

TRANSFORMING HAGS: OLD WOMEN IN CANADIAN FICTION

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ABSTRACT

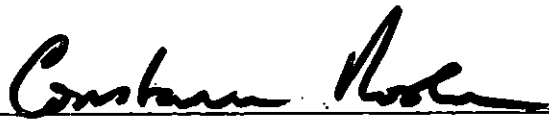
From pre-literate folklore and myth to the modern novel, old women in literature are powerful figures who defy stereotypes. Although they are doubly marginal, as female and elderly, they resist being classified as object, or Other. Old women provide the matrix which grounds us in the past and which links us with the future. They are the avatars of a mediating power that may bridge the gulfs between the sexes, between the generations, and between this world and the next.

This study examines the image of old women in Canadian fiction, specifically as they appear in Sheila Watson's The Double Hook, Ethel Wilson's Swamp Angel, and Margaret Laurence's The Stone Angel. These novels contain three different and distinct types: Mrs. Potter in The Double Hook represents the witch figure; Mrs. Severance in Swamp Angel represents the wise woman; and Hagar Shipley in The Stone Angel is the old woman in between the positive and negative stereotypes, the old woman who insists on being recognized as the speaking subject of her life story.

Angels are figures who occupy the boundaries of this world and the next, and, because of their marginality,

they have a special relevance to old women. In each of the three novels there is an angel who conveys a message about the nature and significance of the old woman, and about the importance of her mediating power. Each angel leads us to see the old woman as a transforming hag, a shape-shifting figure in the tradition of the Triple Goddess. The tradition of the Triple Goddess enables old women to transcend objectification, and it reveals them as mutable yet powerful subjects.

Examiners:



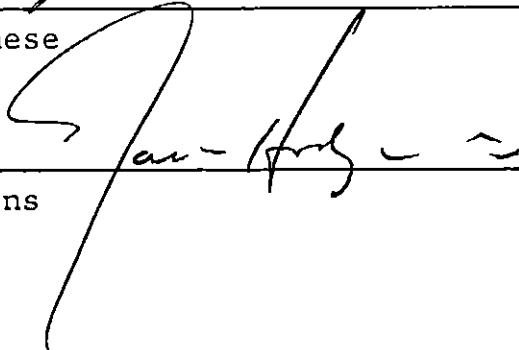
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PROLOGUE

OLD WOMEN AS OBJECTS: Matriarchs of Canadian Fiction

In our literature and in our society, we have glimpses of a long tradition which attempts to contain old women as something strange and foreign, something beyond the bounds of normal community, something which is perceived as "Other". As elderly person and as female person, the old woman occupies a double state of Otherness. The category of Other, says Simone de Beauvoir, is applied to women because a woman is defined not with respect to herself, but with reference to a man: "she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is Subject, he is Absolute -- she is Other."¹ The term Other also applies to the elderly who, de Beauvoir notes, are seen as inactive and unproductive. They too are ostracized as different and inessential, as another and lesser sort of being than the young or the middle-aged person. Those who are both old and female are doubly marginal, and so it is not surprising that our society and our literature attempt to present them as objects, whether they are viewed as objects to be feared,

to be revered, or to be ignored. And yet the power of old women is such that they resist this treatment: in Canadian literature, as in Canadian society, they escape containment as object, they defy reductive stereotypes, and they force a recognition of their real power. With their special knowledge about female goals and about approaching death, old women can be seen as avatars of the mediating power that may bridge the gulfs between women and men, and between this world and the next.

This study examines the image of old women in Canadian fiction, specifically as they appear in Sheila Watson's The Double Hook,² Ethel Wilson's Swamp Angel,³ and Margaret Laurence's The Stone Angel.⁴ Sometimes the discussion will focus on the old woman as female object, sometimes as elderly object, but in either case it will be concerned with the power of the old woman to transcend such treatment as object. The condition of object, or Other, implies passivity and impotence, and indeed, recent sociological studies suggest that old women, in Canada and elsewhere, endure social, psychological and economic hardships which result from, and contribute to, a state of powerlessness. Yet from their dual state of Otherness, as female and as elderly, old women may exert a powerful influence on our culture and on our literature.

Our images of old women are influenced by cultural codes associated with mythic and folkloric figures of witches, hags, wise women and goddesses, and also with our own experience of old women as grandmothers, as the matriarchs of our individual psychological development. At first glance these perceptions of old women appear to create fragmented parts which bear little relation to each other. When we perceive old women as objects, as inessential and relative, we do not easily recognize their power. But when the literary figure of the old woman is experienced as a subject, the scattered mosaic of fragments and stereotypes is assembled by and infused with a powerful spirit which transforms the image of the old woman.

The personal experience we have of old women as grandmothers gives us a link which grounds us in the past and also affirms an evolving future. To call someone grandmother, after all, is to define her as a representative of the past, and as a member of a family. Such a definition fixes her in time and space, as the object rather than the subject of a relationship, and identifies her as the Other. Still, grandmothers wield a peculiar kind of power. As figures of family origin they are both the sources of regeneration and the markers of

passing time. Thus they have implications for the future as well as for the past. In relation to them, the third generation can define itself as distinct and individual, and yet remain part of a continuity of tradition. This power in grandmothers may be viewed positively or negatively, however, and grandmothers may be seen as using it to assist or to block the growth and development of younger people.

In native Indian tales, grandmothers are associated with agriculture, with the earth and with knowledge about how to reap the fruits of the soil. In many American Indian myths, an old woman is, like Demeter, a kind of corn priestess who is concerned with the seasons and especially the harvest.⁵ In one such myth, an old Sioux grandmother has a vision which leads her to the medicinal peyote plant that gives her people health and power. In another, a Cherokee tale, Grandmother Spider shows others how to make pots from clay, in this way transforming the productive earth into containers which carry its fruit to the people.

The Coast Salish word for grandmother is "Setla", which means "wise woman," and Salish grandmothers are known to possess secret knowledge about the healing powers of plants and herbs.⁶ They are responsible for carrying

wisdom and conveying it to the young, and much of their instruction has to do with the soil, with herbs, with creation and cultivation. Since Partridge⁷ gives the root of matrix as "womb" and "a register of students," the Salish matriarch, Setla, seems to link the two meanings of the word matrix, which is the root of matriarch. As nurturer and educator, the Salish grandmother provides that matrix which fosters and orders the development of future generations.⁸

In fiction, too, grandmothers often supply a structural matrix which contains the possibilities for a young character's development. This matrix may be delineated by a splitting of the grandmother role into binary opposites which illustrate the range and the limits of possible behaviour. The grandmothers in Sylvia Fraser's Pandora,⁹ for example, divide the functions of the Salish wise woman. Granny Cragg represents cultivation as she tends her root cellar and her herb garden, while Other Grandmother, who had "Another Sort of Life," represents accomplishment and thus, by implication perhaps, instruction. In Pandora's murky world, however, cultivation and accomplishment become perverted and sinister. Granny Cragg's garden smells of "wild thyme, for coughs . . . sweet rosemarie, for headaches . . .

catmint, for scaring away rats," but it also contains "the deadly nightshade, the tricky foxglove, the sly monk's hood, the destroying a-man-an-i-tas," and Pandora imagines that her grandmother has poisoned her when she gives Pandora some "Baker's bitter-Blue chocolate" (pp.17-18). Other Grandmother, for all her accomplishments, is confined to an ivory bed with nothing but faded coquetry and the mindless agitation of her lace-making to occupy her until finally she becomes "caught in the threads of her own silken web, spinning geometric complexities out of her own diminishing substance." (p.129). The iciness of Other Grandmother and the earthiness of Grandmother Cragg combine to form the slippery ground on which Pandora stands.

Initially these grandmothers seem to extend promising opportunities, with all the magical potential of fairy tale transformers -- for at first glance Granny Cragg could be one of the cunning people of English folklore while Other Grandmother resembles an eccentric fairy godmother. The grandmothers do assist Pandora by providing her with matriarchal models and with real tools (experience and inheritance), but these old women are not primarily helpers. Indeed, more than they represent healing powers, they seem to symbolize the wound itself.

It is as if their own injuries call out to be repaired by Pandora when she lifts herself from her frightful past in order to take charge of an independent and integrated future. The literary function of these two old women is not so much to solve Pandora's problems as to show us the dark stuff from which she emerges. The actual transformation must be achieved by Pandora herself.

Fraser's Pandora is a modern reworking of the Pandora myth, and indeed the novel begins with a quotation of Hesiod's verse from The Age of Fable, Bullfinch's Mythology. In Hesiod's version of the myth, Pandora is sent by Zeus as a punishment to man. Her jar, the proverbial Pandora's box, contains all the world's troubles, and the only good thing in it is hope. The moral that David Staines¹⁰ applies to Fraser's novel is simply that while we have hope we are not made completely wretched by any of the other ills which are loose in the world. But it is important to look further into the origins of the Pandora myth in order to understand its importance in relation to Sylvia Fraser's novel. Jane Harrison offers a different perspective on this myth, suggesting that Hesiod's verse distorts the image of the Earth-Mother and illustrates the shift from matrilinear to patrilinear conditions:

When Pandora opens her box it is not the woman temptress letting out the woes of mortal man, it is the great Earth-Mother who opens her pithos, her store-house of grain and fruits for her children. Through all the glamour of Hesiod's verse, enchanted as he is himself by the vision of the lovely temptress, there gleams also an ugly and malicious theological animus: he is all for the Father and the Father will have no great Earth-Goddess in his man-made Olympus. So she who made all things, gods and mortals, is unmade and remade and becomes the plaything of man, his slave, his lure, dowered only with bodily beauty, and with a slave's tricks and blandishments.¹¹

In Fraser's reworking of the myth, there is clearly a shift from matrilinear to patrilinear conditions. Her Pandora is raised in a patriarchal home, back of which we see the impotent matriarchal figures of the grandmothers. In them, the Earth-Goddess is indeed unmade and split into two failed mortals. Here there is no mother-goddess who opens a "storehouse of fruits and grains," only one old woman who grows toadstools in chamberpots and another who dispenses silver dollars from a silver chest. But no matter how strange and perverse the grandmothers are, it is only Pandora's father who is overtly cruel to her. Declaring the patrilinear conditions of their household, he strips Pandora's clothes away, and snarls

That's all you are, and all you'll ever be.
Everything decent you get from me. If you try to leave this house with one stitch of my property, I'll call the police, and they'll put the bloodhounds on you, and they'll track

you down to whatever garbage patch you hide yourself in!" (p.134).

The only hope extended to Pandora comes from her grandmothers. When Other Grandmother's money makes it possible for Pandora to be educated, she imagines "Another Sort of Life" for herself, and thinks, "It is enough to know, for now, that such a life exists" (p.254).

Pandora's words here describe the hope that lies at the bottom of her jar, and they also express the hope of her grandmothers: for these old women, redemption will depend upon the successful, integrated lives of women in future generations.

In Margaret Laurence's A Bird in the House,¹² Vanessa's two grandmothers represent similarly contradictory models of female maturity. Grandmother McLeod is a tyrannical old matriarch who represses her own emotions and urges others not to "give way," not to "make a fuss," while Vanessa's other grandmother is loving and gentle, able to accept the flaws of her family and to express love and tenderness, even in Grandfather Connor's surly presence. Margaret Atwood writes that Grandfather Connor and Grandmother MacLeod ("Grandfather the Bear-mask and Grandmother the corseted brontosaurus") are the patriarch and matriarch of Vanessa's world.¹³

Surprisingly, however, Atwood fails to remark upon the

important dynamics between the opposing grandmothers. Grandmother Connor's self-sacrifice contrasts sharply with Grandmother McLeod's driving selfishness, and an examination of their differences helps to explain Grandmother MacLeod's unyielding tyranny.

The two grandmothers were born at a time when the role of women was restricted to that of wife, mother and homemaker. Although "the woman question" was widely debated in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, most women were resigned to their position as child-bearer and child-rearer, and, like Grandmother Connor, devoted themselves to the demands of their husbands and children. "Acceptance was at the heart of her," Vanessa says about Grandmother Connor (p.72), but Grandmother MacLeod wanted more: "Your grandmother was interested in being a lady," says Vanessa's father, "And for a long time it seemed to her that she was one" (p. 53). Grandmother McLeod was a grandmother before she finally became a legal person, since it was only in 1929 that His Majesty's Privy Council made the historic decision that women were legally persons. As a strong, proud woman, she may have decided that becoming "a lady" was perhaps the only alternative to being merely a chattel. But Laurence does not present the

ideal of being a lady as worthy of pursuit. In another of her novels, The Stone Angel, Hagar Shipley is sent away to school to learn to become a lady, and her accomplishments bring no more satisfaction to her than they do to Other Grandmother.

