Changes of Women and Canadian Society in the Mid 20th Century in Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God*

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Tutkielmani tarkoituksena on tarkastella miten Margaret Laurencen teos *A Jest of God* (1966) ilmentää kanadalaisten naisten aseman muutosta Kanadassa 1900-luvun puolivälissä. Tutkimuksen lähtökohtana on Laurencen oma toteamus siitä, miten kaikki hänen kirjoittamansa teokset ovat tavalla tai toisella poliittisia ts. hän pyrkii kirjojensa välityksellä käsittelemään sosiaalisia oloja, jotka vallitsevat ympäristössä, johon hän sijoittaa teoksensa. Laurencen tuotannosta valitsin tarkastelun kohteeksi *A Jest of God*:in sen aikanaan saaman julkisuuden vuoksi. Teos sai vuoden 1966 The Governor General's Award -kirjallisuuspalkinnon, joka on Kanadan merkittävin vuosittain jaettava tunnustus kirjallisuuden alalla. Lisäksi kirjan pohjalta on tehty vuonna 1968 elokuva *Rachel, Rachel*.

Tutkielmassani keskityn pääasiassa kolmeen osa-alueeseen, joissa tapahtuneet muutokset vaikuttivat naisten elämään kanadalaisessa yhteiskunnassa 1900-luvun puolivällissä: seksuaalisuus, yhteiskunnan näkemykset naisista ja naisten asemasta, sekä naisten perhe- ja työelämä. Tutkielman tarkoituksena on tarkastella miten kaunokirjallisen teoksen voidaan nähdä olevan eräänlainen metafora siitä kulttuurista, josta se kertoo. Lisäksi tutkielmani kiinnittää huomiota siihen miten kaunokirjalliset teokset ilmentävät "fiktiivisen maailman" ja "todellisen maailman" keskinäistä riippuvuussuhdetta.

Tutkielmani osoittaa, että *A Jest of God:*ia voi pitää eräänlaisena metaforana kanadalaisten naisten sosiopoliittisesta asemasta 1900-luvun puolivälissä. Tästä osoituksena ovat esimerkiksi tapa, jolla Laurence nostaa esiin romaanissaan Kanadan sen hetkisen tiukan ja vanhentuneen aborttilainsäädännön sekä yhteiskunnan näkemykset naisten kodin ulkopuolisesta työurasta.

Contents

1. Introduction

This thesis examines the way in which *A Jest of God*[1] by Margaret Laurence can be seen to reflect the movement and struggle of Canadian women into the greater sphere of Canadian society after the (re)domestication of Canadian women that took place after World War II. I will argue that the protagonist of *A Jest of God*, Rachel Cameron, is a representation of a Canadian woman who is struggling to overcome the traditional role expectations that Canadian post-war society places on her.

Moreover, Rachel is a representation of a Canadian woman who is placed in the middle of "the generation gap". She belongs neither to the generation of women that helped the Canadian society to overcome the traumatic war years by participating in the war industry during World War II nor to the women of the baby boom generation that are the enforcers of the change that is occurring in the roles of Canadian women in the 1950 and 1960s.

This thesis will mainly concentrate on the ways in which *A Jest of God* reflects different aspects of women's lives in Canada in the post-war Canadian society. My examination and analysis of *A Jest of God* owes a great deal to the interpretations of the contemporary, i.e. post-war, Canadian social and women's history. The analysis is also, to some extent, influenced by the theoretical frameworks of Cultural Materialism and New Historicism due to the characteristics of this work to read "literature in history and history in literature"[2].

The influence of Cultural Materialism and New Historicism is for example clear in the way in which my analysis is an analysis of the life of a "mainstream"

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[1] Margaret Laurence wrote *A Jest of God* at Elm Cottage in Buckinghamshire, England in 1964 and 1965 and it was first published in 1966.
[2] Brannigan, John. *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*. London: MacMillan, 1998. p.220.

anglophone Canadian woman. This means that in order to perform my analysis I have had to do some amount of "remembering and a necessary forgetting."[3] The scope of the analysis does not touch for example the somewhat different experiences of the francophone Canadian women or those women who immigrated into Canada before and after the war from all over the world. Moreover, because of the close attention I pay in my analysis to the gender situation, the social context and to the post-war Canadian society at large my examination will also have influences from the areas of Feminism, Marxism and Sociology.

The motivation for this thesis originates from Michel Fabre's interview, "From *The Stone Angel* to *The Diviners*", with Margaret Laurence that I read in *A Place to Stand on: Essays by and about Margaret Laurence*.[4] In the interview Fabre asks Laurence if she is interested in social change. Laurence replies:

> I think that everything that I have written is, in some way or other, political. I don't mean political party or anything like that. Perhaps social would be a better word because although I am not doing this with any sense of writing polemics, or propaganda, which is wholly different world from fiction, I do think that I am very much aware of the social conditions in a particular place.[5]

Laurence's statement about her own work was intriguing, because many studies and articles written about Margaret Laurence's fiction concentrate on the evaluation of the

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[3] Bennet, Andrew, "Speaking with the Dead: New Historicism in Theory" *English Studies and History.* Ed. David Robertson. Tampere: Tampere University Offset, 1994. p. 48.
[4]Fabre, Michel. "From *The Stone Angel* to *The Diviners.*" *A Place to Stand on: Essays by and about Margaret Laurence.* Ed. George Woodcock Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1983. p. 193-209
[5] Fabre, p. 201.

characters of the novels based on different allusions or different types of symbolism and imagery that are apparent in her works of fiction.[6]

Another common theme for previous studies on Margaret Laurence's Manawaka novels[7] is the focus on the Post-Colonial features of her texts. One such example is a Swedish scholar, Gunilla Florby. In her study *The Margin Speaks – A Study of Margaret Laurence and Robert Kroetsch from a Post-Colonial Point of View*[8], she compares how Laurence and Kroetsch challenge the dominant Euro-American discourse and create a past and a new identity for a new country, Canada, from the transplanted European culture. In addition, one should not forget yet another popular starting point for studying Laurence's Manawaka novels – the study of the women protagonists and their relationships with other women (especially with their mothers and sisters), since women are, after all, the core of Margaret Laurence's Manawaka novels.[9]

The reason for choosing *A Jest of God* in particular to be the novel through which to examine the ways in which Margaret Laurence's fiction reflects the socio-political aspects of the society that her fiction is situated in, was the fact that it gained

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[6] Examples of this type of works include for example: Bailey, Nancy. "Fiction and the New Androgyne: Problems and Possibilities in The Diviners" *Atlantis* 4.1 (1978): 10-17.; Comeau, Paul. "Hagar in Hell: Margaret Laurence's Fallen Angel" *Canadian Literature* .128 (Mar. 1991): 11-22.; Cooper, Cheryl. "Images of Closure in The Diviners" *The Canadian Novel: Here and Now*. John Moss Ed.. Toronto: NC Press, 1978. 93-102.; Bader, Rudolf. "The Mirage of the Sceptr'd Isle: An Imagological Appraisal" *ARIEL* 19.1 (Jan. 1988): 35-44.; Davidson, Arnold E. "Cages and Escapes in Margaret Laurence's *A Bird in the House*" *University of Windsor Review* 16.1 (Sept. 1981): 92-101.

[7] Manawaka is a fictionalized small town that Laurence has placed in Manitoba. The five novels (*The Stone Angel, A Jest of God, Fire Dwellers, A Bird in the House, The Diviners*) situated in or having ancestral connections to the town of Manawaka have become known as the Manawaka novels.

[8] Florby, Gunilla. *The Margin Speaks – A study of Margaret Laurence and Robert Kroetsch from a Post-Colonial Point of View*. Uppsala; Lund University Press. 1997. Other examples of Post-Colonial studies made on Margaret Laurence's fiction include for example the following: Osachoff, Margaret. "Colonialism in the Fiction of Margaret Laurence" *Southern Review* 13.3 (Nov. 1980): 222-238.; Ash, Susan. "Having It Both Ways: Reading Related Short Fiction by Post-Colonial Women Writers" *SPAN: Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies* 28 (Apr.1989): 40-55.; *Narrative Strategies in Canadian Literature: Feminism and Postcolonialism*. Coral Ann Howells, et. al eds.: Open University Press, 1991.

[9] Examples of these types of studies and articles include for example: Buss, Helen M. *Mother Daughter Relationships in the Manawaka Works of Margaret Laurence*. Victoria: University of Victoria. 1985.; Bennett, Donna A. "The Failures of Sisterhood in Margaret Laurence's Manawaka Novels" *Atlantis* 4.1 (1978): 103-109.; Bird, Michael. "Heuresis: The Mother-Daughter Theme in *A Jest of God* and *Autumn Sonata*" *New Quart.: New Directions in Canadian Writing* 7.1-2 (Mar.1987): 267-73.

considerable amount of publicity after it was published in 1966. One of the reasons for the publicity was the fact that Laurence won her first Governor General's Award[10] for fiction with *A Jest of God* for 1966.[11] Another reason is that soon after, in 1968, the novel was adapted into a movie entitled *Rachel, Rachel*, which won New York Film Critics awards for both Joanne Woodward (Rachel) and Paul Newman (Director), and four Oscar nominations, one of which was for Woodward.[12] These two media brought the "social customs and sexual constraints … the kind of expectations placed on women … - perfect physical beauty, total self-confidence, angelic and selfless nurturing of one variety or another"[13] that Margaret Laurence handles in *A Jest of God* (as well as in her other fiction) to the attention of her readers. In that way Laurence can be said to have done her bit in furthering the emancipation of women in Canada in the middle of the 20th century. Manawaka is after all as Clara Thomas writes,

> …a fully realized, three-dimensional, imagined town of length, breath, and depth, and of history and corporate personality. We can orient ourselves to its social structure, as to its streets and buildings. Through the stories of its people, we can make connection with the present and the past of the people of Canada, their aspirations and failures – and our own.[14]

I will begin my discussion by introducing the ways in which a literary text can be seen as a representation of a time and a place. I will then move on to more detailed analysis of the primary text *A Jest of God*. My analysis will focus on the three following

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[10] The Governor General's Award is probably the most prestigious literary award presented annually in Canada <http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Governor_General's_Award> (27.6.2003)
[11] <http://www.nwpassages.com/bios/laurence.asp> (27.6.2003)
[12] <http://www.blockbuster.com/bb/person/details/0,7621,BIO-P117305,00.html?> (27.6.2003)
[13] Atwood, Margaret. "Afterword" *A Jest of God*. Margaret Laurence. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, Repr. (1966) 1993. p. 215.
[14] Thomas, Clara. *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*. Toronto: McClelland & Steward, 1975. p.187.

aspects in *A Jest of God* that mirror the changes affecting the lives of women in the Canadian society: sexuality, society's views, work and family life.

Firstly in my analysis of the text, I will look at the way in which Rachel's situation in *A Jest of God* reflects the change in the attitudes towards women's sexuality in the mid 20th century Canada. I will concentrate my attention here particularly on three aspects, where significant change can be said to have emerged at the time: marriage and female sexuality, pre-marital sex, and attitudes towards abortion and contraception.

The fourth chapter of this thesis will take a closer look at the way in which the attitudes of Canadian society towards the Canadian women in the middle of 1900s is reflected in *A Jest of God*. Here the main emphasis will be given to the following points: the role expectations placed on women, both by the society at large and their families, the generation gap and mothers and the lives of single women.

The fifth chapter of the thesis will discuss how *A Jest of God* can be seen to reflect the working lives and education of Canadian women in the 1960s. Close attention will be given to the career opportunities and education of women at that time together with the "expected" role of a mother and homemaker, and also the job-markets of the time. Firstly, the chapter will discuss the type of education that women received and sought after at the time and secondly the types of women's careers and the possibilities for further education and advancement that the women had in the Canadian society in the sixties.

2. History in Fiction and Fiction in History

A Jest of God is a work of fiction and it is therefore also debatable how much different occurrences in the contemporary 1960s Canadian society have affected its writing or its theme. Margaret Laurence's statement, as quoted in the introduction of this thesis, declares that all her work is political in nature. This statement made by Laurence raised my interest to probe whether the happenings in the women's situation in mid 20th century Canada are reflected in *A Jest of God* and moreover how and in what ways this can be observed in a close reading of the text.

