

THE CIRCLE OF CONVERSATION IN THE SACRIFICE

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Students of *The Sacrifice* have given some attention to Wiseman's use of symbolism in that novel. The circle, particularly, has been identified as central to the novelist's theme because it is used to define the perfect sacrifice, the interconnection between the Biblical God, Abraham, and Isaac. And we are obviously meant to compare this Biblical circle with the novelistic God-Abraham-Isaac relationship.¹ But what has yet to be pointed out is that Wiseman goes beyond this simple use of Biblical reference and uses the circle to define the nature of man's relationship to God and particularly man's relationship to his fellow man. Specifically, she associates the circle with the notion of conversation, which because it involves a connection or sharing between individuals (a verbal circle), becomes the dominant indicator of moral involvement, vitality, and growth in *The Sacrifice*.

In order better to understand the relationship between the circle symbol and Wiseman's moral ideal, it is useful first to summarize briefly her concept of art, for it lies at the basis of her use of conversation in *The Sacrifice*. The central notions of her aesthetic theory are ideas that are also basic to good conversation—consciousness and social involvement. As Wiseman says, in discussing her mother's art,

... what the artist creates is consciousness. Hers is an expression of consciousness which extends consciousness. We cherish it because it represents us not as good, but as aware, and lets us feel that we have contributed to the dignity of creation an expression of our awareness of our situation, which enlarges creation and ourselves. This sense of enlargement, of augmented power, helps us, even, briefly, to imagine that we may somehow become "better."²

¹This point is made by all of the following: Stanley G. Mullins, "Traditional Symbolism in Adele Wiseman's *The Sacrifice*," *Culture*, 19 (September 1958), 287-297; John Moss, *Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974), pp. 96-104; Michael Greenstein, "Movement and Vision in *The Sacrifice*," *Canadian Literature*, 8 (Spring 1979), 23-36.

²Adele Wiseman, *Old Woman at Play* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1978), pp. 59-60.

If the artist extends consciousness through his expression of consciousness, then he is clearly performing a social function.³ The artist's work derives validity, then both from its dependence and its influence on the public sphere. Wiseman does not see the artist as a Romantic solitary, but as a member of a community who is involved in an ongoing social dialogue. In fact, she refers to the artist as,

the *receptive-expressive* creative person [who] seems to concentrate in himself and focus, in his work, currents from the *shared* emotional and intellectual life of his society. His product epitomizes, and in some form projects resolutions for, underlying dilemmas of the human in general and his culture in particular. . . . Ideally, his performance is both a personal and a social act [my italics].⁴

The terms "receptive-expressive" and "shared" point to Wiseman's basic concept of the artist: he is an individual, but he is also part of a community; he shares a public life with the community, but he expresses his personal consciousness of that life; in this way, his personal consciousness affects the consciousness of those who share his culture. What Wiseman is describing, in effect, is a type of conversation that defines a circular, vital activity between the individual artist and his society.

It is precisely this artistic ideal that serves as the moral ideal in *The Sacrifice*. In the same way that the artist must participate in a give-and-take relationship with his society, so, in the novel, must the individual participate in the circle of conversation with his God and with his fellow man. This idea is first suggested in the often-cited scene in which Abraham, in describing the Biblical near-sacrifice of Isaac, defines the ideal sacrifice with the circle image:

"... And God himself is bound at that moment, for it is the point of mutual surrender, the one thing He cannot resist, a faith so absolute. You are right when you say that it is like a circle—the completed circle, when the maker of the sacrifice and the sacrifice himself and the Demander who is the Receiver of the sacrifice are poised together, and life flows into eternity, and for a moment all three are as one.

³Earlier in her discussion, Wiseman points out that "the act of creation is essentially a generous, social gesture" (*Old Woman at Play*, p. 9).

⁴*Old Woman at Play*, p. 130. For a fuller development of this same position, see Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 394-395.

