

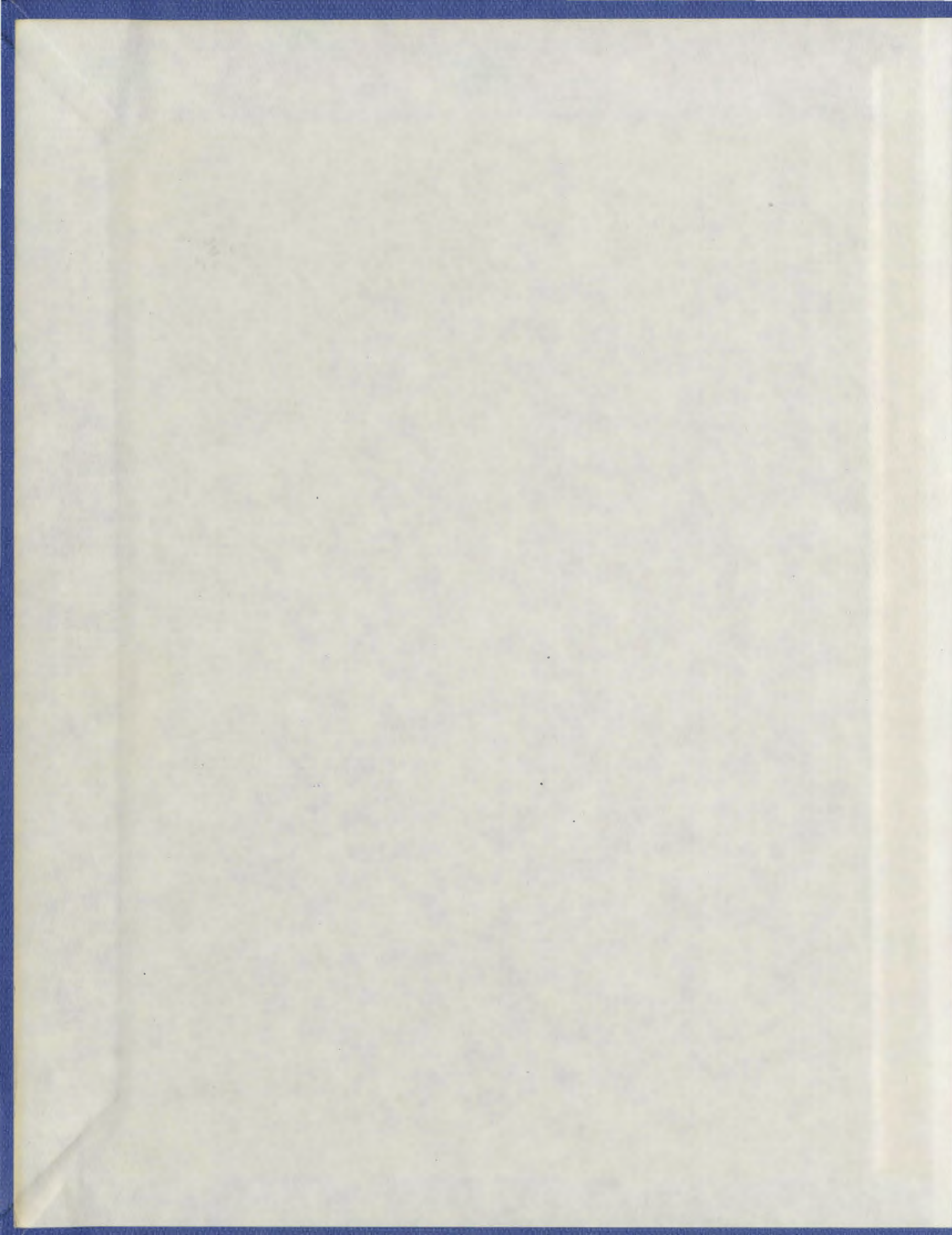
THE VALIANT STRUGGLE:  
A STUDY OF THE SHORT  
STORIES OF SINCLAIR ROSS

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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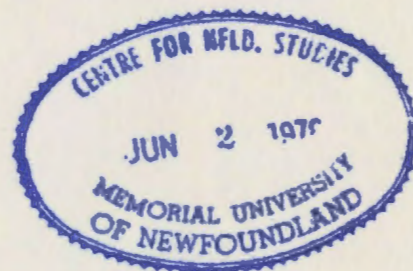
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**THE VALIANT STRUGGLE:  
A STUDY OF THE SHORT STORIES OF SINCLAIR ROSS**

by

**Wallace Byron Moores, B.A., B.Ed.**



**A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts**

**Department of English  
Memorial University of Newfoundland**

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**Newfoundland**

## ABSTRACT

This study examines in detail a neglected area of Canadian writing, the short story, and a neglected aspect of the art of Sinclair Ross. The focus of this study is not on the links between Ross's stories and novels, but on the stories themselves as together forming an independent imaginative unit. The stories are linked to each other by recurring symbols, characters, narrative patterns and themes.

Chapter One analyzes Ross's most poetic and optimistic stories. The universal tension of innocence and experience is the recurring theme of these stories and is presented through the narrative pattern of youthful conflict with monotonous reality. Chapter One traces Ross's gradual mastery of this single pattern.

Chapter Two concentrates on what are, as a whole, Ross's weakest stories. Excessively concerned with eccentric and obsessive characters, most of these stories do not embody Ross's typical balance of the elements of action, character and meaning. These tales of the misfit represent, with one notable exception, a gloomy but rather shallow view of life.

The third and final chapter is a study of those stories which are among Ross's most well-known. These stories articulate dramatically the theme of life as a cycle of struggle and disappointment. In his stories of adults in conflict, Ross creates exciting, compassionate and richly symbolic statements of human endurance. It is these stories which

are a culmination of Ross's continuing interest in the human struggle.

Several of these stories are so accomplished as to fully justify Ross's

reputation as a master of this genre.



#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Memorial University of Newfoundland and the Provincial Government of Newfoundland for their financial aid during the writing of this thesis.

My sincere thanks to Mr. Ron Wallace, my supervisor, for his valuable encouragement and advice.

#### INTRODUCTORY NOTE

This study employs an abbreviated form of footnoting. The first quotation from a story is accorded a full footnote, but subsequent quotations from that story are not: a simple parenthetical page reference is incorporated into the text, immediately after the quotation. When reference is made to another source of information during the analysis of a story, that cross-reference is also fully footnoted.

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INTRODUCTION

Reviewing Sinclair Ross's fourth novel, Sawbones Memorial, George Woodcock lamented that "It's a perpetual source of grievance among Canadian novelists that their audiences—critics and readers alike—are inclined to remember them by one book, or by the books of one particular period, and to ignore or to undervalue the rest of their works."<sup>1</sup> Woodcock was referring specifically to the fact that Ross's first novel, As For Me and My House, has tended to overshadow his three subsequent novels. The same phenomenon, however, has also obscured Ross's substantial achievement in the genre of the short story. To use Woodcock's terminology, Ross's short stories have been, if not undervalued, at least ignored. This is damaging to an understanding of Ross's artistic development as a whole: it should be remembered that Ross's first published works were short stories, many of which appeared some years before the publication of As For Me and My House in 1941. These stories generated some critical, if not public, acclaim; this passage from a review of As For Me and My House indicates that Sinclair Ross was initially seen as, first and foremost, a short story writer:

This is Mr. Ross' first novel. We have been awaiting it with eagerness. For some years now we have watched his progress in the pages of Queen's Quarterly. We have been stirred by his short stories . . .<sup>2</sup>

It is my intention to restore something of this original emphasis, to examine Ross's "progress" in the short story as a significant artistic development in itself.

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<sup>1</sup>George Woodcock, "Adele Wiseman and Sinclair Ross: Return Engagements," rev. of Sawbones Memorial by Sinclair Ross and Crackpot by Adele Wiseman, Maclean's, 87, No. 10 (October 1974), 110.

<sup>2</sup>A. M., rev. of As For Me and My House by Sinclair Ross, Queen's Quarterly, XLVIII, No. 2 (Summer 1941), 198.

Considering the acclaim that As For Me and My House has in recent years received, it is surprising that Ross's short stories, many of which preceded and clearly influenced that masterful first novel, have not been studied in depth. Rather, they have suffered from a curious sort of benign neglect: there has been casual consensus on Ross's stature as a short story writer, but this has been used to slight his recent novels. Thus Donald Stephens, reviewing Ross's third novel, Whir of Gold, asserts that "Ross is primarily a short story stylist."<sup>3</sup> John G. Moss begins his review of the same novel by stating that "Without a doubt, Sinclair Ross is one of the finest short story writers in the English language."<sup>4</sup> Such assertions require either confirmation or contradiction, in the form of a detailed analysis of the themes and techniques of the stories. The focus of this study will not be on the considerable links between Ross's short stories and novels, but on the stories themselves. It has become something of a cliché to assert that Ross's short stories deserve recognition; it is first necessary that they receive a sustained analysis.

Although Sinclair Ross has never moved in literary circles and his development as a writer has been, in a sense, in isolation, his short stories nevertheless seem very much in the mainstream of the development of that genre in Canada, as viewed by Alec Lucas:

During the period from 1920 to 1940, a marked shift in sensibility occurred. The stories remained rural in their setting for the most part, but the romantic hero, the picturesque, and the pseudohistorical gave way to the everyday person in an everyday world, if "lonely" and "bleak" do not vitiate

<sup>3</sup> Donald Stephens, "Fluid Time," rev. of Whir of Gold by Sinclair Ross, Canadian Literature, No. 48 (Spring 1971), 93.

<sup>4</sup> John G. Moss, rev. of Whir of Gold by Sinclair Ross, The Fiddlehead, No. 90 (Summer 1971), 126.



the meaning of "everyday." Indeed in the aftermath of war and during the Depression years the everyday for many was lonely and bleak. The short stories simply reflected the social conditions of an unhappy period. Their protagonists appeared in a context that denied them power, confronted as they were with overwhelming economic or natural forces. Their authors studied the individual in terms of environment, not of idealism, and were largely pessimistic vis-a-vis the earlier writers, who almost invariably made virtue triumphant. . . . Yet, if the perspective of the writer may have changed, the story was obviously moral, and frequently indignantly so, as its author questioned the justice of a capitalist system in which poverty ground down the poor or as he searched for meaning in a world where God (if He existed) seemed powerless against the forces of a senseless, if not malevolent, nature.<sup>5</sup>

Lucas seems to implicitly link Ross's short stories with the more famous tales of Morley Callaghan, for if Ross is associated with the theme of the malevolent natural environment, it is Callaghan's stories which are viewed as being critical of an unjust economic system. Just as, however, such an assessment perhaps denies the range of Callaghan's themes, so too it limits one's appreciation of Ross's short stories. Sinclair Ross's tales are in a sense an imaginative unit, expressing a view of life which is slightly less bleak and more varied than critics have recognized. Several of the stories to be dealt with in this study have received no critical attention, but do contribute to a broader view of Ross's artistic range and development, of his abilities and deficiencies in this genre, than does Lucas's generally informative survey.

The stories to be explored in this study were originally published between 1934 and 1972. The majority of these stories arose out of and reflect the prairie experience of the 1930's and 1940's, although several date from the early 1950's. In 1968 nine of Ross's stories, most of which originally appeared in Queen's Quarterly, were republished in The

<sup>5</sup> Alec Lucas, ed., "Introduction" to Great Canadian Short Stories (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1971), pp. 2-3.

Lamp at Noon and Other Stories. Despite the considerable gap in time between Ross's earliest and most recent stories, they can be grouped in terms of their major themes. The stories to be dealt with in the first chapter are sensitive and poetic portraits of imaginative rural youths struggling to escape the monotonous prairie realities. These stories present a bittersweet view of the painful but valuable experiences of youth. The stories to be examined in Chapter Two are not marked by such a warm, vivid narrative voice, and present a rather dark view of experience. These stories are concerned with grotesque or eccentric characters, misfits who struggle with burdens of guilt, sin and responsibility. The third and final chapter is an analysis of those stories by Ross which depict the struggles of husbands and wives with each other and with the stormy realities of life. Although these are perhaps Ross's most acclaimed stories, they form only part of his total expression in the genre of the short story.

Sinclair Ross's short stories all share a concern with human conflict and, I suggest, use realistic human situations to pose universal questions. To achieve this symbolic and metaphorical end, Ross employs a variety of techniques which warrant detailed analysis: there is Ross's creation of an intense relation between the external and internal worlds of man, his use of a seemingly simple but deceptively allusive prose style, his concentration on the brief, dramatic moment of illuminating human response to external reality and his development of an organic group of symbols. Ross's stories range from the poetic to the dramatic, from the nostalgic to the embittered. They do not express only a tragic point of view. Ross's characters range from the sensitive rural youth to the eccentric soldier, from the stolid farmer to his distraught wife.

These characters act and react in simple, recurring situations which incorporate recurring images of glorious horses, monotonous farm labour, oppressive storms, metaphorical soaring and cyclical human struggle.

These few elements form the basis of what I believe is Ross's extensive, orchestrated and thoughtful world-view, as explored and developed in the short stories about to be examined in this study.



CHAPTER I

CHILDHOOD SOARING

At one point in Sinclair Ross's third novel, Whir of Gold, the protagonist, Sonny McAlpine, recalls the advice of his former music teacher: "Slowly, smoothly--slowly, smoothly--the good steed Impetuosity must submit to the reins of Discipline."<sup>1</sup> Her counsel is a fitting introduction to Ross's short stories, as the first group of stories to be examined in this study is concerned with the struggle between youthful impetuosity and mature restraint. Moreover, the "steed" analogy is of importance in Ross's stories, crucial to action and meaning. Specifically concerned with the experience of prairie youths, the stories to be viewed in this first chapter chronicle the first glimpses of the adult reality. There are painful confrontations with the world of adult necessity, but there are also dreams of escape. A further passage from Whir of Gold illustrates the essential process of this first type of story: "The long empty hours and the long empty miles--you soared in desperation, dreamed in defiance of the monotony" (p. 177). Sinclair Ross makes repeated use of metaphorical soaring to represent the youthful urge to rebel. In the imaginative soaring there is Ross's optimism. In the brevity of this release is his awareness of the poignant inevitability of the adult world.

The stories to be examined in this chapter--"Circus in Town" (1936), "A Day with Pegasus" (1938), "Cornet at Night" (1939), "The Outlaw" (1950), and "Saturday Night" (1951)--all make specific reference to youthful soaring. The children of these stories all soar "in desperation" because their spirited rebellion inevitably gives way to a painful accommodation of adult reality. The youths move from frustration with

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<sup>1</sup> Sinclair Ross, Whir of Gold (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), pp. 72-73.

the mundane reality of the farm to momentary escape from that reality, and finally back again to reality. "Circus in Town," first published in 1936, represents Sinclair Ross's first treatment of this type of childhood experience. This story is valuable more for its flaws than its strengths; it has the structure Ross uses in succeeding stories of childhood soaring and embodies his recurring techniques without having a substantial narrative framework. These techniques can therefore be isolated and examined in "Circus in Town," as an introduction to their more subtle function in later stories.

The circus of this first story, or rather the circus poster, is the first of the symbols Ross creates which evoke the youthful longing for release from the farm life:

The bit of poster had spun a new world before her, excited her, given wild, soaring impetus to her imagination; and now, without in the least understanding herself, she wanted the excitement and the soaring, even though it might stab and rack her, rather than the barren satisfaction of believing that in life there was nothing better, nothing more vivid or dramatic, than her own stableyard.<sup>2</sup>

This is the response of eleven-year-old Jenny to a tattered advertisement. Jenny responds as an imaginative child to what the poster symbolizes. She is the first of Ross's fictional youths to respond symbolically to some external object, and to create out of that object an internal fantasy. The adult reactions to the poster are also significant, for Jenny's father, mother and brother all respond to it in other than literal terms. Jenny is rebuffed by her father for scaring his horses with her fluttering poster; she must not interfere with the world of adult necessity by upsetting the work horses. If Jenny's father

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<sup>2</sup>Sinclair Ross, "Circus in Town," in his The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), p. 68.

rejects the imaginative world of the poster, her mother is, in contrast, alive to its symbolic possibilities:

"Never mind, Jenny." A hot hand gentle on her cheek a minute.  
 "Your day's going to come. You won't spend all your life  
 among chickens and cows or I'm not the woman I think I am!"  
 And then, bewilderingly, an angry clatter of stove-lids that  
 made her shrink away dismayed, in sudden dread of her father's  
 coming and the storm that was to break. (p. 69)

The "storm" of marital conflict is really a debate about the quality of the life being lived, with its poverty and uncertainty: "Her mother shouted about working her fingers to the bone and nothing for it but skimping and debts. She didn't mind for herself but she wanted Jenny to have a chance" (p. 69).

This conflict is generated by a seemingly harmless circus poster. Clearly the characters in the story, as well as the reader, see this poster as a symbol of a whole way of life outside the farm experience. Each character infuses the poster with a personal significance. Jenny escapes into the fantasy of an imaginary circus, thus implicitly rejecting the real world around her. Her father, driven by the necessities of the farm, must reject outright the imaginative world; therefore, he brusquely rebuffs Jenny. Tom, Jenny's older brother, senses her soaring response to the poster and reflects that "perhaps in picking up the poster he had been unworthy of his own seventeen years" (p. 68). Tom is closer than Jenny to the adult world, but his guilt cannot be understood as the result of giving her a harmless poster. There is in his self-reproach the mature and sympathetic realization that Jenny will probably never see a circus, never get beyond the life of the farm. Tom, bridging the worlds of adult and child, has the youthful impulse to give his sister a poster clouded by the adult perception that the promise of the poster may never

be realized. Jenny's mother has a similar perception, but responds in anger, determined her child will have certain opportunities. Tom responds with compassion. In an awkward and premature attempt to console Jenny, he deprecates the circus she will not be allowed to attend as not even worth seeing. Tom has retrieved a colourful poster for Jenny only to finally feel guilty for this innocent act. Of all the characters in "Circus in Town," he is the most complex. He is a transitional figure, able to sympathize with the soaring of a child as well as with the limitations of an adult. His changing nature is signalled by his complex response to the poster. At the end of the story, when Jenny escapes to the stable loft with her dreams at least temporarily intact, it is Tom who calls, in the voice of adult responsibility: "'You'll catch it . . . hiding up here instead of helping with the dishes'" (p. 72). Tom's words are less a threat than a warning, spoken with compassion.

Tom may be the most complex figure in "Circus in Town" but he too has his essential nature fixed by his symbolic response to the torn circus poster. The father rejects the world beyond the farm but the mother strives to make it real for her daughter. Jenny escapes into a fantasy and rejects the reality of the farm. Her brother, in his twisted guilt for an innocent act, seems to bridge both the adult and the child-like responses to the poster. All the characters define themselves by their responses to an external object, a harmless poster. All the responses reveal the essential qualities of the lives being lived by the members of the family. Jenny manages to preserve her imaginative world, to fight off her fear of her mother's dark prophecy--"Another ten years--can't you just see the big gawky know-nothing she's going to be?" (p. 70)--and to create her own circus, "the splendid, matchless circus



of a little girl who had never seen one" (p. 71). This is, however, very much of a Pyrrhic victory, for Jenny retreats into dream and savours her own circus but does no more than preserve a fixed, static construct. She is not a developing character to the extent that even her brother is. He is a more interesting character, torn between adult and child, but he is in the background and his development is largely to be inferred.

The essential flaw of "Circus in Town" is that the circus poster, to which all the characters respond and therefore define themselves, is not altogether credible as the catalyst for these personal revelations of character and meaning. There needs to be some credible dramatic action to bring about the mother's anger and despair, for example. The circus poster as symbol and catalyst is too obviously a literary device, and realism is threatened by the absence of human action equal to the symbolic action. Compounding the problem of static, mechanical responses to the circus poster is the static quality of Jenny's vision, its essential escapism, and the sentimental glow in the narrative.

"Circus in Town" raises the conflict of youthful dream and adult reality only to gloss it over in a sentimental conclusion. The prose is best when it embodies the differences between adult and child. Thus we learn of the "quiver" in Jenny's voice, but of the "drawl" of Tom. Also, Jenny "pirouetted," "shivered," "gulped," "wheeled" and "pierced." There is a fierce vitality evident in these minor details, which creates a real sense of Jenny's youthfulness. She is the first of Ross's fictional youths to "soar." Her escapist vision anticipates the more complex soaring of other characters. Jenny escapes into the "dim, high stillness" (p. 71) of the loft, dreaming of her circus, of the "arched" neck of an imaginary horse. The real horse, the "skittish old roan Billie" (p. 69)

is imaginatively transformed into "A young, fleet-footed Billie" (p. 72). The images of soaring and of the rejuvenated horse have an implicit poignancy, for Jenny's dream surely cannot last. There must come the inevitable return to reality. That does not occur in "Circus in Town," but it is a natural development in "A Day with Pegasus."

First published in 1938, "A Day with Pegasus" reaches beyond the sentimental conclusion of "Circus in Town," where a dream is cherished and preserved--"to scale the glamour and wonder of it, . . . to feel herself unfurl" (p. 71)--to a child's consideration of the mysteries of life. Here, the vision is set in the real world, in a quality of experience rather than in an escape from experience. Again, the story focuses on a farm youth struggling for imaginative if not literal release from the constrictions of the farm. In "Circus in Town" there are brief glimpses of the real and imaginary forms of Billie, the farm horse. The story ends with Jenny's dream of a young, sleek and beautiful Billie as a circus performer. "A Day with Pegasus" takes this idea as its starting-point: the boy in this story eagerly awaits the birth of a colt previously promised to him. He is therefore already much closer to the reality of the horse than was Jenny, since he will have to confront the real animal. Jenny, in contrast, luxuriated in "her own circus; the splendid, matchless circus of a little girl who had never seen one" (p. 71). Peter Parker of "A Day with Pegasus" has dreams like Jenny, but unlike her he must come to terms with the reality of a wobbly, blind, new-born colt.

Like Jenny who enjoys slowly feeling herself "unfurl," Peter Parker prefers to postpone the suspect reality and nourish his beautiful dream of the colt:

It was some instinct perhaps of emotional thrift, warning him that so fierce and strange a tingle of expectancy ought to be prolonged a little--some vague apprehension that in Biddy's stall there might be less than he had seen already.<sup>3</sup>

Initially the awkward new-born colt is no match for the dream colt, "fleet of limb, possessed [of] a fire and beauty that enslaved him now, that he could not abandon for the bleary-eyed reality in Biddy's stall" (p. 108). Peter, like Jenny in "Circus in Town", has the impulse to simply escape into fantasy, but unlike her he must confront reality. Thus the sentimentality of the conclusion of "Circus in Town" is avoided in "A Day with Pegasus." Peter's development is a logical extension from Jenny's pathetic, isolated dreaming, as Ross realizes that the dream world cannot be preserved indefinitely, even for or by a child. The real colt in "A Day with Pegasus" provides the catalyst lacking in "Circus in Town."

The adult world of "Circus in Town" is seen only indirectly and inferentially through glimpses of the farm routine and the comments of Jenny's father, mother and brother. The adult world assumes a larger significance in "A Day with Pegasus" as Ross starkly contrasts the two worlds the child occupies;

It was the colt, the colt he had raced with before breakfast across the garden, that made the feeding of the calves this morning such a humiliation. . . . Nigger--Daisy--Dot--as stupid and silly as their names, gurgling and blowing at him till there was no colt left at all--until for beginnings again he had to steal back to the stable and pay another visit to the box-stall. (p. 109).