The aim of this thesis is not to suggest that a work of fiction can be used as a historical source as such, but to indicate how a work of fiction can be seen as a metaphor of the society and people's lives at a given time. In other words, to show that a work of fiction, which can be seen as a metaphor of a certain human society in time has, similarly to a historical narrative, "qualities that make them metaphorical statements suggesting a relation of similitude between such events and processes and the story types that we conventionally use to endow the events of our lives with culturally sanctioned meanings".[15]

In addition this thesis aims to point to the ways in which the works of fiction that we read are used to denote the interdependence between the "fictional world" and the "real world" or as Ruth Robbins writes

> Literature, in literate cultures, is part of reality. It reflects the real (though the mirror is generally somewhat distorting); it creates the real (through getting us to believe in its fictional worlds and by suggesting that we might behave in a particular way), and it offers us alternatives to the real

[15] White, Hayden. *Tropics of Discourse Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, (1978) Repr. 1985. p. 88.

> (through critiques of reality as we live it, or through imagining alternative modes of being as in fantasies, utopias, dystopias and science fictions). The text is produced out of a specific reality and it bears the marks of its time, place, and mode of production. It is to be understood as relating to historic and geographic specificity, both at the moment at which it is first produced, and at the moments when it is reproduced by our readings of it.[16]

Robbins describes with the above statement one of the three attributes that she considers to be at the foundation of feminist literary theory. The other two attributes that Robbins underlines are firstly, that the written world and the real world share a political relationship in connection with power i.e. texts can be used to change the world because of that relationship. The third attribute, which according to Robbins is the most important, is that all feminist theories concentrate on women.[17]

The close reading of *A Jest of God* that this thesis aims to achieve agrees with all the three ideas that Robbins emphasizes as attributes of feminist literary theory. In that sense it can be said that this thesis, in its attempt to find a connection between a particular work of fiction and a particular historical time and space location, draws its methods from feminist literary theory. It cannot be forgotten and overlooked, however, that similar approaches are also elements of Marxist literary theories, for example.

2.1 Similarities between Fiction and History

A work of art, such as a novel, is an artefact that is both artistic and cultural. A novel usually not only embodies, reflects and projects the experiences and attitudes of a given

[16] Robbins, Ruth. "Introduction: Will the Real Feminist Theory Please Stand Up?". Ed. Julian Wolfreys. *Literary Theories: A Reader and Guide*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999. pp. 49-50.
[17] Robbins, p. 50.

people at a given period of time, but also in significant ways reflects the systems of belief and cultural references of those people. Literary texts can be said to have always been associated with, and shaped by, history and because of this the similarities between historical works and novels are also easily noted by their readers. Hayden White illustrates this connection between history and fiction by saying "There are many histories that could pass for novels, and many novels that could pass for histories, considered in purely formal (or, I should say, formalist) terms. Viewed simply as verbal artefacts histories and novels are indistinguishable from one another."[18]

Ultimately, it can be argued that both writers of history and writers of novels share the same goal, because they both wish to give their readers an illusion of truth and authenticity. The difference in the representation of a novelist and writers of histories lies in the way that they present their ideas and visions of what they consider to be the reality. Novelists can more freely use indirect methods in depicting that reality "by registering a series of techniques"[19] whereas the historians are expected to approach their subject matter more directly "by registering a series of propositions which are supposed to correspond point by point to some extra textual domain of occurrence or happening".[20]

The above-mentioned similarity and difference of works of fiction and history illustrates the relationship between the two. The relationship is by nature both excluding and including of one or the other. The relationship is excluding in the sense that the relation between the two has traditionally been based on the way in which the term history has generally been defined as something that novels or fiction is not – it is

[18] White, p. 122.
[19] White, p. 122.
[20] White, p. 122.

conceived to be truthful and part of "the real world", whereas fiction is a creation of the author's imagination and therefore biased and subjective.[21]

The historical narratives also possess aspects of fictional narrative, because they cause their readers, as Hayden White states,

> …[to] experience the "fictionalization" of history as an "explanation" for the same reason that we experience great fiction as an illumination of a world that we inhabit along with the author. In both we recognize the forms by which consciousness both constitutes and colonizes the world it seeks to inhabit comfortably."[22]

Moreover, both history and prose are alike in the sense that people use the same patterns in order to make sense of the world that they are depicting. In other words, "It does not matter whether the world is conceived to be real or only imagined; the manner of making sense of it is the same."[23]

This close relationship between historical narratives and works of fiction is well illustrated in the way in which some works that when first published have essentially been seen as works of history have later become to be considered as works of art – or as Hayden White writes "it is *reborn* into art"[24] Such works include for example works from such famous writers as de Toqueville, Marx and Hegel. In Canadian literature Susanna Moodie's autobiographical work *Roughing It in the Bush* could be considered also to possess more or less this quality.

In a traditional sense, history has been regarded as an independent, impartial and objective body of knowledge. As a result, historical representation of past events has more or less been considered to be unbiased and straightforward. Despite this, the

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[21] White, p. 121.
[22] White, p. 99.
[23] White, p. 98.
[24] White, p. 118.

validity of the sources and documents used in the historical writings has also faced considerable debate, since the recording of historical facts and events requires both previous interpretation and analysis, which again implies subjectivity.

Thus, subjectivity is to a large extent shaped by culture and its main ideology or ideologies and therefore history depicts the cultural and also ideological discourse of a given society. Another significant limitation of history, besides subjectivity, is that it cannot make a report about all past events and therefore historians are faced with a need to make selections, which often can be based and made on quite arbitrary terms. As Linda Hutcheon states, "[historical] Facts are not given but are constructed by the kinds of question we ask of events" [25]. This points to one of the main problems of historical research – the claim of totality. In other words, the chosen historical facts used in the research are connected too closely both with the power and ideology of the society in which they are created. This question is of great relevance especially when it comes to the historical representation of minorities, for example.

Contrary to history, which is in a way "the master narrative" of a certain society, personal or local narratives, which also often are the focal point of works of fiction, are characterized by fragmentation, indeterminacy, silences, lack of closure and particularly by the fact that they frequently portray the lives of minorities or groups lacking power within a society e.g. women or the working class. In other words, these personal and local narratives alongside with works of fiction tell stories that are often forgotten or even disregarded by history.

In addition, narratives written by novelists can be said to give attention to the richness, diversity and complexity of individual experience that history often is forced to neglect. Moreover, in contradiction to the attempt to reach totality in their description

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[25] Hutcheon, Linda. " 'The Pastime of Past Time': Fiction, History, Historiographic Metafiction." *Postmodern Genres.* Ed. Marjorie Perloff. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989. p. 71.

of the past, as many historical works do, many personal narratives do not pretend to give a finished and total account of what they are writing about.

The main difference, alongside with the similarities, of the work that historians and novelists do, to be kept in mind is that historians tend to write about, and interpret, events that as a rule are or were familiar and recognizable in time and space, in other words something that are generally considered to be "real events". Imaginative writers such as novelists, on the other hand, are not only concerned about "the real" but also about hypothetical events, events that they come up with themselves by the help of their imagination.[26]

This leads to the issue which this thesis is primarily interested in, to see the ways in which a work of an imaginative writer, in this case Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God*, can be seen to portray and touch on the historical and also socio-political events that occurred in the same time-space location of the culture that it aims to represent, which in this case is rural Canada in the mid 1900s. Hayden White underlines this idea in his essay collection by saying "Although historians and writers of fiction may be interested in different kinds of events, both the forms of their respective discourses and their aims in writing are often the same."[27]

The idea of novels having an ideological basis and bearings in the cultures in which they are written is further emphasized in Robin Mathews' ideas about the socio-political novel in the Canadian context. Mathews argues that ideology influences every writer's work[28]. Mathews also states that

> ... we commonly believe that novels differ recognizably, at least in their extremes, depending upon whether the writer has wished primarily, to

[26] White, p. 121.
[27] White, p. 121.
[28] Mathews, Robin. *Canadian Literature, Survival or Revolution*. Toronto: Steel Rail Educational Publishing, 1978. p.136.

> create a work of art or to create a significant effect upon the consciousness or the behaviour of men and women considered as part of the social order.[29]

Mathews believes that this common belief that people have about novels has affected especially those writers that wish to create works of art. They are not very keen to voice that their novels have been influenced by political or social motives. Nevertheless, Mathews argues that social and political concepts are alive and well in the fiction of Canadian writers.[30] The ways in which these kinds of social and political concepts can be seen to be a part in Margaret Laurence's novel *A Jest of God* is the core of this thesis.

[29] Mathews, p.136.
[30] Mathews, pp.136-137.

3. Female Sexuality in Mid 20th Century Canada

In this chapter, I will concentrate on the way in which *A Jest of God* portrays three different aspects of women's sexuality that were closely related with the assumptions of female sexual conduct, which the Women's Liberation movement aimed to demystify in the Canadian society. This second wave of Canadian women's movement gained momentum in the 1960s, when the pre-baby boom and baby boom generation women started to act against the restrictions of the post-war mores concerning female domesticity and sexual behavior.[31]

I will discuss the issues of marriage and sexuality, premarital sex and contraception and abortion in relation to the prevalent attitudes and assumptions which Canadian society held towards these three issues at the time. In the case of contraception and abortion I will also discuss the affects that the contemporary legislation concerning these two matters had on the lives of the Canadian women.

The traditional attitudes towards female sexuality had still very strong hold on the Canadian society in the mid 20th century. The aspect of sex and marriage in *A Jest of God* has to be approached by looking at the few comments that Rachel makes on her parents' and sister's marriage. Rachel's sexual relationship with Nick outside of marriage represents the attitudes of the new and changing society and the marriage of her parents represents the traditional attitudes towards sexuality.

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[31] Owram, Doug. *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby-Boom Generation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 1996. p. 251.

3.1 Cult of Domesticity and Marriage

Sexuality in marriage was to a great extent in mid 20th century Canada still strongly influenced by the cult of domesticity that had taken over the Canadian society after World War II. The cult of domesticity meant that men earned the money for the household and women remained in the home taking care of the household and children.[32]

The description of sex and marriage presented in *A Jest of God* through the marriage of Rachel's parents is a representation of the traditional attitudes towards women's sexuality. The traditional view assumes that sex belongs to marriage and sexual relations outside marriage are not considered socially acceptable.[33] Married men expected their wives to be pure and chaste and for this reason aimed to keep their wives' sexuality under their control.[34]

The marriage of Rachel's parents in *A Jest of God* can be seen as a representation of the traditional attitudes towards marriage that the Canadian society still held in the mid 1900s. It is also symbolic, however, that Rachel's mother is a widow. The fact that May Cameron's marriage is over due to her husband's death symbolizes in a way also the death of male dominance in a marriage, a development that gained its full strength when the children of the baby boom generation started to marry in the 1960s.

May Cameron and her husband Niall were most likely married after Niall Cameron came back from World War I. At that time, it was widely believed that women

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[32] Owram, p. 23.
[33] Owram, p. 271.
[34] Pierson, Ruth Roach. *"They're Still Women After All" The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood*. Toronto: McLelland & Steward. 1986. p. 188.

lacked the ability to enjoy sex the way men did, because of their "innate goodness".[35] This is illustrated by a lecturer that Letha and John Scanzoni quote in their study of the sociology of marriage and family.

> The best mothers [and] wives … know little or nothing of the sexual pleasure. Love of home, children, and domestic duties are the only passion they feel. As a rule, the modest woman submits to her husband, but only to please him.[36]

The above statement is a good description of May Cameron and the way she sees her own and women's sexuality in general. May Cameron most likely has not been much affected by the change that started to occur in the attitudes towards sex in marriage already in the thirties.

In the 1930s the idea that both partners should get pleasure out of sex gradually started to gain more attention.[37] In the 1930s May Cameron had already more or less "lost interest" in her husband. He had, after all already given her two children, Rachel and her older sister Stacey. This is well illustrated in the following part of *A Jest of God*.

> My mother said, "One thing about your father, he was never one to make many demands upon me, that's one thing you could say for him." (p. 96)
>
> She and dad had given up conversing long ago, by the time I was born. She used to tell him not to lean back in the upholstered chairs, in case his hair oil rubbed off. Then she put crocheted doilies on all the chair backs. And finally on the chair arms as well, as though she felt his hands could never be clean, considering what he handled in his work. (p. 22)

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[35]Scanzoni, Letha Dawson and Scanzoni John. *Men, Women and Change – A Sociology of Marriage and Family*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981. p. 431.
[36] Quoted in Scanzoni & Scanzoni p. 431.
[37] Scanzoni & Scanzoni, p. 432.

