

Image Juxtaposition in *A Jest of God*

B.A. Legendre

Ever since publication in 1966, Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God* has received mixed reviews. Partly because of the personality of its protagonist, partly because of Laurence's choice of first-person present narration, critics have been sharply divided: J.M. Stedmond ambiguously claims that Laurence's treatment of Rachel is "a triumph," yet the use of first-person narrative "brings us rather too close to Rachel, making us participate almost too actively in her self-pity."¹ James Bannerman lauds Rachel's complexity;² but Robert Harlow applauds "with only one hand," claiming that the novel lacks "objectivity, distance, irony."³ Dennis Duffy feels that Rachel is not a very "engaging human being,"⁴ and even Clara Thomas, almost always in sympathy with Laurence's characters and style, says that Rachel's whole potential is very hard to find "behind the neurotic facade."⁵

Laurence herself states that the use of the first-person present causes the focus of the book to be "narrow—but so was Rachel's life."⁶ Laurence further justifies her choice: "Most writers," she believes, "work out their own forms and means of expression through a strong compulsion to get closer to their material, to express it more fully" (55). She adds that she herself is always concerned "with finding a form which will enable a novel to reveal itself, a form through which the characters can breathe" (55). Laurence did not initially want to use the first person in *A Jest of God*: she says that she "tried again and again to begin the novel in the third person, and it simply would not write itself that way" (58). Finding the right form for Rachel's voice was imperative, and the third person was not it:

¹ "Fiction: *A Jest of God*," *U of Toronto Quarterly* 36 (1967): 382.

² "The Passion of a Prairie Spinster," *Maclean's* 1 Oct. 1966: 55.

³ "Lack of Distance," *Canadian Literature* 31 (1967): 72, 74.

⁴ "Critical Sympathies," *Tamarack Review* 42 (1967): 82.

⁵ Margaret Laurence, *Canadian Writers* 3 (Toronto: McClelland, 1969) 83.

⁶ "Gadgetry or Growing: Form and Voice in the Novel," *Journal of Canadian Fiction* 27 (1980): 58.

. . . the character of Rachel would not reveal herself. So finally I gave up and stopped struggling. I began to write the novel as I really must have very intensely wanted to write it—in the first person, through Rachel's eyes. (58)

And what Rachel sees through these eyes is a grim reality indeed: one that is lifeless, devoid of spirit, thoroughly restrictive.

Yet Laurence does not abandon readers to this singular vision. Rachel Cameron is not solely negative. Her fantasies, dreams, and semi-conscious preoccupations are alive with sensuality, glamour, and fearful excitement. Laurence reveals this hidden life to us through her own poetic gift: the use of rich imagery—metaphoric language and situations, strong descriptive scenes, frequent Biblical allusions. Taken together these techniques illuminate Rachel's world and character, explain her slow change, and explicate the novel's major thematic issues. Once again, as in *The Stone Angel*, Laurence rescues the restricted first-person narrator through imagery, this time in the sequential or simultaneous juxtaposition of positives and negatives, sometimes overt, sometimes subtle, often incrementally suggestive.

The three nursery rhymes in the opening pages of the novel begin the process of image juxtaposition.⁷ In each rhyme attractive and exotic references are placed in sharp contrast. Rachel longs to be "queen of the golden city,"⁸ like the alluring Spanish dancers, or part of Nebuchadnezzar's worldly kingdom, yet she perceives an immediate threat in each of these wishes. In the first, she "says she'll die" (1); in the second she fantasizes about children whose "bodies have grown grotesque and died" (2); in the third she thinks of "blue dogmen . . . snarling" (2). The exotic thought is inevitably associated with death or rejection. It is as if only the mundane is acceptable and safe, for Rachel, the child of Manawaka, has been trained to reject the unconventional and to accept other people's opinions. Therefore, she now acknowledges Willard Siddley as "a good principal. . . Everybody says so" (8); she rejects Calla Mackey, colleague and friend, because Rachel feels compelled to follow the dictates of Manawaka, according to which Calla is too unconventional.⁹

⁷ The nursery rhymes are discussed fully in George Bowering, "That fool of a Fear: Notes on *A Jest of God*," *Writers of the Prairies*, ed. George Woodcock (Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 1973) 149-64; and in Clara Thomas, *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence* (Toronto: McClelland, 1976) 80-81.

