

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

The Spiritual Dimension of the Struggle of Marian Engel's  
Heroines to Shape their Lives toward Wholeness

by

M. Laurel Buck

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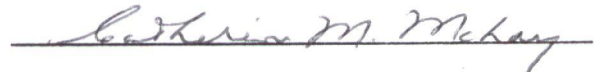
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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled, "The Spiritual Dimension of the Struggle of Marian Engel's Heroines toward Wholeness" in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



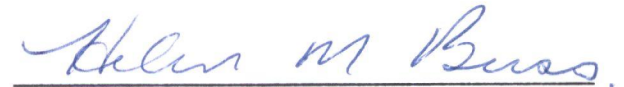
Dr. Catherine M. McLay

Department of English



Dr. Diana Relke

Department of General  
Studies



Dr. Helen Buss

Department of English

(Date) May 1 1990

### Abstract

While Marian Engel shares with such writers as Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood the creation of women, engaged in a struggle toward wholeness of life, the exploration of the spiritual dimension is distinctive in her work. It emerges out of her characters' awareness of the failure of the Puritan belief in perfectionism (the belief in the moral perfectibility of individuals) to deal with the fragmentation they perceive at a critical juncture in their lives. Moreover, their perception of the cataclysmic social changes in the 1960s and 1970s serves only to exacerbate their personal sense of chaos and confusion. Engel's insight into the apocalyptic nature of her changing times leads her to present her women engaged in a search to find the way in which the life-sustaining role of religion may be rediscovered. The spiritual dimension, characteristic of her work, arises out of such an engagement.

The first chapter of this thesis examines the nature and recurring influence of an apocalyptic period that pass into literature, as writers respond to their own turbulent times. The second chapter demonstrates that Engel's articulation of the fragmentation women experienced in the '60s and '70s and the nature of their response to it is in the vanguard of a new perspective by writers in the latter half of the twentieth century. Chapters three, four and five examine a progression in

Engel's articulation of the spiritual dimension throughout the sequence of the novels under examination, The Honeyman Festival, Bear and The Glassy Sea. Three questions emerge in the sequence: What is right? What is real? in the first novel, Who and what am I? in the second and an implied question in the third, Is grace, unmerited love, able to foster growth in the face of the failure of perfectionism? Just as the focus of each question changes but at the same time reveals a common thread, so Engel's compression of time and place reveals a common intent. It is to communicate that her women's struggle springs from an inner apocalypse, born of a desire to shape "a world [they] could have an importance in" (Gl.S. 155). Engel's interest derives from her concern of how one deals with an imperfect world when brought up to look for perfection (Room of One's Own, vol.9, no.2, 29). The third question, therefore, shows Engel's intent to define an answer that will open up no less an opportunity than that her women might live.

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## Chapter One

In January, 1985, just weeks before she died of cancer, Marian Engel wrote the following introduction to her last piece of fictional work, The Tattooed Woman, a selection of short stories, composed over a decade:

I am not good at traditional narrative. Reality brings out the worst in me .... Ordinary reality keeps turning on me. What I have to deal with is super-reality, that element in everyday life where the surreal shows itself.... The inner impulse that forces me to the typewriter is now aligned with the force that created and found the materials. In a moment, the story will leap out of my arms like a hyperactive baby (intro.xiii).

This passage conveys, firstly, Engel's personal struggle with a traditional perception of reality that fails to meet her experience. Secondly, she declares that it is a creative struggle for it has provided not only the "inner impulse", the motivation, for her work, but insight into how to deal with the "materials", the structure of her fiction (intro.xiii). Indeed, Engel's experimental attitude is characteristic of writers who have continued to respond to the twentieth century revolution in science, philosophy and religion. An examination of her work, therefore, reveals that she shares the interest of such writers noted by Friedman and Donley in their book, Einstein as



Myth and Muse. In it they trace the development throughout the 20th century of experimental writers' response to "new world views [which] opened up a huge realm of unexplored possibilities and demanded a change in our imaginative picture of the world" (intro.1). Significantly, Engel's use of surrealism, therefore, implies her consciousness of the change around her and its potential to impinge upon tradition as well as to shape the future. In fact, this particular consciousness is apocalyptic in nature. In this thesis I will demonstrate Engel's understanding that the sense of a cataclysmic crisis, arising out of an apocalyptic time, profoundly shakes the perception of reality by individuals and society. To deal with it, those affected come to perceive that it calls for a change so radical that it can only be defined as re-birth. This is the nature of Engel's understanding of a spiritual struggle and allies her work with a recognized type of literature known as apocalyptic. This first chapter will examine the significance of an apocalyptic perception as a framework for the search for spiritual wholeness presented in fiction, a relationship evident in Engel's work. She acknowledges that her insight arises out of her own experience with the propensity of perfectionism "to poison lives" at both the personal and social levels.

In an interview with Carroll Klein, she states:

... my books generally come out of some kind of personal struggle and an attempt to organize

experience. I'm always dealing with the perfectionism in this country. This is a very puritanical country and almost all our institutions are about perfectibility (Room of One's Own 29).

In particular, Engel is concerned with the exacerbation of such a struggle in the turbulent times of the seventies. It is in this decade, therefore, that she begins to define the significance of a spiritual dimension in her women's struggle, experimenting with the treatment of time and place to convey the sense of compression and urgency expressed in such a dimension. She begins her definition in The Honeyman Festival, published in 1970, develops it further in Bear, published in 1976 and examines it more fully in The Glassy Sea, published in 1978.

Engel examines the efficacy of grace to alleviate her women's sense of failure, which they encounter in attempting to meet the perfectionist standards set in their childhood. In The Honeyman Festival, its need is anticipated by Minn through her challenge to the God of the Puritans for "another theology" (71). Her double-barrelled question, What is right? What is real? finds an answer within her understanding of the unity, yet diversity, of love. It is reinforced in Bear by Lou's experience with love as restoration of innocence through healing, allowing her to answer Who and what am I? In The Glassy Sea, Engel fully examines the crucial nature of grace to

bring about an experience of re-birth through Rita who, on entering an Anglican contemplative order of nuns, begins a search for "another theology" (H.F. 71).

Engel treats time and place as a continuum in her novels, in which her women move mentally from present to past and past to present. The compression of these two aspects shows them struggling to shape their lives so that they might gain insight into how to grow toward the future. The Honeyman Festival concentrates on a period, less than twenty-four hours, spent by Minn in her crumbling, old Victorian House. She feels the urgency of gaining a sense of life-direction, as she approaches forty, akin to the impending birth-process of the child she awaits. In other words, it is a case of being on the verge of the fulness of time. In Bear, time and place are associated with a woman's awakening from a kind of hibernation, through her increasingly insensate perception of herself as animal, to awareness of the necessity to undertake a search for self. Once again, the sense of a critical moment of decision at hand is rendered in the inevitability of the cyclic return of hibernation. In The Glassy Sea, the autobiographical letter, forming a seemingly disproportionate part (actually four-fifths) of the novel, reflects the heaviness of Rita's burden of imperfection, marked by "cracks...crucial and deep" (141). She, herself, therefore, as the focus of time and place, must find a breakthrough before being overwhelmed by a sense of her crumbling self. Engel acknowledges influence from Laurence

Durrell's work because of his "wonderful sense of place" (Klein 11). Indeed, it is reflected in her images of entombment and fragmentation, representing the struggle of all three women to create coherence of self out of layers of their past. However, Engel pushes almost to the limit the capability of her fictional art to treat time and place in such a way as to convey the sharp, undeniable anguish of her women. For their sense of being almost buried under the layers is made all the more excruciating because of a parallel sense that they are living in an apocalyptic time.

The purpose of this chapter is to clarify the claim of this thesis that Engel, in writing her fiction, draws upon insight into the apocalyptic nature of the sixties and seventies. It presents an examination of the term's association with a critical period in which the past, present and future are, together, thrown into sharp relief and of the continuing use of the term in literature. The word, apocalypse, originates from the Greek, "apokalupsis", having to do with the act of unveiling or revealing something that is covered, an act accompanied by both a mood of expectation and of apprehension. The definition of the word in the Oxford Dictionary plainly associates it with The Revelation of St. John the Divine in the New Testament. Firstly, it refers to the revelation of the future granted to St. John in exile on the isle of Patmos and also, the book of the New Testament containing it and secondly, in a general way, to any revelation or disclosure" (81).

The theologian, George B. Caird, in his commentary on The Book of the Revelation of St. John the Divine, writes that the title not only describes its content but classifies it as a recognized type of literature (9). Implicit in this literature is the portrayal of a present crisis, set against a background of world history that is marked by oppression. Accompanying the present crisis set within an awareness of an oppressive past, there is an apprehensive longing for a clear path to the future. Moreover, characteristic of apocalyptic literature is the use of images which convey anxiety about that which is to be revealed in keeping with the sense of urgent crisis (9). Tension and ambiguity create at once positive and negative aspects in the portrayal of such a crisis, which are compounded by its personal and social nature. While John's book, Caird declares, warns of a coming catastrophe, as previous Old Testament apocalyptic writers had done, his book also encourages his readers to look beyond their fear of an eschaton, a final event beyond which nothing can be imagined to happen (310). The emphasis in John's account of the apocalypse is a positive one, marked by the expectation of an ultimate transformation of life following the trials. It takes the shape of growth toward spiritual wholeness through faith in Jesus Christ, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end of life (Caird 301). Caird believes that the coming crisis that John wrote about was simply the persecution of the church, and "that all the varied imagery of his book has no other purpose than

this, to disclose to the prospective martyrs the real nature of their suffering and its place in the eternal purposes of God" (12). Caird makes the claim that John's imagery was used as a literary tool to convey a vision, to prophesy about what was bound to happen, given the urgency and crisis of the present that had long been building. It was meant as a warning from an imaginative realist but also as an encouragement to his readers to strengthen them through a period of suffering. The goal would be a new world, a new sense of spiritual wholeness.

Literary critic, David Ketterer, examines the word apocalypse as a critical term after presenting his resume' of John's Apocalypse. Both he and Caird acknowledge the presence of the negative and positive aspects in the word, that is, of both warning and encouragement. However, Ketterer speaks of a necessary correlation between the destruction of the world and the establishment of the New Jerusalem. He expands his view of the term, suggesting that the correlation between the personal and the social aspects of the crisis allow for a "dialectic, conflict, or tension of oppositions—and a dialectic, conflict, or tension of opposites is the stuff of literature" (8). He observes wryly that, living in a nuclear age, "for the first time, man has it in his power to be the instigator of a do-it-yourself apocalypse" (4). He claims, therefore, that writers, such as Leslie Fiedler in his Waiting for the End and Stanley Edgar Hyman, in The Promised End, writing in the mid-sixties, would seem to endorse the validity and relevance of the

apocalyptic vision (4). Ketterer develops the distinction between writers who define apocalyptic by emphasizing the negative or positive aspects. The former tend to concentrate on the power of the catastrophe to create nullity and void, the latter, on the transformation to come, following the catastrophe. The disillusionment of the latter writers, such as was seen among the Romantics following the French Revolution, led to the concept of "apocalypses of the imagination" by which man struggles to achieve the New Jerusalem by mental fight (10).

The development of the apocalypse to convey an inner spiritual event is traced by M.H. Abrams in his essay, "The Apocalypse Within ". He notes the development of flexibility of the Revelation firstly, for historical application and later, as spiritual application:

The freedom of interpretive manoeuvre was greatly increased by the early application to [John's] Revelation of an allegorical mode of reading, either as an overlay or as a total displacement of its 'literal'—that is , historical reference, and especially by the interpretation of its 'carnal sense' as encoding an inner 'spiritual sense' (Patrides and Wittreich 353).

In his Confesssions, St. Augustine, for example, was a pioneer in transferring "to the theater of the individual spirit" an apocalyptic vision regarding the tension of his struggle toward

spiritual wholeness (353-54). Indeed, Abrams claims that Augustine's Confessions, itself, became the paradigm of numerous spiritual autobiographies as it established the interior life "as one of polar self-division, internecine self-conflict, crisis, abrupt rebirth, and the consequent renovation of the way we experience the world" (354). The correlation between the personal and social aspects of the apocalyptic framework or vision can be seen in Augustine's process of "psycho-historical" parallelism (354).

The nineteenth century saw a revival of interest in the Revelation of St. John. Mary Wilson Carpenter and George P. Landow, in their essay "Ambiguous revelations: the Apocalypse and Victorian Literature", refer to the influence of the Bible upon the culture of that day but, even more importantly, to the influence of the Revelation upon its fiction (299). In particular, they examine the presence, in George Eliot's novels, of the apocalyptic framework. Interestingly, they suggest that, while Eliot had abandoned obvious practice of Christianity, nevertheless she used the apocalyptic theme in the development of her characters. Critics, they claim, generally have taken account of this theme in Daniel Deronda as both Daniel and Gwendolen struggle to overcome a critical sense of alienation from self and from community, the personal and the social. However, Carpenter and Landow maintain the presence of an apocalyptic concern in Romola, Felix Holt, Middlemarch as well as Daniel Deronda:



...each employs as a structural device a central change or personal reformation, and ... precisely such reformation played a major part in those apocalyptic schemes familiar to Eliot. Thus, the novels which U. C. Knoepfelmacher has well characterized as centering on the 'historical life of man' all employ apocalyptic schemes in one way or another (301-02).

The authors draw a correlation between the personal turning-point in the individual characters' lives and a turning-point in society:

...a central reformation divides Middlemarch, for at the end of the fourth of eight books Dorothea achieves that first great renovation of fellow-feeling for her husband and walks down the corridor with him, hand in hand. A similar division of the novel into two eras of political reform parallels Dorothea's personal change, for the Reform Bill struggle echoes only faintly in the town of Middlemarch during the first four books of the novel, but in the second four it becomes active in the town (302).

The association between the personal desire for wholeness and the perception of a need for social change is at the heart of women's struggle for spiritual wholeness in many female writers of today, according to Carol P. Christ in her book, Diving Deep and Surfacing. Like Ketterer, she touches on the tension, ambiguity and conflict which are at the heart of

characters' struggles to understand the implications of their lives in transitional times. Carol Christ points out "the dualisms of spirit and body, rational and irrational, nature and freedom, spiritual and social, life and death, which have plagued Western consciousness" (7). She does not align her perception of the characters' search for wholeness within an apocalyptic framework as directly as do Ketterer and the authors in Patrides and Wittreich's book. Nevertheless, Christ pays particular attention to an apocalyptic vision in Doris Lessing's The Four-Gated City and in Adrienne Rich's poetry. It is interesting that she makes the distinction between the negative and positive aspects found in each author's definition of the apocalyptic. Christ is disturbed by an emphasis in Lessing's work on the inevitability of a nuclear catastrophe which leads to a pessimism toward social change. Yet, she is overlooking the importance of Lessing's images of growth and her emphasis on spirituality, noted by critic Catharine Stimpson in The Voyage In (192). Stimpson credits such images and such an emphasis to Lessing's Sufi belief in "the possibility of a conscious evolution ... this more rarified evolution that our future depends on" (192). Stimpson summarizes the implication of Lessing's adaptation of "the myth of individual and collective rebirth" from "apocalyptic historiography" (193):

If each of us nurtures consciousness as we pass from youth to a semblance of maturity, if we join with

others who are doing the same thing, then we may either avert the apocalypse, or live through it and protect those children whose minds are even more potent than our own (The Voyage In 192-93).

Carol Christ sees more clearly at the heart of Adrienne Rich's poetry than in Lessing's fiction a personal apocalypse of women that leads to an inner transformation "[where] anger consumes their ties to the patriarchal world rather than an external destruction" (76). Here, Carol Christ's understanding of an inner apocalypse is similar to Abrams' description of St. Augustine's apocalypse of the individual spirit.

More definite implications of a positive apocalypse are reflected in Frank Kermode's work, The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction. In his examination of writers through history, he points out their sense of the beginning of an inner transformation, following a period of suffering. According to Kermode, there has always been a human inclination to think of our own day as the dark before the dawn. In our desire to make sense of our lives, we make models of the world, such as in our fictions, in which we imagine how the past, the present and the future bear relationship to one another. As Kermode writes:

The Bible is a familiar model of history. It begins at the beginning ('In the beginning ...') and ends with a vision of the end ('Even so, come, Lord Jesus'); the first book is Genesis, the last Apocalypse.

Ideally, it is a wholly concordant structure, the end is in harmony with the beginning, the middle with beginning and end. The end, Apocalypse, is traditionally held to resume the whole structure (6).

While the images associated with the terrors, the decadence and the hope of renovation in St. John's Apocalypse may be taken literally, Kermode says, nevertheless, "the historical allegory is always having to be revised ..." (8). Because over the centuries, The Revelation has been continually disconfirmed without being discredited, its chief characteristic is resiliency, according to Kermode:

It can also absorb changing interests, rival apocalypses.... It is patient of change and of historiographical sophistications. It allows itself to be diffused, [and] blended with other varieties of fiction ... (8).

Kermode's view is supported by critics, Abrams, Carpenter and Landow, Christ and Stimpson, treating works as disparate as St. Augustine's Confessions, George Eliot's novels and works by contemporary women writers.

A new literary type which finds expression in some of the women's autobiographical writings in the German-language literature of the 1970s, is pointed out by Sandra Frieden. In her essay, "Shadowing/Surfacing/Shedding: Contemporary German Writers in Search of a Female Bildungsroman", she examines the words of one German woman author, Jutta Heinrich, speaking of

her experience, "For me, to become an adult means to come into the world in the middle of life with intensified birth pains" (The Voyage In 305). This symbol of re-birth is similar to Engel's character, Minn, who sees in the impending birth of her last child, her own urgent struggle for renewal. This is an image, informing three characteristics of an apocalyptic framework or vision that have passed into contemporary fiction written by women about women; namely, the experience of exile, the reference to a present crisis of personal and social import and the longing for a transformation of their lives. First of all, she perceives that only a new beginning as radical as a re-birth will gain her a significant place in her changing society. Moreover, the urgency of the pains connected with birth, indeed, a birth overdue, creates the tension of a present crisis that has been growing for a long time. Secondly, it follows that release from the old restrictive roles, a matter of life and death, calls for a rejection of arbitrary standards. Thirdly, the image anticipates a new life based on "trust [of] her own perceptions and [her allowance of] them to shape her behavior" (311). Frieden notes the dual aspects of the woman's "emerging sense of self" in conflict with "the social expectations imposed upon her" (305). She examines the attempts at self-understanding by such women as they question the desires and dreams that have evolved from the dark shadows of their pasts. "A crumbling framework of social institutions", which was becoming apparent in the seventies in the fractured

family units and in the confused relationships between women and men, created a sense of crisis (308). All of these factors of shadowing, surfacing and shedding, therefore, imply an apocalyptic framework involved in the German women-writers' sense of women's spiritual struggle for wholeness.

Engel's work reflects, also, the concerns of women writers like those examined by Judi M. Roller, in her book, The Politics of the Feminist Novel. Roller reinforces the argument that the spiritual struggle for wholeness is compounded in intensity by the protagonist's perception that her own crisis is closely connected with society's crisis (5-6). Moreover, she maintains the existence of an international commonality in the experience of women which is reflected in their fiction:

Critics have suggested that in women's writings in general nationality may not be as important as it is elsewhere; and even further, that the human component to literature is more easily discussed by women nationally foreign to one another than by any woman with any man (4).

In particular, Roller sees a cohesion among the American, British, Canadian, and Australian feminist novels that arises not only from a common language, but from themes connected with fragmentation and a desire for unity. Implicit in the protagonists' struggle is the perception of a world which is "unbounded, complex, chaotic, fragmented" (67). Roller suggests that the woman's grasp of reality in these novels is a factor

in her search for wholeness:

The acceptance of wholeness, of the complete human personality, of the communities of the world implies also a facing of the disorder, anarchy, confusion.... Chaos is not always reduced to order, but may exist simultaneously with it (95).

Engel's interest in finding a way toward a sense of wholeness that is accepting of imperfection, unlike the Puritan dogma of perfectionism, reflects Roller's observation. Thus, Engel's work is related to a development in women's fiction in the latter half of the twentieth century, which, because it depicts a struggle that takes place in "the theater of the individual spirit", identifies the work as a derivative of the paradigm set in St. Augustine's Confessions (Patrides and Wittreich, 353).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For a discussion of Puritanism, Perfection and Perfectibility, see John Passmore; The Perfectibility of Man. New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1970; chapters one and four.



## Chapter Two

While Marian Engel shares with such writers as Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood the creation of women engaged in a struggle for wholeness, the spiritual dimension is distinctive in her work. Integral to this development is, firstly, that her women are aware that the intensity and complexity of their crisis, at a transitional time in their lives, are compounded by the apocalyptic nature of their contemporary period. Secondly, the longing for integration arises out of their perception that the Puritan belief in perfectionism, brought to bear on them in their parental homes, cannot deal with the reality of fragmented lives and societies. Their desire for renewal of their lives, therefore, emerges from the sense of being under siege from within and without and manifests itself as a matter of life and death. Engel's engagement with the negative aspects of a widely influential religious attitude does not lead her to reject a religious perspective out-of-hand. Rather, she explores the possibility of a restoration of its life-sustaining role.

The apocalyptic framework discussed in chapter one is relevant to the spiritual struggle of the women in Engel's fiction in that her women experience the kind of inner apocalypse of which the critics write. The intensity of her women's struggle for wholeness is compounded by their awareness of its connection with society's crisis. Personally, each of the women is at a crucial stage in her life, one marked by a

crisis perceived as an urgent need to grow. Engel, herself, has wondered about the quandary of what to do when one, who has been brought up to believe in such a goal, perceives that imperfection persistently characterizes not only oneself but one's social context:

I had been worried as a child and as a young adult growing up in a small town, being United Church, going to a Baptist university, by this eternal insistence that we ought to try to be perfect. I grew up in a family of perfectionists.... I was always a failure....

(Room of One's Own, vol.9, no.2, June, 1984, 27).

She claimed to Allan Twigg that it was thirty years since she had 'darkened the door of a church' (200). Yet, she criticised Ernest Buckler's failure to take into account a religious perspective in his development of his characters' struggle for a sense of identity (McMaster University Library Research News The Marian Engel Archive (Box4, F.13)). It is clear that, in spite of her criticism of the church as an institution, she appreciates the potential of a religious perspective to speak to human longing for wholeness. She recalls, in Room of One's Own, coming across a book, The Perfectibility of Man, by the Australian philosopher, John Passmore ( vol.9, no.2, June, 1984, 29). She was delighted to discover that they shared not only the same family name (Engel's maiden-name is Passmore) but also criticism of the dogma of perfectionism. He, also, sought to expose the potential of this particular accretion to

Christianity to, in Engel's words, "poison lives" ( Room of One's Own, 29). For he claims that the Puritan pursuit of perfectibility urges us "to be self-sufficient in a sense which does not permit of love" (Passmore, 326). Such a lack, both Passmore and Engel attest is dehumanizing since it leads away from involvement with life. In the same interview, she goes on to recall that she was writing The Glassy Sea at the same time as she was working her way through Passmore's book. Following his argument sympathetically, she

was trying to take Rita [a former Anglican nun] through this whole course in the hope of finding a situation for her where imperfection was sufficiently acceptable that she could be involved with the world again (Room of One's Own, 29).

In as much as Engel's characters make progress toward wholeness through coming to love, not only themselves better, but others in renewed relationships, she agrees with Passmore. The primacy of love in her search for an integration of self is as fundamental as re-birth; this reveals the reasons for both her appreciation of a religious outlook and her rejection of perfectionism. Her religious interest, therefore, is neither unquestioning nor conventional.