The second excerpt above can also be seen as a description of the way in which Rachel's mother felt about her husband's touch – she did not want him to touch either the backs or the arms of the chairs or her. Part of the reason why May did not want her husband to touch her can of course be seen to be caused by her husband's profession, Niall Cameron was the undertaker of Manawaka (p. 19), and he therefore had to handle dead bodies in his work. However, it has to be also pointed out that this probably was not the whole reason for May's displeasure: the fact that Niall and she both no longer talked with each other (p. 22) and that Niall could no longer hold his liquor (p.176), as Rachel had observed, has to be also seen as matters that influenced her actions in this matter.

May Cameron can also, however, be seen as Helen M. Buss states in her study as "an image of a woman that is essentially male-defined"[38]. This is illustrated, according to Buss, in the way "May tries so pathetically to meet the standards of womanhood she supposed her dead husband to have"[39]. The following excerpt illustrates her point:

> Just as [May] was beginning to go off to sleep she murmured something so fretfully that I wondered how many thousand times she'd stabbed herself with it.
>
> *Niall always thinks I am so stupid*. (p. 193)

May Cameron is, as Buss suggests, a male-defined character, but her being male-defined has more to do with her wish to be a good homemaker and a mother, than with her sexuality as Buss is suggesting. May Cameron is a product of an era that still holds in high esteem the Victorian values of family. These values place the women in

[38] Buss, p. 38.
[39] Buss, p. 38.

the home, "in their proper sphere"[40], and see her, above all, as a mother and as the heart of her family.

Equality between men and women during the time that May Cameron and her husband Niall were starting a family meant that a wife should try to become her husband's best friend in a sense that she should devote most of her free time to being a loving and supportive companion to her husband. In other words the wife should give her support and also give in to her husband, who at the time still was considered to be the head of the family both in the eyes of the society and the law.[41]

May Cameron has lived up to the society's expectations by making her home above her husband's business, the Cameron Funeral Home. The following excerpt from *A Jest of God* portrays May Cameron's attitude towards her home:

> Mother wouldn't feel at home anywhere else. You'd think she would want to leave but she doesn't. She always let on to my father that she didn't enjoy living here. She used to say "Your father's so attached to this place," and then sigh delicately. But if he had been able to move anywhere, I don't suppose she would have gone. (p. 62)

The way in which May Cameron, during the time when her husband was still alive, let her husband believe that she would like to live somewhere else, was her way of succumbing to the idea of seeing the man as the head of the family. For May Cameron admitting that she was satisfied with the home above the funeral parlor would have been also in conflict with her efforts to keep up appearances – who would want to live above a funeral parlor out of her own free will? She wants to appear as a woman who is a good wife for her husband. A wife who is both ready to sacrifice her own

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[40]Prentice Alice, et al., *Canadian Women: a History*. Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1988. p. 143.
[41] Prentice et.al., p. 255.

desires and ideals of a comfortable home, for example, and still manages to do her best as a wife and a mother also in those "limited" conditions.

Whereas May Cameron in *A Jest of God* gives a description of the traditional views of female sexuality and marriage, Rachel's sister Stacey illustrates what kind of notions Rachel's own generation of women held about female sexuality and marriage. The excerpt below shows well how unmarried women often were expected to be unaware of the pleasure that sex offers to people.

> When Stacey was here that time, seven years ago, I asked her at the end of the one week if she wouldn't consider staying a month. The children would be all right with Mac's sister, and it would mean a lot to Mother. Stacey wouldn't, though. "I guess it must sound crazy to you, Rachel, but another three weeks and I'd be up the walls – I don't mean because of anything here and that – it's just missing Mac – not only around and to talk to – I mean in bed." What made her so certain it would sound crazy to me? (p. 27)

On the other hand the excerpt also shows how marriage made sexuality and sex suddenly become something that was natural and enjoyable also for women.[42] In other words, Stacey is allowed and expected to enjoy sex and sexuality within her marriage and can be open and outspoken about her relationship with her husband, whereas Rachel as an unmarried woman finds it hard to admit her own sexuality and needs both because the society around her placed sexual freedom inside the boundaries of marriage and also due to the fact that she herself has internalized these rules that the society is putting forward.

[42] Owram, p. 259.

3.2 Premarital Sex

In the 1960s, the attitudes towards premarital sex in Canada were strongly influenced by the so-called cult of virginity.[43] Due to the cult of virginity, sexual activity outside marriages, especially "going all the way", was heavily stigmatized and viewed as being morally wrong by society.[44] By the 1960s some signs of new liberalism concerning sexuality were already in sight at least in the larger cities. However, the reality of small town Canada was somewhat different from that of the larger cities. *A Jest of God* gives a picture of that small town Canadian reality and the pressures that women still faced in their everyday lives in relation to their own sexual freedom and activity.

At the same time with the apparent influence of the cult of virginity, movies and magazines were promoting the need for a woman to be sexually attractive[45], a good example of this are the contemporary movies starring for example Marilyn Monroe. This meant more pressure especially for girls living in a society – such as contemporary Canada – which was governed by the double standard[46] views towards sexuality.

In other words, on the one hand the popular culture was sending a message that one should not deny one's own sexuality and on the other, old traditional views with social restrictions still persisted. Post World War II Canada experienced, for example, a strong emphasis on family values, which resulted in people marrying at an earlier age than the previous generations. Marriage at an early age helped young people to open the only socially permissible door to sexual activity.

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[43]The cult of virginity stressed that if women lost their virginity outside marriage, they also lost their value in the marriage markets. In other words, girls were told that men would not marry a girl who had 'given herself' to someone else. Owram, p. 257.
[44] Owram, p. 257.
[45] Owram, p. 257.
[46] Persons who hold the double standard believe that males have the right to engage in sexual intercourse before marriage but that premarital sexual intercourse is not permissible to females. Scanzoni & Scanzoni, p. 75.

In *A Jest of God* the double standard of the contemporary 1960s Canadian society is portrayed both through Rachel's relationship with Nick Kazlik and through her sexual fantasies. Laurence uses Rachel and Nick's relationship cleverly in *A Jest of God* to point out the tensions that the double standard caused in women's lives.

Rachel's fantasies on the other hand emphasize the way in which the attitudes towards female sexuality at the time often caused women to have feelings of guilt and shame in relation to their own sexual desires. In other words, on the one hand you should be in touch with your sexuality, and know what you want from sex, and on the other you should hold on to the *woman's most precious possession* (p. 96) – virginity.

> And how it would shame me, to have him know it [sex] hurt, at my age, with only one possible reason for it. I can't. Maybe it wouldn't hurt. The membrane went years ago – I made sure of that, thinking I won't have my wedding night ruined. What a joke. It would hurt, all the same. It would be bound to. I can't let him know that about me. (p. 96)

After the first time that Rachel and Nick have sex together, Rachel is put face to face with the changing attitudes of society by Nick.

> "You didn't make it, did you, Rachel? You were pretty tense, darling." …
> "Yes, I know. I'm sorry."
> "It doesn't matter. It's never much good the first time."
> "It was so obvious, then?"
> "What was so obvious, Rachel?"
> "That it was the first time, for me?"
> Now he is the one that turns away.
> "Don't say that, Rachel. You don't have to. It's not necessary. Let it be, just as it is. Don't worry – I don't think you're a tramp."
> I can't see what he means. Then I realize. When he said *the first time*, he meant the first time two people were with each other. … He believes I was lying to him, out of some false concern for – what? *My reputation – I've lost my reputation*. Who said that? Some nitwit in Shakespeare. (p. 98)

Rachel and Nick's double misunderstanding of the meaning of "the first time" illustrates well the way in which people are aware of the double standard. Nick's reaction to what he assumes is Rachel's unnecessary attempt to claim her innocence to him is a reflection of the changing attitudes in the Canadian society that no longer held the premarital virginity to be an essential part of the society's moral codes, which is further underlined by Rachel's own realization of the two way misunderstanding.[47]

In Nick's world – the world of urban Canada – the double standard has already started to loosen its grip, because of beginnings of the sexual revolution, and premarital sex is not seen as such a big taboo as it is in Rachel's world of small town Canada. In mid 20th century Canada the sexual revolution, which meant more relaxed attitudes towards pre-marital sexual relationships, same sex relationships and contraception and abortion, was more influential at the time in the big cities than in small town Canada.

One of the most important reasons why the sexual revolution began to spread out from the cities, was that many bigger Canadian towns had University campuses. Rachel has lived most of her life in a Canadian small prairie town Manawaka (an "alter ego" of Margaret Laurence's home town Neepawa), which due to its quite conservative Scot-Presbyterian heritage is slow in acquiring and accepting new social changes[48] that are generally already accepted in more urban areas.

The disapproving attitudes towards sex outside marriages did not stop people who were not married from having sex. The most likely places for people who were not married to have sex, probably as a shock to the contemporary parents, were their own homes or their partner's home.[49] The parents and other people, however, blamed their children's promiscuity more often than not on cars. This was also true in a sense,

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[47] Owram, p. 262.
[48] Atwood, Margaret. "Face to Face." *A Place to Stand on: Essays by and about Margaret Laurence*. Ed. George Woodcock. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1983. p. 25.
[49] Scanzoni & Scanzoni, p. 89.

because if it was not possible, for one reason or other, for unmarried couples to have sex in their own homes, cars and out-of-doors were the easiest option available.[50]

Rachel and Nick's relationship is no exception to this rule. The first time they have sex it happens out-of-doors close to a riverbank (p. 96) and the second time is at Nick's home when his parents are away on a short holiday (p. 109). Having sex out-of doors is uncomfortable for Rachel. She is scared of being seen by someone, for Nick it is a "summer house".

> "C'mon Rachel, here's the summer house."
>
> *The summer house*. The green edge of a brown river, the broken branches that clutter the shallow water, the high grass loosely webbed – a screen anyone could look through, … If only it weren't so exposed. He claims it isn't, but it seems so to me. If only we could be inside a house again, a proper house. It was better, there. I was better. (p. 149)

Rachel's wish to be inside a house in the excerpt above reflects her willingness, or in Rachel's case compulsive need would perhaps better describe the situation, to live up to the expectations of the society around her.

For Rachel to have sex outside means that she admits the unconventional nature of her relationship with Nick. The fact that they are having sex out of doors, emphasizes the temporality of Rachel and Nick's relationship and underlines the fact that they are not married. In other words, the luxury of having sex inside a house is only available for people who are married or for people who at least have the benefit of their own apartment. Rachel's desire to be able to have sex inside a house is also a reflection of her insecurity and conventionality. Sex inside a house seems more acceptable for her and most importantly inside a house she feels that she is safe from the criticism of others.

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[50] Scanzoni & Scanzoni, p. 87 and p. 89.

Rachel's sexual fantasies in *A Jest of God* are well used to point out the way how the women in contemporary Canada were still made to feel guilty and ashamed about their own sexuality and especially about masturbation.

> – A forest. Tonight it is a forest. Sometimes it is a beach. It has to be right away from everywhere. Otherwise she may be seen. The trees are green walls, high and shielding, boughs of pine and tamarack, branches sweeping to earth, forming a thousand rooms among the fallen leaves. She is in the green-walled room, the boughs opening just enough to let the sun in, the moss hairy and soft on the earth. She cannot see his face clearly. His features are blurred as though his were a face seen through water. She sees only his body distinctly, his shoulders and arms deeply tanned, his belly flat and hard. He is wearing only tight-fitting jeans, and his swelling sex shows. She touches him there, and he trembles, absorbing her fingers' pressure. Then they are lying along one another, their skins slippery. His hands, his mouth are on the wet warm skin of her inner thighs. Now–
>
> I didn't. I didn't. It was only to be able to sleep. The shadow prince. Am I unbalanced? Or only laughable? That's worse, much worse. (pp. 24-25)

The guilt and shame that were attached to masturbation was mostly due to the insistence that all sexual activity should be part of a marriage. Masturbation still carried in the mid 1900s the stigma of being something somewhat perverse, because of the self-induced sexual pleasure.[51]

3.3 Contraception and Abortion

In the mid 20th century the attitudes towards contraception and abortion remained secretive and there was not much information available on the subject for people that

[51]Gordon, Linda. *Woman's Body Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977. p. 379.

were unmarried not to mention the laws concerning this "unmentionable" subject that still were the same as more than a century ago.