The above paragraph begins and ends with the colt. The first reference is to the imaginary steed and to an imaginary ride. The mundane reality

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<sup>3</sup> Sinclair Ross, "A Day with Pegasus" in Rudy Wiebe, ed., intro., Stories from Western Canada (Toronto: The Macmillan Company of Canada, 1972), p. 106.

of the farm, the monotony of feeding the "stupid" calves, then leads Peter to consider the real colt in the box-stall. There are three elements interacting: the dream horse, the real farm world and the real colt. The movement in the above passage is from dream to "humiliation" to comfort in the real colt. It is a microcosm for the structure of the whole story; the return to the real colt indicates the significant development from the escapism of "Circus in Town." This simple pattern is repeated throughout Peter's day. The monotony of the farm chores is replaced by the monotony of the classroom, where again Peter escapes into dreams. Specifically, he writes a composition:

"Something that you'll enjoy," Miss Kinley beamed at them over her glasses. "How you spent last Saturday. Just a little story about the little things you did." (p. 114)

Peter's essay is in fact the verbalization of his own soaring fantasies. That is, he gives concrete form to his dreams by setting them down in words, thus presenting them for all the world to see. It is a realization of his escapist fantasies. Peter, unlike Jenny in "Circus in Town," acts on his dreams, taking the major step of communicating them to others. He soars first in his imaginary ride and again in his composition:

He wrote and wrote. Because on the one hand it was impossible not to write at all, because Miss Kinley's threats were never idle; and because on the other it was equally impossible to write about last Saturday in its long-drawn, potato-planting reality. So he transformed it, soared above the limitations of mere time and distance. All the glamour and bravura of the rodeos he had never seen was there, . . . all the steadfastness of his vanished comradeship with Slim. (p. 115)

Miss Kinley wants the facts of Saturday, the adult reality of planting potatoes. She is "aghast" at Peter's transformation of, his soaring above, the facts. Peter, like Jenny, has soared in his imagi-

nation. Unlike her, Peter is forced down to earth. Just as the earlier "humiliation" of feeding the calves had drawn Peter from the imaginary to the real colt, so his latest humiliation of having to re-write his composition leads him again to thoughts of the real colt. His second composition is a drab, factual account of the dreary day of work. From this punishment Peter escapes to the real colt, "all his pride in a peerless horse become a humble need to draw comfort from a wobbly-legged one" (p. 116). At the end of "Circus in Town" Tom warns his sister: "'You'll catch it. . .'"<sup>4</sup> We are told, however, that she is not deterred by this threat. In "A Day with Pegasus" the approach is more realistic, for the threat of punishment expressed in "Circus in Town" is realized in "A Day with Pegasus." Peter does in fact "catch it," and the adult punishment, the class-room humiliation, leads naturally to the search for comfort in the real horse. This is a more credible situation than one in which a child is seemingly immune to punishment and able to preserve her dream-world intact. Peter develops and goes beyond his dreams, but Jenny is pathetically secure in her fantasy and cut off from further growth as a character.

Through the "humiliation" of his composition and through defending the honor of his colt from the sneers of his class-mates, Peter gradually comes to terms with the "frail reality" (p. 109) in the stall: "The colt, now that he had actually championed it, seemed more real, more dependable . . ." (p. 114). Peter has a respect for the spirit of the animal, for what it is as well as what it might become. He has been initiated into an imaginative understanding of the colt, so that symbol becomes real,

<sup>4</sup> Sinclair Ross, "Circus in Town," p. 72.



and he moves beyond the fantasies of Jenny. Like Jenny, Peter retreats to the stable loft, a place of elevation and escape. Like her, he is called by the adult voice of an older brother from below. Unlike Jenny, however, Peter turns to the external world of the prairie landscape, and his thoughts expand to ponder the mysteries of life rather than the imagined beauty of a circus or a horse:

A little door in the loft that they used for throwing in feed was open, and he sat down on its sill, his legs dangling out against the stable wall. Before him the prairie spread alight with slanting sun and early grain. For a few miles it fell gently, then with a long slow swell slipped over the horizon. There was a state of mind, a mood, a restfulness, in which one could skim along this curve of prairie floor and, gathering momentum from the downward swing, glide up again and soar away from earth. (p. 118)

Peter soars, "borne by a white-limbed steed again" (p. 118). Now, however, there is the sobering adult awareness of the mystery of life, "a mystery still but intimate, a heartening gleam upon the roof of life to let him see its vault and spaciousness" (p. 118). Perhaps the mystery concerns the miraculous birth of Peter's colt, or the inexplicable maturing of Peter's brother Dan, lately become "such a meddlesome old Miss Kinley . . ." (p. 117). Perhaps the mystery is in Peter's own changed perception of dream and reality. At any rate, it is significant that Peter is in touch with the prairie landscape, however much he soars above it imaginatively. The land slipping over the horizon and the lowering sun create a scene which, if it does not trigger Peter's meditations, certainly complements his mood of restfulness. The use of landscape in this final soaring which embraces rather than excludes reality creates a conclusion more poetically suggestive but less sentimental than that of "Circus in Town."

In "Circus in Town" the angry response of Jenny's mother to a

toen poster is suspect because it seems exaggerated and histrionic. Into "A Day with Pegasus" Ross infuses more substantial human action, the writing of a composition, that is a credible catalyst for Peter's development. Jenny's mother, in "Circus in Town," responds to the poster with pity for her child and anger towards her husband, anger possibly tinged with a sense of desperation. This pattern continues in "A Day with Pegasus" as Sinclair Ross carefully notes Miss Kinley's poignant response to Peter's first composition:

She was more distressed than angry. It was something she had never encountered before, something that evaded her ordinary, time-tried classifications of good conduct and bad.

(p. 115)

The anger and pity of Jenny's mother are rather one-dimensional traits, but they do anticipate the more complex response of Miss Kinley quoted above. In "A Day with Pegasus," "The Outlaw" and "Cornet at Night," adult responses to the central action or imagery range from embarrassed and repressed pride to a strange, inarticulate sense of helplessness. Miss Kinley's reaction to Peter's composition in "A Day with Pegasus" anticipates that of the father to the music in "Cornet at Night." Both characters express a certain distress, agitation or helplessness upon recognition of something foreign to their rural adult world. As the catalyst grows in complexity from inanimate poster in "Circus in Town" to the human act of writing a composition in "A Day with Pegasus," so too the human responses to the catalyst grow in complexity, from the anger of Jenny's mother to the more significant "distress" of Miss Kinley.

Jenny's older brother Tom in "Circus in Town" has a parallel in Peter's brother Dan, for both serve as mediating figures between the

worlds of child and adult. Dan's approval of the new-born colt, the "quality of reverence" (p. 108) he reveals, is a bond between the brothers despite their difference in age. Dan, like Jenny's brother Tom in "Circus in Town," is in the process of assuming a full adult role:

Dan was like that of late. Clean hands, good table manners, polite answers--ever since he started going with his girl friend--as if all at once it was his responsibility how the whole family behaved. (p.117)

Dan drives a team of horses, but Peter's mythologized hero Slim rides them gloriously; Dan, while bridging the worlds of adult and child, is seen by Peter as compromised and wasted. The contrast between Dan and Slim is a complement to the conflict between the real and the imaginary colt, so that Ross provides the older brother of "A Day with Pegasus" with a major role. Dan, like Jenny's brother Tom in "Circus in Town," calls to Peter at the end of the story from below, but that voice is pathetically limited and compromised. It is ineffective in reaching Peter's soaring imagination. More than Jenny in "Circus in Town," Peter embraces the opposites of dream and reality, the mysteries of life, in his soaring.

The sentimental glow of Jenny's dream is not evident in "A Day with Pegasus" because there is a greater presence of the real world in this story. To balance the risk of sentimentality in the child's vision of the world, Ross adopts in "A Day with Pegasus" a humorous and therefore distancing approach to his material. The elaborate machinations Peter uses to manoeuvre the conversation of his class-mates to the subject of his colt is an example of this refinement of Ross's narrative voice.

For last winter when he told Rusty Martin and the others about the colt they had laughed; and it was to settle that score, not to slight Skinny, that this noon he had chosen the steps for lunch. With the exception of Skinny not one of them had a horse of his own anyway. . . . They wouldn't laugh now. They wouldn't say it was a funny Christmas present you had to wait five months for. His eyes narrowed as he watched them. It was hard holding back. The blood was pounding in his temples and his stomach felt small and tight. (p. 112)

"Momentously," Peter introduces the subject of his colt. The humour in the above passage is that of an older narrator looking at the great schemes of the child. The tone underlines the vivid quality of the child's vision but also, by its humour, maintains a narrative distance from that vision.

The visionary soaring that is an important element of Ross's tales of childhood experience and that necessitates a balancing, humorous tone is typified by such lyrical prose as is seen in this passage from

"A Day with Pegasus":

Then suddenly he was mounted, and the still May morning sprang in whistling wind around his ears. Field after field reeled up and fell away. The earth resounded thundering, then dimmed and dropped until it seemed they cleaved their way through flashing light . . . (pp. 109-110)

Clearly, such prose might be suspect, its author accused of over-writing, in any context other than that of the dreams of youth. Even this prose, however, is more effective than that of "Circus in Town," as it is strengthened by the discipline of an over-all humorous tone absent from the earlier story. Also, there is in "A Day with Pegasus" the added element of vital, gripping action absent from Jenny's dream in "Circus in Town." The sudden, active quality of young Jenny, "pirouetting," leads in "A Day with Pegasus" to a concern with the essence of action, with vitality and physical movement as things beautiful in themselves.

Lean and spare Sinclair Ross's prose may be, but the elements of economy,

humour and lyricism indicate that it is not simple. The prose is functional, practical and aimed at specific effects, as in the visual contrast between Peter's first, lyrical composition and his second, drab essay. In "A Day with Pegasus" and subsequent stories of childhood soaring by Ross, the prose strikes the necessary balance between deflating humour and sentimental lyricism. The style contains and controls the various elements in the story.

In "Circus in Town", a minor aspect of Jenny's dream is the proud circus horse Billie, an imaginary transformation of the plodding, real work-horse. There is, then, a minor contrast between dream and reality in the contrasting visions of Billie. In "A Day with Pegasus", the same technique is evident in the contrast between Peter's imaginary, fiery colt and the real, helpless, new-born colt. There is a more complex use of horses and a more subtle distinction between types of horse in "A Day with Pegasus" than in "Circus in Town." The central animals in "A Day with Pegasus" are the new-born and the imaginary colts, but there are others present:

Nearly all their horses were Biddy's colts or grand-colts. Big, rangy, hairy-footed Clydes, and yet with twice the dash and spirit of the horses that he knew on other farms. Because Biddy had a strain of racing blood. Even after nearly twenty years of foal-bearing and the plough, she herself always pranced a little as they led her out of the stable. (p. 107)

The important distinction Ross insists on in this passage is that between plodding work-horse and spirited racer. Even a trace of "racing blood" is an object of pride, a straw to be grasped, another manifestation of the impulse to fantasize and escape into a world beyond the farm. The important, redeeming quality of an animal, the quality to be respected and shared imaginatively, is its spirit. Even adults make a point of



respecting this spirit, as a point of honour, almost part of an unspoken creed. Thus, in "A Day with Pegasus," "in Dan's smile as he appraised the colt there had been a quality of reverence that established between them a kinship stronger than the disparity of eleven years" (p. 108).

There is a bond of reverence for the essential spirit and quality of the animal. The strain of racing blood, the arched neck of Jenny's imaginary Billie, speak to adult and child alike of an inner quality of freedom and beauty in animals; a quality not yet destroyed by years of monotonous labour. The horse as symbol either beckons to a future of promise or mocks the failures of the present. Individuals in Sinclair Ross's short stories respond to horses, as to a circus poster, symbolically; there, too, the horse is a far more convincing catalyst than is a circus poster. As in a mirror, the children of Ross's stories see in beautiful animals the promise of the future, but the adults see only the shoddy present. The external object mirrors the internal state of the perceiver.

What one traces in "A Day with Pegasus" is the development of a natural symbolism that is an organic part of the story as a whole rather than an imposed effect. With "Cornet at Night," first published in 1939, this development continues as Ross creates a credible, substantial, central incident which generates significantly different responses in both adult and child. In "Cornet at Night," the split perceptions arise out of a specific incident and are therefore more realistic than the obviously literary and imposed responses to Jenny's poster in "Circus in Town." The conflict between adult and child, glimpsed in the incident of Peter's composition in "A Day with Pegasus," is in "Cornet at Night" dramatically central to the story. With the greater emphasis in "Cornet at Night" than in the two previous stories on the adult response to the

central incident or symbol, there is a consequent darkening vision of life. Instead of the brief humiliation of Peter Parker in "A Day with Pegasus" there is in "Cornet at Night" an insistent, inescapable adult reality which even a child must accept.

Tommy Dickson, the eleven-year-old farm boy in "Cornet at Night," is charged with the adult responsibilities of going to town to barter eggs for groceries and of finding a hired hand to help with the harvest. Significantly, his father is beginning to call him Tom; this first trip into town alone can be understood as an initiation into manhood. His development is further complicated by the background of parental conflict, which Tommy internalizes. That is, Tommy seems a participant in the marital conflict, unlike Jenny in "Circus in Town" who is no more than an observer of her parents' squabbles. Jenny retreats into dreams, safe from the arguments of her parents. Tommy Dickson is a more complex figure because he mirrors the struggle of his parents and is almost the battleground for them. Tommy, says Robert D. Chambers in his book on Sinclair Ross and Ernest Buckler, is torn between the conflicting values of his parents:

His father's great compulsion is the crop; ripe wheat will be harvested, Sunday or not. Tommy's mother warns of the vengeance that will be reaped by breaking the Sabbath, or keeping Tommy home to help with the harvest.<sup>5</sup>

The role of the circus poster in "Circus in Town" is dubious, for a circus is hardly a vital and necessary part of farm life but an extrinsic luxury which Ross has imposed on his characters. As a catalyst, therefore, the poster is weak. In contrast, the question of harvesting one's

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<sup>5</sup>Robert D. Chambers, Sinclair Ross and Ernest Buckler (Toronto: Copp Clark Publishing, 1975), p. 20.

crop, "Sunday or not," seems a more authentic vehicle for polarizing different points of view, as it is a question of life-and-death proportions. It is crucial to the economic survival of the farm. It is more authentic and relevant to the reality of farm life than is a symbolically inflated poster. Also, Tommy, torn between his parents, is allied first with one and then the other, so that marital conflict is a basic, internalized part of the action and the tension developed in the story. Thus, while the father cuts his wheat on Sunday, mother and son "spend an austere half-hour in the dark, hot, plushy little parlour. It was a kind of vicarious atonement. . . ."<sup>6</sup> Later, Tommy assumes the role of the adult male during his trip to town.

Tommy's mother encourages him to play hymns and classical pieces on their piano, but he has difficulty with the Sons of Liberty piece, which his mother assumes mere perseverance can overcome. Tommy cannot discipline his playing, for he is too emotionally involved with the music: "I know I'd do better if I didn't feel that way and could keep slow and steady like Miss Wiggins" (pp. 45-46). Like the young Sonny McAlpine in Whir of Gold, Tommy is caught between his impetuous delight in playing music and his need for disciplined practice. Both incidents reveal the central tension between youthful freedom and mature restraint, which is the theme of Ross's stories of childhood soaring. The dominant metaphors vary, from the animal to the musical worlds, from the horse in "A Day with Pegasus" to the music of the cornet in "Cornet at Night." In either case, the process is the same: the experience of brief, joyful soaring leads inevitably back to the real world and reveals the essential

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<sup>6</sup>Sinclair Ross, "Cornet at Night," in his The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories, p. 36.

quality of individuals' lives by generating significant human responses to that adoring.

The mediating figure between the adult and the child in "Cornet at Night" is Philip Coleman, a musician whom Tommy hires to help with the harvest. He is also the essential catalyst in the story, for it is his presence which generates significant conflicting responses among the members of the Dickson family. Coleman is clearly an inappropriate choice as hired hand, unsuited for and inexperienced in harvesting. Sinclair Ross uses the significant detail of Coleman's hands to indicate just how poor a choice he is as a labourer, and also to suggest why Tommy hires him:

His hands were slender, almost a girl's hands, yet vaguely with their shapely quietness they troubled me, because, however slender and smooth, they were yet hands to be reckoned with, strong with a strength that was different from the rugged labour-strength I knew. (p. 42)

Tommy, himself an amateur musician, responds to the aesthetic strength of Coleman's hands. His choice of Coleman is in effect a defiance of the values of the farm. He has chosen a radically different course, alien to the farm. Tommy has not chosen as his father would have: he has followed his aesthetic and youthful impulse in disregarding the realities of his father's world.

In "Cornet at Night," the child deliberately chooses to realize a dream by choosing Philip Coleman as the hired hand, just as in "A Day with Pegasus" Peter Parker deliberately realizes his dream by giving it concrete form in his composition. Peter's composition is a harmless creation, but Tommy's choice of the wrong sort of man can have more serious consequences, since it can affect the success of the whole harvest. The issue in "Cornet at Night" is definitely serious, going

beyond the concerns of the child, for Tommy in fact jeopardizes the adult and real necessity of the harvest, with his aesthetic soul-mate. With this more complex structure, the adult point of view needs no caricatures or one-dimensional mouthpieces, but emerges naturally from the circumstances of the story itself, from the inevitable clash of two world-views. This is evident at the end of the story with the simple, understated truth of "You always have to put the harvest first" (p. 51). The strength of this story is not simply in the clash of child and man but in the tragic rightness of this quotation. The harvest is demonstrated to be the reality which is above any luxuries of human emotion and sensitivity. Ross's outlook in "Cornet at Night" is tragic; all the characters are, finally, sacrificed to the harvest.

Predictably, Coleman's stay is brief and painful. More important than his failure are the insights of father, mother and son which his presence generates. In the pattern of the older brother in "Circus in Town" and "A Day with Pegasus," Philip Coleman is a mediator between the worlds of adult and child. Because, however, he is an exotic outsider to Tommy, he represents more the ideal than the real older brother. He is, in his glamour and mystery, similar to Peter's mythologized cowboy, Slim, in "A Day with Pegasus," not to the real, compromised brother, Dan. Philip Coleman nevertheless eases Tommy's passage into the adult world. When Tommy confesses his lack of discipline as a musician, Coleman, with a significant analogy to horses, advises Tommy to harness, but not to overcome, his spontaneous delight in music. Like the other young adults seen in the earlier stories, Coleman tries to fuse mature self-discipline with youthful energy. His primary function, however, is that of catalyst. He plays music which effects a transformation in the world of the farm:



And I was right: when they came the notes were piercing, golden as the cornet itself, and they gave life-expanse that it had never known before. They floated up against the night, and each for a moment hung there clear and visible. Sometimes they mounted poignant and sheer. Sometimes they soared and then . . . fell and brushed earth again. (p. 49)

Again Sinclair Ross turns to the image of soaring to express the sense of escape into an expanding, wondrous world beyond the farm. Both "Circus in Town" and "A Day with Pegasus" end on this optimistic note of elevating release, but in "Cornet at Night" one returns to earth in the end, after the gloriously uplifting music, with the necessary dismissal of Coleman.

Anticipating this dismissal, and of a piece with it, is the evidence of adult responses to the music of the cornet. For the child, the music means romance and escape. For his father, the music is a kind of reproach, recalling the "distress" of the teacher in "A Day with Pegasus":

It was helplessness, though, not anger. Helplessness to escape his wheat when wheat was not enough, when something more than wheat had just revealed itself. (p. 50)

The child can escape from the wheat imaginatively into music, but the father cannot, must not. In the two responses are the polarities of youthful optimism and adult pessimism. The mother's response to the music and to Coleman's failure as a hired hand is left in doubt, but "she had been listening, too, and she may have understood" (p. 51). Her surface reaction is to retreat behind self-righteousness, to gloss over the real meaning of Coleman's visit and find in it divine punishment for harvesting on Sunday: "Next time he'll maybe listen to me--and remember the Sabbath Day" (p. 51). This is a poignant and feeble attempt to defend from attack the meagre lives being lived on the farm, to provide a kind of perverse support to her husband, who is crippled by a sense of

his own helplessness. The complexity of human responses to a deceptively simple incident--soaring elation, a sense of helplessness and false piety--indicates the technical improvement in "Cornet at Night" over the similar but more simplistic approach in "Circus in Town." The music of the cornet and in fact the whole presence of Philip Coleman is a central symbol of the great world beyond, to which all members of the Dickson family respond with a revealing depth and poignancy. The meaning of the whole story, then, radiates outward from the music, which either transforms or mocks lives, in any case illuminating the central quality of the lives being lived. The power of the story is in its tragic overtones, in the absence of villains such as Miss Kinley in "A Day with Pegasus" and in the awareness that the harvest must come first.

This hard edge of reality is present throughout the story. Philip Coleman, for example, seems a doomed figure, a mysterious failure as a musician and a pathetic outsider in the rural environment. Nothing is revealed of his past, so that he is a figure of considerable mystery. There is also a bitterness, frustration and pettiness in the parental squabbles and in the "unappetizing righteousness" (p. 37) of the repressive religion of the mother. The major reason for the tough realism of "Cornet at Night," however, is the double vision of the first-person retrospective narrator, who is aware of both the soaring music and the tragic limitations of prairie life. Because the voice is retrospective, it can embrace both the lyrical moments of release and the pervading atmosphere of mature acceptance of the farm reality. The narrative voice is almost by definition bittersweet; it is therefore the perfect vehicle for contrasting youth and age, idealism and necessity. The retrospective first-person narrator can re-create his youthful experience of soaring,

but from an adult point of view which tempers the sentimentality of the child's vision. This complex narrative voice is complemented by a rather intricate use of symbolism in "Cornet at Night." Instead of the claustrophobic concern with a child's perceptions, as in "Circus in Town," Ross in "Cornet at Night" details the multiple effects of a central symbolic event, the music of the cornet, on several characters. There is, then, an expansion of symbolic effect, with the multiplicity of responses to the music.

The richly ambiguous narrative voice is most effective at the end of "Cornet at Night," where it embraces the various moods of youth and adult:

I wanted to rebel against what was happening, against the clumsiness and crudity of life, but instead I stood quiet a moment, almost passive, then wheeled away and carried out his cornet to the buggy. My mother was already there, with a box of lunch and some ointment for his sunburn. She said she was sorry things had turned out this way, and thanking her politely he said that he was sorry too. My father looked uncomfortable, feeling, no doubt, that we were all unjustly blaming everything on him. It's like that on a farm. You always have to put the harvest first. (p. 51)

It is impossible to determine whether it is the child or the adult who voices these evocative words. It is therefore impossible to define the tone of "You always have to put the harvest first," as this statement embraces both youthful bitterness and mature resignation. The impulse to rebel is clearly that of the youth; it is surely the adult who sees "the clumsiness and crudity of life," however. The matter-of-fact tone of "she said she was sorry" and "he said he was sorry" indicates an understated suppression of emotion which further contributes to the ambiguity and complexity of the narrative voice, thus leaving the conclusion open-ended in tone and interpretation. The sentimental glow of the

child's soaring vision never dominates the tone of "Cornet at Night," because the realistic course of events in this story simply does not permit such sentimentality. Elsewhere, the infusion of light, distancing humour keeps even the most pleasant events in perspective:

For a farm boy is like that. Alone with himself and his horse he cuts a fine figure. He is the measure of the universe. He foresees a great many encounters with life, and in them all acquits himself a little more than creditably. He is fearless, resourceful; a bit of a brag. His horse never contradicts.

