Hislop or Svarich, whose continuing struggles for identity in later life perhaps reflect the problems which the Kid and Brian O'Connell may also eventually face. Mitchell indicates in *The Kite*

(and later in *The Vanishing Point*) that the quest for identity can be just as important in later life as it is in youth, and the theme becomes more universal in scope.

The narrative structure of *The Kite* also differs from the earlier novels, for although David Lang is certainly the central character whose quest for identity is the centreline of the thematic pathway, it is actually the figure of the aged Daddy Sherry who is the focus of attention throughout most of the novel, and is one of Mitchell's most memorable creations. It is eventually through Daddy Sherry, a living symbol of the vitality of the human cycle, that David Lang is able to finally accept his own mortality, and his search for information about Daddy's identity is actually a journey into Lang's own past, present and future which results in a new awareness of himself and others. Therefore, while much of our discussion will involve Daddy Sherry, the figure of David Lang is ever in the background as our "creative partner" participating in the process of understanding.

The central symbol of the kite itself represents man's mortality, and is important to David Lang's understanding of his place in the natural cycle. In an interview with Donald Cameron, Mitchell has explained the symbolism of the kite:

The idea of a kite, a lively thing held by a thin thread of life, is comparable to man and his mortality, and the novel is a study in mortality, and awareness of the shortness of man's days upon the earth.¹

The major characters in the novel, Keith Maclean, David Lang, and Daddy Sherry, depict three important stages in the human cycle: youth, middle age, and old age, respectively. The linking of these three characters through the symbol of the kite provides the basic structure for the development of theme, and continues the discussion of the individual's place in time which was left unanswered at the conclusion of *Who Has Seen the Wind*. As Mitchell has pointed out, *The Kite* attempts to provide an answer to the basic question of man's identity in the cycle of life:

Any novel will probably involve a search and a questioning --and in most cases an answer. When I wrote *Who Has Seen the Wind*, I didn't have an answer. It was just a question, which is a perfectly fine reason for writing a novel. In *The Kite*, there is an answer.²

David Lang's search for identity in *The Kite* is hidden underneath a more mundane quest, for on the surface he is merely researching a magazine article which he has been assigned to write about the personality of Daddy Sherry, "the oldest man in Canada" (p. 3).³ However, as Lang progresses in his inquiry into the identity of Daddy Sherry, he unlocks the key to his own identity, and the quest becomes one in which he finally learns to accept his own mortality and enter into a new social and self-identity. Through Daddy Sherry, an individual with a secure self-identity, Lang learns that time is not an evil force which seeks to crush the individual in its inevitable path, but rather a factor of existence to which the individual must be allied in order to realize the full potential of his identity. The study of Daddy Sherry therefore becomes to Lang (as it does to us) a search into the

problem of identity, and when he is finally able to see the connection between Daddy's identity and that of the kite, Lang learns the importance of the kite to his own identity.

When we first meet David Lang in the novel, he is a man in conflict with time. His profession as a journalist exemplifies this conflict, and he recognizes that he "wrote always against time" (p. 6). He feels that time has erased his efforts to establish himself in the world through his writing:

Not that there was anything so durable about a magazine article; it was read; it was used to wrap the garbage, to start the incinerator fire, or to be rolled into cylinders and soaked with chemicals for a yule log that would give pretty flames; not much more lasting really than the television image that flashed upon the passive eye and the idle ear. How had the supply of time become so breathlessly small? The world's contemplative time was almost non-existent; he himself had used up thirty-nine years of David Lang time, done not one persisting thing. (p. 2)

Ironically, it is this same profession which returns him to the Alberta foothills, the setting in which he spent his youth, to interview Daddy Sherry and eventually find a new place in relation to time. However, as he enters Shelby he is unaware of the deeper importance of his latest journalistic endeavour, and is concerned that he has so far been unable to use his writing ability to establish his immortality on paper: "Why hadn't he managed the time for a novel? A Play?" (p. 6). The introspective mood which comes to him as he approaches the scene of his childhood causes him to reflect upon his past, and when he sees several kites in the sky, "five of them dancing high" (p. 8), he recalls an important event in his childhood which has

affected him throughout his life. At the age of eight, his father four years deceased, David became attached to an elderly border who lived with him and his mother. Lon Burke, a father figure to David, had assembled a kite and attempted to fly it with him. The kite, which David wants to "dive an' dash an' do acrobatics" (p. 11), represents the freedom which cannot be realized in an urban environment, as Lon had explained to David:

We can't fly her in the city, boy--they aren't for flyin' in cities. We got to ride out to the limits where there's space--kite needs elbow-room where she won't get tangled up in telephone wires--power lines . . . free of buildings. (p. 12)

Neither David nor the kite ever did escape the city however, as Lon died of a heart attack before the kite could be flown. The natural feelings of excitement which might have come to David Lang with the flying of the kite were denied him, and in their place he induced a substitute feeling with Lon's nitroglycerine pills. The "explosions of feeling" which Brian O'Connell felt on the prairie in *Who Has Seen the Wind* were a result of a natural growth of emotion, but young David Lang, stranded in the city, could experience only the artificial feeling which the pills induce:

It tingled into pins and needles, his pulse fluttering at his throat, his blood turgid at his temples and ringing in his ears. The room had begun to shimmer and he was about to do one of three things: become airborne, burst out of his skin, or deflate into a boneless heap on the floor . . . They were truly explosion pills. (p. 18)

Like the lost kite, David could not "become airborne," but rather was left "deflated" after all the pills were consumed and he

had to face total loss: "Then the pills were gone. Lon was gone. The kite was gone" (p. 19).

After Lon's death, another boarder came to stay for a short while and left behind a set of encyclopédias in lieu of rent: "In a way it was a sort of legacy from Lon, not a kite but something almost as wonderful" (p. 19). Having accepted the world of reason and experience represented by the encyclopédias, over the freedom and innocence symbolized by the kite, David has developed into a man of thirty-nine who is anchored too securely to the ground and cannot allow himself to soar with the winds of time. Thus tightened down, he must attempt to fight against the current of time rather than move with it. Instead of allowing his artistic intuition free reign, David chose to become a journalist, an occupation based on fact rather than feeling. It is only through Daddy Sherry, the old man who has never been afraid of time or emotion, that Lang eventually learns to accept the fact of his own mortality and frees himself to become an artist and an important part of a social whole.

Lang's present reliance on fact versus feeling is evinced in his first thoughts on the approaching interview with Daddy Sherry. To him, Daddy represents merely an interesting physical phenomenon and an historical curiosity:

Longevity--obviously--living record of the limits of human life--the Old Parr of the foothills--the one unbroken thread of flesh and spirit unravelling vulnerably from the year eighteen forty-nine. The California gold rush--twelve years old when Abraham Lincoln became president of the United States, sixteen when the president had been assassinated in Ford's Theatre. (p. 7)

The reference to the "unbroken thread" is the first hint that Daddy is linked to the image of the kite, and indicates that the "secret" which Daddy Sherry holds in trust for David Lang concerns more than just the "longevity" formula for his one hundred and eleven years. Neither Lang nor most of the residents of Shelby are aware of Daddy's deeper message however, and several different explanations of Daddy's "secret" are passed on to Lang from local residents. The barber, Mr. Spicer, accounts for Daddy's old age by comparing him with ancient Egyptian corn which is preserved by the dry Sahara climate: "Same as Daddy Sherry--spent over ninety of his years either on the prairies or in those foothills--dry--pure air for ninety years--kind of preserved him." (p. 28). To Spicer, an amateur historian, Daddy's identity is shaped to conform to his own view of the old man in relation to history. Doctor Richardson, a physician, sees Daddy in quite another light, and his view again conforms to his own predilections. To Richardson, Daddy is a phenomenon not of history, but rather of science--a product of birth and environment:

"Ageing--in anyone--is a--a--continuum that starts at conception and ends at death. Daddy Sherry's life--the length of it--must have been determined by the germ plasm from which he started . . . You could say he started out with an original energy charge . . . the other factor is the environmental influence to which he's been exposed." (p. 64)

For Richardson, Daddy's message is that death should be "put off as long as possible" (p. 64), but Lang does not accept his answer:

"I'm not anxious to attain extreme old age" (p. 65).

Mr. Suttee, an American businessman who attempts to buy Daddy's property, thinks Daddy's secret is that "he just doesn't give a damn for unimportant things . . . Things like half a million dollars" (p. 123). Again, Daddy's message is interpreted in terms of the beholder; as is true of Reverend Donald Findlay's summation that Daddy has lived "intuitively" (p. 152) according to a certain code of conduct.

In each of the above cases, Daddy is interpreted by various members of society according to their own identity, not Daddy's. The person who eventually comes closest to interpreting Daddy's true secret for Lang is Daddy's granddaughter, Helen Maclean. She recognizes that to Daddy "everything is a new thing under the sun," (p. 136), and that Daddy's secret is not one of old age, but of "eternal youth." In describing Daddy as approaching life "like a poet," she is touching a part of Lang's self-identity as well, for he had at one time attempted to write "some poetry" (p. 151).

The realization that his search for information about Daddy's identity for the article is really becoming a quest for his own identity, comes to David Lang slowly, and it is not until later, when he is about to speak with Helen MacLean that he begins to realize that "There was something else that Daddy had for Him" (p. 135). Meanwhile, all others in the community have been interpreting Daddy to Lang to suit their own visions, and Daddy himself in the first interview with Lang, explains his secret in terms that he thinks Lang wants to hear. Knowing that all who visit him from out of town

wish only to ask him about his secret of old age, Daddy has developed a false identity behind which he can hide whenever he wishes. When Lang visits him, Daddy assumes the identity of his "bad days" and tells him:

" . . . buttermilk an' pigweed greens--keep reg'lar--stay outta draughts . . . The Secret . . . You ain't from town--first thing--what's the secret? Ain't any secret but that--an'--hundred an' eleven--crock a day--cu-rocka day--buttermilk." (p. 32)

Daddy's artificial identity which he presents to the world is similar to the social identity which Lang himself has been portraying in his writing and as host of a television show. Lang has developed an outer identity in place of an understanding of himself, and has accepted public recognition in lieu of self-awareness. As he earlier had argued to himself, the profession of journalism may not be fully satisfying "But at least he wasn't anonymous" (p. 6).