“That was the moment that even God could not resist, and so He gave us the future.”⁵

The key to this passage is the idea of surrender: Isaac surrenders himself to the will of Abraham; Abraham surrenders himself to the will of God; and God, in the face of such faith, surrenders new life to man. And so the circle is closed. Each relies on the others. Future life depends, then, not on the individual himself, but on the individual's surrender to, and participation in, a sort of spiritual conversation.

When this surrender to a greater spiritual truth is lacking, then the spiritual conversation cannot take place. This is revealed in the novel by the character of Isaac, whose agnosticism and lack of faith in life isolate him in what one critic has called “his relativistic microcosm.”⁶ As a result, he is depicted, in his dream, as being “imprisoned in a transparent bubble” (p. 197) from which he cannot escape and out of which he can see only his own reflection. This image is ironic in that it reminds us, in its roundness, of the circle. But whereas the circle suggests the possibility of continued life through conversation, Isaac's bubble connotes the isolation and death of the individual that is not spiritually “receptive-expressive,” as Wiseman's ideal artist is.

The same obtains at the social level in the novel. As long as the individual avoids isolation and surrenders himself to the life of the community by actively using language in a productive, public way, then he will continue to participate in the circle-conversation of life. But if he fails to be both “receptive” and “expressive”—that is, both a listener and talker—then he will fall out of the conversation, out of the circle, out of life. We are first alerted to this idea early in the novel when Abraham links Sarah's worsening state to her isolation from the community. He comments that Sarah needed “people around her to talk to her, to force her out of herself” (p. 32). But Sarah does not talk, does not come out of herself; so when she is about to die, her state is compared to “a long conversation in which she had somehow said all that she had to say, and to which she was now even forgetting to listen” (p. 133).

This theme of conversation is most fully developed through Abraham. Indeed, it serves as a structuring device in the novel, for it helps us to see how Abraham goes from participation in the circle of

⁵Adele Wiseman, *The Sacrifice* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1956), pp. 177-178. Future references will be parentheses in the body of the essay.

⁶Greenstein, p. 33.

life, to alienation, to eventual reconciliation. In the early chapter, before the deaths of Sarah and Isaac, Abraham seems to be the most vital of the three. And this is indicated by his efforts at conversation. Even though he is in mourning, he feels a strong need to communicate his grief over his dead sons, and he purges himself, to some extent, of this grief by sharing it with Chaim Knoff. And Abraham is also capable of listening in these early chapters. For example, even though he and Isaac have disagreements, Abraham makes an effort to understand his son's position. After one argument, for instance, Abraham comments that "A man must keep up with the ideas of the times. He himself was lucky that he had a son like Isaac to discuss them with" (p. 112).

But as we see in the very next chapter, Abraham's willingness to listen seems to disappear when his hopes for the future are challenged in any way. Chapter eight begins with the news of Ruth's pregnancy, which Abraham insists is a "miracle." But a shadow is cast over the event because Ruth and Isaac wish to have the baby in a hospital. An argument ensues as Abraham refuses to believe that there is no danger of babies being separated from their proper parents in hospitals. And he tries to prove his point by retelling the story of a cousin of his wife who went mad and became a Christian. The only way that Abraham can justify this event in the family is to suggest that the cousin was not really a Jew at all but just a gypsy changling. What is even more interesting about the scene is that, more than just being stubborn in this conversation, Abraham is actually lying. As Sarah makes him admit after Isaac and Ruth leave the dinner table, the "mad" cousin in question was not Sarah's but Abraham's.

This scene helps us to see that at the root of Abraham's problem with language and conversation is his pride, a pride that becomes particularly obvious when his grandson is born.⁷ On that occasion, Abraham tries to share his news with the rest of the people in the waiting room. But he does not speak their language. And we are left with a strong sense of his isolation and his self-centredness: "We will call him Moishe Jacob," Abraham stated to the anteroom at large

⁷Wiseman has recently commented that at the time that she wrote *The Sacrifice* she "had become acquainted with the Greek idea of hubris and . . . was interested in the intersection between this notion and the Jewish moral idea" (Roslyn Belkin, "The Consciousness of a Jewish Artist: An Interview with Adele Wiseman," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 31/32 [1981], 152). For a discussion of Abraham's pride and its isolating effect on him, see Moss, pp. 96-104.