(p. 40)

The affectionate but rueful tone in the above passage implies the present, inescapable realities of the adult world. The tone, like the music of the cornet, embraces positive and negative, the sense of soaring and individual growth as well as the awareness of definite limitations.

As in the previous stories examined in this chapter, horses play a significant role in "Cornet at Night." There is Tommy's pony, Clipper: "There was a wind this sunny August morning, tanged with freedom and departure, and . . . Clipper whinnied for a race with it" (p. 36). In contrast to the free spirit of Clipper and of the music of the cornet, there is old, reliable Rock, a disciplined work-horse, and of course the repressive religion of Tommy's mother. There is, then, even in minor details a thematic contrast between freedom and discipline, which leads naturally to the final sentence of the story, counterpointing effectively these conflicting values: "A harvest, however lean, is certain every year; but a cornet at night is golden only once" (p. 51). Tommy thus accepts the passing of the music, but honours its essential, "golden" quality. He goes beyond his youthful soaring, but does not betray in retrospect the integrity of that experience, does not denigrate it from an adult point of view. Of all the "lessons" in "Cornet at Night"—

Tommy's plodding music lessons, Coleman's unsuccessful lessons in stooking and the shallowly pious lesson Tommy's mother draws from Coleman's incompetence as a harvester--only Tommy's lesson about the possibilities of life, and the nature of art, seems enduring and valuable. By means of the music of the cornet, Tommy soars into a world alien to the farm and learns that the two worlds are incompatible. He also learns, however, that hours of practice on the ironically titled Sons of Liberty piece will not necessarily result in the soaring music of a Philip Coleman. There is a clumsiness in Tommy's playing that anticipates his ultimate perception of the "clumsiness and crudity" of life, but he apparently heeds Coleman's advice and does not stifle his own spontaneity. Thus Tommy understands that the qualities which characterize a good farmer do not necessarily ensure success as a musician, that imagination, sensitivity and talent, as well as perseverance, are required. Tommy as an older narrative presence values his youthful experience, but re-creates it within the necessary, disciplined form of the narrative. Regardless of the clumsiness of events, of his music, Tommy recognizes the lasting value of his experience of the "golden" music.

This respect for the essential, internal, unsullied quality of some experience is a persistent theme in Sinclair Ross's stories, and is one of several links between "Cornet at Night" and "The Outlaw," first published in 1950. There is again the youthful soaring, again the first-person retrospective narrator. There is, however, a lightening of the general tone from that of "Cornet at Night," in that the realities of crops and of adult responsibilities do not intrude painfully on the child's vision in "The Outlaw." They are, however, present as an assumed, understated background; the narrator simply says of his father

that "Twenty years of struggle with the land had made him a determined, often hard man . . ." <sup>7</sup> This adult world is present as a general context in which, again, a youth soars, partly as an escape and partly as an initiation into manhood. As in "A Day with Pegasus" and "Cornet at Night," the child soars only to return, more mature, to earth.

The central tension of the story is, expressed in the first sentence: "She was beautiful but dangerous" (p. 24). The beautiful outlaw horse, Isabel, like the music of the cornet, appeals to the imagination of the child. "Dangerous" betokens adult caution and suspicion. It refers to Isabel's reputation as a vicious animal, but it also may imply the mysterious power of beauty to reveal powerful human truths, as does the beautiful music in "Cornet at Night." At any rate, Isabel, like life itself, beckons the child, but is fraught with danger. One of the most elemental and bare of Ross's short stories, "The Outlaw" chronicles the boy's brief ride on Isabel, against all parental orders. The focus of the story is, again, twofold: on the child's experience of the ride, and on other characters' responses to that ride. Again, the central symbolic incident of the story illuminates the lives of all major characters in the story.

Isabel is no ordinary farm horse; she is in the tradition of Tommy Dickson's pony, Clipper, Jenny's rejuvenated Billie and the imaginary colt of Peter Parker:

To approach her was to be enlarged, transported. She was coal-black, gleaming, queenly. Her mane had a ripple and her neck an arch. And somehow, softly and mysteriously, she was always burning. The reflection on her glossy hide, whether of winter sunshine or yellow lantern light, seemed the glow of some fierce, secret passion. (p. 25)

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<sup>7</sup> Sinclair Ross, "The Outlaw," in his The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories, p. 25.

More than an image of beauty and romance, Isabel expresses something wild and powerful. She has an inner spirit which the boy's father perceives but is, finally, unwilling to break:

His intention was to work her on the land a month or two, just till she was tamed down to make an all-round, serviceable saddle-horse, but after a painful week of half-days on the plow he let her keep her stall. She was too hard on his nerves, he said, straining ahead and pulling twice her share. She was too hard on his self-respect, actually, the slender limbs, the imperious head. (p. 25)

Although not a tamed animal, Isabel "was a captive, pining her heart away" (p. 24). She is a real horse, an image of beauty and the embodiment of some basic spirit of freedom which beckons the boy to worlds beyond the farm: "She was one horse, and she was all horses. Thundering battle chargers, fleet Arabians, untamed mustangs--sitting beside her on her manger I knew and rode them all" (p. 25).

The child may be transported imaginatively by Isabel, but his parents are less enthusiastic: "she was a very dangerous horse, and dutifully my parents kept warning me. Facts didn't lie, they pointed out. A record was a record" (p. 25). The horse elicits conflicting responses; the child sees story-book visions of "thundering battle-chargers" (p. 25) but the parents "dutifully" cite the record of facts. The use of "dutifully" is one of those minor touches by Ross which seem innocent and incidental but become significant, even transformed, in retrospect as the central experience of the story spreads its ripples back over the story. In retrospect, Ross's choice of "dutifully" is revealed as purposeful, subtle and thematically significant. The symbols Ross employs in his stories of childhood soaring become very complex, for Isabel represents a spirit of freedom but also radiates the roles of dangerous outlaw and romantic steed. Her reputation, the "facts" of her



career, the rational and the romantic views of her--all agree upon her central spirit. Essentially, Isabel serves a purpose similar to that of the land in much prairie fiction: she is, with her spirit, a challenge for a rider "with heart and spirit equal to her own" (p. 26). The father's decision not to break Isabel's spirit by making her an ordinary work-horse is a thematic prelude to his son's experience with her.

The unnamed thirteen-year-old son boasts that he is no longer a "small boy" (p. 26). To impress a visiting classmate, he makes the imaginative and spiritual leap of daring to ride Isabel. He is eventually thrown by Isabel, but the ride is for him a complete, if momentary, transformation similar to the sparing of youths in Ross's earlier stories. The ride is a fusion of external and internal worlds, of reality and fantasy. The boy experiences the reality of the cold wind stinging his face and the sensation of swift movement, but also realizes his fantasy of Isabel as "one horse, and . . . all horses" (p. 25). Just as the music of Philip Coleman's cornet stimulates some aesthetic sensitivity in Tommy Dickson, so too the glorious ride on Isabel causes her young rider to respond aesthetically to his natural environment: "I . . . was aware as never before of its austere, unrelenting beauty" (p. 30). As in "Cornet at Night," the visionary soaring is double-edged in "The Outlaw," for the external landscape in its beauty leads inevitably to a rather somber perception by the young rider:

Look, she [Isabel] said firmly, while it's here before you, so that to the last detail it will remain clear. For you, too, some day there may be stalls and halters, and it will be a good memory. (p. 30)

The freedom and beauty of the ride is to be savoured because it is a momentary soaring that must inevitably pass. The adult world of con-

strictions, of "stalls and halters," is looming even in these moments of ecstatic release. Isabel therefore provides the momentary release, but her own lack of freedom is both a reproach to and a prefiguration of the adult world which limits human spontaneity. The boy is, in effect, instructed by Isabel to preserve the integrity of the ride in his memory, to honour the brief soaring, just as Tommy Dickson is in a sense true to the quality of his youthful experience and similarly pays homage to its value. There is in both "The Outlaw" and "Cornet at Night" an emphasis on the value of youthful experience and on the respect such experience deserves.

The boy, in riding Isabel, succumbs to the sin of pride: he assumes for a moment that he is master of Isabel, that he is in complete control of her. He is promptly thrown by Isabel, and made to realize that "Being able to ride an outlaw was not the same thing at all as being accorded the privilege of riding one . . ." (p. 31). The important quality is not in man's mastery of a situation, but in his approaching the task with the proper spirit. The boy must ride Isabel "with heart and spirit equal to her own" (p. 26). Thus the boy learns to respect Isabel's inner spirit, just as his father had earlier abandoned attempts to master Isabel and just as Tommy Dickson is counselled by Philip Coleman to control his spontaneity but not to destroy it. Respect for and participation in the proper spirit of the momentary soaring is the highest form of homage to that soaring. This interpretation is reinforced by the ending of "The Outlaw," with the revelation of the father's pride in his son, rather than anger at his disobedience:

Pride--that was what it amounted to--pride even greater than mine had been before I landed in the snowdrift. It sent me soaring a minute, took my breath away, but it also brought a

little shiver of embarrassment and shame. How long, then, had I kept them waiting? How many times in the last few months had they looked at me and despaired? (p. 33)

The father's pride is not in a successful mastery of Isabel, who had in fact thrown her young rider. Rather, it is in his son's noble attempt, evidence that the boy's spirit is equal to the challenge of the horse. The challenge of Isabel is by implication the challenge of the land, and of life--one must make the attempt, take the first tentative step into manhood. Significantly, at the end of the story father addresses son "in a man-to-man tone of voice . . ." (p. 33). The mother's protests are probably only for the sake of appearances, a show of superficial piety concealing her ambiguous responses to her son's foolhardiness. They are probably voiced so that the husband and son can make a manly show of ignoring them. Like Tommy Dickson's mother, the mother in "The Outlaw" responds in a "peculiar parental idiom" (p. 34) to the central incident. One can only hope that the mother in "The Outlaw," like Tommy Dickson's mother, "may have understood."<sup>8</sup>

The boy, then, soars twice in "The Outlaw," first in his ride and later in his discovery of his father's pride in him. He sees the beauty of the land in his ride, but, equally important, he respects the source of that beauty and recognizes his own small role in the universe. In the final soaring, the discovery of paternal pride, Ross moves this story of youth into a rite of passage into manhood, more optimistic than the initiation seen in "Cornet at Night." Both stories, however, reveal an authorial respect for the vision of the child, an insistence that his experience is important, even honourable, and should be cherished in

<sup>8</sup> Sinclair Ross, "Cornet at Night," p. 51.

memory. The soaring ride cannot last, but can be remembered and thus re-created. It is the ride in "The Outlaw" which is the central symbolic experience illuminating the lives of all major characters. The boy responds with soaring exhilaration, and after he is thrown develops a more mature perception of his role as participant in, rather than master of, life. The father's "dutiful" warnings are revealed by the ride as a mask he uses to hide his real hopes for and pride in his son. The mother's angry reaction to her son's disobedience also possibly conceals her pride in him. Meaning and character development radiate outward from the central and symbolic ride.

In Isabel, the outlaw horse, there is virtually a fourth major character in the story. She is a real horse, free-spirited but a captive. In her predicament she images the tension between freedom and containment. She serves as a fanciful mentor to the first-person narrative figure, as mediator in the absence of an older brother figure in this story. The personification of Isabel as a coy female who bends the boy to her will is presented with more than just the necessary distancing of humour. Ross projects the internal desires of the boy onto the external view of the horse, thus avoiding the risk of sentimentalizing the boy's fantasies:

With muzzling, velvet lips, she coaxed and pleaded, whispered that the delights of fantasy and dream were but as shadows beside the exhilarations of reality. Only try reality--slip her bridle on. Only be reasonable--ask myself what she could gain by throwing me. (pp. 25-26)

The technique is used to lighten, without losing, the serious lesson of the story:

For in her own way, despite her record, Isabel was something of a moralist. She took a firm stand against pride that wasn't justified. She considered my use of the word "master" insufferably presumptuous. (p. 31)

There is the false pride of "mastery" and the justifiable pride in a spirited attempt at "mastery." Finally, in the contrast between Isabel's inner freedom and physical captivity there is a reflection of the compromise evident in all the young adults of these stories, figures who are a poignant mixture of adult and child. Isabel throws her presumptuous young rider, thus instructing him in the proper and necessary respect that a mature person must accord the spiritual realities. Life, says Ross in his stories of childhood soaring, cannot be mastered but can be participated in with grace, style and courage. The boy in "The Outlaw" may never tame Isabel, and Tommy Dickson in "Cornet at Night" may never master his impulsive joy in playing music, but both characters develop a mature respect for their own experiences. They soar to escape reality, only to finally confront it in its expanse and mystery. The soaring is brief, but enlightening, for all characters concerned.

It is this process of soaring which links "Saturday Night," published in 1951, with the other stories of childhood experience. "Saturday Night" is superficially quite different from, for example, "The Outlaw" or "Cornet at Night." It has a more urban, contemporary setting and a slightly older protagonist than do those stories. In essentials, however, "Saturday Night" embodies the process charted throughout this chapter: a youth soars into fantasy only to return to reality considerably wiser, and with a healthy respect for his previous soaring. In "Saturday Night", the protagonist, Tom, creates a whole fantasy, not of a circus, a horse or music, but of his future with a girl, based on a brief flirtation with her. Working in another town, Tom returns home unexpectedly to escort Helen Bradley to a Saturday night dance. He quickly has his fantasies of Helen shattered and must make an adult accommodation of the

reality of her indifference to him.

The opening account of Tom's train ride home depicts his conflicting doubts and aspirations. He is physically awkward, and regards Helen as a redeeming figure: "Hair and pimples, the size of his ears, things like that didn't matter now. She was satisfied with him, just as he was."<sup>9</sup> A youth such as Peter Parker in "A Day with Pegasus" escapes into fantasy from the monotony of the farm life; Tom in "Saturday Night" escapes into fantasies of a life with Helen, thus rejecting his own self-doubts. In both cases, youths soar to escape some unacceptable reality. Tom reflects on the beauty of his one brief evening with Helen, anticipates their imminent meeting and even constructs a fantasy of their future life together. What distinguishes these sentimentally juvenile thoughts is Tom's absolute conviction, his belief in the value and rightness of his feelings. The train ride is "Just the right speed. Fast, but not too fast. Getting there, but with time to feel and savour what was happening to him . . ." (p. 388). Tom has apparently learned the lesson taught by Isabel in "The Outlaw," as he savours the quality of his immediate experience. Tom values his own impulsiveness: "Waiting and worrying, writing letters too crazy to send, and then, a week sooner than you'd hoped, counting the minutes and the telegraph poles--this way it had a special edge" (pp. 388-389). Even washing is for Tom a ritual of preparation; all experience becomes transformed and has a "special edge" because of Helen. Thus Tom determines not to look at his photograph of Helen because "Another hour and he would be with her--why not wait and take the moment of arrival neat? Why pour tepid anticipation in to rob

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<sup>9</sup>Sinclair Ross, "Saturday Night," Queen's Quarterly, LVIII, No. 3 (Autumn 1951), 390.

it of its tang and sparkle?" (p. 390).

By means of these tactile references to the "special edge," the "tang and sparkle" of experience, Ross expresses the earnestly naive expectations of Tom. Complementing this is the benevolent landscape which the train carrying Tom races through "with a derisive whisk and flourish . . ." (p. 388). The train ride home resembles the galloping ride on Isabel in "The Outlaw," as the sheer energy of both rides results in similar manifestations of self-congratulatory pride in both protagonists. The youth in "The Outlaw" fancies himself, briefly, the master of Isabel. In "Saturday Night," Tom imagines the whole landscape to be an elaborate preparation for his return home:

Ordinarily he took little notice of such things, but he was aware to-day, and approving. The golden stillness was somehow appropriate, a setting, as if he had been prepared for. He smiled at the extravagance of the thought, indulgently, and said to himself, "The way I feel to-day I'd make something of it even if it were pouring rain." (p. 387)

Isabel's young rider is thrown in order to learn his proper role in the order of things. So too must Tom learn, must his soaring end. With the arrival of the train, the real world must again be faced by Tom. He returns home only to be scolded by his mother for his extravagance and impulsiveness. His confidence is restored, however, as he asserts his manhood by telling his mother of Helen: "Turning away from her [his mother] he had also turned a corner, turned his mind, and now . . . he soared again, felt a surge of confidence" (p. 392). Tom soars into illusions of his own adulthood and of a life with Helen Bradley, but his eventual encounter with her destroys these illusions. Helen is with another boy, so indifferent to Tom that she can offer him "A friendly light-hearted smile, without a shadow of embarrassment" (p. 397). The



real focus of concern is Tom's reaction to this humiliation. He is torn between the impulse to rebel, to create a scene, and the more mature determination to accept this shock gracefully. He denigrates his feelings for Helen as "just a bad case of puppy love . . ." (p. 396). He denigrates in retrospect his own previous soaring:

And it was clear to Tom now that the way you dressed and danced was what counted with a girl. Catching a train straight from work and bringing yourself along like a gift, complete with ears and pimples--no, that sort of thing you just didn't get away with. (p. 397)

Tom is here being false to his own experience, is betraying the value of his soaring. He is humiliated as is Peter Parker by his teacher; he is figuratively thrown as is the youth in "The Outlaw," but only he seems to consciously reject and abandon his earlier soaring.

Tom leaves the dance, manfully returning home. The "pouring rain" that, earlier, he boasted would not dampen his spirits is now the perfect ironic complement to his gloom. Tom ponders his mother's solicitude:

And . . . he wondered if you forgot as you grew older, or if what he was experiencing was, as they said, just a silly boy and girl affair, if experience to come would someday make it seem romantic, far-fetched nonsense. (p. 398)

Tom is faced with the temptation to splinter his personality by adopting an adult, condescending perspective towards his own experience of soaring. He is the first of Ross's fictional youths to consciously articulate this conflict. In a youth such as Tommy Dickson there is not a similar degree of self-conscious abstraction, or, finally, any doubt as to his attitude towards his own experience. Painful that experience might be, but it is never "nonsense." Tom resolves his personal crisis very much as one might expect, given the quality of the resolutions in the other stories studied in this chapter:

They [adults] laughed because they were envious. They called it nonsense because they had lost it. With mockery and an air of wisdom they tried to make their loss seem less. And a sudden, overwhelming loyalty to his age and predicament took possession of him. He knew that it would never happen again, never quite the same, and he also knew, baring himself to the moment as to a bitter, shining morning, that he would never take sides against it, never look back and belittle it from some complacent hilltop of maturity. (p. 399)

By this final stage of Tom's development, the rain provides not a gloomy atmosphere but "a patient, healing sound" (p. 400). Tom, now refusing to belittle his youthful infatuation, becomes, ironically, more mature and civilized. Again the essential spiritual quality of the experience is honoured. Tom preserves his inner life; Helen Bradley, however, has not Tom's potential for growth but represents something fixed and stagnant. Helen is beautiful but strangely mature, a finished piece of work. She has lost a certain vitality which Tom has preserved by his final loyalty to his age:

Her hair was arranged more elaborately than he had ever seen it, and a necklace, gleaming and hard, considered, like a band of colour round a bowl, gave her finish and maturity. She seemed older, even lovelier, as if somehow she had changed since last week, grown out of reach, become a stranger. (p. 395)

She is, like her necklace, "gleaming and hard;" Tom does not harden himself, is only briefly cynical and preserves his inner youthfulness.

Tom is an older boy than the other fictional youths viewed in this chapter; he substitutes the dreams of soaring astride a horse with dreams of a life with Helen. Tom's visions, so grandiose yet so dependent on the whims of the indifferent Helen, are probably even more elusive than those of the younger protagonists. This last story has little of the rhapsodic flourish of the other "soaring" stories, little of the lyrical rendering of both fantasy and concrete action, but it follows a similar pattern of dream in conflict and reality. The ending of

"Saturday Night" has a grace and simplicity that echoes the endings of "The Outlaw" and "Cornet at Night," with their similar insistence on the avoidance of self-betrayal. Although much of the linguistic richness of the earlier stories is absent from "Saturday Night," this is perhaps appropriate because Tom is a significantly older figure than, for example, Tommy Dickson, and he is less concerned with the beauty of music or of the landscape than he is with more abstract subjects such as his future life with Helen. Due to the absence of the first-person narrative figure, there is in "Saturday Night" a decline in the distancing humour found in "Cornet at Night" and "The Outlaw," and an excessive concern with the fantasies, the world-view, of Tom. In these flaws, "Saturday Night" curiously echoes "Circus in Town," for both stories are marred by a lack of substantial human action and of humour to balance the relentlessly earnest, dangerously sentimental narrative tone. The failings of the first and last of Sinclair Ross's tales of childhood soaring do not, however, diminish the achievement of the other stories, where Ross integrates human action, a subtle narrative voice and substantial themes.

Technically, the stories of childhood soaring are deceptively complex. There is Ross's use of a significant detail, such as the description of Philip Coleman's hands, to fix Coleman's essential character. This is an example of the degree of economy in Ross's prose. The symbolism of horses is achieved without a loss of credibility, just as the single elemental experience on which each story concentrates is acceptable on both literal and symbolic levels. There is a fusion of action, character and meaning. The tendency of Ross's characters to define themselves by their responses to central events is apparent in

many of the short stories, and is a further example of his compressed, functional prose. The narrative voice of these stories of childhood soaring is itself a remarkable creation, embodying in the first-person retrospective form the essential conflict between innocence and experience. The narrative voice is flexible enough to allow for both the lyrical moment of soaring and the rueful humour of an older narrative figure, so that there is an internal tension and discipline in the form as well as the content of the story. Perhaps the limited success of "Circus in Town" and "Saturday Night" is due in part to their lack of a narrative subtlety comparable to that found in "A Day with Pegasus," "Cornet at Night" and "The Outlaw."

The essential qualities of Ross's artistry in the short story are evident in this first type of story. There is a compassion for the human condition which informs Ross's sympathetic character portrayals. Thus instead of simply depicting the anger of an adult at some youthful display of energy, Ross penetrates to the "helplessness" of a man confronting his own limitations. For the prairie child struggling to expand his horizons, Ross demonstrates unsentimental respect and sympathy. Although at times melancholy, Sinclair Ross's vision in these stories is affirmative, for his youthful protagonists do endure with their self-respect and integrity intact. The characters in these stories, limited as they may be by environment and circumstance, reveal in their spiritual lots of either weary helplessness or joyful release common bonds with humanity. Ross's fictional youths confront the universal problem of growing up, of coming to terms with the loss of innocence. These youths retain their self-respect much more than do the protagonists of the stories to be examined in Chapter Two, stories in which self-betrayal

and self-degradation figure prominently as motifs. These stories of self-betrayal are not concerned with the dreams of youths, but with the nightmares of grotesque characters. They present a more gloomy view of humanity than do the stories of childhood soaring.