⁸ Laurence, *A Jest of God* (Toronto: McClelland, 1966) 1.

⁹ Nancy Bailey sees this rejection as Rachel's Jungian rejection of her own inner primitive

Unfortunately, Rachel, in her restrictive conservatism, fails to see the significance of her owl-wise friend, rejecting both Calla's person and her important belief that "we hold ourselves too tightly these days . . . afraid to let the spirit speak through us" (33). Rachel herself needs to let go, to loosen up, to relax, to dream exotic fantasies without fear of reprisal. Locked in a world where people keep "themselves to themselves . . . the only decent way" (43), Rachel stagnates, torturing herself, controlled by fear and self-restraint, a neurosis that Laurence articulates through sophisticated image juxtaposition.

Three important scenes early in the novel reveal the motivation which informs Rachel's restraint. Both the fantasy sequences at the end of chapters one and three and the Tabernacle episode in chapter two explain character metaphorically, thus circumventing the need for insight on the part of the first person narrator. Laurence's technique here is subtle yet clear. The first scene occurs after May Cameron's bridge party. Rachel goes to bed fretful, worried that she will not be able to sleep. She finally focuses on a recurring waking nightmare:

Tonight it's hell on wheels again. Trite. *Hell on wheels*. But almost accurate. The night feels like a gigantic ferris wheel turning in blackness, very slowly, turning once for each hour, interminably slow. And I am glued to it, or wired, like paper, like a photograph, insubstantial, unable to anchor myself, unable to stop the nocturnal circling. (21)

Rachel is out of control in the darkness, "unable to stop," "unable to anchor." Paralyzed, she can only wait, a victim with no power to get off the ferris wheel and no power to stop it.

Rachel's second fantasy in this sequence is the erotic masturbation "dream":

—A forest. Tonight it is a forest. Sometimes it is a beach. It has to be right away from everywhere. . . . The trees are green walls, high and shielding. . . . She cannot see his face clearly. His features are blurred as though his were a face seen through water. She sees only his body distinctly, his shoulders and arms deeply tanned, his belly flat and hard. He is wearing only tightly fitting jeans, and his swelling sex shows. She touches him there, and he trembles, absorbing her fingers' pressure. Then they are lying

woman. Rachel must reclaim Calla, representative of her own inner woman, before she can grow: "Margaret Laurence and the Psychology of Re-Birth in *A Jest of God*," *Journal of Popular Culture* 18.3 (1981): 62-69.

along one another, their skins slippery. His hands, his mouth are on the wet warm skin of her inner thighs. Now—

I didn't. I didn't. It was only to be able to sleep. The shadow prince. Am I unbalanced? Or only laughable? That's worse, much worse.

(21-22)

Rachel imagines intercourse in a secluded wilderness with a man whose face is unclear, yet whose body is sharply defined. It is clear that this is a repeated fantasy for Rachel ("Tonight it is a forest. Sometimes it is a beach.") and that she feels very guilty: the walls must hide them; she does not see his face clearly (as he probably does not see hers clearly); she denies her orgasm ("I didn't. I didn't."), then justifies it to herself ("It was only to . . . sleep"). Most significantly, though, Rachel objectifies herself. It is not Rachel who is making love; it is "she"—the neutral third person. Further, the personal involvement necessary to enact this fantasy is quickly repudiated. Rachel has difficulty accepting her own complicity.

The two reveries are similar. In the first Rachel was totally out of control on a ferris wheel which she could not stop; in the second Rachel has created the situation of orgasmic lack of control. And her fear is immediate: "Am I unbalanced? Or only laughable?" To be unwittingly out of control or to allow oneself to be momentarily out of control: each is frightening to Rachel: each indicates that she may be mad, and people might then laugh. The fright is dramatized in the third segment of the fantasy. Here, the novel's images of death once again appear. Almost asleep, Rachel feels herself "sinking at last into the smooth silence where no lights or voices are" (22), an almost sepulchral image in itself:

—Stairs rising from nowhere. . . . The stairs descending to the place where I am not allowed. . . . The silent people are there, not lipsticked and rouged, powdered whitely like clowns. . . . He is behind the door I cannot open. And his voice—his voice—so I know he is lying there among them, lying in state, king over them. He can't fool me. He says run away Rachel, run away, run away. I am running across thick grass and smell purple violets—weeds—dandelions. The spruce trees bend, bend down, hemming in and protecting. My mother is singing in a falsetto voice, the stylish tremolo, the ladies' choir voice.