Her insight into this view of spiritual life is similar to that of Simon Tugwell in his book, Ways of Imperfection. He identifies a contemporary interest in spirituality which reflects its original connection not only with "the life of

grace" but also with a later development that it means "a way of viewing things" (Preface vii). This spirituality is concerned not just with prayer and contemplation, but with the ways that ordinary people seek to make sense of their lives, as they try to find ways to live in the very presence of chaos and confusion (Preface viii). Engel also reflects the view of theologian Paul Tillich who identifies the nature of grace as paradoxical in that "it gives fulfilment to that which is separated from the source of fulfilment, and it accepts that which is unacceptable" (Systematic Theology 284). This is the heart of religion that interests Engel because it deals with the experience of fragmentation, which perfectionism finds unacceptable. As Carol Ochs observes in her book, Women and Spirituality, insight into one's own experience is the mark of a religious attitude; entering into relationship with one's experiences is the mark of a spiritual dimension of life (144). Each of Engel's protagonists, in reacting against perfectionism, acknowledges a religious context in her struggle. Engel's undertaking the process of defining grace as its alternative in the sequence of the three novels examined here indicates her spiritual dimension. The Glassy Sea (1978), although the latest, is the most religious. Engel's expression of her spiritual insight is reflected in the reaction of Rita, a former Anglican nun, to Brother Anthony's "passionate and efficient" arguments on behalf of the role of engagement with religion to restore a life (150). Indeed, Rita's thoughts

anticipate her subsequent claim of the efficacy of grace toward such a restoration (163):

They did not attempt to get around the fact that evil things had befallen me; they did not allow me to blame my misfortunes on God or on myself or on other people; they allowed for the spaces between the lines of the stave of logic, but they were logical in themselves; they made me feel that the religion that had sustained me was perhaps within my grasp again (150).

Minn, in The Honeyman Festival (1970), seeks how to deal with the burden of her imperfection. She likens her compulsive processing through the rooms of her house to the observation of the stations of the cross marking Jesus's last hours before his crucifixion and subsequent resurrection. This is in keeping with Tugwell's observation as quoted on the book cover of Ways of Imperfection that "the religion of the cross is the religion of failure turned to account, creatively." In her longing for her sense of failure to be transformed into a reason to live, Minn anticipates the need of grace as she suggests to the Lord the need of "another theology" based on love (71). Lou, in Bear (1974), is visited by the Devil at night in her island refuge accusing her of having no sense of herself, of being, in fact, without "grace" (123). Later, her experience of learning to love the bear rightly leads to a restoration of innocence and cleansing which reflects Engel's process of defining grace to

deal with otherwise unacceptable imperfection. (136,137).

Engel makes an observation about her art which implies the experimental nature of her approach as she develops her insight into the conflict of her characters. She remarked to Carroll Klein that she was not following any Canadian writers as models:

I was never influenced by writers in this country.  
It was before the great bulge of creativity and  
I was arrogant enough to think of myself as equal  
to anyone (Room of One's Own, vol.9, no.2, June,  
1984, 10-11).

She goes on to reveal that while on the faculty of a school in Aix-en-Provence, France, she was influenced by "the explosion of the nouvel roman by French writers" (Room of One's Own 12). Indeed, Lou, in Bear, refers to feeling "like some French novelist who, having discarded plot and character, was left to build an abstract structure, and was too tradition-bound to do so" (84). Obviously Engel, herself, was not too tradition-bound to experiment with the structure of her novels, in particular with treatment of time and place.

In an essay written in the mid-1960s, Leslie Fiedler, points to the necessity of such experimentation as he considers the very survival of the novel as an art form:

...though I practice the art of the novel ironically  
and desperately in a world which provides me no  
assurances about the nature, or even existence, of

such an audience as I dream, I am inclined to believe that the history of the genre is approaching its end (Waiting for the End 177).

Then he hastens to add that the end of the genre he foresees is that which occurs before a new beginning, an apocalyptic insight. In other words, he foresees experimentation with the structure of the novel, such as Engel undertakes, to reflect the changes apparent in a transitional age: "for I cannot conceive a human situation in which stories are not somehow told, and I do not myself foresee the end of man" (177). Interestingly, he associates survival of story-telling with the survival of humanity. That Engel is aware of these views is made evident by Minn, in The Honeyman Festival, when she refers to Fiedler as someone whose view about changing times she shares (62,63).

Engel's interest in the causes and characteristics of the transitional period of the sixties and seventies is apparent in her writing of a review of Edward Shorter's The Making of the Modern Family, 1970 (McMaster University Library Research News. Marian Engel Archive, Box 25, F.16). In it she expressed her appreciation of Shorter's examination of the effects on individuals and relationships of the "rupture of most of the social controls ... in the 1960s and '70s" (Shorter 7). Of particular interest to Engel was his reference to contemporary women's experience of dispossession of their traditional identity which was forcing them to feel like exiles. For their

roles in the institution of marriage, in the family and in the world had become uncertain and confused. Engel shares Shorter's assessment that the break came when the strong connection along the chain of the generations ceased any longer to transmit a sense of meaningful identity to succeeding generations. Engel's understanding of a strong reason for the break between the older and younger generations of women is that the elder generation's Puritan, judgmental attitude transmitted a legacy of guilt instead of encouragement to their daughters that they shape their lives anew. Indeed, the experience of the latter was akin to that of the offspring of immigrants in a new land.

Engel conveys her understanding of the depth of change impinging on women's sense of self in her perception that her gender is as fundamental as "a part of my particular regionalism" (Branching Out '78, 40). Her insight that her very gender is like an aspect of a country, a region, connotes her awareness of the depth of change in women's lives in the sixties and seventies, a change that indeed, affects the very ground of their being. Nevertheless she does not confine herself to this 'regionalism':

...we need to learn about power structures and how they function, and not continue to write solely about women's problems .... One thing that nobody mentions about me is that for three years I was a library trustee in Toronto. I found this to be an extremely demanding, unpaid job. But it taught me a very great



deal about the workings of power structures and how social change is brought about (Branching Out, 1978: 12,40).

Her awareness of the need for social change is clear, therefore; even more importantly, the above is evidence of her acknowledgement of the need for women to question how they might find their place in this changing world.

That Hugh MacLennan was Engel's supervisor for the writing of her Master's thesis on the Canadian novel from 1920-1955 may have influenced Engel's questioning and unconventional approach to the role of religion in fostering growth, particularly in a time of change. MacLennan has declared to his biographer, Elspeth Cameron, that "The God I believe in is not the God of my Calvinist ancestors" as he explains:

My mortal quarrel with Calvinism was not that it denied realities, but that it inculcated into children the idea that God was each man's personal enemy, and that a man committed a sin merely by existing (Cameron 348, 229).

Engel would have appreciated MacLennan's stance toward the capability of religion to sustain a life while criticising one of its accretions, a Puritan judgmental outlook. Moreover, she would have felt free through her association with him to pursue the significance of such a perspective. Indeed, they became friends, continuing to correspond for years. Engel's fiction indicates she was exploring a similar concern. In interviews

she remarked "I grew up in a family of perfectionists [who harped on] this eternal insistence that we ought to be perfect" (Room of One's Own vol.9, no.2 (1984): 2) and "[M]aybe I was trying to cut loose from the Victorian thing that dominated my childhood" (Branching Out vol.5 (1978):12).

This awareness of perfectionism that passes from Engel's personal experience into her work informs the lives of her fictional women. Coupled with her perception of the individual's inability to achieve perfection is her realization of the lack of perfection in society. The quandary of what to do when you realize the failure of such a religious attitude at both the personal and social levels concerns Engel in her life as well as in her fiction (Room of One's Own, vol.9, no.2, June, 1984, 29,30). It is out of this quandary that Engel's engagement with the influence of religion on a life springs. Her rejection of this Puritan belief does not prevent her from declaring that a society, fraught with change, calls for experiment in alternative lifestyles that acknowledge the place for a religious and spiritual dimension. This can be seen in her comment on The Glassy Sea:

My next novel [The Glassy Sea] is about alternate lifestyles, about Mary and Martha, about whether to be contemplative ... (I hope it will provide a new perspective for women.) (Branching Out (1978),40).

Moreover, Engel's attempts to convey in her fiction her women's spiritual struggle to deal with their experience of

fragmentation lead her to seek alternative forms of structure.

In their introduction to The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development (1983) the editors refer to the vital interest in the search for wholeness of life by 20th century women writers. Indeed they claim that "the novel of development" (the evolution of a coherent self) has become "... the most salient form of literature" among contemporary women writing about female characters (13). The three editors speak rather confidently of many "women writers who now for the first time find themselves in a world increasingly responsive to their needs" (13). That this can be said after the personal and social confusion of the sixties and seventies, as depicted in the work of women writers such as Engel, is significant. The editors' observation, coming nearly a decade after Engel began to write, implies their recognition not only of progress in society's responsiveness to women's need to find a new place in society, but also progress in the saliency of the work of women-writers like Engel. Indeed, the editors' comments imply that they have taken note of the prophetic quality and the sense of crucial urgency that emerged in the writers of those earlier decades. It is understandable, therefore, that Engel's women feel they are engaging in a battle to find a place in the changing world of the sixties and seventies. Moreover, like Engel herself, they realize the necessity that feminine perspectives as fundamental as their regionalism be heard for the good of the overall 'country', to expand Engel's sharply

Canadian metaphor.

One central aspect of Engel's assertion of the connection of 'super-reality' with 'everyday life' involves her attempt to depict the drastic change in women's attitudes toward their sexuality, in the context of their own relationship to society. With the development of chemical means of birth control, pregnancy was no longer an expected consequence of sexual activity. This affected relations between women and men as women anticipated relief from child-bearing and freedom to pursue further education and participation in a career outside the home. It also put women in conflict with the body-mind split that characterized the Puritan reticence toward sexuality of their mothers. However, in the decades of the sixties and seventies, women found that the possibility of choice about childbearing still was impinged upon by the threat of time running out as the onset of menopause loomed. Equally, they viewed the easier availability of abortion with mixed feelings. Engel's women struggle with the new implications of the sexual revolution that distinguishes so markedly their time from that of the previous generation. Childbearing and anticipation of the menopause and their effects appear in The Honeyman Festival and The Glassy Sea. Abortion and confusion about sexuality appear in Bear. Yet Engel's women realize that they are not satisfied to escape behind the facade of the body-mind split that their mothers sought. For they see that the very existence of the facade symbolized the fragmentation of the previous

generation which hindered them from expressing their sexuality free from the fear of multiple births and the guilt of enjoyment of their sexual nature. Unlike their mothers the younger generation of women begin to move toward owning their sexuality as an essential part of the wholeness they seek. Engel's development of a spiritual dimension to her women's longing for integration as a re-birth, therefore, includes an acceptance of the physical side of their nature.

Engel, therefore, is very much aware that women's exilic experience originates not only from the deep division between women and men but also from that among women themselves. In particular, she is interested in the growing gulf between them and their mothers. She realizes that the spiritual nature of the struggle for wholeness, therefore, begins in loneliness. It arises out of the experience of separation from the roles shaped by generations of their mothers and grandmothers and in the realization that they must shape a renewed sense of their 'regionalism'. Engel, as she articulates in the seventies the connection of loneliness with the spiritual dimension of women's struggle to define themselves, anticipates a rising interest in religious experience in women writers in the eighties. Carol Ochs, in her book, Women and Spirituality, explains that what defines a struggle as spiritual is the situation of having "no list of experiences with which to compare our own and no acceptable standard against which to measure our life" (144). Indeed, Ochs identifies such

loneliness as akin to that of an alien:

Our experiences are so changeable - we move rapidly from joy to fear, from sorrow to comfort - and seem to provide a shaky foundation for our relationship to reality, yet they mirror a reality that we cannot grasp without distortion nor control without estrangement (144).

Engel's use of images of the 'surreal' or of 'super-reality' to present her women's sense of a 'shaky' reality confirms Ochs' observation. Moreover, the use of such images of distortion places her in the company of those writers of the sixties and seventies who interest also literary critic, Sharon Spencer. For Spencer observes that new shapes of the novel reflect "a clearly realistic attempt to approximate a comprehensive view of reality ... by insisting upon the crucial nature of some generally ignored or derided perspective" (3,4). This observation would fit with Engel's conviction that a comprehensive view of the reality of women's sense of self must be expressed through accepting the unity of body and mind. Engel's awareness of the younger women's struggle to integrate all aspects of their lives in opposition to the body-mind split of the previous generation is at the heart of her claim that her gender is central to the ground of her being.

Spencer notes as do Friedman and Donley the influence of Einstein's new ideas about the nature of the universe on writers intent on conveying their protagonists' struggle for "a

change in [the] imaginative picture of the world" (Friedman and Donley intro.1). Indeed, the observations of these critics speak to the depiction by women-writers of their protagonists' need to achieve a more comprehensive view of reality. One way that Engel conveys the distortion of reality expressed in her women's struggle to achieve the unity of body and mind missing in their mothers' lives is through the use of dream-images. Engel's use of a single perspective in the three novels examined in this thesis creates a very high intensity of focus which reveals an extreme loneliness, one which, Ochs points out, leads to distortion of reality. The use of such a perspective, characteristic of a closed structure as noted by Sharon Spencer, creates opportunity for writers to use images of dreams which heighten the critical nature of their women's confusion about integration of their lives:

...the novel with a closed structure often is indebted to the liberating powers of dream and of the unconscious mind. The dream provides this type of novel with an appropriate source not only of images and techniques for organizing the various elements of the tale by means of free association, but also with an approximation of a spiritual dimension (28).

In Minn's 'waking dream' of conversing with the Puritan Creator she expresses her fear of passing on to her children the sense of the body-mind split she received from her mother. To the Creator's question, "What is reality?" she replies with

reference to the body: "Plumbing, my Lord ... And, well, glands, my Lord..." (70). Minn progresses from there to refer to the mind, psychology and philosophy until she touches on the need for love to transform the old theology of the Puritans. Minn's sense of the Lord's approval of the process of unifying the body and the mind that she has presented assures her of his acceptance. Indeed, in his parting words, "Pass on, oh daughter of Weeping Willie, and of Gertrude-and-Alice Stein" he acknowledges the burden of body-mind split imparted to her by the previous generation of women in her life (71). For between them Minn's mother, Gertrude and her aunt Alice represent the submersion of emotion under reason on the one hand and of powerful emotional and sexual feelings on the other hand. The implication is that together, but not individually, they represent the unity of mind and body. The reference to the relationship between writer Gertrude Stein and her companion Alice Toklas is similar to that of her mother and aunt.

Lou's dream of being threatened with being eaten alive by Grinty and Greedy, characters in a child's book, follows the kindling of guilt over her awareness of her powerful sexual feelings in the bear's company. Her long-standing fragmentation involving guilt about sex goes back to her experience as "a half child in a school gym, being held to a man's body for the first time, flushed, confused, and guilty" (114). Rita's 'waking' dream symbolizes her longing to integrate the fragmented aspects of her self which she sees in rags and



tatters floating around the house in  
 eddies of wind, [her] old self lying on the dirty road  
 listening to underground streams, [her] sensual self  
 taunting Anthony [the Bishop's envoy], and another  
 piece of [her] wrestling with all I could know of  
 Hopkins' God ... (154).

Here, Rita progresses toward a wholeness of self which includes  
 body, mind and spirit.

Engel's depiction of her women's spiritual struggle to  
 define self by means of mentally turning from the present to  
 the past before the women can address the future positively  
 cannot easily be portrayed in a traditionally linear,  
 chronological ordering of time and place. Her experimenting  
 with this cyclical aspect of structure accords with the theory  
 of time shapes as explained by the critic, David Leon Hegdon in  
 1977. He claims that "as authors carve forms with beginnings,  
 middles and endings from time, time assumes a variety of  
 'shapes'- shapes which are adjuncts to meaning in the work"  
 (4). His description of retrospective time is significant in  
 coming to understand Engel's treatment of time and place. It  
 emphasizes what Kirkegaard means in his statement, "Life can  
 only be lived forward and understood backward" (Hegdon 6). As  
 Hegdon suggests:

Retrospective time provides the structural framework  
 for confession and spiritual autobiographies. Passages  
 selected almost at random from Saint Augustine's

Confessions ... provide clear examples of the retrospective time shape (7).

Hegdon explains that a character involved in 'retrospective' time is active in a three-fold way; firstly, there is her present on-going daily life; secondly, because of a particular crisis brought on by an event or a moment which forces recognition of a need of transformation, the character stops to consider the past and to try to make sense of it; thirdly, as she steps "out of time's flux", the possibility of change becomes a new focus (7). His insights into an author's use of the retrospective 'time shape' to convey a spiritual struggle bear a relationship to those in M.H. Abram's essay, "The Apocalypse Within" as discussed in Chapter One. The work of both critics sheds light on a reader's understanding of the relationship between Engel's style and substance.

Relevant also to Engel's experimentation with style is Spencer's observation concerning the revolutionary influence of Einstein upon the manner in which imaginative writers treat space and time (intro. xvii). Engel manifests this influence through structures which convey a space-time continuum derived from the new physics of Einstein. In other words, she draws upon the potential in his view, connected with how the physical world is shaped and functions, to create images of a personal world being shaped by her protagonists. Engel's use of such images is evident in all three of the novels examined in this thesis. In The Honeyman Festival, Minn's progress in coming to

terms with What is right? What is real? brings her closer to a sense of integration. Outside the room where she is remembering her past as she rests beside her sleeping children, the curved space of the long hallway cluttered with boxes of rubbish implies her progress in beginning to shape her personal world, her life, an interesting reflection of Einstein's theory of relativity. In Bear, Lou's continuing need to define herself in spite of the move from her tunnel-like existence in the archival basement with its dust-streaked windows to the splendid Cary House on an island is conveyed by Engel's images of the space-time continuum. Although the upstairs study in Cary House is flooded with light by windows that look out over the river, the lower floor of the house contains small, basement-like, dusty windows through which Lou sees the "last sun slanting low" (24). Thus, Lou almost unconsciously is aware that she is approaching the boundary between being caught once again in her old world of a near-buried life and entering a renewed phase of that life. In The Glassy Sea, Rita's long autobiographical letter presents the process of her very life itself as an image of the space-time continuum implicit in understanding the process of how to turn her fragmentation into wholeness: "I wanted a world; yes, that was it ... a world ...[I] could have an importance in" (155).

Friedman and Donley observe that "Einstein's position that not all data true for one observer will also be true for another observer in another frame of reference", while it

belongs to scientific observation of the universe, stimulates the imagination to envision a sense of human liberation (Friedman and Donley 69). In his position, Einstein emphasizes the importance of the frame of reference of the individual observer over the old Newtonian perspective of a predictable, mechanical world. This observation may be applied to the situation of Engel's women who are unwilling to labour under the old mechanistic order, for them, the burden of Victorian perfectibility, which is ineffective in a world at once chaotic, but potentially dynamic toward change. Minn's feelings of being "powerless, without initiative" in her mother's spotless and orderly house burdens her with the Puritan standard that 'cleanliness is next to godliness': "the smell of furniture polish sapped her. The hopelessness of reinventing this dying world..." (102). Lou's vulnerability to her past is directly related to her guilt at failing to meet the Puritan standards impressed upon her early by her parents: "... she was always ashamed, for the image of the Good Life long ago [was] stamped on her soul ... and she suffered in contrast" (12). Rita at the end of her long autobiographical letter is unable to accept the Bishop's invitation to take up her life in a new kind of service in her re-consecrated convent: "I'm not the strong vessel you need; ... [my cracks] are crucial and deep; I won't do" (141).

Thus, it is obvious that Engel is among the company of writers experimenting with structures capable of examining the

effect upon the human condition of changing times. Her use of dream and exploration of the unconscious mind which are open to her by use of the single perspective and her treatment of time and place as a continuum allow her to shape an apocalyptic framework which opens up the possibility to explore the spiritual dimension. Central to Engel's resolution of the spiritual depth of her women's struggle is the development of relationship, of love. This accords with Carol Ochs' observation that defining a spiritual dimension in the face of chaos calls for a resolution that is to be approached by a commitment of love (144). Awareness of the importance of such a commitment can be seen from the beginning of the urgent, inner apocalyptic struggle in all three of Engel's women, Minn, Lou and Rita. It is apparent in Minn's washing of the failed sculptor's hands and the drying of them with her mother's white towel, in Lou's renewed sense of how to love herself through her love for the innocent bear, and in Rita's insight that women and men "... must love one another or die!", to counter "the fall-out from the battle of the sexes" (161, 157). In times of great change such as Engel's women experience, the absence of a list of a meaningful experiences understood and accepted by the various generations calls for inductive, not deductive action. It is through that realization that her women come to see the crucial nature of love.

It will be seen that this thesis treats the term apocalyptic as both a religious or philosophic term and a literary term. In

harking back to the theologian George Caird we recall his view that the term apocalypse has had a two-fold meaning since John wrote his Revelation. Caird states "John calls his book an apocalypse or revelation, and this title not only describes its content, but classifies it as a recognized type of literature" (Caird 9). Moreover, he refers to John as a visionary pastor "who thought with his pen, and whose meditations bodied forth into fresh vision as he wrote, so that vision and art were not two processes but one" (13). Caird writing in the sixties acknowledges that a modern "generation which has accepted surrealist art and has become familiar with the kaleidoscopic quality of dream imagery" continues to find the apocalypse a source of interest (13).

It is interesting to observe how Caird's insight could be applied to the element of magic realism whose presence in Canadian fiction is discussed by Geoff Hancock. Engel's fiction is not mentioned by Hancock. However, her declaration that her art proceeds from a perspective that includes the potential of surrealism and super-reality to reveal the depths of experience that are felt but not otherwise easily demonstrated would ally her work with other writers he discusses. Hancock's explanation that the term, magic realism, raises fundamental questions about personal and social identity, the nature of reality and the sense of exile associates it with the experience of tension implicit in an apocalyptic time that interests Engel. For he maintains that the use of magic realism by writers reflects

their awareness of a contemporary "crisis in reality and the corresponding crisis in the literary imagination" (Magic Realism: An Anthology 42).

Hancock's noting of the capability of the images in this technique to reflect the action of memory to "mix the probable and improbable" speaks to the development of fantastic reality by Engel in her fiction (Hancock 30). While the term, magic realism, pertains particularly to Lou's experience in Bear, its presence may be seen in The Honeyman Festival and in The Glassy Sea. The depiction of a woman falling in love with a bear is not a conceit used by Engel; rather its very improbability set in juxtaposition with the reality of Lou's alienation from self, from relationship with others and from nature sharpens Engel's focus upon the intensity of Lou's suffering and the crucial imperative that it be alleviated. The bizarre episode of Minn apparently talking to aspects of her divided self expresses her lack of wholeness. The shift of focus to the Creator represents Engel's process of defining Minn's suffering under the religious attitude of perfectionism. The participation by the Creator and Minn in a kind of catechism continues on this bizarre note until the reader realizes that Minn has progressed to the point of articulating a question to the Creator that is crucial to her integration: "Why don't you condescend and give us another theology?" (71) Rita in her letter to the Bishop describes her only vision connected with Eglantine House. In it both her longing for

wholeness and her ambiguous attitude toward her sexuality caused by her burden of a Puritan body-mind split are apparent:

I saw myself standing purified and free, at the edge of a body of water, alone, dressed in white linen and holding one [pearl... I was seeing myself as Venus, I think, but for one moment I thought I was a saint (87).

This passage by Engel indicates how she is using similar images to those writers observed by Hancock; here the exaggerated images of magic realism extend the fictions so that "they are not limited by the linear perceptions of time, the cause and effect of plot, or the accuracy of fact" (44).

Engel's particular compression of time and place to create a sense of critical spiritual struggle is similar to that of Mary McCarthy in The Company She Keeps, as described by Patricia Meyer Spacks in her essay "Mary McCarthy: Society's Demands". Spacks writes about that author's view that the limitation of her protagonist's world is a factor in her struggle for wholeness and that, moreover, the struggle within confined, limited space and time characterizes it as a specifically spiritual struggle. Spacks comments:

What Margaret is seems fully defined by where she is, in time and space: this fact generates her pain. She articulates the complicated and often contradictory values of her world, demands of herself that she articulate them flawlessly.... Her highest achievement is insight, for which she prays: "If the



flesh must be blind, let the spirit see. Preserve me in disunity" (90).