Each of Vanessa's grandmothers have admirable qualities, but with their limited options for personal development, they are not shown to have achieved independence or self-actualization. Both women raise questions about the desirability of the feminine role, and neither serves as a guide for Vanessa's development. Not surprisingly, at the end of the novel Vanessa feels that it is Grandfather Connor who is proclaimed in Vanessa's veins. At the same time, though, the reader may observe the power of the female matrix, and may note that Grandmother Connor's heart and Grandmother McLeod's tenacity are also revived and redeemed in the young woman.

In Sheila Watson's The Double Hook, two very different and contradictory grandmothers appear. Mrs. Potter is linked to death and destruction, and also, curiously, to sight. Widow Wagner is associated with a refusal to see what is happening around her, but also, through Lenchen, with the salvation of the community. Mrs. Potter's association with death begins on the first

page of the novel, when the old lady is pushed down the stairs by her son. She continues to haunt those around her, appearing before them beside pools, creeks, and rivers, "in every fold of the country" (p.43). Her destructive potential is described in the suffering of Greta who "inherited destruction like a section surveyed and fenced." When Ara watches Mrs. Potter fishing, she has the impression of

death leaking through from the centre of the earth. Death rising to the knee. Death rising to the loin. (p.21)

Obviously the old lady continues to exert a powerful influence over others long after her death. Dead, she is nevertheless a real presence to the eyes of other characters, and to the reader.

By contrast, Widow Wagner ultimately becomes a figure of hope, salvation and renewal, despite the fact that for much of the novel she represents blindness and denial. Initially, she rejects her daughter in her pregnancy, but later she sends Heinrich to fetch the girl and her baby. Finally, remembering that she has things from her family to pass on, she takes the cloth which she has spun for her own children and cuts into it, in order to make a shirt for her daughter's child.

In this way, the two grandmothers divide the

life-destroying and life-giving powers of mythical old women, and together they form a matrix for the third generation. As opposing figures, they contrast death and life, destruction and salvation, dark and light, and vision and blindness. Mrs. Potter appears as a disturbing spectre of the past, who forces people to recall their old offences. Widow Wagner, initially unwilling to acknowledge Lenchen's pregnancy, eventually extends her cloth to connect three generations of her family. In both directions, then, these two old women draw attention to the passage of time, and, united through the birth of their grandchild, they provide the ground upon which present possibilities, in the form of the new baby, can rest.

Margaret Atwood's Life Before Man¹⁴ presents another set of grandmothers, two old women who appear as opposing pillars in the structure of a young girl's development. Recalling the brooding attentions of the warring grandmothers who desperately competed for influence over her childhood, Lesje sometimes thinks that

she was produced not by her parents in the usual way, but by some unheard-of copulation between these two old ladies who never met. They'd existed in an odd parody of marriage, hating each other more than either hated the Germans, yet obsessed with each other: they'd even died within a year of each other, like an old, devoted couple. They'd infested

her parents' house in relays, fought over her as if she'd been a dress at a bargain. (p.72)

Lesje's early days are divided equally between the two old women. As a child, Lesje wants to form a link between the two grandmothers, and she imagines herself walking up the steps of the Museum with one grandmother on each side.

These two women share similar experience and environments -- each a widow in a tiny, china-filled home with a single male boarder -- and perhaps underneath they are not so very different. But the grandmothers have different nationalities, languages and religions, and they "would sooner die" (p.249) than speak to each other. They have always pulled Lesje in opposing directions, and their own feelings for her are divided and mixed:

. . . they'd both loved her, she supposes; and both had mourned over her as if she were in some way dead. It was her damaged gene pool. Impure, impure. Each thought she should scrap half her chromosomes, repair herself, by some miracle. (p.56)

One symbolic scene with the Jewish grandmother involves the Ukrainian grandmother's gift of an egg, which the Jewish grandmother furiously smashes into fragments, but which she ultimately replaces, at a cost that Lesje later realizes is more than money. The image of the shattered egg symbolizes the pointless destructiveness of the battles between the grandmothers. In their angry

rejection of each other, the old women threaten to destroy their only grandchild, their link with the future.

Dividing her between them is impossible -- how can a shattered egg be made whole again? And yet, although it cannot be separated into parts, there is a sense in which the egg, being at the same time the product and the producer of another generation, signifies links between three generations. The unified egg, then, may suggest the multi-faceted goddess Demeter, in whom three phases of creativity are all joined. Lesje's pregnancy associates her with the three-in-one goddess, and thus links her with her grandmothers, but it also frees her to establish links with the future through a new trinity.

At the beginning of the novel, Lesje is "wandering in pre-history," and it does seem fitting that she should feel most at home in a prehistoric setting. Unable to incorporate the antithetical elements of the two old women who represent her own history, she locates herself in the distant past, outside the influence of the ancestral figures she could not integrate in her adolescent development. Later, when she begins to consider her own future, wondering if she should become pregnant, she re-enters her past and walks around "the land of grandmothers," looking for their houses and wanting their

squabbling voices, wanting "to be endorsed, sanctified," by the reality of her heritage. It is striking that she turns to her grandmothers rather than to her mother when she seeks a mother's blessing, but where better to go with life and death questions like the matter of pregnancy than to the old women who have the power to bequeath and to shatter her childhood egg? The powers that have to do with unity and division, wholeness and fragmentation, creation, destruction and rebirth traditionally belong to old women and are the very real, daily preoccupations of Lesje's grandmothers.

Lesje's dream of walking up the Museum steps with one grandmother holding her right hand, one holding her left, herself in the middle, gives a vivid picture of her need to unify these divided matriarchal figures. The image is a classic one. In child development theory it is necessary for a child to separate "good" and "bad" mother images before unifying them to produce a "whole" mother who combines pleasing and disturbing parts,¹⁵ and in fairy tales it is commonplace for a maternal figure to be split into good and bad roles. The splitting of mother images in fairy tales is necessarily somewhat forced, however, since it depends upon figures like godmothers and stepmothers to explain the doubling of maternal roles.

Grandmothers exist naturally in pairs and so they lend themselves to a division of role and function. Thus the literary treatment of paired grandmothers is particularly interesting, mythically and psychologically as well as thematically, for two reasons. First, it helps us to recognize the objectification of old women, and, second, it allows us to examine ambivalent attitudes towards matriarchal figures. The task for the fictional heroine is to unify and to integrate the conflicting maternal models of her grandmothers, and thus to internalize them in her own subjective experience. Readers who wish to appreciate the importance of old women in literature have an even more demanding and complex task. Their challenge is to recognize the unity of the mythic Great Mother that underlies the schismatic representations of old women as object and other. Associated with the otherness which is assigned both to females and to the elderly are stereotypes and cultural codes which resist articulation, but in literature we are invited to decipher these codes and to reject those stereotypes in order to discover the archetypal old woman.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge expressed a common prejudice when he declared, "There are three classes into which all the women past seventy that ever I knew were to be

divided: (1) That dear old soul: (2) That old woman: (3) That old witch."¹⁶ In objectifying old women this way, we are able to delineate and reduce them. But when we see an old woman as subject, she cannot be contained by such rigid stereotypes. She exceeds and transcends the narrow categories which classify her as either good or bad, or invisibly ordinary.

In literature, we have glimpses of the powerful old woman who dwells in between the stereotypes, the old woman as subject. We see in her the tradition of the Great Hags, the old mother-goddesses and witches of myth and folklore. Here we see the three-sided figure of Demeter,¹⁷ the Great Mother whose children attempt but are unable to split her and to contain her as object. Although Demeter is the general title of the Triple Goddess, under that name her three-sided being comprises three generations: the young girl, Persephone; the mother, Demeter; and the old woman, Hecate. The Triple Goddess represents the waxing, fullness, and waning of the moon, and also the phases of creativity. As a three-generational entity, Demeter looks backwards and forwards, from what is to what has been, and also to the future, towards possibilities of becoming. It is her spirit which resides in powerful old women. She is the transforming hag who embodies,

transcends and transforms the stereotypes of old woman as object. In her image it is possible for us to recognize the full power of our witches, our wise women, and our ordinary old grandmothers.

CHAPTER ONE

THE WITCH FIGURE: Black Magic in The Double Hook

One of the most striking examples of the witch figure in Canadian fiction is Mrs. Potter in Sheila Watson's The Double Hook. This novel is frequently interpreted as a grail allegory in which the central character is the young man whose task it is to rejuvenate the wasteland, yet in the dramatis personae the major role is assigned to the witchlike old lady who haunts and frightens the community. Unlike most of the other characters, she is not given a name but is described as an object, in terms of age, sex, and maternal relations, and this initial description of her is set apart from the references to other characters. Her status as Other is so extreme that she is seen as a dark power who is cut off from the rest of the community, and from the light and life-giving aspects of her own nature.

The lyrical opening leads us to expect that the story will be a kind of fairy tale about an old lady who once upon a time lived in the folds of the hill. But we learn, only a few lines later, that the old woman is already dead, murdered, pushed down the stairs by the will

and hand and words of her own son. In fact, the treatment of Mrs. Potter's murder is so casual that it may take some readers several chapters or even a second reading to realize what has happened. But even more startling than the murder itself is our discovery, a page later, that somehow the dead Mrs. Potter is still around; and, if not alive and kicking, she is nevertheless still seeing and fishing, still defying God, her family, and the reader in their attempts to bury her.

This -- her stubborn refusal to die -- is the first information we have that Mrs. Potter is an unnatural old woman, and we have this information on the first page, since a close reading of the dramatis personae reveals quite quickly that Mrs. Potter doesn't die when she should. Suggesting the fragments of poetry that appear throughout the novel, these first lines look and sound like verse, in their spatial arrangement and most strikingly in the repetition of the word "lived." Centred and separated from the other lines, the word "lived" at first leaps from the page and later, after it is repeated five times, echoes in the ear:

In the folds of the hill
under Coyote's eye
lived

the old lady...

lived...

lived...

lived...

lived...

lived...

until one morning in July

This skeleton offers a simple summary of The Double Hook: there was an old woman who lived too long until eventually her son decided to kill her.

The murder of Mrs. Potter is swift and matter-of-fact. In this it resembles the ritual killing of witches in fairy tales. For example, in Hans Christian Andersen's "The Tinder Box",¹ an old woman is summarily slain by an unemployed soldier whose idle curiosity about the old woman's tinder box is cause enough to kill her. And in "The Tinder Box", as in The Double Hook, immediately after he kills the old woman the murdering young man begins a journey of adventure, discovery and fulfilment, without ever having to explain or apologize for his crime. The old woman in The Tinder Box is described as a witch and a hag and a loathsome-looking creature, but she is polite and friendly to the soldier, and she does keep her part of the bargain, which is to provide the young man with an abundance of gold pieces. The only explanation we can find for the soldier's

chopping off the old woman's head is that it allows him to steal her seemingly useless tinder-box. The act is felicitous, however. With the tinder box, the soldier ultimately gains possession of the hag's magic powers, powers which enable him to overcome great obstacles and to possess the beautiful young princess of his choice. The moral in this tale seems to be that a young man may find it advantageous to kill a powerful old woman.

What reason is there for James Potter's murder of his old mother? Readers continue to raise and critics fail to answer this question. Let us assume that, as the opening lines suggest, it is simply the case that the old woman has lived too long, has become a hag, or a witch, and thus has invited murder. The explanation, then, lies not in Mrs. Potter herself, but in social attitudes towards elderly females. From this perspective we may see in Mrs. Potter an emblem of the condition of all old women who find themselves to be past their productive years, to be in the way of others, to be unwanted and resented by their children. Mrs. Potter is oppressive to her children, and they see her as an object, as something which should be destroyed. When an old woman is seen only as an object, it is natural to want to kill her, it seems, judging from James' description of the way he and Greta

watched for their mother's death:

They'd lived waiting. Waiting to come together at the same lake as dogs creep out of the night to the same fire. Moving their lips when they moved them at all as hunters talk smelling the deer. Edged close wiping plates and forks while the old lady sat in her corner. Moved their lips saying: She'll live forever. And when they'd raised their eyes their mother was watching as a deer watches. (p.43)

Talking like hunters, they express the fear that the old lady will never die, and when they look up they find her watching them like a hunted animal, a victim, their prey.