CHAPTER II

THE MISFIT

A second type of story written by Sinclair Ross presents a darker view of growing up than is seen in his stories of childhood soaring. The youths in the stories viewed in Chapter One are only in a minor sense loners and outsiders. Tommy Dickson feels uneasy in town, but finds a consolation in his friendship with Philip Coleman. The narrator of "The Outlaw" dreams of riding Isabel in order to overcome the "ignominy" of his lowly status among his peers. In "A Day with Pegasus," Peter Parker satisfies the urge to settle a "score" by telling his scornful classmates of his new colt. Tom in "Saturday Night" sees in Helen Bradley one who has "set him apart" from his own mediocrity. All of these youths, then, are oddities for they are self-conscious and physically or socially awkward.

In the stories to be examined in this chapter, Ross creates characters whose physical eccentricities are the first sign of deeper psychological or moral displacement. Ross clearly emphasizes the personal idiosyncrasies of his characters in these stories. Of the characters examined in the previous chapter, Philip Coleman from "Cornet at Night" is most similar to the figure of the misfit, the central type of character to be viewed here in Chapter Two. Coleman is an outsider and a failure. His slender hands indicate that he is foreign to rural life. The characters to be examined in this chapter, like Coleman, seem haunted figures who are cut off from their human potential. They range from the vulnerable simpleton to the demented murderer. Such misfits experience themselves or perceive in other characters various obsessions with guilt, sexual perversion or petty greed. Violent death, caused by man, is a part of this world. The initiation into adult reality is seen in terms of trauma and suffering rather than in a mellow, nostalgic context.



Instead of the momentary soaring into freedom, there is the overwhelming presence of menace and evil, of self-destructive rather than self-liberating urges. The magical horses so evident in the stories of childhood soaring serve a more pessimistic function in this second type of story. They appear in all their beauty in "The Runaway," only to be burnt to death. In the stories to be explored in this chapter--"One's a Heifer" (1944), "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune" (1947), "Jug and Bottle" (1949), "The Runaway" (1952) and "The Flowers that Killed Him" (1972)--Sinclair Ross depicts not imaginative release, but physical and mental suffering. Loyalty to the truth of one's experience, a motif of the stories of youthful soaring, is replaced by the phenomenon of self-degradation and self-betrayal.

The suffering and degradation in "One's a Heifer," which dates from 1944, is concentrated in the character of Arthur Vickers and perceived by the anonymous first-person narrator. This retrospective narrator functions principally as an observer and recorder of Vickers' oddities; he is only secondarily a participant in the story. This is in contrast to the role of the narrative figure in a story such as "The Outlaw," where a central concern is the development of the narrator as a major character. In "One's a Heifer," the thirteen-year-old boy is sent out in search of two missing yearlings. This is his first trip away from home alone, and it is presumably something of an initiation into adult responsibilities, but Ross does not expand the possibilities of this rite of passage. The boy's search is therefore a convenient device to introduce the character of Arthur Vickers. It is a credible method of introducing a secretive recluse. Vickers is Ross's essential concern; he is seen from the boy's point of view, but little is made of the larger

context of the boy's life.

Suspecting his animals are hidden on Vickers' farm, the boy insinuates himself into an overnight visit in hopes of discovering them. Even in this minor act of deceit and conniving there is perhaps evidence of a different type of youth than the more naive figures of Ross's stories of childhood soaring. Vickers denies his guest access to a locked stall in his barn, so that their evening together, ostensibly occupied in a game of checkers, is a kind of battle of wits over access to the stall. Ross concentrates on the boy's perceptions of Vickers, and on the atmosphere of their evening together, to suggest the man's possibly deranged state. The central technique used to create an atmosphere of tension and to suggest Vickers' crazed state is the concentration on his appearance, and especially that of his eyes.

This technique is anticipated even before the boy encounters Vickers, for a sense of brooding and mystery is present at the beginning of his journey. The boy's aunt advises him that the people he will encounter are "strangers up towards the hills."<sup>1</sup> There is in this warning a prophetic indication of things to come. The hostile landscape and the "strangers" together anticipate the character of Vickers:

The deadly cold and the flat white silent miles of prairie asserted themselves like a disapproving presence. The cattle round the straw-stacks stared when we rode up as if we were intruders. The fields stared, and the sky stared. People shivered in their doorways and said they'd seen no strays.  
(p. 120)

The "disapproving" and "staring" presence is the first indication of something hostile to the boy. It also introduces the concentration on

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<sup>1</sup>Sinclair Ross, "One's a Heifer," in his The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), p. 119.

eyes. Soon after this account, the boy meets a woman whose "eyes light greedily a second" (p. 120) upon seeing his money. A "nagging wind" (p. 120) and the "thin, wavering howl of a coyote" (p. 121) further darken the scene in anticipation of Vickers. Finally, the first view of Vickers' farm is a significant introduction to the man:

We were hungry and tired, but it was a poor, shiftless-looking place. The yard was littered with old wagons and machinery; the house was scarcely distinguishable from the stables. Darkness was beginning to close in, but there was no light in the windows. (p. 121)

Vickers' animalistic way of life is suggested, in the above description, by the emphasis on the environment of the man. His appearance reinforces what is suggested in the above passage. His eyes are at various points "hypnotic," "fierce," "guilty," "flashing," "narrowed," "glassy," "cold," "sharp," "metallic," "wild," "wavering" and "queer." They "glare," "stare," "glitter," "dilate" and "harden." Vickers has a pet owl, the eyes of which "go on and off like yellow bulbs" (p. 129). In a game of checkers the boy sees Vickers make a "short-sighted" move; even the lantern becomes a "hard hypnotic eye" (p. 123). In a dream the boy sees the owl's "yellow eyes like a pair of lanterns" (p. 130). The boy notes Vickers' "crafty" and "shifty" "looks," and the "harsh," "thick," "excited" voice of the man. There is also a suggestive contrast of darkness and light: "Behind the light from his lantern the darkness hovered vast and sinister" (p. 123). The atmosphere is further intensified by brief references to the ticking clock, the wind outside and the cold within the house. The result of these intense and repetitive patterns of imagery is as much a creation of atmosphere as it is a study of the character of Vickers. He remains enigmatic, but the tension he generates is very real. One can suspect Vickers' sanity, or the validity

of the boy's perceptions, but the total atmosphere of fear that is generated between them is very intense. The internal life of Vickers remains mysterious, but is nevertheless brilliantly suggested by the numerous external hints.

The question of Vickers' possible insanity is dramatized in the problem of exactly what is hidden in the locked stall. This stall, this secret, is an excellent link between the boy and the man. They are engaged in an elemental conflict over truth: one is intent on revealing, the other on concealing, the truth of the locked stall. For both figures, the struggle becomes obsessive; what is initially for the boy a simple problem of finding lost animals becomes, briefly, something very different. In his final attempt to open the stall, the boy seems to go beyond his original motivation, and seems compelled by a need to know the truth, whatever it might be: he is "Terrified of the stall, yet compelled by a frantic need to get inside" (p. 132). At this point in the story the boy seems to have forgotten about his animals, and the issue of the locked stall assumes almost an impersonal philosophical importance. The locked stall also, of course, provides a focus of the conflict between man and boy in the story.

Part of Vickers' conversation with his young guest concerns the problem of isolation:

"You don't know how bad it is sometimes. Weeks on end and no one to talk to. You're not yourself--you're not sure what you're going to say or do." (p. 125)

This theme of geographic or social isolation is a recurring element in the stories to be examined in this chapter. Vickers is isolated by his environment as much as by his innate personality. (Other characters such as Private Coulter in "Jug and Bottle" are not placed in such desolate

and empty environments, but are nevertheless alienated from their fellow man. Isolation, suspiciousness, and vulnerability are common elements in the figure of the misfit in Ross's stories.) Isolation is part cause and part symptom of deeper disorders in the misfit. Vickers' statement quoted above may be a kind of tentative confession, but it may also be a threat. Vickers' ambiguous words testify to the dangers of prolonged isolation, and are ominously linked to his tale of a girl who had briefly lived with him. This story-within-a-story, disjointed as it is, further contributes to the menacing portrait of Vickers:

"Too many of the kind you'll never get rid of again. She did, last summer when she was here. I had to put her out.

Just two weeks ago she came back--walked over with an old suit-case and said she was going to stay. It was cold at home, and she had to work too hard, and she didn't mind even if I couldn't pay her wages.

She was so stupid that at checkers she'd forget whether she was black or red. . . . I used to look at her and think nobody knew now anyway and that she'd maybe do. . . . But then I'd go up in the hills . . . and it wasn't right even for the sake of your meals ready and your house kept clean."

(p. 127)

In "One's a Heifer" and "Jug and Bottle," the story-within-a-story is told by a character as if to purge himself of some burden of guilt. Here, Vickers obsessively returns again and again to his tale, but he has enough cunning to refrain from telling all.

Several phrases from his reverie are powerfully suggestive: "'the kind you'll never get rid of again,'" "'nobody knew'" and "'it wasn't right . . .'" Together, these phrases suggest that Vickers was torn between a basic sexual need for the girl and an overriding guilt for his desire. The statements about the girl's stupidity are significant; the same pattern of the simpleton or misfit evoking significant human

reactions in others is given prominence in "Jug and Bottle" and "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune." The view of Vickers is further darkened by the image of him alone at his table, playing checkers with an imaginary opponent or staring fearfully out a window "as if there was nothing he was afraid of that could reach him by the door" (p. 129). The details of the story suggest there is something terribly wrong with Vickers. The boy's final attempt to open the stall fails and results in a narrow escape from an enraged Vickers. Upon arriving home, the boy learns that his animals have already returned home; he then asks the question which takes one back again to the enigmatic Vickers:

"But the stall, then--just because I wanted to look inside he knocked me down--and if it wasn't the calves in there--"  
(p. 134)

This ending has a quality found in the endings of other stories by Ross, an ability to, as Robert Chambers notes in his book Sinclair Ross and Ernest Buckler, send "our minds reeling back across the whole length of the story . . ."<sup>2</sup> The ending is more than just a surprise. It forces a revaluation of all that has happened in the story, for the obvious possibility that Vickers has killed and hidden his female companion puts his "crafty" "looks," his fear of the boy's search, into a darker context. Seemingly innocent details now take on a more ominous interpretation. This can be compared to the ending of "The Outlaw," where the final revelation of parental pride in the son's daring ride on Isabel transforms one's understanding of the parents. Their earlier warnings against riding Isabel are revealed as a kind of hidden encouragement. The surprise ending of "One's a Heifer" also in a sense creates

<sup>2</sup>Robert D. Chambers, Sinclair Ross and Ernest Buckler (Toronto: Copp Clark Publishing, 1975), p. 24.

an entirely new story, to the extent that it suggests a new interpretation of events. One can choose between the view of Vickers as a mere eccentric and the possibility that he is a grotesque murderer. There is no conclusive evidence to support either view, although Ross clearly implies that Vickers is, at the very least, deranged and torn by some mysterious guilt.

"One's a Heifer" presents, in the character of Vickers, a useful introduction to the other stories to be viewed in this chapter, for there is in most of these stories an emphasis on a certain type of character rather than primarily on, as in the stories of youthful soaring, a pattern of experience. "The Runaway" is the major exception to this, for it, more than the other stories to be examined here, balances human character and human action. For the most part, however, the emphasis in these stories is on character and atmosphere rather than on action. In "One's a Heifer," for example, Ross carefully constructs a brooding atmosphere by the orchestrated references to eyes, to Vickers' "looks" and to his ominous mutterings. Furthermore, the character of Vickers embodies many of the qualities to be seen in Ross's subsequent fictional misfits. In "Jug and Bottle", Ross describes a lonely young soldier obsessed, like Vickers, with a burden of guilt. In "The Flowers that Killed Him", there is a character torn between violent perversion and the tortures of his own guilt; this kind of conflict is suggested in Vickers' own tale of his female guest. In "The Runaway", there is a cunning and obsessively greedy farmer who dies a violent, grotesque death. In "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune," the next story to be examined, Ross creates a character who is, like Vickers, a lonely outsider, and, like Vickers' female guest, rather simple-minded.



"Barrack Room Fiddle Tune," first published in 1947, tells of Peter Dawson, a young soldier who is "simple and a little queer."<sup>3</sup> Dawson is not a grotesque figure like Vickers, but he is a misfit and an outsider, isolated not by geography or twisted personality but by his own mental limitations:

He was just a big, awkward, farmboy. All he knew was wheat and horses . . . but no one ever laughed or tried to make a butt of him. There was something that kept us in our place, demanded our respect. Not just his simplicity, his slow, countrified helplessness that would have made a joke at his expense like a shot at a sleeping bird. No--something more than forbearance on our part, something positive, within himself, a kind of dignity that made us hesitate before we laughed. (p. 13)

Dawson's helplessness as a young recruit, his uneasiness and self-consciousness, significantly affects his fellow recruits, for "Seeing him so awkward and exposed, so helpless and sincere, we felt his distress as keenly as he did himself" (p. 13). Dawson evokes support and sympathy from his peers; the idiot girl in "One's a Heifer" apparently provoked a mixture of contempt and lust in Vickers. In both cases, human responses to these two misfits are significant. The first-person narrator of "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune" and his fellow recruits reveal their own characters by their compassionate response to Dawson. Similarly, Vickers' attitude towards the idiot girl signifies his whole twisted nature.

Dawson is simple, credulous and vulnerable. He has a childlike joy in his "free" military uniforms and equipment, for he cannot realize the serious consequences of his enlisting. Yet even this pathetic innocence at first moves Dawson's peers to sympathy: "Ordinarily we joked and wisecracked a lot, but no one tried a syllable of it now. Instead

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<sup>3</sup> Sinclair Ross, "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune," Manitoba Arts Review, 5, No. 4 (Spring 1947), 15.

we tried to match his enthusiasm, turned from admiring his boots and undershirts to a disgruntled inspection of our own" (p. 14). Inevitably, there are those who do not so protect and support Peter Dawson. As a soldier, he is a failure and is treated as such:

He had a hard time on the drill square. Slow, awkward, big--out of step and unaware of it, never able to distinguish left from right--he drove the Sergeants desperate, and they bellowed at him without mercy. (p. 15)

Furthermore, he is ridiculed by a girl who "liked to feel him in her power" (p. 15).

For consolation, Dawson turns to his fellow recruits, among whom there is a spirit of "camaraderie," and to his fiddle. These recruits see beyond Dawson's stupidity and helplessness to his sensitivity and vulnerability: "We were the only ones who ever really saw him. We saw him only when he had his fiddle out, intent on some simple tune that he would never learn if he kept at it till he was a hundred" (p. 15). The "ugly, jagged sounds" (p. 16) of Dawson's fiddle represent a final test to his fellow recruits. They are torn between putting an end to Dawson's cacophony and further supporting him: "So we let him fiddle. Cowards, in a way, afraid of the dumb, reproachful misery that we knew would fill his eyes" (p. 15). Just as Dawson has brought out the best in his peers, by evoking their compassion, his "jagged sounds" now provoke in them "black, cowardly evil, directed . . . at his fiddle" (p. 16). They stage an "accidental" destruction of the fiddle, but thereby render Dawson, inadvertently, a stunning blow: "His face, though, revealed him, a numb, suspended look as if he were keeping still, just hanging on, till he could get a grip of himself and decide what next to do" (p. 17). Shamed and embarrassed, the men finally redeem themselves by buying Dawson a

new fiddle, thus restoring his happiness and stability. They, unlike Vickers, purge themselves of guilt for their treatment of the simpleton. The story concludes with the narrator's acknowledgement of the importance of his experience with Peter Dawson:

But whether the importance was because of him or us, because he had loved his fiddle and grieved for it, or because we had destroyed it, been ashamed and tried to make amends--that was not so easy to decide. (p. 17)

"Barrack Room Fiddle Tune" is, in terms of its plot, anecdotal, flat and rather sentimental. The most interesting aspects of the story are the character of Peter Dawson and the phenomenon of the vulnerable eccentric somehow significantly affecting other characters. The misfit in this story again evokes illuminating emotions in other characters. He is perhaps important in himself and also for the responses he generates in others. "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune" and "One's a Heifer" both deal with the situation of the simpleton evoking significant human responses. In "One's a Heifer", that situation is secondary, barely suggested in Vickers' tale of his female guest. In "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune", it is dealt with more directly. This story is more optimistic than "One's a Heifer" because the recruits, unlike Vickers, right their wrong to the simpleton. In "Jug and Bottle," the phenomenon of the misfit evoking illuminating human responses is again prominent. "Jug and Bottle" is also an anecdotal, retrospective tale of an odd young soldier, but it is perhaps thematically more ambitious than "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune." Private Coulter, the protagonist of "Jug and Bottle," is not a simpleton, but he is guilt-ridden, maudlin and virtually friendless. He is, then, another isolated misfit; his fate is less pleasant than that of Peter Dawson.

"Jug and Bottle," first published in 1949, like its predecessors "One's a Heifer" and "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune" is a first-person retrospective study of a social misfit. The narrative figure in this story is, however, more of a participant in the story than is the boy in "One's a Heifer." Consequently, both the narrator and Private Coulter are major figures in "Jug and Bottle." The guarded narrative voice, like that of Arthur Vickers during his disjointed monologue, presents an ambiguous and ominous view of its speaker:

Most people I tell it to just shrug and ask if there aren't too many sentimental fools already meddling up the world. Forget him, they say, with a clear conscience. It isn't as if he were an old or valued friend.

Obviously he was on his way out anyway. What I did for him and what I failed to do are beside the point. A leaky boat in a storm is doomed.

The narrator in this passage at the very beginning of "Jug and Bottle" admits to a sense of guilt, and to a compulsion to tell his tale of Private Coulter, who "was on his way out anyway." The clipped, clichéd phrases the narrator uses in the above passage have the ring of empty words repeated in a futile attempt to gain absolution. The narrator is torn between rationalizing his mysterious past treatment of Coulter, and acknowledging a "feeling of involvement and responsibility . . ." (p. 500). The story is his attempt to free himself, like Vickers, of guilt by re-living the traumatic experience from the past.

Once the emotional context of guilt is established, the story proceeds, in anecdotal sections, to depict the character of Private Coulter and the nature of his relationship with the narrator. The anecdotal form is similar to that of "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune," but is more

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<sup>4</sup> Sinclair Ross, "Jug and Bottle," Queen's Quarterly, LVI, No. 4 (Winter 1949-1950), 500.

rigid in "Jug and Bottle." Coulter, like Peter Dawson in "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune," is a failure as a soldier, an oddity in external make-up:

Part of Coulter's trouble, on the parade square anyway, was his height. Six feet three and thin--the sergeants couldn't miss him. His neck was long, his nose a beak, his shoulders weak and drooping. Still worse, he had a peculiar, jerky gait when marching. . . . The NCO's could no more have missed such a sight than they could have considered it a credit to their training. All they could do was make a butt of him and bellow. (p. 501)

Furthermore, his hands are "the most useless pair . . . I have ever seen on a man" (p. 501). His voice is "thin, almost piping in grotesque contrast to his big, ungainly body . . ." (p. 502). This detailed account of Coulter's physical oddities, like the description of Vickers' eyes in "One's a Heifer," is in anticipation of the man's internal oddities: "There was something exposed and vulnerable about him that invited bullying. No signs up, no defences" (p. 501). Peter Dawson, it should be remembered at this point, is "so awkward and exposed, so helpless and sincere. . . ."<sup>5</sup> The narrator of "Jug and Bottle" assumes a protective role towards Coulter, just as the narrator of "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune" supports Peter Dawson. Both responses are in contrast to the mixture of loathing and desire with which, apparently, Vickers in "One's a Heifer" responds to his female guest. In this instance, however, a flawed, handicapped and in some sense helpless person is thrust upon a normal person as a sort of responsibility, and the morality of that normal character is revealed and tested in his treatment of his helpless charge.

Although the narrator of "Jug and Bottle" assumes a protective role towards Coulter, his motives for this are more complex, and perhaps less admirable, than those of Peter Dawson's fellow recruits in "Barrack

<sup>5</sup>Sinclair Ross, "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune," p. 13.

Room Fiddle Tune." The narrator relishes the "feeling of control . . . Something like a small boy in charge of a lumbering draft horse" (p. 503). In some sense, the narrator is master as well as protector of Private Coulter; this possibility was not explored in the relationship between Peter Dawson and his fellow recruits, which may account for the sentimental nature of "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune." At any rate, there is in the narrative voice in "Jug and Bottle" a constant element of guilt and self-condemnation:

I didn't worry, didn't probe, didn't take him too seriously. . . Even on his bad days I just said easy, cheerful things and let him go again. It happened in books and movies, not among people you knew. (p. 503)

The mysterious "It" in the above passage reflects an obsessive concern with some unspecified event and cleverly leads the reader on. The same technique is used in "The Flowers that Killed Him." The type of relationship described in the above passage is precisely what is charted in the various anecdotal sections: the narrator assumes a certain responsibility for Private Coulter but does not live up to it. The relationship between the two characters is rather static: the passages describing the narrator's lack of real involvement in Coulter's problems only support what is evident in the above passage. They do not expand the dynamics of a human relationship but merely reinforce the factuality of the above passage. The result is a repetitious and patterned relationship between the two characters. Anecdotal increments predictably reinforce the initial view of the relationship between the two characters.

Private Coulter, "outlandish" in his appearance and his personality, like Peter Dawson in "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune" "roused something . . . protective in you, made you want to keep an eye on him . . . It became

a kind of responsibility" (p. 502). The narrator's admission that "I became necessary to him . . ." (p. 507) anticipates the moral test of his sense of responsibility. Accounts of the "dead-weight, blank despair" (p. 504) of Coulter's drinking sprees and of his tentative experiments with suicide are produced as evidence with which the narrator condemns himself: "I hadn't the slightest awareness or understanding of the crisis that was approaching" (p. 507). Just as Coulter's external oddities mirror his eccentric nature, so too his drinking and his suicidal impulses indicate "an inner collapse, a relinquishment of everything by which a man lives--purpose, expectancy, self-respect" (p. 505). There is, then, the mystery of the despair of Coulter, as well as the mystery of the narrator's guilt. Both characters are, in a sense, misfits. There is also the puzzle of Coulter's paradoxical attitudes toward a girl, Muriel: Coulter writes her faithfully, but confesses "I enlisted to get away from her" (p. 504). He shows the narrator a picture of her, "and the next instant, in what seemed a fit of rage, ripped it through and crumpled the pieces" (p. 503). There is in this inner conflict between attraction or loyalty to and repulsion from the girl a similarity to Arthur Vickers' conflicting responses to his helpless female guest in "One's a Heifer."

With the overseas journey of the troops in Section IV of "Jug and Bottle" comes the revelation of Coulter's guilt-ridden tale. Coulter's explanation of his despair is very sentimental, and perhaps the weakest aspect of "Jug and Bottle." Muriel is revealed to be a terminally ill girl whom Coulter had befriended, out of a sense of responsibility similar to that of the narrator for Coulter, and indeed to that of the recruits in "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune" for Peter Dawson: "She was always



there, next door, a kind of responsibility" (p. 513). Muriel stages a miraculous recovery; Coulter is trapped in a relationship which is more than he anticipated and escapes into the Army. The only redeeming feature of this account is the ironic cycle of guilt, a legacy passed from Muriel to Coulter, from Coulter to the narrator. Both men feel guilt for assuming, then neglecting, important human responsibilities. Coulter, like the narrator, sees in benevolence to another "'a kind of blanket compensation'" (p. 512) for his own sense of inadequacy. Both characters assume the role of defender and benefactor; they, unlike the recruits in "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune," do not fully accept and perform the inherent responsibilities of that role.