Two of Engel's short stories, "The Tattooed Woman" and "The Last Wife", describe within the extreme limitations of time and place imposed by the story's structure patterns seen in more extended versions in the three novels. Like a skilled artist turning to paint a miniature, Engel in the reduced scope of the short-story meets the challenge to convey her insight into the spiritual struggle of her women to find a way to grow in a time of cataclysmic change. Images of fragmented lives set within a crumbling society inform her women's crises. Engel articulates the women's sense of being caught between the failure to meet the Puritan standards of perfection set in their parental homes and their confusion about how to live. In the manner of the short-story writer she shows them in brief episodes struggling at the very point of transition to embrace the totality of their nature. To create the women's sense of spiritual crisis, Engel draws upon images that create a sense of super-reality, of the surreal (terms which she uses interchangeably) and of the fantastic juxtaposition of the improbable and the probable.

"The Tattooed Woman" (1975), is an illustration of her insight that spirituality encompasses the totality of what it means to be human. It deals with a middle-aged woman's struggle to define her sense of self upon realizing that her husband is unwilling to accept her 'imperfection', caused by natural aging. She perceives his falling in love with a younger woman

as an ultimate casting-in-doubt of her very identity.

This story points up the fragmentation she experiences at several levels. On the physical level, regardless of her relationship with her husband, her passage from young womanhood to middle-age implies a struggle toward a new sense of self with the arrival of the menopause. That her husband is rejecting her because she is no longer young and that she, therefore, is being penalized for having reached a natural stage of her life make her conflict more keenly felt. Indeed, she jumps to the conclusion that she is to blame for his rejection:

She has nothing to offer. She had kept her figure, but her body, transformed by hysterectomy and appendectomy, was not new or neat or pretty (4).

The burden of perfectionism she carries from her upbringing is evident in her almost unthinking acceptance of her husband's belief that adultery is understandable in a man as he grows older. Moreover, her initial unquestioning attitude toward the toleration of her mother's generation of the ingrained Victorian mores that co-exist with such a Puritan religious view is obvious:

She had taken it with great dignity, she decided, and of course there was no other way.... She had taken it like a queen, she decided, because her mother had told her when something is hard, pretend you are a queen (The Tattooed Woman 4).

However, her repetition of the refrain, "they had been married for twenty-one years"; signifies her desperate attempt to come to terms with what has happened to her (4). It is a lament that emphasizes not only her personal break with the past but also her realization of the instability of marriage in an increasingly chaotic society. Engel's use of the two women, the older wife and the younger mistress, as foils enables her to focus, at both the personal and societal levels, on the confusion that affects women's perception of themselves in the seventies. Engel has given no name to the older woman nor to her husband. In this way they appear to bear a universality, evidence of the increasing numbers of failed marriages, including those of long-standing. That the young woman, Linda, is named, signifies the older woman's personalizing of her own lost youth. She sees the young woman as almost a surrealistic reincarnation of her past self:

When I was young, I clerked in the store, like Linda. My name has the same number of letters as Linda. I am forty-two and she is twenty-one. She is a year older than my son. She is from Winnipeg and I am from Winnipeg ... (8).

Her preoccupation with her past, in the person of Linda, is a sign of her reluctance to live in the present and her hopelessness about the future.

The woman's act of carving designs on her forehead, cheeks, arms and legs with a razor conveys her attempt to articulate

her fragmentation so that she might begin to grasp her sense of self. While it represents an unspoken expression of a deeply-felt inner hurt she is not yet able to verbalize because she initially believes the break-up is her fault, it represents an incipient positive sign of her development toward wholeness. For she does not use the razor to kill herself. Instead, she begins to see the carvings on her skin as a badge of what is her greatest asset, her experience. For the marks are not random and slashing, but form a design: "Experience must show," she thought" (6).

She is beginning to take issue with her state of compression at being caught between her mother's Victorian view of the value of women's regal endurance in matrimonial matters and the permissive view of the present emerging society. Moreover, her realization represents the loosening of her burden of perfectionism as a means of evaluating her life and society. For she acknowledges the long, overdue nature of her need to grow and that society's changes have left her behind over the last twenty-one years. This leads to her realization that:

I am an artist, now, she thought, a true artist.

My body is my canvas. I am very old, and very beautiful, I am carved like an old shaman, I am an artifact of an old culture, my body is a pictograph from prehistory, it has been used and bent and violated and broken, but I have resisted.

I am Somebody (8).

Engel's comprehensive view of the achievement of renewed identity emerges in her protagonist's perception in religious terms of herself as a shaman, a healer, a kind of 'priest-doctor'. The woman is moving toward not only accepting her imperfection but valuing it. Thus, her perception of her less-than-perfect body as a valued old and beautiful canvas carved in the shape of 'an old shaman' signifies her movement toward a spiritual sense of wholeness. Indeed, she is "Somebody" (8). The woman's apocalyptic awareness, therefore, emerges in her linking of herself and society in the hope that in spite of the changes that have caused her and "the old culture" to become fragmented, a new identity is possible (8). This is evidence of Engel's positive understanding of an apocalyptic period that makes itself felt at both personal and social levels.

In the short story, "The Last Wife", published in 1977, both Engel's criticism of a Puritan upbringing and her emphasis on the spiritual dimension of women's struggle for wholeness can be found. Pat experiences a double irony in that she feels guilty about "leading a life that so obviously contained the Christian virtues that she had been brought up to fulfil" (14,15). The double irony lies also in her experience of guilt in standing pat in the face of so much change in her present society. She perceives that growth can be both personally and societally risky, "Dangerous, that, with what was in the air these days: never be smug" (15).

That it is Pat's birthday, one on which she is approaching

forty, implies she is at an important transitional point. Her standing on the ladder to mend a crack in the ceiling is an image of her budding awareness that her stirrings to gain perspective on her life are in some way associated with changes in society. She is beginning to worry, therefore, about her dual perception of the growing obsolescence of her identity as a traditional wife in a rapidly changing time and of her uncertainty about how to express herself in the future. However, her focus is not yet seriously sharpened on herself, for it is her son's room she is working on. Her long-standing roles as mother, careful homemaker and dutiful wife appear to have long defined her.

Moreover, the image of Pat standing on a ladder addressing a crack in the ceiling is an apocalyptic one, implying Engel's positive interpretation of the apocalyptic framework in which her protagonist's spiritual struggle for wholeness is set. It is interesting to compare Engel's use of the cracked wall-image with its use by a German woman writer of the seventies, Ingeborg Bachmann in Malina, referred to in The Voyage In. Interestingly, Frieden suggests that in Bachmann's novel, the cracked wall represents Malina's anxiety about expressing her desire for wholeness of life in a society that is threatening to crumble. Moreover, it represents her fear that her identity may be "swallowed up by a world that accommodates her only in providing a crack in the wall into which she can silently step and thus pass out of existence" (Voyage In 310). Obviously,

Engel and Bachmann differ in their experience of what Frieden characterizes as " the birth of consciousness" (310).

Engel's development of women that are foils to one another presents the depth of personal and social confusion of the sixties and seventies. The relationship between Pat and Marina is an example. Indeed, they are well named. For Pat has been 'standing pat' as a traditional wife in a role passed on by her mother before her, and Marina, named for the sea, has cast herself off from the traditional roles to try to find her way in a society apparently without direction. Disintegrating relationships between men and women, between parents and young people, frenzied attempts to find meaningful sexual expression and new expressions of work have affected Marina. Both women in "The Last Wife" need each other for confirmation as to who they have been and who they might become in such a turbulent society. Pat, in reply to her husband's criticism of the close relationship between her and her friend, Marina, explains in this way, "Ying and yang, I guess so-oh, I don't mean sex, Chris [as she notices him flinch] .... We complement each other" (The Tattooed Woman 16). This is indicative that each woman's search for wholeness is incomplete.

Conflict between women and men, at odds about their relationships, is apparent in Pat's experience. She is aware that, even in a relatively peaceful relationship with her husband, any departure from what he expects or for that matter from what she, herself, has come to expect from her established

life is risky, even dangerous. Pat's willingness to take the risk to grow is basically a departure from her Puritan upbringing with its emphasis on perfectionism. Thus, her past artistic work becomes an assessment of her past self: "the reason her drawings had not been good was that they were too easy, too perfect; they did not reach out, or strive" (20). Moreover, her struggle to gain a new sense of self is seen as a spiritual one, involving relationship. In the midst of her worry over her own attempt to grow, she, also, is concerned about Marina's vulnerability and the possibility of her succumbing to the confusion of her life and the world. Pat's admission to her husband that she prays for Marina does not go quite as far as admission of praying for herself but it is implied in her perception that she and Marina complement each other and that each aspires toward wholeness.

Pat begins to question the basis of the apparently peaceful relationship with her husband, realizing that their reluctance to change may be creating stagnancy instead of peace. Her husband's anger, that she has broken a promise he believes they gave to one another about not believing in God, does not shatter Pat. Her husband's attitude in this matter reflects a lessening in the influence of religious institutions as society becomes more secular in the seventies. Indeed, his anger appears to serve as an opportunity for her to articulate what is the core of her own belief, not just a set of Christian virtues she feels she has been somehow forced to fulfil to



pacify her parents:

She was half amused. [Perhaps the other half is relief]

He might be accusing her of having an affair.

"Look, Chris, anything that can help you keep your still centre is good. You get drunk, sometimes, and spew out all your bad feelings. Do I object?

Then why shouldn't I have little pleading conversations with the corner of the Lord I can't disbelieve in?"

(19)

Here, as in her novels, Engel shows that her character's experience of the inability of perfectionism to allow her to grow is alleviated by the action of owning the source of her fragmentation and claiming the imperative to grow in the context of her relationships and society. This view is substantiated by Pat's experience of contentment, indeed, a sense of wholeness, in the face of her husband's anger at her admission of reliance on prayer to create "a still centre" (19). What is even more revealing is that Pat is content because "her life had a flaw in it now, and she felt better" (20). The significance of this short story is connected directly to that of Minn's, Rita's and Lou's stories and reflects Judi Roller's observation that "the acceptance of wholeness ... implies ... a facing ... [that] chaos is not always reduced to order, but may exist simultaneously with it" (95).

Implicit in Engel's fiction, therefore, is her articulation

of the spiritual nature of women's struggle to express their 'regionalism', their feminine perspective, in a turbulent, apocalyptic world in which they seek to find an importance. The concluding three chapters will, demonstrate through an examination of The Honeyman Festival, Bear and The Glassy Sea, a progression in Engel's exploration of the spiritual dimension of such a struggle.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For a general discussion of the theme of exile in Canadian fiction, see Hallvard Dahlie, Varieties of Exile: The Canadian Experience. Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1976.

<sup>2</sup>For a layman's understanding of Einstein's Theory of Relativity, see Joe Schwartz; Einstein for Beginners, illustrated by Michael McGuinness; New York: Pantheon Books, 1979.

### Chapter Three

At the very beginning of The Honeyman Festival, Engel's use of an apocalyptic image informs the nature, not only of her woman's struggle, but of the times in which it is set. A sense of crisis in Minn's life, of something waiting to be revealed, is thrust forward, as large as her globe of a belly which, from her angle of vision as the bath-water laps around her pregnant body, appears "to meet the spotted ceiling" (1) Thus, Engel conveys a sense of a parallel between the timing of Minn's aspiration toward a new development of self and her consciousness of the crumbling world, impinging on her own. Moreover, a second parallel emerges. Engel's association of her protagonist's urgent desire for change with the impending birth of the child suggests that Minn longs for nothing less than a re-birth of self. The emergence of her twinned question, "What is right? What is real?", by its import and association, attests that her tension is generated by her failure to accomplish "the puritan hurdle-course she had been taught to believe in" (121, 8). Her failure affects her ability to grow and to comprehend reality. However, that Minn asks this at all is a mark both of her hope and her desperation.

With her children asleep upstairs, her attic-tenants, the Flower Children, out of the house and her husband, Norman, "as usual ... away" with his work, Minn faces her task alone (2). Her vulnerability in the face of the daunting task that lies before her is implicit in her position, of lying prone in the

bath that scarcely contains her, her mind whirling even as her body is close to collapse. She uses her imagination to peer through the layers of her own flesh, through the division of cells to where the child is. Similarly, she is aware that to begin her integration she must turn her attention to the layers of her past where her guilt originates. But she will not rest there, even as the unborn child must enter the world of the present. Minn's sense of the integral nature of relationship, even from conception, conveys an early hint of a working out of the double question that engages her:

She tapped [the unborn child] with an extended finger, to let it know how things would be.... From conception, there was relationship of sorts. She covered her belly with a wrung-out cloth to keep it warm (2).

Following her bath, Minn's tension between her past and the present is emphasized in her early-evening compulsive walking back and forth through the fourteen rooms of her old house. Her association of her movement with the image of the stations of the cross gives a sense of urgent mission as night approaches. It, like Christ's experience, involves both the threat of death and the promise of new life. What Minn is hoping for is healing, transcending her suffering from guilt. Thus, Engel makes clear the nature of her character's concern about what is right. It goes beyond the search for a moral code. Indeed, Minn, is beginning to articulate it as a process of discovery

of the importance of the primacy of love in religion, which her parental generation had displaced by a Puritan judgmental attitude. Minn's struggle, therefore, is fundamentally a spiritual one, set in an apocalyptic time. This is apparent in her thought, "Homesick, am I? Everyone's homesick now. If you don't know how to make a new world, you fall back on the old one" (52).

Minn, "nearer forty than thirty", the mother of three young children, four years and under, is struck by the complexity of her growing sense of exile from herself, from her foreign-correspondent husband, and from her pluralistic society (3). Engel, by the establishment of the apocalyptic image at the outset of the novel, implies her character's present involvement with unresolved conflicts of her past. Moreover, its use allows her character through her memory to range to and fro over the complex layers of that past, even as she experiences mounting anxiety about the future. Thus, the people in those places from her past arise to meet Minn in her memories, forcing her to deal with the failure of the Puritan perfectionist influence that burdens her life.

Engel's device of a film festival, of which Minn is reluctant host in her house, opens up a confrontation between her past and present. Thus, the tension builds as she is pulled back and forth between the two, forced to attempt to discern the answer to her twinned question about how to live and how to grasp reality. There are several layers of irony in her being

caught in preparations for a festival that she has not organized, one of an on-going series, dedicated to obscure movie-directors. It is present in the incongruence of her hosting a festival on a night in which she feels a mounting sense of urgency to find a new definition of her life. It is evident in her having to welcome people, from whom she largely feels exiled, who will gather in her living-room to celebrate the late film-director, Honeyman. Significantly, Honeyman was director, not only of Minn who acted in several of his films, but of a golden period of her life from her twentieth to her twenty-fifth year. Most especially, therefore, it is ironic that she, having to act as host of the festival, is aware that she has outgrown Honeyman's once life-sustaining memory and that she, now, perceives him as "a calcified embryo" (21). Her chosen image speaks of both her transitional, bereft state, without his sustaining memory, and the nature of her need. For his accepting affection for her had "made it look easy to live, as if living were some kind of road you strode along and not the puritan hurdle-course she had been taught to believe in" (18).

Engel compresses time and place to barely twelve hours in the life of Minn in her crumbling Victorian house. Her treatment of her protagonist's present reflects the compression of the stages of Minn's life that are forcing her to recognize the necessity for her own re-birth. The impending birth of Minn's baby gives a sense of crucial imminence that she choose

how to live. So, too, does the ringing of the doorbell at several stages of the evening, announcing the arrival of individuals from stages of her past, the wave of strangers celebrating the festival and representatives of society's perfectionist legalism. The appearance in her kitchen of her attic-boarder, the "infinitely young and delicate" Richard, reminds her of the universal longings of that adolescent stage of life (41).

Engel begins her treatment of her protagonist's present in the early evening just as Minn has lowered her heavy body into the bathtub, in a brief respite after putting her children to bed and before she begins to prepare for the festival. Her lonely responsibility and crushing fatigue make her anxious about her ability to keep control of her life. The crumbling condition of her old house simply makes her own sense of fragmentation loom all the larger. In this quiet moment, her realization that "it was hers to remedy the error" underscores the necessity of answering, for the sake of her life, What is right? What is real? (8). The little-used doorbell hoarsely announces the surprise surfacing of a childhood acquaintance, cast up to Minn for years as a model of perfectionism during her growing up in Godwin, a town whose name has overtones of Victorian utilitarianism and pursuit of perfection (23). Later in the evening, Minn's almost dreamy reflections of her childhood memories are shattered by the clear, loud ringing of all the doorbells in the house, announcing the arrival of the



first wave of the festival celebrants. That the young people fixed them during her reverie underscores her need to be alert to the present, as well as the past, in her search for integration of her life.

Minn picks up and lays down her resumption of search for self throughout the progress of the festival. Thus, the persistence of the layers of her past claim her attention by overlapping the stages of her unfolding present. Her lack of ease of movement through the crowd because of her large belly forces her to retreat upstairs to the quiet of her children's rooms. Here, she is free to reflect on her past. Yet, the sound of the voices rising from her living-room below attract and draw her to attempt to participate. Thus, tension builds, created by her lack of resolution of her past and her unfamiliarity with her present society.

Minn's efforts to achieve unity out of the fragments of her life thus far have led to confusion, manifested in the appearance of her house. The decoration of the rooms, particularly that of the living-room, implies overlapping layers of time and place associated with her life. It bears resemblance to her mother's Victorian style but stapled onto the walls are mementoes of Minn's and Norman's early relationship. The passages, particularly the dining-room with its window looking out onto a brick wall, and the littered upstairs ones, imply Minn's need to create order in her life. The urgency of this stage of her life is conveyed in Engel's

observation, "To its fourteen rooms it had two clothes closets and a tendency to race out of control" (15). Moreover, the upstairs hallway is cluttered with "rubbish [standing in] humps", indicative of Minn's unreckoned past (15). Her restless walking, therefore, reflects both her desire for integration and her reluctance to begin. However, it is clear that Minn is aware that the increasing compression of the past upon her present calls for crucial action so that she might live. For, "she could hear time ticking around her, beginning to expand" (2). Indeed, it is an image of Minn's world waiting to be shaped anew.

She is aware of her need to integrate her life by addressing first her past. She realizes that she is diametrically opposed to her mother, Gertrude's way. For to Gertrude, the image of the well-ordered house stands for the well-ordered life. Equally, Gertrude believes the person who avoids memories is better able to stay clear of the confusion of the past. Minn, however, feels herself being drawn more and more to consider the past. The five years she spent with the movie director, Honeyman, in Europe had meant she was free from parental influence. A man nearly old enough to be her father gave her his approval; "...liking is a kind of miracle" (18). Honeyman, in fact, filled Minn's lack of nurturing from Willie, her father. It is understandable that memory of this period has comforted and sustained her in the subsequent years. It has continued even in the recent ones when "fertility had taken

[her and Norman] by storm" and loneliness grew as Norman was working more and more on the other side of the world (2). The glow of the Honeyman years has faded, however, as Minn is being driven more and more to direct her own life even as she bears almost single-handedly the responsibility for her and Norman's children. Now, the living embryo in her womb is a more significant image of her need to grow than is the talisman-like memory of Honeyman. In seeing that the annual festival of his movies is no longer meaningful to her, she is taking a step toward her grasp of what is real. For she perceives that "the wave is finished" (22). Nevertheless, Minn perceives that the miracle of liking, including oneself, is related to the answer she seeks in the span of her two-faceted question.

Minn, nevertheless, must deal with the burden of guilt, engendered in her formative years. Her realization that she can no longer draw her life from its Honeyman 'festival' phase means she must now face her vulnerability engendered in the Godwin period. It is significant, therefore, that her restless walking to and fro is interrupted by the surprise arrival on the scene of Jane-Regina, sent by a social agency in response to Minn's request for help. For during their childhood, Jane-Regina was cast up to Minn by her mother as a model of perfection. This woman's unexpected arrival in Minn's living room marks the beginning of a wave that carries Minn back to her past. Typical of Engel's extended images, Jane-Regina represents not only a foil to Minn but also a younger replica

of her mother. With the ringing of the doorbell, not only Minn's past walks in, but also a representative of what her present might have been.

Immediately, Minn is threatened with an engulfment of guilt:

Can I bear her now? Should I have tried seriously for an abortion, alcoholics on both sides of the family and Annie [her retarded sister], me over thirty-five and who needs more kids in the world? (23).

In turning to her distant past, she is hanging on by the skin of her teeth but "decide[s] to hope for the best: Sheer plod makes plough down sillion/shine ... (23). Minn's use of Gerard Manley Hopkins' quotation emphasizes her awareness of the spiritual nature of the struggle which lies ahead. Her acknowledgement of the need to look her past in the face is implied in her staring into Jane-Regina's eyes. Yet, she fears that she will be swallowed up. Indeed, "the glittering pupils seemed to enlarge" just as earlier Minn experienced anxiety at time expanding all around her (25). Jane-Regina's compulsive talking washes over her like a flood, leaving her nearly "hypnotized" (30 ). But she is able to hang onto reality by "hoping that the words would go away and what made them so emotional would finally be revealed" (24).

Obviously, Minn's reaction hearkens back to her childhood bewilderment in trying to understand her unemotional mother. This explains the diminishment of her behavior to that of a child in her reaction to Jane-Regina; "Thank you for coming",

she said in a small, obedient voice", as if speaking to her mother (30). The inhibiting influence of that training on Minn's growing-up years is apparent, in her small rebellious thought that mention of the body's functions is taboo. For later, from that child's world, transferred to the adult, she "tr[ies] to remember who it was at summer camp who could fart at will" (30). Minn suspects that Jane-Regina's compulsive talk and obsessive attention to other people's lives betray her fastidiousness about sexuality and an attitude of a voyeur. This is behind the sexual image that passes through Minn's mind as she recalls a sign in "the Bologna railway station ladies' loo" in the midst of Jane-Regina's flood of words (29). The image of the icebergs that Minn imagines are hiding in Jane-Regina's eyes conveys the influence of the pursuit of perfection that Jane-Regina has been so indoctrinated by. That Minn dismisses this woman from her past, without warmth, as she "went determinedly into the dark" is a sign that she, too, as well as Jane-Regina bears the stamp of cold perfectionism. (32).

Minn's realization that the discovery of "the smallest possible spot" on Jane-Regina's gift of baby clothes "exquisitely confined in uncrumpled tissue paper" gives her satisfaction, is revealing (34,36). She is struck by the tyranny of perfectionism in her own life and its tendency to lead to "small-mindedness" and "nit-picking", a diminishment close to death (34). Jane-Regina's gift to Minn of the book,

The Challenge of Childhood, is ironic for it implies that she puts more stock in theory than in Minn's experience.

Understandably, Minn refers to such manuals as "the new tyranny", equating them with an expression of the pursuit of perfection (34). The manual is like a message from Minn's mother:

Child-raising manuals continually destroyed her, pushed her against monoliths: the perfect housekeeper, the perfect disciplinarian, the perfect mother. There was no way of accepting failure ... (35).

Thus, Engel's development of her woman's struggle toward a concept of wholeness in the face of a religious attitude emerges. Indeed, the double question, in particular, the part of "living realistically" is articulated (38). Moreover, a definition of what is right begins to emerge in Minn's reaction to Jane-Regina's visit, that devotion to perfection leads away from relationship, from expression of love.

Minn is drawn almost masochistically to the child-raising manual, as if she were attempting to stare down Guilt itself. Yet, ironically, the manual leads Minn to consider the crucial adolescent period of her life. She imagines the bad smell of a damp wicker fern stand, reminiscent of her mother's house, filling her nostrils. It appears to herald the bad smell of guilt, prompting Minn to recall her own puberty when sexuality, "the masonry of female mysteries" first dawned (36). She realizes they were mysteries because girls' bodies and the

implications of their physicality were referred to in whispers, with inaccurate vocabulary and a sense of warning and shame by their elders. The lack of free exchange between the female generations concerning puberty led to Minn's early turning to the readily available glossy American magazines everywhere in Canada. But even within their shiny pages she detected, then, the emergence of the emphasis on perfection, that looking attractive was related to being good (36). As Minn looks back to this period, she is aware that a sense of alienation from one's identity existed both in herself and in Canadian society long ago. She singles out a span of two generations in which the young adolescent has been influenced by an intrusive American society. For the Flower Children of the seventies, Richard and his friends, it is the more insidious because it is electronic and generally violent. Learning how to live realistically has not become any easier, Minn realizes.