when they heard the news, 'for my eldest sons who were killed in the pogrom. You see,' he explained to the others who waited, most of whom did not understand him but smiled with a sort of nervous sympathy, 'new grapes on the vines.' He laughed and spread out his arms. 'Who can be my equal now?' " (p. 128). Significantly, it is soon after this that Sarah's fading life is compared to "a long conversation in which she had somehow said all that she had to say, and to which she was now even forgetting to listen." Abraham, as opposed to Sarah, does not seem to have said all that he has to say in life. But the earlier incidents in this chapter do suggest that he is beginning to forget to listen. Indeed, as the tragedies accumulate in his life, he listens less and becomes more stubborn. Sarah dies toward the end of chapter nine. And in chapter ten we find Abraham engaged in another disagreement with Ruth and Isaac, this time concerning Hymie and the boy who helped Hymie to cheat on his exam. The one major difference we can see in Abraham at this point is that he is quicker to judge and condemn others. Whereas in the early stages of the story Abraham had refused to judge even someone as obviously misdirected as Laiah ("A man may choose the sunlight, but he has no right to pass casual judgment on the shadows" [p. 26].) now Abraham condemns the boy who helped Hymie even though the boy has already had his academic career ruined by the incident and has run away from home. And, of course, most of the final half of the novel is a build-up to Abraham's judgment and sacrifice of Laiah, a tragic act that is linked to Abraham's growing alienation from the circle of conversation.

The first step in this move towards alienation is Abraham's loss of resolve after the death of Isaac. He now, like Sarah before him, starts to give up on life: "It was a sin against life for a man to pry into the ways of death. But his thoughts kept slipping back longingly. He would sink deep, deep down. He would no longer grasp after the bits and pieces of his life. He would forget. He would leave the surface noises. A deep current could carry him swiftly, noiselessly, indifferently" (p. 226). On the ninth night after Isaac's death, Ruth discovers Abraham on the floor, "stretched out, an effigy of death" (p. 228). And it is significant that when he wakes up, he leaves the room "without a word." In fact, as Chaim Knoff observes, Abraham is now for the first time in his life "a man of silences" (p. 229).

Strictly speaking, Abraham does not remain totally silent. In fact, from the latter part of chapter thirteen through chapter fifteen (when

he kills Laiah), Abraham makes a conscious effort to reject death, which he comes to associate with Laiah. But ironically, he himself creates death, a turn of events that is strongly associated with the misuse of language and conversation. Chapter fourteen begins with the aftermath of an argument resulting from a misunderstanding between Abraham and Ruth. It is clear from Moses' thoughts on it that the nature of arguments has changed in Abraham's household:

There had been quarrels before in the house. But there was something about the way they used to argue long ago, when his father was alive, that had been different. There had not been the feeling then, hanging in the air, that they were somehow implacably, hatefully, opposed to each other, that each was somehow sure that the other was trying to do him vital harm. (p. 249)

Abraham and Ruth eventually make up, but not before they have privately rehearsed their respective grievances. Abraham feels that he is being treated like a stranger, someone who has no rights over his own grandson. And Ruth, besides being worried about how Moses is turning out, feels frustrated that Abraham will not share in what she calls her "constructive" plans for opening a dry-goods shop. In fact, the next chapter opens with an argument on this very subject. Ruth has gone ahead without consulting Abraham any more and, with the help of a salesman named Harry, has made arrangements for setting up her business. When she announces this to Abraham, he feels that he has lost his authority and his "word" in his own family (p. 269). The argument that ensues is uglier than the previous one, for Abraham insists that Ruth is just looking for a lover, causing Ruth, in an effort to stop this destructive conversation, to explode, "For heaven's sake, shut up." As before, they make up, but it is clear from Ruth's thoughts that they are pushing each other to the limit: "Always they managed to cut off the quarrel just in time, before a certain externally imposed control would be lost and feelings and misunderstandings that had never really come to life would be sparked into being. I won't be so nervous, she told herself, when we are finally settled" (p. 271).