The Canadian legislation concerning contraception and abortion in the 1960s dated back to the 19th century, more precisely to 1892.[52] The Criminal Code of Canada, Section 179 – the law concerning contraception and abortion – read, for example:

> Everyone is guilty of an indictable offence and liable to two years' imprisonment who knowingly, without lawful excuse or justification, offers to sell, advertises, publishes an advertisement of or has for sale or disposal any medicine, drug or article intended or represented as a means of preventing conception or causing abortion.[53]

The legislation did not change considerably until 1969 when changes to the law were made. The new law that came into force in Canada that year, still regarded abortion to be illegal unless it was performed by a doctor in an accredited hospital and under certain specified conditions. These "specified conditions" included for example a statement, which had to be acquired from a committee comprised of three doctors, saying that the pregnancy was unsafe for the mother.[54]

In general, the strict legislation against both contraception and abortion shaped the general attitudes of the Canadian society towards these issues. At the beginning of the 1960s, a new birth control device, "the Pill", was launched in the United States.[55] This did not, however, have much effect on the lives of Canadian women, since the Pill was only available to married women in larger Canadian cities as medicine, not as

[52] Prentice et al., pp. 165-166.
[53] Quoted in Prentice et al., pp. 165-166.
[54] Prentice et.al., p. 354.
[55] Owram, p. 267.

contraceptive, since according to the law the selling of contraceptives was still illegal, and remained so until 1969.[56]

The breakthrough of the Pill into the markets in the United Stated did, however, raise interest and sparked off a public debate about the apparent need to change the old legislation concerning both contraception and abortion in Canada. The public discussion on the issue was not diminished by the crude fact that between 1954 and 1965 the estimated number of illegal abortions in Canada was 50 000 to 100 000.[57]

The large number of illegal abortions is further illustrated by the abortion-related deaths in British Colombia: between 1946 and 1968 one fifth of all maternal deaths in British Colombia happened due to abortions.[58] Furthermore, a good illustration of the conservatism of the Canadian society, and especially of the Canadian authorities in the wake of the introduction of the Pill, was the strong understanding of the authorities that birth-control advice was to be given only to those who were married.[59]

A Jest of God draws considerable attention to the way the contemporary mid 20th century legislation on abortion and contraception affected the lives of Canadian women. The way Rachel is faced with the harshness of the contemporary Canadian contraception and abortion laws in *A Jest of God*, when she suspects she is pregnant is a good representation of this point.

> Let us be practical, because in the last analysis that is all that matters. Could I go to Doctor Raven? What would I say? Look – I want you to recommend to me someone who is willing to perform an act that is classified as criminal and illegal? (p. 170)

[56] Prentice et.al., p. 233.
[57] Prentice et.al., p. 323.
[58] Prentice et.al., p. 323.
[59] Owram, p. 267.

This legislation was practically endangering the lives of the Canadian women, the evidence of which is clearly seen in the considerably high number of illegal abortions mentioned above. This downfall of Canadian society is also brought up in *A Jest of God* in the following manner: "I've read all the articles in magazines, saying so-many thousands are performed every year and isn't it dreadful and so on." (p.170).

A Jest of God gives a good description of the difficulties that the Canadian women had to face in relation to contraception, especially in small towns such as Laurence's Manawaka. According to Owram, acquiring prescriptions from doctors for such contraceptives as the Pill was remarkably difficult for an unmarried woman in the mid-1960s. In addition, it is no surprise in Owram's words that "women in large urban centres found it easier to find an appropriately liberal doctor".[60]

> *You'll fix yourself?* How can I? Listen, Nick – you don't understand. How can I get what is necessary? Doctor Raven has known me since I was a child. I can't see myself going to him. It's out of the question. Or going to the Manawaka Pharmacy, where everybody knows me. How can I? He [Nick] doesn't understand. He doesn't know. (p. 102)

In the excerpt above, Rachel's inner reaction to Nick's request reveals the source of the difficulties for many women in relation to obtaining of birth-control devices in small towns – the fact that there were so few of doctors. In small towns there were only a small number of doctors to choose from and one usually had "a family doctor", like Doctor Raven is to the Cameron's in *A Jest of God*, who was the only physician that had been treating you since the day you were born.

The excerpt is also a good example of the way in which contraception was seen mostly as the responsibility of the woman, even though also the contemporary ideal

[60] Owram, p. 267.

would have seen women and men sharing the responsibility equally.[61] The reason why the ideal was not the reality, was due to the natural, yet inexcusable, reason that the women would be the ones who would have to face the social stigma in case of an unwanted pregnancy.[62]

Moreover, in small towns the information concerning birth-control and contraception was limited and also hard to acquire when needed[63] as Rachel's thoughts in the following also illustrate:

> I know what I have to do, and what I have to have done to me. But how in hell am I going to do it? I don't know where to go. … If I go to the city, any city, what difference would that make? Where do I begin? I am not accustomed to this kind of thing. Of whom, not knowing anyone, could I enquire? A taxi driver? A waitress? Pardon me, but could you tell me where I can find an angel-maker? I do not know where to go. … *How do all those women find out where to go?* I would be willing to pay. But I don't have the address. (p. 170)

A significant part of the reason why birth-control information was hard to acquire is, of course, due to the strict legislation of those matters, as discussed above. Another reason for the limited availability of information on the subjects was, however, also very likely the tight moral opinions that people held towards pre-marital sex and unwed pregnant women.[64]

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[61] Scanzoni & Scanzoni, p. 95.
[62] Owram, p. 264., Scanzoni & Scanzoni, p. 95.
[63] Owram, p. 267.
[64] Luker, Kristin. *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985. p. 177.

3.4 Pregnancy Out of Wedlock

Pre-marital sex, and especially pregnancy out of wedlock, was highly stigmatized by a large proportion of the Canadian society in mid 20th century. Because of the possible outcast label that an unwanted pregnancy cost, many girls and young women were faced with a "nice girl dilemma" – on the one hand, a "nice girl" says no to sex before marriage and if a woman buys or has contraceptives, such as condoms or a pessary, she is admitting to all the people around her, including herself that she is in fact most likely having sex with someone and is really not the "nice girl" everyone thinks she is. On the other hand if the woman does not use birth control and is having sex despite this, she risks becoming pregnant and again she is not a "nice girl" in the eyes of others.[65]

As a result of the general attitudes towards premarital sex, pregnancy still remained as one of the most powerful fears for unmarried women that were sexually active in the middle of the 20th century in Canada. It required a significant amount of courage from a young, unmarried woman to keep her child, because the opinions of the people in the community were often strongly opposed towards it. Not to mention the fact that unwanted pregnancies were seen as shameful not only to the unmarried woman herself but also to her family.[66] May Cameron's reaction to a local girl's decision to keep her babies that were born outside of marriage gives a good idea of the attitudes women were faced with in these situations in the 1960s in Canada:

> "You know the Stewart girl, Rachel?"
> "Cassie? The one who works at Barns' Hardware?"
> "That's the one. I only heard today. You know she's been away?"
> "I hadn't noticed."

[65] Scanzoni & Scanzoni, p. 93.
[66] Owram, p. 264.

> "Well, she has been. It's dreadful for her mother, a nice woman, nothing to write home about, but quite a nice woman, Mrs. Stewart, I've always thought. The girl isn't married and no one even in prospect, so I gather."…
>
> "You mean she's had a child?"…
>
> "Twins," she says sepulchrally. "What a heartbreak for her mother. Imagine. *Twins*."
>
> I have to resist some powerful undercurrent of laughter. Twins. Twice as reprehensible as one.
>
> "Is she going to keep them?"
>
> "That's the awful thing," Mother says. "Apparently she refuses to have them put up for adoption. I can't fathom the thoughtlessness of some girls. She might consider her mother, and how it'll be for her. It was Mrs. Barnes that told me. I said to her, I thank my lucky stars I never had a moment's worry with either of my daughters." (p. 64)

Many girls, such as Cassie Stewart in *A Jest of God*, were sent away to live with their relatives or to institutional homes for unwed mothers that were kept up by the church, for example, until they had their illegitimate child.[67] In other words, a problem that was out of sight did not exist.

The following excerpts from *A Jest of God* point out the emotional distress that women who suspected pregnancy outside of marriage had to endure due to the strict attitudes of society.

> *What will become of me?*
> It [the baby] can't be borne. Not by me. What am I going to do? It does not matter at all what I feel, or what the truth is. The only fact is that it cannot be allowed to be. … She would be – how? – broken up, wounded, ashamed, hysterical, refusing to believe it, believing it only too readily, willing to perjure her soul or pawn her wedding ring to be rid it, never able to trust again (she would declare), not able to hold her head up forever after on Japonica Street, outcast and also seeking exile because unable to meet the sympathetic stutterings of the world, and worst of all perhaps, blaming herself (or claiming she was) for something unknown and unsuspected in her rearing of me, "What, I ask myself, Rachel, could I have done, in bringing you up, that you would go and do a thing like that?" … And underneath all the frenzy, all the gimmicks, she would

[67] Owram, p.264.

> mourn really. As though it were a death. And no one could ever convince her otherwise. (pp. 166-167)
>
> As though people did get what they wanted. They don't know what they're talking about. Left to myself, would I destroy this only one? I can't bear it, that's all. It isn't to be borne. I can't face it. I can't face them. (p. 171)

Rachel's fear of causing her mother shame and becoming a social outcast is not an overstatement. The social stigma was very heavy on unmarried women that became pregnant, and for that reason many unwed women decided rather to put their children out for adoption or sent them away to be raised by relatives in another locale than to raise them by themselves.[68]

Those unmarried women who decided to keep their children, faced also other difficulties besides the shame and social stigma. For a woman who was working outside of the home, arranging the day care for her child or children could be difficult if she did not have family or friends who were willing to take care of them during the time she herself was working.[69] As Rachel is weighing her options of whether to have the baby or not, she also ponders about the question of who would take care of the baby while she would be working.

> Cassie Stewart. … She's kept the children. But her mother looks after them while she works. Whatever it may have been like, or however her mother regarded it, Mrs. Stewart takes charge of the twins while Cass works. The thing one doesn't know before is that the process doesn't end with birth. It isn't just that, to be reckoned with, explained, faced, brazened out. … There would not be any space for anything else – only that one being, and earning enough to keep you both, and hoping you could find someone who could look after the child while you worked.
>
> Mother wouldn't. That is certain Even if she could bring herself to, which she couldn't, she wouldn't be able to. Physically, she is not up to it. (pp. 174-175)

[68] Owram, p. 264.
[69] Prentice et.al., p. 313.

The socially most acceptable way to overcome the plight of her situation, if the woman wanted to keep her baby that is, was to marry. Through marriage she would gain back her position in the society and avoid the label of a social pariah that unmarried mothers so often had to carry.[70]

[70] Owram, p. 264.

4. Women and Society

In the mid 20th century women's roles were still underlined by the ideals of the Victorian age. The Victorian hegemony cherished the idea of woman as "the-angel-of-the-house" — the Madonna like wife and mother that was a guardian and representative of virtue and innocence within her family and society.[71] These long-lived attitudes promoted the traditionally accepted roles of wife and mother, together with high morality expectations for women, well into the mid-20th century. A few examples of the social expectations of women's behavior from the work of Letha Dawson Scanzoni and John Scanzoni illustrate the kind of "feminine" attributes that were given a great deal of emphasis in evaluating girls' behavior: "girls should be sweet and gentle", "nice women don't show aggression" and "women should let the men take the lead".[72]

The traditional values were also to a large extent based on the way in which, in western culture, family has traditionally been seen as the most important nuclear unit of people's lives. [73] Therefore, family has also been considered as the most important provider and contributor and also as the protector of people's emotional wellbeing and development into being reliable and trustworthy members of the society to which they were born. In other words, family was the most important social institution in the safeguarding of the culture and traditions of a society.