*Bless this house dear Lord we pray, keep
it safe by night and day. (22-23)*

Rachel descends the stairs to the forbidden mortuary where the eerie dead become the silent subjects of Rachel's father-king who warns Rachel to flee an implied horror. She runs to the safety of the spruces which surround her Japonica Street home and is comforted by her mother's falsetto voice and prayer. Although it is not entirely clear why Rachel flees—there is a discrepancy between what Rachel perceives (“funny,” clownlike corpses) and the overall macabre tone of the piece—it is clear where her solace comes from: the dark, bending, isolating spruces, which enclose and protect, the *falsetto* voice of the mother, and the conventional church prayer. Rachel runs from the death below to the death above. She escapes one form of horror for another.

These three juxtaposed images are important. Individually, they reveal the fear that results in Rachel's self-restraint—fear of being out of control, fear of her own sexuality, fear of death; as a group they represent something more. Through juxtaposition, Laurence has created a suggestive cause and effect which critics often overlook. Linking fear of lack of control—both sexual and non-sexual—with death, and fear of death with a retreat into convention, Laurence provides insight for her readers that Rachel could not easily convey.

Chapter Three concludes with a similar, though less extensive, image juxtaposition; falling asleep after a particularly trying day at school, Rachel begins to relax—“*Each day dies with sleep*” (72). She tries to sleep, feeling that the shadow prince will not appear, “Even that solace isn't deserved” (73). Nonetheless, Rachel conjures up Egyptian women and Roman soldiers who

copulate as openly as dogs, a sweet hot tangle of the smooth legs around the hard hairy thighs. The noise and sweat—the sound of their breath—the slaves looking on, having to stand itchy immobile while they watched the warm squirming of those—(73)

Presumably, as indicated by the incomplete sentence, the fantasy is interrupted by orgasm and need not continue. It is immediately followed by two sentences: “The night is a jet-black lake. A person could sink down and even disappear without a trace” (73). The image illustrates in detail Rachel's earlier passing thought, “*Each day dies with sleep*” (72). Rachel falls into sleep at the end of the day just as she might sink into the jet-black lake without a trace. Sleep and death come together as do sex and

death, the same revealing juxtaposition as in the shadow prince image.

The third major scene—the Tabernacle episode—further explores the complexity of Rachel's psyche. Again, setting and language converge to produce extra meaning. Instead of a series of images, Laurence creates a unique overlay of image. Her method is stylistically sound and provocative, rife with sepulchral images and sexuality.

Having agreed to accompany Calla to the Tabernacle of the Risen and Reborn, Rachel is uncomfortable: "How to get out of [going]? I can't bear watching people make fools of themselves. I don't know why, but it threatens me. It swamps me" (34). Rachel cannot bear excesses of any sort, even as an observer. When she arrives at the Tabernacle, she immediately sees the room as a threat: the walls are "heavy," "murky," like the sea depths (37). The room, like people who make fools of themselves, can "swamp" her.

Rachel is suspicious and reluctant. Once again, the fear of a possible lack of control—speaking in tongues—is coupled with the menacing death imagery. When Calla and Rachel seat themselves, Rachel feels trapped, "I can't move now. I can't move; that's the awful thing. I'm hemmed in, caught" (37). She feels as if she is in a vault: "It's like some crypt, dead air and staleness, deadness, silence" (38). She tries to make herself "narrower" (39), "as drawn in as possible" (43) (as if in a coffin), so that she "won't brush against anyone" (39). And the singing sounds to her, "macabre as the messengers of the apocalypse, the gaunt horsemen, the cloaked skeletons" (39). The music "washes" into her head, "sea waves of it" (39) swamping her. Rachel feels threatened, frightened, and conspicuous, afraid of being noticed: "How in hell can I get out of this bloody place without being seen?" (40) She feels the "gauntlet of eyes" (44) and hears the "hushing dog's" voice of the minister, "a low growling" (40).