After the first interview with Daddy, Lang encounters Keith Maclean, the youngest character in the novel, who is able to see clearly the true image of Daddy behind the mask:

"That's the way he gets away from people. Ones he doesn't like. He doesn't like my grandmother. He'll do it whenever he's losing an argument or doesn't want to do something against his will . . . Way I see it--if a person could just step inside of Daddy's hide for a few minutes then that's how it would be inside of there--with the clouds sliding over and it goes kind of darker--and then the sun comes from behind the cloud and she's bright again. (p. 41)

Keith's understanding of Daddy links the two characters together, and thus represents the cycle of life as youth and old age meet. The image is similar to the friendship which had once existed between

young David Lang and old Lon Burke, but in the present scene David plays a dual role in the relationship with Daddy and Keith. David is linked to Keith in the similar pattern of their early lives, for Keith has also lost his father at an early age. David can thus see himself in Keith, but takes on many of the qualities (and eventual physical fact) of a substitute father, thus becoming himself a counterpart of Lon Burke. While David is linked with Keith, as his older companion, Daddy Sherry remains a similar "Lon Burke" figure to both, and thus the three characters are interwoven into a pattern of cyclical existence.

As Keith has pointed out, Daddy's mask of false identity emerges when he "doesn't want to do something against his will," in other words, when others force an even more artificial identity upon him. Daddy's extreme age causes him problems in maintaining his identity within the community and the family. To the family, Daddy is usually seen as a troublesome child who must be cared for. When Keith's grandmother attempts to enforce her will upon Daddy, the identity problems of youth and old age are brought together when Keith comments "I thought coffee was just bad for kids," and his grandmother replies "And old people." (p. 45). In addition to guarding against stimulants, Mrs. Clifford also has views on the sleep patterns which must be enforced: "We all need our sleep . . . Young and old." (p. 48).

In contrast to the submission which Mrs. MacMurray evinces in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, Daddy does not allow himself to be easily

handled in his old age. His ultimate defense is to act even more childishly than others intend to treat him, and so he maintains his individuality in spite of his age. When the coffee is finally returned to Daddy by a condescending act of Mrs. Clifford, Daddy refuses to be so easily placated: "Coffee--cocuh--coffee--cocuh--make up your mind, woman! . . . I like cocuh" (p. 50).

To the town, Daddy is not an individual but a symbol of magical longevity to be worshipped in his approaching birthday celebration:

For this civilized community Daddy Sherry must almost have the set-apart magic of a tribal shaman; in him reposed the extra spiritual power of the witches of old. No wonder they were traditionally old, David thought, for their age was just more proof of their special power over the immutable laws of death. (p. 71)

Daddy's identity in the community is overshadowed by the town's desire to worship him as a living symbol of longevity to which all aspire. Even his house, with its "pyramid roof" (p. 37), becomes a part of the overall picture of deification surrounding Daddy. Like the kites which, as Lon Burke explained, are worshipped by natives "Somewheres around Australia or New Zealand--around there--they sing hymns to their kites whilst they're climbin' up" (p. 10), Daddy is no longer thought of as an individual human being with his own lively identity, but rather as a symbol of time to be worshipped. Like the town of Shelby, David Lang has also accepted society's worship of time, before he can find his own place in time he must cease to hold it in awe. It is only through Daddy, the symbol of time itself, that he will be able to comprehend the relationship between man and time.

Daddy's true identity is linked not with time, as represented by the clock, but rather with nature and the kite. Daddy has persisted in life because of his closeness to nature and freedom in an era which allowed the individual to develop a self-identity often in lieu of a social identity. As David Lang points out, this means Daddy has ended up "a pretty unsocial being" without "the social virtues" (p. 199).⁴ However, nature provides an environment in which self-identity can be realized:

"It must be a lot easier to get along with grass and earth and sky than with other men. You know where you stand with them . . . There were the dependable rhythms of the seasons--the lunar cycle--planting and harvest. Earth and leaf and grass and water and sky." (p. 199)

The link between Daddy's identity and nature is developed in several ways within the novel. The description of Daddy himself, through similes and metaphors, focusses attention on his closeness to nature; he "hibernates like a grizzly" (p. 25), sips his drink "like an ancient humming-bird at a blossom" (p. 96), has "turtle eyes" and "juniper root hands" (p. 79), and becomes excited "like a damn good hail storm" (p. 80).

In the hunting episode Daddy becomes linked to the old goose who has defied man's attempt to kill him. The two old figures are first linked in death and then resurrection. The goose is supposed to die in the trap men have created for him, but the trap is also described as a grave for Daddy, who is brought to the hole which has been dug in "a long black hearse" and concealed with "emerald green grass" (p. 87). At the climax of the scene, Daddy rises from the grave

and allows the old goose to fly away unharmed, and their shared laughter is a celebration of identity:

Then Harry heard the honking behind himself. He looked back to the half-resurrected Daddy Sherry. The old man had lifted the bright green grave grass over his shoulders like a shawl. He was laughing. The two old ganders laughed in unison.
 They laughed at the doctor.
 They laughed at the minister.
 They laughed at the undertaker. (p. 90)

Paradise Valley, the natural haven which Daddy guards against the intrusion of society, is symbolic of Daddy's own identity which must be similarly kept in its state of innocence. The physical link between Daddy and the valley is interesting, for we are told that Paradise is the place "where the wolf willow blows," (p. 102), and Daddy's sense of smell has been affected by "parosmia," so that he continually experiences the "smell of wolf willow." (p. 66)

Just as Daddy is described as part of nature, it is equally important to note that his Paradise Valley stream is personified so as to represent the human cycle of birth, middle age, and old age-- the same stages of development portrayed by Keith, David, and Daddy:

In the rare mountain air it was a young stream, spawning-grounds for rainbow, cut-throat, and Rocky Mountain white-fish; by the time it reached Shelby it had achieved a smoother, more leisurely middle . . . After Shelby the river flowed . . . much wider, much slower, its tepid waters shunned by trout . . . an old and sluggish river.
 (pp. 170-171)

In addition to the physical links with nature, Daddy's identity is depicted by the image of the kite, and its accompanying acrobatic movements in the air. Unlike the static kites which become the objects

of worship for natives, the kite images which describe Daddy's true identity are lively and acrobatic. Like the kite, Daddy himself has wanted to be an "acerobat" (p. 50) and "Swing--swing--swing, swing out an' loop the loop--summersault through thin air." (p. 51). When he does finally realize his ambition on the trapeze in the barn, his acrobatic act is a defiant exercise of his individuality over the authority which is attempting to control him:

"Lay-dees an' gentlmen! You are about to witness for thee first time on thee earth--thee death-defyin' reverse triple summersault thu-rugh thin air . . . without the aid or pertection of safety nets--by thee world's most ay-gile an soople an' graceful . . . swingin' acerobat of them aaaaaa1111!" (p. 59)

Daddy's act truly is "death-defyin'," for he refuses to submit to the kind of burial which would inter his spirited self-identity before his body has died. His vital act is in sharp contrast to David Lang's "impotency, the same old pre-trapeze feeling--no life net." (p. 6). Unlike Lang, Daddy needs no life-net, for he has no fear of time and its consequences. Sure of his self-identity, he does not share Lang's fear of falling.

Opposed to the valley and the kite, symbols of freedom and self-identity, are the images of the town and the clock, symbolizing a social identity which is linked to the worship of time. Daddy is out of place in the urban milieu and goes into town only once a week "except in winter" (p. 25). His visits are described as being so regular on Saturday's that one can "Set your clock by him," according to Mr. Spicer (p. 25). Daddy however, has an aversion to clocks

similar to that of Mrs. MacMurray who, in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, feels the clock "had measured out little of her past life, and now thought it was going to dole out what was left."⁵ His own opinion of the "god of mortality" is similar to hers, but more vehemently stated:

"I hate clocks," Daddy said with intensity. "They'd told me ahead of time then I'd told them. Leakin', nasty, bullyin' things . . . Leak the seconds an' hours an' days . . . Belvah has--'lectric one over the stove in the kitchen. I never look at it. I ignored 'em for the past thirty years . . . I don't want no loud tickin' clock--tricklin' away my time for me! I hate clocks an' watches--cuckoo clocks--wag-on-the-wall clocks--anniversary clocks--fryin' pan clocks. I don't even like sundials or egg-timers." (p. 127)

Daddy's conflict with society and its clocks turns into a physical battle when the town attempts to honour his birthday by giving him the grandfather clock. Unwilling to accept the identity which the clock represents, he asserts his own sense of identity by breaking the false god standing before him:

And with unsporting fury Daddy had leaped forward, to stamp it and beat it again and again with his cane as though it were a deadly snake coiled and reluctantly dying on the community centre stage. No one stepped forward to stay him; he did not stop his swinging and knee-high destruction until the clock was junk dead. (p. 206)

The concept of time appears in both gifts which Daddy receives on his birthday, but the gift which Keith wants for Daddy differs greatly from the town's present. Society's gift is a static representation of time which it mistakenly thinks will fit the occasion:

"Time. In some way we had to take time into account if our gift was to be fitting. We finally hit on the idea of giving him a clock--a grandfather clock--happy selection--symbolic and fitting." (p. 184)

In the town's eyes, Daddy is merely an old man whose longevity is to be recognized by the gift; and their choice of the clock as "symbolic" of Daddy's identity is no more fitting than the suggested wheelchair (p. 184) would have been. As Daddy has tried to explain: "Maybe it's somethin' I don't want--somethin' I don't need--somethin' I already got . . . " (p. 185). His desire is for a gift that he can enjoy, not one that the town feels is "fitting" to the occasion:

"No! I just want a present I want. I want a present that ain't a surprise present. I got no breath to spare for surprises. I can't stand still to wait for surprises. Can't hold my mind empty that long--got to know ahead of time so's I can touch her--cuddle her there--come back to her again and again like pettin' your dog." (p. 187)