It can be seen that when she and Norman decorated the house, Minn had tried to approach her past by patterning the design of the attic rooms on the upstairs of her parental home. Recently, however, she has rented out the rooms to a group of contemporary young people disconnected from their families. It is they and not ghosts, therefore, which frequent her attic. Thus, while Minn feels no importance in the world outside as her Godwin friend, Annabel, the medical doctor does, she has not totally isolated herself. Unlike many of her age, she meets the new wave of the present through the Flower Children. Minn's

initiative here constitutes part of her defence against Annabel's criticism. It is the remembered note of censoriousness in her friend's voice, a reflection of the icebergs she has met in Jane-Regina's eyes, that raises Minn's hackles. Along with this coldness, she perceives a lack of imagination in these women behind their unquestioning attitude toward the older generation's expression of a creed. It is important to Minn that the use of imagination be related to memory and to the emotions, detractors to Godwinian belief in perfection.

Interestingly, she begins to see that part of her own reality has been shaped positively by that past she is so critical of: "I do my best, I try.... I haven't run away, though I nearly did once" (40). She admits her own courage, her sense of responsibility, to her children in spite of loneliness. Her chaotic life so strained her two years earlier that even the clean orderliness of a mental institution appeared attractive when she visited a friend. The stillness of the hospital room's perceived state of perfection was undeniable to the exhausted Minn but she recognizes that the perfect state appears to lie next to death. There is a clear identification shaping in her mind that out of chaos may come life, as she thinks, "Hope springs eternal for the mother's breast" (41).

Minn's relationship with the Flower Child, Richard, reveals the importance of imagination to foster understanding when



motivated by sympathy. Through communication with him, Minn is able to achieve a perspective on her own adolescent years. She sees that the lack of a father's substantial presence has been formative in her own growing-up years as in Richard's at present. It is unavoidable that Minn is apprehensive about the effect on their children of Norman's absence. To talk with Richard in her chaotic kitchen gives her opportunity to sort out the change in circumstances from her adolescence and also to distinguish the constants that define the human need to grow:

These were the kids born just after the war....

Togetherness. Four babies in series, budgets, and resurgence of breast-feeding. It should have worked better than this (44).

Minn realizes that, while circumstances change from one period to another in which the young reach adolescence, the need for expressions of liking is integral. Her action of taking Richard into her kitchen and feeding him is a caring one, as "she warmed him up with stew" (45). Indeed, it is a sign of her articulation and expression of what is right.

Minn's question, "Did you ever go to Sunday School, Richard?", is related to her own struggle with the working out of a religious attitude toward what is right and what is real (45). It leads to a revelation that Richard discerns the gap between being taught about the Prodigal Son and not being made welcome at home. Minn has to acknowledge that "it appears that

however you live your life it is some mysterious kind of hell ... (46). But she does not end her communication with Richard on such a desperate note. Just as she thinks that he is inarticulate, denatured and unformed, he asks of Minn, "Tell me what it was like when you went home" (47). Her kindness is beginning to open him up. The answer to What is right? is beginning to follow on the heels of What is real? Indeed, Minn observes that in meeting Richard half-way, the resulting relationship is beginning to shape him more definitely and, as well, to open the way for her to face further her past. The image of Minn continuing to unburden these stored-up memories to the adolescent Richard, now asleep at her table, is a pointed one. For now she must go the rest of the way alone.

A strong apocalyptic image emerges as she turns to the dark passage of her second dining-room:

This one, an anomalous room connecting the kitchen with the front of the house and containing the back stairs, was dark and gritty. Its one window looked out on the next-door wall ... (49).

Engel puts forward the idea that Minn must examine parts of her past that she has left in obscurity and suggests in her image that the process is essential to Minn's integration of life. This room belongs neither to the stage-set living room, complete with Victorian trappings and mementoes of her and Norman's relationship, nor to the kitchen, marked by signs of her present confusion. The passage- room, with its appearance

of being long unused and neglected, signifies the connection between layers of Minn's life waiting to be made. That there is no clear view to the outside indicates, also, her long refusal to look more clearly at herself in fuller relationship with the outside world.

Minn is becoming more aware of what it means to live realistically. She is critical of Reiner, Norman's friend and organizer of the Festival. He is a kind of organizer of people's dreams "who divided the year into months and the months into Festivals of movie directors" (50). His approach is to alphabetize the past. Minn observes, "they had just taken Samuel Fuller down; Honeyman would be succeeded by Abel Gance" (50). Indeed, she rejects his approach to the past because she detects an aspiration after neat perfectionism. Nevertheless, Minn feels her vulnerability as she prepares to approach her Godwin years realistically. As if reluctant to leave the present, she "wipe[s] the kitchen counters again" (50). It is fitting that it is in the big kitchen where she communicates with Richard and begins to address her Godwin past. For it is here in her active present where she has begun to make some progress. She visualizes a startling image which ties her two concerns together:

the sound-and -light show of [Minn's] subconscious [which] sent flickering across her vacant mind the images of Godwin as if it were the only frame of reference she had ever known (51).

It is a telling one in its contrast with the dark passage-room, leading out of the kitchen. Minn's mind is open now to the significance of Godwin as a frame of reference to find integration of her life. That she acknowledges the crucial nature of this point in her life is seen in her awareness that this is "her vulnerable hour" (51). As she approaches her task, she is concurrently aware of the necessity to examine the fragmentation of the world and its relationship to her own:

With some discipline she could force herself  
to think of the larger world, the issues she ought  
be active about ... even her own character, which  
seemed to be getting out of hand (51).

Minn perceives her own inner apocalypse, therefore, as related to such a manifestation in the world. A startling image ties her two concerns together in her thought that:

leads to the picture of a woman and her children  
fleeing the holocaust and they are not quick enough  
and she is not strong enough, and which one should  
she save? (51).

The spiritual dimension of her struggle grows in several questions, related to What is right? What is real?, revealing her intention to act in spite of chaos. The first emerges: "And why not send the mind to dwell on it before it is entirely gone? What else is there to do but watch and pray?" (51) The extent of Minn's feelings of vulnerability is implied in the objectivity she first tries to maintain by adopting, in her

imagination, Honeyman's role as a movie director toward her people. She rationalizes her approach by claiming a difference between the movie she would make and the kind that Honeyman had directed: "Honeyman. All your meticulous work, and ... silly stories about never-never land" (51). But soon she is propelled by her memories to begin to see a more complete picture of her people, particularly her mother. Minn does this by consciously assessing the impact of the times on her mother as she had come to young womanhood. In fact, she uses the same approach in trying to understand herself and also Richard. In trying, therefore, to stay on a realistic course of examining her people, she is forced to set aside Honeyman's metier. Minn acknowledges that one does not get a true picture of reality through a film with "a big lurching movement to climax or fall"; she realizes, "Life did not make art" (55).

Her mother's refusal to indulge in memories has thwarted communication and a growing relationship between her and Minn. Nevertheless, Minn realizes "the real movie is in their heads, in their histories, if you could get it out of them ... because too many memories are a sign of bad housekeeping" (53). Here, she touches on the reason for her mother's adherence to the dogma of perfection. Wanting to know what life is for is a human need, Minn realizes (60). Her mother's way was an attempt to deal with the confusion of what it means to be human. But the abhorrence of the complexities of sexuality, for example, led to "the body-mind split" and "the vocabulary split" that

Minn observes in her mother's generation (58). All seem to be related to her people's way of dealing with human vulnerability, a universal experience.

Another question comes, "Where are my hard, dry surfaces?" (61). Indeed, she is anticipating the need to push forward, "to get on with living" because she has "had enough of suspension" (60). Her use of her imagination, the turning of her mind, is a kind of suspension. What she realizes she needs is "to deal with something live and squirming and visible", as much her own re-birth as her child's birth (60). She is coming to realize that her family's perfectionism that has so disheartened her has at least led to something substantial "... like pricks to kick against" (60). This, she observes, is the opposite of Richard's experience where the lack of clear definition of his family has pushed him out, instead of giving him something to push against to begin to shape his life. Minn wonders that no one ever has come looking for him. Minn's communication with Richard resumes when he awakens from his sleep with her confession of "a sordid story", the basis of a deep conflict between her parents (65). Her father had disturbed her mother's life-standard, especially since she had been a member of the Police Commission. In telling this story to Richard, she is able to articulate a perspective on that period of her life. "They were all trying to do what they thought was right" indicates her coming to come to terms with her Godwin past (66).

At this point Minn turns her attention to the unfortunate development of perfectionism out of a religious attitude toward life. It appears to Minn to be an accretion that has hampered growth of wholeness of life. Engel creates a kind of catechism that Minn participates in (68-71). At first it appears to be an account of Minn talking to herself. Indeed, there is a bizarre note as if fragments of her personality were in dialogue. It conveys her fear that, although she has come this far, she is nearly overwhelmed by her vulnerability. The tenor of the dialogue changes, however, as if Minn were speaking to the God of the Puritan perfectionists. "Build! Organize! Preserve!" she hears (68). Then another change occurs. The Creator directly touches on her present life: "We fear you are on a downward trend, influenced by your tenants" (69). This releases a flood of Minn's innermost thoughts about her marriage, her children, her own character, references to her recent past and her present. All of this is addressed to 'you' and signifies her direct approach to the Creator (69). The substance of her flood of thoughts, she claims, gives her a sense of reality. Minn gathers courage at the unperturbed acceptance of her definition of reality in which she appeals, in essence, for an end to the body-mind split arising from guilt. "You should know the rules", she declares to the Creator (71).

The catechism continues as Minn is asked, "What will you name the child?" (71). Her reply is evasive as if she is unwilling, while the child is still being shaped in her womb,

to infringe on its growing identity. This is borne out in her suggestion that, "Name is self-indulgence", reflecting a choice made out of parental predisposition to their own time rather than out of a sense of the child's time (71). Her adoption of a mildly sarcastic tone implies her challenge of the Creator to consider that this attitude reflects the Puritanical propensity to 'name', to prescribe, without consideration of the succeeding generations' identity, how they should live. Then comes a crucial question: "Your discontents, are they divine?" (71). Thus, Engel pushes her enquiry to discover the dimension of a struggle for integrity when dogmatic, religious accretions and philosophical and psychological orientations are stripped away. Minn's answer reflects this concern:

Nothing, my Lord, of fashionable divinity has been allowed to survive. Belief in progress (mother) left me at an early age. Belief in politics (father) can survive only if I think him misunderstood, which he was not. I refuse to have an Oedipus or an Elektra.... [If you push away Moses [the Law] and the Ancient Greeks at once you are left with Girl Guides.... "To do my best to do my duty...." Will it do? Better than the Beatles pewling love-love love war-is-over-in-my-yellow-submarine? (71).

And then Minn reveals what she is looking for in her question, "Why don't you condescend and give us another theology?" (71). A new understanding of love is what she is asking for, not one



hemmed in by emphasis on the Law nor a silly, romanticized one. This question anticipates her praise of love and its diversity, expressed in relationships. The exhausted Minn, in spite of having to work at keeping awake, has made an important stride in gaining insight into her life. Her initial questioning of the God of Puritanism appears to have led to her discovery of the Creator's acceptance of her: "Pass on, oh daughter of Weeping Willie, and of Gertrude-and-Alice Stein" (71).

Immediately thereafter, Minn feels free to address the vulnerable memories of her adolescence. Later, returning from that period, she perceives herself like the blind man, healed by Jesus in the New Testament who, only gradually at first began to see "men as trees" (75).

The ringing of bells and the perception of people walking on the ceiling are significant. For they point simultaneously to Minn's important commencement of her process of defining self and to her need to discern more clearly the wave of reality from the outside world landing at her front door. The celebrants of the Honeyman festival arrive in a wave at Minn's door, therefore, even as she barely has begun to shape a sense of her own personal world. It is the Flower Children who connect her to the present reality. "We fixed all your bells, Mrs. Burge" (75). The arrival of Sam Talman, from her university days, propels Minn back to the intermediate period between her Godwin days and her time with Honeyman. Engel includes another apocalyptic mode of communication, a kind of bilingual Greek

chorus [English and French] to mark this transition, passing through Minn's head as a reading by herself and Sam (76-78). Its use serves both to introduce another layer of Minn's past pressing upon her and the depth of her long-standing frustration with her life. It emerges as she is carried back to "dry leaves, the greenish autumn gloom of the campus, the worries of a mismanaged world interlined with poetry" (76). She recalls "the years at university as an island of inaction", as leading to nothing useful; indeed, Minn left before she accomplished her degree, adding to her sense of having failed to meet the Puritan standard of perfection (76). Equally, the experience there failed to help her resolve the conflict between emotional satisfaction and utilitarianism. This is signified in the tenor of the Greek chorus, emerging from a bizarre juxtaposition of Milton's patriarchal description of Eve in "Paradise Lost", the Genesis creation story, both in English, and advice to young women in excerpts from a good housekeeping manual, in French, a Romance language! The passage represents the tension Minn has always experienced between the utilitarian demands of her mother and society and her own emotional depths. It provides a sense of her frustration just prior to her departure for Europe. More importantly, Minn's encounter with Sam, who had bade her farewell as she was about to begin her Honeyman years, serves to strengthen her sense of reality. "Things had happened to him and he was weary" (82). The positive effect upon Minn of facing even a small part of

her past in Sam's unexpected company this night indicates the importance of relationship in such a process.

Once Sam leaves, Minn's sense of being alone in the Festival crowd sharpens. Compared to the people of Minn's past and even the Flower Children, these contemporary people are a mystery to her for "she could read no expressions on the faces which surrounded her" (85). They appear to have "no age and no station", in other words, to Minn, they are outside time and space (85). She is in danger of losing any sense of herself and of her surroundings. The shape and landmarks of the living-room with its identifiable layers of her past have been obliterated by this contemporary crowd. The image of Minn trying to propel herself, with her globe of a belly before her, into the wave of people represents the irony of her sense of alienation and yet, her longing for a new expression of her life. Only when Minn hears someone remark, "Isn't it a marvellous house?" is she brought back to herself (87). Unknowingly, this stranger helps to shape Minn's sense of reality and propel her toward an answer to What is right? as he observes:

I went upstairs.... There seem to be babies all over the place, but there's the most wonderful curve in the hall. I don't suppose it does anything, there's no structural reason for it, I fancy it's hollow. Imagine that nowadays. Nobody builds like this any more (87).

In this one passage lie the seeds of Minn's sense of identity. Its effect on her is freeing; the speaker moves away and

"seeing that she, too, was free, she backed out into the corridor" (87). Minn must, therefore, go back to her past once again before she can begin to make sense of the confusion of the present outside world.

Minn seeks refuge in her children's rooms, as she visits them one by one. She gathers comfort from them as they verify her present reality. She realizes, however, that she must not equate the full development of her identity with them alone, as she notes, "their noisy breathing, quicker than mine Temptation to synchronize ..."(88). Minn is aware that to love them is not a fallacy, but to make them her whole world is to place a burden on them and herself. However, her sense of reality deepens here in the presence of her children, who, in their sleeping forms, express their own vulnerability. Thus, "she sat and rested and loved them ....", a powerful image of what is right (88). In the meantime, outside their rooms is the silent hallway, its splendid, curved walls hinting at Minn's life, her world, a space waiting to be shaped.

In spite of the cacophony flooding the hallway from the crowd below, Minn feels impelled this night to understand the significance of her Godwin visit the previous week. Her love for her children is the bridge by which she can approach the significance of all that Godwin means to the process of defining herself. Minn recalls as she approached her mother and her aunt Alice then, that "... age had mellowed the old women, and the children had loosened [her] emotions" (92). What she

had been looking for was:

the one factor of having your children's reality verified by your mother's acknowledgement, in her case a kind of negative blessing in the failure to lay on hands, and another factor, that of her own spiritual weather, which required cyclical returns to the countryside (92).

Minn's quiet perusal of her recent memory allows her to articulate her spiritual need to understand her origins in people and place. Thus, her visit there last week now enables her to grasp the reality of the connection between the three generations, Gertrude, herself and her children. For it both joins them and differentiates them, important processes in Minn's search for her identity. She acknowledges the fallacy of equating growth with patterning her life on her mother's, but accepts the necessity of owning her roots. The struggle to free herself from the feeling that "if she stayed longer than a day she still came back in little pieces" remains, however (92). Therefore, she recalls that almost on her mother's doorstep, "she held her breath and wondered if it was too late to turn back" (93). It is Til's cough that alerts her to the present; "Minn levered herself up, all vigilance", vigilant not only of her children, but of the necessity to participate in society in order to make it her day and age. This is evident in her recognition of her choice: "she could try to sleep on the twins' floor [or] she could go downstairs again. She went

downstairs" (93,94).

Down there, questions begin to be shaped, addressed to Minn, from the second wave of Festival celebrants arriving on her doorstep. She is forced to change from being an observer to being a participant. The first question, "Do you love your husband?" is asked initially almost as a rhetorical question (95). It is asked of an older woman by a young girl, who, flitting about the crowd like Ariel, does not wait for an answer. This is an image, reflecting, undoubtedly, a similar fleeting thought that has drifted through Minn's mind. The question is picked up by the older woman and asked of Minn, who answers quickly with an almost conventional retort, "what? me? Of course I do" (95). For now, however, of more importance is Minn's encounter with someone who has surfaced from the wave. What impresses Minn is that the woman with "a figure that was upholstered rather than dressed" appears to remind her of her mother (96). Yet, the woman reminds Minn, also, of what she herself might be like in another few years. For the woman is obviously trying to sort out for herself the reality of love, usefulness and the struggle for one's sense of identity:

When things get difficult I go into the garden and  
rip up nightshade ... one has a spurious feeling of  
usefulness. But love! Did I love my husband! Well, I  
said what's that got to do with anything? ... You  
have to get on with your life (95, 96).

The woman speaks out of a life influenced by the Puritan

emphasis on perfection, with a note of criticism, but, also, she, unwittingly, affirms for Minn how imperative it is to get on with her life. Moreover, the woman touches her both by her words and her action of laying "a warm hand on Minn's shoulder" (96). She responds as if she has received the laying on of hands her mother has failed to give her in full measure. That "there was no answer" in Minn's mind to her question about love between her and Norman attests to her awareness of the threat of continuous separation against their relationship (96).

As she continues to be confronted by women, representatives of particular points of view she has not met directly before, she feels their aggression. Minn realizes that these women reflect the swiftly changing roles brought about by a society in transition. They question her validity in the women's movement, as they represent it, simply because of her globe of a belly: "What do you think?" "Who feeds you? Who buys your clothes?" (97,98) They allude to women's problems in the work-force, outside of Minn's experience: "Do you think it's right ... to break down the entire system of division of labour?" (99). Their unwillingness to seriously relate to Minn prevents their discovery of her crucial effort to shape her life in a changing society. She recognizes something familiar in their desire "to divide the world into two sides and ignore its multifariousness"(98). "It's such an old quarrel", marked by the cold censoriousness implicit in perfectionism (99). Yet, paradoxically, Minn, moved by her greater understanding of her

mother, puts these women in their place. "Something of Gertrude's authority [which] had crept into her voice ... subdued them" (100). Nevertheless, it is Minn's own courage, taken in spite of her vulnerability, that disarms them for "they stepped aside and let her go" (100). Her first brush with these women, "her own age, but tough and professional", makes her realize the gulf between them and her (97). As she withdraws from the people in the crowd forming little worlds, such as, "men talking business" and "women ... talking babies", Minn resumes her contemplation of the Godwin world (100).

She recalls her feelings of the week before, as "red and hot and out of breath" she arrived in Godwin with her squirming, lively children (102). There, as she met the "cool gloom of [her mother's] house", she felt "powerless, without initiative" (102). Initially, it was as Minn expected. Yet, as she looks back, she realizes two insights, significant to her development. Firstly in the midst of the signs of her mother's belief that cleanliness is next to godliness, Minn realized "the hopelessness of reinventing this dying world" (102). For indeed, she recognizes now the extent to which, in failing previously to make her own world, she has fallen back on the old one (52). Secondly the coffin-like image of Annie's empty, adult-size crib has been transformed by a swift memory of her late, retarded sister. She had once cradled Minn's baby with "looks of such love that the purity of it was frightening, and Minn [had begun] to cry" (107). Indeed, she realizes that she



and her offspring have been affirmed from an unexpected quarter of her family. The irony that such pure love should be expressed by an obviously imperfect person is sharp. Equally important, she realizes now that the sight of the crib opened up her sympathy with her mother's long-lasting burden in caring for Annie who had lived to be "grizzled and fifty" (107). In this frame of mind Minn sees more clearly through her mother's reserve to where her emotions lie. As if in reinforcement of this insight, she remembers that when young Ben, almost literally, made a crack in his grandmother's armour by biting her leg, Gertrude smiled suddenly and said, "Let us know when you have the baby" (109).

Minn's last engagement with Honeyman's memory is not with the flat, two-dimensional poster of him, but with his son, Calvin, who arrives unexpectedly at the Honeyman festival. Thus, her present time and place are entered by Honeyman's representative in the flesh. The significance of this is seen in the image of Minn, in Cal's embrace; "she let herself sink into him for a moment, because his length and his body were good, but she gave nothing up to him" (112). As "she was sitting beside him now, feeling sorry for him [speaking in] that awful western accent that was no real part of him", she realizes his need of affirmation to alleviate his obvious fragmentation (115). As she did with Richard, she reassures him with her words, "It's all right, Cal" (117). Minn has responded with a kind of love. Indeed, through his son, she, in the

present, addresses the Honeyman of her past and at the same time bids his memory farewell. Evidence of Minn's movement beyond the pull of those years emerges in the words, "... in the blackness she could hardly see to wave at Calvin's car" (117).

Later that night, following the departure of the celebrants, Minn's dream about her public condemnation arises from her earlier encounter with the judgmentalism of the latest proponents of society's perfectionism that "circled her ... like harpies" (99). It abounds with images of her long-time failure to meet her mother's tests of cleanliness, orderliness and respectability. But it moves from there to the representatives of the law who have "charge[d] her with failure to keep an orderly house" (118). All the items signifying Minn's claim to reality in her earlier conversation with the Creator are condemned. While, there, she had been somehow affirmed, in spite of her fragmentation, in the dream, she is publicly condemned by its lawful representatives (71). The unkindest cut of all arises from the aggression she felt from the 'harpies'. For in her dream she is condemned not only for her expected child, but for her aspiration toward a re-birth of her own life; "Mrs. Burge was led away bulging" (120).

In juxtaposition, however, to the implications of Minn's dream, comes her affirmation of the primacy of love. It follows her awakening from her engagement with the religious attitude that has so defeated her in the past. Her proclamation of a

growing sense of achievement of control over her own development is clear:

There's the church, there's the steeple. The people have all gone home. I own myself again, she thought. I've been returned. I'm somewhat overdue, there was a fine, but I'm here again (120).

It emerges out of her earlier undertaking to separate out from its accretions a re-discovery of religion's potential to foster growth in a life. Indeed, it marks Minn's push against the hard surface of that guilt-generating old quarrel. In her affirmation of love Minn answers her rhetorical question, "How shall we live now, Mother?" (120). In Minn's understanding, love is seen to be both fragile and yet able to be 'primed' in its multifacetedness by the individual's will (129). Her praise of love is, indeed, an extension of her acknowledgement of the importance of relationship seen in her tap of her belly as she addresses her unborn child. It is apparent in Minn's nurture of her children, in her hospitality and encouragement of Richard and Calvin. It is related, too, to the miracle of liking she shared with Honeyman. Minn's understanding of the reality of love is that it is a gift, meant to be expressed actively through relationship. It is:

a well of feeling in the back of your personality, in the bowels of your personal earth ... you tended your supply carefully, tried to get in order later to be able to give, for it worked better when it was

primed, but it was all the same stuff (129).

Minn acknowledges that human failure to do this priming has consequences in relationships. In this connection, Engel's images of biting, of drawing blood, occur in several places and imply how hard it is to penetrate the hard surfaces people put in place to protect themselves from the vulnerability they experience when their emotional levels are touched. At the same time, the images convey equally that love is the life-blood of anyone who seeks for integration of life: in fact "it was no small thing to be equipped to survive" (129). This realization is what defines Minn's struggle as a spiritual one. Yet, it is not a pie-in-the-sky kind of spirituality. Rather, it is translated through the substantiality of Minn's experience; it is, she realizes, "something touched by hands, something made, human, humanized, not sterile, not plasticised" (121).