Very soon, however, Rachel begins to be lured into the drama. The minister's voice becomes "creamy as mayonnaise" (40); "his voice no longer growls—it reaches out like arms of strength to captivate" (41). He announces "the joy felt and known by any one . . . as they experience the deep and private enjoyment, that sublime edification, the infilling of the Spirit—" (42). And although Rachel is terrified, she is also moved. Though she persistently repeats that she must flee, she is unable to. In fact, her will seems to be given over to the group: "I seem to be taken to my feet, born ludicrously aloft, by sheer force and weight of the rising people on either side of me" (42). Physically

powerless, almost as in the ferris wheel fantasy, Rachel becomes vulnerable and emotionally susceptible to the message of the hymn being sung:

In full and glad surrender,
I give myself to thee,
Thine utterly and only
And evermore to be. (42, emphasis mine)

Fearing the public spectacle of speaking in tongues, Rachel holds herself tightly together, as remote from the group as possible. Yet hearing a man speaking in a "terrifying, calm voice," Rachel is "caught up in that voice" (43), at once menacing and filled with truth. For Rachel sees a "younger Tiresias come to tell the King the words that no one could listen to and live" (43). Rachel's allusion to Tiresias is significant. For Tiresias revealed truth to Oedipus, a truth which was horrifying (as Rachel recognizes) but also necessary to the integrity of Oedipus's life. And this modern Tiresias also revels menacing truths: he speaks in tongues, having been filled with the Spirit. He allows himself to be open to experience; he does not "hold [himself] too tightly" (33), as Calla cautioned against. Though his literal message is unclear because it is spoken in tongues, his symbolic message is absolutely evident, if not to Rachel, then to Laurence's readers: the young man becomes a model of possible liberation for the repressed and sterile Rachel.

This is the young man's primary function in the novel, but Laurence also uses him for another purpose. Rachel sees him as a "mad enchanter, himself enchanted" (43). Here, Laurence, through Rachel's language, links the young man with the other exotic emblems in the novel: the queen of the golden city, the Spanish dancers, Nebuchadnezzar—all of whom are desirable for their romantic qualities, but also dangerous. The enchanter, who is not in control, is linked with the earlier symbols of exotic danger. And Laurence reinforces two major connections: death/danger with lack of control/exotica and safety with convention. These associations, made at a textual level through language and allusion, shore up the novel, reinforce meaning, and provide a structure beneath surface plot.

Laurence's multi-level approach to meaning occurs throughout the Tabernacle scene. As Rachel innocently experiences the service, Laurence manipulates language and event to create two worlds: one, the actual events in the Tabernacle; the other, and more interesting, a suggested realm superimposed to provide explanation of and insight into Rachel's complex character.

But the surface action of the Tabernacle scene is interesting in itself. Rachel listens to the minister's explanation of the gift of tongues. The infilling of the Spirit—the gift of tongues—is portrayed as a joyful and ecstatic experience, a fulfilling and edifying one, one to be "felt and known" (42), deeply and privately (42). It is a gift given by God who is "not the author of confusion but of peace" (40). The experience involves a "full and glad surrender," the giving of oneself "to Thee" (42). The second man who experiences the gift that evening "moans," his pulse "throbbing" (44).

This language, of course, is the language of sexual experience: the knowing and feeling, the throbbing and moaning, the ecstasy, peace, joy, and giving, the infilling and the tongues, the deepness, fullness, privacy, and gladness. It is the experience of surrender—voluntary loss of control—which Rachel finds so hard to permit herself, the surrendering that causes her to fear that she is "only laughable" as in the previous shadow prince scene (22). There, sexual activity, letting go, being mocked—all were connected. And here, on a realistic plane, letting go through speaking in tongues is "sinister foolery," for fools who are also farcical, which in Rachel's mind is "threatening" (34), "mortifying" (11). Here, speaking in tongues, being out of control, justifies the laughter of the "gauntlet of eyes" (44) watching Rachel, and warrants the death suggested by the sepulchral imagery of the entire sequence.

On a literal level Rachel now begins to lose control, to court the danger so integrally connected with that loss. And on an associative level, Rachel is involved in a metaphoric sexual experience, thereby doubly courting danger and humiliation; once again, she is "lifted by the unasked-for pressure of elbows" (43). Out of control, she recalls the mad Dionysian women in strange ecstasy. She hears the quiet man beside her who "moans" and she is "shocked by the sound's openness, the admitted quality of it" (44); she sees a vein throbbing (44). Feeling along her "nerves and arteries the squirming and squeamishness of shame" (44), Rachel then hears the man who "moans gently, moans and stirs, and moans—" (44).