Arthur Vickers, in "One's a Heifer," at the very least turned a helpless girl away from his house, and possibly murdered her. His odd behaviour indicates that he is troubled by the nature of his treatment of her. Similarly, Coulter and the narrator of "Jug and Bottle" both seek relief from guilt through telling their tales. Coulter seeks a response from his listener to the tale of Muriel. He is gratified by the bland assurance of the narrator, and gratefully replies to him: "You always talk like that, and somehow I always end up believing you" (p. 515). Coulter thus seeks some sort of symbolic forgiveness from the narrator; when they meet, Coulter's "Guilt [is] followed instantly by relief . . ." (p. 510). The narrator, of course, in telling the tale of "Jug and Bottle" is also attempting to purge his own guilt, for he had "failed him [Coulter] when he had greatest need of me . . ." (p. 500) just as Coulter himself had failed Muriel by leaving her.

Vulnerable misfits such as Peter Dawson or Private Coulter court disaster, and in a sense their survival depends on the benevolence of

their peers. With the arrival of the troops in England, Coulter's increasing dependence on the narrator, and his vulnerability, puts the narrator's glib sense of responsibility to an illuminating test. Again, the misfit evokes significant human responses:

Something about his voice and manner brought out the worst in me. Something that was at once frightened and demanding, wretched and proprietary. Just as if he had a special claim on me, as if sympathising with him in his misfortune was my special job. (p. 516)

Coulter, of course, does have a "special claim" on the narrator; he has been previously granted that claim by the narrator, who has tacitly assumed the roles of Coulter's friend and confessor. Coulter, who has previously brought out the best in the narrator, now brings out the worst in him. Despite the external hints of Coulter's approaching "crisis"--his "frightened stammer," his tendency to wince and recoil--the narrator determines to terminate their relationship.

At this stage, the narrator might have some cause in feeling guilty for rejecting Coulter. The final section of the story, however, shifts thematic emphasis from human guilt and responsibility to external fate and chance. Muriel is revealed to have wasted away to death, pining for Coulter, presumably. Coulter, distraught, seeks out his friend, and they arrange to meet at a local pub which the narrator calls The Jug and Bottle. Coulter does not arrive, however, and later, his suicide is revealed. A major supplies the final ironic surprise:

"According to some of the men in his hut, Private Coulter left camp early last evening to meet a friend in the village, so it's likely he was waiting for you across the street. There are two public houses in the village, and I daresay they both have a door marked Jug and Bottle. It's just an entrance--you'll see it everywhere over here--the door you use when you bring a jug or bottle to take away your beer." (p. 521)

The final paragraph returns to the understated and perhaps unjustified guilt of the narrator. The "chain of guilt" (p. 519) is thus passed from Coulter to the narrator, both of whom perceive themselves as false to their charges and to their best impulses. Coulter first feels guilty because "He had saved, then abandoned her . . ." (p. 519); later, the narrator believes "I failed him when he had greatest need of me . . ." (p. 500).

It might be wise at this point to recall the narrator's warning from early in the story: "Don't read into it what was never there; don't try to fit it into some pattern of destiny or judgment. It isn't necessary; there's no blame to be shifted" (p. 500). Sinclair Ross apparently recognized the weak ending of the story, and in the above passage seems to have anticipated criticism of it, but he does not overcome this weakness. There remains a contradiction between Coulter as a doomed figure and Coulter as an innocent victim of chance. His suicide is robbed of any dramatic power by its accidental nature, and there is a lack of clear focus on either Coulter as a tragic character or on the forces of "destiny or judgment" (p. 500). There is a narrative vacillation between these two views. Indeed, the emphasis is shifted by the ending of the story to the new irony of cultural displacement, of the trials of unsophisticated young Canadians abroad. There has been no preparation for this in "Jug and Bottle." The incremental, anecdotal format is a further flaw; it becomes repetitious and patterned rather than dynamic and expansive. One striking account of Coulter's suicidal tendencies would have been more effective than the several placid acknowledgements of this character trait which Ross supplies. The result is that Coulter's obsessiveness is pitiful and unconvincing, his tale of Muriel is maudlin and melodra-

matic, and even the narrator's despair seems false.

Sinclair Ross, removed from his familiar prairie landscape, virtually ignores the possibilities of this new environment, except for several pockets of landscape description which are rather artificially incorporated into the narrative. There is not a sustained fusion of character and environment in "Jug and Bottle;" atmosphere is not an integral part of character development. The only notable exception to this is a suggestive description of the sea:

For most of us, including Coulter, it was our first meeting with the sea, and beneath our casual acceptance we were vaguely disturbed: a dimension of indifference and power which lay outside the range of our highway-ribbed imaginations. We were in convoy, but the other ships strung along the horizon failed to reassure us. Instead, scattered and small, often obscured by mist and rain, they served only to suggest the ocean's vastness, like a scale at the bottom of a map. (pp. 509-510)

This passage seems to broach the subject of cultural and geographical displacement, an interesting idea in itself. Unfortunately, the isolated passage quoted above is an inadequate preparation for the important re-appearance of this idea at the end of the story, where the unfamiliarity of the narrator and Coulter with English customs contributes to Coulter's suicide. Thus Ross diffuses the tragic potential of Coulter and opts for the irony of the accidental, but even this is forced and unconvincing.

Coulter, deprived by Ross of tragic stature, emerges as a boring loser. There is, then, no evidence to justify the narrator's guilt, and his contention that Coulter was a figure of some human potential. Coulter's suicide is hardly a surprise, but the form it takes is contradictory to the general tone of the story, for it brings to bear external forces on Coulter's internal and inevitable decline. The surprise ending

in "Jug and Bottle" is less successful than that of "One's a Heifer" because it is less natural and more authorially imposed. It limits the possible interpretations of characters and actions. Arthur Vickers grows in menacing stature at the end of "One's a Heifer." Private Coulter is merely restricted to the role of victim and loser.

Coulter, despite the narrator's insistence, is not "borne inexorably" to his fate, but pushed and prodded to it by Ross. This is because "Jug and Bottle" simply does not reveal any inexorable chain of events. Its form, like that of "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune," is anecdotal. Its content is little more than a series of images of Private Coulter. There is an absence of compelling human action linking the various sections of "Jug and Bottle." Ross examines Coulter as an isolated character, not as an actor in a human drama. Thus there is little tension in the repetitive narrative pattern, but a degree of interest in the inner tensions of the characters themselves, such as the narrator's withholding of his emotions at the very end of the story. Ross vacillates between two different interpretations of Coulter. As a result, there is a fundamental contradiction in this story between Coulter as pathetic loser and as tragic figure. Nevertheless, "Jug and Bottle" indicates Ross's interest in the substantial themes of human guilt and the nature of fate. A story which more cogently articulates these themes, which makes a more dramatic study of patterns of "destiny or judgment" (p. 500) is "The Runaway." In this story complex characters are truly and vividly caught up in an inexorable chain of events, "helpless in some primitive mechanism . . . , borne on inexorably . . . to the blade of punishment" (p. 519). "The Runaway," unlike the stories viewed previously in this chapter, balances character and action, and reveals the grotesque and the

terrifying in human events as well as in human personalities.

First published in 1952, "The Runaway" examines the problem of retributive justice, of striking a balance between human sin and divine retribution. It goes beyond the masochistic self-laceration of characters such as Arthur Vickers or Private Coulter, in that the characters in "The Runaway" do not reveal self-indulgent and purely personal eccentricities, but pose universal questions about the nature of life. There is a depth and relevance to their situation which are absent from those of the previous stories examined in this chapter. Ross again employs a retrospective first-person narrator who figures prominently, as a youth, in the story. As in "One's a Heifer," the first-person narrative voice is a convenient device for presenting events in "The Runaway." It also, however, enables Ross to supply a significant analysis of one of the major characters in "The Runaway." The narrator's assessment of his father is a mixture of memory, love and compassion; rendered from a point of view other than that of the son, it would seem less authentic in its intimacy. The first-person narrator is therefore not simply a recorder of events in "The Runaway," but an important character as well, one who supplies a strong sense of authenticity to the story.

Action and character are inextricably linked in "The Runaway." The narrator's father is tricked by an unscrupulous neighbour, Luke Taylor, into accepting as part of a trade two beautiful but worthless animals. The father is humiliated, but confident that Taylor will be punished for this and other shady deals. In the father's patient efforts to rehabilitate his balky horses is the unfolding action of the story, and in the complex character of the father is Ross's essential theme. The father's faith centres around the belief that goodness is rewarded

and evil is punished. It is his experience with the horses that tests his simple faith. The balky horses, flawed like the idiot girl in "One's a Heifer," the simple Peter Dawson in "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune" or the distraught Private Coulter in "Jug and Bottle," are vulnerable, even helpless. These horses, like the human misfits in "One's a Heifer," "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune" and "Jug and Bottle," are seemingly at the mercy of man. Just as Coulter in "Jug and Bottle" "brought out the worst" (p. 516) in the narrator, so too do these balky horses elicit illuminating and powerful human responses.

The father is easily tricked by Luke Taylor, for his horses are beguilingly beautiful: "Black coats shining in the sun like polished metal; long, rippling manes; imperious heads--the mares were superb, and they knew it."<sup>6</sup> The father is initially proud of his animals; he piously ignores Taylor's bad reputation and the possibility that Taylor is tricking him: "'Luke must be getting close to seventy . . . and for all you know he's starting to repent. If he wants to turn honest and God-fearing at last it's for us to help him, not to keep raking up his past'" (p. 85). The father's benign dismissal of Taylor's "bland voice and shifty smile" (p. 84) is not without hypocrisy, for he is less moved by Taylor's seeming repentance than by the beautiful horses which appeal to his own vanity. His benevolence, like that of the narrator of "Jug and Bottle", is not altogether selfless. The father's vanity is revealed in his first use of the new horses:

My father, driving up to the door with a reckless flourish of the whip, was so jaunty and important, and above the pebbly whirl of wheels as the Diamonds plunged away there was such a

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<sup>6</sup>Sinclair Ross, "The Runaway," in his The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories, p. 84.



girlish peal of laughter from my mother! They were young again. (p. 86)

Their youthfulness is brief, for the Black Diamonds, the horses, are not the ideal creatures they first appear to be. The trip to town ends in disaster:

"Right in Main Street, wouldn't take a step. Just as we were ready to start for home. Two hours--the whole town watching. I even took the whip to them, but with balky horses nothing helps. The longer they stand the worse they get. I had to unhitch at last, and hire a team from the livery stable."

(p. 87)

This is no minor irritant, but a profound crisis in the life of the father. There is the deep humiliation over his balky horses, the public exposure of Taylor's trickery and the collapse of the illusions of youthfulness and pride. There is, for the mother, the additional burden of hiding her own embarrassment in order to support her husband in his moment of crisis. The balky Black Diamonds assail the father's core of values and beliefs, his very sense of identity:

According to his lights my father was a good man, and his bewilderment was, in proportion to his integrity. For years he had been weakened and confused by a conflict, on the one hand resentment at what Luke had done and got away with, on the other sincere convictions imposing patience and restraint; but through it all he had been sustained by the belief that scores were being kept, and that he would live to see a Day of Reckoning. Now, though, he wasn't sure. You could see . . . that he was beginning to wonder which he really was: the upright, God-fearing man that he had always believed himself to be, or a simple, credulous dupe. (p. 88)

The father is not concerned with personal revenge in itself, but with some proof that Divine "scores were being kept . . ." He is engaged in a crisis of his simple Christian faith. Out of a simple incident of victimization and trickery, Ross creates an altogether credible metaphor for the search for God. In "The Runaway," the questions of guilt, punishment and justice are not presented as simply human idiosyncrasies

and obsessions. They are questions of importance, and treated as such; these questions are not in "The Runaway" treated pretentiously or self-indulgently, as they are in "Jug and Bottle." It is the single, simple incident presented in "The Runaway," not the rambling and clumsy narrative of "Jug and Bottle," that successfully generates meaning.

The balky horses trigger a convincing spiritual crisis in the father. They also pose another sort of threat: the father's self-respect is tested by his treatment of these horses. He defines himself by his response to these flawed creatures, animal equivalents of Ross's human misfits:

He should have known . . . that a balky horse is never cured. If you're unscrupulous, you'll trade it off or sell it. If you're honest, you'll shoot it. Promptly, humanely, before it exasperates you to moments of rage and viciousness from which your self-respect will never quite recover. . . . You'll . . . degrade yourself to blows. And at last, weary and ashamed, you'll let the traces down and lead it to its stall.  
(p. 89)

The father in persistently attempting to rehabilitate his balky horses exposes himself to this threat to his self-respect. The horses can either restore or destroy his shaken faith and self-esteem. The narrator of "Jug and Bottle" delights initially in his control over Private Coulter. Similarly, the father in "The Runaway" "yielded to the vanity within himself" (p. 90) in his treatment of the horses. He assumes proudly that he has cured the horses:

And for a week or two he was young again. Young, light-hearted, confident. Confident in the Diamonds, confident in the rightness of the world. Old Luke had traded off balky horses on him, but now, in the service of an upright man, they were already willing, loyal ones. . . . Watching and working with them it was impossible to doubt that at the heart of things there was wisdom, goodness and a plan. They were an affirmation, a mighty Yea. (p. 92)

Depending on their behaviour, the horses represent to the father either

an affirmation or a negation of his religious faith. This is a philosophical and symbolic element absent from "Jug and Bottle." The horses also elicit aspects of the father's personality, such as his pious view of himself as "an upright man." Both his religious optimism and his personal self-assurance, like the initial glib benevolence of the narrator in "Jug and Bottle," are tested and found wanting.

The horses are put to work on the farm, but eventually they balk once more, thus triggering an illuminating reaction from the father. The narrator in "Jug and Bottle" remarks that "Something about his [Coulter's] voice and manner brought out the worst in me."<sup>7</sup> In "The Runaway," when the horses balk once more, the father's "real nature, too, was paralyzed and darkened" (p. 93). The father follows the mocking advice of Luke Taylor and lowers himself to Taylor's level by literally lighting a fire under the horses to move them. He is exasperated to "moments of rage and viciousness . . ." (p. 89). He betrays his humane impulses, and fails his helpless animals just as, in "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune," Peter Dawson's fellow recruits fail him by destroying his fiddle and just as the narrator in "Jug and Bottle" "failed him [Coulter] when he had greatest need of me . . ."<sup>8</sup>

After the father lights a fire under the horses, events move forward with an inexorable swiftness to their inevitable conclusion. The straw the horses are hauling ignites, the horses panic, run wild and finally thunder into Luke Taylor's yard. There, his barn catches fire and Taylor, together with all but a few of his precious Black Diamond horses, is burnt to death. Ross, then, in "The Runaway" dramatically

<sup>7</sup> Sinclair Ross, "Jug and Bottle," p. 516.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 500.

positions the element of the grotesque and the terrifying in a human event. Luke Taylor is in a sense a grotesque figure, cunning and greedy but obsessed with his beautiful horses. His fiery death is a powerful realization of his self-destructive personality, for it is his greed which lures him into the fiery barn:

Then old Luke arrived, and agile as a boy he leapt down from his wagon and started across the yard towards the barn. Three or four of the neighbours closed in to intercept him, but swerving sharply, then doubling back, he sprang away from them and through the door. (p. 97)

In "The Runaway," the grotesque event and the grotesque character fuse, Taylor's fiery death being the inevitable fulfilment of his self-destructive, greedy personality. In "Jug and Bottle," there is not such a fine balance between character and action; the event of Coulter's suicide lacks the intensity and internal logic of Luke Taylor's death in "The Runaway," a death which is a peculiar kind of suicide. Taylor's end is suicidal in the sense that he is drawn into the inferno of the barn by his own unnatural and overpowering obsession with his beautiful horses. His grotesque death is the result of his grotesque nature; in "Jug and Bottle," Private Coulter's suicide lacks this sort of logic and inevitability, for it is something of an artificial, authorial imposition.

Taylor's death, then, provides a powerful climax to "The Runaway." Moreover, the themes of justice and punishment are examined in depth. The father's final perplexity goes far beyond the self-indulgent, neurotic guilt of a character such as Private Coulter to express a universal human question:

There was a troubled, old look in his eyes, and I knew that for him it was not so simple as that to rule off a man's account and show it balanced. Leave Luke out of it now--say that so far as he was concerned the scores were settled--but what about

the Diamonds? What kind of reckoning was it that exacted life and innocence for an old man's petty greed? Why, if it was retribution, had it struck so clumsily? (pp. 97-98)

The father has tormented and tortured his balky Black Diamonds by lighting a fire under them. Taylor's own horses are horribly burnt to death. In each case, the innocent and helpless suffer, just as the human misfits such as the girl in "One's a Heifer" or Private Coulter and Muriel in "Jug and Bottle" suffer. The father ponders not only his own, but also, presumably, God's cruelty to the helpless, the misfits, the innocent and the harmless. He suffers not just personal guilt, but also philosophical doubts.

"Retribution" is out of all proportion to the human error, and cannot be equated with justice. Ironically, therefore, that which should affirm the father's Christian faith, the Day of Reckoning, leaves it further in doubt, and the final, troubling question of the above passage remains unanswered. There is, for the father, only the consolation of the future Black Diamond colts he will raise. This hope is raised by the wife, in her familiar, supportive role, after her initial retreat behind piety--"Though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small" (p. 97)--fails to console her husband. Her attempt to support her troubled husband is similar to the piety of Tommy Dickson's mother at the end of "Cornet at Night." Both incidents suggest the fragility of the family structure, and of the common faith. There is a perceived need to support and defend these values from the slightest attack.

The sense of human incomprehension evident at the end of "The Runaway" is anticipated by the evidence of human helplessness Sinclair Ross creates near the end of the story by means of action verbs such as

"lashed," "pommelled," "leaped" and "thundered." Once the horses panic, the human figures are powerless witnesses as events take on an independent life and move inexorably to their conclusion. All human attempts to interfere in and halt the course of events are futile. The human attempt to master the situation and control the horses is doomed to failure; the father's proud confidence that he is in control of his horses is an illusion, similar to the confidence of the boy in "The Outlaw" that he is master of the horse Isabel. The runaway is a credible incident, but also a metaphor for the external and uncontrollable forces of chance which seem to deny the possibility of Christian faith. As an accident, it is more successful than the accidental suicide of Coulter in "Jug and Bottle," for in "The Runaway" the accidental is also, ironically, convincingly depicted as the inevitable, as the culmination of Luke Taylor's obsessive nature.

The father in "The Runaway" confronts not only his personal degradation, in his cruelty to the horses, but the whole philosophical problem of what the narrator of "Jug and Bottle" calls the "pattern of destiny or judgment."<sup>9</sup> That philosophical theme is virtually ignored in "Jug and Bottle," with its emphasis on human eccentricities and neuroses. In "The Runaway," however, it is part of Ross's dual vision of human responsibility and inexorable destiny. Both elements are fused in a simple, dramatic and symbolic incident. The power of that incident, and of the concepts of retribution and fate, sets "The Runaway" apart from the other tales studied in this chapter, which, in general, fail to dramatically fuse action, character development and meaning in a single

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

powerful incident. "The Runaway" is philosophical but concrete, analytical but compassionate. Its intellectual strength arises naturally out of the human events it charts. The last story to be examined in this chapter, "The Flowers that Killed Him," also charts a dramatic, even sensational, event; it, like "The Runaway," examines the grotesque in both human characters and human events. "The Flowers that Killed Him" does not, however, employ the dual vision of "The Runaway." The emphasis of this recent story, published in 1972, is on the literal level of characters and their actions. This story does not reveal the intellectual depth of "The Runaway," for Ross in "The Flowers that Killed Him" emphasizes the elements of suspense and action. The larger moral issues of retribution and responsibility are suggested, but not examined, in this story. Like "One's a Heifer," "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune" and "Jug and Bottle," "The Flowers that Killed Him" does not rise above the level of its immediate details, its interest in eccentric characters and events. Therefore, it further serves to emphasize the contrasting depth and artistry of "The Runaway."

"The Flowers that Killed Him" is presented from the first-person point of view of a thirteen-year-old boy, Joe, and uses a disciplined variation of stream-of-consciousness. The boy's thoughts trace the developments of the story in a chronological order. Counterpointed to his thoughts is the curious reality of his present situation: we follow Joe's reconstruction and analysis of past events as he attends his father's funeral. There are, then, specific limitations on time, setting and point of view in this story which ensure that clarity does not suffer as a result of the use of the stream-of-consciousness technique. As Joe is in a better position than the reader to understand the



mysterious death of his father and the recent violent deaths of two school-mates, there is a degree of ambiguity in his reflections and therefore a tension in his unfolding narrative. Joe's guarded, veiled tone is crucial to the story. It recalls the success of Arthur Vickers' disjointed monologue in "One's a Heifer," and in its economy gives less away than does the narrative voice of "Jug and Bottle." In "Jug and Bottle," Private Coulter's suicide is anticipated by the narrative voice to the extent that the final event, when it occurs, loses much of its dramatic potential. The ambiguous stream-of-consciousness in "The Flowers that Killed Him" does, however, contribute to the powerful, surprising conclusion and is itself enriched by that ending. The surprise ending of this story, like that of "One's a Heifer," creates a whole new interpretation of action, character development and meaning, thus expanding the possibilities of the whole story.

Two of Joe's young friends have been sexually assaulted and murdered. The most recent murder had occurred only a week previous to the death of Joe's father. The father's death is not initially explained, so that one assumes it is a natural or accidental death. There is, however, the widow's strange response to this death:

Thinking of me, though, as she said it, not him. Easy to tell--the white, tight mouth, the scared eyes. Scared so bad they looked frozen, not far off crazy; and why would you be scared for somebody who's already dead?<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, something is amiss: fear is not the emotion one associates with a widow. The enigma grows when one considers the narrative tone, as well as the content, of the above passage. Joe is strangely remote from the

<sup>10</sup> Sinclair Ross, "The Flowers that Killed Him," Journal of Canadian Fiction, 1, No. 3 (Summer 1972), 5.

emotional reality of his father's death. Apparently, neither mother nor son are in grief. The narrative tone in the above passage is curiously laconic and controlled. There is nothing in his tone of the bittersweet nostalgia so evident in the stories of childhood soaring, examined in Chapter One of this study. Joe seems capable of the most mature and pragmatic analysis of his parents' marriage:

I mean they weren't exactly what you'd call a happy couple. For years they haven't even been sleeping together, and in the spring when we were looking for an apartment that was the big problem, finding one we could afford with three bedrooms. Still, he was her husband, and now that it's over I suppose she's got a lot to think about and remember. (p. 5)

Equally important as the content of the above passage is the tone, the remarkably tough and realistic attitude of Joe. It is perhaps difficult at this point in the story to fully accept such precocity, but the surprise ending does make sense of Joe's objective tone. At any rate, the tone as well as the content of the above passages indicates that Joe is another of Sinclair Ross's misfits, emotionally scarred by some mysterious experience. The natural concern of the reader is to discover the cause of this trauma; one is compelled to read further.

Other significant details are revealed by Joe: "People didn't like my father very well but they all respected him" (p. 6). The father thus begins to emerge as something of a misfit. He is eulogized from the pulpit as "Devoted husband and father . . . outstanding example to the community . . . a sensitive man, lover of the finer things . . ." (p. 7).