"The whole world's got distemper . . . You and me and the old lady," James wanted to shout (p.43). This recalls the earlier passage in which Felix remembers a rat he had shaken down from the rafters:

. . . the one he'd poked down. Poked at. For the thing crouching, its tail hanging there above his head, had sprung. Had jumped to the pole seeking it. Had run from pole to arm, its teeth sinking in his neck crevice, its claws clutching mad with dread. He had shaken it off, uncertain in its rage, and [the dog's] teeth had closed on its throat. White foam on the brown swirl of it. The old lady fishing in the brown water for fish she'd never eat. The old lady year after year. (p.39)

The rat in the rafters, "mad with dread," rushes to its own destruction, runs from pole to arm to Felix's throat, and is shaken into the jaws of the terrier. The picture suggests an earlier scene in which the old woman is pushed

down from the rafters. It uses a particularly repulsive symbol for Mrs. Potter, that of a mad rat attacking wildly. And yet here we must note that the action is in fact initiated by the man who pokes at the crouching creature, approaching it as a thing, an object. When James kills his mother, he too disposes of an unwanted creature, and Felix's words hint again that the old woman's undesirable state is created by her extended age and her excessive domination: "the old lady year after year."

The word "distemper" is derived from the Latin temporare combined with the prefix dis, meaning to mix badly, and hence to disorder, to derange, and from the Medieval Latin word distemperantia, which means unhealthy air conditions. Partridge says that the Latin tempus is perhaps akin to temporare and may originally have borne the connotation "'to do things at the right time -- in the suitable season.'"² It could be argued that the distemper exists because of an interruption of the proper order in which one thing should naturally lead to another and one generation give over to the next. Properly, then, according to this argument, Mrs. Potter should release her hold and allow her children to establish a new generation.

Instead of relinquishing her maternal powers,

however, Mrs. Potter continues to command her children, and consequently she is rejected by James and Greta. John Grube describes Mrs. Potter as "a powerful and physically dominating old woman" from whom not just James but the entire settlement must be liberated.³ Similarly, Margaret Morriss sees the old lady as a negative figure whose death "is a longed-for event"; Morriss says that James, like Oedipus in Watson's "Brother Oedipus," must learn that "'We are her children. She is not our mother.'"⁴ In actual fact, though, Sheila Watson gives us almost no evidence that Mrs. Potter's behaviour towards her children is tyrannical, except in her refusal to die. We form our own impressions of Mrs. Potter largely from the violent repudiation of her that we see in her children and in others.

The impression we have of Mrs. Potter is, at the very least, of a non-nurturing female. Her name should connect her with the earthenware jugs of the ancient Greek and Indian mother-goddesses, but her behaviour is depicted in sinister images, as antisocial and God-defying. Like the Celtic hag, Mrs. Potter is frequently associated with cow images and water settings. The pagan Celtic goddesses are associated with transformation into liquids and, like Mrs. Potter, they often appear by pools, rivers and wells.

A Celtic journey prayer which describes the divine hag of the Celts might almost describe Mrs. Potter as she is seen by other members of the community:

The woman on her knee,
The woman at her evil eye,
The woman with her spleen,
The woman with her envy:

The woman at the cattle of her herd,
The woman at the young of her cows
The woman at the rearing of her flocks,
Until it reaches the fibres of her heart.

The woman frowning and foul,...
Until she reach the place whence she came.⁵

Clearly Mrs. Potter is viewed by those around her as a witch figure, but critical writing about The Double Hook too readily accepts that Mrs. Potter is solely responsible for all the ills of the community, and that in her very existence she is a blight on the people around. Such an assumption suggests the broad hostility towards maternal figures which Dorothy Dinnerstein describes in The Mermaid and the Minotaur:

Woman, who introduced us to the human situation and who at the beginning seemed to us responsible for every drawback of that situation, carries for all of us a pre-rational onus of ultimately culpable responsibility forever after.⁶

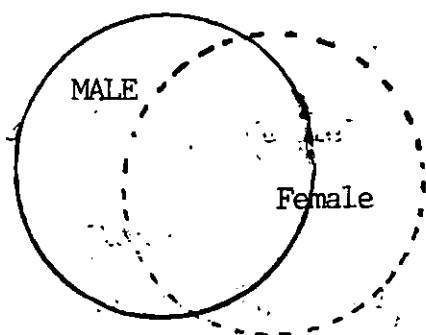
The resentment which Mrs. Potter attracts has just such enormous and irrational proportions, and it raises questions about which came first, Mrs. Potter's dark,

oppressive powers, or the hostile treatment as object which has isolated her from others.

Morriss says that Mrs. Potter is more of a force than a character in the novel (p.193), and John Grube agrees that Mrs. Potter is something more than James' mother (p.12). In these comments, Morriss and Grube both suggest that the old lady stands for larger and deeper concepts, yet neither of them identifies what it is the old lady should be seen to represent. Angela Bowering leads us closer to an understanding of Mrs. Potter when she states that the old lady represents the Great Mother in all her forms, from Hesiod's Gaia to the North American Indian mother-goddesses, the Celtic Machu, the Irish Danu and Anu, and so on.⁷ As the hieroglyph, or sacred figure, who presides over the confusion of The Double Hook, the old lady, Bowering claims, provides "the darkness that measures the relationship of all the other figures. She is the thing against which all other things shine. She is the darkness that allows the glory."⁸ Like Hecate, the guardian of the Styx, Mrs. Potter suggests the dark power of the old moon. But the old lady is static in the role of Hecate: she is isolated from the other two phases of the moon, both of which contain more light, and she is detached from the possibility of the glory. Wherever she

appears, she seems to be less a real person than a spectre, a shade, a witch; she is only the third phase of the triple-goddess, severed from her other selves. Almost always alone, Mrs. Potter is an anti-social figure who is set aside and apart from other community members. She is cut off from her children and from future generations.

The model of "non-social" or "muted" behaviour which British anthropologist Edward Ardener presents in Perceiving Women may help to illustrate the old lady's relation to the rest of the community. Ardener proposes the following model to illustrate the way in which females constitute a muted group whose experience lies partially outside of the bounds of the dominant (male) group:



This diagram shows the way in which female culture overlaps the dominant social structure, so that an area of female experience necessarily lies outside organized society. Ardener uses the terms "muted" and "articulate" to describe the two groups, and explains that a group

becomes muted because it is not part of the society's dominant communication system. Thus, if the dominant structure is male, the female reality is a muted one. The term "muted," Ardener points out, does not simply refer to linguistic silence:

. . . in English we mean by it both 'dumb' and 'of a reduced level of perceptibility'. The muted structures are 'there' but cannot be 'realized' in the language of the dominant structure.

Mrs. Potter's peculiar mutedness merits close attention. There is an extreme quality of Otherness about her, and she is clearly outside social conventions. Animals turn away from her (p.20), but she herself is sometimes likened to an animal, compared to a deer and associated with Coyote. She rejects human companionship, and Pockett observes that it is a queer thing that he never met the old lady. The images of Mrs. Potter are often subdued: she appears quickly and fades away; she is surrounded by trees and weeds and water. On one occasion, Heinrich confuses her with a shadow, wondering whether what he sees is the old lady, or if he is seeing light in a different way (p.29). And Mrs. Potter is silent. Since she is dead, her lack of speech is not really surprising, but death does not stop her from moving around the community and engaging in other lifelike activities.

In contrast with Mrs. Potter, the other women do not quite so obviously fall into the category of mutedness, at least not in terms of their speech. Widow Wagner is continually wagging her conventional tongue, and Angel's capacity for conversation causes Theophil to complain:

You used to listen and learn from me,
Theophil said. Now you just tell. Right from
the squeak of dawn. Telling. Telling. A
man would be hard pressed to wedge a word
into the silences you leave. (p.73)

Angel is constantly nagging others to go on about their work, and even when she returns to Felix Prosper's house we learn that

She did not come in peace. Her voice
lapped and fretted against Felix's silence.
(p.86)

Yet there is a sense in which all the utterance of these women could be said to be muted, in that it is different in tone from that of the men. Speaking frequently about doubts, mistakes, and questions, the female characters tend to talk about personal and emotional perceptions and experience, and they usually speak in the first person. In contrast, men's speech tends to be concerned with matters of rights, custom and action, and men use the word "man" pronominally, to replace "I", or "he", or "one." "A man does what he can," says William (p.53), and later, "A man has his own things

to see." "A man stumbles on things," says Kip, and, "A man can't be remembering things all his life" (p.62). "Some men get what's coming to them," says Theophil (p.80). "Is there any law against a man showing himself friendly in case of need?" Traff asks (p.102). "When I need any man's help, James said, I'll ask" (p.104). Heinrich inquires, "What does a man do ... when there's nothing to be done but dig a grave?" (p.114). Masculine action is underlined by the frequent appearance of the word "man," repeated persistently by most of the male characters. It is noteworthy that female characters use the word more specifically to describe male action which is distinct from female, as indicated in Widow Wagner's comment

A man came when the food was cooked. He came unless he'd been gored by a bull. Or fallen into a slough. Or shot for a deer. A man had to come. (p.55)

or in Angel's, "A man feels strongest in bed." (p.58). Felix is an interesting exception in that he uses the word "man" only once, at the end of the novel, when he says, "When a house is full of women and children ... a man has to get something for their mouths (p.114).

Since male speech underlines male action in The Double Hook, it is not surprising that readers generally assume that the novel is about a young man's adventure. Women's speech is muted, and the language and discourse of

the novel seem to emphasize the male subject. Most critics assume the novel is about James' quest for meaning, but this is an inadequate reading of the text.

As George Bowering comments,

Some readers have gone a little too far in their view of James as redeemer and renewer. He did, after all, murder his mother and blind a young man before returning to the pregnant lass he had abandoned.¹⁰

In order to read the story as a hero's quest or a grail legend, it is necessary to ignore James' gross misdeeds and to see Mrs. Potter as an object or thing who deserves to be destroyed. Morriss tries to do this, arguing that Mrs. Potter's quest is "inevitably sterile, distortive and self-destructive" (p.193), and that it is James' quest that initiates the transformation of the wasteland. John Moss goes further, maintaining that James recognizes that the old lady is "a seeker of meaning in darkness," suggesting that she is a witch, and that this is why she must be killed:

The others who see her still fishing after her death were unnerved by her apparent behaviour because they have accepted the darkness, the imminence of death, without question -- all but James who understands that it is not something to be sought after, whatever it is that she seeks, and kills her. In doing so, the first step is taken unwittingly towards the light.¹¹

His explanation has the ring of a desperate lawyer who is grasping at straws in order to plead that his client is

not guilty. Moss produces an odd sequence of events in his defence of James: using a curious muddle of tenses, he seems to imply that the dead Mrs. Potter's fishing is the reason that James decides to kill her!

If we were able to ignore the murder, blinding and seduction, it might not be too difficult to see The Double Hook as a young man's story, with James as the hero of a knightly tale in the grail tradition. James is, after all, the most active character in the novel. Because he is the only one to leave the community, his return is associated with the transformation which seems to occur at the end of the text. The many Christian references suggest that James' journey has some similarities to the legend of Parsival's search for the Holy Grail, in which the object of the quest is for the young man to redeem the old Fisher King (or the old Fisher Queen, in the case of Mrs. Potter) and to restore life to the wasteland. And so on. But even if one obvious diegesis in the novel were that of a heroic male adventure, the very attention which is given to gender roles insists that we must go beyond this reading in order to examine the relations between men and women, as well as between the young and the old.

Male behaviour is in fact not very attractive in The Double Hook. Part Four, in particular, suggests a

perversion of heroic male behaviour and of the relations between men and women. Eight of the eleven chapters contain no women, and the men in this section are concerned only with drinking, cheating, and whoring. The man who befriends James later tricks and robs him. In this section, women appear as chattels of men, prostitutes mocked by their own names -- for Lilly and Christine are not pure, and Felicia does not bring happiness. The women themselves don't speak well of their relations with men. Greta thinks James would kill her for standing in his way, and Angel sees that going from Theophil to Felix would only be going "from worse back to bad" (p.79). Theophil, the most unattractive character in the novel, insists on male dominance ("I bring back all that's needed here"), and he treats Angel as a thing and his possession: "A woman has no call for reasons ... Not when her man treats her good" (p.57).