Another reason why family values were highly supported in the mid 20th century in Canada was due to the Second World War. During the war years a large proportion of Canadian women, both single women and women who were married,

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[71] Scanzoni & Scanzoni, p. 78.
[72] Scanzoni & Scanzoni, p. 20.
[73] Dollimore, Jonathan. "The Challenge of Sexuality" *Society and Literature, 1945-1970.* Ed. Alan Sinfield. London: Methuen, 1983. p. 60.

joined the work force or the CWAC [74] in order to help overcome the shortage of workers that the society was faced with after the men left to fight in the battle fields in Europe.[75] The desperate need for workers during the war years changed to a total opposite as soon as the war was over and the men started to return back home. The society wanted to provide the returning soldiers with the jobs that women had been taking care of during the war years, and send women back to their homes and into their traditional roles as wives and mothers.[76] This is illustrated by an excerpt from a contemporary issue of a Canadian magazine *Saturday Night*:

> 'We made munitions, served overseas or at home whenever we were needed. And loved doing it. Then what happened when the war was over? We were patted on the head and told, 'Good show, girls, but now back to *kinder*, *küche* and *kirche*….' If married women are people in emergencies, why can't they be people when there isn't an emergency?'[77]

The following sections will discuss further the roles of women in the contemporary mid 1900s Canadian society and the ways in which they are being reflected in *A Jest of God*. The first section will concentrate on way in which the expectations of society defined the kind of behavior that was expected of women and also people in general. The second section will discuss the generation gap and the third section deals with women that for one reason or another were unmarried, their roles and the ways in which their role was observed by the society at large.

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[74] Canadian Women's Army Corps
[75] Pierson, p. 13.
[76] Prentice et al., p. 307.
[77] Quoted in Prentice et al., p. 307.

4.1 The Struggle of Being Nice

In *A Jest of God* Rachel's mother May strongly emphasizes the importance and need for women to always be well groomed and sweet, just as the stereotypical gender difference expects people to believe. She is in complete agreement with the traditional ideas and happily pushes these ideas forward to her daughter

> "Oh, are you going to wear that orange scarf, dear? Isn't it a little bright, with your green coat?"
>
> "Do you think so?"
>
> "Well, perhaps not. I would have thought your pink one would've gone better, that's all. But never mind. You wear whichever one you want."
>
> I won't change. I don't like the pink scarf. But now I won't feel right about the orange one, either. (p. 46)

Rachel herself is also clearly aware of the stereotypical gender difference put forward and encouraged already at an early age in life, and allows her also to be influenced by it and senses a familiarity in their way of acting with people. The following excerpt also emphasizes the way in which girls, already when very young, try their best when it comes to appearing pleasant and pleasurable.

> Interesting creatures, very young girls, often so anxious to please that they will tell lies without really knowing they're doing it. I don't suppose more than a few of them were actually out in the country at all. They only think I'd like to hear it. And yet I feel at ease with them in a way I don't with the boys, who have begun to mock automatically even at this age. (p. 11)

Helen M. Buss touches also on the powerful effect that May Cameron has on her daughters in her study mentioned above. This aspect can also be used in relation to

May's power in transmitting the women's traditional roles to her daughters. Buss writes;

> Rachel and Stacey from the beginning of their lives are exposed to May Cameron's philosophy of what is 'nice', especially what is 'nice' to say. In addition to directing her girls only to express the 'nice' thoughts and feelings May has adopted a self protective martyr role that allows for little real communication.[78]

The way in which May emphasizes the need for her girls to be 'nice', is also a good illustration of the way in which she practices her power as the promoting force of the tradition. This aspect of her character is illustrated for example in the following parts in *A Jest of God*:

> When I came back to teach in Manawaka, I told Mother the first Sunday that I didn't think I'd go [to church]. … She said "I don't think it would be very nice, not to go. I don't think it would look very good." (p. 45)
>
> "Too much bridge, maybe."
> "I would have thought that,' she says petulantly, 'although the girls did think it was a little odd, your going off like that, not that they actually said anything." (p. 119)

To May and the generation that she represents "keeping up appearances" is very important. In May's case the surroundings in which she lives in, the small conservative prairie town of Manawaka, add even more to her need to comply with the expectations of others.

In small towns, such as Manawaka, standing out was hardly considered to be a positive attribute. Any behavior that in some way was in conflict with the "accepted standard" would be judged and frowned upon. Clara Thomas gives in her book *The*

Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence a vivid description of small town Canada and the way of life in such environment;

> The town was our tribe – not, primarily, a network of kinship and family, but a powerful structure of hierarchical social relationships. The fact that everyone knew all about everyone else provided the framework of common knowledge, common interest, and gossip that held the town together. Talk, resented or enjoyed, malicious or concerned, both feared and welcomed, was the strong human communication-fabric of the town and was often stronger than the individual's communication lines through love or duty, trust, or even hate.[79]

In *A Jest of God* reactions to people that are in conflict with the framework of accepted behavior are well described for example when Rachel and her mother are in church one Sunday;

> Tom Gillanders used to have a good voice, but that was years ago. He must be eighty now. … How can he do it? Doesn't he know how he sounds and how it makes him look? … Mother squirms. I can't blame her. Surely one might reasonably expect not to be embarrassed in *this* church, at least.
> … When I was a child, some people called Dukes had a mongoloid son. … They used to bring him to church sometimes, and those Sundays were a torment as pure as anything I've known since. He would talk aloud, in a high slurred voice, all through the service, but still they'd stay, on and on, and wouldn't leave unless he started saying swear words. Or even worse. *I got to pee, Mama*. And everyone would sit with burning faces, pretending they hadn't heard. …
> "They shouldn't let him," Mother says, as we walk. "It's a disgrace. Don't you think so, yourself, Rachel?"
> "Yes. Yes, I certainly do."
> And yet with some part of myself I am inexplicably angry at this agreement. (pp. 48-49)

As also indicated above, May's attitudes are not her own doings – on the contrary – her opinions have most likely been enforced all her adult life by the media,

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[78] Buss, p. 33.

for example, which especially in the early postwar years and in the 1950s strongly promoted women's roles as homemakers and mothers. From my perspective, Prentice et al. point out this fact in their study quite clearly; "Canadian media portrayals of women in the post-war years stressed an all-pervasive stereotype of women as happy homemakers, winsome wives, and magnanimous mothers."[80]

May Cameron's feelings for the apartment that she lives in with her daughter describes well the way in which the women of her generation, who started their families in the aftermath of World War I, were marriage and family defined.

> Mother wouldn't feel at home anywhere else. You'd think she would want to leave but she doesn't. She always let on to my father that she didn't enjoy living here. She used to say "Your father's so attached to this place," and then sigh delicately. But if she had been able to move anywhere, I don't suppose she would have gone. (p. 62)

In those days, when May and Niall, her husband, got married, marriage was seen as the ultimate goal of women's lives and those who for one reason or other were unmarried were frowned upon. After marrying, taking care of the family would become the focal point and main career for the women.[81] This makes it understandable that letting go of the place where most of the important and noteworthy things in a woman's life have happened could be difficult. To leave the place where one has raised one's family for a woman at that time can easily enough be compared to losing or retiring from one's job.

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[79] Thomas, p. 176.
[80] Prentice et al., p. 307.
[81] Prentice et al., p. 245.

The idea of seeing motherhood as a career, not simply as a duty, was emphasized at the time also by some experts as the following statement made by Dr. Helen MacMurchy illustrates:

> Being a mother is the highest and the most extensive of all undertakings. Nothing that she can know is useless to a mother. She can use it all. The mother reports for special duty about 250 days before the baby is born and she is never demobilised until she meets the Bearer of the Great Invitation. Mother, at ninety years, is still Mother.[82]

May Cameron voices in *A Jest of God* this sense of losing her "job", and her daughter reveals – at least to the readers – her understanding of the reasons why her mother is upset by the decision to move away from Manawaka.

> "Oh Rachel – it's mean of you. You've turned really nasty and mean, and I can't see what I've ever done to merit it. It's not fair. *It's not fair!*"
> … And for myself, I [Rachel] don't really know what it will cost her to leave this place where she has over the years nursed two children, a dead man, some sprightliness of chosen draperies and china, and more dank memories than I dare to dwell upon. (pp. 200-201)

Rachel also knows that she does not fully understand what leaving those memories will cost her mother, but dwelling in the past will not help either of them, especially not Rachel, to find her independence or at least tolerance of herself and the expectations of society. For Rachel moving away from Manawaka to Vancouver (pp. 199 –200) is comparable to any mother's decision to enter into the labor force from the life of a housewife. For Rachel Manawaka is the safe and cramped home environment, which for homemakers is their family home**.**

4.2 The Generation Gap

The post-war attitudes were the main reason for the emergence of the so-called generation gap that started to raise its head in Canada in the early 1960s. The generation aspect is well-defined in Owram's study; he writes that the idea of a generation comes from a "social moment" and that a generation is essentially "an age group shaped by history".[83] The excerpt below from *A Jest of God* points out the way in which Rachel sees the "generation gap" between her and her mother. Rachel understands that May represents a different era of womanhood and she tries to take care not to upset the power-relations between them more than is necessary.

> I cannot look at her. She wouldn't know at all; no explanation could ever get through to her. There are three worlds and I'm in the middle one, and this seems now to be a weak area between the millstones. (p. 100)

One can ask how the gap between generations in the mid 1900s differs from the gap that is between every two generation of parents and their children. The fact that makes the gap significant between the generations at that point in time is World War II, or more precisely the significant economic growth that can be seen throughout the western world in the post-war years. The economic boom as a result started again another boom – the baby boom. The effects of these two booms begin to gain momentum in many areas of life in the 1960s, the effects of which caused this particular generation gap to be more clear that between any other two generations.[84]

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[82] Quoted in Prentice et al., p. 251.

[83] Owram, p. 159.
[84] Owram, pp. 159-160.

The aspect of the generation gap was used for example in the political debate of the New Left[85] movement in Canada in 1960s. The New Left movement was essentially a student movement and therefore also influenced the importance of the new generation to make changes happen in the society. The New Left addressed the discrimination against several minorities, including women, black and the Native people, by pointing out that the affluence, which the Canadian society was currently enjoying did not include these minorities.[86]

While student movements, such as the New Left, were gaining momentum and attention in the university campuses and big cities and drumming for change, many things remained constant in small town Canada. For example the traditional attitudes and ideas of what a woman should be like remained more or less unchanged. In *A Jest of God* Rachel is constantly put face to face with the traditional role expectations that the contemporary 1960s society still places on women despite the concurrent radicalism and new idealism that stated to be voiced in the Canadian society. Her mother – the representative of the traditional views – evaluates her every action, even if she is not actually present when Rachel faces a contradicting situation. The echo of her Mother's voice can more or less always be detected in Rachel's actions.

> Well, poor Calla – it isn't her fault that she has no dress sense. I look quite smart in comparison.
>
> Oh God. I don't mean to be condescending. How can it happen, still, this echo of my mother's voice? (p. 10)

[85] Owram, p. 227.
[86] Owram, pp. 228-229.

Rachel's statement also shows how important it was still considered that women were feminine and neat at all times. Women who did not appear feminine to other people risked being viewed as sloppy, careless and unwomanly.[87]

This idea, which Betty Friedan has called the "feminine mystique"[88] affected especially the women of Rachel's generation and before. In contrast the girls who were growing up in the 1960s, the situation was becoming different, as can also be seen in *A Jest of God* in the way in which Rachel is intimidated by the coarse behavior of the teenage girls in Manawaka.

> Now they are about sixteen, I guess. Their hair is incredible. Piled high, finespun, like the high light conical mass of woven sugar threads, the candy floss we used to get at fairs. Theirs is nearly white and called Silver Blonde. I know that much. It's not mysterious. It's held up by back-combing, and the colour sprayed on, and the whole thing secured with lacqeur like a coating of ice over a snowdrift. They look like twins from outer space. No, not twins necessarily. Another race. Venusians. But that's wrong, too. This is their planet. They are the ones who live here now. (p. 18)

The excerpt also points out how at that time also the standards of beauty[89] were changing fast and radically from what they had been during the immediate post war years and in the 1950s when the cult of domesticity was at its highest.

Another aspect in the Canadian society that indicates the power struggle between the two generations in the middle of the 1900s Canadian society, is the increase of social freedom of women in the Canadian society at that time. In other words, by the 1960s the lives of Canadian women were no longer as carefully supervised as in the previous decades. For example, this meant that in the 1960s it was not considered unusual anymore if a single woman was living on her own.

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[87] Gordon, p. 360.
[88] Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1963 (Repr. 1984)

This new freedom is apparent in the 92 percent increase in the total number of single households in Canada between the years 1966 and 1971.[90] Living on their own meant also expansion in young people's freedom in general. According to Prentice et al. this change in young people's lives was "a manifestation of the unprecedented freedom – economic, social and sexual – enjoyed by the Canadians coming of age in the 1960s"[91].