Minn's perception of making "the chatelaine's tour" of her house implies a hopeful development out of her earlier sense of the walk through the rooms as the way of the cross (131). Having faced her vulnerability to fear of her past, she is able to attend to the present and to begin to consider the future; her observation that the "clock nags" implies that she is conscious of the urgency to move in this direction (131). Apocalyptic images of "terrains-vagues", vacant lots, representative of a wasteland, convey Minn's sense of a crumbling society and of her worry about the effects upon her children (131). But in tucking in her sleeping children and in

touching them one by one, she affirms the importance of love. Behind Minn's vigilance, however, is an uncertainty about Norman's place with them: "what would he say if he came back and found us gone? ... queasiness of sense of loss is quickly comforted ..." (132). Minn is aware that his regular absence is detrimental to their family. She wonders with a touch of bitter sarcasm if he would miss them seriously enough to search for them or would he advertise in the lost and found column as if they were objects missing from their usual place (132). That she has doubts about their place in one another's lives marks her approach to reality. Equally, her chatelaine-like attention to the doors and the passage-room, with its window looking out to the brick wall, reflects her attempt at reassurance of her own integrity in spite of her anxiety about movement into the world. Minn's mixed feelings arise out of her hesitation to move from the setting she knows into an, as yet, undetermined one. Nevertheless, in her conviction that she and her children "face a dying world", Minn holds out a hope of a re-birth of a new world (132). While she considers that it is "not safe to wonder what kind of a world it will be then", she anticipates that there will be at least a struggle to bring about change that her children will engage in, even as she is doing (131, 132).

During the course of her tour, two apocalyptic images emerge from Minn's handling of two games. Even as she uncovers them from the boxes she has stored them in, their significance in

her struggle is likewise uncovered. She perceives they are now merely talismans representing once an incipient desire to shape a new expression of her life. Seated at the table in the passage-room, she turns to the playing cards and then the cardboard figures. It becomes clear to Minn that her sorting and arranging have always stood for her longing to lay out the fragments of her life so that she might approach reality. Indeed, her earlier criticism of Reiner for alphabetizing the past anticipates her rejection now of a similar attitude in herself. For the use of such a superficial approach to take the sting out of the past by making it into a game, implies Minn's deep and long-standing anxiety about her life. Even now, however, in her imagination, the faces on the playing cards assume the features of her people and then the faces of American stars familiar to them because of the "grey airwave invasion unwilling" (133). Minn acknowledges the difficulty experienced by her people and country to establish identity in the face of the overwhelming presence of a dominant American culture; "My country 'tis of theirs" (133). Indeed, it reflects her own struggle to claim her identity, faced with the overwhelming presence of perfectionism in her familial and cultural background. The image shifts, for as Minn speeds up the passage of the cards from hand to table, it is as if she is exerting her will upon the passage of time and place. As "she slapped and shuffled the cards ... [the] cards whispered gotobed, gotobed" (133). Minn realizes that the fruitlessness

of such obsessive behavior leads only to dangerous fantasy. In casting the game aside this night, Minn is exerting her sense of reality upon her life.

With the second game, the "two-inch cardboard toy-theatre characters which were manipulated on wire slides like extended paper-clips", Minn has tried to make time and place stand still (134). Indeed, in superimposing faces of those people significant in her life and in her society, she was trying to reduce both to a manageable size. Minn recognizes that "what she was trying to do was to create some kind of concrete landscape of her imagination, but she never succeeded at it" for it was divorced from relationship and sympathy (135). Significantly, after Minn sets aside her toys, she moves to look out the window, indicating her anticipation of involvement in her society. Thus, she indicates her understanding that use of the imagination, alone, to escape reality is a trap. Rather, imagination must be tempered by sympathy if understanding of self and of others is to be achieved. It is at this point that Minn determinedly turns to the two games and "made sure they were packed away and put them in a drawer" (139).

Minn's opportunity to create an active, real expression of her life through relationship presents itself in the arrival of John Colebrook. The failed sculptor and she have been aware of one another's sense of fragmentation and together have played the game of the cardboard figures. His cape and turquoise ring lend him an artistic air, mantling to some extent the marks of

his destitution. His surprise appearance in her hall after she has put away the cardboard figures is like a sudden personification of one of them. Indeed, he asks her to play the game again. Instead, Minn does an astonishing thing.

Essentially, it constitutes a ritual by which Minn places her particular mark upon her life, arising from her realization of the importance of accepting love, rather than judgmental perfectionism. Taking a basin of water, nail brush and, significantly, "clean linen huck towels from her mother's house", she washes properly and carefully the failed sculptor's hands, including his treasure, the turquoise ring (141). It is an action representing the importance to Minn of getting "in order later to be able to give" (129). What she is giving to John is her acceptance of him as he is and, also, her encouragement of him to live, freed from vulnerability toward the past. But equally, the act represents Minn's acknowledgement of her own need for "occasions of touching" as affirmation of herself in relationship (141). The contrast between her earlier dismissal of Jane-Regina and her acceptance of John Colebrook points up the sign of Minn's own integration. Although she watched each visitor disappear into the dark, Minn is able to affirm the latter and in turn receives affirmation from him in his parting words, "You're a good woman, Minn" (143).

Alone, late at night, the exhausted but determined Minn, in her stream-of-consciousness thought, reveals old episodes from



her past that mingle with present concerns, while her anxiety about the future hovers in her mind; "Don't think of them. You've got all tomorrow. You can't skip tomorrow. If that's what you're hoping" (147). Minn knows that while she is apprehensive about tomorrow, she has already begun to put her stamp on her life. With this last ringing of her doorbell, this newly-gained sense of self is challenged by her perfectionist, judgmental society as she sees in the dim light a police car. Dream of arrest appears to match reality. But it is Richard the two men want, one claiming to be his father. Seeing no anxious love on his face, Minn decides "that Richard could go on weeping in her teapot, bother or not" (150). Her retaliation to the law forcing open her door, at this point, is significant for it signifies her realization that her life is no longer in suspension, but active. Therefore, her lunging attack on the policeman, bearing her huge globe of a belly before her, is Minn's defence of her newly-shaped sense of the priority of love over perfectionism. Another of the biting-images which Engel uses to convey Minn's sense of a life and death struggle is seen in her encounter with the law. For Minn sinks her teeth through the policeman's uniform, biting her own tongue in the process, thereby leaving her mark on the authority of the law. Yet, she acknowledges the authority of her mother in at first answering the call of the law in her mother's firm tones, "Mrs. Williams, here" (149). In so doing Minn draws on her newly-won selfhood but conveys that it was launched initially by her need

to push against her mother's overwhelming strength of character.

The pains, announcing the impending birth, force Minn to be anxious only about the physicality of the child's coming and to recognize that she is essentially alone; "the hang of the gut, now. The slow swinging shift of the viscera" (158). This undeniable reality makes her afraid as she recalls what loneliness had brought before: "Wanting to die of captivity on winter afternoons, but not now, no, Lord, not now. Make me dead, but not yet, Lord ..." (159). With the subsidence of the pains, "one bird ... would not come home to roost" (161). She returns at this late stage of the night to thoughts of Norman's place in her life, even as she began the evening. She realizes that an understanding of the reality and viability of their relationship remains to be answered. Her uncertainty about their ability to maintain a relationship is evident in that she has tucked away his last letter without having opened it: "she did not want reality to interfere with her efforts to maintain a poetic view of life ... his letters to her often seemed just more pieces of copy ... (162). Norman's letter reveals a tendency to live in the past and, indeed, to hold Minn to a perfectionist image that no longer applies. "Tell Mordie [the doctor] I'll want you in good shape ..." is small comfort; indeed, it reveals his lack of awareness of the kind of shaping Minn is struggling to make real (164). Her perception that the letter is like pieces of copy represents the fragmentation in

their relationship but, since it is all there is of Norman, "she put her face on it, and, finally slept" (164).

Engel's images to mark her protagonist's morning wakening are charged with a positive apocalyptic significance, indicating Minn's renewed sense of self and of society. The earlier apocalyptic image of the future, a woman with her child in her arms fleeing the holocaust, has given way to a new one. People form a circle, expressing the particular need in transitional times for cooperation between the generations, not isolation. The threat of annihilation by the bomb makes this imperative. Engel's awareness of the use of concepts in physics as images to convey her protagonist's growing confidence to shape her life and to find an importance in the world is marked:

Wake on a fresh, high-pressure morning like this,  
and the newspaper world's unbelievable. Frittering  
and fretting and nothing about first causes except  
from revolutionaries (169).

That renewal may be achieved in the face of chaos is clear in Minn's observation of "something fresh and light about the day" in spite of her acknowledgement of the "rotten world, always has been, only now we know it" (166). Minn, a realistic revolutionary, anticipates that the times call for parents and children to be revolutionaries:

The kids have to fight us. We fight them. Need the  
tension. To extract from them the requisites of a

civilization we can't believe in (169)

Thus, she claims the necessity for dogma to be transformed by experience in order that a new theology of love may replace the old perfectionist rigidity. How hard this tendency is to overcome and yet, how crucial to life is its overcoming are implicit: "We will bite each other's fingers out of boredom to see the blood" (170). The biting image points to the constant need to be alert to reality; moreover "to see the blood" represents the necessity of seeking the humanity beneath the protective layers adopted by people to hide their vulnerability (170). It is clear that Minn acknowledges the ongoing need of her twinned question to be asked with its implied tension at future times of crucial change. "And the morning will come, and so will the night again. Won't it?" (170).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For a discussion on changing relations between parents and adolescents in the sixties and seventies, see chapter eight, Towards the Postmodern Family or, Setting the Course for the Heart of the Sun) by Edward Shorter; The Making of the Modern Family; New York: 1977.

## Chapter Four

Between The Honeyman Festival and Bear Engel develops the spiritual dimension in her women's struggle to integrate their lives. Minn's question, "What is right? What is real?" involves layers of relationships, complicated by a period of both personal and social change (H.F., 121). In Bear, however, Lou's implied question, "Who and what am I?" reflects a poverty of relationship with self and the world along with a deep confusion between reality and fantasy. In fact, she behaves as if she is a refugee, severed from a sense of identity and driven underground to escape a catastrophe that has already happened. For she is a woman almost totally separated from her past. This has been her condition for so long that her memory, imagination and emotions have nearly atrophied. More seriously, she is so diminished that she approaches herself through animal imagery. Even after she sees how she has been living, she deflects her crucial question toward the bear, her only fellow-resident on Cary Island: "Bear", she whispered to it, "who and what are you?" (36) Her reluctance to address herself initiates a distorted relationship with the animal. One critic has complained of Engel's use of distortion, accusing her of having written "a Conceit in novel's clothing" (Clery, Val. Books in Canada, 1978, A5). Nevertheless, it is important to see that Engel's use of such images expresses Lou's spiritual anguish at her failure to meet Puritan perfectionism. For, "... the image of the Good Life long ago stamped on her soul was quite

different from this, and she suffered in contrast" (12). In Lou's struggle to understand the bear rightly, the renewal of her atrophied self emerges. Indeed, her long perception of herself as animal is where she must begin to initiate growth.

Lou is reminded that "the outside world had ever existed" only by the trivia of others' lives she handles and sorts in the dark basement of the Archives (12). The parallelism between her own state and the world's is apparent; for, she feels "that she [is] as old as the yellowed papers she spent her days unfolding" and that the present is "as ungraspable as a mirage" (19-20). Indeed, Lou's desperate attempts to deal with this diminishment represents in actuality what Minn acknowledges with a degree of objectivity; "The mind has molehills and they lead to tunnels of escape". (H.F. 123). Engel makes clear her focus in the first paragraph of Bear:

In the winter, she lived like a mole, buried deep in her office, digging among maps and manuscripts. She lived close to her work ... scurrying hastily through the tube of winter ... wasting no time. She did not like cold air on the skin (11).

Thus, in this novel, too, Engel indicates, by compression of time and place, her woman's critically reduced state of life. Moreover, in the very first line, her reference to Lou as simply "she" conveys how bereft the woman is of a sense of identity. The animal imagery Lou applies to herself denotes an increasingly insensate state as the winters pass; "...she saw

that her arms were slug-pale [and] her eyes would no longer focus in the light..." (12). Engel's reference to Lou's fingering of maps and manuscripts hints at the urgency not only to find a way to move toward the future, but also, to examine the past. The compression becomes sharper as she seeks increasingly to bind together work at the Institute and basic existence away from it.

The spiritual nature of Lou's crisis emerges each year as the sun penetrates "the spring dust [of] even her basement windows", implying a recurring hope for renewal (12). However, this spring Lou, in longing to become an antelope, expresses her desire to break through this cycle and expand the boundaries of her life. Ironically, if it were not for her work, this particular opportunity to grow would not have occurred. For it is her field assignment to document the 19th century Cary household in northern Ontario that initiates her change. The Puritan belief in the virtue of tireless work, therefore, becomes a prick to kick against in order to launch her own life. Lou's action of rooting out of mothballs, "old camping gear—motheaten mackinaw jackets, hiking boots, a juvenile sleeping-bag" implies how long she has been buried in her feverish approach to her work (17). Moreover, Engel's juxtaposition of the motheaten clothes with "filing folders, paper, cards, notebooks and a typewriter" implies Lou's transitional point (17). It is the need to assume the long-delayed search for self over obsessive work.



The connotation of death, implied in the cold burial of winter, shifts to an awakening from hibernation as Lou passes, on her journey to the island, through countryside that connects with her childhood. Indeed, her response to this familiarity is astonishment at the unexpected discovery of something long-lost. Her opening-up to time and place, implicit in her movement across the surface of the earth, stimulates Lou's sense of continuity and the possibility of growth. With a loosening of the parameters of her physical movement, Lou begins to turn her mind to the past and to anticipate the future. Therefore, with the surfacing of memory comes the expression of emotion, moving her closer to a hope of integration. Her awareness of the apocalyptic nature of her barely emergent life, touching an outside world she scarcely believes exists, is conveyed in Lou's thought:

The road went north. She followed it. There was a Rubicon near the height of land. When she crossed it, she began to feel free. She sped north to the highlands, lightheaded (17,18).

It is obvious that her burgeoning freedom is tempered by the sense that her crossing will lead to a life-and-death struggle, a Rubicon. It follows that her stirring self-awareness releases vulnerable memories of her childhood.

Lou's recollection of her parents' withdrawal from her as they searched to document "fringed gentians and grass of Parnassus"... is a painful memory (18). For it heightens her

remembered loneliness and even fear of nature. Left to herself, "[Lou] found herself riveted by the skeleton of the biggest dragonfly, caught in a spiderweb in a cabin window, sucked dry" (18). Even then, she had begun to bury herself from the world. However, as she journeys toward Cary Island, Lou's emotions rise in response to an incipient relationship with nature; [She] "... spent the evening mooching along the water, listening to the birds" (19). Thus, as Lou's memory, imagination and emotions are quickened, the nature of her desire for renewal emerges in her statement, " I have an odd sense... of being reborn" (19).

As she travels on the ferry, it is apparent that Lou has a long way to go before entering into relationship with other human beings. For her superficial noting of only her fellow-travellers' clothes reflects her long separation from the world. Significantly, her distant observation of the "elderly couple [engrossed in] reading side by side at the top of the companionway" represents the gap between Lou and her parents (18). However, Engel's sharp, raised focus upon the figures emphasizes Lou's need to bridge that gap. For her obscure memory of "something ... that happened when she was very young, some loss", indeed, her very sense of self, has originated in that relationship (19). This slight stirring of memory enables her to define her separation from the outside world:

...it was as if life in general had a grudge against her ... although at first she had revelled in the

erudite seclusion of her job, in the protection against the vulgarities of the world that it offered... (19).

Her cursory reference to something that happened five years earlier, which forced her into seclusion, betrays further the superficiality of Lou's self-knowledge. Engel's dry report that Lou came to work at the Institute "by the time [she] got her growing-up over with" emphasizes this aspect (13).

Lou's reluctance to face the reality of her life is revealed in her use of Platonic philosophy to provide distance between herself and the tame, resident bear at Cary House. For her philosophic stance is a device to deflect the crucial question she must ask herself at a profound level, "Who and what am I?" It is her ability to research what is outside herself that is reflected in her thought:

Everyone has once in his life to decide whether he is a Platonist or not ... I am a woman sitting on a stoop eating bread and bacon. That is a bear. Not a toy bear, not a Pooh bear, not an airlines Koala bear. A real bear (34).

In facing the animal's undeniable presence as they stare into each other's eyes, Lou is thrust into the presence of herself, in spite of her whispered question, "Bear, ... who and what are you?" (36) This confused attempt to escape the fear of self-examination is evident in her further impression of the bear as:

a middle-aged woman defeated to the point of being

daft ... waiting for her husband for so long that time had ceased to exist and there was only waiting (36). Lou, almost unconsciously, makes a tentative move toward acknowledging an experience with a man that left her traumatized. However, her failure to own the experience and, instead, to hide it away in her impression of the bear, is ominous. Indeed, she is exchanging her tunnels for the bear as a "cavity" where disturbing self-impressions may be thrust (123). Therefore, Engel's use of animal imagery, initially general, to describe Lou's reduced state becomes specific, in order to depict aspects of her search for self. In associating with the bear, Lou perceives that it, too, has experienced a reduction of its life. In this context, Lou moves toward defining her struggle and is faced with the challenge to grow in spite of the "dubious beginning for a bear" she sees in herself as steward of it and herself (32).

The beautiful house with "plenty of windows" is a resurfacing image of Lou's basement workplace (23). As in The Honeymoon Festival, the house represents aspects of the protagonist's struggle for renewal. The stamp of Puritan perfectionism upon Lou is evident in her response to the building. For the "perfection" she admires in its "... classic Fowler's octagon", emanates from the architect's belief in the individually inherent power of the brain (32,22). Fowler was a nineteenth century architect who was interested in a mental science, called phrenology. It advanced a psychological belief

in " strict localization of function in the human brain" ... and purported to be able to assess, by examination of the skull, "the abilities and personality of the subject" (Encyclopedia Britannica). While the octagon- shape was admired by Fowler for its neatness of design, practically, it presented awkward, unliveable corners for the resident of such a house. Similarly, while phrenology was admired by its proponents for its neat explanation of the brain's power, nevertheless, its elitist attitude implied exclusion of the possibility of renewal. As Lou steps into the hall, "[the] last sun slanting low through small old window-panes" amid "the smell of dust" represents her critical life-condition in the archival basement-office (24). In fact, the compression of time and place, evident in Lou's tunnel-life, is multiplied in her perception that this setting expresses even deeper layers of the past. Firstly, it is defined by the island- setting of Cary's failed utilitarian dream to build a lumbermill in a "marshy haven [that] was more isolated than a cartographer would have reason to expect" (21). Secondly, "the idea of the bear struck her as joyfully Elizabethan and exotic", romantic, rather than useful (29). Finally, the legendary past is implied in the relationship between the bear and the Indian woman, who is "as old as the hills" (21). These associations that surround Lou are figures for the layers of her own past, implying a depth of conflict she is not yet cognizant of. That "she was surrounded by doors and windows" signifies the life-shaping

decisions she has opportunity to make here (24). The dim light in the downstairs rooms, revealing "a glow of sofas and bow-legged tables, plant-stands and dead ferns", no doubt dimly reminiscent of her parents' Victorian style, reflects Lou's need to examine further the obscure memory of her childhood (24). The "broad stairwell" which lies "ahead of her...leading to the top of the house", the study-library, represents Lou's propensity to give herself to her research (24). It is that well-appointed work-place that becomes the arena where her struggle for renewal is played out.

Soon after assuming residence, Lou acts as if she has entered paradise, perceiving her new setting as her "kingdom" (29). However, Engel emphasizes the crucial nature of the choices that Lou must make to gain a sense of self as "she went up towards the light" (37). The possibility of seduction by the sensual appeal of beauty in nature, the perfect design of the house and the intellectual challenge of books is a threat to Lou's integration. Engel's cluster of images set in juxtaposition depicts such a struggle. On the one hand, the power of such seduction is seen in Lou's action of "[wading] around the room slowly, reverently [through] a sea of gold and green light" (37). But, images of "glass bookshelves" and "an elaborate brass Tilley lamp [which] hung over the counter facing the river" represent a warning that she must see her life and the world more clearly (37). What follows, therefore, is her almost subconscious awareness of the weighty nature of

her choices:

She ... opened a volume of engravings of ruins.

Piranesi. She stared at the broken columns for a long time. Then ... she looked out the back window, brushing a dead fly off the empty counter. The bear was staring up at her (37).

Her swift change of focus from the eighteenth century ruined columns to her present observation of the dead fly is significant. For it opens the way for Lou to circle back to her childhood observation of "the skeleton of the biggest dragonfly ..., sucked dry" (18). The linking of broken buildings and dead insects speaks vividly of Lou's long isolation from self and society and the inertia to integrate her life. The bear's staring attitude points Lou to the crucial nature of asking, "Who and what am I?" to initiate this process. Indeed, it represents a warning that she is in danger of suffering under the compression of time and place, now shifted to her island kingdom. That her acceptance of her parents' understanding of reality through research is a barrier to her renewal, is seen in her reaction to the contents of the library:

She wondered where else there was such a perfect library for its period ... geology and geography, geophysical speculation, the more practical philosophers... (38).

Even in her transformed work-environment, her initial "pre-sentiment of an unknown joy awaiting her" is tamped down by her

perception that work well done is a fulfilment of the perfectionist idea of being "virtuous and efficient" (42). Indeed, consideration of deeper insights into her life takes second place to work as "she went downstairs and brought up her paper, her typewriter, her filing cards" (38).

Engel's focus on Lou's relationship with the bear is related to her acknowledged use of surrealism to portray her insights into experience. What she calls "super-reality" allows flexibility to create images that signify a confused state (The Tattooed Woman, intro.xiii). Since Engel has said of Bear, "It's a novella about loneliness and sexuality", her images indicate at what a deep level Lou's relationship with self and the world is out of joint (Branching Out '78, 40). However, her memory, emotions and imagination, lightly touched on her way to Cary Island, are activated after her arrival. The catalyst that deeply stirs all three aspects of her life is the bear. It is the depth of her loneliness, her estrangement from self and from the world, that stimulates her to perceive the island as her kingdom. Initially, the bear fills Lou's need for love in ways not experienced in her childhood, the devoted following of an animal appreciated in childhood, the companion on adventures, the bolsterous playmate and the comforting presence. It is a small step, once that kingdom is created, to conceive of the bear as a man, magically disguised as a beast, waiting to be transformed as her lover. Lou's perceptions are expressions of a juvenile imagination, hinted at in the image



of her "juvenile sleeping-bag", part of her equipment carried to the island (17). It is apparent that parental admonitions rather than affirmation have created a gap in Lou's development; the loneliness of the child has become complicated by the sexual manifestation of the adult.

The distortion in her perceptions of self and the bear reflects Lou's intense desire to exorcise her Puritan-generated guilt. Therefore, through images of distortion Engel seeks to convey the spiritual nature of Lou's crisis. Such images arise out of Engel's interest in art. When asked by an interviewer what other things she would like to do besides writing, she replied musingly, "...maybe if I could draw" (Branching Out, '78, 40). More especially, her interest in the relation of artistic images to literary ones is apparent in her inclusion of a quotation from Kenneth Clark's Landscape into Art on the flyleaf of Bear: "Facts become art through love, which unifies them and lifts them to a higher plane of reality". It alludes to the tension the artist feels as he tries to express his relationship with the focus of his art. Indeed, this is the "higher plane of reality" which lies behind the facts before his eyes (flyleaf). Thus, Lou's tense, critical state is thrown into sharp relief through the bizarre image of a woman who falls in love with a bear. Significantly, Emily Carr, an experimenter in art as Engel in fiction, speaks of the use of distorted images "to grasp the spirit of the thing itself [that which interests the artist] rather than its surface appearance"

(Fresh Seeing, 11,12).:

This leads to distortion, which is often confused with caricature, but which is really the emotional struggle of the artist to express what he feels. This very exaggeration or distortion raises the thing out of the ordinary seeing into a more spiritual sphere...(12).