Heinrich and Felix, perhaps the most appealing male characters, tend to question the rigidity of male behaviour -- "Can a man speak to no one because he's a man?" Heinrich asks (p.82) -- and to challenge male conventions. Felix does not treat Angel as his possession -- "He'd never broken Angel. He'd never tried to" (p.40) -- and, especially in his behaviour towards Lenchen, he

displays a somewhat androgynous nature. Heinrich too is an androgynous figure. A young boy ignorant of love, he is kind to his old mother, and sensitive to the woman's story as well as the man's. "There was Greta as well as James," he reminds William and James when the two men are talking about James's journey (p.132). His last words, as he turns to James and says, "Tell me ... what would a girl do?" (p.132), give us the most provocative question in the novel.

This ambiguous question, which James does not answer, directs us to a reading of The Double Hook in which we must examine the differences between male and female behaviour, and in which we study the feminine undercurrents in the stream of masculinity that is the text's first flow of meaning. Such a reading gives us, most simply, a story about an old woman who is slain by a son and reborn to haunt her community until a young woman gives birth to a son. The end of the story becomes a mirror image of the beginning, with the wrong righted. The answer, then, to Heinrich's question becomes clear. What a girl would do is precisely what Lenchen does do -- she would remain in her own community and bear fruit, give birth.

Images of mothers vary greatly in this book, and

they are by no means all positive. Mrs. Potter is seen as a witch figure, frightening and oppressive. The description of Angel walking away from her husband "like a mink trailing her young behind her" (p.25) could suggest animal stealthiness and cunning. Widow Wagner's fretful wailing is banal and tedious. Yet the birth of Lenchen's baby brings out the best in all the women. Angel finds Widow Wagner and brings her to Lenchen, so that mother and child are reunited, and Ara drives the horses that draw them there. Both Mrs. Potter and Widow Wagner are transformed after they become grandmothers. Widow Wagner makes a new singlet for her grandchild from the cloth she wove for her own children, thus forming a link between three generations. Once the new generation is established, even dead Mrs. Potter stops her fishing and becomes transformed into a tree, a symbol of life, with roots reaching out to water, a symbol of spirituality. The image reminds us of the transition she makes into the next world, and it also suggests the intergenerational roots which are now established. At the end of the novel, the four women are gathered together inside Felix's home with the new baby whose name means happiness and whose birth symbolizes creative female power. At the end of the novel, then, the power of the matriarchy is

re-established. Another mother-son relationship begins; not only another son, but also another Potter matriarch is created by Felix's birth. But absolute power is not presented as a desirable thing in The Double Hook. Female power must be redefined in the light of positive links to the future and connectedness within the female community.

Mrs. Potter's quest for meaning is often associated with the lamp she holds up in broad daylight. The lamp links her with the Greek philosopher Diogenes' search for an honest man, and John Grube comments that

The implication of this reference in The Double Hook is that the logical, rational approach is not, of itself, enough, that it cannot turn two men or ten men into something more than two men or ten men. Other aspects of man, such as those represented by Felix, must come into play. (p.12)

In this connection, Grube presents Mrs. Potter as an absolutist who, like Diogenes, is searching for something that defies human standards. This suggests that her own exaggerated behaviour may have invited James's violent action, and that hence perhaps the murder is justified. But if the murder is simply an absolute solution to an absolute problem, shouldn't Mrs. Potter be viewed as a victim, as well as a violator?

Mrs. Potter's link with Diogenes provides another and more useful clue as to her significance in the novel.

Diogenes is known not only for his fabled lamp, but also for his famous remark that he was a citizen of no country but of the world. If we consider this in conjunction with Sheila Watson's statement that what she wanted to write was a novel which was not regional but universal, the association with Diogenes may suggest that Mrs. Potter's place is outside the scope of the community, as a symbol of the marginality that is attributed to the unwanted old woman. The oppressive matriarch of a wasteland, Mrs. Potter represents the plight of old women whose power is static, oppressive, defined in absolutist terms. As the witch figure who hovers around the insular little community, Mrs. Potter seems to possess the black magic of the Celtic cailleach_dhub,¹² the dark nun of the pagan Celts. According to Alexander Carmichael, the cailleach represents that period of time when the weather is inclement and the land is unproductive. Like Demeter, and like the old lady, the cailleach haunts the barren land, switching her magic wand to the detriment of people and animals, and speaking about her quest for power:

It escaped me below, it escaped me above,
 It escaped me between my two hands,
 It escaped me before, it escaped me
 behind,

It escaped me between my two eyes.

It escaped me down, it escaped me up,

It escaped me between my two ears,
 It escaped me thither, it escaped me
 hither,
 It escaped me between my two feet.¹³

Cut off from society and perceived as an object to be feared, hated and destroyed, Mrs. Potter is doomed to seek the power that has escaped her.

As she fishes, Mrs. Potter serves as a model for the critic who looks for meanings that are not readily apparent or easily articulated in this post-modernist text, with its many layers and different patterns of meaning. In order to find significance in The Double Hook, we must continue our own searching to discover the multiple meanings which are present in this text, including those codes that are disclosed by new readers with different interests and distinct perspectives. Speaking about about the marginality of women in relation to The Double Hook, Barbara Godard claims that "the revolutionary qualities in Watson's writing are a consequence of her femaleness".¹⁴ One of the most revolutionary qualities of this novel is the openness of the text which defies closure of interpretation. A study of the marginal old lady suggests that, below the surface this text contains unplumbed depths, dark things to uncover, to bring to light, to drag up from the deep. If we focus our attention on Mrs. Potter, we find invisible

and perhaps unconscious meanings which inform us about the dark powers that are associated with old women. When, like Mrs. Potter, the old woman is perceived as object, fixed as a Hecate figure, her powers become static, negative and oppressive. And they attract murderous animosity.

CHAPTER TWO

THE WISE WOMAN: White Magic in Swamp_Angel

Although very different from Mrs. Potter in The Double_Hook, Mrs. Severance is another old woman whose role it is to raise questions about gender and generation. Described by Margaret Atwood as a "Wise Old Woman,"¹ Mrs. Severance is a kind of sorceress or high priestess, a sybil who stands at the crossroads between this world and the next, and who has special knowledge of the past and of the future. She possesses a peculiar magnetism which charms everyone from the disreputable Italian waiter who shares her spaghetti dinners to the conventional young businessman who marries her daughter. In her role as wise woman, she draws attention to shifting relations between the sexes and the generations, and she works to mediate between men and women and between present and past.

Criticism about Ethel Wilson's Swamp_Angel often states that the pearl-handled revolver is an important symbol, but there are varying and divergent opinions about just exactly what it does symbolize. George Woodcock likens it to Excalibur,² and Donna Smyth describes it as "a charged symbol, an iconic link between herself, the

past and Philip Severance."³ Desmond Pacey claims the gun is "an almost endlessly suggestive symbol,"⁴ and indeed he does suggest a great many ways in which it is connected with the novel's plot and subplots. That the Swamp Angel is important is obvious from its use as title, symbol, and plot device, but what it signifies in the novel is not so readily apparent. The evocative name of the novel leads critics Pacey and Smyth to speculate about the emergence of the divine from the muck or slime, but surely Mrs. Wilson's epigraph also directs us to connect the title specifically and literally with the gun:

"Swamp Angel. An 8-inch, 299 pound ...
gun, mounted in a swamp by the Federals, at
the siege (1863) of Charleston, S.C.
Webster's Dictionary

Subsequently, there was an issue of small
revolvers, inscribed "Swamp Angel"(p.11)

The epigraph twice points out that "Swamp Angel" means "gun", and it leads us to think of that gun in terms of two of the novel's important thematic concerns, power and proportion. Any psychological interpretation will identify a gun as a symbol of masculine power, and the first part of the epigraph associates the Swamp Angel with power and with warfare, which are usually associated with male behaviour. The second sentence, interestingly, gives us a diminishment of the first image, since it describes a gun which is now little and

portable, which might be used not only by men involved in a military siege, but by anyone, male or female, for any purpose. In the novel, however, the Swamp Angel is the property of an old woman, and we very quickly come to feel that the significance of the symbol is underlined by the character of its owner.

To understand the meaning of The_Swamp_Angel, we must examine it in relation to that extraordinary old woman, Nell Severance. Scarcely half a page after we first encounter her, and a full page before we hear her speak, Mrs. Severance picks up her revolver and tosses it into the air, spinning and catching it, and distracting and disturbing the violent man, Edward Vardoe, who has stormed into her home to search for his wife. This scene presents an early picture of the disproportion and paradox which run through the novel. We observe the trim, prim, "human doll" (p.30) of a man burst into "a torrent of accusation and abuse" (p.32), while the large, slow, silent, old woman plays daintily and lightly with a lethal weapon which commonly symbolizes male sexuality. The young man's rage is larger than his doll-like person, and the dangerous masculine symbol of the gun becomes merely a mocking toy in the hands of the old woman. The scene juxtaposes youth and age, male and female, person and thing, power and play, and underlines the contradictions and disproportions which

co-exist in what Mrs. Severance refers to as "the miraculous interweaving of creation" (p.150) which binds everything together. As mediator, though, Mrs. Severance will emphasize the co-existences, the linkings, the connectedness, rather than the contradictions.

In the first scene with Mrs. Severance, when Edward Vardoe is "taken out of himself" (p.32) as he watches the old woman juggle, and "rises as if drunk or dreaming" (p.33) as he leaves to go home, we become aware that Mrs. Severance's charm has some real magic in it. The act of juggling itself suggests the special powers of Nell Severance, who is able to manipulate people as well as objects. Her juggling gains further significance when we think of Alberto Cosco's comment, "I love to see you yoogling the little gun" (p.63-64), because the pronunciation "yoogle" makes us laugh and also draws us closer to the roots of the word "juggle." "Yoogle" suggests the Latin word ioculari, to jest, and the Old French iogler, which means "to be a jester or entertainer, e.g. a tumbler, or esp. a juggler." Mrs. Severance is unquestionably an entertainer. She lived her early life in front of audiences, and she captures an unwanted audience when she tumbles to the ground outside her gate, and when she tosses her gun high into the air inside her living room. She entertains when she jests, juggles, or talks. And she herself participates in and

appreciates the joke as she sits, Buddha-like, in the chair from which she watches and comments upon the human scene that surrounds her.

The weapon which is emblematic of Mrs. Severance is also a sexual symbol, the force of which appears most vividly in the passage in which she recounts her past triumphs in the circus:

"... the drums louder and louder -- a real drum roll ... and I'd have the three guns going so fast they dazzled, one behind my back and one under my elegant long legs (such lovely legs!), and one out as if out towards the audience and then crack-crack-crack and the audience going crazy and me bowing and laughing like anything ... how I loved it." (p. 64)

This brief description is intensely erotic as it builds to the climax of cracking guns and clapping crowds. The slow fluidity of her perfect timing, the drums beating faster and louder, the dazzling guns flashing between the young girl's legs -- all of this contributes to the strong sensuality of the old woman's memory.

The ardor of Mrs. Severance's recollection and the curious change of voice in the passage which follows cause a blurring of past and present so that, for a moment, it is not clear whether it is the old woman or the young girl she once was who is more real to the reader. The paragraph begins from Hilda's point of view, with an observation about her mother's age, and it seems to be Hilda who notes that the legend and

the Swamp Angel were the only proof of the earlier time. Thus, it is startling to encounter, in the same sentence, the interjection

(could it be that I, sitting heavily here, am that girl?) p.64

It is as if the young Nell Bigley has interrupted not only her older self but also both Hilda and the reader to assert her vitality and her everlastingness. This sense of entrancement or sorcery is echoed, a few lines later, when Mrs. Severance's appearance of "heaviness and years" is deemed perfectly suitable as a medium for her habits of compassionate observation on the human predicament. This "medium", then, permits free expression of ghosts from the past, so that the young Nell is able to employ the word "I" not only in the mind of old Mrs. Severance, but also in the thoughts of her daughter, Hilda.

The relation of youth to age is strangely reversed in this passage. The young self from the past insists upon her present existence -- "Mrs. Severance told the tale and I, the girl, lived" (p.64) -- but the old woman reveals her present advanced age only when she returns to the past and is re-experiencing her youth. Hilda reflects that her mother's physically aged appearance is now intrinsic -- "was, in fact, Mrs. Severance" (p.64) -- yet the appearance of the young girl, when we see her, is no less a part of our picture of

Nell. Both images of Mrs. Severance, her old self and her young self, are offered simultaneously in the simple cumulative style that is so typical of Ethel Wilson's writing. She does not suggest that we should consider either that Mrs. Severance's old body is a mask which hides her younger self, or that the laughing young girl is a half-formed harbinger of the powerful old woman. One Nell is as real as the other, and they co-exist.