Yet it is Rachel who cries out in abandonment:

Chattering, crying, ululating, the forbidden transformed cryptically to nonsense, dragged from the crypt, stolen and shouted, the shuddering of it, the fear, the breaking, the release, the grieving—

Not Calla's voice. Mine. Oh my God. Mine.
The voice of Rachel. (44-45)

It is a voice which reveals something shouted, stolen from a hidden place, something secretive, something which needed to be released in tears and shuddering. It is both the literal release of pent-up emotion and the suggestive release of pent-up sexuality. It is the letting go of forbidden feeling and emotion so long held in by Rachel's rigid body and attitude. And like the sexual experience that Rachel cannot acknowledge, the abandonment at the Tabernacle is enigmatic; both are fraught with "release" and "fear," desirable yet terrifying. Both are "forbidden" and must be "dragged" from their hidden source. Both require abandonment and lack of control. Both might induce shame, guilt, grieving. And like the first set of juxtaposed images (the ferris wheel/shadow prince/mortuary), these images also reveal character and motivation, although more complexly. Again, as in the previous major scenes, Laurence presents lack of control and pleasure (the relief of letting go by speaking in tongues, here equated with orgasm) tightly linked with fear (the fear of being out of control physically and emotionally, either through speaking in tongues or through sex) and fear inevitably bound to death imagery (the swamping sea, the crypt, the Apocalypse).

It is clear at this point in the novel that through major imagery Laurence has laid a sufficient foundation for the development of Rachel's character. Rachel is fearful, self-conscious, self-concerned. In order to be more healthy, she must move away from the egocentric habits that she now exhibits; she must come to see her world with some objectivity. Moreover, she needs to take charge, as Calla does, to move away from the comfortable victim position that she assumes.¹⁰ These changes do occur, but incrementally and painfully. And it is not Rachel's experience with Nick, her first lover, that changes her, as some critics like to imply.¹¹ Rather, her change occurs because she is forced to face certain realities (Nick's leaving, her possible pregnancy) and because she seems to choose to confront other realities (the meaning of her father's life and a new perception of the meaning of her own).

¹⁰ No doubt Margaret Atwood would place Rachel in Victim Position Two: in which you "acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but . . . explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God" etc. Atwood explains that Canadians who assume this position are resigned and long suffering. Later in the novel, when Rachel changes, she moves into Position Three, which Atwood defines as "the acknowledgement . . . that you are a victim but [the refusal] to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable": *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972) 37.

¹¹ In fact, Laurence herself asserts that it is Rachel's reaching out which is important, not the sex act at all. In Graeme Gibson, *Eleven Canadian Novelists Interviewed by Graeme Gibson* (Toronto: Anansi, 1973) 204.

Earlier I pointed out that Rachel fears being out of control because she might then violate Manawakan constraints. Her fear is so intense that she feels death would ensue. Control is an important issue to her. It helps her stay within bounds. All this has been revealed through imagery. And it is to this imagery that one must return in order to see the complex pattern of Rachel's maturation. What actually occurs is that Rachel metaphorically confronts her fear of death and, as she comes to realize, albeit unconsciously, that she will not die, she begins to allow herself to experience powerlessness, lack of control, and even lack of restraint with far less fear. It is through this deceptively simple, yet psychologically sound, process that Rachel grows.

Rachel's first experience with death occurs when she decides to visit Hector Jonas. Rachel has never before visited Hector, nor has she ever had the desire to. Her motivation for visiting him is never given. It is nearly one o'clock in the morning, yet Rachel feels compelled to journey down the frightening stairs (much as Hagar Shipley does at Shadow Point) into the death-filled realm of the mortuary.¹² Here Rachel symbolically begins her confrontation with her beloved, yet distant, father and with her fear of death and rejection—both necessary confrontations for emotional growth. Here Rachel also begins to learn how to act on her own life.

Plagued by self-doubt, anxiety, and fear of pregnancy and independence, Rachel goes to visit Hector Jonas. She fearfully allows herself to enter the forbidden mortuary, her father's hide-out, the one from which he told her to run. But now, inexplicably, she moves into it. And here she meets Hector who appears to be a "comic prophet," a "dwarf seer" (153). At his "high altar" (152), Hector reveals truth. With his eyes "owling" (148) down at Rachel, Hector speculates about Niall Cameron and the choices he made in his life. When Rachel says that her father drank because he was unhappy, Hector remarks that he sees it differently, "I bet he had the kind of life he wanted most" (153).