While the town is attempting to worship time through the clock and the figure of old age, Daddy is struggling to maintain his own identity as a live human being. Like the mock burial at the goose hunt, Daddy is being buried alive by the town. Keith Maclean, who sees Daddy not as a symbol of time, but rather as an individual identity still very much alive, wants his gift to "be something he'd get some fun out of" (p. 190). His gift is not a symbol of time in the abstract, but is rather a gift of time itself--his own time given to Daddy, as David Lang suggests: "Some of your own time would be wrapped up in your present to him" (p. 190). Because Keith recognizes Daddy's birthday is a celebration of life rather than of death, he

visits him in order to find out what it is that would please Daddy himself. In the ensuing conversation, it is actually David Lang who realizes that the kite, not the clock, is the most "fitting" gift for Daddy. The three characters become linked in spirit as they discuss the love of nature and acrobatics:

"Prairies and foothills is never still," Daddy said.
 "Always a meadow lark--gophers squeekin'"
 "Grasshoppers clicking," Keith said. . . .
 "A person gets to thinking the goofiest things," Keith said. "What would it be like if you were"
 ". . . up to the fetlocks in fluffy cloud"
 "Just take a fast running jump and give a leap and sail through the air and land on a cloud," David said. . . .
 "When I was a boy," David said, "I used to dream I could float up off my bed and drift around the ceiling and then out the window"
 "Me too--me too," Daddy said. "Slip my wishbone over the ridge of the barn--swoop down over the stock through--then straight up--give the windmill a flip goin' past--straight up--straight as a arrah . . . kids fly kites any more?" (p. 194)

Daddy's comment that "Some time or another a kid oughta fly a kite," (p. 194), causes David Lang to envision a kite as a suitable gift for him, and the recognition of Daddy's love of the freedom represented by nature and the kite marks an important point in David's own self-realization. Lang has become linked into the cycle of life represented by Daddy and Keith--youth and old age--but he is still uncertain as to the "unsolved puzzle of Daddy Sherry" (p. 195). He has, however, begun to realize that Daddy's message is somehow symbolized by the kite:

In some terribly important way the kite was part of it, but whether it was this kite, or whether it was another kite not quite dissolved by the years between boyhood and now, he could not be sure. In the end what was there that he could be sure of! (p. 195)

Daddy has tried to explain his "secret" further to David and Keith during their visit before his birthday, but the connection between his philosophy and the symbol of the kite has not been fully understood by Lang. Daddy's message for Lang, who has been attempting in his life to avoid his own ambitions in art for fear that there is no "life-net," suggests freedom and individuality in tune with nature:

"Don't give a whoop--be a dangerous acrobat--sail over the tops of circus crowds. Don't give a damn whether she rains or thaws or freezes--whether you live or die . . . Live loose an' soople an' you'll come through without a scratch. Live careful an' you'll break your goddam neck. That's the secret. (pp. 191-192)

Lang has never managed to not "give a damn," and his world has always been one controlled by clocks. Even during his assignment in Shelby he has continually been aware of the schedule he has had to follow for completion of the article on Daddy Sherry. As a young boy he had witnessed the death of Lon Burke, and the experience had instilled in him a fear of death which has affected his entire life. Afraid to fall to earth if his novel should fail, Lang has turned his writing ability to the reality of journalism which keeps him earth-bound. In her article "*The Kite: A Study in Immortality*," Catherine McLay suggests the artistic symbolism inherent in the kite, and how the loss of David Lang's first kite parallels his failure to develop his artistic ambitions: "It is most of all a symbol of craft: it must be sturdy so it will not come apart in the wind, yet perfectly balanced, the tail calculated to a nicety:

If she's too long . . . she'll fly all right--but sort of dead and sluggish. She won't dive an' dash an' do acrobatics . . . nor too short either . . . Only go up twenty--fifty feet an' she goes wild--right out of control--she'll dive, maybe get her balance an' go too far to the other side--head straight for the ground--whang her nose into the dirt--snap her back (pp. 11-12)."⁶

Like a kite without a tail, Lang has been unable to realize the full potential of his life, and has thus failed to realize his true self-identity. After speaking with Daddy before his birthday, Lang's frustration over his inhibited identity surfaces and he yearns for the ability to use his own imagination in the same way as Daddy and Keith seem able to do:

If only his mind would soar! If it could lift with the effortless grace of a still-winged hawk riding a foothills current to heights of ineffable detachment! Was that it? Their talk about leaping from cloud to cloud? Had their child-like reverie carelessly touched some profound truth, unaware? Whatever it was--was it of such faint and fragile substance that it would always elude him? God, it would be simply wonderful to have the hawk's high vision, if his understanding could tilt and hang against the rare sky, then with one superb slice fall upon the truth and hold it in sure beak and talon! (p. 195)

Afraid to realize his identity through his art, Lang has instead chosen a profession which allows him to become a spectator to the identities of others. As Helen Maclean explains to him, Daddy's life has been lived differently:

"What do you think," David said, "would be the main difference between Daddy's time and ours?" Helen thought it over a moment, then she said, "About the same difference there is between Keith's Little League and the World Series. Daddy didn't watch someone else play life for him. He made his own hits--runs--errors. His life hasn't been a spectator sport at all." (pp. 200-201)

In the closing scene of the novel, David attempts to interfere in the flying of the kite which Keith has given Daddy. Lang, the artist, has helped to make the kite, but the actual flying is an expression of identity shared by Keith and Daddy to which he must remain a spectator:

The shortness with which Keith answered him caused David to look quickly down to him; he surprised a look of ill-concealed impatience on the boy's face. There was no attempt to hide it, for it was an excluding impatience, the only way in which the very young could let the very adult know that they were interfering selfishly.

"Sorry," he said . . . He handed Keith the ball of kite string. "Let me have the kite and you can take the string-- just shout when you start to run and I can let go . . ."

"Who the hell's kite is it?"

Daddy's simian face was thrusting raw annoyance at David.

"Sorry," David said again and handed the kite over to Daddy. (p. 207)

Earlier, Helen had assured Lang that "You'll fly it some time-- I know you will," (p. 201), but she had been referring to the kite which he had failed to fly as a youth. The kite which Keith and Daddy are flying however, is not his, and before he can ever "fly his own kite" he must establish his own sense of identity. The image of Keith and Daddy before him on the field is the key to the message he has been trying to decipher, for Daddy had once remarked about his own life; "Bein' a kid. That was one end of her. Now I guess I got holt of the other end." (p. 50). With Daddy now holding one end of the kite and Keith the other, Daddy's image of mortality takes on concrete form. Lang is now able to see what Daddy's "secret" really implies:

Now he knew what it was that Daddy had for him--the astonishingly simple thing the old man had had to say--and had said through the hundred and eleven years of his life--between the personal deeds of his birth and his death, knowing always that the string was thin--that it could be snapped. He had lived always with the awareness of his own mortality. (p. 209)

At the conclusion of the novel Lang assumes a new identity as part of the cycle represented by the stretched kite string held by Daddy and Keith. Daddy is actually Keith's "great-great-grandfather" (p. 168), and when David marries Helen he will become physically a part of their cycle and thus be allowed to fly the same kite. On another level, it is assumed that Lang's self-identity as an artist will develop from a new ability to understand life as an acrobatic exercise in which he will participate rather than merely spectate. He has now emerged "Out of limbo" (p. 210), as

William H. New concludes:

David Lang achieves a new completion of his own, for here he at last recognizes the necessary relationship between the individual and the realities of life and death. Limbo--surrender to the negating power of time--is a kind of death-in-life for the journalist in him, but elasticity of self within his own environment, in place and time, will allow immortality and let the artist in him create. Recognition of this also allows him to anticipate a full future--out of limbo--with Helen and Keith Maclean.⁷

Lang's struggle for identity has lead him to discover both a true self-identity and a new social identity. His awareness of his own mortality has released him to develop his potential as an artist without fear of failure, and his new place in the family provides him genuine immortality as part of the cycle of life.

While the central focus of the novel is upon the quest for identity of David Lang, and the effect which Daddy Sherry's example has upon Lang's self-awareness, it should be pointed out that the relationship between Keith Maclean and his mother also serves to further develop the theme of identity. In *Jake and the Kid* and *Who Has Seen the Wind*, the possible negative effects that parental authority can have upon the young have been witnessed in the attempts of the Kid's mother and Mrs. O'Connal to exercise control over the identities of their sons. Helen Maclean, on the other hand, has realized that such over-protectiveness must be avoided, and Keith has been allowed the freedom he must have if he is to mature. As Helen explains to David Lang, her role as parent is one of guidance rather than interference:

"I don't breath down his neck any more--try to give him too much or take too much. . . .Part of the restraint is just selfishness. That's half the battle in being a good parent." (p. 127)

Although Helen does not attempt to force her son into an identity which would only reflect her own desire for fulfillment, she admits to Lang that there is something lacking in her life and without a husband she cannot have a full identity:

"I said that I was not complete and that no woman's complete without a man. I shall probably spend the rest of my days just that way--incomplete." (p. 150)

Although Helen evidently feels that her own social identity is incomplete without a relationship with a man, it is clear that her self-identity will not allow her to fill this gap in any haphazard

manner. She neither allows herself to incorporate Keith's identity into her own, nor will she settle for the first man to come along offering sexual fulfillment. As she tells David Lang, "I've had more passes--covert and overt--thrown at me than any other female in Shelby" (p. 149), but she recognizes that such social relationships would give her a social identity only at the expense of her self-identity: "it's what I would have lost" (p. 150), she explains.

Unlike the David Lang pictured at the beginning of the novel, a man who has allowed himself to enter into an easy affair with the first profession offering to free him from anonymity, Helen Maclean retains a strong sense of her own identity and does not freely accept an alternate identity merely because she wishes to be freed from "limbo."