It is Ethel Wilson's way to create such co-existences, to link ideas without subordinating them. Throughout the novel, her prose is loose, flowing, conjunctive, and it creates patterns -- like the migrating birds at the beginning of the novel, or the flickering fish at the end -- rather than judgments. This type of conjoining occurs throughout the novel, for example:

The family thought it was pretty funny, and
then they forgot all about it (p.44)

or

She loved her mother and hated her a little
(p.49)

or

Her mind, idling, also, but on two clouds,
was aware of her mother recounting the
distant triumph of guns, and drums, and skill
and legs and applause and the laughing girl
(p.64)

and

Mrs. Gunnarsen was moderately happy although

she rather preferred to be unhappy, and now there was something between them that could not be resolved, and they were resentful of each other and with all circumstances, and poverty looked steadily at them through the window, and all on account of six inches of mud (p.72)

(italics mine in the above quotations)

Where we would expect to find "but" or "yet" or "then" or "so," instead there is Wilson's ubiquitous "and". The effect is to make the reader see connections between things without drawing conclusions or making judgments. As the wise woman who connects this world with the next, Mrs. Severance is concerned with creating such co-existences.

The individual stories of Hilda, Maggie, Mrs. Severance, Edward Vardoe, Mr. Cunningham, the Quong family, and the Gunnarsons are brought together in the same coincidental way. These stories weave together and draw apart, and, although the novel begins and ends with Maggie, the narrator does not suggest that any one story subordinates another. Indeed, every story appears in relief against another, or several others, and produces a narrative wound around itself like a skein of embroidery thread. We become aware of things coming together in the casual, necessary circumstances which Wilson terms coincidence: the "'series of combination of events' which

meet at a certain point of time or perhaps place" (p.101).

Conjunction is fundamental to Ethel Wilson's writing, just as connectedness and co-existence form the matrix of Nell Severance's world-view. The importance of relationship and interdependence is what emerges finally as the central theme in Swamp Angel:

* "I sit on top of my little mound of years," said Mrs. Severance, "and it is natural and reasonable that I should look back, and I look back and round and I see the miraculous interweaving of creation ... the everlasting web ... and I see a stone and a word and this stub," and she threw down the stub of her cigarette, "and the man who made it, joined to the bounds of creation-- has creation any bounds, Maggie? -- and I see God everywhere. And Edward Vardoe .. and your little Chinese boy and the other little boy and you and me and who knows what. We are all in it together. 'No Man is an Island, I am involved in Mankind,' and we have no immunity and we may as well realize it." (pp.150-51)

These words, spoken by a woman in a novel written by a woman, could serve to exemplify the argument Carol Gilligan puts forth in her important and provocative work on psychological theory and women's development.⁵ In a study which analyzes female voice in relation to female development, Gilligan emphasizes that an insistence on connectedness is a distinctly feminine concern. Although she joins other developmental psychologists in claiming that attachment and separation provide an anchor for the human developmental cycle, Gilligan diverges from

traditional developmental theory in giving specific attention to the way in which female development depends upon a search for intimacy and upon an identity ultimately defined in a context of relationship. She cites Lawrence Kohlberg's scale of moral development which claims that the highest stage of moral development involves an understanding of and concern for individual rights, and she argues that, for women, the highest stage of human development is concerned not with individual human rights but with an ethic of relationship and responsibility:

The elusive mystery of women's development lies in its recognition of the continuing importance of attachment in the human life cycle. Woman's place in man's life cycle is to protect this recognition while the developmental litany intones the celebration of separation, autonomy, individuation, and natural rights. The myth of Persephone speaks directly to the distortion in this view by reminding us that narcissism leads to death, that the fertility of the earth is in some mysterious way tied to the continuation of the mother-daughter relationship, and that the life cycle itself arises from an alternation between the world of women and that of men.⁶

Without denying the importance of individuation and individual achievement which she sees as informing male developmental theories, Gilligan proposes that a theory of women's development may offer a new perspective on relationship and interconnection. She suggests that, because of these two different perspectives, "men and

women may speak different languages that they assume are the same, using similar words to encode disparate experiences of self and social relationships."⁷ In her discussion of women's voice, she says, "the language of responsibilities provides a weblike imagery of relationships to replace a hierarchical ordering,"⁸ a description which is directly evocative of Ethel Wilson's language, syntax and imagery.⁹

Almost paradoxically, it seems, the recognition of the interweaving of creation brings with it not only a recognition of interconnection but also a respect for individual distinctness. Within the web, Mrs. Severance sees the impossibility of judging people justly, and both she and Maggie remark that "'it takes God Himself to be fair to two different people at once'" (p.95, p.151). There is, of course, a temptation for the reader to make judgments in Swamp Angel for, again and again, Wilson presents us with contrasts in behaviour that seem to invite evaluation. The morally superior behaviour of Maggie is juxtaposed with the pettiness of Edward Vardoe and the festering jealousy of Vera Gunnarson. A little kitten, tiger-like, extends predatory paws toward an attentive fawn, and an eagle swoops down to steal a fish from the claws of the smaller bird who has caught it.

Hilda Severance quietly moves into a happy marriage and motherhood and the Quong family continues to wake and sleep in harmony, while other marriages are failing and unhappy. We are inclined to compare and to judge, and yet we feel we are intended to see each person or creature distinct and unique, as part of the web of creation in which people can only do the best they can.

Certainly Mrs. Severance does not attempt to do much more than to recognize the connectedness between people. She cannot, or will not, sum up, and in this she brings to mind the comment about women that Atwood's Commander makes in The Handmaid's Tale:

Women can't add, he said once, jokingly. When I asked him what he meant, he said, For them, one and one and one and one don't make four.

What do they make? I said, expecting five or three.

Just one and one and one and one, he said.¹⁰


Although the Commander's comment is intended to demean women, it provides a good description of Mrs. Severance's ability to see individuals as discrete beings while recognizing their connectedness. Being able to recognize both their individual vulnerability and interdependence is what permits her to perform a kind of white magic. There is clearly something of the sorcerer about her -- even the name of her family, the Juggling Biggleys, sounds like

jiggery-pokery -- but we expect her powers to be used for good purposes. The name "Severance" implies separation, and is sometimes given as a saint's name, perhaps because it suggests the remove associated with sanctuaries. Mrs. Severance gives a kind of sanctuary to Eddie Vardoe, and offers him salvation, while acknowledging "his helplessness and his meanness and his stupidity." After she talks with him, she announces that she has been "saving souls," and although her daughter accuses her of making gross mistakes by playing God, Hilda too recognizes her mother's real power.

But if the huge old woman on her little mound of years is a kind of saint or wise woman, she is unquestionably an unconventional one. Throughout her life, Mrs. Severance has been a marginal figure. The childhood in the circus, the illegitimate relationship with Philip Severance, the pearl-handled revolver which she juggles in her disproportionately tiny hands -- all of these suggest dark sources, antisocial origins, a kind of wildness, in which we see glimpses of the Hecate figure as well as the wandering Demeter.

Her present situation is suffocatingly domestic, however, and the one time she goes out of the house she suffers a painful and humiliating fall. In contrast with

Maggie, she claims not to care for fresh air, and she tells Maggie, "Everything of any importance happens indoors" (p.149). Yet, when "the fresh prevailing wind of her mind" (p.152) blows away her irritation at Vera, she feels compassion for the unhappy woman whom she describes, pityingly, as "house-bound, without an opening window" (p.152). The comment seems strange at first, since Mrs. Severance is at least as house-bound as Vera Gunnarson. But, when Nell Severance says everything of importance happens indoors, she is referring not just to her house but also to her head and her heart. These places, in her, are open, unconstricted, and responsive to fresh winds.

 When her fall causes too much of her inner life to be exposed to others -- "She who was private had lost all privacy" (p.79) -- Mrs. Severance begins to consider the possibility of giving up some of her power and preparing for death. In what sounds almost like an out-of-body experience, she sees with terror the Swamp Angel, fallen from her person and just beyond her reach, and it seems that she has lost a part of herself. She realizes what she had almost forgotten, that the Swamp Angel is really a gun, as well as a symbol. Visions and words "which had long occupied her mind" (.79) come to her, in her sedated state. She begins to see that the Swamp Angel is too

powerful a symbol, and that it prevents her from recognizing something:

All this nowadays of symbol symbol symbol ...
 too much power, people worship symbol ...
 obscures something ... what ... obscures ...
 she drifted. Where are we, Philip, the storm
 came in bumps. She opened her eyes and saw
 her bedroom. She closed her eyes again ...
 the Angel. The Angel must go ... because it
 is a symbol and too dear ... and some other
 reason ... what other reason ... she drifted.
 (79)

What is it that the Swamp Angel obscures? What is the "other reason" for its banishment? These questions are raised in innuendos and answered in actions, rather than being addressed directly. Mrs. Severance's dream-like reflections can be best understood, as can all dreams, in the context of what precedes and follows them. Before her fall, Mrs. Severance was thinking that her peculiarities might hinder her daughter's chances with young men, and was considering ways in which she might "decoy" Albert Cousins in order to alleviate his possible fears. The day after her fall, she uses her difficulty as an excuse to invite Cousins to call on her. Clearly, the unspoken inducement for her to give up her "endeared symbol" (p.83), which represents much of her power in concrete as well as symbolic terms, is the desire to secure happiness for her beloved daughter. Like Prospero drowning his book after arranging for his daughter's wedding, Mrs. Severance *

boxes up her beloved Angel and, once she has made her plans to see her daughter settled in marriage, sends it off to Maggie to be thrown into the lake. The spirit Ariel persuades Prospero to abjure his magic, and more than one angel influences Mrs. Severance's decision to give up her symbolic power. In the dream-like state in which she worries about the power of a symbol to obscure reality, three angels -- her dead lover, her dear daughter, and the gun itself -- are all in the old woman's consciousness.

As a symbol of her old life, the Swamp Angel ties her to the past and obscures her view of the future. When she recognizes that she cannot continue to hold on to her power -- "It will live longer than I shall" -- she begins to look towards the future, towards the generations that will follow and towards her own death. In sending off the gun, Mrs. Severance divests herself of her dreams of the past. She directs her art away from the little dramas she has previously played for her own amusement, and focusses instead on her more immediate concerns:

The play that she might play this afternoon, on the simple stage which she would set, differed, and was of importance, for it concerned Hilda's happiness." (p.82)

With her powerful symbol gone, she attends to one of her final tasks, the achievement of some degree of safety for her child and for the generations that will follow.

Although she does not claim, like Prospero, that every third thought will be of the grave, she does recognize, in "a bright revealing instant" that her life is drawing to a close, and so she begins to prepare for her death. She is able finally to give up the gun, because its powers are not what she needs to face the wind that shakes her in her final years.

The task for Nell Severance, once she has divested herself of the symbol which has been her constant companion, is, as Maggie knows, to accept her own ability "to throw away the substance, to lose all yet keep the essence" (p.129). She learns to accept the loss when she sees how happy Hilda and Albert will be -- "something in the room became simple again" (p.129) -- and she tells Hilda, probably falsely, that she doesn't really miss the Swamp Angel. More truly, she tells Hilda that she gave the gun away because she knew she was too old to be able to keep it safely (p.119), implying that death would soon take it away from her anyway. When she visits Maggie for the last time, Mrs. Severance does not even mention the Swamp Angel. Instead she reviews her past life, talking about the philosophy with which she approaches the transition into death and about the connectedness that she sees as she looks around from where she sits on top of her

"little mound of years." The absurd image of the huge woman on the little mound is an important one, for it portrays the disproportion between Mrs. Severance's large nature and her short life. In this conversation we are aware of the size of Nell's spirit, and it seems as though the essence of the Swamp Angel's power is indeed with her, so that she no longer needs to hold the gun itself.