This speculation is significant because of the setting in which it occurs. Rachel has descended to the place of death and confronted its presence. She has found the mortuary hygienic and bright, not unlike a hospital—totally antithetical to her fears. She has had a new vision. Now she has heard a prophet speak.

¹² See Bailey, who suggests a Jungian interpretation of the descent, and Gwen Curry, who sees a Biblical parallel, in "Journeys Toward Freedom: A Study of Margaret Laurence's Fictional Women," diss., U of Indiana, 1980. Also see Warren Stevenson, who discusses the mythological parallels in "The Myth of Demeter and Persephone in *A Jest of God*," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 1 (1976): 120-23.

And what he says, she hears: he had "the life he wanted most." This idea is new to Rachel. Again, she experiences a new vision. Her father actually chose the life he lived; if he had wanted another, he would have chosen that and lived it. The simplicity is astounding to her, and Rachel accepts. Moreover, she examines her own life and concludes that it too may be changed. Finally, she reinterprets her parents' relationship. Perhaps it was her father who avoided the living rather than her mother who rejected the dead (symbolized by Niall himself). Rachel re-sees; she has a new vision of the past.

On a metaphoric level the passage suggests more: it reveals Rachel facing her worst fear—the fear of death—and surviving. The implications of this confrontation are significant. For if Rachel has avoided being different in Manawaka because of a fear of rejection/death, if Rachel has refused to let go and be spontaneous because of this fear, if she has not allowed herself to be orgasmic with Nick, if she has refused to relax and to accept herself because she is in truth different from others—and all because of fear—then she may now begin to change. Having confronted her fear, it should now dissipate, and Rachel should be able to grow. Eventually she does: she decisively leaves school after the term has begun, almost gloating that she leaves in scandal; she uncharacteristically decides to move to Vancouver; she eventually has an orgasm with Nick; and, most significantly, she begins to accept herself and to find significance in a non-subjective reality.

But these changes do not occur as rapidly as they appear here, nor with the tight cause and effect bond that I imply. The changes, in fact, occur far more slowly and realistically. Rachel struggles for many weeks; further, she again experiences the metaphoric confrontation with death. Thinking she is pregnant, she visits the family physician (ominously named Dr. Raven). Laurence again takes charge here: the language of death exposes Rachel's terror. Certain that she will now die—of embarrassment, of guilt, of mortification—Rachel enters the doctor's office and sits:

We are waiting to be called for examination, as though this were death's immigration office and Dr. Raven some deputy angel allotted the job of the initial sorting out of sheep and goats, the happy sheep permitted to colonize Heaven, the wayward goats sent to trample their cloven hoof-prints all over Hell's acres. What visa and verdict will he give me? (216-17)

Death's immigration office indeed. . . . That bleak celestial sorting house, and immigrants' numb patience, all of us waiting with stupefied humbleness to have our fates announced to us, knowing there will never be any possibility of argument or appeal— (217)

This coldness pierces me more than any physician could. The intense and unearthly coldness of this metal table I'm lying on, like the laying-out table in the deodorized anteroom to the chapel where the jazz hymn plays in the blue light.

I'm frightened. And now I think for the first time [consciously] that maybe it will kill me after all, this child. Is that what I am waiting for? Is that what is waiting for me? (220)

Traditional religious referents—angels, heaven, Hell, eternal judgement—suggest Rachel's guilt and helplessness. Unable to appeal the judgement of the deputy angel, Rachel will be consigned against her will. Either that or die. But Rachel survives this confrontation with death, too. And though she is mortified that her supposed pregnancy is only a tumor, she is also relieved: she is alive and she will now be different.