But this resolve does not last long, for soon after, Abraham and Ruth have their worst fight, the one that immediately precedes the scene in which Abraham kills Laiah. This fight is particularly interesting to study because it illustrates how one's use of language reflects one's position (either productive or destructive) in life's "conversation." As

the encounter begins, it is more of a dialogue than a fight, for both characters show concern for the other's feelings. Ruth, for example, checks herself from accusing Abraham of being "cranky," and suggests instead that he is "depressed" because of his physical ailments (p. 284). Her ability to choose the less offensive words at this point shows that she is trying to be a productive conversationalist, a listener who considers the feelings of others. However, Abraham's peevishness soon pushes her to accuse him of "talking like a child." Ironically, she says this right after he has asked "that when I talk to you, you should listen to me." Consequently, he responds angrily to her insult, but he remains conscious that what he says is "not what he really wanted to say" (p. 285).

At this point, both of the characters are vacillating between controlling their feelings (and therefore their words) and giving vent to their pain. Ruth, in fact, still tries to be soothing. But both of them are very close to the edge, and as soon as he says something not quite clear to her, something that could be taken as a criticism, she becomes defensive. This leads her to finally lose control; she lists her past grievances and then breaks down in tears. And the narrator's comments make it clear that the argument has reached the point of no return: "The sound of her sobs rasped along his nerve ends, quivered through his body to his fingertips. He had come too far. He had come, begging to know, to understand, and suddenly a mirror had been flipped up in his face and he himself stood revealed as he was to another—a stranger, an enemy, an egoist" (pp. 286-87). But Abraham cannot stop now. He also must defend himself. Like Ruth, he utters his grievances. He reprimands her for never having allowed Sarah to hold her baby. And, again like Ruth, only after he has had his say does he realize that he should not have spoken: "Something inside of Abraham hammered a counterpoint to his words. Was this it? Was this the only communication they could make with each other, tearing like beasts at the raw entrails and the naked heart?" (p. 287). But this reasonable side of Abraham is not allowed to regain control. Feeling that she is being accused of having killed Sarah because she did not let Sarah hold the baby, Ruth counters that Abraham could have saved her life if he had allowed her to stay in hospital. After she mocks his appeal to God, he accuses her of having introduced atheism into his house. Then the argument becomes petty, but ironically, Abraham is impressed with himself for "the way he

could rip her words from his own wounds and with a twist send them, like knives, whistling back at her” (p. 289).

This is almost the end of the argument, and it is of note that words have lost their productive nature; they have degenerated into weapons. Abraham himself becomes aware of this once more. After Ruth inflicts the deepest wound by suggesting that Isaac often objected to Abraham’s ideas and dreams, he counters by attacking her viciously and then running off in anger. But he is also confused by his behavior, for he is conscious of how he has misused words: “What things had he said to her? Even in defending himself he had degraded and besmirched himself, and now stood revealed by everything that had happened as something utterly different from that to which his soul had aspired. Never before had he quarreled like that, aiming his words like blows, not to enlighten or persuade but to maim, to hurt” (p. 292).

It is significant that, following this episode in which Abraham has so misused words, he finds himself going to Laiah’s apartment. Abraham has before now come to see Laiah as someone who is not serious about life, someone “moving always in a direction that was exactly opposite to his path in life” (p. 245). He first indicates this during his first visit to Laiah’s (this takes place right after Abraham has gotten over his period of silent mourning over Isaac’s death). Laiah is having her tea leaves read by her neighbor, Jenny, and when she asks Abraham if he would like his future told, he quickly leaves in fear. He is shocked and tells himself that the tea leaf reading “was some game they played” (p. 245). After this scene, Abraham goes to see Laiah three more times, each time following one of his arguments with Ruth. In chapter fourteen, after the argument concerning Moses, Abraham makes his second delivery to Laiah, and they become involved in a lengthier discussion. It is clear that they are on two different levels. She is the scarlet woman trying to seduce him. He talks about his relationship with Isaac and about his own desire for death. Laiah tries to console him, but her words justify life at only the most trivial of levels, the level of the “joke” and the “little bit of fun” (p. 260). By the end of the scene, they are talking about the future, but they are not communicating at all. She even puts her hand on his as she makes suggestive comments. He, by contrast, is confused because “always there was something left unsaid.” And he judges her for having used her sex for pleasure rather than for producing children: “She was like a great overripe fruit without seed,