The final image in the novel is of Maggie flinging the Swamp Angel into the lake where it sinks down into the ooze, lost perhaps for all time. The fish flee from it, return to it, then flicker away. It is fitting that this final image should be of things moving apart and drawing together, since the Swamp Angel is ultimately a symbol of change, mediation and transformation. Together the Swamp Angel and the old woman have effected and endured years of change. Mrs. Severance uses the Swamp Angel to mesmerize others, and her own greatest transformation takes place when she is able to renounce her "endeared symbol" and yet to retain the mediating power which it symbolized. When the Swamp Angel finally disappears from sight it returns, like Mrs. Severance, to Mother Earth, leaving its white magic to reside in the continuous, weaving interplay of the web-like structure that composes Mrs. Wilson's vast universe and her little text.

CHAPTER THREE

TRANSFORMATIONS: Old Woman as Subject in

The Stone Angel¹

Seen as object, Hagar Shipley might appear to be an ordinary Canadian grandmother, no longer able to care for herself and faced with the predictable traumas of nursing home, hospital and death. The success of Margaret Laurence's The Stone Angel, however, is that Hagar resists being viewed merely as object, and insists that we come to know her subjective experiences in exquisite detail, and to recognize her as a powerful and independent old woman. In her we see glimpses of the witch figure, of the wise woman, and of the ordinary old grandmother, yet Hagar goes beyond any of these three categories and must be seen as the full and complex subject of her narrative. In the course of the novel, Hagar narrates her own life story, gathering up fragments of herself that are presented as discrete episodes, or flashbacks. The whole woman that we see at the end of the novel is formed when the many images of the woman as distant object are united with an intimate experience of the old woman as narrator and subject.

Ultimately, the real spirit of Hagar Shipley is captured between the contours of subject and object, between present and past.

The opening paragraphs of The Stone Angel describe the central image of the novel, the statue which dominates the Manawaka cemetery. In this first view of the stone angel we see features which we soon come to recognize in the narrator herself. Like Hagar Shipley, the angel is cold, rigid, and female. She has existed for a long time and is viewed from a remove. Hagar sees herself in much the same way when she begins the process of reviewing and reconciling herself to the events of her long life. Thus the angel becomes an important icon which signifies the mediation and transformation that attend Hagar's journey towards integrating her many previous selves, and the reader's experience of unifying several images of the old woman.

The angel has importance in relation to Hagar and also to her mother, but she is much more than a mere monument to the mother or even a reflection of Hagar's own isolation and blindness, because she signifies, simultaneously, both the patriarchal foreground and the matriarchal background of Hagar's story. Much critical attention is directed towards the conflict between Hagar

and her father, but a careful examination of Hagar's character obliges us to take note of her negative feeling about her dead mother as well, and to recognize her search for positive female identity as an important concern of the novel.

In "A Feminist Reading of The Stone Angel,"²

Constance Rooke points out that the angel

expresses Jason Currie's privilege as a man, as well as the privilege he enjoys as a man of substance. Jason had little use for women, and little reverence for those feminine virtues which inspired men like John Ruskin or Coventry Patmore to such absurd heights of idolatry: but he shared their more significant belief in male superiority, and he accepted their notions of what behaviour and what education were appropriate for a lady.³

Rooke draws attention to the novel's sociological subtext, in which one can see the patriarchal order which she holds responsible for Hagar's inability to acknowledge her own feelings or to express them to others, and for social conditions which limit the human development of both men and women. From this perspective we observe that Hagar's moment of truth in the hospital occurs only when Hagar finally identifies with the women who surround her and forms her own link between the four generations of women from her mother to her granddaughter. Hagar acknowledges that "The plagues go on from generation to generation,"

and recognizes that change will happen slowly. Rooke suggests, however, that in her final days Hagar is able to imagine a positive change in the lives of women, "a situation in which both men and women will be free to love one another and to respect each other's needs."⁴

In Hagar's acceptance of her female identity, and of her place in a community of women who share her resilient vulnerability, we witness a final integration of the character we have seen in scattered episodes that stretch over more than eight decades. The novel "comes a full circle" when the female ties are formed between the circle of women who are cloistered in the hospital and between the generations of women who are linked by the shared ring.

The sense of unity is intensified in the closing paragraph. The diffuse experiences of Hagar's individual life are drawn into the subjective instant of her last breath: "And then --" (p.308). The immediacy of Laurence's writing in that enormously evocative final phrase is such that the reader's own throat catches at the unfinished utterance. Throughout the novel, Laurence's alternations with tenses take us back and forth between past and present, "now" and "then." We move from her poignant "there, there," which she thinks several

times but does not say aloud, to her unarticulated "here ... here," when we are called into her consciousness to share her point of view. The effect is to create fluctuations in our perception of Hagar, so that we see her from two perspectives -- here as subject and there as object. An exquisitely constructed series of shifts in point of view has us sometimes near enough to Hagar to experience her thoughts subjectively and sometimes remote enough to see her clearly, as if in a snapshot. The narrator leads us back and forth at various distances, and then, at the end of the novel, reels us in so close and so quickly that we finally become one with Hagar in the brief moment that is beyond words.

All of The Stone Angel is written in the first person, and yet Hagar sometimes acquires the tone and distance of an omniscient narrator as she recalls her younger self. Because her view of her past is informed by present experience and by the intervening years, old Hagar sees young Hagar as distinctly separate from and almost alien to her. The co-existence which occurs with the young and old Hagars is similar to what happens in Swamp Angel when Nell Severance reminisces about her younger days. In The Stone Angel, the past tense and the privileged position of the knowledgeable narrator combine

to create a kind of subject-object relationship between narrator and reader. Hagar is the speaking subject who sorts out just what information the reader is to have, and offers remarkably detailed little tidbits about the pictures she presents:

I'd be about six, surely, when I had that plaid pinafore, pale green and pale red --not pink, a watery red, rather like the flesh of a ripe watermelon, made by an aunt in Ontario and grandly piped in black velveteen. (p.6)

While Hagar as subject talks about her young self as object, the reader becomes another kind of object, the indirect object who is the recipient of old Hagar's point of view, and who listens to the commanding narrative voice.

When Hagar begins to tell her old stories, in episodes as markedly vocal as they are vividly visual, we can hear the old Hagar as we see the strutting peacock she once was. Curiously, although we see the young Hagar at a distance and we hear the old Hagar as a somewhat remote voice, we are also very close to actually experiencing Hagar's own subjective perceptions as she insists on us seeing precisely what she sees:

There was I, strutting the board sidewalk like a pint-sized peacock, resplendent, haughty, hoity-toity, Jason Currie's black-haired daughter. (p.6)

Briefly, we relax into an acceptance of an apparently

reliable chronicler who maintains a polite distance between herself and her listeners, but this comfortable relationship is interrupted again and again by the old woman's immediate responses to her own past. Indeed she seems determined to jolt us into recognizing her severed selves, and to have us travel back and forth through time in order to do so. Present reflection interrupts and weaves in and around layers of past experience, as Hagar recollects, wonders and grieves. She laments yet survives, and ultimately she accepts and prevails over her own history.

These fluctuations in narrative distance produce a sense of freedom and structural fluidity which is interesting in a novel that contains so many images of constriction. Hagar's corsets and the embroidered shoes of the footbound Chinese women Mr. Oatley smuggles in to Canada are clearly emblematic of women's oppression, and suggest patriarchal forces which prevent women from breathing easily or walking freely. Subtler references to the tension between freedom and constraint appear in the first and central image, the stone angel, a winged creature who is earthbound and flightless, and in the variations of that image which occur repeatedly in the following pages. There are sun-hatched chicks, entrapped

by their broken shells, mutilated and voiceless (p. 27). There are parrots, stiff-feathered, sharp-beaked, not flying but trod upon, on the linoleum in Bram Shipley's bedroom (p. 80). Years later, in the same house, Hagar watches a "mammoth matriarchal fly" labour obscenely to bring forth her eggs (p.170). Hagar herself keeps a bunch of flapping, squawking chickens for the cash their eggs will give her, though the fluttering, frightened birds never cease to sicken her. Inside the cannery, a seagull is trapped, frightened and flapping, and half a dozen jewel-like June bugs are caught, dead, in a scallop shell (pp. 216-17). Again and again what should be wingborn, unfolding and unconfined is weighed down, trapped, immobile, if not lifeless.

The bird and egg symbolism is interesting in relation to the old woman. Many mother goddesses are represented as birds in at least one of their forms, and the egg too is an ancient symbol associated with the Great Mother. But in The Stone Angel birds are flightless, eggs are broken, and the whole process of incubation and birth is constrained, frightening and painful. The broken egg conveys an ominous message about chrysalis and transformation, yet it is appropriate for a woman who is not giving birth but is engaged in transition at the other

end of the spectrum, in approaching death. This is "the dark egg" which Nor Hall talks about in The Moon and the Virgin:

Usually we think of eggs as white and golden, regular sunbursts of brightness. But seen from the inside, an unhatched egg would be a lightless place where there would be no possibility of seeing with outward looking eyes. Perhaps this is another reason why the egg symbolizes a phase of initiation -- it is the dark before the dawn.⁵

The egg imagery suggests Hagar's constricting pride, and it also prepares us for her ultimate recognition that in her heart she had always longed to break free, to rejoice:

I must always have wanted that -- simply to rejoice. How is it I never could? I know, I know. How long have I known? Or have I always known in some far crevice of my heart, some cave too deeply buried, too concealed? Every good joy I might have held, in my man or any child of mine or even the plain light of morning, of walking the earth, all were forced to a standstill by some brake of proper appearances -- oh, proper to whom? When did I ever speak the heart's truth?

Pride was my wilderness and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched. (p.292)

As she reviews her life story, Hagar is in the final phase of her life. She describes herself as being in a cocoon, "woven around with threads", and she waits for the tight threads to loosen (p.306). In the shrunken world of the hospital, Hagar remembers her son's gasp at birth and

wonders if there might be a similarly unknown element awaiting beyond this life. "Can angels faint?" (p.307) she jokes to herself about the amazement she would feel on discovering life after death. For Hagar, this is the moment of the dark before the dawn, when she is about to enter her final transition. Like the stone angel, Hagar embodies opposing characteristics of vitality and rigidity; she has an exuberant spirit that is encased in unyielding pride. Like the bird inside the dark egg, Hagar must break free of that constricting shell in order to experience the enlightenment that follows the darkness.

It is tempting to perceive Hagar's contradictory characteristics as existing in a kind of binary opposition in which one must yield to the other, but in fact Laurence insists on our accepting the vitality and the rigidity as only two parts of Hagar's complex personality. The novel creates many such strong dualities, as Clara Thomas observes:

Throughout the novel a world of dualities is constantly with us, in the juxtaposition of the physical Hagers, young and old, and also in the contrast between a Hagar who is supported and ennobled by her enduring pride and the same Hagar, ruined by it. We are constantly made aware of the clashing of appearances and realities: Hagar as she thinks she is and as she really is: Hagar as she reads her motives in the past and as they seem to us.⁶

However, these seeming dualities do not yield to the application of a simple either/or formula in which one perception acquires meaning at the expense of the other. Instead, they produce a mosaic which allows contradictory characteristics to co-exist within a collection of fragmented episodes.

It is appropriate that egg and birth references are frequently a part of these dualities, reminding us that in the primary division which occurs when a child first becomes separate from its mother there is a unity created. We think not of mother or child but of mother and child. The female process of reproduction simultaneously produces both individuation and integration. So it is with the young and old Hagers, and with all the other voices which combine to form the multiple narrator of The Stone Angel. The educated Hagar tells her story with references to Bernini, Coleridge, and the Brownings. The blunt young woman, fresh from finishing school, speaks to her father in sharp short sentences, without a scrap of subtlety. The prissy wife corrects the speech of her husband and children. The old woman who detests slang learns, in her last days, to say "O.K." and "swell." Hagar's voices are various, and form a kind of chorus. Together the many voices create the complex speaking subject we construct as

we read The Stone Angel.

The construction of Hagar as subject occurs as the reader engages in both objective and subjective relations with the narrator. In the circumstances of the novel we observe that being female and being old contribute to Hagar's condition as object. We see her sent to school to learn to embroider and to dress like a lady, all for the approval of the father who views her "as a thing and his" (p.42), and we see her taken off to Silverthreads Nursing Home where a condescending matron grips and steers her "as one would a drunk or a poodle" (p.97). Yet, as we read the novel, we respond to Hagar's energy and exuberance and to her presence as subject. We learn to listen for fluctuations in Hagar's voice over time, and from her many selves to construct the mosaic which is ultimately the novel's message. We hear the voice of the old woman, and in that voice we hear a new kind of narrative, one which embodies a multiple subject, and which is itself an object, one which explores the terms "subject" and "object" to their fullest potential.