At the conclusion of the novel, when David Lang becomes linked to Keith and Daddy by marrying Helen, he not only completes his own identity, but also that of Helen Maclean. Furthermore, having learned to accept the cycle of life, Lang is now able to help Keith Maclean answer many of the questions arising from his own search for identity, and may finally help Keith to understand the meaning of his earlier question "Why does stuff have to die?" (p. 142). The cycle of the novel is thus complete, and as Helen and David end their quests, Keith Maclean begins his search for identity.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

¹ Donald Cameron, "W. O. Mitchell: Sea Caves and Creative Partners," *Conversations With Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), p. 55.

² Ibid., p. 55.

³ W. O. Mitchell, *The Kite* (1962; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1974), p. 3. Subsequent references from this edition.

⁴ It is important to note that although Daddy's individuality and "harmony with the earth and sky" (p. 199) is stressed at this point in the novel, and he is described as "a pretty unsocial being," Mitchell has carefully developed Daddy as a part of a larger social whole as well. By stressing the point that Daddy is Helen's "great-grandfather" and "Keith's great-great-grandfather" (p. 168), Mitchell has given Daddy a family social identity. Also, Daddy's past relationship with his deceased friend Ramrod, and Jack Dalgliesh's comment that "all of us at one time or another have had something to do with Daddy that's--well especially between ourselves and--and Daddy" (p. 109), proves that Daddy has formed other social relationships as well. Daddy is not really the "unsocial being" that Lang thinks him, but rather prefers to relate to society on a one-to-one basis, refusing to accept the negative effects of society which result when the rules and authority set by groups become more important than the people themselves. Daddy extracts the best from society, and his emphasis upon people rather than rules is not a denial of social identity, but rather his own way of asserting his social identity.

⁵ W. O. Mitchell, *Who Has Seen the Wind* (1947; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1974), p. 284.

⁶ Catherine McLay, "W. O. Mitchell's *The Kite*: A Study in Immortality," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, II.2, Spring 1973, p. 48.

⁷ William H. New, "A Feeling of Completion: Aspects of W. O. Mitchell," *Canadian Literature*, No. 17, Summer 1963, p. 32.

⁸ Konrad Gross, "Looking Back in Anger: Frederick Niven, W. O. Mitchell, and Robert Kroetsch on the History of the Canadian West," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, III.2, 1974, p. 52.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE VANISHING POINT

In Mitchell's latest novel *The Vanishing Point*, and its forerunner *The Alien*, many of the identity problems introduced in earlier works combine to form a more unified thematic pattern. While problems both of self and social identity have been discussed in other novels, the emphasis has usually rested upon the theme of self-identity. Such characters as the Kid in *Jake and the Kid*, Brian O'Connell in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, and David Lang in *The Kite*, have all been concerned with finding their place in the natural human cycle in order to develop their own identities. While the question of social identity has also been of concern to such characters, the primary focus has usually been on self in relation to the natural cycle. Carlyle Sinclair, the central character of *The Alien*¹ and *The Vanishing Point* is equally concerned with self and social identities and must accept both his own humanity and his place within society. Because his search for place encompasses both aspects of identity, the thematic pathway is "broader and deeper," as Catherine McLay has stated in a recent article:

In *The Vanishing Point*, the quest for truth is both broader and deeper. For the central character Carlyle Sinclair must not only come to terms with death and life; he must also accept man as a social being and attempt to reconcile the divisions between the individual and society, the Indian world and the white.²

The quest for identity involving Carlyle Sinclair, a white man who is alienated from the Indian world (and, as he eventually realizes, the white world as well), is paralleled by the search for identity involving Archie Nicotine, an Indian alienated from the white society and allied to nature, yet still unable to establish a full identity on the reservation. The central symbol of the novel is the vanishing point, the artistic moment at which two parallel lines almost, but not quite, meet, and as both Archie Nicotine and Carlyle Sinclair progress to their quests for identity, their searches eventually converge. Although they never fully meet because each retains his own self-identity, a bridge of communication and understanding is finally built between the two characters and spans the last distance between them. Both Archie and Carlyle develop an awareness of self which allows them to realize their self-identities within the social setting of the reservation. The symbols of the vanishing point and the bridge are therefore joined together, and symbolize not only the convergence and bridging of separate worlds and individual identities, but also indicate the balance between each character's own social and self identities.

The two environments, nature and the city, appear in *The Vanishing Point* again as the basic ingredients of Mitchell's "illusory bubble" but they combine in the setting of Paradise Valley, a mid-way point and hence, a bridge, between two worlds. From the valley, characters journey into the city, which represents the suppression of individuality, but is depicted as a past from which one must somehow emerge into the

present. The problem of identity thus becomes a struggle to balance the two worlds, the one in which social identity displaces the self, and the other where egocentricity disallows social identity. Each of these conflicting worlds is represented by the two central characters in the novel who meet in Paradise Valley: Archie Nicotine, the Indian whose past is linked to nature, and Carlyle Sinclair, the white schoolteacher who has his origins in the urban environment. Neither can feel at home in the other's environment, and both must find a new identity in Paradise, the vanishing point at which the two worlds come together. Each sets out in search of something, and their apparently separate quests eventually bring them together in a new awareness of their identities.

The basic structure of *The Vanishing Point* is similar to that of *The Kite*. In each novel the central character is depicted in a search involving some aspect of his life, and as the narrative progresses the search develops into a quest for identity. Both David Lang in *The Kite* and Carlyle Sinclair in *The Vanishing Point* set out initially to locate some person involved in their lives, and as they draw nearer to their apparent goals they find that their searches have revealed a hidden truth. In *The Kite*, David Lang returned to the rural environment of his youth and the sight of kites in the sky caused him to reflect upon an important youthful experience which affected his identity throughout all his life. Carlyle Sinclair similarly returns in *The Vanishing Point* to the scene of his youth, but his journey is to the city. Again, it is the sensual perception of something linked to his youth which causes him to reflect upon an

early event of great significance to his identity, and as Carlyle experiences various smells in the city he begins to consider more carefully the effect which his past has had upon his present life. Both David Lang and Carlyle Sinclair are men in their late thirties who have somehow learned to fear the human cycle, and this fear results in an inability to involve themselves with others and form a social identity. Carlyle Sinclair's lack of acceptance of the human cycle is depicted in his attempt to avoid or mask the physical evidence of bodily functions exhibited by smells and signs of sexuality. The link between smell and the human cycle is established early in the novel:

Smell didn't have its own art. Why not? Individual smells could be sorted out, then related in a register, used separately, blended, built to a climax. Many were funny, some poignant. They accompanied birth, love, age, death. A performing art maybe. (p. 6)³

Unlike *The Kite*, in which David Lang's past was presented to us in one early chapter, Carlyle Sinclair continually reflects back to his youth throughout *The Vanishing Point*, and the events which have caused him to adopt the civilized world's avoidance of human functions are discovered only in stages. However, if these are combined, we can see that the genesis of his flight from humanity traces back to a time in his youth when he was sent to live with his aunt Pearl after the death of his mother. At the age of six, Carlyle learns that white society is fearful and ashamed of its bodily functions. "Bad smells bothered [Aunt Pearl]" (p. 306), and in the same way that she burns string in the bathroom to cover the smell of her bowel

movements, society attempts to hide nature under a veneer of civilized deodorants; "Smell must be civilization's first casualty" (p. 133) he later observes.

At his aunt's home Carlyle also is forced to feel embarrassment over his own emerging sexuality, and in two encounters learns that society's mask extends to those organs as well. When he projects the image of his penis with the magic lantern, "his pecker on the opposite wall, way larger than his father's" (p. 311), his aunt walks in and scolds him. His father, who comforts him over the lantern incident, himself is angered over Carlyle's next encounter with sexuality; after he learns that his son has been visiting (in order to sell mail-order lingerie) the whorehouse at which he is a patron, an argument ensues:

That was the thing about his father; he could not recall any other occasion when his father had lost his temper with him for anything he had done or had failed to do. Nor could he remember when he had been angry with his father--truly angry. (p. 332)

While both his aunt and father pass on to Carlyle their own aversions to smell and sexuality, the schoolroom which he attends similarly teaches him to ignore his own human identity. In health classes the human reproductive system is dealt with "not at all; sex surfaced only in grammar, with the personal pronoun possessing the gerund and the chaste union of subject and predicate by non-thrusting copulative verb" (p. 315).

The submergence of Carlyle's identity to conform with society's lifelessness is further exemplified by the episode in the art class ruled over by "old Kacky," the authoritarian teacher whose conception of art is "a lot like geometry" (p. 318). Realizing that the picture he has drawn lacks life, Carlyle attempts to animate his drawing:

But very soon--before art period was over--his drawing didn't satisfy him. Empty. It needed something . . . The drawing had to have something more--some gophers, like tent pegs--clump of wild roses--buck brush. That was it! A tree! (p. 319)

For his "deliberate disobedience" (p. 321), Carlyle is strapped by the teacher. Afterwards, his feeling of alienation from both himself and society grows within him:

Here he stood by himself, and outside the office walls were all the others properly together and busy all around his own empty desk. He had vanished from them. Old Kacky had vanished him from them to vanishment. And then the rally crazy thought happened. He was being vanished from himself . . . stepping outside and apart and walking away farther and farther from himself, getting smaller and smaller and smaller . . . dwindling right down to a point. That was crazy and enough to scare the shit right out of a person. (p. 322)

In one last assertion of identity, Carlyle's bodily demands overcome him and he defecates into the teacher's desk drawer. Later, he refuses to admit to the act, and his friend Mate assumes responsibility. Contrasted to Carlyle, Mate is a youth who is unafraid of himself and, like Daddy Sherry, his freedom of identity emerges in his wish to "become a famous acrobat" (p. 326). But Carlyle has learned to feel guilt over his own freedom of action and he begins to "have the dream in which he was approached by a flayed brigand with his arms down at

his sides and his hands turned out" (p. 333).