which hung now, long past its season, on the bough. How many generations had been denied in her womb? What festered there instead? She had denied creation, and to deny is to annihilate" (p. 261). And when it occurs to him that perhaps he and she are not really different because they are both empty now, he defends himself by saying that the difference is in the choosing: "... I chose life" (p. 262).

The next chapter begins with the argument resulting from Ruth's announcement that she has gone ahead without telling Abraham and has made her business arrangements. This is immediately followed by Abraham's third visit to Laiah. As before, Laiah uses language to seduce and corrupt: "'... I say live while you can. Ruth is young; she wants to live. She knows that while you are alive you must take advantage of life. You can't deny her that. And she wouldn't deny you, either.' Laiah smiled at him earnestly. 'Don't you agree?'" (p. 272). But Laiah does not really care about Ruth. Her intent is to get Abraham to forget about Ruth so that she, Laiah, can succeed with Abraham; she even dreams of seducing him into marriage. But Abraham is becoming suspicious that Laiah "was more than she pretended" (p. 276). In fact, after he leaves with her house key, which she has pressed upon him, Abraham has an imaginary conversation with Isaac in which Isaac teases his father for taking the seductress's key. It is clear from this one-way "conversation" that Abraham is not a complete innocent. He knows what Laiah stands for, and he wishes to keep himself, not at her level (the level of self-indulgent sex), but at the level of the spirit and the "word":

Maybe—Isaac laughed—it's you she wants to squeeze a little
So that's what your mother and I slaved for, to bring up our
son to be a *grobion*. That woman—Well, never mind, whatever it
is, if that's what she wants from me, if that's what her door leads
to, it would be a fine way, eh, to agree that her way has been right
all along. What right would I have then to hope for a word, a sign?
What right would I have to mourn my sons? That you don't answer
eh? No, when it comes to that all is silent. (p. 277)

It is Abraham's ideal to be part of the positive forces of life, the world of the spirit and the word. This helps to explain his shock just a little later in the chapter when, in his final argument with Ruth, Abraham finds himself talking destructively, using words "like knives." Through this fight with Ruth, Abraham comes to see the potential for

evil in himself. He who has consciously chosen the path of creation finds himself assuming the role of destroyer. Distraught by this revelation, he automatically goes to the one person whom he has come to identify with the negation of life.

Abraham wants the truth, but he has made two serious errors. He has judged Laiah, dismissing her as evil. And secondly, he has fled from the conversation that led him to see the evil in himself. In short, he is guilty of pride. Rather than investigating the evil, or at least the potential for evil, in himself, he has run away from it by placing it all in a scapegoat, someone who will become his sacrificial victim. As a result, he cannot see the truth and he is quite incapable of taking Laiah's unambiguous sexual advances for what they are:

"Yes," said Laiah softly, caressingly, her words playing, like her hand. "I've waited a long time," she said a little chidingly.

"You have waited for me?" Now it seemed to him that she was beginning to reveal herself. If he listened now, if he could seize the right moment to ask the right question—It had been done in stranger ways. Something about this woman . . . (p. 297).

Laiah continues to make her intentions clear when she states that there is "an affinity" between the two of them and then squeezes Abraham's hand. But her physical advance does not seem to register with Abraham. What is important to him is the word "affinity" and the suggestion, to his mind, that he and Laiah have something in common—namely, evil. The conversation that follows is consequently filled with ironic misinterpretations. Abraham, disturbed by the thought that she has "waited" for him, focuses on the one thing that, to him, represents her denial of life: "You have never had any children?" She, ingenuous in her simple sexuality, thinks that he is talking about birth control: "'I am not likely to have any accidents,' she said. 'Even if I had to worry I could handle that. I am not anxious for any more responsibilities either'" (p. 298). But this answer merely reinforces Abraham's fear that he is being taken over by evil.