The truth is that he was a loner, virtually friendless and unhappily married. He was mockingly nicknamed "Old Creeper." Joe ponders the history of his own friendship with the two murdered boys and the role of his father in bringing the three boys together. In repeatedly searching

for an explanation which "Makes sense . . ." (p. 7) of his father's benevolence, Joe notes another disturbing element of his father's personality. "Old Creeper" had encouraged and assisted Larry Blake, one of the murdered boys, but even this benevolence had not won him gratitude or affection from Larry's mother:

In fact . . . she never had much use for him. She wasn't the only one, but it was different with her because he'd done a lot to help her, her and Larry both. So it was what you might call a struggle, what she felt about him and what she kept telling herself she ought to feel. (p. 7)

Disliked but respected, mocked for his benevolence by his students, "Old Creeper" nevertheless seems strangely innocent:

For it wasn't popularity--at least not just popularity--he was after. He liked flowers himself and he thought we'd all be better, live better lives, if we liked them too. . . . And he wanted us to grow up knowing better, so we'd never kill just for the sake of killing. (p. 8)

"Old Creeper" is a lover of beautiful flowers, averse to killing even snakes. His paradoxical role in the community is that of one treated with respect but with no affection; it is complemented by his appearance:

No-- it was . . . maybe the way he looked. Not so bad full face and sitting, say at the table; but far too big and scrawny. Six feet three with a long neck, a head on the small side and not too much chin. Arms floppy; feet never sure which way to go. (p. 8)

Joe's father seems an eccentric loner similar to Private Coulter in "Jug and Bottle;" like Coulter, he plays the role of benefactor to fellow victims and outsiders, the two murdered boys who were of low social status in the community:

Larry always ran; Red always fought; and my father, the principal, decided it was time to do something. Always on the outside, everybody against them: they were making things bad for themselves, maybe spoiling their whole lives. That's what he came and said to me one day. "We've got to get them integrated and you've got to help." (p. 6)

The less admirable aspects of "Old Creeper's" benevolence are presented as Joe recalls his father "always pushing in and getting round"

(p. 7) Larry and Red:

Maybe that's what they'll remember, Old Creeper at the door saying "Hello" and "Good Night" . . . I hope so, because what I remember is Old Creeper upstairs waiting--every minute they were there I could feel him waiting--watching the time, sitting down with his book, coming to the basement door to listen. (p. 8)

There is in the above passage the beginning of a conflict between the external and the internal views of the father, and a sense of menace in the father's "waiting." Also, there is the mystery of Joe's desire that a certain generous view of his father prevail. This simple mystery contributes to the element of suspense in "The Flowers that Killed Him," and the "all-out, cat-spitting hate" (p. 9) of Joe's mother for her husband further darkens the ambiguous character of "Old Creeper."

As the funeral ends, Joe's thoughts move to the recent murder of his friend Red Cochran. With a relentless pace similar to that of the final events in "The Runaway," Sinclair Ross details the events leading to the death of Joe's father. Joe recalls a parental argument which resulted in his father's retreat to the seclusion of the school. He ponders the inexplicable presence of his father, the next morning, in the mother's bedroom; this is virtually an invasion of her privacy. Also, Joe recalls that Red had inflicted scratches on his attacker. These seemingly unrelated details are linked to an important decision made by Joe shortly after Red's death: "A long time--just thinking and watching the curtains blow--and then it was over and I knew what I had to do" (p. 10). Ross builds suspense by concealing the exact nature of Joe's decision and by describing his seemingly senseless and unrelated

actions on the day of Old Creeper's death. Such actions as Joe's placing fragments of glass on the sidewalk below his apartment seem irrational, but, because they are performed so methodically, seem linked to some eventual culmination. Again, then, Ross maintains a high level of suspense. Events culminate in Joe pushing his father to his death from his apartment window. Only in the final paragraph does Joe tell of the scratches on his father's face, scratches which were unsuccessfully concealed by make-up taken from the mother's bedroom, and which are concealed forever by the further cuts sustained in "Old Creeper's" fall to a sidewalk littered with glass. The father is thus revealed as the murderer of the two boys, but in death his reputation is intact.

The father's benevolence and sensitivity, his love of flowers and professed aversion to killing any living creature, are an ironic mask concealing his true nature. Just as the seeming irrationality of Joe's memories and his final actions strengthens the suspenseful climax of "The Flowers that Killed Him," so too ambiguity strengthens the story as a whole. Thus the father's favorite hymns are remarkably apt in retrospect, and are transformed by one's final darker understanding of "Old Creeper." "Lead kindly Light amid the encircling gloom" (p. 7) and "Forgive our feverish ways" (p. 8) are a chilling testament of and cry from the tortured existence of the father. His burden of guilt and sinfulness is powerfully suggested, in retrospect, by these pious hymns. In "Jug and Bottle", the guilt of both the narrator and Private Coulter is made to seem trivial because it is all too constant and obvious a factor in the story. Such is not the case in "The Flowers that Killed Him," where, in these few poignant lines from innocent hymns, the internal torment of Joe's father, a kind man out of control, is barely

glimpsed. This guilt and torment is an important element at the end of "The Flowers that Killed Him," but it does not control and obscure the whole narrative structure of the story, as does the guilt of the narrator in "Jug and Bottle." There is none of the exaggerated self-laceration of the narrator of "Jug and Bottle" in Joe's account. Furthermore, "Old Creeper's" inner torment, like that of Arthur Vickers in "One's a Heifer", is thoroughly warranted and therefore credible. By providing a shocking reason for his inner torment, and an economic presentation of it, Ross permits "Old Creeper" to expand in significance as a grotesque figure. The hymns, and Joe's father, grow in significance; in retrospect. In this, they embody the whole process of "The Flowers that Killed Him," for Joe's puzzled analysis of events is also in retrospect symptomatic of a need to understand his father.

Joe's understated tone suggests his own strained state of mind. He must hold his emotions in check if he is to preserve his own sanity. All that he can permit himself is: "I was sorry too, sorrier than I'd ever been . . ." (p. 10). Joe has lost two close friends, has discovered the awful truth of his father's nature and has killed his father. It is therefore not surprising that he is at the edge of an abyss and must control himself very carefully. This is psychologically credible and also contributes to the ambiguity of the narrative voice. The clipped tone of the narrator entices one to read on, in search of his secret. Also, Joe's motives for killing his father remain in doubt. He is "sorry," but "I knew what I had to do" (p. 10). Elsewhere, he boasts that "Nobody pushes me around now" (p. 6). Early in the story, he asserts that "a husband's a husband, and . . . a son's a son" (p. 6). There are some suggestions of personal guilt in Joe's tone, as he seems

to reproach himself for his treatment of his father: "I never got along with him very well. . . . But I always knew, even when things were messed up between us, that he was trying" (pp. 7-8).

There are, then, several forces which drive Joe to murder his father. There is the possibility that Joe acts in order to avenge his dead friends. There may even be a concern with defending himself against his father: "Nobody pushes me around now" (p. 6). The dominant suggestion, however, is that Joe is moved by compassion to perform a kind of mercy killing. Thus he confirms that "a son's a son" (p. 6) in performing this duty and also carefully protects the good reputation of his father. This violent act is something Joe "had to do" (p. 10). He performs what he perceives to be his responsibility to the grotesque character who is his father. Again in "The Flowers that Killed Him" the misfit elicits significant responses in others; Joe's reaction is indeed violent, but it is essentially an act of kindness. Joe, unlike, for example, the narrator in "Jug and Bottle," does not shirk what he sees as his duty to the misfit; he atones for his neglect of his father, for the years when he "took sides with her against him" (p. 8).

Joe feels compelled to murder his father; ironically, he thus becomes himself a murderer, a grotesque figure, a psychological cripple. His confrontation with reality is a good deal more vicious and traumatic than the sort of maturing process traced in the stories of childhood so far. Joe's cool and rational tone is crucial to the development of suspense in "The Flowers that Killed Him," but it is also a shocking indication of his own inner torment, which is barely under control. The surprise ending of this story reveals the need for Joe to so control his emotions. As in "One's a Heifer," the surprise ending of "The Flowers



that Killed Him" serves to illuminate and radically alter one's understanding of the whole story. Typical of this process is the revaluation one must make in retrospect of the father's favourite hymns. Ross's economic and functional use of detail is also evident in this story: an early reference to the mother's use of make-up is an adequate preparation for its important recurrence as the father's disguise. Such masterful control of technique creates in "The Flowers that Killed Him" a strong sense of suspense.

"The Flowers that Killed Him" does not, however, go beyond its powerful immediate situation to more universal problems, as does "The Runaway." It is, like "Jug and Bottle" and "One's a Heifer," essentially a study of the misfit. In its surprise ending, which reveals the complex horror and beauty of human action, it raises questions of basic human motivations and emotions. There is a whole complex of factors--anger, fear, love and guilt--leading Joe to murder his father. There is a kind of redemption in Joe's action, a suggestion of elements which balance the evil of his father, but these elements are only suggested and are not articulated at any point in the story. Joe's motives remain something of a mystery, just as his father's guilt is barely suggested. The story is taut and tense; this technical finesse does not, however, compensate for the absence of fully developed themes in "The Flowers that Killed Him." Important themes are poetically suggested in this story, but they are not treated in any detail. As a result "The Flowers that Killed Him" is more than a mere study of the misfit, but it falls short of the kind of thematic complexity which is powerfully articulated in "The Runaway."

The stories examined in this chapter share a rather negative view of human nature. Man, it seems, is either hounded by guilt like Private Coulter in "Jug and Bottle," crafty and cunning like Arthur Vickers in "One's a Heifer," dishonest like Luke Taylor in "The Runaway" or sexually aberrant like "Old Creeper" in "The Flowers that Killed Him." The only hope and relief is in the moment of redeeming human love or action: in "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune", the recruits right their wrong to Peter Dawson by giving him a new fiddle; in "The Runaway", the father ponders the cruelty of innocent animals being burnt alive and finds solace in the surviving horses; in "The Flowers that Killed Him", Joe mercifully ends his father's torment. Without such moments of atonement, man seems, in these stories, plagued by guilt and condemned to purge that guilt by telling his tale. If the misfit is the central type of character depicted in these stories, the central technique employed by Ross involves the charting of human responses to the misfit. Characters such as Arthur Vickers in "One's a Heifer" and the narrator in "Jug and Bottle" reveal their own spiritual conditions by their significant responses to more vulnerable characters. Even the flawed horses in "The Runaway" are a kind of moral test for their owner, because they provoke in him cruel and self-degrading reactions. In "The Flowers that Killed Him," Joe's father is initially the benefactor of the two boys he later murders; for him too the helpless boys represent a moral test, which he fails. In these gloomy stories, even the most generous and benevolent human impulses are suspect.

A problem Sinclair Ross encounters in these tales of the misfit is that he does not establish a balance between character, action and meaning. Thus "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune" and "Jug and Bottle" concentrate,

within an unsatisfactory anecdotal format, on the rather dull misfits, Peter Dawson and Private Coulter. Both stories are sentimental; both lack real action and suspense. On the other hand, "One's a Heifer" creates a tense atmosphere, but the thematic implications of this atmosphere are limited. The same holds true for "The Flowers that Killed Him," which is also a technically accomplished but thematically shallow piece. Only "The Runaway" seems to integrate the elements of action, character and meaning, which function in isolation in "One's a Heifer," "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune," "Jug and Bottle" and "The Flowers that Killed Him."

Ross's fictional loners, outcasts and misfits range from the sentimental to the terrifying in their personalities. Because they are eccentrics, often they lack credibility: there seems an innate difficulty in rendering the misfit ordinary enough to appear credible. The misfit is most acceptable as a character when he exhibits both normal and abnormal characteristics; thus Arthur Vickers' guilt is balanced by his normal human need for companionship, and "Old Creeper's" external, respectable role balances his perverted inner nature. Ross's fictional misfits are obsessed with the problems of sin and guilt, the question of one man's obligations to another. Frequently the misfit betrays others and therefore himself. In the stories to be viewed in Chapter Three Ross depicts a larger, almost cosmic, betrayal of man by the external conditions of life! Man's youthful aspirations and his faith in life are tested and often destroyed in this last type of story, just as, in the tales of the misfit, man's glib self-esteem and altruism are tested and found wanting. The stories to be viewed in Chapter Three are not concerned with merely eccentric and isolated characters or situations. They portray those human problems which have an almost timeless and

universal relevance. In this, they are perhaps similar to "The Runaway," a story which fuses exciting action, memorable characters and a complex understanding of life. Several of the tales of the misfit profess a concern with patterns of destiny and retribution, but, with the notable exception of "The Runaway," their essential concern is the figure of the misfit himself. This is not the case in the stories to be dealt with in Chapter Three, stories in which universal patterns of experience are explored by Ross.

CHAPTER "III"

THE VALIANT STRUGGLE

The stories to be viewed in this final chapter are accounts of the adult frustrations of farm life. In each story--"No Other Way" (1934), "A Field of Wheat" (1935), "The Lamp at Noon" (1938), "The Painted Door" (1939), "Not by Rain Alone" (1935 and 1941) and "Neil" (1941)--Sinclair Ross portrays the struggles of men and women with each other and with the vicissitudes of weather, uncertain crops and monotonous poverty. In all but two of these stories the stormy human relationships are complemented or provoked by storms of dust, snow, hail or by drought. This storm motif is powerfully realistic but is also a sustained metaphor for the uncertain human struggle. It is an outstanding feature of these stories, and represents a fusion of the narrative structure and the essential themes. These stories are not concerned with the soaring dreams of youths, but with the harsh reality those youths escape imaginatively. Neither are these stories concerned with the types of eccentrics and misfits discussed in Chapter Two, but with fairly ordinary men and women.

The major concern of the stories to be explored in this third chapter is human conflict, in its many forms. There is conflict between characters in fierce debates over the value of life on the land. There is the orchestrated human struggle against a capricious external world. Finally, there is, within many of these characters, a struggle between youthful resentment and mature acceptance of fate. Torn between the impulse to rebel against and the need to submit to his fate, the protagonist of a story such as "Not by Rain Alone" searches for a way to resolve his inner conflict, only to find that there is "no other way" than simply accepting his lot. This is one of the recurring insights of Ross's struggling characters. In these stories, man rarely wins his many

struggles, but he does endure somehow, after suffering greatly. His struggles are concentrated in one dynamic incident, against a background of universal patterns of struggle and submission, storm and calm, and in a relentlessly oppressive atmosphere. That single incident often culminates in a significant human response to some external phenomenon. For example, in "Nell" a simple bottle of ketchup is transformed into a symbol of human love and loyalty by generating external evidence of these internal emotions. Material objects thus develop into symbols which evoke a complex of emotional responses. Responding to the truths of the indifferent external world, man perceives the reflection of his internal plight. He must either accept this internal truth, or be destroyed by it.

"No Other Way" is the first of Ross's stories to use the external world as a mirror of internal human truth. First published in 1934, the story lacks the storm motif of subsequent stories such as "A Field of Wheat," but it does introduce the recurring theme of marital conflict. In "No Other Way," the routine of Hatty Glenn's farm chores provides an external complement to her internal conflicts, and a stability lacking in her marriage. It provides a simple narrative structure, but it is also the vehicle for presenting the essential authorial view of Hatty as a victim. Furthermore, Hatty's internal development is indicated by her significant human responses to her daily chores. Her relation to the land is defined by her chores. They are an external fact of her life, in terms of which she defines herself and her predicament. She is only the first of many of Ross's adult characters to significantly react to some seemingly insignificant external phenomenon.

Hatty is first seen in relation to her immediate environment and her routine of chores: "Hatty Glenn, on her knees at the end of the two-



acre garden, felt it [night], closing in, and her big butcher-knife hacked with feverish haste at the frost-blackened turnip-tops."<sup>1</sup> Hatty is compelled by the dictates of climate to fight for the harvest of her crops. This external struggle lacks the excitement of a struggle with a snowstorm, but it does serve as a prelude to another sort of struggle:

An old struggle, for years now an inseparable part of her life. Love against a sense of injustice--duty against something that kept saying she was a fool--loyalty and sympathy trying to oust the fear that she was making only a dog of herself. A useless, wearying struggle, making her harsh and sour and old, and always ending just where it had begun. Why ought she to worry and bother when Dan never lifted a finger? (p. 16)

Hatty feels compelled to save her crop from the approaching winter, and her marriage from another kind of blight. She is torn between the impulse to rebel against her lot and the necessity of continuing her work, as "It was the only way. There was snow in the wind" (p. 16). Hatty's internal struggle and her recognition of the "only way" anticipate the fatalistic acceptance of circumstance which is a recurring aspect of Ross's vision of the adult world. In "No Other Way," the primary concern is the way Hatty resolves her conflicts with the land and with Dan.

The futility of Hatty's position is emphasized by her being "on her knees," literally and metaphorically, as the story opens. The cold winter wind assaults Hatty, emphasizing her insignificance. Her attempt to protect her garden from hungry cows provides another example of the external world exacerbating and complementing internal despair:

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<sup>1</sup>Sinclair Ross, "No Other Way," Nash's Pall Mall Magazine, XCIV, No. 497 (October 1934), 16.



The dozen oat stacks, built in a square, with only narrow runways between them, formed a little labyrinth where the cows dodged in and out and from side to side, indifferent to her screams and yells. The bristly butts of the sheaves as she squeezed her way among them were like needles on her face and hands. The dust rose in dense, choking clouds, stinging her eyes, and forming on her lips in little larva-like clots of mud. (p. 80)

Ross's word-choice in the above passage is significant: there is the external, physical "labyrinth" which suggests the tangled maze of Hatty's internal conflicts. The animals are, like Dan, indifferent to Hatty's shrieks. There are also suggestions that the natural environment is almost actively hostile to Hatty. She is victimized by "bristly butts" and stinging dust, mocked by the land and Dan alike. This account of Hatty's struggle with her environment complements her struggle with Dan, and emphasizes her isolation. The above passage functions as do the accounts of storms in subsequent stories. The process is seen in its embryonic form above and becomes a controlling motif in a story such as "A Field of Wheat."

Accompanying Hatty's brutalizing chores is her running denunciation of Dan, "an old harangue that she went through nearly every day of her life" (p. 80). This harangue is as revealing a commentary on Hatty herself as on Dan, for it exposes the bitterness and aridity in Hatty which in part justifies Dan's indifference. It also emphasizes the pathos of her attempt to win back Dan by accompanying him to a dance in town. There, Dan is in his natural element but Hatty, removed from her familiar chores, is clearly not. Ross carefully selects those significant details which create an authentic, palpable sense of Hatty's self-consciousness. Her voice is uncontrollably shrill, her hands red and wrinkled from work and her "best dress" is an embarrassment. Her psycho-

logical pain is every bit as credible as the physical pain earlier imposed by the "bristly butts" of sheaves. Hatty again perceives herself as a victim. Ross selects only those details which confirm Hatty's sense of isolation. Hatty intercepts smirks, winks and looks of pity which worsen her internal state: "Then her partner across the table winked at the lady with the bright spots of rouge. She saw him, and sobered abruptly" (p. 81).

Hatty's attempt to assert her lapsed femininity fails, for she bears too many scars--a shrill voice, a withered appearance--from her years of chores and invective. She returns to the comfort of her familiar chores, thus coming full circle from rejection to acceptance of her life. Ross prolongs her inner struggle, however, thus weakening the dramatic unity of the piece. Hatty vacillates from bitterness to a sense of helplessness, to a realization of her love for Dan: "she would just have to go on slaving and fighting, loving him all the time . . ." (p. 82). She next considers suicide, but has this alternative arbitrarily removed by the appearance of cattle in her garden again. This galvanizes her once more into action and invective. Her final thoughts--"Butter twenty-five cents a pound. There was no other way" (p. 84)--echo precisely her earlier calculations for the coming winter and indicate that she is trapped in a futile, cyclical pattern, "always ending just where it had begun" (p. 16). There is altogether too much vacillation in this final section, a profusion of Hatty's conflicting impulses which is, furthermore, brought to a rather forced resolution. Ross loses an objective distance from Hatty and resorts to an abundance of insignificant details.

Hatty's final submission to her fate, to the "way" of her life,

can be considered as a positive development only in a limited sense, for she is essentially prolonging a blighted existence. She may well be simply enslaved to her daily routine. Hatty survives, but only to face recurring conflict. She pays for her physical survival in spiritual hardening. In "No Other Way," the repetition of key words at the ending of the story points to a significant development in the character of Hatty. She and the reader infuse "There was no other way" (p. 84) with symbolic meaning. They embody a stoical submission to a thankless way of life. The technique appears frequently in other stories by Ross. In "The Lamp at Noon," a key phrase appears at the beginning and end of the story. In "Nell," a bottle of ketchup punctuates the beginning and end of the story, charting character development. In "A Field of Wheat," simple preparations for supper appear significantly at the beginning and end of the story. Cyclical patterns, recurring images and events accompany internal developments in Ross's tales of adult experience.

The daily routine of wearying chores, which Hatty briefly escapes, asserts itself once more at the end of "No Other Way," so that the whole story takes its form from the pattern of Hatty's work. There is the first section of the story, in which Hatty toils in her garden and calculates the economics of her crop; there is her trip to town and, finally, her return to the farm. This is similar to, but less dramatically exciting than, the calm-storm-calm structure of a story such as "A Field of Wheat." The detailed treatment of Hatty's work is more than simple realism. In "No Other Way," Hatty's relationship with her land is symbolic of her whole status in life, for she is truly "on her knees" in both her work and her personal life. Her impulse to rebel against her numbing chores is an attempt to forge a completely new role for

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herself in life. When she finally comes full circle and resumes her task of milking the cows, she is making a significant statement about the nature of life. Her internal progression from rebellion to submission is indicated by her resumption of her chores. The invective and the unrewarding labour continue, but there is an element of positive human courage in Hatty's endurance, in her positive response to her routine of chores.

"No Other Way" is seriously flawed by its lack of a compelling series of events which could balance the obsessively shrill rhetoric of Hatty Glenn. Her vacillations in mood are not always held in check by Ross, especially at the end of the story. Her internal drama does not reach a climax, for even her suicidal tendencies are aborted by external circumstances in a contrived resolution. Her decision to continue seems not inevitable but accidental. There is no inner logic leading events relentlessly to their conclusion. The story is perhaps too faithful to the monotony of Hatty's external life. In later stories of adult conflict, Ross provides relief from such an oppressive atmosphere by a shifting narrative pattern or by the depiction of exciting human action. In a story such as "A Field of Wheat" the human struggle achieves a dignity that is absent from the struggle in "No Other Way." This may be due to the petty meanness of Dan and Hatty Glenn in contrast to the grandeur of the natural world in "A Field of Wheat," a grandeur which somehow elevates the characters. More admirable victims of circumstance appear in subsequent stories by Sinclair Ross. Hatty Glenn evokes pity; Martha in "A Field of Wheat," a more sympathetically and fully developed character than Hatty, evokes compassion.