Engel's use of layered images is a device that allows her to present the loosening of the stages of a life long buried. In a sense, it represents the process of excavation, integral to her woman's experience of renewal. This can be seen, for example, as Lou picks up a book "produced by the Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge" and out of it "a slip of paper float[s] to her feet" (43). On the paper Cary had written the dictionary description of a bear, like Gradgrind's definition of a horse. Into Lou's careful following of the factual meaning, creeps her imaginative and emotional awareness of the animal. For reference to the similarity of its cylindrical bones to those of man, enabling it to stand upright and dance, touches the romantic side of her nature. With reference to the sexual parts of male and female bears, Lou's kinship with the bear in its lonely state is sharpened. It is at this point that she begins to refer to the bear as "he" (45). She is at the point of either entering a relationship with the bear as a discerning human or becoming trapped in bizarre ways to ease the newly awakened aspects of her life. At the same time, rationally, Lou is struck by the stark contrast between useful

knowledge and knowledge gained by feelings. The image, "sparks showered from the cedar logs", therefore, stands for the sudden charging of long unattended aspects of her being (44). It reflects more than a sudden flash of consciousness of the bear's nature; it is a rampant awareness of her own.

Lou's dream reinforces the contrast between these two sources of knowledge, pressing her to address where she stands. In it her association with the bear is implied further:

...the Kamchatkans on their high peninsula [were]  
looking at her through the windows and snowmasks  
they make from the gut of the bear, and [she] heard the  
whistle of mown grass falling where they slashed it  
with the sharpened shoulderblade of the bear (44).

The dominant position of the utilitarian Kamchatkans as they look at her is related to the parent-figures seated up in the companionway of the ferry, with eyes averted. Only now it is as if they have looked up, disapprovingly, at her budding romanticism. Thus, in her growing consciousness of the bear, her engagement with its essence and her own evolve together.

Initially, as she gains impressions of the animal, her senses begin to open up to nature in general:

She stood outside, listening. Small birds cheeped.  
The river sucked at reeds and stones. Branches cracked,  
rubbed against each other. Bird-feet rustled in dry  
leaves .... She went inside, hating to disturb the  
precious felted silence (46).

However, as confusion continues to characterize her feelings about herself and the bear, her rampant imagination and emotions grow together further: "His bigness, or rather his ability to change the impression he gave of his size, excited her" (47). Here is evidence of Lou seeking resolution of confusion by drifting into fantasy. To compensate she, initially, seeks refuge by adopting an objective attitude. "Yesterday he stood there staring at [her] like a fur coat ... and today ... like some kind of raccoon" (47-48).

Engel emphasizes Lou's growing fantasy through the sudden appearance of Lucy, the ancient Indian woman, on Lou's back stoop. It was here that she first phrased her question to the bear. Lucy's merriment and down-to-earth common sense inform her relationship with the animal. Like Lou, she refers to it as "he" but there is a detachment, a lack of manipulation toward the animal. She affirms its reality: "...Bear your friend ... he's a good bear" (49). Lou, however, is unable to fully appreciate Lucy's realistic touch. The strength of her fantastic sense is evident in her perception of Lucy's departure:

Snap, crackle, she was off ... the bear didn't move and neither did Lou. She had no time to. Lucy was gone, that was all, a hundred years old... (49).

Engel's still image of Lou, the bear and time, itself, conveys the futility of the fantastic direction of Lou's thoughts to create a dynamic world. Shortly thereafter, Lou's

turning from reality leads to a further isolation from the outside world. Even the sight of "the inlet filled with motorboats [and] pennants of smoke ... from other little islands" makes her feel "invaded" (53). The question of her identity waiting to be addressed appears to hover in the air as Lou notices subconsciously "the goshawks [which] stared at her from their barkless elm with impenetrable eyes" (54). With the arrival of the bear upstairs one night where Lou is classifying natural history manuals, rational pursuit and fantasy meet headlong.

Confused images of the bear pass swiftly through Lou's mind, as "a cross between a king and a woodchuck", as a holy man, with one hand, "raised in salutation or blessing", as a man, and finally as a dog, having "folded himself down on all fours again" (55). The multiplication of her distorted images reflects a maturing of her earlier childish perceptions of the bear, but, also, it makes plain that she is being tugged from reality. Her impressions of the bear reveal self-perceptions of her long-stifled imagination, uncaring sexual encounters, longing for a restoration of innocence and lastly, yearning for restoration of realistic relationship between herself and nature. Lou's choice of reading, "a life of Beau Brummel", sparks more than her professed interest that "perhaps the way to Cary was through his contemporaries" (56). For the image of the early nineteenth century romantic dandy passes into her imagination as another figure for the bear, indeed, later, Lou

calls the bear, "my beau" (90). The close atmosphere of the study, warmed by the fire, appears to cast a spell on Lou. The whisky she is drinking adds to her confusion, drawing her more closely into her fantastic world. The opening-up of her imagination and emotions, long unexpressed, directs Lou to her sexuality and loneliness. These aspects of her life become the focus of Lou's hectic desperation to cast her life into a meaningful shape. Impressions of the "Beau ... dominating duchesses .... The Beau ... on the make" lead to conflicting responses in Lou: "How she disapproved of him, how she admired him ... who would not touch reality with a barge-pole ..." (57). Lou's sense that "worlds changed" reflects more than an historical perspective; it reflects Lou's desire to withdraw deeply into a changed world with the bear, transformed into Beau Brummel (57). Her desire is signified in the image of her "running her bare foot over [the bear's] thick, soft coat, exploring it with her toes, finding it had depths and depths, layers and layers" (57). Meanwhile, the depths and layers of Lou's life wait to be addressed.

This activating of Lou's being leads to an incipient revelation of childhood memories of "the many books about animals" she had read (59). She condemns the older generation's propensity to clothe "animals ... in anthropomorphic uniforms", reflective of the Puritan shape of their world (59). But she does not see that she, too, is substituting another world for reality. Her feeble struggle to keep an objective attitude

toward bears, in general, "They were creatures. They were not human", is a mark of that world's power (60). Desire for a balanced relationship with nature vies with the attraction of her fantasy. This is apparent in Lou's observation through the window of an intense summer storm. Her "view from the library window [is turned] into an astonishing tunnel of green" after the furious bouts of rain and sun (62). The focus of Lou's conflict is implicit in the image. It is whether to turn from her inclination to hide, albeit in a green tunnel, or to grow. For a few moments Lou responds clearly through her imagination and emotions "to the riverworld shaking the rain off its wings" (62). All around her, creatures act naturally, in keeping with their potential:

A bittern boomed eerily. With a rush, a flock of returning swallows careened across the sky. A fish leapt. At her feet, frog spawn winked in the sun (62).

The implication is that Lou's personal world is waiting to be acted upon positively. Importantly, in the midst of her chaos, Lou has taken a step toward relationship with the world.

The spiritual dimension of Lou's struggle emerges further as she reads about the abuse of the bear's species by humans observing religious ritual. Lou's emotional response to the account of "the many taboos and propitiatory ceremonies" arises out of her struggle with a Puritan religious attitude (64). Her abhorrence at the ancient practice of slaughtering the species is intensified in her associating the bear's suffering with

her guilt at having once picked up a man "in a fit of lonely desperation" (64). This is the beginning of Lou's realization of the animal's innocence and a stirring of her own. It is as much for her own sake as the bear's that Lou cries out, "'Oh Lord, keep him safe from harm' .... She had not prayed for years" (65).

Lou's friendship with Homer is an important factor in articulating her struggle for self-renewal. As the indigenous story-teller about the Carys, he manages to retain his grasp on the reality of their lives and his own. He acts, therefore, as a counterbalance to the distortion of Lou's outlook, affirming her human nature. Moreover, as a native of the place, he acts as an agent of reality about the landscape, river, weather, island and the bear. Not only does he attempt to teach Lou about the flora and fauna but he dares several times to address her in her fantasy-world: "How're you doing otherwise?... Lot of people can't figure out how you stand it" and "People get funny up here ... when they 're too much alone" (75,127). Significantly, "his acceptance of her gave her a feeling she was ... not one to be scorned" (75). This is directly related to her desire for innocence, for freedom from guilt. This articulation enables her to shift her question's focus to herself. It is apparent in her elaboration of two distinct but related questions: "What am I doing here?" and "Who the hell do you think you are, having the nerve to be here?" (82,83). Her voicing of these questions uncovers more and more self-



revelation. She admits the habit of burying herself in research; "She justified herself by saying that she was of service, that she ordered fragments of other lives" (83). Compared to Homer's "vivid, "revealing", "relevant story" about the Carys, her fact-filled cards fail to help her "so that she could find a structure, plumb a secret" (83). Obviously, Lou is treading the line between discovery of an integrated life-structure and her continuing habit of hiding behind the superficiality of her work. On investigating the island, Lou experiences an historical perspective of the original Carys' presence there. It is summed up in the spectacular viewpoint she stands upon. "They came for this, she thought; they were landscape nuts", ultimately choosing romanticism over utilitarianism (87). Gazing at the broad, turbulent river and the "islands and range-lights [which] winked in the sun", Lou finds her perspective broadening to remember stories about her ancestors (87). She makes the connection between the original Carys' nineteenth century arrival in Ontario and that of her own people. Using her imagination to gain a real sense of her people's personal and social context, she increases her understanding of the hardships involved in their passionate struggle to tug "a new world out of the universe" (88,98). Her insight releases Lou's memories of "another incarnation" in which she worked as a journalist (89). She realizes that the Puritan pursuit of perfection has permeated secular society. "For missing a deadline was their form of Original Sin";

moreover, Lou's recall of Puritanical interviewees prompted "a vivid memory of courses in Victorian history" (89). In identifying the secularization of perfectionism, Lou approaches the personal and social context of her desire to shape her own new world. Indeed, she indicates that she knows that her conflict is spiritual in that "it was years since she had had human contact .... It was as if men knew that her soul was gangrenous" (92). As well, she comes close to seeing clearly the reason for the creation of her fantasy with the bear.

However, the possibility that "she could paint any face on [the bear] that she wanted", to ease her "inconsolably lonely" state continues to attract Lou (92). Her random choice of reading Trelawny's "remembrances of Byron and Shelley" stimulates her romantic sense (90). In spite of the rational side of her nature telling her that "most autobiography is rubbish", she is attracted by Trelawny, "the pirate. Giant of a man" (90). His association with Byron who had owned a tame bear extends, in Lou's imagination, to Cary and his bear. Soon the rational, factual emphasis of her training that "most autobiography is rubbish ... [because] people remember things all wrong" gives way to recognition of her intuitive side (90). She is struck by the realization that Trelawny, as a writer, "...SPEAKS IN HIS OWN VOICE" (91). Swiftly, her excitement opens up her desire to experience the speaking presence of a lover (91). Her relationship with the Director in her basement office is a memory of "no care in the [sexual] act, only habit and

convenience" (93). On the contrary, the comforting presence of the somnolent bear, "like a man; big", implies Lou's readiness to paint a lover's face on it (91). As if to alleviate her desolation as "[she] began to make love to herself", the bear approaches and "began to lick her" (93). Engel's bizarre image of the animal's probing tongue reaching "all of her secret places" establishes Lou's dire need of a loving touch, but, also more comprehensively of healing (92). This is apparent as Lou "awoke in the morning ... [and found that] wisps of guilt trailed around the edge of her consciousness" (94).

Significantly, Lou addresses her sense of guilt and evil but finds that "she felt loved" (94). Her perception of the bear's acceptance and love brings Lou her first experience of peace. It remains that Lou gain control over shaping her life instead of burying incipient revelations about herself and the bear in a shifting world inhabited by herself and a bear/man.

Lou's descent to the basement of the Cary house is a figure for her will to go more deeply into self. Significantly, it follows upon her initial experience of healing and peace. The angled corners of "the nether region", mirroring the "wrong-angled, unlivable corners" of the so-called perfect octagonal shape, reflect Lou's suffering under perfectionism (107). A warning image associated with Lou's earlier burial as a mole is signified in the quarried-out cold room where lay "the long-decayed form of a burrowing animal" (102). The implication is that Lou's struggle is not yet complete. Engel conveys,

however, Lou's increased awareness of the importance of mutual liking in the struggle to grow as Homer accompanies Lou to the cold basement. It is he who calls her back to reality when a new fantastic phase threatens to entrap her as she dons the elegant 1920's velvet dress of the last Cary. He does so by reminding her of her sexuality, her loneliness and her status as "a modern woman" (109).

Engel conveys the mounting crisis of Lou's urgent need for renewal by the image of her "menstrual fever" (111). The cyclical nature of the menses mirrors the mounting phases of her fantastic world. Moreover, it implies both the promise and threat of time's effect on the ability to conceive life. At this time, Lou begins to push to the limit the possibility of her fantasy to shape her world. "Bear, I love you. Pull my head off" signifies her desire for relinquishment of rationality (111). "Bear, make me comfortable in the world at last. Give me your skin" reveals the depth of her need for contact with self and others (111). Reality fades even as the faint radio voices pass into "garbled languages" in the background (113). Finally, her frenzied efforts to actualize her world culminate in an attempt to mate with the bear even as "the rest of the world had turned into a tight meaningless knot" (117). Nevertheless, in the midst of her fantasy Lou experiences the positive place of guilt in assessing her manipulation of the bear. The animal's affection for her is undemanding, surfacing from "a depth in him she could not reach, could not probe and with her

intellectual fingers destroy" (119). It is Lou's budding consciousness of the animal's essential integrity that initiates the period in which "they lived sweetly and intensely together" (119). Lou's bizarre attempts to live "for the bear" represent her longing for personal and social re-birth as she "almost believ[es] that he could impregnate her with the twin heroes that would save her tribe" (121).

In contrast, the dark memory surfaces of a relationship with an essentially loveless man who had manipulated Lou to be "subservient to his demands" (118). A child had been conceived and her lover "had made Lou have an abortion" (118). Lou's reluctance to face this past episode has caused her to bury it deeply. Indeed, the aborted foetus is as much related to the image of the calcified burrowing animal in the cellar as she herself. Her identification of the child's innocence with the bear's is clear as she acknowledges guilt over her manipulation of the animal. "She had gone too far. No doubt if she had children she would neglect them" (122). The stark emergence of Lou's self-consciousness initially puts her in danger of seeking alleviation in death: "It made her want to die" (122).

Threatened by the ultimate disintegration of her fantastic world, the spiritual nature of Lou's struggle intensifies: "She knew she had to hide, but there was no cavity, no bear .... She sucked at her toes and fingers, pretending to be born" (123). The life- and- death significance of her crisis is sharpened in her dialogue with the Devil during his visit in the night. His

rational manner and clever humour disguise his lovelessness and hopelessness. He scorns her attempts to gain a sense of self, accusing her of having "no originality, no grace" (123).

Indeed, his words reflect the sterile emptiness of perfectionism that burdens Engel's women with guilt and shame. In contrast, Lou's perception that the bear "was watching over her" reflects her need for acceptance, not rational judgment (124). Moreover, since she has already been assured of Homer's acceptance, she turns to him who speaks to her from the real world, repeating "People get funny when they're too much alone" (128). He appears to signal the coming end of her fantastic world with, "Fall's coming on ... you'll be going soon" (128). In fact, their coming together is initiated by Homer almost as a ritual to destroy her fantasy: "...he plucked her sleeve and took her into a decayed bunkhouse" (126). But, subconsciously, Lou appears to be aware that reality must be fully restored in the context of her relationship with the bear (126-27).

The passing of time is conveyed also in the bear's approaching cycle of hibernation and in the near-completion of Lou's research work. The critical point of her decision about her life is at hand. Yet, her state of mind is chaotic as she is pulled between two worlds: "It's over, now," she told the bear. You have to go to your place and I to mine" (131). In the next moment, the unmistakable sign that the animal's mating season has arrived is apparent. Lou's reluctance, even now, to leave her kingdom and her consort, prompts her to get "down on

all fours in front of him, in the animal posture" (131). Reality is initiated by the bear's action which declares its own integrity and innocence. The animal's striking of Lou's shoulder, breaking the skin and drawing blood, is like Engel's biting images in The Honeyman Festival. It signals the arduous yet life-giving necessity of breaking through the protective layers humans create to hide from facing the reality of their lives. Lou has for the last time attempted to put a human face on the bear: "She could see nothing, nothing, in his face to tell her what to do" (132). The bear's action and Lou's response to it rupture the walls of her fantastic world.

Her clarity of mind is signified in the image, "the [morning] light was streaming in " (133). The sequence of her washing in the river, addressing herself in the mirror and donning clean clothes represents her achievement of spiritual cleansing. Indeed, her perception that "she was different. She seemed to have the body of a much younger woman" implies her re-birth (133-34). That Lou acknowledges responsibility for her life is evident in her owning "the long, red, congealing weal [which] marked her from shoulder to buttock" (134). Moreover, her observation that "it is not the mark of Cain" attests to her relief at the restoration of right relationship with the bear, indeed, with nature, itself (134). "That night, lying clothed and tenderly beside him by the fire, she was a babe, a child, an innocent" (136). Thus, Engel conveys her understanding that nothing less than an experience of re-birth

can relieve the Puritan burden of guilt. Lou's sense of completion, rather than perfection, has been achieved in the face of her chaos. This is signified in her turning to the restoration of order in her work-place and in the return of the bear to its old association with Lucy.

It is significant that Lou experiences "an immense peace in performing these duties, which she did thoroughly and well", not to meet someone else's standard but as a sign of placing order on her own life (139). Equally, she perceives that the world's fragmentation is a reality, but can say, "Well, let the world be smashed; that was the way things were bound to go" (139). This is an apocalyptic statement and, in the light of Lou's experience of re-birth, a positive one. Upon leaving Cary Island, having dealt with her research and made progress in search for self, she passes through familiar countryside, no longer held by it. Her intention is to return to the city and to initiate participation in a new expression of her life. Her deliberate passage from "the smell of water and trees [into] the gas fumes" of the city implies her belief that renewed relationship between humans and nature may heal even the polluted chaos of city life (141). That "Who and what are you?" and "Who and what am I?" must be asked if urgent renewal of persons and the world is to continue is presented in the apocalyptic image at the end. In it Engel expresses her belief in the ability of relationship, of love to generate light out of the darkness of experience. It is represented by Lou, newly



restored, raising her head to look at the starry constellation of the bear in relationship with the virgins:

it was a brilliant night, all star-shine, and  
overhead the Great Bear and his thirty-seven thousand  
virgins kept her company (flyleaf, 14).

Thus, Lou has achieved "a higher plane of reality", referred to by Engel on the flyleaf of Bear.

## Notes

For a discussion of Plato's ideas about intelligible forms and reality see W.C. Dampier; A History of Science and its Relation to Philosophy and Religion, 1929. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966; 28,29. See page 39 for Plato's way of thinking about animals.

## Chapter Five

The Glassy Sea opens in the present by means of a prologue, marking the evening before Rita Heber, a former Anglican nun recently re-dedicated to her Order, commences her role as sister superior in a new mission of her convent, Eglantine House. Engel's treatment of the failure of perfectionism to foster growth is presented through the structural device of Rita's long autobiographical letter which forms four-fifths of the novel. It is accomplished by Rita's reflective re-reading, now, of her letter written the previous winter during her exile, imposed by her ex-husband, to the house by the sea. In that letter Rita refused the Bishop's offer to return and help to reopen her old convent because her "cracks" were too "crucial and deep" and, therefore, she "[wouldn't] do" (141). Engel's recapitulation of her protagonist's life, therefore, shows how Rita's inability to meet the judgmental standards of her family's belief in perfectibility brought her to the state of repudiation of self. Her life-affirming declaration on this night of her re-dedication reveals Rita's growing realization of the efficacy of grace to bring about a sense of wholeness that perfectionism fails to accomplish:

I feel very strong, very calm, as if grace had indeed been conferred. Perhaps it has. There are miracles. I suppose, though, it's more because now I know who I am and what I want. I see a clear path. I shall pray that it is the right path and that

it can be kept clear (2).

In this third of the novels examined here, Engel addresses to its fullest the spiritual dimension in her women's struggle for an integration or a re-birth. The question, Is grace, unmerited love, able to foster growth in spite of the failure of perfectionism? is implied in the reason for Rita's first visit to Eglantine House years ago. For she goes there "to discuss ... Herbert's concept of grace" (55). As we have seen, Engel begins to explore an understanding of grace in The Honeyman Festival and Bear. Minn's challenge to the Puritan God of her parents, concerning perfectionism, "Why don't you condescend and give us another theology?" leads to her praise of the diversity within the unity of love (H.F. 71). Lou's experience of acceptance and healing which restores her innocence implies the connection between love and grace. Rita's discovery, in The Glassy Sea, of the significance of the shift from perfectionism to grace in the attempt to integrate a life is as radical as another theology.

Engel demonstrates that in seeking perfection, the Puritans of previous generations turned to living under law, something as Christians they were supposed to be delivered from. The result was the perpetuation of guilt and failure through succeeding generations. It is this that gives rise to Engel's understanding of her women's struggle to know how to deal with an imperfect world when you have been brought up to look for perfection (Room of One's Own, vol.9 no.2, 29). Engel does not

repudiate a religious outlook but shows her women struggling to recover the means by which its promise to renew a life can take place. Thus, even after refusing the Bishop's invitation during her period of exile in the house by the sea, Rita comes to hope that "somewhere in my black, angry, jealous heart there was still room for a small eternity: a resurrection" (149). This novel points out the crucial role of grace in Rita's struggle for integration in the face of the failure of perfectionism. It will be seen that this expression of religion not only enables her to face the reality of her life and society with hope but that Rita's renewal is echoed by development of reform in the once dying institution, Eglantine House. That grace may be mediated in the midst of imperfection and that it bears a human face is evident in Rita's experience with the Bishop's emissary who bears a message to her place of exile:

I do not remember Brother Anthony's arguments, but they were compassionate and efficient.... They did not allow me to blame my misfortunes on God or on myself or on other people; ... they made me feel that the religion that had sustained me was perhaps within my grasp again... (150).

As in the other novels, Engel's protagonist comes to appreciate the centrality of relationship in the struggle to grow in a transitional time. Indeed, Rita's seeking to uncover and make sense of her life in her long autobiographical letter is an apocalyptic image signifying the crucial nature of such a

process in Rita's ultimate ability to mediate in the rupture of relationship between men and women, the effect of "the fall-out from the battle of the sexes" (157).

The short prologue and epilogue affirm the potential of grace to cause a sharp turn-around in Rita's life in spite of her life-long buffeting by perfectionism. Indeed, Engel impresses upon her novel an apocalyptic shape, which is reflected in the title, taken from Revelation (Rev.4:6). The beginning of Rita's story, the prologue, is the ending of the recapitulation of her life, set out by her in her letter to the Bishop. The epilogue moves from the past considered in the letter and is woven into the beginning. The shape of the novel, therefore, implies that Rita's "remembering is not a pastime preoccupying the soul forever" (6). It is a structure that Kermode, referred to in chapter one of this thesis, calls:

a wholly concordant structure, the end is in harmony with the beginning, the middle with beginning and end. The end, Apocalypse, is held to resume the whole structure" (Kermode 6).

Thus, the very shape of Engel's novel is an adjunct to its meaning connected with Rita's struggle to integrate her life. The short prologue presents Rita on the eve of embarking upon her newly-shaped life. That the prologue is both the beginning and the ending of what is played out in her autobiographical letter reflects the words of Jesus in St. John the Divine's Revelation, "I am Alpha and Omega", implying the process of re-

birth in an apocalyptic time (Rev.1:8, 1:11, 21:6, 22:13). This is plain in Rita's response to the Bishop's remark at the outset of the novel, "So our story will have a happy ending?"; she replies, "A happy beginning" (4).