In *A Jest of God* Rachel has had to give up her independence, the independence she had already gained after moving away from home after completing high school to study at a university, after her father dies. Her father's death reveals to Rachel and her family that Niall Cameron has left his family nothing but debts, and they cannot afford to pay for Rachel's education as a result (p. 18).

Rachel voices a certain amount of regret towards her decision to succumb to the faith instead of fighting against it and changing the inevitable into something that she herself would have wanted, even at the risk of possible severe financial difficulties. Yet, she is not quite able to see how it would have been possible, since she had to take care of her mother, who is unwilling to live anywhere else.

> My great mistake was being born the younger. No. Where I went wrong was in coming back here, once I'd got away. A person has to be ruthless. One has to say *I'm going*, and not to be prevailed upon to return. …"Only for a year or so, Rachel, until we see." See what? She [Rachel's mother] couldn't be the one to move – I do see that. … From pillar to post. What could I have done differently? (p. 18)

At the beginning of *A Jest of God* Rachel is bound to her mother by the ties of responsibility and pity and as the time has passed after her father's death also because

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[89] Banner, Lois W. *American Beauty*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983. p. 290.
[90] Prentice et al., p. 319.
[91] Prentice et al., p. 319.

she cannot imagine any other kind of life for herself as can be seen from above. At the end of *A Jest of God*, just like so many other women at the mid 1900s, Rachel finally realizes that in order to find herself she has to stop living her life through others, for example through her mother.

4.3 "Spinster Sisters"

As marriage was seen to be the woman's ultimate goal in life, those who did not comply with the expectation, faced prejudice and false ideas about spinsterhood, the word which in itself has a very unflattering tone for many.[92] The way in which unmarried women were seen in the mid 1900s, shows clearly how women were still at the time seen in the eyes of the general public as male and family defined. One of the most extremist opinions about unmarried women, which underlines well the society's ideas about unmarried women and their womanhood, was stated in the early post-war years by Dr Marynia Farnham. She was of the opinion that teachers who are unmarried give the children they teach a wrong kind of example about womanhood and should therefore be banished from the teaching profession.[93]

Unmarried women were also often considered to carry also somewhat an aura of strangeness around them as well. They were spinsters, a word that for many young women at the verge of adulthood carried the stigma of "worst case scenario" for women.[94] Being a spinster meant also for a large number of people that you were a bit eccentric and strange. *In A Jest of God* Rachel is afraid that she will sooner or later

[92] Thomas, p. 81.
[93] Gordon, p. 365.
[94] Gordon, p. 408.

begin to manifest the strangeness that the society believes that unmarried women possess.

> There. I am doing it again. This must stop. It isn't good for me. Whenever I find myself thinking in a brooding way, I must simply turn it off and think of something else. God forbid that I should turn into an eccentric. This isn't just imagination. I've seen it happen. Not only teachers, of course, and not only women who haven't married. Widows can become extremely odd as well, but at least they have the excuse of grief.
>
> I don't have to concern myself yet for a while, surely. Thirty-four is still quite young. But now is the time to watch out for it. (p. 8)

At the beginning of the novel Rachel is especially preoccupied with the fear of turning into an eccentric. She is afraid of becoming like her friend and colleague Calla, who does not seem to care at all about "keeping up appearances". A good illustration of Calla and her character is provided by the scene where Rachel tells the readers about how Calla has painted her apartment door lilac without asking anybody's opinion (p.180). Calla is like that door to her apartment "… quite a mild lilac, but in this warren of cream and beige doors, it makes its presence known"(p. 180) – a mild personality but the way she dresses and acts makes her stand out from the crowd.

Rachel's fear is only subdued after she has her affair with Nick Kazlik, which underlines clearly the way in which women often were at the time very male- and marriage defined.

> She [Calla] has left me behind. I'm not following her. And yet I'm not so much frightened, not any more. It won't happen to me. I won't become an eccentric, moving in some private pattern only, speaking oddities which seem quite usual to me and otherwise to others – hilarious to the cruel, terrifying to the slightly more observant. Not now. Not anymore. She could be mad as any April fool and it wouldn't infect me.
>
> Perhaps he will phone me tonight. Nick? *Listen* – (p. 142)

It is not abnormal that Rachel's fears of what the fate of an aging spinster might bring her. Most of the women in her age-group had already married and had children by her age[95] – some had probably even divorced[96]. The contemporary mid 20th century media advertising also tries to save women form the undesirable fate of an unmarried woman. The adverts aimed at young single women were more or less shaped to give guidance on how to get the man of one's dreams.[97]

One of the ways in which people saw women who were not married had to do with the fact that many of them lived with their parents. These women, who did not leave their childhood homes, were never able to establish their own lives and gain their own identities outside the home where they grew up. For that reason they had difficulties in gaining the status of an independent adult both in the eyes of their own families and in the eyes of the community. In *A Jest of God* the situation in which Rachel is living illustrates well this lack of own identity. An especially good description of the way in which she is still forced to remain in the position and role of a child can be seen in the following excerpt:

> This bedroom is the same I've always had. I should change the furniture. How girlish it is, how old-fashioned. The white spindly-legged dressing-table, the round mirror with white rose-carved frame, the white-painted metal bed with its white-painted metal bow decorating the head like a starched forgotten hair-ribbon. Surely I could afford new furniture. It's my salary, after all, my salary we live on. She'd [Rachel's mother] say it was a waste, to throw out perfectly good furniture. I suppose it would be, too, if you think of it like that. (p. 22)

In other words, they remained in the status of "someone's child" rather than being a person on their own right.

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[95] Eichler, Margit. *Families in Canada: An Introduction*. Toronto: OISE Press, 1986. p. 27.
[96] Eichler, p. 47.
[97] Prentice et al., p. 308.

The fear that Rachel has of becoming an eccentric spinster has also to do with the fact that she suffers from the Rapunzel syndrome, as Margaret Atwood points out in her book *Survival*.[98] The symptoms of the Rapunzel syndrome are clear in Rachel's case; she is trapped in her claustrophobic life of taking care of her ageing and somewhat selfish mother in a small prairie town which is full of prejudice and archaic value systems. In Rachel's case the prince who comes to Rapunzel's rescue is Nick Kazlik. Atwood further describes in *Survival* the rescuer as follows "The Rescuer's falseness and lack of substance as a character is usually a clue to his status as a fantasy-escape figure; Rapunzel is in fact stuck in the tower, and the best thing she can do is learn how to cope with it."[99] In Nick's case one has to agree that he is a quite shallow character in *A Jest of God*, but in fact, Nick's seeming shallowness is the result of Rachel's self-centred and self-absorbed life. Despite this it does not, however, mean that Nick's role is insignificant for Rachel's final acceptance of herself and her being able to put the expectations that the society places on her as a woman into a more reasonable perspective, as Atwood's statement in *Survival* seems to suggests.

In fact, as Atwood further points out[100], Rachel's prison is to a large extend self-made, but one cannot underestimate the power that the environment has had in the moulding of that prison. Without the society's constant pressure and enforcing of the traditional roles for women and men her situation would be different and she would not have the compelling need to be "a nice girl", to which she has been taught to aim at throughout her life.

In her struggle into a more independent self and acceptance of her situation (the fact that she may never marry and have children i.e. do what every woman is

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[98] Atwood, Margaret. *Suvival A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1972. p. 209.
[99] Atwood, *Survival*, p. 209.
[100] Atwood, *Survival*, p. 209.

"supposed to do"), Rachel has to overcome the nice girl dilemma[101]. In Rachel's case the dilemma is only somewhat different from that mentioned in Scanzoni and Scanzoni's study. The nice girl dilemma Rachel is facing is the supposition, which was still very strongly held by the Canadian society at large in the mid 20th century, of the ultimate goal in life for women being marrying and having children.[102] This nice girl dilemma is also one of the major sources for Rachel's fear of becoming an eccentric spinster. In Rachel's mind if she reaches that point she will no longer have any chance of complying with what she has been taught that "nice girls" are supposed to do i.e. have a family of her own. In the end she realizes and comes to terms with the fact that her life is not any less valuable if she does not have a husband and/or children.

> Where I'm going anything may happen. Nothing may happen. Maybe I will marry a middle-aged widower, or a longshoreman, or a cattle-hoof-trimmer, or a barrister or a thief. And have children in time. Or maybe not. Most of the chances are against it. But not, I think, quite all. ... I may become, in time, slightly more eccentric all the time. ... I will be light and straight as any feather. The wind will bear me, and I will drift and settle, and drift and settle. Anything may happen, where I'm going.
>
> I will be different. I will remain the same. ... (pp. 208-209)

The accepting of the situation opens a new life for Rachel, both in the sense of not being too easily affected by the opinions of others and trying to live one's life according to what one supposes to be "the right thing" to do. This nice girl dilemma, along with its sister dilemma dealing with women's sexuality, was loosening its grip in the mid 1900s as the number of single households and the age of first marriage was rising. These two factors, among other things, helped to lessen the stereotype of unmarried women as

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[101] Scanzoni & Scanzoni, p. 93.
[102] Prentice et al., p. 245.

spinsters by gradually changing the image towards the more favorable and flattering term of a single woman.

5. Women, Education, Work and Mothering

In the mid 1900s women's work and careers were still quite strongly influenced by the traditional views about women's roles as housewives and mothers. These traditional roles for women were promoted for the Canadian society by the idea of social equality that stated that women and men were equal in relation to one another, but that their roles were to be different. This idea of being different but equal is illustrated in the many contemporary mid 20th century writings that often suggested that women who have a career should select a profession that would provide them with skills that they need in their "real job" i.e. being a homemaker in the future.[103] A Gallup poll from 1960, which Owram uses as an example in his study, illustrates this further: the poll showed that only 4 percent of men and 5 percent of women were of the opinion that a woman could continue working outside home if she had small children.[104]

Part of the reason why the traditional roles for women were so strongly emphasized both by the Canadian government and the media in the mid 20th century was due to the ending of World War II. During the war years, thousands of women had entered the work force in order to keep the country running and had provided for their families, while the men were overseas fighting for the Queen and their country. When the war was over, and the men returned back home from overseas, a large proportion of these women were practically forced to give up the jobs that they had been holding in order to provide work to the males returning from the war. The need for women to make way for the men was further emphasized in the mass media. In other words, the magazines, radio and other media that during the war years had trumpeted and

[103] Owram. 1996. p. 130.
[104] Owram. 1996. p. 131

encouraged women to enter the military service made a 90 degree turn and started once again to promote the old patriarchal ideals of women as homemakers, wives and mothers.[105]

This chapter will discuss in more detail the contemporary mid 1900s women's working and family lives and the ways in which *A Jest of God* can be seen to reflect the contemporary mid 1900s situation in Canada. The first section of this chapter will discuss the education that women received prior to their working in the mid 20th century, since education is often seen as the gate to new possibilities and future, as well as the types of work that women actually did outside their homes. The second section discusses the more traditional career of a housewife and a mother.

5.1 Educating Women and Career Girls

The expectations of the society are reflected both in the careers and the education received by the majority of Canadian women at the time. The aspiration for equal opportunity for both men and women, which had been extensively advertised during the war, became the order of the day in education after the Second World War. This is illustrated by the fact that the last barriers that had previously prevented women from entering into certain fields of higher education had become non-existent by the late 1960s[106] and more and more women were continuing their studies also in secondary and post-secondary levels.[107]

Even though the barriers were removed and more women were receiving higher education, the sex stereotyping of what were considered to be suitable roles and careers for women and men continued to manipulate and keep the ideas and attitudes of

[105] Prentice et al., p. 307.

people traditional. A quite common notion in the mid 20th century in Canada, as for example in its neighbor the United States, was that women in general were certainly competent enough to have a career outside the home, but combining that career with motherhood was considered to be a rather impossible equation, or moreover, something rather unnatural.[108] In *A Jest of God* none of the married women with children seem to have jobs outside the home. Rachel's sister Stacey takes care of her four children at home (p. 28) and so does James Doherty's mother Grace (p. 56). The only woman with children who works outside the home in *A Jest of God* is Cassie Steward an unmarried young woman with twins, who works at a hardware store while her mother takes care of her children (pp. 174-175).

All in all, the number of women in secondary education started to rise steadily in the post-war years. In general, it became, for example, far more common for people, both men and women, to complete high school in the post World War II decades in Canada than it had been in the pre-war decades. The change in the number of women finishing high school, however, was even more dramatic than the corresponding number of men.