"All my life," he burst out, "I have wanted only one thing: to grow, to discover, to build. Of all the voices that are given to a man I took the voice of praise; of all the paths I chose the path of creation, of life. I thought that merely in the choosing I had discarded all else. I thought that I could choose. One by one, with such ease, they were stripped from me. Wherever I look there is a shadow, a shadow that all my life I did not see, I tried

to ignore. The shadow grows about me, filling in the corners of my emptiness, darkening my desire. You've waited for me, empty, all this time." (p. 299).

Laiah, like Abraham, misinterprets completely. The word "empty" has only a literal and physical meaning to her mind: "Yes, I've waited.' He was right. What did the others really mean now? It was so simple. She gestured with her arms, empty and waiting." But Abraham does not want her physically. When he then asks "Why?" he wants to know why this "empty" woman has waited for him. Laiah, in turn, ignores the spiritual level, and she takes his simple question as conscious titillation. She is fully excited by what she sees as his sexual "game": "Not since a very long time ago had she played it with such enjoyment, had it seemed so new, with whispered words and shadowy nuances." So she answers in the only way she knows how, by pressing her body up against his and saying, "Because of this . . . Closer . . . like one" (p. 300). This, of course, simply reinforces Abraham's fear that he and Laiah are spiritually identical: "'Like one,' he whispered. The other part of him—that was empty, unbelieving, the negation of life, the womb of death, the black shadow that yet was clothed in the warm, tantalizing flesh of life."

It is of note that at this point, after this scene of misunderstood words, Abraham cuts his hand on the bread knife that is on the table. The symbolism of the knife has already been well established in the earlier sections of the novel. The knife is used to kill, but in the hands of the right person, like Chaim Knoff the shoichet, who is trained according to the law and who speaks the right words, it is seen as a necessary part of the life cycle. When the praying shoichet kills an animal according to Jewish law, he is doing God's will, in the same way that the Biblical Abraham was doing God's will when he accepted the divine order to sacrifice his own son. In such circumstances, the knife is properly used and is therefore associated with vitality because the person doing the killing is acknowledging that he is only an instrument doing God's will and that the power to create and destroy comes ultimately from God. On the other hand, when the knife is used without respect for the law and the word, then it is destructive because the killer is actually assuming God-like authority. He is guilty of selfishness and pride. This idea is established by Abraham himself in chapter two when he tells the story of how his master had broken the law by killing two cows himself and the forcing Abraham to kill

another one. As Abraham makes clear, his master did this, not out of necessity, but out of greed because in doing the killing himself he was saving the shoichet's fee. So even though he said the proper prayers and then forced Abraham to say the prayers during the killings, he was in effect misusing the holy words because he did not have the God-given authority to perform the shoichet's task. Abraham was quite aware of this at the time. Indeed, the ultimate effect of his involvement in these unholy killings was that he was forced for the first time to face evil and the mystery of life and death.

It is Abraham's consciousness of his misuse of the words and the knife that allows him to grow and become a man. From this time on, Abraham does not misuse the knife. In fact, in chapter eleven, he is associated with the careful use of the knife (as opposed to Laiah's mishandling of it), and right at the beginning of his final scene with Laiah, Abraham automatically dries the knife that Laiah has carelessly left dirty on the table. Thus, it is symbolically quite important that later in this same climactic scene Abraham cuts himself with the knife just at the point where the misunderstanding between Abraham and Laiah is reaching its worst level. The accident with the knife, preceded by the misuse of words throughout the scene, indicates that there is something destructive in both characters. Laiah simply does not take life seriously enough; she is a sort of spiritual innocent who has chosen, for her own convenience, not to face certain moral issues. Abraham, on the other hand, is deeply aware of the dangers of evil, but in his pride he chooses to see that evil in Laiah and not in himself.