These early events, which teach Carlyle to conform to social authority by hiding his own identity rather than asserting it, cause him to become uncertain as to his own place in the human cycle and he carries this uncertainty with him when, at the age of thirty-six, he moves from the city to become a teacher at the Paradise Valley Indian Reserve. The first action Carlyle takes upon entering the schoolroom at the reserve reflects the fact that he has himself learned to mask the natural human smells around him, and his attempt to deodorize the room signifies his alienation from nature:

That first year in Paradise--the coffee-can of water simmering on the schoolroom stove, its stem carrying the civilization of carbolic out to conquer twenty-nine active sets of sebaceous glands at their desks. (p. 6)

Like his white predecessors at the school, Carlyle must mask the natural smell of the environment in which he is an alien. Having arrived from the world of the city which has lost its natural smells, he attempts to establish his own "civilized" odours in order to hide his repugnance of humanity. His discussion with Old Esau who realizes Carlyle's facade, indicates not only his lack of self-awareness about his own smell, but the difficulty he has always had in communicating with people. When Esau tells him "White people smell too" (p. 7), Carlyle assumes he means the odour is sweet:

"How do you mean, Esau?"
 "To us people, you know."
 "We smell to you."
 "Cow."
 "I don't . . ."
 "Quite strong."

"Oh--milky. You mean we smell milky to you?"
 It was several deliberate seconds before Esau lifted
 his hooded eyes. "Heh-uh." This time he meant no. (p. 7)

The world of Paradise Valley is a world of smells in which
 Carlyle becomes lost. The smell of spring birth mingles with the
 smell of death in Esau's room, and he is surrounded by the evidence
 of mortality:

Smell, Sinclair--smell left mould and wet earth, singing
 with the menthol of spruce, bitter with the iodine edge
 of willow smoke from Esau's stove pipe! (p. 4)

.....
 God--how Paradise had early taught him the use of his own
 nose! That lingering and contradictory sweetness must be
 the civet trace of a nocturnal pack-rat; the roquefort
 of feet was unmistakable. There was mould. There was
 mildew. There was the murmur of kerosene, and he was
 quite certain of urine's high soprano. (p. 6)

Paradise Valley is also a world of sexuality, and from this aspect
 of humanity Carlyle similarly is alienated. Spring is the "grabbing-
 hold of" time for the young Indians, and the emerging sexuality of
 the young is represented in the "Chicken Dance" which they continually
 perform during school recess:

At recess they found their own boy or girl pole, the girls'
 over towards Old Esau's cabin, where they sat cross-legged
 on the packed earth, playing some wild sort of jacks with
 willow sticks, the boys on the river side of the school-
 grounds. Several would crowd into the boys' toilet with an
 old washtub, beating it with peeled sticks, voices lifted
 in the cascading rhythm of the Rabbit Dance, or the swifter,
 more dominant chant of the Prairie Chicken Dance. (p. 144)

The Chicken Dance, depicting "two cocks fighting for the possession
 of a hen,"³ is only a game to the younger students, but as they mature
 the sexuality of the dance becomes more apparent to Carlyle. When

his favourite student Victoria joins the boys in the dance, he reacts violently in an attempt to suppress her natural development:

The beginning of the next week, he did not see her with the boys or the girls--at first--and then he saw her at the end of the Chicken Dance train, his head forward, face turned upwards, her right hand holding a twig to her rump for prairie-chicken tail-feathers. Her elbows were crooked into quivering wings. He slammed from the room. He grabbed her by the shoulder and yanked her out of the dance circle. (pp. 207-208)

The natural and unashamed acceptance of bodily functions is a part of the Indian identity from which Carlyle continually recoils. As Archie Nicotine points out to him in a service station washroom, the white society which Sinclair represents is "careful what you do with this [penis]," and spends a great deal of money "Just to take care of shit" (p. 38).

While smells and excrement in the white world are disposed of in "square shrines" (p. 38), the sexuality of the modern world is similarly hidden away. The attempt to hide from natural existence is symbolized by the plaster animals which Luton produces, and the glass and concrete phallic-shaped Devonian Tower in the midst of the city. Sexuality becomes merely a replica of true human response as described in the "fornicating horror" (p. 41) of the statues and the "Devonian Tower thrust with stiff arrogance" above the skyline of the city (p. 42).

Carlyle represents the inability of the white man to return to a true identity allied with the natural cycle, and his failure to become one with nature is shown in the trip he eventually makes to

the Storm and Misty canyon where he becomes weak and disoriented. In the figure of Archie Nicotine the same alienation occurs when the Indian enters the city. Archie is continually arrested in the city and loses his identity. To the cab driver Archie is a faceless Indian to be called "Chief," (p. 48), an attitude similar to that of the television policeman who refers to Victoria as "one of our fine young Indian friends" (p. 269). In the city the Indians lose their identity and become, like Luton's plaster replicas of wildlife, merely ornamental--the way white society wishes them to appear. At Stampede time they are just part of the carnival attractions to be photographed in colourful costumes.

The white attitude towards the Indian identity is carried to the reservation by those in charge of Paradise Valley. The Indians are treated either as children, whose identity can be changed, or as terminal cases which time itself will eliminate. The Reverend Bob Dingle refers to them as "good people--gentle--happy--just children" (p. 151), and like Sinclair, had used lysol and boiling water to mask the smell in the schoolroom when he had been the teacher.

Ian Fyfe, the Regional Director of the Indian Affairs Department, considers the Indians' identity as something which will eventually die out on its own:

Fyfe saw the Indians--all of them--as terminal cases to be made comfortable as possible within the terms of the reserve system--the budget and the Indian Act--and the civil-service machinery. All you could do for terminal cases--wait and see if they expired. (pp. 91-92)

As Doctor Sanders points out to Carlyle Sinclair, the resulting loss of identity of the Indian has provided them with "a terrible feeling of inferiority." (p. 130), and as Archie recognizes, the white society prefers the Indians to sustain the feeling of inferiority: "With white people it's easy for us people to be ashamed in front of them . . . I come to a conclusion--they want it that way" (p. 296).

Both the white officials and some of the older Indians recognize that the present Indian identity is in the midst of a change and that the children are the ones who must eventually find a new identity. Ezra Powderface echoes Fyfe's comment that "If there's hope for them, it lies in their children" (p. 121), when he observes:

"The old Indian good-livin' and the new white way--these people are between that now . . . but Thou take the young ones . . . the kids and the like of that. These are the ones! . . . These are the ones who will live the white way . . . " (p. 126)

Powderface's sermon however, calls not for the Indian to establish a new identity of his own making, but rather to accept the identity offered by the white society. His wish for a future in that world is as impossible as Old Esau's dream of "leading his band, to find the happy days that they had lost" (p. 108) in the canyon.

The Indian's loss of identity is symbolized by the drying-up of the Beulah Creek which has its headwaters in the Storm and Misty canyon. Like the seismic crews which are responsible for the stoppage of the river, other white men have denied the identity of the Indian. Faced between two worlds, one to which they are denied access because of discrimination, and the other which is too far in the past for

them to return to, the Paradise Valley Stonies are in "limbo" of identity similar to that which imprisoned David Lang in *The Kite*. Like Archie Nicotine, Carlyle Sinclair's struggle for identity is one of finding a place in which to realize himself, and both characters are seen in a quest for identity which will finally bring them together at a vanishing point.

The physical quest which Carlyle Sinclair sets out upon is not the journey from which he ultimately returns. Like David Lang, whose initial search was for a magazine article, and who ultimately found a message of understanding he had not expected, so Carlyle's quest becomes more deeply involved with his own identity. In his search for Victoria Rider, who has left her hospital position, Sinclair finds himself moving backward through his own consciousness to the events of his youth, as well as through the physical surroundings of the city, the reservation, and the Storm and Misty canyon. He does not recognize the true dimension of his quest until late in the novel:

The loss of Victoria has shattered something inside him. He knew that now. He knew he was not trying simply to find her. He knew that he must put back together something he had been trying all his life to keep from being splintered--broken beyond repair. It was something mortally important to him, and it had never--ever--been whole for him really; Aunt Pearl and Old Kacky had seen to that. And his father. (p. 323)

Victoria Rider had become important to Carlyle in the schoolroom because he had seen in her, as had others who believed the hope of the Indians lay in the young, a chance to establish a vicarious identity in her development. By forming Victoria into a replica of the white aspirations for Indian children, he might accomplish one

certain thing as a result of his work on the reservation. By educating her and sending her to the city, he felt that "For the first time two worlds had merged " (p. 216). But what Carlyle has really been attempting, rather than a bridge between the two worlds, is to try to implant his own fears and aversions into his student. He wants Victoria to deny the naturalness of the Indian lifestyle, and his act of pulling her out of the Chicken Dance indicates that he is willing to use force to mold Victoria's identity. Although he has been able to reform much of her outward appearance and sends her into the white world dressed accordingly, Victoria's eyes are a reminder that there is something within her which he cannot erase or disguise:

When he took her into the city to begin training in the hospital, she wore the navy suit with lace at her throat--high heels. Just the eyes now! Not much--just a trace of smoke in the eyes! (p. 238)

The first portion of Carlyle's search for Victoria takes him to the city where he intends picking her up at the hospital. Before his arrival at the hospital he stops for a traffic light, and the description of the movement of the urbanites becomes an interesting contrast to the lively dances of the Indians. Like other symbols of sexuality and vitality in the white world, the dance of the traffic is a pale, mechanized imitation of the natural vigour of the Indians:

The light had just turned red as he reached the intersection; he remembered it as a long and complicated one, green and red alternating with lighted arrows. Now it was the turn for cars on the outside lanes to his left and to his right to move out to the centre, meet opposite partners, swing and pass each other in opposite directions. (p. 57)

Carlyle realizes that the time he has spent on the reservation has alienated him from the society of the city: "They weren't freaks--exactly--but they were somehow exotic and unrelated to him; Nine years in Paradise Valley had set him apart with this perspective." (p. 58). He recognizes that life in the city is only a counterfeit replica of existence, as portrayed in the huge shopping mart he visits:

Why was it--in a city with over a quarter of a million population--he always saw the same people in the Super Arcade. He did again and again, their faces calling out to him for remembrance . . . he'd figured it out; there were people who lived in department stores and supermarkets. They were born in Infants' Wear; they grew up through the difficult and insecure years of adolescence in Teen Town; were married in Bridal Belles. They bought their contraceptives and douches and sanitary napkins in Drugs; ate and slept in Furniture and Bedding; their dishes came from Glass and China . . . " (pp. 61-62)

The search for Victoria in the city also brings Carlyle into contact with several "lonely accosters" (p. 63) who try to converse with him, but his inability to communicate with them further indicates his alienation from individuals as well as from society as a whole. His first visitor at the hospital causes him to recall others who have tried to reach out to him:

One of the lonely accosters; it always surprised him how often--in restaurants--waiting rooms--on elevators--at bus stops--people initiated conversations with him--spilled precious intimacy . . . He must disappoint them, because listening was an active act, and he wasn't any good at it. (p. 63)

From the hospital Carlyle goes to visit Fyfe, the Indian Affairs official, who tells him to return to Paradise in search of Victoria.