This notable change illustrates also a relative shift in the traditional expectations towards the amount of schooling women should receive and it shows how in the post-war years the old views about women's education started to falter. The reason why many women of previous generations had left school often considerably earlier than their male counterparts was firstly because people thought that it was not considered to be an economic necessity. Another, and maybe even more significant,

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[106] Prentice et al., p. 328.
[107] Prentice et al., p. 324.
[108] Owram. 1996. p. 131 and Friedan, p. 163.

reason was that since women were going to be homemakers and mothers they did not need as much formal education as men.[109]

The traditional attitudes were also reflected in the careers and occupations that were viewed as suitable or desirable for women compared to those that were seen to suit men. The occupational fields that were seen as best suited for women included nursing, teaching and social work, whereas the ones for men included medicine, engineering, science, architecture, the law and business.[110]

Likewise, the long-lived traditions were still very much potent in the universities. Even though the number of women was growing in the university campuses[111], women were still enrolling to courses that were viewed as traditionally "female" such as arts, nursing, household science and physical and occupational therapy. In *A Jest of God* this gender difference in the educational fields is also apparent. Rachel's family doctor, Dr Raven, is a man (p. 184) as well as the surgeon operating on her tumor (p. 191), whereas the nurse taking care of her after the operation is a woman (p. 191).

In the early post-war years, especially young women moved from the workforce into the roles of wives and mothers, but this did not mean, despite the strong media efforts that the number of married women started to decline in Canada. On the contrary, the share of married women, in general, among the female workers continued to rise in comparison to the years before World War II. According to Prentice et al. in 1941 only a little over 10 percent of all working women were married (during the war years the percentage was 25 to 35 percent). By 1961 nearly half of all Canadian women with jobs were married.[112] Despite this, the number of women that actually entered and

[109] Owram. 1996. p. 274.
[110] Prentice et al., pp. 324-325.
[111] Prentice et al., p. 326.
[112] Prentice et al., pp. 311-312

became a part of the Canadian workforce was still relatively low because in the age group from 25 to 44 year-old women only approximately one in every four Canadian women were working outside their homes around the mid 1900s.[113]

Moreover, the women who were working outside their homes were more often working part-time compared to their male counterparts.[114] This characteristic of women's work is one of the reasons why, alongside with the fact that their jobs were often low-paid, the jobs held by women often were considered almost synonymous to low-status and stamped with the stigma of being only "women's jobs". These kinds of jobs included secretaries, nurses, waitresses and bookkeepers, for example.[115] These were the kind of professions women were seen to be "born into". Almost the exact words "to be born into" a certain profession are used in *A Jest of God* in a discussion that Rachel's mother May and her bridge club friends have with Rachel about her job:

> They [the bridge club members] feel duty bound to address a few remarks to me, remarks which have fallen into a comfortable stability. "How's school, Rachel?" Fine thank you. "I guess they must keep you pretty busy, all those youngsters." Yes, they certainly do. "Well I think it's marvellous, the way you manage – I always think that anyone who's a teacher is marvellous to take on a job like that." Oh, I enjoy it. "Well, that's marvellous – don't you think so, May?" And mother nods and says yes it certainly is marvellous and Rachel is a born teacher. (p. 23)

Being a school-teacher, as Rachel in *A Jest of God,* was seen to be a fitting job for women because people saw it as a profession where a young woman could practice her nurturing skills. Having a profession like that would not make her unfeminine and did

[113] Li, Peter S. *The Making of Post-War Canada*. Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1996. p. 39.
[114] Li, p. 55.
[115] Li, pp. 53-54.

not represent risk making her bad marriage material, which some people thought too much education might cause.[116]

Other examples of occupation fields between the genders can also be seen in Rachel's working place, the Manawaka primary school, where all the teachers, who are mentioned in the text – Sapphire Travis and Calla Mackie – are women (p. 9). However, the principal Willard Siddley, in other words the person in the leadership position and in charge of running the school, is a man (p. 12). In the early stages of the novel Rachel does not question Willard's abilities as a leader and an authority figure, but in the end she sees him more as her equal.

> His [Willard's] humour. I didn't know I was smiling. If I was, it was only out of nervousness. Which is ridiculous. I've nothing to be afraid of, with him. He has never given a bad report to the School board on my teaching, as far as I know. I don't know why I should even think he might have. I can feel my face paling to the peculiar putty colour it takes on when I'm thrown a little off balance. … … I know I must not stand up now, not until he's gone. I am exceptionally tall for a woman, and Willard is shorter than I. He arranges it whenever possible so that when we are talking either he is seated or I am, and there is no comparison. He hates to be considered a short man. He makes up what may seem to him his stunted stature by being six hundred times more brisk than anyone needs to be. He calls this efficiency. (p. 13)

> "Weren't you happy here?" Willard asks, peering foxily. … He doesn't want my answer. He wants me to say "Of course I have always been as happy as a veritable meadow-lark in this eminently well-run establishment, Willard, and I can assure you my leaving has nothing whatsoever to do with you, who have been in every conceivable way the best of principals… …What am I to say though? Sometimes I was happy here, and sometimes not, and often I was afraid of him, and still am, although I see now this was as unnecessary as my mother's fear of fate. (p. 204)

This in part reflects the ability to take her matters into her own hands with less consideration to the thoughts and judgments of others that she gains through the ordeals

[116] Friedan, pp. 161-162.

that she experiences during the summer. As to a large extent did most other Canadian women in the Canadian workforce by the end of the 1960s.

5.2 Homemaking and Mothering

The society's attitudes toward women's work in Canada were still influenced by the patriarchal family model, despite the fact that during World War II an extraordinarily large number of women had entered the work force in order to help the country to survive the serious lack of employees that was caused by the fact that so many of the men had left the workforce to go fight in the war. The patriarchal family model meant in practice that in case of a nuclear family the husband was working and earning the money for the family outside the home, and the wife stayed at home without pay to take care of her assumed responsibility of taking care of the home.[117]

The dominance of the patriarchal family model meant that large part of the Canadian society still thought that women who had children should not work outside the home and in some cases were even asked to leave their jobs, after getting married and having children or sometimes even after they had reached a certain age (hence the headline of the previous section "career girls", the word which also shows that women with careers were often seen to be girls not grown-ups).[118] The above was true especially in small rural Canadian prairie communities, the kind that Rachel's hometown Manawaka in *A Jest of God* represents. Gunilla Florby underlines the way in which the women in towns such as Manawaka live lives dominated and shaped by a

[117] Pierson, p. 93.
[118] Friedan, p. 387.

society that is controlled by men.[119] This aspect of the society is seen in the following example:

> [Willard says] "…What ever our shortcomings here, I would not want it said that we were a slack school, would you?"
> [Rachel replies] "No – of course not. I'm sorry I haven't seen her, Willard. Honestly. I've been meaning to, and – "
> I hear my own voice, eagerly abject. Probably I would get down on my knees if this weren't frowned upon. I hate all this. I hate speaking in this way. But I go on doing it. (pp. 50-51)

In the mid 1900s the traditional family model gained further support also due to the lack of jobs for the men who had returned form the war in the immediate postwar years. As already mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, during the immediate post World War II years the Canadian media was mobilized to reverse the wartime message and image of an ideal Canadian woman that it had been vigorously promoting. The wartime image of an emancipated woman, who was an essential part in the nation's survival during the war years, changed almost overnight into a romanticized role of a homemaker. The role, which was no longer portrayed as something boring and common, as it had been just a few short moments ago, but as something that would offer women more gratification and overflowing satisfaction than any other career or job outside the home could ever offer her.[120]

In *A Jest of God* there are at least three clear examples of women that are good examples of women who are satisfied with, and also take pride in, their roles as homemakers and mothers (or at least the readers are given this impression by the limited view that they get through the interpretations made by the novel's protagonist, Rachel). The first of these women is Rachel's mother May and the two others are

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[119] Florby, p. 196.
[120] Prentice et al., p. 307.

Rachel's sister Stacey, who lives with her family, which includes her husband Mac and four children (p.27), in Vancouver and Grace Doherty, the mother of Rachel's favorite pupil James.

Rachel's mother, May, is a clear representative of the traditional views of women's roles as housewives and mothers. She has lived up to the traditional expectations placed on women both by the society and their families which maintained that a girl gets married and lives as a wife and mother happily ever after. [121].

May has performed her role as a perfect mother and a wife thoroughly, and has thus managed to meet the expectations of the tradition and the society around her. She is also ready to promote it further to the next generation. May takes care to be always neat and tidy – as a good housewife is supposed to. Rachel regards her mother's accomplishment with awe:

> …she takes pride in wearing only fine-denier nylons and never sensible shoes. Her hair is done every week, saucily stiff grey sausage curls, and the frames of her glasses are delphinium blue and elfin. Where does this cuteness come from, when she's the one who must plump up the chesterfield cushions each night before retiring and empty every ashtray and make the house look as though no frail and mortal creature ever set foot in it? (p. 21)

Both of May's daughters have absorbed the ideas that their mother and the society have been teaching them. The older one of her daughters, Stacey, follows in her mother's footsteps as a dutiful and devoted mother.

> Stacey flutters around those children such a lot. Every time one of them has a cold or a sore throat, we hear about it. She'd learn not to fuss if she had thirty to cope with every weekday. Four on her hands for only two

[121] Owram, p. 254.

> months, and in summer, doesn't seem such a terrible prospect to me. But she worries all the time about them like that, especially the boys. (p. 28)
>
> Is it true, what she said that time, and I can't understand? When I said why not stay longer, and she said that about Mac, then she told me she couldn't be away from the children any longer, either. "I know they're okay, and safe, but I don't feel sure unless I'm there, and even then I never feel sure – I don't think I can explain – it's just something you feel about your own kids, and you can't help it." (p. 28)

The excerpts above show also Rachel's insecurity towards her own situation as an unmarried woman and the slight jealousy she has towards women with families of their own and her lack of understanding of what it is to be a mother.

Rachel is, however, very much aware of her own feelings, the yearning she has for having children of her own, towards her students, and is for that reason very concerned and tries her best not to mix her role as a teacher with being a mother. Nevertheless, the deep longing that she has for a family of her own, as Elisabeth Potvin has also observed[122], makes it hard for her to let go of some of her students that she has become fond of at the end of each school year.

> [Nick asks] "…Do you like teaching Rachel?"
> … "I like it – yes, but there's something about it I can't get used to."
> "How do you mean?"
> "Maybe it doesn't affect you. Your classes are older, and when they move on, they soon move right away and you don't see them anymore. But mine are only seven, and I see them around for years after they've left me, but I don't have anything to do with them. There's nothing lasting. They move on, and that's that. It's such a brief thing. I know them only a year, and then I see them changing but I don't know them any more."
> His face looks momentarily troubled. I shouldn't have said all that. What will he think?
> "You get pretty attached to them, I guess, Rachel?"

[122] Potvin, Elisabeth. "'A Mystery at the Core of Life': Margaret Laurence & Women's Spirituality" *Canadian Literature* 128 (Mar 1991). p. 31.

> "Oh – well, I realize one isn't supposed to, and of course I don't with all of them, but there are some you can't help liking better than others, and then you feel – I don't know – it seems kind of futile." (pp. 113-114)

Rachel clearly mixes her role as a teacher to that of a mother in the early stages of the novel. Only later after the ordeal of thinking that she is pregnant, which was discussed in more detail in chapter 3, does she fully comprehend the difference between the role of a teacher and a parent, when she realizes how totally dependent a child is on his or her parent or parents (p. 174).

Rachel's misconceptions about parenting are best seen in her misinterpretation of the actions of the other good housewife and a mother, Grace Doherty, when Grace allows her son to play truant knowingly.