"No Other Way" is a valuable introduction to Ross's tales of the

adult struggle. The idea of human struggle, and of endurance won at a tragic internal cost, is a major theme of these stories and is introduced in "No Other Way." Ross articulates the view of life as an unending struggle and conflict in an indifferent universe in these stories; there is "no other way" for man than, at best, endurance and a grudging acceptance. The cyclic patterns both within and outside man are technically and thematically important in these stories, as is the sustained correspondence between external and internal worlds, barely glimpsed in "No Other Way." The reliance on human responses to the external reality as a guide to meaning also has its roots in an early story like "No Other Way" and becomes a more critical aspect of technique in, for example, "The Lamp at Noon." In the stories of adult conflict published by Ross after "No Other Way," he essentially refined the structure of that first story. The process begins with "A Field of Wheat," the first story to build on the foundation of "No Other Way," to explore with greater subtlety of language and character the theme of human struggle.

"A Field of Wheat," first published in 1935, makes a more dramatic use of atmosphere than does "No Other Way." The conflict between John and Martha in "A Field of Wheat" rises above the petty to achieve a real poignancy. John and Martha retain a dignity and therefore a power to evoke compassion, a power denied Dan and Hatty Glenn. This development is achieved in "A Field of Wheat" by the introduction of the significant external force of the hailstorm, which quite realistically wreaks human havoc. There is, then, a suspenseful and credible sequence of events in "A Field of Wheat" which elevates and intensifies the plight of Ross's main characters. Moreover, the natural disaster of the hailstorm shares a reasonable part of the responsibility for the internal unhappiness of

both John and Martha. The cause of the Glenns' discord was never brought into similar focus.

Martha, the central character in "A Field of Wheat," lives a life similar to that of Hatty. She, like Hatty, is first seen in an emblematic pose, at work in the fields:

Martha was thirty-seven. She had clinched with the body and substance of life; had loved, borne children--a boy had died--and yet the quickest aches of life, travail, heart-brokenness, they had never wrung as the wheat wrung. For the wheat allowed no respite. Wasting and unending it was struggle, struggle against wind and insects, drought and weeds. Not an heroic struggle . . . but a frantic, unavailing one. They were only poor, taunted driven things; it was the wheat that was invincible.<sup>2</sup>

The wheat, like Hatty's chores, allows "no respite." In both women there is a sense of futility and a loss of individual feminine identity, a conceptualization of life as a struggle. A new element is, however, introduced in the above passage. Martha's quarrel is less with her husband John than with the domination of their life together by the wheat. A weakness of "No Other Way" is the seemingly compulsive bitterness of Hatty. This is not the case in "A Field of Wheat," where marital discord has a credible external explanation in the tyranny of the wheat.

The conflict between John and Martha runs deeper than that between Dan and Hatty Glenn. In "A Field of Wheat," this conflict is merely suggested, so that its dramatic possibilities are not diffused in rhetoric early in the story. An understated tone of regret is more effective in "A Field of Wheat" than are the unrestrained hysterics of Hatty Glenn in "No Other Way:"

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<sup>2</sup>Sinclair Ross, "A Field of Wheat," in his The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), p. 74.

She had loved John, for these sixteen years had stood close watching while he died--slowly, tantalizingly, as the parched wheat died. He had grown unkempt, ugly, morose. . . . John was gone, love was gone; there was only wheat. (p. 74)

The external world of wheat is a real force disrupting the marriage of John and Martha. It allows for more complex character development by Ross: John is not a one-dimensional scoundrel like Dan Glenn, but a farmer quite justifiably committed to his work. The circumstances of such a life, the dictates of the wheat, inescapably come between John and Martha. There is "no other way" than farming by which John can support his family. Ironically, this farming demands so much attention as to alienate John from Martha. There is a tragic inevitability to this paradox absent from the petty conflict between Dan and Hatty Glenn. The plight of John and Martha is less volatile than that of Dan and Hatty, but more credible and evocative. Dan and Hatty seem complete opposites, so that their initial marriage seems completely without basis, there being no evidence of the slightest compatibility. It is clear, however, what has come between John and Martha, as well as what originally brought them together. Finally, because Martha's dismay is not articulated, it remains a source of tension. The tension of Hatty's anger is, however, quickly dissipated in "No Other Way."

Hatty Glenn believes, wrongly, she can win back Dan. Similarly, Martha sees in the bountiful wheat some hope for a better future with John:

Three hundred acres. Bushels, thousands of bushels, she wouldn't even try to think how many. And prices up this year. It would make him young again, lift his head, give him spirit. Maybe he would . . . believe in himself again. (p. 74)

The wheat is an external force which has come between John and Martha, for in the past John has, spiritually, "died . . . as the parched wheat

died" (p. 74). There is a link between the fate of John and that of his wheat, so that external prosperity promises, for Martha, an internal resurgence in John. The wheat is invested with almost mystical powers: it can change lives. It is the link between external and internal worlds, between physical reality and human hope. It is the receptacle of the aspirations of John and Martha, who, unlike the Glenns, are united in a common goal, a record crop of wheat. The wheat is, however, "invincible;" therefore, in a sense it must take precedence over human concerns if it is to fulfill its human promise. John, to be as good an economic provider as possible, must neglect to a certain extent his roles as husband and father, and focus all his energy on the wheat. The wheat overrules personal, emotional concerns, creating a rift between John and Martha. They, unlike Hatty and Dan, seem drawn apart inevitably by uncontrollable external forces, as symbolized by the "invincible" wheat. They are, of necessity, drawn apart. The characters in "No Other Way" exploit and abuse each other; those in "A Field of Wheat" seem victimized by uncontrollable forces of circumstance. There is in this development a more truly tragic vision of life. For John and Martha there is unquestionably, tragically, "no other way," "nothing else but going-on" (p. 74).

Martha, like Hatty Glenn, experiences an inner conflict between resentment of her plight and resignation to it. This conflict is revealed in a more economical, less rhetorical fashion in "A Field of Wheat" than in "No Other Way": "He [John] never seemed to feel that he owed her anything, never worried about her future. She could sweat, grow flat-footed and shapeless, but that never bothered him" (p. 75). John is, however, not a gambler or philanderer like Dan Glenn, but a farmer obsessed with his wheat as a means of providing for his family. He is



not a simplistic villain; his wife's resentment is therefore not exaggerated but restrained and tempered with understanding. Also, in "A Field of Wheat" there is more substantial human action than in "No Other Way." Following the economical presentation of what is essentially Martha's point of view, Ross modulates into a transitional passage depicting the innocent play of Martha's daughter:

Sitting down on the doorstep to admire the gaudy petals, she complained to herself, "They go so fast--the first little winds blows them all away." On her face, lengthening it, was bitten deeply the enigma of the flowers and the naked seed-pods. Why did the beauty flash and the bony stalks remain?

(p. 76)

Annabelle recognizes the "enigma" of the cyclical pattern of birth and death, growth and destruction. The wind which destroys her flowers becomes the battering wind of the hail-storm which destroys the wheat. Both the devastating storm and the "enigma" it poses are anticipated in the above passage.

Ross's description of the storm itself, and of the family's pitiful defense against it, is a stunning creation of external oppressive atmosphere internalized, a concrete imaging of human struggle. There is an intensity and suspense in this account absent, perhaps unavoidably, from the descriptions of Hatty's struggles in her garden. The image of hail literally bursting into Martha's house emphasizes the oppressive effect of the storm on a perceiving human consciousness. There is the "intense and breathless" heat prefiguring the storm, the "choked" light and especially the sense of imprisonment: "To the west there was no sky, only a gulf of blackness, so black that the landscape seemed slipping down the neck of a funnel" (p. 77). This fusion of land and sky is a common and effective image Ross employs in the stories of adult exper-

tence to fuse external events and internal responses, to further suggest diminishing human horizons in an oppressive environment. The storm itself is described very much in terms of the human reactions it generates; the family is galvanized into action by the storm, but their efforts to defend their home are as futile as Hatty's efforts to protect her garden.

The plight of man in this hostile environment is apparent in such passages as "She wanted to scream a warning, but it was a bare whisper" (p. 77). Man is simply assaulted and overpowered by the elements; he is "deafened, pinioned, crushed" (p. 78). The destruction of the house is rendered in language which suggests human destruction, thus again linking the internal and external worlds: "there was a sharp, crunching blow on the roof, its sound abruptly dead, sickening, like a weapon that has sunk deep into flesh" (p. 78). The storm is more malevolent, swift and overpowering than any of Hatty's minor irritants; it is an actively hostile force literally and figuratively invading man's internal world, his home and his dreams:

The stones clattered on the floor and bounded up to the ceiling, lit on the stove and threw out sizzling steam. The wind whisked pots and kettles off their hooks, tugged at and whirled the sodden curtains, crashed down a shelf of lamps and crockery.  
(p. 79)

Ross's many verbs in the above passage create a realistic scene, but also suggest, by their sheer devastation, the traumatic effect of such a scene on the characters.

With the abrupt end of the storm, the wheat, obscured as an issue by the vitality of Ross's account of the storm itself, re-emerges as a concern. The language also shifts from an emphasis on the physical external action of the storm to a style which suggests the numbed, human internal response:

Nothing but the glitter of sun on hailstones. Nothing but their wheat crushed into little rags of muddy slime. . . . Martha and John walked to the far end of the field. There was no sound but their shoes slipping and rattling on the pebbles of ice. (p. 80)

It is at this point that the role of the storm as catalyst emerges. As in subsequent stories to be viewed in this chapter, the chaotic external storm here worsens or even triggers internal human stress. Given Martha's background of discontent, it is to be expected that she, at this point, breaks down in despair and is consoled by a word from John, "more of him than she had had for years" (p. 80). What is shockingly unexpected is the conclusion of the story, Martha's discovery of John secretly weeping, internally broken by the external devastation of his crop.

Martha's discovery is "the strangest, most frightening moment of her life. . . He had always been so strong and grim . . . and now he was beaten" (p. 82). Martha's insight is dramatically effective, a powerful image. Hatty's progression was not accompanied by any vivid external referent, and consequently lacked conviction and force. Such is not the case with this final, powerful revelation in "A Field of Wheat." Martha's insight into John's humanity gives her the courage to go on; she, like Hatty, signals her internal development by resuming her daily chores, the human reality only briefly interrupted by the external fact of the storm. Martha thus makes a symbolic affirmation of life, albeit in a fairly pessimistic context. As does Hatty in "No Other Way," Martha endures, but she bears invisible scars. The hailstorm destroys the wheat and gives Martha an insight into John, who has fully internalized the destruction of his crop. It does not, however, unite Martha and John in grief. Martha must keep her knowledge of John secret: "She crept away. . . It would be unbearable to watch his humiliation if he looked up and saw

her" (p. 82). John and Martha resume the daily pattern of their lives, the searing irony being that the wheat has indeed proved "invincible." It has only externally been destroyed; John and Martha remain locked into the old values of the land, the stifling human roles which the wheat dictates. They remain stoic, but tragically apart, for however noble a purpose. The wheat remains as a reality separating John and Martha for they still conceal their emotions from each other, "going on" in isolation. The strength of Martha is her endurance and tenacity; balanced against this is her pathetic, incommunicative relationship with John. She, like Hatty Glenn, survives, but in an imaginatively diminished world.

The rhythm of calm-storm-calm provides an organic narrative structure for "A Field of Wheat," and an ironic external foil to the internal, human ruin, while at the same time contributing to that ruin. The struggle between submission and rebellion within Martha is linked to the external storm, which devastates John, and reveals the truth to Martha. The external storm also intensifies the already claustrophobic atmosphere, for the oppressive storm beating into Martha's house exacerbates her tension. In "The Lamp at Noon," "The Painted Door" and "Not by Rain Alone," there are also storms which literally invade human shelters. These incidents epitomize the human struggle in an indifferent, even hostile, world. Human insignificance, the inability of man to resist these impersonal climatic forces, is an abstract concept rendered dramatically real. In "A Field of Wheat," the storm is suspenseful and credible. Moreover, it is linked to the internal lives of John and Martha and to the theme of human struggle and endurance. It is also the essential catalyst in "A Field of Wheat," for it reveals the inner quality of the lives being lived by John and Martha; it triggers events leading to

the final, pathetic scene of Martha secretly watching John.

The importance of human responses to external phenomena also figures in "A Field of Wheat." There is John's despairing response to his destroyed wheat, and Martha's courageous response to John's collapse, signalled by her resumption of her chores. This return to her external routine indicates an internal affirmation of life. The storm and the wheat in "A Field of Wheat" are both more than simple external phenomena. They are symbols: the storm acts in destroying the wheat, and the wheat itself changes its role from receptacle of hope to symbol of defeat.

Neither force plays a static role in the story. The wheat, for example, is, ironically, not destroyed by the storm. Symbolically, it survives in the rigid attitudes, the imprisoned love, of John and Martha. There is a grandeur and universality in the struggle of John and Martha to survive without forfeiting their humanity. This is due to the internalization of the grandeur of the landscape, and the subtle portrayal of man in that landscape. Finally, the human struggle Ross depicts in "A Field of Wheat," unlike that seen in "No Other Way," has a tragic inevitability and an inner logic which raises it from the particular to the universal. The next story to be examined, "The Lamp at Noon," like "A Field of Wheat," reveals the universal in the particular. In this story, not a hailstorm, but a prolonged duststorm, acts as the catalyst for the expression of elemental human emotions. "The Lamp at Noon" is perhaps even more pessimistic than "A Field of Wheat," where characters, and human love, survive in some twisted form. In "The Lamp at Noon," human life, human sanity and human love are all destroyed.

"The Lamp at Noon," first published in 1938, is another study of human conflict. There are obvious similarities to "A Field of Wheat" in

the debate over the value of rural life, the importance of atmosphere and the cyclical progression from one attitude towards life to its virtual opposite. Again, conflict is dramatized in terms of conflicting responses to the land, to the life of the farmer, and is exacerbated by an external storm. As in "A Field of Wheat," in "The Lamp at Noon" the husband's psychological distance from his wife is complemented and to a degree caused by the necessity that he work long hours on his farm. Conflict is central to the story; there are again the struggles within man and against the unpredictable natural environment.

The recurring irony of "The Lamp at Noon" is first voiced in the opening sentence of the story: "A little before noon she lit the lamp."<sup>3</sup> It is this seemingly minor detail, caused by an oppressive dust-storm, which eventually expresses the theme of the story. Early in the story, however, Ross concentrates on the atmosphere of the storm as perceived by the woman Ellen:

Demented wind fled keening past the house: a wail through the eaves that died every minute or two. Three days now without respite it had held. The dust was thickening to an impenetrable fog. (p. 13)

The wind that is introduced here becomes, together with the lamp, one of the main symbols in the story. Ross's choice of words is significant in the above passage; "demented," "keening," "wail" and "impenetrable fog" create a scene which is more than simply realistic. The wind is given human qualities, thus anticipating the presentation of Ellen:

Her eyes all the while were fixed and wide with a curious immobility. It was the window. Standing at it, she let her forehead press against the pane until the eyes were strained apart and rigid. Wide like that they had looked out to the deepening ruin of the storm. Now she could not close them. (p. 13)

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<sup>3</sup> Sinclair Ross, "The Lamp at Noon," in his The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories, p. 13.

The "deepening ruin," the "demented wind" and the "impenetrable fog" are, one suspects, not merely in the world outside. Ellen seems deeply affected, internally, by the external chaos.

The suggestions of Ellen's "strained" perspective create a complex relationship between the prolonged storm outside and the stability of Ellen's psyche within. This relationship continues throughout "The Lamp at Noon." Ellen is not simply angered or discouraged by the dust-storm. Rather, she internalizes the external chaos, is, more than Hatty in "No Other Way" and Martha in "A Field of Wheat," absorbed by her landscape. The environment provokes in Ellen not only literal responses of bitterness and anger, as it did in Hatty and Martha, but its own inner reflection, an internal storm. The process of external phenomena triggering internal developments is also seen in "No Other Way" and "A Field of Wheat," but the actual state of mind unleashed in Ellen is different from the one-dimensional and literal emotions of Hatty and Martha. As the external landscape, the dust-storm, is a more pervasive atmosphere in "The Lamp at Noon" than is the incident of a sudden and brief hail-storm in "A Field of Wheat," so too the internal mental landscape is more varied in "The Lamp at Noon" than in the earlier story. Ellen's internal life is more complex than are the lives of Hatty and Martha. She is not limited and caricatured by any one emotional component.

The effects of the storm are not confined to the outside world. Ellen, spending hours staring out at the storm from her window, is virtually hypnotized by it; her eyes are variously described as "fixed," "wide," "rigid" and "dazed." Ross thus implies that she is somehow being influenced by the storm. The storm is not confined to the world outside the house, for it literally seeps into the house and also psychologically

intrudes on Ellen's state of mind. It invades the house as did the hail in "A Field of Wheat" and further makes its presence felt on Ellen's psyche:

The baby started to cry. He was lying in a homemade crib over which she had arranged a tent of muslin. . . . She would have liked to rock him, to feel the comfort of his little body in her arms, but a fear had obsessed her that in the dust-filled air he might contract pneumonia. (pp. 13-14)

Even here, verisimilitude is not sacrificed to literary technique, for there are no neat, artificial literary parallels between the external and internal worlds. Ellen has good reason to fear for her son's health; at this point, the wind truly is her enemy. The forced deprivation of maternal contact is poignantly credible, and seems a further, though secondary, catalyst for Ellen's obsessiveness.

The opening account of Ellen's state of mind concludes with a passage which demonstrates the degree to which she internalizes her landscape:

There were two winds: the wind in flight, and the wind that pursued. The one sought refuge in the eaves, whimpering, in fear; the other assailed it there, and shook the eaves apart to make it flee again. Once as she listened this first wind sprang inside the room, distraught like a bird that has felt the graze of talons on its wing; while furious the other wind shook the walls . . . till its quarry glanced away again in fright. (p. 14)

What Ellen hears in the storm is an echo of her own inner tension, of her struggle with her husband Paul. The internal and external are inseparably linked, each contributing to the other, so that the wind provokes Ellen, but she also responds to it from an already rather frenzied point of view.

If the first section of "The Lamp at Noon" sensitively images the plight of a woman oppressed by her environment, that which brings



Paul and Ellen together demonstrates a different function of the stormy environment. With the appearance of Paul and the consequent expansion in point of view to include the dialogue of Paul and Ellen, the storm itself becomes an actor. It changes roles, exhibiting an almost human flexibility. The storm is initially seen in terms of its effects on Ellen. When Paul and Ellen come together, they argue as the storm rages outside. The external storm and the storm within Ellen are obscured by a storm of words which rises and falls in intensity very much like the forgotten storm outside. Moreover, Paul and Ellen are contrasted by means of the external storm of the eroding wind:

Dust and drought, earth that betrayed alike his labour and his faith, to him the struggle had given sternness, an impassive courage. Beneath the whip of sand his youth had been effaced. Youth, zest, exuberance--there remained only a harsh and clenched virility that yet became him, that seemed at the cost of more engaging qualities to be fulfilment of his inmost and essential nature. Whereas to her the same debts and poverty had brought a plaintive indignation, a nervous dread of what was still to come. The eyes were hollowed, the lips pinched dry and colourless. (p. 15)

The "whip of sand" exposes the essential inner quality of man and woman. The storm polarizes the two characters; their stormy life of struggle has revealed their conflicting natures.

The eroding wind which thus reveals character is more than that of the immediate storm. It is a metaphor for all the years of struggle and poverty that Paul and Ellen have faced and, indeed, have yet to face. The wind, the storm itself, is, if not the wind of Biblical prophecy, a similar messenger of truth. It reveals by erosion, by a life of struggle, the essences of its victims, the man's strengths and the woman's weaknesses. The wind is a symbol of the concept of life as a struggle. It telescopes, condenses in a brief period, the aging processes

of a life-time. It brings suddenly and dramatically the revealing, truth-telling calamity that is ordinarily spread over a life-time. It is a microcosm of all the vicissitudes of life. The wind accelerates the normal processes of life. The storm of wind and sand disturbs Ellen, complements her stormy argument with Paul and contrasts the essential natures of Ellen and Paul. It eventually provokes the climax of the story. Its functions are many and varied.

Ellen, unlike Martha in "A Field of Wheat," articulates her discontent. She retains a poignancy and humanity, for her argument is not the shrill rhetoric which mars "No Other Way." The conflict between Ellen and Paul is not forever at a fever pitch but takes account of the subtle variety of human conflict: "The pleading in her voice now, after its shrill bitterness yesterday, made him think that this was only another way to persuade him. He answered evenly . . ." (pp. 15-16). In this brief passage there is considerable insight into the tactics and stratagems of conflict. Furthermore, there is sympathy generated for both Paul and Ellen. Ellen is justifiably concerned about her future in such a barren environment. Paul quite reasonably resents the prospect of "sweeping out your father's store and running his errands" (p. 16). No conclusion is reached, for, as in "A Field of Wheat," each character is tragically locked into a limiting role imposed by the rural life. Paul must perform the role of stoical male provider; he believes Ellen must endure silently, supporting him in his struggle. Ellen, like Hatty and Martha, resents her husband's seeming indifference, and by implication her own lapsed femininity: "Do you ever think what my life is? Two rooms to live in--once a month to town, and nothing to spend when I get there. I'm still young--I wasn't brought up this way" (p. 18).

Paul and Ellen align themselves with external phenomena to indicate their conflicting points of view. Ellen cries, "'Look at it--look at it, you fool. Desert--the lamp lit at noon--'" (p. 16). The waste of desert, the absurdity of having to light a lamp at noon, is the bitter, mocking reality Ellen responds to, for it speaks to her of her own terrible despair. If Ellen staring out her window sees only waste and futility, Paul deliberately concentrates on a different sort of reality. He fixes his attention on the flickering lamp. It, like the wind, contrasts Paul and Ellen. Ellen's perception is of the absurdity of their lives, as symbolized by the lamp lit at noon. Paul ignores Ellen's response to the lamp and seems to see in it some symbol of hope. Again, conflicting responses to some external reality signal conflicting characters. One character sees the lamp as a symbol of defeat, but the other attempts to see it as a symbol of hope. Ellen, like Martha, despairs of "'the hopelessness--going on--watching the land blow away'" (p. 17). Paul ignores the external reality of desert, the panic in Ellen's "glazed" eyes, "his eyes fixed on the yellow lamp flame" (p. 17), but he eventually must confront the "deepening ruin" (p. 13) of both the land and Ellen.

Paul, like John in "A Field of Wheat," is trapped in the role of the stolid male. He returns to the comfort of his chores in the womb, the "cavern-like obscurity" (p. 17) of the barn, again recalling John, who expresses his grief not to his wife but among his animals. Ross thus shifts the point of view to Paul, creating a natural three-part structure to the story based on a shifting narrative pattern. The story is not structured in terms of calm-storm-calm to the extent that "A Field of Wheat" is. "The Lamp at Noon" moves from Ellen's point of view to the confrontation of Paul and Ellen to Paul's point of view. The storm is

not limited to the middle section of the story as it is in "A Field of Wheat," but spreads its influence over the whole story. There is, however, calm at the end of "The Lamp at Noon" as at the conclusion to "A Field of Wheat," but this serves an ironic, thematic purpose more than one of narrative structure. The storm in "The Lamp at Noon" is quite realistically a different type of storm than that seen in "A Field of Wheat" so that it is valid that the stormy atmosphere be more pervasive and internalized in "The Lamp at Noon" than in the former story. Both stories, however, bring the central characters together in the middle section only to tragically separate them once more in the final section. In "A Field of Wheat," the members of the family huddle together, "pinioned" by the hail-storm, but are later separated in their grief. In "The Lamp at Noon," Paul and Ellen come together, if only to argue, but are later seemingly irrevocably apart.