The orchids which Fyfe raises are symbolic not only of the overall attempt of the white society to rearrange the natural life of the Indian, but on a smaller scale portray Carlyle's own desire to change Victoria, a parallel he begins to see in his own discussion. By questioning the failure of Fyfe to produce a perfect orchid, he is actually questioning his own right to establish Victoria's identity:

"And that colour--just species colour--it's slightly larger than species, but that's all you can say for it. Complete miss."

"Who says?"

. . . "I do--any Breeder would--or show judge."

"What's the orchid say, Ian?" . . . "You're trying to--for something that hasn't got something to do with what the orchid wants." (p. 85)

Returning to Paradise Valley, Carlyle is led to believe that Victoria's family has travelled to the Storm and Misty canyon, and his search leads him back to the source of Beulah Creek. He realizes that there is an ancient mystical quality to the area and "Here a hero could seek vision and solution" (p. 108); but the only thought which comes to him is one of confusion and anger over Victoria's apparent disloyalty to him: "Why had she done it! And what could he do for her! Why had she failed!" (p. 109).

When he arrives back in Paradise Valley, a new snowfall illustrates the fact that the spring which had heralded his embarkation upon the quest was false, and symbolizes the return of his own feelings of self-doubt which had begun to disappear when Victoria had first been sent to the city. The snowflakes themselves indicate the loss of identity which he suffers in thinking that Victoria has become lost

in the rush of city society: "Individual flakes had become indistinguishable, just loosed from above without identity, myriads bewildering with vertigo" (p. 114).

In the next stage of his search, Carlyle returns to the city where he realizes that he cannot recall what Victoria looks like. Having remade her into a reflection of white identity, he is unable to recall that false picture. Instead, it is the memory of smell, the true evidence of her own identity, which he remembers:

Now, he could not find her even within himself. When he tried to summon her face behind his closed eyelids, he could not manage one cue . . . she had been erased from within himself! Then the smell stole to him--a subtle musk that he couldn't identify at first--it belonged to August and to elliptic, silver leaves--wolf willow! But that was not the right perfume, for it didn't have the light willow sweetness; this was more like the faintest drift of smoke. (p. 263)

Throughout his search, the sense of smell becomes Carlyle's link to the past. The hospital smell reminds him of "his father's surgery; it breathed through the pre-med lab of his university days" (p. 63), as does the "depot, with its seated and waiting people" (p. 301). The bus depot, like his father's surgery, has "the same expectant air--arrested people each with his own inward and urgent concern" (p. 301). Like other aspects of the city, the depot reflects the lack of communication between people:

Unlike airports and railroad stations, this was not a place where people met people. The buses unloaded outside; the depot doors opened and the passengers entered, looking slightly dazed, as though they had just stepped bewildered from a car wrecked in a highway accident. (p. 301)

The connection he draws from the scene at the bus depot leads Carlyle to see the loss of identity of people when they become merely replicas of life:

The child on stilts. Some sort of child's game? Statues-- oh God yes--that was it--bodies frozen--he and the bus-depot people and the Stonys--all men--held frozen. They must not move--they could not move--not a muscle--an eyelid . . . The game held delight for the one who was It, a delicious sense of power over others. It must have been a game that Aunt Pearl had loved when she was a little girl. (p. 302)

Like Aunt Pearl playing "It" in a game in which she turns Carlyle into a "statue," so too the Indian Affairs officials and agents freeze the identity of the Indian. Eventually Carlyle will find that he has attempted the same transformation of Victoria. It is at this point in the quest, after his memories of the time spent at Aunt Pearl's home and the schoolroom remind him of his own alienation in youth, that he realizes his search has broadened: "He knew he was not simply trying to find her" (p. 323). In searching for Victoria he has been trying to assure himself that all is well and that her safety will confirm his belief in the system he represents:

Victoria Rider had grown essential; he must find her and must do it to save himself as well. He could not tell which drove him more, his own need or hers. If he were honest with himself--probably his own. (p. 323)

The gradual realization that what he has done to Victoria is similar to the action others have forced upon him in childhood causes Carlyle to retreat temporarily into alcohol, the same escape used so often by Archie Nicotine. He awakens in the morning and meets Heally Richards, "the negative man" (p. 281) he has briefly encountered

in the city. Richards is a vital link between the two quests : which are simultaneously taking place in the narrative, for both Carlyle and Archie become associated with Richards. Also, many of the youthful experiences of Richards are similar to those in Carlyle's life, and as Catherine McLay has pointed out: "Heally's failure leads to Carlyle's recognition of his own personal failure."⁴

Richards is a faith healer who not only promises to resurrect Old Esau, but also has the power to return the senses of "taste and smell" (p. 348) to his believers. But Carlyle sees that Richards is part of the same dehumanizing group as others who wish to exercise power over the identities of individuals, and Richard's sermon reminds him of his past and reflects his own present wish to change Victoria to suit himself:

Aunt Pearl had given him this feeling when he was a child. What was it? Not that she had disliked him--hated him--not that clear--as though there'd been a halo round her--or the absence of one. That was it--Heally Richards had no compassion halo. He was ordering them into a moral box to suit himself only--not them. (p. 354)

As Archie Nicotine had earlier commented to Carlyle, "Whites herd better" (p. 28) than Indians, who stubbornly refuse to give up their individuality, and at the climax of Richard's sermon Carlyle recognizes the "herding" quality of the white audience and desires his own release from the "bonds of self" which have held him. It is again, as in other novels, the description of an "explosion" which heralds the sudden awareness he feels;

He'd been here before; the soft explosion of recognition was unmistakable . . . The voice riding high over the congregation chorus kindled only resistance in his-- unwillingness to be urged--like a cow turning off, now one way and now another, refusing to be herded by the voice behind . . . He'd heard that lyric ecstasy that decayed to frightening anguish; he'd heard it flow from others no longer able to keep their own plight to themselves--or their own delight at releasing it when the bonds of self had been broken. Oh, God--oh, God--if only his own could be! (p. 358)

As Carlyle's own sense of himself begins to emerge, there is a great irony in the fact that another member of the congregation jumps up to exclaim "Praise His name I smell again!" (p. 359), for the masking of smell has been one of the important outer signs of Carlyle's inner masquerade.

The climax of the sermon is also the culmination of Carlyle's search for Victoria, for afterwards he meets her on the street. She tells him that his attempt to make her return to the life he has envisioned for her is impossible because of her pregnancy. In telling him that "You are asking me to turn the mountains upside down . . . Stop the spring run-off" (p. 364), she is really pointing to his inability to accept the natural cycle (represented by her baby) and his powerlessness over that cycle.

When Carlyle lets her go and returns to his room he realizes that "he was not one bit different from Heally Richards" (p. 366), and what he had been teaching the children on the reservation was not at all suited to their own identity:

He had never helped them--really--how could he have--without knowing. Till now. His Samaritan role was nothing. What a fool he'd been just to feed, just to clothe--to keep alive only. They perished and he taught them arithmetic; they thirsted to death on their time desert and he gave them reading and spelling lessons. (p. 366)

Carlyle's new awareness causes him immediately to despair that he will be able ever to accomplish anything on the reservation, and leads him to conclude that "nothing could be done at all" (p. 367). Esau's recent physical death thus parallels his own inner death of spirit, and when he returns to Paradise Valley he is ready to face even the prospect of his own physical death:

He was very tired. He had held himself against the current too long; all he wanted to do now was to give up and be swept away. He had lost all will for living--for self-determination. His life had been long illness, survived with energy left only to let him breathe and to be. His body must bother him no more with any of its minor or major hungers. (p. 376)

But true spring is returning to the valley, and as Daddy Sherry has stated in *The Kite*: "Man can't go an' die in spring."⁵ Like the robin which called Daddy back to life, and the ruffed grouse which had drummed out "its invitation to join the living whole" (p. 3) for Carlyle at the beginning of the novel, the sounds of the drum call him to join the dance of life and fertility:

Soft--distant--the dim pulse came to him. He listened, then clearly recognized the bump of the dance drum. He got up and went to the kitchen door--opened it. Spring's cool breath carried to him the wild drift of the Owl Song pure upon the night. (p. 380)

Responding to the rhythm of the dance drums, Carlyle's thoughts echo the cadence of the Prairie Chicken Dance:

My child--my child! Oh God, you were my child! How I
 Loved you--loved you--till he took you--took you! Now
 all will take you--all--all--all! (p. 382)

The drums which recall him from spiritual death dispel Carlyle's alienation and he recognizes that "He did belong with them" (p. 384). As Catherine McLay has stated "The revelation is sudden . . . in accepting responsibility for others he enters a new social unity,"⁶ and he realizes that man is the one being which is able to construct bridges of communication between himself and others:

Man lifted bridges between himself and other men so that he could walk from his own heart into other hearts. That was the great and compensating distinction: man did--the jack-rabbit, the badger, the kill-deer, the weasel, the undertaker beetle, did not. How could he have forgotten that! (p. 385)

By submitting to the rhythm of the drums and dancing with Victoria, Carlyle has left the false identity of the white world behind him and entered into a new closeness with himself and the Indians. When he sleeps with Victoria he also accepts his own sexuality, and the next morning the ruffed grouse again awakes him to spring and the description of its sound "as though his own pulse had drummed" (p. 387) indicates a new oneness with nature. By finally erecting a bridge between himself and the Indians he has established a new social identity, and that identity and his awareness of a free and sexual self meet at the vanishing point when he decides to marry Victoria:

Why had he taken so long to know? There must have been some hidden awareness--long unadmitted. But why hadn't he admitted it sooner--given himself to it--and to her? His life just hadn't taught him how. It had given him the wrong commandments: Be loved--don't love; tell--don't ask; take--don't give . . . Tell you what, Aunt Pearl and Fyfe and Old Kacky and Ottawa--I'll marry her; isn't that something to transpire: the union of two--no--two and a half in the holy bonds of matrimony! (p. 388)

The rebirth of Carlyle's identity is symbolized not only by the smells and sounds of spring but also by the revitalization of Beulah Creek which has somehow overcome the effects of the tampering by the white seismic crew. Like Carlyle, the creek has asserted its own natural identity over the forces which have impeded its existence. At the same time as Carlyle notices the revived waters of the creek flowing through the reservation, the sounds of Archie Nicotine's truck intermingle with the natural sounds of spring, proof of the rebirth of Archie's automobile and the end of yet another quest.