The Stone Angel challenges us to examine the various uses of the terms "subject" and "object". The noun "subject" can, of course, be used to mean several different things. It may refer to the topic of discussion

or study, or to one who owes allegiance to another power. An "object" may be something which is capable of being seen or sensed, or something physical or mental of which a subject is aware. With a slight change of point of view, a subject may become an object, or vice versa. Moreover, with a slight change of pronunciation, both of these nouns become verbs and take on very different meanings. "To subject" means to bring under control, or to make submit to something. "To object" means to oppose or to feel distaste for something.⁷

This novel offers us alternations in the positions of subject and object, both in relation to Hagar and with regard to our own position as readers. In these alternations, we also become aware of a slippage that can take place between the noun and verb states of these words. Jason Currie, as subject of Hagar's recollections, subjects his children to his harsh will, and becomes the object of their fear and resentment. Hagar, as domestic object, is subject to his desires but objects to her powerlessness. A reversal occurs when these nouns become verbs, and are empowered by action. Such twists are worth noting because subject and object constitute an important shifting dynamic within the novel, and as readers we engage in the dialectic through the shifts in our

identification with Hagar.

Another variation of subject and object relations occurs because Hagar breaks through the boundaries between writer, teller, tale and reader. When least expected, she interrupts her stories with sudden present-tense interjections to no apparent listener, exclaiming, "There. There" (p.191), or "It doesn't seem so very long ago" (p.22), or "Wrangle, wrangle" (p.85). In a stream-of-consciousness mode, Laurence suddenly breaks down the boundaries between self and other and obliterates the distance between writer and reader.⁸ This kind of writing is perhaps what Helene Cixous celebrates in her article entitled "The Laugh of the Medusa":

To admit that writing is precisely working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other without which nothing can live, undoing the work of death -- to admit this is first to want the two, as well as both, the ensemble of the one and the other, not fixed in sequences of struggle and expulsion or some other form of death but infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another. A process of different subjects knowing one another and beginning one another anew only from the living boundaries of the other: a multiple and inexhaustible course with millions of encounters and transformations of the same into the other and into the in-between, from which woman takes her forms...⁹

It is in this "in-between" that we are able to see the power of the old woman. The in-between is the space that

permits object to become subject, and it is the present moment that unites past and future. It is what transforms the dualities that seem to exist on the surface of this novel into the triads which are the traditional embodiment of female groups, as seen in the three muses, the three fates, the three weird sisters, the three graces. In the in-between we find the power of the old woman as seen in the spirit of Hecate, who allows the mother Demeter and the daughter Persephone to become a powerful Triple Goddess. Hecate, as the third form of Demeter and as another form of Artemis, is the goddess of the crossroads. She is positioned at the gateway between two worlds, the underworld and the upper world, and from there she provides the link that reunites the split forms of Demeter:

It was probably because of this dwelling-in-between that she was the only one to hear the cries of Persephone when she was abducted. Hekate, the Distant One, being neither goddess nor mortal woman at this time, contains the peculiar force that draws together those who have been torn apart. Demeter, the grieving mother, wanders horizontally, Persephone's journey is vertical -- like a seed sunk and risen -- and Hekate, goddess of crossroads, is at the place where the two meet.¹⁰

The technique Laurence uses to make us aware of the in-between involves creating a character by assemblage, by accumulation, and by working towards a co-existence

between the present individual and her ancestral past. In this, her style is reminiscent of other Canadian writers such as Alice Munro and Ethel Wilson. Laurence describes the themes and experiences and interactions of characters in a novel as "a series of wavy lines, converging, separating, touching, drawing apart,"¹¹ suggesting something that sounds very like Nell Severance's "everlasting web," and that also recalls Sheila Watson's densely-layered and tangentially symbolic text. As in Mrs. Severance's web, nothing is ever lost in The Stone Angel. Although Hagar grieves for her lost men, when she "collects" her thoughts at the end of the novel, we realize, as we listen to the voice of the old woman, that she has not lost anything. Captured between fragmented images of her past, her life is all there, "radiant, everlasting," like the things in the lists that Alice Munro's young heroine yearns to make in Lives of Girls and Women.¹² Margaret Laurence's old heroine gives testimony to the fact that the creation of such lists is not impossible, and may even be inescapable.

Hagar has been called a tragic figure, but the feeling of triumph at the close of the novel is stronger than any sense of tragedy. Laurence does not allow Hagar to become trapped by time; the novel, like the river in

The Diviners, does not simply flow in one direction. It moves backwards and forwards, towards subject and towards object, towards the past and towards the future. And although the realities of time and place are striking in this novel, Hagar, like the emblematic angel itself, ultimately transcends both. The old woman signifies the duress of a winged figure cast on a stone ground, an image which suggests hope and failure. As woman and as old person, Hagar tells us both of her aspirations and of her failures. As she approaches death, the old woman experiences a heightened desire to correct her mistakes, and at the same time she is acutely aware of the limited time remaining to her. She cannot alter what has been; it is too late to change things, even if she wished to do so: "I can't take on anything new at this point. It's too much. I have to let it go" (p.297). And yet there is a feeling of hopefulness at the end of The Stone Angel. As she lies in her cocoon, poised like Hecate between two worlds, Hagar's powerful presence promises myriad possibilities of transcendence and transformation -- hope for her own entry into the next world, and hope for the future generations that she will leave behind. The last four words of the novel ("There. There. And then --") crack resoundingly, like the breaking open of an egg.

EPILOGUE: ANGELS

All angels are messengers . . . which isn't
to say all messages are good.

Margaret Atwood¹

In each of the three novels which I have studied, there is an old woman who figures prominently and powerfully, and there is also an angel. The old women are very different from each other, and they represent three distinct types: there is a witch, a wise woman, and an ordinary Canadian grandmother. The angels also appear in many forms: a human female in The Double Hook, a gun in Swamp Angel, and a statue surrounded by flowers in The Stone Angel. The way they are represented may vary, but the function of the angel in these novels always includes the illumination of the old woman figure. As an iconic representation, the angel assumes diverse forms and no single meaning, but each of these angels conveys important information about the nature and significance of the old woman who appears in the same work.

Etymologically, "angel" derives from the Greek angelos, meaning messenger, and in The Double Hook the character named Angel functions as a messenger when she

moves among various members of the community, talking to William, Greta, Ara, James, Heinrich, Kip, Theophil, Felix, William and Lenchen.² Lenchen wants Angel to be her midwife when, approaching labour, she becomes frightened about bringing a child into the world. Angel doesn't deliver Lenchen's baby, however: rather than bring the child to the mother, Angel delivers Lenchen's mother to the childbed. This turns out to be a more significant act of mediation, one that heralds the reuniting of the generations and the re-establishment of the community. In her role as mediator, Angel moves in between individuals and households, between different husbands, between the old and new communities: she is constantly in motion.

Unlike the old lady, Angel is no absolutist. She is ready to compromise, to adjust, to change her mind or to change directions, to leave a husband and later to return to him. Above all, she is pragmatic, concerned less with principles than with people, and with the need to get on with the practical work that has to be done, the cleaning, cooking and caretaking. All of Angel's actions carry the message of mediation, of linking, of working helpfully between people. In this she draws our attention to the condition of the old woman who lurks around the edges of the community, whose marginality is the antithesis of

Angel's mediation. And when we see in the old lady the problem of alienation and isolation which is afflicting the community, it is because we have also seen the solution to it in Angel's ministering care. The message of this Angel, then, is not a wholly good one, in that it points to the dark and destructive powers of the old woman who is static, fixed as object, casting a pall on those around her. Nevertheless, at the end of the novel, as the women gather together inside the house when Lenchen's baby is born, there seems to be a flourishing of female power.

The Angel in Ethel Wilson's novel is not a person, nor a spirit, but an object. As noted in Chapter Two, the Swamp Angel's importance as a controlling symbol is clear from its appearance in the title and epigraph and from its significance in the plot. Even before the novel begins, the epigraph introduces the idea of the contrast in power and proportion, concerns which are present throughout the novel. The Swamp Angel is often referred to simply as "the Angel" by Nell, Hilda, and Maggie, and certainly it has an important function as messenger. Its ability to communicate is so great that Nell Severance needn't even speak to convey an effective message to Edward Vardoe, and although Nell writes a short note to Maggie when she sends her the revolver, the Angel carries its own meaning to her

friend. In a letter to Nell, Maggie writes

About the Angel. It may not be very significant to you, sending it away, but it is to me . . . I am so sure that our ability to throw away the substance, to lose all yet keep the essence is very important. (p. 129)

Later, when Maggie throws the gun away, the narrator observes

. . . soon it will be gone. It will be a memory, and then not even a memory, for there will be no one to remember it. Yet does the essence of all custom and virtue perish? (p. 157)

Clearly the Angel is no mere revolver, but a representation of a much larger "essence". Described initially as a male weapon, the revolver is seen as a toy in the hands of Nell Severance: the powerful male symbol becomes a playful female one. It seems that at least one of this Angel's messages is that we should examine such shifts in power and proportion in the relations between men and women. Again the message is not entirely good, since in this novel the relations between men and women are never easy or comfortable. As in the passages about the eagle and the osprey, and the fawn and the kitten, encounters between men and women are likely to be fluctuating and uncertain, and to combine cruelty and compassion.

"How are the horror and the glory reconciled?" asks

Desmond Pacey in his introduction to Swamp Angel (p. 9). This question evokes the problem of The Double Hook: "when you fish for glory you catch the darkness too," and Pacey's answer -- "They are reconciled through process" (p. 9) -- applies to both novels. The process that reconciles these binaries in The Double Hook is Angel's mediating, and in Swamp Angel, as Pacey points out, it is the continuity of movement that animates the novel, which

begins with the flight of birds and ends with the swimming of fish. In between everything . . . flows, floats, slides, glides, flies, travels . . . Life cannot stand still. (p.9)

Similarly, the Swamp Angel is almost always described in motion, spinning in the air when Mrs. Severance tosses it, or sliding between her hands, "moulding and curving -- it seemed almost -- like a goldbeater's skin in a warm palm" (p. 64). The revolver -- and there is motion in the word itself -- comes to Nell from her father, and travels everywhere with her: it is her constant companion, until the day when she sends it off to Maggie. In our final view of it, when it rises higher into the air than ever before, the Angel assumes the radiance of a celestial messenger:

It made a shining parabola in the air, turning downwards -- turning, turning, catching the sunlight, hitting the surface of the lake, sparkling down into the clear

water, vanishing amidst breaking bubbles in the water, sinking down among the affrighted fish, settling in the ooze." (p.157)

If we try to analyze the Angel's message in relation to the old woman who owns it, we see that, in its travels, the revolver functions as a kind of mediator. The angel does this in tandem with its owner, first in frightening and subduing Edward Vardoe, then in attracting and engaging (in more than one sense of the word) Albert Cousins, and finally in becoming a kind of legacy of continuity for Maggie. As we follow it to its final resting place, we see the Angel becoming reunited with its owner as it sinks through the clear water to settle into the ooze. The word "ooze" connotes primeval slime and suggests a return to Mother Earth, to which destination the Swamp Angel follows Mrs. Severance. The Angel, initially associated with masculinity, finally becomes feminized in its union with the old woman, when it is cast not heavenwards to God the Father, but earthwards to the embrace of the Great Mother, the source of all creation.

In The Stone Angel, the statue itself moves very little, although she is toppled down on one occasion and is heaved around by the earth and left standing askew. As a monument, ostensibly to the memory of a dead woman and more truthfully to the pride of a living man, this angel

bears many messages. By virtue of her costliness she is supposed to proclaim the father's dynasty, "forever and a day" (p.3), but her message is short-lived, since winter snow and summer winds eat away at her from the very first.

The stone angel, like other angels, is first of all a messenger. Imported to Manawaka "at a terrible expense," she is meant to convey information not about the glory of her creator but about the pride of her purchaser. Once placed on Canadian soil, however, this winged creature becomes a sort of trickster figure who defeats her owner's intention. Her pure white marble wings disintegrate in the face of wind and weather, and, as she overlooks the abandoned family plot where two rival households are levelled by disregard, her message soon proclaims not her owner's triumphant dynasty but his mortality. Jason Currie's initial aim is realized only briefly, in Hagar's childhood, if then. In her final days, Hagar, remembering how altered the angel had been by lack of care, wonders if it is still standing.