It is Abraham's pride and his consequent exclusion from a true circle-conversation, then, that leads to his confusion and to the tragic killing of Laiah.⁸ As the scene comes to its climax, Laiah continues to press herself upon Abraham and to ignore the serious level of her words. "Don't you love me?" (p. 301) she urges at one point as he seems to be unresponsive; but her intent is obviously to seduce, not to discuss his feelings. That this is true is reinforced by her response to Abraham's next comment:

⁸Clara Thomas has pointed out that Abraham's "final tragedy is that his 'sacrifice' of Laiah shuts him away from that community which he so much needs and leaves him solitary within his own mind" ("Women Writers and the New Land" in *The New Land: Studies in a Literary Theme* [Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfred Laurier Univ. Press, 1978], p. 53). Similarly, Michael Greenstein refers to the "split" in Abraham—"a division within himself and a retreat from his fellow man, witnessed climactically in the slaying" ("Movement and Vision in *The Sacrifice*," p. 34).

"All I have ever wanted," he protested distractedly, "is to build for my sons, to grow."

"Forget," she said impatiently, "forget all that. They're dead; we're alive." (p. 302)

Laiiah is here guilty of insensitivity, but her insensitivity stems not so much from blackness or evil in her soul as from simplicity. She does not delve into moral problems. Like a child, she seeks the physical gratification of the moment. In fact, when she next speaks, her voice is described as having "an almost childish petulance." And at the end of the book when Abraham confesses his wrong to Moses, he reinforces this point about Laiiah: "'When a human being cries out to you, no matter who it is, don't judge him, don't harm him, or you turn away God Himself. In her voice there were the voices of children. Do not harm her, lest you hear them weeping'" (p. 344).

But during the death scene, Abraham does not see Laiiah's spiritual innocence. Instead, he judges her as someone who negates life. Or to be more precise, he judges her as "the negation of *his* life" [my italics] (p. 303). As a result, when she tells him to "forget all that" (his dreams about his sons and building a future), he feels cut off from his life. In his confusion, Abraham does not see the simple facts before him. Instead, he transforms Laiiah into some mystical figure "who would speak if he asked, who would give if he offered—if he had the courage" (p. 302). This indicates the workings of Abraham's pride. Rather than facing the evil in himself, Abraham metamorphoses himself into something like an ordained seeker of the truth. In this way, he can conveniently eliminate Laiiah and her temptation, for she becomes the necessary victim in what he sees as his holy offering to God:

Looking at her then, he was lifted out of time and place. Lifetimes swept by, and he stood dreaming on a platform, apart, gazing at her with fear growing in his heart, and somewhere his Master, waiting. As in a dream, the knife was in his hand, the prayer was on his lips. Praying over her, at some neutral point in time, he saw her as though for the first time, and yet as though he had always seen her thus, saw her as something holy as she lay back, a willing burden, to offer, to receive, as once another . . . From inside him a tenderness swelled toward her, and for a moment he forgot his fear and felt as though he were almost on the point of some wonderful revelation.

" . . . *Eloheinu Meloch Hoaul'om* . . ." (p. 303)

This is Abraham's dream—to be part of the holy "circle" with the victim below him and God above him sanctifying his actions with the divine "word." It is very revealing that the present scene is heavily reminiscent of the episode of Abraham's first killing. Abraham is now reverting back to that time when he was a child, when he had no responsibility because he was forced to kill; it was the time that he first experienced wonder in the face of the mysteries of life and death. In addition, he is now also conjuring up the feelings of sublime surrender that he associated with the miracles of his religious tradition. Abraham has, in effect, fled into a spiritual fantasy. In doing so, he has surrendered all moral responsibility, the kind of responsibility that is basic to a mature and life-giving use of language. It is thus quite right that his killing of Laiah, an act that in his moral confusion he sees as a pure sacrifice, is associated with his misuse of the very word to which he has dedicated his existence:

Even as his arm leaped, as though expressing its own exasperation, its own ambition, its own despair, the Word leaped too, illuminating her living face, caressing the wonder of the pulse in her throat, flinging itself against the point of the knife. Life! cried Isaac as the blood gushed from her throat and her frantic fingers gripped first, then relaxed and loosened finally their hold on his beard. Life! pleaded Jacob as Abraham stared, horrified, into her death-glazed eyes. Life! chanted Moses as he smelled, sickened, the hot blood that had spurted onto his beard. Life! rose the chorus as the knife clattered to the ground, and the word rebounded from the walls and floors and the ceiling, beating against the sudden unnatural stillness of the room, thundering in accusation against him. Weightier in death, Laiah pulled him to the ground. (p. 304)

The heavy irony of this passage is the most dramatic example of Wiseman's use of the language theme in *The Sacrifice*. As is true throughout the novel, the individual's use of words is a direct indicator of his moral success. When he attempts to use words in a serious and public way—that is, when he seeks understanding through conversation—then he maintains vitality and moral integrity. But when he does not take the words seriously enough or when he drops out of public conversation and falls into a private world, then he runs the risk of succumbing to confusion and even death. Such is the case in the final scene between Laiah and Abraham. Laiah does not take life and language seriously enough. And Abraham, although he seeks the truth, is blinded by his too private perception of evil. Consequently,

their conversation is not a conversation at all but merely two monologues at cross purposes with one another. And the end result is death.

Significantly, the novel does not end here. Instead, it concludes on a very positive note, a note of reconciliation, following a conversation in which true communication takes place.⁹ Moses has gone up Mad Mountain to visit his grandfather. The boy is in a state of confusion. To his mind, Abraham is just a murderer, someone who has destroyed Moses' childhood trust, and so he is on the verge of condemning his grandfather. But he cannot do it. Instead, the conversation consists mainly of Abraham's confession of his own guilt and Moses' emotional response to this confession. Then Abraham takes Moses' hand, and with this contact, Moses is shaken out of his childish isolation: "It was as though he stood suddenly within the threshold of a different kind of understanding, no longer crouching behind locked doors, but standing upright, with his grandfather leading him, as he always had" (p. 345). The novel then ends with Moses coming down Mad Mountain "a different person from the boy who had gone up the hill." He is now closer to being a man, and this change has come about as a result of a conversation, an exchange with another that has forced him out of his private world. And so we are reminded a final time of the one element that gives *The Sacrifice* much of its unity—the circle-conversation. In the scene of reconciliation, each of the characters has come out of his private world in order to share a common bond of love and understanding. This is the ultimate sacrifice—the surrender of the self to a consciousness of a larger truth, a surrender which allows the individual to be a "receptive-expressive" person, a vital part in life's "conversation."

For this reason, it is particularly significant in terms of the Biblical references of the novel that the final conversation in the book depicts Abraham, the patriarch, united in a life-giving circle with Moses, the bringer of God's "word" in the Ten Commandments. For it is language that unites men. Language is, after all, the most basic of social tools. With it a community defines its vision of the world and its ethical standards, standards that are the result of public agreement, standards that may change as the community changes. In brief, language reflects the vitality of a community, a vitality that depends

⁹Michael Greenstein comments that "Avrom and Moses are united in a reconciliation of vision and action that involves the Shakespearean identification of lover, fool, poet, and madman . . ." ("Movement and Vision in *The Sacrifice*," p. 35).

on a basically public and non-individualistic involvement in human problems. It is only through this kind of cooperation that the community can survive and grow. Indeed, language itself, in being a system of verbal conventions, reflects this cooperative spirit. Thus, when individuals in a community use the language in an ego-centered rather than a public way, when they become monologists rather than conversationalists, they become destructive to themselves, to the community, and to the language. This is what *The Sacrifice* illustrates most brilliantly. And it is by focusing on this problem that Wiseman succeeds in making her subjective vision public and universal. She achieves her ideal of the "receptive-expressive" artist, for by defying each of her characters according to his relationship to language, Wiseman is able to analyze each character's moral position in terms of the widest area of reference, an area of reference that goes beyond the novelistic world and includes the writer and her readers as well.

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