At the beginning of the novel, as Carlyle began his journey into the city in search of Victoria, Archie Nicotine caught a ride with him in order to enter the same setting in a quest for the "Rings and rebuilt carburetor" (p. 12) which he must have to repair the truck he had brought back from the city two years before. Archie's inability to incorporate functionally certain aspects of modern white society into his own identity is symbolized by his failure ever to return from the city with the parts for the truck. On several occasions in the past he had attempted to bring back the parts, but each time had ended up wasting his money on beer in the Empress Hotel and spending

time in jail. Because of his failures, Archie has developed feelings of inferiority in the white world, evinced by his thought that "white was lucky; red was not" (p. 26). His feelings have made him defensive, and he attempts to establish areas in which Indians are superior to white men: "The whole situation is red stomachs are superior to . . . white stomachs" (p. 27). Although Archie wishes to maintain certain aspects of his Indian identity which he feels are superior to white society, there are segments of the white world to which he is drawn. The truck is evidence of the ability of whites to produce useful items, and he desires to harness the vehicle to his own use. "Anything you people make is superior" (p. 27), he says to Sinclair, but believes that it is only "White luck" (p. 27) which accounts for the ability to produce modern conveniences.

Archie also wants to believe in the promises of the white religions to perform miracles and his other purpose in visiting the city is to find Heally Richards and have him save Old Esau from death. Archie is a "religious joiner," and has "been in turn: original Methodist, Presbyterian, United, Baptist, Pentecost, Mormon" (p. 17). Archie's faith in white technology accounts for his similar faith in the promises of Heally Richards, for he insists that the radio would not carry the message if it were not true:

"I never seen him do it, I just heard it over the radio. What I mean is, they wouldn't let him onto the radio if he couldn't do it." (p. 18)

To Archie, the healing methods of Heally Richards are more acceptable to the Indian than is the white technology of medicine as practised in the hospital. "Us people don't like to go in hospitals" (p. 20) he asserts. Held in Limbo between the old world of his ancestors and the new world of white technology, Archie tries to allow only those portions of the white world into his identity which he feels will be helpful to him on the reservation. His eclectic search for a new identity is hampered by his belief in the power of white religionists such as Heally Richards to provide the salvation for himself and his people, and until he finally realizes which aspects of white society can be of use, his quest is unfulfilled.

When Carlyle lets Archie off in front of the Empress Hotel, the lure of the beverage room comes to Archie in terms of his own world in Paradise Valley:

He caught a smell sweet as wolf willow, from the woman who pushed past him into the Ladies and Escorts door of the Empress, her perfume winning over beer bloom through the opened door. Buh-beer--buh-beer--buh-beer--it beat in him like a Chicken Dance drum. (p. 47)

Forcing himself away from the place where he knows his own identity will disappear into the sea of forgetfulness offered by the beer, Archie takes a taxi to the tent occupied by Heally Richards. In effect, although he has not realized it, Richards offers the same mind-lulling enjoyment to the white society as the beer parlour offers to the Indian.

Archie's desire is to return to the reservation with something from the white world which will benefit his people. However, Richards informs him that the people must come to him: "No--they come to me--people--from the city and from the country. They come to me" (p. 54). After being turned down in his request for Richards to visit Paradise, Archie sets out to find the parts for his truck. But he stops instead at the hotel where he meets Gloria and Norman Catface, two Indians who have accepted the city and as a result have lost the identity they once had on the reservation. Norman and Gloria represent the Indian who has perverted the naturalness of sexuality for the lure of prostitution and alcoholism in the city. As Archie points out, they are aliens not only in the city, but "They would both be trespassers" (p. 55) if they returned to the reservation. The Catfaces are lost to both worlds, and Archie recognizes that they are "tied up in a sack" (p. 289) without an identity in either world. After seeing the Catfaces, Archie avoids spending time in the beer parlour and leaves to pick up the truck parts. Ironically, it is not the drunken effects of the beer which cause him again to be arrested, but rather the need it produces to urinate, resulting in his arrest for indecent exposure. Responding to the same natural impulse which had caused the young Carlyle Sinclair to despoil Old Kacky's desk, Archie urinates in the parking lot and is punished for his actions.

As he later points out to Carlyle, Archie has "learned something new this time" (p. 112), for he has experienced the frustration of civilization's attempt to mask the bodily functions, and the

dehumanizing power which is brought to bear upon the individual who attempts to disobey. Like Carlyle, Archie has learned that the city enforces other rules than the Liquor Act.

When Heally Richards pays Archie's bail it is because he wishes him to find the Catfaces for him. He is not interested in curing Old Esau, but rather wants the two Indians to become symbols of his ability to enforce his own sense of morality upon others. Archie begins to lose faith in Richards when he listens to his next sermon, a service he witnesses in person instead of through the medium of the radio. In person, Richards does not hold the same sway: "So far as Archie could tell, Heally Richards didn't sound so much different from what a continuing Methodist did--or Baptist--or Nazarene--or any of the others he had ever taken a try at" (p. 257). He recognizes that "Beer made him feel the same way" (p. 260) when he experiences the emotion of faith in the tent, and on his way out "jerked off a couple of Chicken Dance steps" (p. 261) in confirmation of his own identity.

Although Archie's faith in the white man's religion is failing, he still brings Old Esau "across the suspension bridge (p. 341) and into the city. On the way, Esau dies, and Archie's faith is finally destroyed when Richards fails to restore life to the dead. Archie, in accepting the fact that the white religion is no more powerful than that of his own past Indian gods, no longer searches for easy solutions in the white world, but instead returns to Paradise

Valley to take a new interest in his role as band councillor. At a meeting of the Indian council he stands up and asserts his identity, pointing out that without the land in Paradise Valley the Indian identity will be lost. His speech draws a parallel between the loss of identity of the Catfaces who are "in a sack" and the situation which will occur if the Indians in the valley do not assert their own identity before they are swallowed by white society and become part of the "herd."

"I am a duly elected councillor. My grandfather was a chief. God made this land and the mountains too, and that's why I think we are born red and why we belong here. Our blood is in the ground and hills. Our great fathers were buried there, and we want to live here with them. We can't leave these hills, but now without enough land we need we are just like in a sack. We got to untie that sack. (p. 378)

From an Indian whose inability to function in the white world led him continually to be jailed in the city, Archie has grown to accept his role as a leader of his people. The death of Esau Rider, an aged leader who would have led his people backwards to the canyon, coincides with the rebirth of Archie's identity. Archie will lead the Stonies forward in a new assertion of identity, incorporating those portions of the white world which, like the truck, will be of use, but retaining the Indian's own identity with nature.

As Archie's truck "exploded and exploded and exploded again" (p. 392) the two figures of Carlyle and Archie are linked together in a sense of identity which brings them together at the vanishing point located on the reservation. Both have realized their true

roles in relation to the society they have chosen to live within, and both have overcome the obstacles to self-identity which alienated them from society and self. The bridge which has been erected between them is based not on weakness but on strength, and neither will have to be supported by the other without carrying his own load. As Archie comments to Carlyle: "Won't have to impose on you for a ride any more Sinclair." (p. 393).

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

¹ It should be noted that the character of Carlyle Sinclair as he appears in *The Alien* is somewhat different from his appearance in *The Vanishing Point*. In *The Alien* as it was published in *Maclean's Magazine* (September 1953 through January 1954), Sinclair is a half breed who returns with his wife and son to the reservation on which his mother had been born. Because of the dual identity inherent in his birth, the two worlds of the reservation and the city pull on him more forcefully. There is thus an added dimension to his search for identity, although the conclusion of the novel is similar to that which we have seen in *The Vanishing Point*. In both novels he emerges with new sense of himself and his place on the reservation.

In order to explain Mitchell's comment that he became dissatisfied with the conclusion of *The Alien* (see page 7 of the Introduction to this thesis), the reader is referred to a manuscript copy of *The Alien* which exists as part of the collection of Mitchell's papers recently purchased by the University of Calgary and now residing in the Rare Book Room of the university library. The conclusion of the novel in manuscript form suggests Carlyle Sinclair's eventual suicide, and therefore presents a much different point of view concerning the theme. For reasons already outlined in my introduction, I have chosen to delete this statement on the theme of identity from this thesis as not belonging to the discussion of Mitchell's continuing thematic pathway.

² Catherine McLay, "*The Vanishing Point: From Alienation to Faith*," manuscript copy, p. 1.

³ W. O. Mitchell, *The Vanishing Point* (1973; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1975), p. 6. All subsequent references from this edition.

⁴ Bernard S. Mason, *Dances and Stories of the American Indian* (New York: Ronald Press, 1944), p. 144.

⁵ Catherine McLay, p. 20.

⁶ W. O. Mitchell, *The Kite* (1962; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1974), p. 162.