Rachel Cameron changes, and a good deal of the motivation for her growth occurs at an unconscious level. Laurence uses subtle metaphor to convey this motivation. Yet she is also more explicit in her expression of Rachel's tribulations. As in *The Stone Angel*, Laurence relies heavily upon Biblical allusion, often a type of metaphor for Laurence, to reveal character and augment theme. Early in the novel she introduces St. Paul's Biblical reference to the fool: "If any man among you thinketh himself to be wise, let him become a fool that he may be wise" (166). Initially, it is Rachel who discusses being a fool. Her fear is that someone will laugh at her because she is caught in an inappropriate situation, something unacceptable to community values. She worries excessively about how she appears to others. Are they laughing at her? Is she a joke to them? Often she imagines such slights: is her sexuality "laughable"? (22, 80); are her distortions of reality "a joke" if viewed by others? (184). Most especially, Rachel fears God's jests. Even though Rachel's God "died . . . a long time" (49), it is He who becomes her chief antagonist, a "brutal joker" (53), the one who laughs when she cannot relax enough to have an orgasm ("All right, God—go ahead and laugh" [142]), the one whose angels laugh right along with Him (143).

Although He is a god whom Rachel says she rejects, she, like Hagar Shipley, prays to Him in her need, eventually making peace with Him as she comes to accept her own life and His "jokes":

Help—if You will—me. Whoever that may be. And whoever You are, or where. I am not clever. I am not as clever as I hiddenly thought I was. And I am not as stupid as I dreaded I might be. Were my apologies all a kind of monstrous self-pity? How many sores did I refuse to let heal?

We seem to have fought for a long time, I and You.

The ones who do not have anyone else, turn to You—don't you think I know? All the nuts and oddballs turn to You. Last resort. Don't you think I know?

My God, I know how suspect You are. I know how suspect I am.

If You have spoken, I am not aware of having heard. If You have a voice, it is not comprehensible to me. No omens. No burning bush, no pillar of sand by day or pillar of flame by night.

I don't know what I've done. I've been demented, probably. I know what I am going to do, though.

Look—it's my child, mine. And so I will have it. I will have it because I want it and because I cannot do anything else. (209-10)

In Rachel's prayer, the climax of the novel, she reconciles herself to herself.

Having humbled herself so fully, Rachel is undone by the information that the pregnancy is not a pregnancy at all but a tumor: "*Oh my God. I didn't bargain for this. Not this*" (221).¹³ But this ultimate blow forces her to re-examine her recent experience. It is to be seen, not as Rachel would have seen it before her confrontation with death and with God, but as a necessary learning experience in Rachel's spiritual growth: Rachel has become a fool, a most feared experience, yet to be a fool is not so bad:

I was always afraid that I might become a fool. Yet I could almost smile with some grotesque light-headedness at that fool of a fear, that poor fear of fools, now that I really am one. (222)

¹³ Laurel Boone, in "Rachel's Benign Growth," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 3 (1978): 277-81, sees the tumor as a symbol of death and its excision as the removal of non-life, the opportunity for Rachel to grow into life.

Rachel comes to the wise conclusion that it is not so terrible to be a fool (241), that, in truth, wisdom comes from the most unusual circumstances, some of them ironic and laughable. Above all, Rachel learns that she is human (fallible, loveable, acceptable) and that life is to be lived as fully as possible despite its unpredictability. Rachel ultimately lets herself go, loosens up, and lives.¹⁴ She re-establishes a relationship with Calla and with Willard. She lets Nick go. She decides to leave Manawaka for good. And, as she leaves the sterility and restrictive conformity of the town, she is able to bless herself and her anthropomorphic God: "God's mercy on reluctant jesters. God's grace on fools. God's pity on God" (246).

Laurence's second use of Biblical reference adds depth and poignancy to the surface texture of the novel. Rachel is named after her Genesis ancestress, Rachel, the daughter of Laban, wife of Jacob, sister of Leah. This analogy is useful, almost necessary. Since Laurence's Rachel is a "chronic pulse-taker,"¹⁵ a sometimes hysteric, a not altogether likable character, the result of the Biblical parallel is to soften her rigid and negative exterior. But, more importantly, because of the Biblical parallel to Jonah—an allusion generally overlooked by critics—Laurence elevates the significance of Rachel's neurosis, making it as much a religious problem as a secular one.¹⁶ Rachel's quest in the novel is to find herself and her proper relationship with herself, other human beings, and with God. She is not merely a neurotic woman; she, like Jonah, is a person struggling with an important concept: the problem of free will and determinism.

The initial reference to Jonah occurs in the novel's epigram, a segment of Carl Sandburg's *Losers*:

If I should pass the tomb of Jonah
I would stop there and sit for awhile;
Because I was swallowed one time deep in the dark
And came out alive after all.