The stone angel conveys more significant messages about Hagar's changing situation. With regard to young Hagar, the angel's significance has to do with rigid femininity and ancestral burdens. In relation to the old Hagar, it points to sightlessness and pride. John refers

to the angel as "the old lady," when he straightens it for Hagar, but it is his brother Marvin who really struggles with the old lady, his mother; and who actually does suggest the biblical story of Jacob wrestling with the angel. Hagar sees this, finally, just in time to liberate herself and her eldest son:

Now it seems to me he is truly Jacob; gripping with all his strength, and bargaining. I will not let thee go except thou bless me. And I see I am thus strangely cast, and perhaps have been so from the beginning, and can only release myself by releasing him. (p.304)

In this moment, "strangely cast" as the angel figure, Hagar acts to free her son and embodies the message of her own deliverance -- the angel in motion, in mediation. In this overlapping of domination and submission -- who, after all, is struggling, and who is letting go? -- Hagar displays the reciprocity which seeks to escape both the dominating behaviour of the subject and the submissive behaviour of the object. What the angel finally points to in relation to Hagar is this need to act freely, to break through the restricting mold of absolutism, to move towards the in-between of reciprocity.

In releasing Marvin from her domination so that both of them may become free, Hagar exemplifies the mediating power which transcends the binary opposites of self and

other. When we formulate the fundamental categories of self and other, we assume an adversary relation in which the One is encouraged to have domination over the Other. When a man or a young person defines himself as the One, he sets himself up as more powerful than those women or old people whom he considers to be the Other. Of course, a reciprocal claim may be made by the other party, as de Beauvoir points out -- in her own country, after all, the foreigner is a native!³ Certainly Mrs. Potter, Nell Severance and Hagar Shipley are all strong women, able to make a reciprocal claim of personal power. But these novels each emphasize the need to set aside absolute power and to redefine personal power in relation to female goals. Thus, at the end of The Double Hook, Mrs. Potter's dark oppressive power is replaced by the mediating, generative power of the women who gather around the new baby. Nell Severance uses her great power for good, but even so, her daughter thinks that she should not be so powerful. Nell, too, recognizes that she must renounce her excessive power, and so she sends the Angel to Maggie when she begins to prepare for her daughter's marriage and for her own death. At the same moment of transition, as she approaches death, Hagar Shipley relaxes her dominating hold on her son, relinquishing tyrannical power in favour

of the mediating power which breaks down barriers between subject and object and which crosses boundaries between self and other. This redefined power, the power to mediate, is characteristic of the old woman at work in the in-between.

In Laurence's novel, the stone angel is an abundantly suggestive symbol, but finally what it points to is the limitation of the transcendental icon, the failure of the sign to capture its own significance. Cast in stone, the marble wings are unable to raise anything on high, nor can the stone figure contain all the earthly meaning we ascribe to it. Yet, paradoxically, the sign is significant enough in itself. As a messenger, the angel is really only a channel, after all. The message she carries is one of mediation, and it is underlined by her own behaviour as message-bearer. In moving between two worlds, then, the message she makes possible may be no more than the possibility that such a channel exists.

Angels are various and fluctuating creatures, and the angel image has many shapes. As an androgynous figure which represents the boundaries of this world and the next, the angel has a particular relevance to old women, since, because of their age and sex, they too are marginal figures. An angel may be a spirit, a muse, a grace, or a

trickster, but all angels are messengers, and their message is always the same: to follow what is mobile and variable, to make connections and form links, to mediate rather than to subordinate. In the three novels I have discussed, the angel reveals the old woman as a many-imaged figure who is best perceived in the flickering moment of transformation. In this moment, the archetypal figures of the witch and the wise woman and the ordinary old woman in the middle become united to reveal the Triple Goddess, the transforming hag, the old woman who transforms others and who is herself transformed: the old woman as subject, powerful and mutable.

NOTES

PROLOGUE

¹The Second Sex, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. xvi. Simone de Beauvoir argues that women are led to make objects of themselves, to set themselves up as the Other, which prevents them from becoming free, autonomous human beings. Similarly, in Old Age, trans. Patrick O'Brian (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1977), she points out that elderly people are also marginal members of the community and perceived as Other.

²Sheila Watson, The Double Hook (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969). References indicated by page number in my text.

³Ethel Wilson, Swamp Angel (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1962). References indicated by page number in my text.

⁴Margaret Laurence, The Stone Angel (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1968). References indicated by page number in my text.

⁵Richard Erdoes & Alfonso Ortiz, American Indian Myths and Legends (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

⁶Information about the Salish grandmother was gained from conversations with Ellen White, Elder, and Grace Nielsen, Seeker of the Wisdom of the Elders, Nanaimo.

⁷Eric Partridge, Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English (New York: Macmillan, 1959), p. 386.

⁸In native Indian society, as in many other cultures, the title of grandmother is accorded respectfully to all old women, regardless of their family status. This title confers upon them an important status as matriarch. Like the word "ground," the word "grandmother" has to do with fertility and productiveness. According to Eric Partridge, "ground" has its origins in the Old English grund, which means foundation or earth, and is akin to the Old English grynde, "for abyss, connected with Early Modern English gring, which becomes groin. Drawing "ground" to "groin" associates it with the word "grandmother" which, as an aggrandizement of "mother," means Great Mother and

is related to the Greek meter, as seen in Demeter, the Barley-goddess or Corn-goddess, goddess of the fruitful soil. (Partridge, p.386).

⁹Sylvia Fraser, Pandora (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976). References indicated by page number in my text.

¹⁰David Staines, Introduction to Pandora, p.xi.

¹¹Jane Harrison, Mythology (New York: Cooper Square, 1963), pp.67-68.

¹²Margaret Laurence, A Bird in the House (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974). References indicated by page number in my text.

¹³Margaret Atwood, Survival (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p.141.

¹⁴Margaret Atwood, Life Before Man (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969). References indicated by page number in my text.

¹⁵In On Human Symbiosis and the Vicissitudes of Individuation (New York: International Universities Press, 1968), Margaret Mahler describes a course of normal development in which the integration of self concept depends upon the child's ability to unify such contradictory mother images. The maturational process, according to object relations theorists, requires that the child moves through phases of symbiosis, separation-individuation and integration. In this process, Mahler says the child learns to separate from an "oceanic" fusion with the mother into a state in which "memory islands" of good and bad stimuli become scattered between self and other (pp.44-46). Both self and other (and, for Mahler, "other" is always "mother") consist of split images of good and bad until object representations (the "nonself", "other", or "mother") is unified and demarcated. The culmination of this separation individuation process, according to Mahler, takes place when the child achieves the stage of object constancy in which the splitting of object images no longer occurs.

¹⁶Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Table Talk (Oxford: Humphrey Milford, 1917), p.141.

¹⁷ See Robert Graves, The Greek Myths, Pt.1 (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1957), 89-96. Demeter is considered a Mother-goddess, but is also associated with age, since as Triple Goddess she is united with Hecate as well as Persephone. Hecate is "the 'carline [meaning old woman or crone] wife of the English Countryside" (Graves, p.92), and Graves notes that the three goddesses represent the green corn, the ripe ear, and the harvested corn. As a triad these corn priestesses, who represent the mysteries of agriculture, simultaneously suggest powers of birth, life and death, and of creation, existence and destruction. Hecate, who signifies the third aspect of the Triple Goddess is symbolized by the Old Moon, Winter or Death, yet she also suggests the actual completion or fruition of the harvest, its possible benefit to others, and the continuing cycle of creativity.

I THE WITCH FIGURE

¹ Hans Christian Andersen, "The Tinder-Box" in The Complete Hans Christian Andersen Fairy Tales (New York: Avenel Books, 1981), pp.348-353.

² Partridge, p.700.

³ John Grube, "Introduction" to The Double Hook, pp.5-6.

⁴ Margaret Morriss, "The Elements Transcended," Canadian Literature 42(Autumn 1964), p.194.

⁵ Alexander Carmichael, Carmina Gadelica (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1928), iii, pp.197-98.

⁶ Dorothy Dinnerstein, The Mermaid and the Minotaur (New York: Harper, 1976), p.28.

⁷ Angela Bowering, unpublished M.A. thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1982.

⁸ Angela Bowering, p.62.

⁹ Edward Ardener, Perceiving Women (London: Malaby Press, 1975), p. 22.

¹⁰ George Bowering, "Sheila Watson, Trickster" in Sheila Watson and The Double Hook, ed. George Bowering

(Ottawa: Golden Dog Press, 1985), p.197.

¹¹ John Moss, Patterns of Isolation (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974), p.177.

¹² The Celtic word Cailleach means both nun and hag, thus linking the sacred and the profane. The word "hag" means both harpy and witch, but its resemblance to the word "hagiology", which refers to sacred writings or persons, associates it with the sacred. See Mary Daly, Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism (London: The Women's Press, 1981), pp.14-17.

¹³ Carmichael, 11, pp.239-40.

¹⁴ Barbara Godard, "'Between One Cliche and Another': Language in The Double Hook," Studies in Canadian Literature, 3, No.2 (Summer 1978), p.149. Godard writes interestingly about the marginality and "linguistic alienation" which she says women share with Indians and other minority groups. This claim might be strengthened if it included reference to the silence of the old woman who is the epitome of such linguistic alienation.

II THE WISE WOMAN

¹ Margaret Atwood, Survival., p.199.

² George Woodcock, "Innocence and Solitudes: The Fictions of Ethel Wilson" in Modern Times, ed. John Moss (Toronto: NC Press, 1982), p.189.

³ Donna Smyth, "Maggie's Lake: The Vision of Female Power in Swamp Angel" in Modern Times, p.159.

⁴ Desmond Pacey, "Introduction" to Swamp Angel, p.10.

⁵ Carol Gilligan, In A Different Voice (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982).

⁶ Gilligan, p.23.

⁷ Gilligan, p.173.

⁸ Gilligan, p.173.

⁹ The conjunctive, accumulative quality of Ethel

Wilson's prose is echoed in the work of another Canadian writer, Alice Munro. See Lives of Girls and Women (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1971). Munro's writing gives the same sense of images gathered, and garnered, and laid out in unlikely, seemingly arbitrary patterns. Del Jordan expresses the urge to contain all of her childhood environment in a list of stores, family names, movie titles and street names: "...what I wanted was every last thing, every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together -- radiant, everlasting" (p.210). Del's list is not unlike Nell Severance's web, in which every kind of thing (a stone, a word, a cigarette stub ...) is contained.

¹⁰ Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1985), p.195.

III TRANSFORMATIONS

¹ Margaret Laurence, The Stone Angel (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1968). References indicated by page number in my text.

² Constance Rooke, "A Feminist Reading of The Stone Angel, Canadian Literature 93 (Summer 1982) p.28. My discussion of The Stone Angel owes a great deal to Rooke's paper, which is singular in its feminist analysis of the novel.

³ Rooke, p.41.

⁴ Rooke, p.41.

⁵ Nor Hall The Moon and the Virgin (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p.50.

⁶ Clara Thomas, The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1975), p.70.

⁷ Based on definitions in Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary (Toronto: Thomas Allen & Son, 1967).

⁸ Interestingly, Watson and Wilson both employ their own attempts to break down the subject-object barrier between writer and reader. In The Double Hook we are drawn into the text as if it is the reader who must

provide the ground on which Mrs. Watson inscribes her mosaic of spare figures. In Swamp Angel we are carried along the narrative line by Mrs. Wilson's peculiar syntax which draws the reader right into her complex web.

⁹Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," Signs 1, No.4 (Summer 1976), p.883.

¹⁰Hall, p.125.

¹¹Margaret Laurence, "Time and the Narrative Voice," in A Place to Stand On, ed. George Woodcock (Edmonton: NewWest Press, 1983), p.157.

¹²Alice Munro, Lives of Girls and Women, p.210

EPILOGUE

¹Margaret Atwood, "An Angel," Malahat Review 74 (March 1986), pp.61-63.

²In "Messages and Messengers in The Double Hook," Studies in Canadian Literature 4 (Summer 1979), Dawn Rae Downton lists William, Kip and Heinrich as the novel's three "designated messengers." She notes, however, that William's ability to communicate is illusory, that Kip is untrustworthy, and that Heinrich is only just coming into his maturity. Downton overlooks Angel who is clearly a superior messenger because of her capacity to communicate as well as her name.

³Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, p.xvii.

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