⁷ Catherine McLay, p. 23.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

In the Introduction to this thesis W. O. Mitchell was quoted as saying that he considers the conclusion of the journey through the bubble less important than the journey itself. By emphasizing that "It isn't the truth that's important so much as the illusory journey to that truth, through the artist's illusion bubble,"¹ Mitchell affirms his personal belief that art is its own truth. Therefore, while it is a worthwhile part of any journey to reflect back upon the distance travelled and the scenery and characters encountered, it is not necessary that the thematic pathway followed through Mitchell's four novels lead to any sudden new truth about the question of man's identity. Throughout the journey we have seen that the author continually expresses the need for the individual to gain an awareness and understanding of himself and his place in the community, and the question "What is the way to understanding? Is it through intuition or is it through reason?"² is raised. Characters such as the Kid and Brian O'Connell rely on intuition rather than reason to gain a new understanding of their identity, but it is also evident that reason can lead to the same awareness. Older characters such as Digby, David Lang, Carlyle Sinclair and Archie Nicotine all arrive at a new sense of identity by reflection and reason. What

Mitchell seems most often to be stating is the need for *balance*, not only the balance between reason and intuition, but also the equilibrium of identity. His statement concerning identity expresses the need for the individual first to develop a self-identity and then to functionally incorporate selfhood into a social identity and become part of a "living whole." Individuals, faced with the often awesome realities of life in the vast expanses of the Canadian landscape, must join together into social units to ensure their own survival. Without such unity, man is merely the "fly on a platter" as expressed by young Brian O'Connal. But society can be a dangerous force acting against the individual, and the inevitable city life which is the ultimate outcome of man's desire to form groups and establish authority, can become merely a facade of real life, as witnessed by Carlyle Sinclair's observations in Calgary. The city can envelop the individual, but Mitchell does not imply that the answer for man is therefore to escape into nature. The wilderness is an environment which shapes self-identity as the individual becomes aware of his closeness to the natural cycle, but we have seen its negative effects on man as well. The Bens and Saint Sammy are extreme examples of the disorienting effects of nature on the human psyche, and characters such as the Kid, Brian O'Connal, and Carlyle Sinclair all experience some form of dislocation when exposed to nature. Mitchell uncovers the malevolent sides of both nature and the city, and the individual cannot flee from either environment. Nature is an important part of us all, but we cannot live alone. Instead, the self-awareness which

results from an understanding of the natural environment must be carried into the community as a self-identity. This self-identity, when firmly established, is both our link with, and protection from, other individuals. The two worlds balance only when identity is balanced.

While the effects of environment on identity is a central focus of Mitchell's novels, he also draws attention to the problems faced by various characters as a result of their age. Jake, Mrs. MacMurray, Daddy Sherry and Old Esau are all presented as characters whose old age is an impediment to their assertion of identity. While each is aware of his or her particular identity, society attempts to redefine their role in the community and disallow their freedom to affirm self-identity. As the old are passing out of the cycle, the young are emerging into the world, and the authority exerted by society is seen as a similar obstacle to the identity of youthful characters. Mitchell develops a parallel between the two struggles of youth and old age, and the two extremes of age are continually linked together in their struggles for identity. The companionships between Jake and the Kid, Brian O'Connell and Mrs. MacMurray, and Daddy Sherry and Keith Maclean, emphasize the common bond which grows as youth and old age struggle for identity.

It is important to note that Mitchell's central characters as they appear in separate novels are all linked together through the author's technique of describing their particular episodes of sudden

awareness, and through his use of the common symbol of the wind. In the first novel, *Jake and the Kid*, the Kid experiences his elation over a new-found freedom of identity when his "chest nearly bust" (p. 142). His sudden exultation is similar to Brian O'Connell's "explosions of feeling" in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, and the description of an "explosion" again signals young David Lang's artificial attempts to induce emotion in *The Kite*. Similarly, at the conclusion of *The Vanishing Point*, Carlyle Sinclair experiences a "soft explosion of recognition" which indicates his new awareness, and Archie Nicotine's truck "exploded and exploded and exploded again" to herald the fact of his new identity. In each case Mitchell uses the sudden burst or "explosion" to indicate the important stage of identity, and it is interesting to note how this technique forms a part of his own identity as a writer. In conversation with Donald Cameron Mitchell explains how he attempts through his writing to create "explosions" within his creative partner, the reader:

If the artist allows a creative partner to complete the art experience, that is where the real magic happens. The writer deals in provocative cues to character or to people; it's as though the writer mines his piece of art with triggers, and the explosion takes place within the creative partner. The reader, without knowing it, is subconsciously contributing to the character concept.³

Just as the characters in the bubble experience their awareness through "explosions," Mitchell allows the reader to participate in his created world more fully, and his illusion is therefore more artistically drawn.

In addition to the common explosions of feeling which link the central characters together, Mitchell utilizes his primary symbol of the wind throughout all of the novels, and its appearance is again a reminder that the thematic pathway is a continuing statement of a universal problem. In the chapter on *Jake and the Kid*, we discussed the wind as an emotional aspect of nature which parallels the Kid's inner emotions. Similarly, in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, the use of the central symbol intensifies, and permeates the entire novel as a reflection of Brian O'Connell's growing awareness, representing the experience and spirituality so vital to self-identity. In *The Kite*, the central symbol is the kite itself, but Mitchell is careful to show that the wind is necessary for its movement, and it is the wind which animates man's existence. The sense of smell is a prime factor of identity in *The Vanishing Point*, and to Carlyle Sinclair it is the evidence of his own humanity. Again, it is the wind which carries the smells of nature and man to Sinclair, and is thus the spiritual force giving life to the senses. In each novel, the wind is a vital symbol of the universal cycle in which each character must realize his own identity, and because of its continuing function in the overall bubble which Mitchell creates, an important thematic link is created between each of the novels.

Because Mitchell's novels are bonded together through similar environments, characters and the central symbol of the wind, the theme of identity which further links the novels together is more easily traced. Since each bubble is really a part of a larger whole, the

theme of identity is fully sustained. When we look backward over the thematic pathway which we have followed through his novels, it is thus easier to see that the theme of identity is a broad statement of a problem which concerns not only the characters who remain within the illusory bubble, but, because the pathway has broadened, perhaps comments upon the larger problem of Canadian identity as a whole.

There is something very "Canadian" about Mitchell's exploration of the theme of identity. Although Mitchell himself denies the fact that he is a "regional writer,"⁴ and while it cannot be said that problems of identity are uniquely Canadian, his novels do reflect an important national struggle. Canadians are faced with the reality of a large landscape dotted with isolated urban centres. In most of Canada the individual is surrounded by the natural environment, yet equally submerged into a social pattern. Canadians are therefore forced to accept both environments as part of their identity in order to achieve complete harmony with their world. As the individual becomes more and more involved in the pattern of authority in the nation as a whole, self-identity can clash with social obligation, and the necessity of balance becomes more essential. In *The Canadian Identity*, W. L. Morton discusses the importance to Canadians of maintaining both their individuality and their place in the growing society:

The personality of the individual citizen, then, is the object of the justice the state exists to provide and of the welfare society exists to ensure. The individual thus possesses the ultimate autonomy, since he is the end to which both state and society are means. But that autonomy carries with it a sovereign obligation to respect and safeguard the autonomy of his fellows, primarily by manners, which are dealings of man with man, and secondarily through the social and political order. So reciprocal and delicate a complex of justice, welfare, and good manners may function only in an organic unity of state, society, and individual.⁵

Mitchell's illusory bubble is a microcosm of the Canadian society. Within the world he creates, individuals from various cultural backgrounds all face their own problems of self-identity and struggle to develop a new social identity in a community inhabited by people from various countries whose identity is reflected in their past. In Mitchell's world the names of characters are indicative of the separate cultural identities which form the new Canadian community, and Wong, Svarich, O'Connell, Lefthand, Sinclair, Luton, and McLachlin, all must find a way in which to retain their own self-identities while combining their efforts to shape a new social identity. In an article entitled "Boil Me No Melting Pots," Larry Zolf has expressed the difference between Canadian and American identities, and points out that while the United States attempts to fuse peoples from various cultural identities into a new "American" identity, Canada remains a country in which individual self-identity can be maintained. Although he makes it clear that Canada is still searching for a new identity which will allow ultimate freedom of separate identity while a new social identity is established, Zolf makes it clear that a

struggling Canadian identity is to be preferred over the "melting pot" of the United States which demands conformity to an American way of life in which national identities disappear. In discussing his own problems of retaining a Jewish identity while living in Canada, Zolf is really articulating the problems of all Canadians who have differences of identity, and it is apparent that he prefers a country which has at least not attempted to submerge his identity:

Canada has not yet bought the American Dream. It's still a conservative country, the land of particularity. I know the Hebrew particularity ain't quite as yet the equal of other particularities. I know that living here is still a trip backwards in the Time Tunnel. Still, I'm glad to be here and be a Canadian, whatever that word means. I'd rather be somewhat of an outsider in Canada than an equal, accepted participant in the American Nightmare.⁶

Through his writing then, Mitchell has created not only an artistic bubble which proves his worth as an author-magician capable of fine illusion in any country, but has also presented a theme which is at once universal and yet somehow particularly Canadian. His identity as an artist is shown in his writing, and his own particular self-identity can be recognized in the events, settings, and characters which he draws from personal experience, while his broader social identity is reflected in the universality of his chosen theme. By combining his identities to produce his novels, Mitchell himself achieves the balance of identity which he has shown to be so important to survival.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER SIX

¹ Donald Cameron, "W. O. Mitchell: Sea Caves and Creative Partners," *Conversations With Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), p. 52.

² Ibid., p. 61.

³ Ibid., p. 53.

⁴ Patricia Barclay, "Regionalism and the Writer: A Talk With W. O. Mitchell," *Canadian Literature*, No. 14, Autumn 1962, pp. 53-56. In this interview Mitchell discusses various reasons why he does not feel the label of "regionalist" suits him in relation to his writing.

⁵ W. L. Morton, *The Canadian Identity* (Toronto: University Press, 1961), p. 113.

⁶ Larry Zolf, "Boil Me No Melting Pots," *Canada: A Guide to the Peaceable Kingdom*, ed. William Kilbourn (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970), p. 156.

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