> What does she think she's doing? How can a child's mother be so irresponsible, as though it didn't amount to anything, as though he didn't amount to anything? … She ought to know better. The ignorance of some people is too much. She doesn't deserve to have him. (pp. 30-31)

> "These absences of James –" my voice sounds distant, cold, a robot's mechanical voice or someone reading from a printed form, "they've been causing some concern to us."
>
> "Why?" she asks, as though innocently.
>
> Why? Listen to the woman. She wouldn't care, I suppose, whether he ever got a scrap of education or not. He could grow up illiterate – it would make no difference to her. …
>
> … "But – why? If he was well, why wasn't he at school?" …
>
> … "He's only seven, Rachel, and he's a clever kid. I mean, I think he's quite clever. … I hate him to miss days like that, but then I wonder if it wouldn't be worse to set him against school? I don't want that. I want him to go on, as far as he –"
>
> I cannot hear any longer. I cannot listen as she elaborates. How could I not have known it of her, the way she feels, her determination and her hesitance? The way she cares about him. (pp. 54-56)

The community and culture in which Rachel lives in is the most probable source for her jealousy and insecurity towards women with families. The ideal of a nuclear family was still very strongly rooted in the Canadian society in the mid 20th century. The way a person's life was supposed to go when one grows up was as Owram writes by the help of quoting Melinda McCracken

> In Winnipeg, recounts Melinda McCracken, everything was set out for children to see. 'Young boy meets young girl, they fall in love, become engaged, are married, lose their virginity together and eagerly await the first child.' With the child (or children) on the way, the family identity became central to social and personal values. They 'functioned socially as couples. They were known as the …s (the Struthers, the Carsons, the Wrights, the Kayes, the McCrackens). The husband, working his job or profession was away all day at the office making money. The wife raised the children and maintained the home. That was what was expected of people; marriage was more important than individual fulfillment, and in fulfilling the central role people's lives were justified.'[123]

Rachel voices some amount of regret for not using the chance she once perhaps would have had for a nice family if it wasn't for the standards and the ideas that she had in her mind for an ideal match.

> When I first came back to Manawaka, Lennox Cates used to ask me out, and I went, but when he started asking me out twice a week, I stopped seeing him before it went any further. We didn't have enough in common, I thought, meaning I couldn't visualize myself as the wife of a farmer, a man who'd never even finished High School. He married not long afterwards. I've taught three of his children. All nice-looking kids, fair-haired like Lennox, and all bright. Well. (p. 37)

In the Canadian rural area, such as Laurence's Manawaka represents, people still lived in the kind of conservative world that still upheld the old views about

women's roles: after marrying the woman's responsibility was solely to take care of her home and family. This caused that many women who for example chose to work outside the home were sometimes viewed as self-centered and careless towards the well being of their children.[124] This attitude of the Canadian society can also be seen in the number of women, both single and married women, in the 1960s that were working outside the home were even lower than in its neighbor the United States. This is significant because as a rule the United States has been viewed to have been one of the most traditional societies in the Western world at the time, when it comes to living up to the traditional values about gender.[125]

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[123] Owram, p. 254.
[124] Luker, p. 204.
[125] Lipset, Seymor Martin. *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada*. New York, Routledge, 1990. pp. 190-191.

6. Conclusion

A Jest of God and its protagonist's persona provide to the readers of the novel exceptionally good descriptions of the way women were put face to face with both the changing society and the traditional gender role expectations in the mid 20th century Canada. Laurence's way of describing the role of women in Canadian society continues the prevailing tradition of Canadian women novelists who write about women and their situation in the Canadian society without, as Mathews has so sharply observed, "women's liberation as the apparent primary purpose or motivation for the novels"[126].

A Jest of God touches on many controversial and much debated aspects of the mid 20th century Canadian society. On the one hand by pointing out its drawbacks, such as the outdated contraception and abortion laws, for example, and on the other hand by giving emphasis to the old fashioned attitudes towards women's roles and place in the society that are still apparent in peoples lives at the time. The reader's of her fiction have also noticed this quality in her novels and "discovered they uncannily revealed [their] history and [their] generation"[127].

However, one has to remember that *A Jest of God* cannot as such be said to give a description of all Canadian women and their situation. Firstly, because it very clearly describes the situation of one specific location within the Canadian society, i.e. Manawaka – a small prairie town in Manitoba and secondly, because the story is the story of a white Anglo-Saxon woman, Rachel. If the novel would tell about a French-Canadian woman living in the Province of Quebec, the experiences and aspects of the Canadian culture that the book would bring up would very likely be somewhat different

[126] Mathews, pp. 138-139.

or perhaps even more severe, due to, for example, the fact that the Catholic church had still in the 1960s a very strong moral and ethical hold of the Quebecois people.

In other words, the portrait that *A Jest of God* gives to its readers is subjective. Despite this apparent subjectivity it can be argued that considering the aspects that *A Jest of God* gives attention to is not without merits as Margaret Laurence herself has also duly noted in an interview with Graeme Gibson:

> The thing is that we come from a very common background, even though this country is geographically different in different parts, and it's culturally very different too – it's not the same thing to grow up in a Newfounland outport that it is to grow up in a prairie town, as I did. But there are certain things that we do share.[128]

The above facts both give grounds for this thesis and also open new doors for exploring. It would be interesting to see how Margaret Laurence's contemporaries have discussed the roles of women in the above mentioned different physical and cultural environments in Canada in the 20th century. One writer who springs to mind is Laurence's French-Canadian colleague Gabrielle Roy, who also was, like Margaret Laurence, born and raised in Manitoba. Moreover, it would be interesting to examine how the experience of Japanese-Canadian women in the fiction of Joy Kogawa or Native Canadian women in the fiction of Lee Maracle, for example, in the Post-War Canadian society differs from that of Laurence's middle class Anglo-Saxon women.

Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that Rachel, as other women presented in Laurence's fiction, gives description of a woman who could be "anyone". She is a schoolteacher, which was one of the most common occupations for women in the mid

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[127] Lunn, Janet "To Find Refreshment in Writing Children's Books: A Note on Margaret Laurence's Writing for Children" in *Margaret Laurence: Critical Reflections* David Staines ed. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2001. p. 152.
[128] Gibson, Graeme. *Eleven Canadian Novelists*. Toronto: House of Anansi, 1976. p. 192.

20th century as the career choices for women in the mid 1900s were still quite narrow, as the discussion in chapter 5 has also shown. Audrey Grescoe has given a good description of the career choices women had at the time by comparing the situation of the 1980s to the situation of what it used to be as follows "The daughters of women who might have picked their occupations by flipping a coin ('Heads I'll be a nurse; tails, a teacher') could conceivably choose a career today by spinning a roulette wheel"[129].

In the novel its protagonist, Rachel, has to find her escape from the traditional role expectations of women, which her mother has successfully been teaching her throughout her life. Rachel's story unveils to its readers also a clever description of the way in which Canadian society at large is changing and how new horizons and roles are opening to the Canadian women outside their traditional roles as wives, mothers and homemakers. Laurence's own comments about the feedback she got from her female readers also shows how the portrait that she gives in her fiction about Canadian society is authentic and valid.

> I used to be surprised when I got letters from women saying, "Right on". My generation of women came to a lot of the same conclusions, but they did it in isolation; you weren't supposed to say those things out loud, to question the assumption that the woman's only role was that of a housewife.[130]

On these grounds it can be argued that Laurence has found a way to voice the aspirations and dilemmas that women in the Canadian society often face. The fact that she uses ordinary women, such as Rachel in *A Jest of God* emphasizes the fact that women need to find the courage to act on those aspirations and dilemmas and make the changes happen themselves.

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[129] Quoted in Douglas, Ann. *Canuck Chicks and Maple Leaf Mamas: Women of the Great White North*. Toronto: McArthur & Company 2002. p. 125.

Perhaps the most forcefully and effectively depicted theme in *A Jest of God* is the female sexuality and the strict social mores of accepted behavior that still governed the sexuality of adult women in the Post-War Canadian society. One of the most interesting aspects of *A Jest of God* is the way Laurence uses Rachel's story to direct attention towards the outdated abortion and contraceptive legislation. Rachel's situation helps to portray how the outdated legislation, along with the traditional moral code, prohibits normal adult women from having full control over their lives and how that legislation also endangers the lives of women by forcing them to seek illegal abortion outside public medical care from suspicious sources. Here again the connections to every-day life and the ordinariness of Laurence's fiction and of Rachel's character, or as Joyce Marshall has observed "[the] honest and explicit treatment of female sexuality, the sexuality of – what shall we call them – normal women? Ordinary women? Women, in other words, who are neither kinky nor whores"[131] brings Rachel's experience closer to the contemporary 1960s women's lives, the feeling of shared experience and familiarity give *A Jest of God* and Rachel's experience their strength.

The title of the novel, *A Jest of God*, derives as itself from the way in which Rachel has to learn through her experience most of all the value of self-respect, both in terms of sexuality and individuality, and courage to confide in people who care about you i.e. learning the value of friendship. For Rachel to finally confide in Calla after several sleepless nights she has spent pondering over her possible pregnancy (p. 181-82) helps her to find the courage to go to the doctor and to accept the possibility of a child. This ordeal teaches her that you are neither any worse as a person nor do people who care about you think any less of you even though you sometimes may make a fool of yourself (p. 188, p. 192 and p. 205). Even more significant is the way in which Rachel

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[130] Margaret Laurence in an interview by Atwood, Margaret. "Face to Face.", p. 25.

learns through her affair with Nick and the false pregnancy to respect herself both in terms of accepting her own sexuality and becoming less concerned about what other people think of her and her actions. At the end Rachel is able to accept not only her own sexuality but also unconventional sexuality in others (p.205). Rachel's triumph over her fear of loosing face is perhaps best illustrated by Rachel's reactions when she hears from Hector Jonas that the rumors and gossip she was so afraid would go around Manawaka if she were to have an illegitimate child have been going around anyway even though she never really was pregnant (p. 207). Rachel finds out that she does not really care about the rumors – in fact she feels indifferent and even content with the fact (p. 207). This proves that she has learned that the person by whom she has to be accepted before she can feel accepted by others is herself as she herself also observes "I do not know how many bones need to be broken before I can walk. And do not know, either, how many need not have been broken at all." (p.208).

This is why one has to agree with the observation of Kristjana Gunnars that Margaret Laurence's fiction, including *A Jest of God*, share and depict Roland Barthes' view about politics being "founded existentially"[132] and about power being "not only that which oppresses or what is oppressive, it is also that which is stifling"[133]. The change that happens in Rachel's life at the end is not of a great magnitude, but it is still significant and that is part of the beauty in it: the change does not need to be earth moving to be meaningful and far-reaching. This in itself helps to express how, as Gunnars continues

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[131] Marshall, Joyce. "Margaret Laurence: A Reminiscence" in *Margaret Laurence: Critical Reflections* David Staines ed. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2001. p. 167.
[132] Gunnars, Kristjana. "Listening: Laurence's Women" in *Margaret Laurence: Critical Reflections* David Staines ed. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2001. p. 126.
[133] Gunnars, p. 126.

> … all of Laurence's fictional worlds are politically imbued. Her women protagonists are enmeshed in politics, and their attempt to speak, in fact to rejoice, is in and of itself a political act. Seen in these terms, it is easier to acknowledge that finding a voice is not easy, nor is finding a voice innocent. This is an intellectual activity, not to be underestimated. To not-speak is an act of refusal.[134]

The subtlety of Rachel's victory over the expectations of the society around her in *A Jest of God*, proves that "the simple fact of being alive [can be] a political act"[135].

Furthermore, even though *A Jest of God* emphasizes the status of women in the Canadian society it does not suggest that women should be separate or above the rest of the society and men. On the contrary, as Mathews put it, it tries to show that "the liberation of women is not a liberation into 'free' rejection of men, community, and nation, but into a state of increased equality and harmony with men and a humanized and liberated participation in community and nation"[136].

A Jest of God is indeed in many aspects a metaphor of the Canadian society in the mid 20th century, at least when it comes to the socio-political situation of women. There are clear relations in the situation the protagonist Rachel and the Canadian society, as for example was shown in chapter 3 in relation to the Abortion laws of the time, not to mention the views and opinions that the Canadian society had of women's careers and social standing. *A Jest of God* is a straightforward example of the way in which a fiction shows and contains a connection between "fictional world" and "real world". Even though the picture that fiction gives can be in some cases somewhat narrow or exaggerated, it more often than not is clear enough to bear distinct imprints and signs of the society and place that it tells about or refers to whether it is science fiction, fantasy, fiction or non-fiction, as can also be seen in *A Jest of God*. It can

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[134] Gunnars, p. 126.
[135] New, William H. "Fiction" in Carl F. Klinick, ed. in *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*. 1965 (Rep. 1976) Toronto: University of Toronto Press. p. 234.

without hesitation be said that in *A Jest of God* Laurence has managed to convey both a sense of place and time, in other words she "is not talking about life; she is trying to re-enact the responses to it" [137].

[136] Mathews, p. 139.
[137] Bowering, George. "That Fool of a Fear: Notes on *A Jest of God*" in *A Place to Stand on: Essays by and about Margaret Laurence*. George Woodcock ed. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1983. p. 225.

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