Readers are thus reminded of Jonah, the reluctant prophet who defied God by rejecting His mission, and who ended up in the belly of a great fish. Jonah, out of sorts with God, is like Rachel, who feels alienated and distant from God ("We seem to have

¹⁴ Laurence says that Rachel's final position is one of "partial victory" because she is no longer "so much afraid of herself" and has begun to learn the rules of survival. Further, she now realizes that "no freedom from shackeldom of the ancestors [her past] can be total," in "Ten Years' Sentences," *Writers of the Prairies* 146.

¹⁵ Laurence, "Gadgetry" 58.

¹⁶ Those critics who do refer to Rachel as Jonah include Bailey 66; Curry 124-28; and Angalika Maesur, "Finding the Mother: The Individuation of Laurence's Heroines," *Journal of Canadian Fiction* 27 (1980): 186.

fought for a long time, I and You" [210]). Just as Jonah rejects God's message to go to Nineveh, so does Rachel, for she refuses willingly to accept His spirit, the Spirit symbolized by the open and receptive recipients in the Tabernacle who readily accept being "infilled." Further, just as Jonah is "swamped" by the waters, so is Rachel—in the Tabernacle, in the bathtub, by her feelings of shame. Finally, Rachel parallels Jonah's self-pity and death-wish, through her own egocentricity ("What would become of me?" "What would I do?" "What will become of me?" [144, 164, 197]) and through her near attempt at suicide.

Significantly, the emotional confusion which reigned evaporates, and Rachel's life becomes peaceful ("God is not the author of confusion but of peace" [40]) when she reconciles herself to both God and herself—another parallel to Jonah. But Laurence never pushes this allusion. Above all, *A Jest of God* is the story of a woman, Rachel, who, as she comes to accept herself, comes to a fuller recognition of God. As Rachel begins to see herself as fallible and human, she can see God—as she no doubt once did as a child—in the central position of power: He controls, not Rachel. He works His mysterious ways, letting humans become fools in order to be wise. And it is He, the one in control, who deserves the pity, not she ("God's pity on God" [246]).

A Jest of God explores many issues. Primarily, Laurence focuses on the paradox of self-control, the lack of freedom within the small town, and the type of responsibility one owes to oneself. Each of these concerns emanates from Rachel's mismanagement of her life as demonstrated, not just through plot development, but primarily through the use and juxtaposition of image. Laurence's conclusions are not simple. She suggests that self-control is not the rigid application of rules which repress and guide. Rather it is the generous self-acceptance of who one actually is; for when self is accepted, then self need not be repressed and held in. The paradox of self-control is that one must lose control to gain it; one must become the fool to become wise. Secondly, and more simply, because of her thematic emphasis on openness, freedom, and growth, Laurence implies that small towns are sterile, claustrophobic, and destructive.

Thirdly, Laurence emphasizes the nature of one's responsibility to oneself. The novel has presented a woman whose life is severely restricted; Rachel has internalized what she assumes to be her mother's and the community's values, never openly questioning them. She begins to mature only when she decides to take responsibility for her life and its outcome. Rather than remaining a victim, Rachel begins to change after hearing Hector Jonas's speculations about her father. Seeing that he may

have chosen his life, Rachel appears to decide to choose hers. She begins to take charge, admit reality, accept herself and her role. "I am not the mother now" is a poignant blessing and a hallmark of great growth for Rachel.¹⁷

Clearly, Laurence's strengths in *A Jest of God* include her mature philosophic approach to twentieth century dilemmas and her intriguing use of juxtaposed images to reveal character, to imply change, and to explicate theme. Given the inherent difficulty of first-person-present narration, given the complexity of Laurence's heroine, no other method would have served Laurence as well. Through image, Laurence slowly shapes her readers' understanding. Subtly she creates a believable and changing frame of thought—one inundated by paradox and contradiction, one rescued by fantasy and infinitesimal mental shifting—in a character who is ultimately cherishable, but only because of her creator's compelling use of poetic imagery.

Wooster, Ohio

¹⁷ Boone (281) sees Rachel's assertion as symbolic: Rachel, the Old Testament mother of Israelites, by association, becomes mother/queen of their city, Jerusalem: "queen of the golden city" of the nursery rhyme on page one of the novel.