The short epilogue which Engel chooses to call *Envoie* suggests several applicable meanings. Its connection with the expression en voie, to be on the way to a destination, alludes to Rita's re-birth. Its meaning as a messenger with a mission applies to Brother Anthony and equally to Rita, once she accepts his challenge. Moreover, the word is a poetic term signifying an address to the reader, conceivably Engel's challenge that her argument, as worked out in the novel, be considered. The long life in the letter is bracketed, therefore, by the short Prologue and *Envoie*, each making a positive claim. In the first, Rita makes a declaration that reflects the Mary aspect of grace in the tension between grace and practicality:

I feel very strong, very calm, as if grace had indeed been conferred. Perhaps it has. There are miracles ... because now I know who I am and what I want. I see a clear path. I shall pray that it is the right path and that it can be kept clear (2).

In the second, the Martha aspect of practicality is reflected:

I know what I want now; I am certain of this as I am of very few things. I want a core of women helping other women to put their lives (their souls

we shall leave to Dr Margaret Charters and the novice mistress) in order .... I will do this work for the good of my own immortal soul; but I will do it also knowing that I came here out of a need, not to serve, but to belong (161).

Thus, she comes to accept the complementary nature of the two attitudes, resolving her long tension, fostered by perfectionism. The close linking of a nun and her convent's failure to maintain relevance in changing times and their subsequent re-birth reflects Engel's apocalyptic insight. It emerges from Engel's intention both to understand and to look beyond the contemporary break-down of traditional expressions of personal and institutional life. Rita's experience in leaving her United Church family and background to become an Anglican nun allows Engel to define more directly her insight. However, she does not confine herself strictly to religious institutionalism but shows Rita in the context of various institutions. Her experience with her "ghastly Puritan background" evolves in her family, church, school and even, university (4). She finds relief during her earlier decade in Eglantine House in association with Sister Mary Rose, who "had won her redemption ... with the assistance...of grace" (60). Subsequently, the early 1970s ecclesiastical phenomenon of "the emptying of the cloisters" sees Rita barely "surviv[ing] her freedom" in marriage, the birth of a hydrocephalic child and finally, divorce (96). In all she struggles with the burden of



her failure to meet the perfectionist standards she has been brought up to strive for and to understand the equally forceful social failure she observes around her. For Rita's experience with the Puritan interpretation of "'Be ye perfect even as I am perfect'" leads her to acknowledge that "perfection is death" (4,5). Engel elaborates this point of view in an interview:

[I had] to take Rita through this whole course in the hope of finding a situation for her where imperfection was sufficiently acceptable that she could be involved with life again (Room of One's Own vol.ix,no.2 June,1984, 29).

In the winter following her refusal of the Bishop's offer, this positive reinforcing of grace over perfectionism is the reverse of Rita's view of her life. Now, her life is reduced to a mere existence in which she contemplates her imperfection. She sees that bare existence bracketed by her birth and inevitable death; "Life, I decided, is a sentence between brackets: these brackets must be seen to contain what is, not what might have been" (143). Psychiatry provides Rita with a static sense of reality, with "what was; not what had been, not what should be, but what was" (139). However, she is lacking still a means of alleviation from guilt so that she can take up her life and move toward the future. Her desperation is magnified by her isolation so that as she examines her life she adopts the roles of accuser and judge; "... judged by any moral standards, any at all, I had soiled the world and myself"

(143). In this context, she comes close to ruling on her own punishment; "... I found that I wanted that end bracket [death] to come fast" (143). Thus, through the two bracketing techniques, Engel draws the contrast between the efficacy of grace over perfectionism to foster growth in a life.

Engel focusses on four areas of Rita's life that gradually are touched by her grasp of the significance of grace in her renewal. They are, firstly, her background influence concerning the desirability of a division between the sacred and the secular and the utilitarian and the romantic; secondly, her Puritan indoctrination that human sexuality is somehow suspect; thirdly, the influence upon her of her mother's belief that imagination is useless dreaming and fourthly, the revelation that grace can give direction to the Puritan concept of practicality as a virtue. Rita experiences a stimulation of these areas by four experiences during her years at university, her first period of life away from Heberville, that she later calls "little epiphanies" (49). Indeed, Engel's use of the term, epiphany, is related to her understanding of the apocalyptic context of her work. For an epiphany is an indication, a manifestation, of the ultimate revelation of "the eternal purposes of God which has been hidden" (Richardson, 138). Each represents a stirring in Rita's life of a reality hidden under the perfectionist, utilitarian values fostered in her background of rural isolation. Indeed, together the epiphanies form a bridge between Rita's entrapment in

perfectionism and the opening of a path to growth by grace. The first epiphany arises through Rita's awareness of the juxtaposition between her reading Tess of the D'Urbervilles on a train and the catching of her attention by an old man playing "Oh Susannah" on a mouth organ (49). For as she journeys to the university, the incongruence, touching her senses, signifies Rita's inkling of the presence of previously unaccountable forms of reality, hovering on the periphery of her Tess-like isolation and illusion. The old world of Tess, like her own isolated Heberville, touching the real presence of an old man, playing on a mouth-organ a deep-south romantic song, is incongruous in a number of ways. The confused limerick-like lyrics, such as, "it rained all night the day I left, the weather it was dry", mark the contrast between it and her people's hearty singing of hymns by "Isaac Watts and C. and J. Wesley and R. Heber and the Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould..." (21). But there is an even more crucial connection for in the back of Rita's mind, lies a revelation about the hymn-writer, Baring-Gould: "oh, if we had known he collected limericks!" (49, 21). In other words, nonsense songs, lying cheek by jowl with spiritual songs, emanated from the same composer, a hint to Rita of a world with a breadth frowned upon by her Puritan background.

The second epiphany emerges when Rita's sexual repression, influenced by her mother's conviction that "sex ... was for the martyrdom of women" is touched "when in the Politics Club the

discussion became heated and Carter Williamson laced his foot around [hers]" (65, 49). Rita is so moved by her budding consciousness that sexual feelings belong to the natural order, she thinks for a moment, "we were roots of the same tree" (49). The third revelation is the affirmation of her lively imagination, often disparaged at home as simply a manifestation of Rita, the dreamer. It is implied in the image of the merging of two worlds: "in a lecture on Chaucer, the leaves around the leaded classroom windows began to rustle in Middle English" (40, 49). Obviously, the earthiness of Chaucer's account is in sharp contradiction to what was allowed as subjects of conversation in Rita's home. Moreover, his eye-witness account of the myriad of characters processing to Canterbury speaks to Rita's experience of wider contacts, simply because she was part of young people's trek to university. Her entrance into the university, therefore, is seen by her as an opportunity to expand her world. However, in spite of being armed with her scholarship, Rita faces an example of a Puritan utilitarian outlook in a professor:

Logic! he snapped. The essence of philosophy is logic!  
 ... You women think it's all the dove of peace  
 brooding over the world, but it's logic! That's why you  
 can't do it. No philosophy for you, my girl ... (42).

The failure of the university, represented in the philosophy professor's attitude, to satisfy Rita's interest in the mystery behind reality is the background to her fourth epiphany. Its

manifestation occurs on her brief, initial visit to Eglantine House, with her tutor, to discuss George Herbert's concept of grace. Essentially, she is struck by her illumination of the activity of grace in Sister Mary Rose's goodness; Rita's subsequent decade as a nun bears out her initial conviction that "Sister Mary Rose had authority but ... she retained it not by means of its exercise but by her goodness of heart" (59,60). Moreover, Rita notes that, during her decade there, the mother superior's goodness is not disassociated from the failings of human nature. Rather, Rita declares:

I was never under the impression that Sister Mary Rose had not been severely tempted in other ways; she had won her redemption by strength of character with the assistance, of course, of grace (60).

The significance of this epiphany is that it imparts to Rita the reality of grace beyond her earlier aesthetic and literary interest in it. It implies that grace may be active within the total sphere of what it means to be human, thus supporting Engel's view that the spiritual dimension in a life is related to the totality of life. Rita becomes aware that grace is more than something to be discussed, that it can be experienced in the midst of chaos and that it calls for a response from the will. Rita in her letter to the Bishop writes, "Funny, grace is a what ... thing, quality, experience ... which I have never understood outside her office...." Yet, with the arrival at her maritime retreat of his emissary, Brother Anthony, in "a little

red car [which] came skittering over the snow and almost slid into the side of the house" grace enters Rita's life. Indeed, it comes at the moment she "wanted that end bracket [death] to come fast" (149,143). Within the context of this experience, Rita's burden of guilt at her imperfection is transformed into an opportunity to be involved in an "envoie", a mission, to serve others whose lives are in chaos.

In the letter to the Bishop, Rita reassesses her life just short of this point. Her earliest recollections of her childhood focus on her keen sensual response to the beauty of nature and to the romantic and, therefore, unacceptable, aspects of religion her family's Puritan expression forbade:

Oh, I was seduced early by roses and crowns....

I was a little girl and my name was Rita Heber ...

and every Sunday ... we started with Hymn

Number One, "Holy, Holy, Holy," by R. Heber, and I

wrote it, and the glassy crowns of the saints were cast

in a glassy sea.... I was in there with the cherubim

and the seraphim (11).

Rita's early identification with such imagery shapes her reputation as a dreamer and anticipates her struggle with perfectionist utilitarianism as a means of renewal; "I was, you see, perverse.... I drove my mother wild" (13). Even as a child, Rita struggles alone to take into account the unseen aspects of reality. The exaggeration of her interest in sensual beauty, which she comes later to call seduction, grows because

scarcely any allowance is made for its existence in her background. The plainness of her family life (even the setting of the place was "in a bleak field") is lightened by her susceptibility to images (12).

Rita's childish tendency to lose herself in the White Rose and Pegasus images on her father's gas pumps is significant. It represents the difference between Rita and her "plain people not made for [the] mysteries" of a far-away world (12). In childhood, the threatening aspects of reality, only hinted at by her family's Puritan attitude, equally preoccupy her:

If you lay flat on the dirt road (dirty girl, dirty girl!) you could hear those creaking, buzzing, trickling underground sinister streams as sure as you could hear the furnace beating like a heart under the school when you put your head on the desk (19).

Thus, Rita's sense of isolation is compounded and it is this situation that leads to a growing sense of illusion since, from childhood, she has no one with whom to share her perspectives on life.

By the time she reaches adolescence, she is pulled between two worlds. On the one hand she tries to meet the standards of the women of her family, who worked so hard because "they belonged to a puritanical religion and an even more puritanical culture" (22). On the other hand, her longing for beauty and mystery is evident in her romantic reaction to the figure in the one stained-glass window in the church. It is of "a pallid

knight, drooping in dusty armour, holding, of course, a rose" (20). Moreover, the unfathomed implication of sexual relationship she intuitively feels in adolescence is represented in the layers of the rose contained in the knight's hand. It is significant, therefore, that when Rita meets Asher Bowen later in high school, she sees him as "a vision of the perfect knight ... [and] the sight of him pierced [her]" (29,30). Ironically, her vague, adolescent belief that "if you took Jesus seriously, you wanted things that moth and rust would not corrupt" leads her to an illusory view of Asher's true nature (24). Her willingness to escape the arousal of her sexuality at the sight of him by equating him with a two-dimensional, stained-glass knight anticipates an aspect of her seeking entrance into Eglantine House. For later, Rita acknowledges that it is her fear of "the flapping wings of Eros ..." that partly sends her there (57).

The traditional Puritan view toward women's roles in Rita's community allows for marriage and child-bearing and failing that, "to be trained to earn a living" (39). Judged from childhood as a dreamer, she does not appear to her parents to be a useful candidate for a university education. Ironically, Rita's summertime experience with Boris, the writer, who "open[s] a number of worlds for [her]", is the impetus of her parents' decision to send her to university (36). For through accounts of his war-experience, love of music and learning and even a little tentative love-making, he, like Christabel,



later, becomes an instrument of her education in a way her parents do not appreciate. Rita's confession to her parents that she wants to study philosophy is seen by them to be Boris' fault, so little do they appear to understand her. Indeed, Rita the dreamer has always been interested in the theory behind the practical world she has been brought up in. It is the assurance that Rita would be doing an honour to "the school and county" if she wins a scholarship that allows them to let her go (38).

Although at university she experiences an inkling of the naturalness of her sexuality, her Puritan fear of sex leads her to live vicariously through her friend, Christabel's careless experience. Her attraction to her friend is revealing at several levels for Christabel's background and life-motivation are a foil to Rita's Puritan origins; this encompasses attitudes to work, pleasure, learning, self-promotion and chastity. Indeed, at a safe distance, Rita can experience the forbidden aspects of life she has long been warned against. It is for this reason that she "... fell in love with Christabel" (43). Her assigned role by the dean of women, that she "was supposed to be steady, a good influence" on Christabel lends a sense of Puritan mission to Rita's relationship with her (45). It serves, however, to lead Rita away from addressing the influence of her own background upon her need to grow. The reasons for her "fainting dead away" at Christabel and John's [Rita's cousin] wedding are complex; jealousy, fear for the future of the couple's marriage but also, "it had something to

do with the way [she] felt about the lives of women" (51). In fact, Rita experiences a break-down in her health at this point in her second university year because of her inability to deal with over-stimulation of her being. The sharp contrast between herself and Christabel, perceived in her close encounter with someone almost as if from another planet, is a factor. That her Puritan concept of decision-making is only barely touched is obvious:

The philosophy course was elementary, but what I wanted, and from it I learned one valuable thing that had not occurred to me before: every decision, down to choosing the colour of one's shoe-laces, was not a moral decision. It had been in our house....  
(43).

However, owing to the lack of a meaningful life-focus, Rita is unable to deal effectively with the significance of the first two epiphanies; to face the burden of her isolation and her tendency to illusion and the "flapping wings of Eros" over her own head (57).

Rita's illness results in "an episode in [her] life that was truly lyrical and led to many strange things" (51). In fact, it serves to make her aware of the significance of her epiphanies, initiating a perception of the role of grace as an alternative to perfectionism. Rita sees at first hand the beauty of her mother's practical nature, when unencumbered by worry and constant interruption. As she guides Rita's convalescence,

"[her mother] was quite wonderful and we were close, and I loved her" (52). It is her mother who, single-handedly, arranges the continuation of Rita's university studies at home, "for Hebers never quit" (52). But neither her mother nor Rita has any way of knowing the repercussions that would transpire out of her mother's choice of the elderly Mr. Laidlaw, a retired Anglo-Catholic priest, as tutor. Through his guidance Rita is exposed to an eclectic selection of literature, including many religious and metaphysical writers, spanning five hundred years. Chaucer, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, Crashaw and Hopkins parade through Rita's consciousness. It is in contrast to her experience at the university where "the books were set, very set [and] the French novel [was] read painfully, word for word" (43). There, while Rita's reaction to the lecture on Chaucer leads her to a vague inkling of his medieval world, under Mr. Laidlaw's tutelage, the "Parlement of Fowles" is as palpable as "the soft grey cut-velvet cloth" of the study-table under her hands (54). Particularly, her introduction to the 17th century metaphysical poets delights Rita, satisfying her longing for the mystery that she feels is a component of reality. Indeed, in response to their work, she declares, "My heart was tender" (54).

There is no strong parental objection when Rita decides to attend Mr. Laidlaw's church since "they were still Christians, Protestants even, in spite of their creed with its small-c

catholic in it ..." (54). But following Rita and her tutor's visit to Eglantine House to discuss Herbert's concept of grace with Sister Mary Rose, Rita makes a life-changing decision. In a matter of fact tone, she recalls in her letter, "I had my tea, I read in Sister Mary Rose's office ... and I decided to spend the rest of my life in that house" (63). No mention is made, here, of a discussion about grace; it is simply that Sister Mary Rose's authority, exercised in that household, causes Rita to begin to sense the relationship between goodness of heart and plainness and orderliness. In this house, she begins to see that grace takes precedence over Puritan practicality for the house is, indeed, plain and orderly. Rita realizes that even "Grammacrae [her judgmental perfectionist grandmother] could not have instituted a more sensible establishment than Eglantine House" (58).

However, her mother's reaction to her decision to enter Eglantine Convent is catastrophic and irreparable. Rita realizes that:

her [mother's] utilitarian view of life cut her off from any sense that that which was not useful (and certainly Eglantism is not, to people of my mother's cast of mind, useful) could be beautiful (65).

Thus, it is apparent to Rita that the love demonstrated in her mother's practical care of her during her illness is conditional under Puritan perfectionism. In her failure, also, to match its standard, Rita is "a liar, a cheat, a thief...

[and] a hypocrite if [she] thought she was religious" (64). As an alleviation of the rift between her and her mother, "[she] agreed privately with Sister Mary Rose to pray to God for grace to love my mother better" (66). From the beginning of her entrance into Eglantine House, Rita recalls that "somehow joy kept creeping in" in spite of the hard year of completing her degree, followed by working to repay what she owed her parents for her education (67). Rita's epiphany, in which she becomes aware of the presence of grace in Sister Mary Rose, initiates "the happiest and most innocent ten years of [her] life" (67). In contrast, the lyrical period with her mother is only an episode (51).

Sister Mary Rose names Rita, Mary Pelagia, with conscious irony:

not ... for the Pelagia who was once called  
Marguerite for her pearls and Marina because she was  
an inevitable cognate of Aphrodite, but for Pelagius,  
theologian and heretic.... [H]e was ... as great a  
Puritan as I (72).

By her choice of the name, Pelagius, Sister Mary Rose is associating the early Christian heretic with Rita's background because of his avowal that everyone has the "capacity for perfecting themselves or corrupting themselves, by the exercise of their free-will" (Passmore 95). He, indeed, was a Puritan. In addition, she is focussing on a tension in the span of the name, Mary Pelagia, which reflects what she observes in Rita,

the tug between the impulse to be a Mary and the parental imperative to be a Martha. Sister Mary Rose recognizes that Rita's swift response to the acceptance and innocence of the House is connected with her desire to escape this tension. Indeed, her response is akin to that of a fugitive seeking refuge as a matter of life and death. This is borne out in Rita's almost instantaneous decision on her very first visit to spend the rest of her life there. Sister Mary Rose's suggestion, therefore, that they study together the life and thought of Pelagius is to encourage Rita to draw out a clearer definition of the relationship between Puritan thought and grace. That the director is accurate in her assessment of Rita's attraction to Eglantine House is affirmed in Rita's recollection of that first visit:

there was something beyond my grasp, something that flitted in and out of my consciousness like a moonbeam, a firefly, or a broken rainbow on a hall carpet that might be there possessed; and it was indeed in Mary Rose's office that I sometimes, fragmentarily, understood that firefly — love, grace, understanding itself ... (60).

During her ten years there, however, Rita largely considers herself an observer of the action of grace through her relationship with Sister Mary Rose. Thus, she, essentially, fails to embrace the role of grace in addressing the totality of her own life.

Rita is allowed flexibility by the head of Eglantine House to simultaneously complete her degree and accomplish her novice year. Later, the way is open for her to combine participation in a teaching career in the outside world and to live as a nun in Eglantine House. Thus, no inhibitions are brought to bear on the scope of her learning nor is there an attempt to completely cloister her. In fact, her mind continues to be challenged by Sister Mary's sending her back to university to study theology, philosophy and the sociology of religion. Indeed, her epiphanies regarding learning and the reality of worlds beyond her Puritan sphere are manifested. However, Rita's double role as a secular religious attracts more attention in the school where she teaches religious studies than she can cope with. When she finds herself falling in love with a compatible teacher, who defends her against the teasing of some of the other male staff, Rita is unable to cope with her sexual feelings. Thus, that fundamental part of her life continues to be unintegrated.

As Sister Mary Rose grows old and infirm, the responsibility to direct the affairs of Eglantine House falls more and more upon Rita, forcing her "practical side [to gnaw] at [her] spirituality" (83). Thus, she finds the fulfilment of her four epiphanies is incomplete. In spite of her outside activities in the school, she experiences isolation but, ironically, because of them, her "physical nature was at last exerting itself" (87). That Rita perceives this as a sign that "the shell of

innocence, in fact, was broken" speaks volumes of this aspect of her Puritan indoctrination (86). The letter to the Bishop in that period of isolation and denial led to:

... my only true Englantine vision: I saw myself standing purified and free, at the edge of a body of water, alone, dressed in white linen and holding one but one only of Margarita's pearls.

Pelagia, Marina, Margarita, Aphrodite: I was seeing myself as Venus, I think, but for a moment I thought I was a saint (87).

Illusion, generated by perfectionism, threatens to overwhelm Rita. That her fragmentation is exacerbated is evident in the multiplication of the names by which she addresses herself. The focus of the resulting tension is exemplified in her opposite self-perceptions as Venus and a saint.

With a decline in the health and vigour of Sister Mary Rose and the others, Rita's early experience of the contemplative life is reduced to "the labelling and ordering of trays, the dispatch of laundry bags, the addition of accounts" (80). Indeed, the pattern of failure in this human institution is matched by Rita's perception of her own failure. Her sense of entering a safe haven where her desire to experience the mystery behind reality, breadth of learning and most of all, grace to mediate her lack of integration appears to be fading. The crisis in her community's decline causes Rita to take control. Indeed, she is "surprised by [her] practicality", a



factor in her Puritan background she has tried to escape (81). A greater irony is manifested in her winning the friendship of the only nun her age, Sister Mary Cicely, who is "pious, homely, and strongly sexed" and jealous of Rita (90). From her depth of awareness, Rita treats her fellow-nun with compassion, holding her as a child to comfort her in her periods of sexual fixation. Indeed, her encounter with Mary Cicely forces Rita to take a tentative step toward questioning the Puritan interpretation of the sexual side of human nature. At the end of her decade there, Sister Mary Rose commends her for "her wonderful work" but essentially sets her free to escape entrapment in "a dying order" (88). Thus, Rita has come full circle, her departure marked by commendation for a Puritan virtue, practicality, in spite of her entrance in hope of grace.

Rita's need to reconcile practicality and grace, implied in the name, Mary Pelagia, that she leaves behind at Eglantine House, still remains a challenge. It is spelled out in her assessment of the decade there as she looks back in her letter to the Bishop:

... but my religion was, I think, aesthetic and literary only; it did not contain within it the true incense of prayer and exhortation ... according to the writings of the great mystics. For me, the practical life of the Order was the only salvation, and that robbed me of its sacramentalism, so I had to leave (91)

Thus, she is unable to see that in expressing unconditionally her practical care and encouragement of its members, she has shown them love and that that makes her deeds sacramental. Her sense of loss at her "sudden and violent" expulsion from the crumbling community prevents her from seeing that she has, indeed, imparted grace to all there (91). The measure of Rita's conviction that her experience at Eglantine has been wiped out by this expulsion is evident in the words by which she describes herself: "Loss: I was empty. I incorporated my egg. I was a white, swollen thing, gut-blown before painting" (95). Her remaining struggle is to see this clearly as well as to distinguish how grace may enable her own life to be renewed.

Rita comes to a half-way house, Maggie Hibbert's, in more ways than one. It is here, arranged by Sister Mary Rose, that she, the now former nun, is taken in to experience recovery and preparation to return to the world. That she declares, in her initial reaction, "I was not born to like Maggie; neither of us took naturally to the other" emanates from both similarities and contrasts between them (96). Engel conveys this fact by her very naming of the women, Rita Heber and Maggie Hibbert. In one another's company they represent an example of the Mary-Martha argument, Rita aspiring after grace, Maggie, after practical service. Rita has spent a decade as a nun; Maggie plans to study law. Yet, each woman seeks to avoid strict perfectionism. While her mother's house had been ruled by perfectionism, and Eglantine House by Sister Mary's gracious authority, Rita comes

to see that Maggie Hibbert rules by a firm practicality, tempered by charity.

It is in Maggie's house that Rita experiences the normalcy of sexual attraction in the company of Maggie's good-humoured and accepting grown sons. The experience "made [her] feel, obscurely, that there was some sort of future, something to live for" (100). This is the first affirmation of the naturalness of her sexuality since the epiphany in the university Politics Club, prompted by the thought that she and Carter Williamson "were roots from the same tree" (49). However, the suddenness of Rita's shift of focus to this long-repressed aspect of her nature leads to an exaggeration of its overall place in a life. Her assessment that "Perhaps our lives should end (our natural lives, not our convent, cubicle, scholarly lives) when our sex urge dies" is revealing (100,101). For it anticipates her frightening penultimate vision before grace arrives in the person of Brother Anthony (144-148). Moreover, Rita's words draw attention to her awareness that her fears regarding sexuality are still not completely addressed.

Maggie Hibbert directs Rita's life during this interim period just as her mother had during Rita's convalescence. But, Maggie treats her as a consistently kind parent who knows all the right rules for introducing eligible young people to life and to one another. However, her life here is much more structured than at Eglantine House where flexibility was

allowed. As a result, Rita has little time for quietness to think and, essentially, her sense of emptiness remains. Her meeting of Asher Bowen in Maggie's house gives Rita a deceptive sense that her life is taking shape: "I invested Asher with all my emptiness, I made him God, home, Mary Rose, family" and her experiences all seems to come together in "a beautiful big old house" they live in after their marriage (104). But, more than anyone, Asher becomes Rita's director: "I was empty; I handed my void to him. He told me what to wear, what to do; when he knew me better, he often told me what I felt" (105).

Rita mistakes Asher's intense participation in the church sacrament and the fact that "his knuckles whitened when he prayed", for goodness of heart (104). In fact, it is religious fanaticism. Equally, she mistakenly perceives her "beautiful, rigid knight" lying beside her as her "miracle" when in reality his own sexuality is confused by his ascetic striving after perfectionism and by Puritan repression (104,105). Two years after their marriage, they sleep in separate beds. Asher's choice of an austere painting of an "hysterically Jesuitical, unresurrectible Jesus" over their marriage bed is too much for Rita (110). The austere room, which Asher had decorated before Rita comes, seems like "a room for a bachelor or a monk" (110). Undoubtedly, it reminds Rita of the overlapping of her unresolved sexuality with her flight to Eglantine House. The failure of their married relationship to deepen their consciousness of themselves as a couple and as persons is in

stark contrast to Rita's epiphanic experience of the potential naturalness of sex. Looking at her years with Asher, Rita admits:

I can't say that Asher and I grew apart. I think we were always apart .... We were not chips off the same block, limbs from the same tree (113).

Obviously, they are not as "roots of the same tree" (49).

The birth of Chummy, their sickly child, brings undeniable imperfection into their lives. Rita responds by setting out "to be the best mum of a hydrocephalic child that ever was, unaware that Asher was bleeding to death inside" (112). In other words, both strive to compensate for their imperfect child by striving to be as longsuffering and perfect as they can, themselves. Thus, their failure to comfort one another leads to Rita's confession that "if I remember anything about that period, it was that we lived an empty life" (113). It is at this time that Rita's religious attitude becomes fatalistic, foreshadowing a further step toward her vision of death as the end bracket that alone can make sense of life (119). Chummy, the obvious imperfect child, whom, nevertheless Rita loves, "[teaches her] to be, if not an existentialist, at least to cease to be Pelagian" (119). For no amount of will on her part can make him well and she perceives no reason in the hopelessness of his condition, which dooms him to not survive his childhood. Thus, Engel opens up the way for Rita's continuing search for grace as an alternative to give meaning to human suffering, since

neither existentialism nor Puritan perfectionism fills Rita's emptiness.

Engel implies that it is necessary that Rita face the origin of her sense of guilt, failure and immorality before she can experience a restoration of her innocence. That her confrontation with herself occurs in Uncle Eddie's house on the edge of Heberville is fraught with multiple ironies. For it was Uncle Eddie's molestation of her as a child, which is the immediate cause of her anxiety about sexuality. Moreover, it is ironic that the beginning of Rita's turning to address her past lies in Asher's purchase of the house as a birthday present for her. Furthermore, the act of facing her origins is initiated by Tess McCrory, her long-ago Catholic contemporary, in her bitter action of placarding, before Rita and Asher, her negative interpretation of the Heber family. Her action mortifies Rita and amuses Asher. Later, Rita acknowledges that Tess's revelation is connected with the division in Heberville along denominational lines, the burden of religious prejudice, passed on to both.

Uncle Eddie's house is a figure, therefore, of Rita's past. Forced by others to face it, rather than by her own motivation, she falls back upon perfectionism. She acknowledges that:

I hated that house. If anything was a punishment for my sins, that was .... I'd find myself scrubbing Eddie's table, cleaning Eddie's toilet .... I'd have got rid of the whole place, given any choice .... I

wanted to paint it all white inside ... (120).

The centrality of Rita's sense of her own imperfection rests on her childhood experience initiated by her uncle. She still carries the unreasonable burden of "dirty girl, dirty girl", equating sex with dirt (19). That she is forced to put her child to bed in Uncle Eddie's spare-room and sleep with Asher in Uncle Eddie's bed are almost unbearable actions, so ill-prepared is she to integrate the stages of her life. Chummy's death soon after their first visit there severs the last link between Rita and Asher. The result of this double loss is to magnify her long-standing emptiness. Her increasing sense of imperfection is sharpened by Asher's fear of it. His question, "Were you ever happy with me?" is the preliminary to his asking for a divorce (124).

Rita is set free, in turn, from Eglantine House, from Maggie Hibbert's house and from her home with Asher. In each case, she has been set free by a director of her life. Now, faced for the first time with the need to make her own decision about its direction since she entered Eglantine House, she collapses. After a period, blotted from her memory, she wakes up in Detroit, having made a bee-line to her imperfect brother, Stu. So begins Rita's round-about circling back to her origins like a pilgrim: "Where were you born?" the Immigration man said. "Heberville," I said (125). Having arrived back at her hometown by bus, ferry and foot, she finds the only shelter open to her is Uncle Eddie's house, her birthday present. Engel, by images

full of distortion, conveys the importance of Rita's need of healing to experience re-birth. Through the irony of the setting and her perception of the blurred line between reality and fairytale, Rita reacts to the presence of a stranger in the house with "little round eyes, little round glasses, a yellow beard and a little knitted cap on his head" as if he is a kind of ministering presence (126). In all, through feeding her and making love to her in Uncle Eddie's bed, he appears to act out Rita's need to join her present state with the disturbing childhood memory. It is a beginning of Rita's recovery but the withdrawal of his presence, like a capricious Rumpelstiltskin, implies the urgent need for her to accept responsibility for the direction of her life (128). This is implied in Rita's remark that the stranger leaves "without quite exorcising Eddie" (127).

In reassessing this period, Rita is moved to convey her state through reference to a painting. In her letter to the Bishop, she says, "the space between that house and this house [the farmhouse by the sea] is best filled, Philip, by telling you to look at the hell-paintings of Hieronymous Bosch" (130). This revealing remark implies Rita's experience of a carnal period as depicted in Bosch's "Garden of Delights", an ambiguous work, described by art critic; H.W, Janson, as conveying through distorted images of human behavior an aspiration after "innocence ... in this panorama of sinful mankind" (Janson, 289). She accepts in the divorce court that,



during her breakdown, she has behaved like "a slut, a whore, and a madwoman" (130). Ironically, although her behavior reflects the aphrodite cognate of her name, Pelagia, the tension in the name, Mary Pelagia, implies Rita's small hope for a restoration of innocence. Her experience of the letter of the law is brought about by Asher's perfectionism, ensuring that he wipes her out of his life at a time when she is most alone. The finality of his repudiation, achieved through the law, initiates this period of her life. Her illusion that Chummy still lives, her efforts to blot out reality by liquor, picking up men and harassing Asher threaten her sanity. Indeed, the measure of her space now is the gulf that lies between her failure to achieve Puritan perfection and her great need to find integration. The tension implied in her Eglantine name, Mary Pelagia, is almost at the breaking point, but not quite.

It is Maggie and her son, Bellman, who rescue her. He and Maggie affirm the reality of Chummy's death and with their accustomed practical charitableness find her shelter and a psychiatrist, Dr. Stern. His treatment and her relationship with the Hibberts draw Rita from the brink of insanity. Subsequently, she attempts to fill her emptiness with group therapy sessions and an eclectic variety of meetings, from women's meetings to "the annual meeting of the Karma CO-OP" (133). The association that touches her most sharply is that of the women's liberation meetings. Her response tells much about her need for further assimilation of her experience:

At these I wanted to shout, "We must love one another or die." I'm still appalled by the sex-hate of the early Christians, of my early self (133). In fact, shortly after her completion of the letter, Rita goes on to express man-hate in her terrifyingly negative vision on the eve of Brother Anthony's arrival at the house by the sea. Nevertheless, here is the cry of one looking for another theology, an understanding of love, that is, grace. Indeed, it anticipates Rita's crucial movement from perfectionism toward the break-through of grace.

Rita circles forward from the past to her present, which she recounts in the letter to the Bishop, written in the house by the shore where Asher has tried to banish her. She admits that, while the psychiatrist, Dr. Stern "got [her] working on [herself] ... [to] lay out reality like a deck of cards", she is still empty (139). Rita falters because of her unclear perception that her life always falls apart when she is a Martha and not a Mary (135). It remains for her to realize that, not only in her unconditional love of the Eglantine sisters, but of her child, too, she was ministering grace. She does not grasp that there need not be a dichotomy between the Martha and Mary side of her but an amalgamation. The recovery of an awareness of the unconditionality of love is the religious expression Engel's women struggle toward in their search of how to live. This is the full implication of what Rita claims, though only partly discerns, when she cries out,

"We must love one another or die" (133).

Because she does not apprehend the full significance behind her cry, she refuses Philip, the Bishop of Huron's offer to participate in her own and Eglantine House's re-birth. Her inability to see a clear way to get out of her impasse is evident in her lack of conviction in her statement to her cousin, John, when he visited her by the sea, "I've been cured of Pelagianism. I believe in grace" (135). For her affirmation is cancelled in the reason for her refusal of the bishop's challenge: "I'm not the strong vessel you need; the pitcher that goes oftenest to the well may be cracked" (141). Rita's earlier claim that her man-hate is over is a mark of her illusive grasp of the depth of her conflict. It belongs to the same category of illusion that leads to the incongruence of her thinking about the relationship between Martha and Mary and between practicality and sacramentalism. Indeed, her perception that "spiritually, I decided, I was a fake and a failure" is the context of her confusion, reflecting still her unreasonable self-judgment by the standard of Puritan perfectionism (143).

Rita is not ready for grace in this place of withdrawal from life. Predictably, therefore, her reluctance to face squarely her continuing entrapment in perfectionism leads to an eruption of hatred of self that spills over into hatred of men. Her vision of negation and evil hearkens back to Bosch's distorted images. It grows out of the long, cold winter nights in the farmhouse at the edge of the world and is her penultimate

vision, broken in upon, later, by grace. Behind it is her mother's indoctrination that sex means martyrdom for women, her own ambiguity about sex and, of course, her bitter experience of rejection by Asher for a more perfect and younger woman. Her eruption of evil thoughts is connected with her only Eglantine vision, experienced just prior to her departure from the convent. Then, standing, in her vision, by the seashore as Pelagia, she held clenched in her hand one pearl, her longing for wholeness to develop out of her fragmentation. The urgency of her need to grow toward a sense of herself is undeniable as evil thoughts multiply images of death represented in the mutilation of women's bodies. In her desperation and distortion of reality, Rita, at forty-two, shapes a diabolical plan by which women should willingly die when the menopause comes upon them. For at forty-five, she declares, their usefulness to men and the world, in general, is at an end. The part that Rita reserves for men is that they "be the ones who take life" (146). In her confused thinking, she creates an image of the integration of the flesh and spirit only in death; Asher and all the other men "know what it is to kill the spirit. Let them kill the flesh .... We should die more, we should die eagerly (147). The diminishment of Rita's will to live is conveyed in an image of death closing in upon her, "by midwinter the view of the Pelagian shore was reduced to the size of a palmprint on a frosted window pane" (142). It is the shape of a cold hand, raised, however, like a wordless cry for help.

As she stares through it to beyond her entrapment in evil thoughts, she draws her breath and waits for an alternative, "a small eternity: a resurrection" (149). In the next breath, that small, gradually enclosing space is filled with "a little red car [which] came skittering over the snow and almost slid into the side of the house: Brother Anthony" (149). Rita's life is saved by the arrival of the Bishop of Huron's envoy. Brother Anthony is the bearer of a message of grace relevant to her desire for resurrection, for re-birth.

The sudden announcement of this momentous news, following on the heels of Rita's terrifyingly negative vision, is almost too much for her to absorb. It leads to her experience of an inner apocalypse which occurs as a night-long spiritual struggle, encompassing her total human nature, her feelings, her sexuality, her sensuality and her spirit:

I was misinterpreting the signals all over the place, my self in rags and tatters floating around the house ... my old self lying on the hard dirty road listening to underground streams, my sensual self taunting Anthony, and another piece of me wrestling with all I know of Hopkins' God, and me, who was I? (154).

It is only when she imagines embracing herself as a child even as she has done with Sister Cicely that she, indeed, is able to extend forgiveness to herself. Its outcome, in essence, serves to cancel her previous vision of negation and to fulfil the

longing of her Eglantine vision. Moreover, it is Anthony's acceptance of her as she is and his confidence in her future that persuades her to accept the Bishop's invitation. The matter-of-fact faith in her of both the Bishop and his envoy, not in spite of her experience but because of it, is the sign of their rejection of her perfectionism. Finally, Brother Anthony's affirmation that grace through faith is always there to be activated, as Minn would say, to be primed, kindles Rita's willingness to grow (164).

She is now able to examine the Bishop and Anthony's proposal to re-open the convent as a hospice, a refuge for women and children, victims from "the battle of the sexes" (157). It is significant that they see it happening only if Rita consents to operate it. Through realistic relationship, not in isolation, Engel implies, human lives can be renewed. The motive force by which this can occur is not judgmental perfectionism but love, understanding, grace, discerned through experience allowing "room for a small eternity"; by this means practical works are free from being conditional upon seeking to be perfect (149). This is borne out in Anthony's kind of logic:

Look, Pelagia, ... there's an establishment: Eglantine House exists. We need you to resurrect it; we are calling you; for practical reasons; and because we think you can do it (153).

Rita's realization of the efficacy of grace as an alternative to perfectionism is seen in her response, "To my amazement, I

started to cry" (153).

She is now free to examine clearly her sense of the parallel social apocalyptic period around her, one of whose marks is the rupture of relationships between women and men. Significantly, Engel's prophetic sense is at work here:

The fall-out from the battle of the sexes is getting worse every day and will continue to do so .... Men, forced by politics and literature and the facts in front of their eyes to see women as they are, are frightened .... [M]arriage is changing; people are afraid of change, war has broken out (157).

In response to Rita's anxiety that she might fail, that she doesn't have enough faith and by implication, that his faith in her may be unmet, Anthony assures her, "You will [succeed] ... if you believe in grace" (163). That she takes encouragement from this interchange is seen in her resolution of her long conflict:

Finally I heard my voice rolling up its sleeves  
and I knew that I was at the end of a long and  
delicious seduction. Nor ever chaste except You...  
[Donne concludes except You ravish me] (163, 151).

Rita's 'seduction', not by beauty, but by grace, allows her to accept the complementary nature of the Martha and Mary aspects that exist in her life. Just as her initial impetus to discuss grace gave way to an experience of it in Sister Mary's

goodness, so her burden of perfectionism gives way to an experience of grace in her own life. That her experience of grace leads to her sense of wholeness or, more accurately, of healing is evident in her statement at the beginning of the novel on the eve of her re-dedication to take up her life and work again:

There are miracles .... [N]ow I know who I am and what I want. I see a clear path. I shall pray that it is the right path and that it can be kept clear (20).

Thus, Rita, like Minn and Lou, acknowledges the ongoing need of the will to prime the supply of "love, grace, understanding itself" (60).



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For a poetic treatment of George Herbert's concept of grace, see his "Grace"; The Poetical Works of George Herbert, ed. George Gilfillan; Edinburgh: James Nichol Publisher, 1853. In the same edition, his poem, "L'Envoy", pages 209-210, presents an interesting reflection on Engel's use of the term, *envoie*, instead of epilogue.

<sup>2</sup>For a discussion of the significance of the late 1960s 'God is dead' phenomenon, see The Meaning of the Death of God. edited by Bernard Murchland; New York: Vintage Books, 1967.

## Chapter Six

### CONCLUSION:

Sherrill Grace, in her book, Regression and Apocalypse identifies the terms as characteristic of the various forms of expressionistic art which emerged in the first part of this century in Europe. Grace's use of the terms regression and apocalypse stands for what is called in my first chapter, a negative apocalypse and a positive apocalypse. As she says:

by ... regression I mean ... the sense of profound yearning, a longing to return to the distant echoes of the animal past, a past free of moral restriction and restraint. [But at its extremel it expresses ... a longing for death.... To the expressionist, apocalypse signifies a cataclysmic, purgative destruction that should lead to regeneration and spiritual rebirth" (38).

Grace suggests that it is possible to identify a small group of contemporary expressionistic writers in Canada today. While she does not include Engel among that group, we may clearly see Engel's work in the terms which Grace identifies with expressionism. In her introduction, she states:

It is my hope that readers of Regression and Apocalypse will be stimulated into finding other artists who might be included, because there is much recuperative and critical work to be done on Expressionism, especially in Canada, which has tried very hard to ignore this

presumably 'un-Canadian' style and subject-matter (6). I find Engel's connection with expressionistic art to be engaging. It may very well arise from the time she spent on the faculty of a school in Aix-en-Provence, France. She acknowledged in an interview that while there she was influenced by "the explosion of the nouvel roman by French writers", which in itself is a form of expressionism (Room of One's Own, vol.9, no.2, June, 1984, 12).

Grace identifies the tension in expressionistic art, emerging in an apocalyptic time, which is reflected in experimentation with structure. She notes that such art "shatters rational concepts of human identity, disrupts order, causality, spatial and temporal norms, and resorts to distortion of reality and to fantastic or grotesque images ..." (41). Indeed, we have seen that such characteristics are present in Engel's fiction as she undertakes to depict her heroines' spiritual struggle for wholeness in such a time.

Engel's interest in conveying the simultaneity or continuity of time and place may show the influence of French writers from this period. Proust's A la Recherche du temps perdu, written early in this century, continued to be influential in post-war French writing. Engel's work reflects a similar interest in time and place to Proust. It is likely, also, that her existentialist concern with the dilemmas of a transitional time may have been influenced by that of Camus, writing in the fifties. She also shares the interest of French

writers in the debate after the war as to whether individualism or relationship within community would shape a better world. These writers view the turbulence of that post-war period as giving rise to apocalyptic themes. It is clear that Engel expresses in her work such themes, characteristic of the sixties and seventies. It is this insight that informs her heroines' spiritual longing for wholeness. Indeed, the concomitant spiritual interest evident among some of the French writers as they addressed the struggle between good and evil, undoubtedly would have caught Engel's attention.

Such a struggle can be seen in Minn's conversation with the God of the Puritans in The Honeyman Festival (68-71). The accusing questions of the Lord set the stage at first as a judgment scene. Minn expects to have to answer for her years of failure to meet the standards of perfectionism as she imagines the Lord shouting, "- Build! Organize! Preserve!" (68). But in her struggle to define the crucial nature of love to foster growth when belief in progress, politics, psychology, philosophy and the law fails, she experiences the Lord's acceptance of her. Lou in Bear is visited by the Devil following her attempt to manipulate the bear to satisfy her sexual need. He conveys no appreciation of what her struggle is really about, to acknowledge the totality of herself and a right relationship with nature, through the bear. Instead, he addresses only the signs of her failure to achieve a "sense of self" (123). In The Glassy Sea, Rita tells the Bishop that the

space of her life after her child's death and her divorce from her husband is "best filled [by looking] at the hell-paintings of Hieronymous Bosch" (130). Thus, Rita reveals that her experience of a carnal period expresses a hidden aspiration after innocence, similar to that depicted in Bosch's painting.

Grace maintains that what a painter or writer wants to show in work depicting an apocalyptic sense "is the idea which hides itself behind so-called reality" (20). We have seen this, too, is Engel's intention. It is explicit in her introduction to The Tattooed Woman, referred to in my first chapter and is implicit in her including on the flyleaf of Bear Kenneth Clarke's quotation from his Landscape into Art: "Facts become art through love, which unifies them and lifts them to a higher plane of reality;".

Grace also points out the use of visionary and prophetic images to convey the longing for re-birth by these writers with an apocalyptic sense (233). I believe that Engel's use of the image of the hyperactive baby, ready to leap out of her arms, to describe the moment of truth when a writer knows she has a story is such an image. For it is related to Engel's obviously confident use of the child-images throughout the three novels to convey stages of her heroines' process toward re-birth.

As a warning of the crucial nature of love in the development of a life, Engel places the child-image in opposition to images of death, connected with the rigidity of perfectionism. In The Honeyman Festival, an example of the

latter is Minn's "dangerous dream" (4). She is so tortured by her failure to meet almost every standard of her mother's perfectionist view that she dreams that her longing for integration of her own life leads to utter neglect of her children. In her dream she wanders through Eaton's looking but not buying silk scarves, books and pieces of amber, representing choices not open to her. She lingers so long that on her arrival home she discovers her three children where she had placed them in the bath, "beautiful, not puckered at all .... They were curled up like little gleaming fish, and dead" (5). Here, Engel expresses the great urgency that her heroine find a way to deal with guilt, generated by Puritan judgmentalism. It is essential not only for her own personal growth but also, to assure that she does not saddle her children with such a dangerous burden.

Engel's use of a child-image to present an attitude of caring relationship with nature is seen in Bear. The image of Lou as a child lying down with the bear implies the restoration of innocent relationship between herself and nature. Indeed, it is an echo of an apocalyptic image in Isaiah of a little child in company with an assortment of animals, such as the wolf, lion and bear; the necessity of human responsibility toward nature is plain in the statement, "A little child shall lead them" (11: 6). That Engel associates her image with this statement is evident in Lou's restoration of the bear to the continuing care of the ancient aboriginal woman, Lucy and her

nephew.

In The Glassy Sea, the initial child-image reflects the use of what Grace identifies in expressionistic writing as "distorted, fragmented, violent images of humanity and the world" (21). Engel's use of the image of Rita as a child signifies both her fear of death and a sense of guilt. It emerges from Rita's early memory of her father, who barely escaped death by poison gas used in the war. (18). Her fear of death is manifested in her apprehension that it can sneak up on a person from the cellar without being seen, like "the ghost of the gassed horseman [who] came up out of the trenches underneath the floor..." (18). Engel goes on to convey that a judgmental attitude of the older generation, used to discipline a child, creates a general sense of guilt that appears to permeate their childhood ambience, but with no particular focus. This is implied in Rita's memory of being sent to the cellar to bring up apples for a pie: "[B]ehind the new fruit is the old ... and there are bad apples in every barrel" (18).

Later in her life, as the potential of grace breaks through such negative influence, Rita experiences a 'dark night of the soul' (154). It leads to her realization that it is herself she has to forgive. That she is able to imagine embracing herself as a child indicates her sense of innocence, restored by grace. Ultimately, however, Engel's joy in her creativity in the face of death which enlightens her use of the image of the embraced, hyperactive child informs all of her child-images. For it

reinforces her positive apocalyptic view, revealing her insight that accepting love may transform the suffering generated by the rigidity of perfectionism.

The particular spiritual dimension of Engel's work derives from her direct engagement with the negative aspects of perfectionism in her own life. This is apparent in her article, "Housework Gives Me the Crazies" about feeling "perpetually guilty" at her failure to be a perfect housekeeper (Chatelaine 46: 34, 83-4, Oct. '73). She does not end there, but turns to the unjustified experience of general failure in the lives of her contemporaries, caused by the whole burden of perfectionism: "Women like me have to get past centuries out of our heads and start living" (83). Her willingness to explore, therefore, the heart of religion is related to the importance to her of asking questions of life. She does this through addressing philosophy, religion and science, together, as she attempts to discern the particular heart of religion and its potential to restore a life.

Alice Munro's comments about Engel's depiction of her heroines in No Clouds of Glory and The Honeyman Festival may apply, also, to Engel's treatment of her subsequent heroines:

She had caught something—our tone, our female bravado, subversive wit, desperate flashes of honesty, and she had gone right through to the spirit beneath that. Marian Engel's bravery in tackling this and her skill in pulling it off is quite revolutionary (Room of



One's Own, vol.9, no.2, June,1984, (33).

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