Ironically, Paul seems sympathetically closest to Ellen and more receptive to her point of view from his refuge in the barn:

And always the wind, the creak of walls, the wild lipless wailing through the loft. Until at last, as he stood there, staring into the livid face before him, it seemed that this scream of wind was a cry from her parched and frantic lips. He knew it couldn't be . . . but still the wind persisted as a woman's cry. (p. 20)

This passage confirms the earlier suggestions that Ellen, as well as the wind, is "demented." Paul's sudden imaginative insight into Ellen's despair--"She had no faith or dream with which to make the dust and poverty less real" (p. 20)--compels him to surreptitiously reassure himself of her safety in the house. Just as Martha, in "A Field of Wheat," spies on her husband, so also Paul watches his wife, "Careful, despite his concern, not to reveal a fear or weakness that she might think capitulation . . ." (pp. 20-21). Paul is victimized by his

perceived role; genuine compassion and concern become twisted, shameful and repressed. Again, the dictates of the land over-ride human concerns, or at least distort them terribly. In both "A Field of Wheat" and "The Lamp at Noon," love is pathetically limited, its expression perceived as an intolerable weakness in a hostile environment.

In "A Field of Wheat," the hail-storm creates the moment of pathetic communion in grief between husband and wife, the image of Martha secretly watching John weep. In "The Lamp at Noon," specifically in the passage quoted above, Paul's insight into Ellen's despair is also generated somehow by the external storm. The wailing wind is imaginatively transformed into a woman's cry, so that again the link between the external and internal worlds is emphasized, and the opening paragraphs of the story are clearly echoed. The storm in "The Lamp at Noon" is a less literal medium of communication than is the storm in "A Field of Wheat," which directly causes events leading to Martha's insight into John's character. There is in "The Lamp at Noon" an insight imaginatively, poetically suggested to Paul by the psychological impact on him of the wind. "The Lamp at Noon" is consistently more concerned than is "A Field of Wheat" with the intuitive, emotional and somewhat vague internal world of the psyche. This trend continues in "The Painted Door," which also depicts psychological phenomena. The wind is at this stage in "The Lamp at Noon" less a physical barrier between Paul and Ellen than an imaginative medium of communication. It is the wind which pushes Paul to his understanding of Ellen, an insight no more unifying and conciliatory than that of Martha in "A Field of Wheat."

When the storm ends and calm follows, as it does in "A Field of Wheat," the land is as devastated as John's sodden wheat:

They [the fields] lay black, naked. Beaten and mounded smooth with dust as if a sea in a gentle swell had turned to stone.

. . . Suddenly like the fields he was naked. Everything that had sheathed him a little from the realities of existence: vision and purpose, faith in the land, in the future, in himself—it was all rent now, stripped away. "Desert," he heard her voice begin to sob. "Desert, you fool—the lamp lit at noon!" (pp. 21-22)

For Paul, as for John in "A Field of Wheat," the land is an article of faith, a religious power the destruction of which causes and signals internal defeat. The external storm has now wrought havoc on Paul's psyche as on that of Ellen, for "like the fields he was naked" (pp. 21-22). This external-internal fusion follows and expands upon the correspondence in "No Other Way" between Hatty's blighted crops and her blighted marriage. More directly, the nakedness of John and the land echoes this passage from "A Field of Wheat": "She had loved John . . . while he died . . . as the parched wheat died."<sup>4</sup> The land is an obsession for characters such as Paul and John; upon its precarious physical existence depends their spiritual survival. The storm is, in its destructiveness, again a messenger of truth. Earlier it had communicated to Paul something of Ellen's panic; now, his land destroyed, Paul is, in his despair, ironically closest to, though separated from, Ellen. This is indicated by his recollection of Ellen's "'Desert, you fool . . .'" (p. 22). In recalling Ellen's words of despair, Paul embraces her hopelessness. He has come full circle; he has been forced to give up his illusions, his "faith in the land" (p. 22). The storm has led him to this perception; the words he recalls, the symbolism of the lamp, indicate he responds like Ellen to his environment, he has reached a nadir.

Paul, who had earlier found comfort in the lamp, is now mocked

<sup>4</sup>Sinclair Ross, "A Field of Wheat," p. 74.

by its symbolic futility. It is his changed perception of the lamp which indicates the internal change he has experienced. The lamp lit at noon has been from the start, for Ellen, a symbol of futility. Once an object of hope for Paul, it becomes for him too a symbol of defeat. Both the wind and the lamp are complex forces in "The Lamp at Noon," for the wind pushes Paul to the point of despair by destroying his land, and the lamp, in its changing symbolism for Paul, crystallizes and articulates his movement from hope to despair. As in the previous stories examined in this chapter, in "The Lamp at Noon," a character's changing responses to external phenomena indicate his internal development. Paul reacts as did Ellen earlier to the lamp lit at noon; the bitter words he invokes signal his moment of insight, of defeat. Together, the wind of the storm and the lamp significantly chart and influence the human developments in "The Lamp at Noon." The lamp and the wind give the despair of Paul and Ellen a focus and a context, linking Paul and Ellen in pessimism, linking their internal plight to the stormy external world. Because the wind and the lamp affect human developments in "The Lamp at Noon" and because they themselves develop and change, serving various functions, they are complex symbols in this story. The lamp, for example, changes, for Paul, from a symbol of hope to a mocking reflection of his own despair. It is virtually an independent force in "The Lamp at Noon."

The climax of this story is the moment of despair and defeat, as in "A Field of Wheat." In that story, the resumption of Martha's chores indicates some limited optimism. In "The Lamp at Noon," Paul also resumes his chores, for so rigidly is he still bound to his role of farmer that "it had not occurred to him yet that he might or should abandon the land" (p. 22). Ross does not, however, permit even some spark of hope in such

tenacity, for Ellen is later discovered deranged; "crouched down against a drift of sand as if for shelter . . . the child clasped tightly in her arms" (pp. 22-23). She is mad, and her child is inadvertently suffocated, the victim of her derangement. In this final context of death and madness, even Paul's earlier resumption of his chores seems not admirable, but absurd. Paul and Ellen do not endure even to the extent that John and Martha survive. Paul, having ignored his earlier vision of Ellen "driven headlong by the wind . . ." (p. 20), must accept responsibility for neglecting her and thereby contributing to her insanity. Paul is not permitted the slightest hope, for he is left with only guilt. At the end of the story, Ross cleverly represses Paul's emotions and depicts instead the beautiful, mocking calm that follows the storm. There is implicit in the final scene the sense of external indifference to the human struggle, a struggle characterized in "The Lamp at Noon" by waste and ruin rather than by courage and endurance. The desolation of the words "Desert, you fool--the lamp lit at noon!" (p. 22) is simply reinforced by the conclusion of the story. The real climax is Paul's insight into despair; what follows that is a mocking and final deflation of his lingering optimism.

Struggle and conflict are central to "The Lamp at Noon." There is the external chaos of the storm which mirrors and exacerbates human tensions. The relationship between the external and internal worlds is sustained at an intense level. "The Lamp at Noon" employs a markedly denser psychological atmosphere than do "No Other Way" and "A Field of Wheat." The essential state of mind of Ellen, the conjunction of oppressive atmosphere and internal panic, creates a detailed portrait of a woman under stress. There is considerable range in Ellen's moods, and a



closer bond between Ellen and her environment than there is, for example, between Martha and the land in "A Field of Wheat." Ellen is a character within an authentic, influential setting. It is in "The Lamp at Noon" that Ross's characters are seen in close, sustained relationship to their environment. "The Lamp at Noon," more than the previous stories viewed in this chapter, examines the psychological tensions of farm life, the subtle constrictions of various roles and the pervasive rather than sporadic influence of landscape on man.

"The Lamp at Noon" is distinguished by the emergence of the storm and the lamp as complex symbols. "No Other Way" is a naturalistic piece, free of symbols. "A Field of Wheat" depicts the wheat itself as a kind of religious symbol. This pattern is expanded in "The Lamp at Noon." Again, the land is a receptacle of faith, but new symbols are also introduced. The lamp is for one character a symbol of hope and for another a symbol of defeat. The wheat in "A Field of Wheat" is for both John and Martha a symbol of hope. The lamp, then, is used to depict and contrast characters. The wind of the dust-storm also reveals characters, by exposing Paul and Ellen to both literal and metaphorical erosion. The stormy wind in "The Lamp at Noon" serves several roles. It separates Paul and Ellen physically: Ellen peers out of the house while Paul is hidden in the barn. It is the imaginative source of Paul's insight into Ellen's panic. It destroys land, and therefore faith, thus revealing fundamental truths. It mirrors human emotions, provokes madness and contributes to the death of Ellen's child. It establishes atmosphere and mood. Finally, the wind and storm provide a narrative structure, a catalyst for the human tragedy and a concrete embodiment of cosmic indifference to man.

There is a darker vision of the "deepening ruin" (p. 13) of life presented in "The Lamp at Noon" than in "No Other Way" and "A Field of Wheat." Physical destruction is at once the main subject of this story, and the metaphor for a fatalistic authorial vision. Ross does not permit Paul and Ellen the dignity of survival; their family unit is more shattered than that of John and Martha in "A Field of Wheat." There is no acknowledgement of any benevolent spiritual forces. The promise of calm weather may have some validity in "A Field of Wheat" but in "The Lamp at Noon" it seems a cruel joke, for Paul is left as naked as his land, and Ross gives no indication of any consolation for him. He is left with a legacy of guilt, as is Ann in "The Painted Door." In that story, a snowstorm is the catalyst for the human crisis. There is a tragic element to "The Painted Door" because, like "The Lamp at Noon," it details the death of love as much as the death of man. If the swirling landscape in "The Lamp at Noon" provokes human panic, that in "The Painted Door" is the perfect mirror for the internal death of hope and love. Again, there is a sustained link between the external and internal worlds to deepen the emotional impact of the story.

"The Painted Door," first published in 1939, like "The Lamp at Noon," creates in an atmosphere of psychological tension a tale of death and destruction. The environmental storm in "The Painted Door" is, however, less the cause of human death than an ironic context for suicide. The snowstorm in "The Painted Door," unlike the dust-storm in "The Lamp at Noon," does not malevolently kill man so much as indifferently permit a character to choose his death. The snow-storm does, however, reflect and provoke certain human, internal developments, so that it, like the dust-storm in "The Lamp at Noon," is the fulfillment of a carefully crafted

technique of presentation. "The Painted Door," like "The Lamp at Noon," is a tour de force of oppressive external atmosphere dramatically absorbed by a perceiving consciousness. Instead of the shifting narrative pattern of "The Lamp at Noon," there is in "The Painted Door" a sustained account of Ann, the farm wife. While her husband struggles offstage through the storm to return from his father's house, Ross concentrates on the strained state of mind of Ann within her house. Although "The Painted Door" adopts a calm-storm-calm narrative structure similar to that of "A Field of Wheat," it sustains an oppressive atmosphere throughout. The type of claustrophobic atmosphere emphasized in the first section of "The Lamp at Noon" is extended, in a different setting, in "The Painted Door." This prolonged, internalized tension is achieved by an almost novelistic manipulation of imagery. In "The Painted Door," Sinclair Ross carefully details the cold, wind and snow battering Ann's house from without, in contrast to the warmth and quiet within. The tension between cold and warmth works on several levels throughout "The Painted Door."

The familiar element of marital conflict is introduced early in the story, in a familiar setting:

She went to the window, and thawing a clear piece in the frost with her breath, stood looking across the snowswept farmyard to the huddle of stables and sheds. "There was a double wheel around the moon last night," she countered presently. "You said yourself we could expect a storm. It isn't right to leave me here alone. Surely I'm as important as your father."<sup>5</sup>

Hatty Glenn is the first of Ross's female characters to insist pathetically on her importance and her womanhood to her husband. Martha in "A Field of Wheat" resents her husband's obsession with the wheat and his

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<sup>5</sup>Sinclair Ross, "The Painted Door," in his The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories, p. 99.

consequent neglect of her. Ellen in "The Lamp at Noon" demands that Paul consider her welfare, and that of their child. She, like Ann, pleads without success not to be left alone during a storm. All of these women are seen in conflict, struggling for recognition, for some external sign of love. Ann's husband John is, like Paul in "The Lamp at Noon," a simple man puzzled and confused by his wife's anger. For such men love is expressed indirectly by devotion to the land, by perseverance in the role of dogged provider. Ann, like Ellen, is within a shelter, protected from but also caged by the external storm. Both women gaze out at the chaos; both women are emotionally affected by that external chaos which invades their psyches. In "The Painted Door", the external cold influences, or parallels, Ann's treatment of John: "It was a curiously cold voice now, as if the words were chilled by their contact with the frosted pane" (p. 99). This is an early indication that the external chill and silence of the landscape, while realistic, also mirrors the failure of Ann's marriage.

Ann is another female character who internalizes the effect of the external environment, perhaps because in a storm she simply has little else to do. For this reason she creates various chores for herself, later, to repress this tendency. Clearly, her sense of isolation and emptiness is intensified by her immediate perceptions:

The sun was risen above the frost mists now, so keen and hard a glitter on the snow that instead of warmth its rays seemed shedding cold. . . . She shivered, but did not turn. In the clear, bitter light the long white miles of prairie landscape seemed a region alien to life. Even the distant farmsteads she could see served only to intensify a sense of isolation. Scattered across the face of so vast and bleak a wilderness it was difficult to conceive them as a testimony of human hardihood and endurance. Rather they seemed futile, lost, to cower before the implacability of snow-swept earth and clear pale sun-chilled sky. (p. 100)

For Ann, the sun sheds cold: the landscape intensifies her sense of isolation. The use of words such as "hard," "keen," "bitter," "distant" and "sun-chilled" in the above passage provides a unique interpretation of what a less despondent witness might describe as a beautiful morning. Here, clearly the landscape does not trigger, but mirrors and even intensifies Ann's internal state. Ann's personal alienation is such that she sees in the "distant farmsteads" a reflection of her internal mood. She responds to this external reality not as to a symbol of hope, of human endurance, but as to a symbol of human insignificance. When she turns from the window, there is "a brooding stillness in her face as if she had recognized the mastery of snow and cold" (p. 100). The landscape here makes a thematic statement of human futility in the face of the "mastery" of the elements. It reflects Ann's despair and also makes a more universal statement on the futile human struggle; the functions of the landscape here are both specific and general.

In a sense, "The Painted Door" charts Ann's struggle with this "mastery of snow and cold." Her efforts to resist the penetrating cold are literally credible and are, further, a metaphor for her inner conflict between submission and rebellion. They are also emblematic of the general concept of life as a struggle. With John's departure, Ann's struggles begin in earnest. Ross concentrates on the besieged atmosphere within the house, and on Ann's activities, all designed "to keep her hands occupied, . . . to stave off the gathering cold and loneliness" (p. 102). All of her activities, then, are geared to resisting the "encroaching chill" (p. 101). This chill is both that of the literal external storm, and of the emptiness within Ann. It is both an external and internal chill; it is both the literal "cold" and the abstract "loneliness" which

Ann resists. She, like Ellen in "The Lamp at Noon," struggles to control herself by escaping into simple chores: "'I'll paint the kitchen wood-work. . . . I'll be too busy to find the day long'" (p. 101). As Keath Fraser notes in his essay "Futility at the Pump: The Short Stories of Sinclair Ross," "Ann's movements become measured and defined like the clock that begins to tick, oblivious of 'the surrounding snow and silence.'"<sup>6</sup> There is thus a tension generated by Ann's measured pacing within the house, as well as that created by the storm. Ann struggles to make herself, like the clock, oblivious of the storms within and outside the house.

Ann's internal conflict rests on the nature of her life with John, and also on John's essential nature. She articulates the recurring concept of life as a struggle:

Year after year their lives went on in the same little groove. He drove his horses in the field; she milked the cows and hoed potatoes. By dint of his drudgery he saved a few months' wages, added a few dollars more each fall to his payments on the mortgage; but the only real difference it made was to deprive her of his companionship, to make him a little duller, older, uglier than he might otherwise have been. (p. 103)

Again Ross describes the apparently unavoidable, ironic predicament of the farmer and his wife of necessity drawn apart by their rigorous chores. Again the life of struggle is endless, "going-on," cyclical, "Year after year . . ." To complicate matters, John is hopelessly naive, "unsuspecting it [Ann's love] might ever be less constant than his own" (p. 100). John's love for Ann is a kind of obsession: "To him it was not what he actually accomplished by means of the sacrifice that mattered, but the sacrifice itself, the gesture—something done for her sake" (pp. 103-104). The result is that "his very devotion . . . forbade her to rebel" (p. 104).

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<sup>6</sup>Keath Fraser, "Futility at the Pump: The Short Stories of Sinclair Ross," Queen's Quarterly, LXXVII, No. 1 (Spring 1970), 78.

Ann is, like Hatty Glenn and Martha, torn between submissiveness and rebelliousness. John's essential nature is fixed by Ross to the concept of the sacrificial gesture. This detail will, in retrospect, be critical to an understanding of "The Painted Door;" it will illuminate John's very essence, just as the lamp and the wind in "The Lamp at Noon" reveal Paul's essential nature.

As a background to Ann's inner struggle, Ross details the immediate atmosphere in the house, and the intimations of the gathering storm outside:

It was getting cold again, and she left her painting to put in more wood. But this time the warmth spread slowly. She pushed a mat up to the outside door, and went back to the window to pat down the woolen shirt that was wadded along the sill. Then she paced a few times round the room, then poked the fire and rattled the stove lids, then paced again. The fire crackled, the clock ticked. The silence now seemed more intense than ever, seemed to have reached a pitch where it faintly moaned. She began to pace on tiptoe, listening, her shoulders drawn together, not realising for a while that it was the wind she heard, thin-strained and whimpering through the eaves. (p. 105)

Ann resists the penetrating cold, just as Ellen resists the sand seeping into her house; both women are oppressed by the external physical forces which invade the human shelter. Ann, who earlier saw the "distant farmsteads" as a symbol not of human endurance but of the "implacability" of the elements, is in the above passage struggling to maintain her home as a human shelter, to resist the invasion of the impersonal external world and to assert human realities and values. This motif of the house is significant in "The Painted Door." It occurs at the beginning of the story, again in the passage quoted above, and at the end of the story where it signals a shift in Ann's outlook. In each case, it expresses the theme of man in a hostile environment struggling to assert his signi-

ficance. The passage quoted above also employs the tension of opposites, of cold and warmth, and the tension of the silence at the very eye of the storm, a tension accentuated by the sentence "The fire crackled, the clock ticked" (p. 105) which is repeated throughout the story as an indication of the strained silence within the house. There is, then, the tension of cold and warmth, externally and internally, literally and metaphorically. There is the tension of boredom, of the dull, repetitive sounds within the house. There is also the tension between this internal silence and the external "whimpering" wind.

As does the dust-storm in "The Lamp at Noon," the worsening snow-storm in "The Painted Door" creates a sense of claustrophobia in the caged female protagonist: "In the distance, sky and prairie now were merged into one another linelessly. All round her it was gathering; already in its press . . ." (p. 106). This fusion of land and sky, pressing in on man, is seen in "A Field of Wheat" where "the landscape seemed slipping down the neck of a funnel."<sup>7</sup> It is also seen in "The Lamp at Noon," in the dust-storm "obscuring fields and landmarks. . . ."<sup>8</sup> In each case, the purpose is to emphasize the sense of human imprisonment in such an environment; the external reality quite understandably influences man's behaviour in these situations. If Ellen's psychic axis in "The Lamp at Noon" is from the lamp to the window, Ann's frame of reference is from the stove to the window, from warmth to cold, as she struggles with her pressing environment:

She turned to the stove, holding out her hands to the warmth. Around her now there seemed a constant sway and

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<sup>7</sup>Sinclair Ross, "A Field of Wheat," p. 77.

<sup>8</sup>Sinclair Ross, "The Lamp at Noon," p. 13.



tremor, as if the air were vibrating with the shuddering of the walls. . . . She stared towards the window again, then detecting the morbid trend of her thoughts, prepared fresh coffee . . . (p. 107)

This vacillation from the stove to the window, and the retreat into physical activity as a kind of anaesthetic, accompanies Ann's inner struggle; her fear of the storm, and her concern for John pitted against her resentment of him are integrated into the accounts of her external activities. Ann's measured pacing continues throughout "The Painted Door," but it comes to express a new sort of tension.

Moving from her stove, Ann ventures out, like Ellen in "The Lamp at Noon," into the storm, only to realize her own puniness: "It was as if the storm had discovered her, as if all its forces were concentrated upon her extinction" (p. 108). This reinforces her earlier recognition of the "mastery of snow and cold" (p. 100). It also anticipates the arrival of Ann's neighbour Steven, who is to keep her company until John returns. Steven, like the storm, is impersonal, implacable and masterful. His presence creates a sexual tension in Ann, for Steven is the opposite of John; he is youthful, gay and attractive. He provides the perfect opportunity for Ann to rebel. Her eventual seduction by Steven is her act of rebellion against her life, similar to, but more extreme than, Hatty's decision to reject her chores and go to town in "No Other Way." Steven is symbolically, but not personally, important to Ann. The lamp which she lights just before his arrival flickers out after the seduction, establishing specific limits to Steven's role in this story. It is not Steven, but Ann's relationship with him, that is significant in "The Painted Door." The essential drama is that of Ann and the offstage presence of John.

Ann's movements from the stove to the window continue, but with sexual connotations: "She rose to build up the fire again and he followed her. For a long time they stood close to the stove, their arms almost touching" (p. 112). They are drawn to the warmth of the fire, and of human contact, something which, presumably, Ann feels is denied to her in her marriage. Although Steven is linked to sexual warmth, Ross creates a further external link to Steven's internal role. He is linked to the pressing storm: "It was less Steven himself that she felt than his inevitability. Just as she had felt the snow, the silence and the storm" (p. 111). Steven is, then, merely another external force impinging on Ann and separating her from John. Her attempts to resist the penetrating cold are as futile as her resistance of Steven, "the same as a few hours ago when she braced this door against the storm" (p. 113). The chill in Ann's heart, her disenchantment with John, is linked to two separate external phenomena: the penetrating cold of the snow-storm, and the inevitable presence of the cold, impersonal Steven.

Steven is a cold, external force of sexuality, not love. He acts on her as does the storm: when she ends her resistance to him, "It was as if the storm had lulled, as if she had suddenly found calm and shelter" (pp. 113-114). The human shelter which Ann has been struggling to defend from the cold is seemingly found in sexual contact, which is some sort of human affirmation in the face of the impersonal universe. Ann's painting, her pacing and her wadding the cracks to repulse the cold have all been metaphorical attempts to assert man's presence in a hostile environment. The house must be made a human shelter. Ann's adultery is a complex event. It is an act of rebellion. It is an act of submission to some overwhelming external force of sexuality. It is also a feeble

assertion of humanity, a search for "shelter" and identity in an impersonal environment. Because it is not an act of love, Ann's pioneer-like attempts to assert a human presence fail:

Earlier in the evening, with the lamp lit and the fire crackling, the house had seemed a stand against the wilderness, a refuge of feeble walls wherein persisted the elements of human meaning and survival. Now, in the cold, creaking darkness, it was strangely extinct, looted by the storm and abandoned again. (p. 116)

The seduction has not affirmed human survival, for it was itself a cold, impersonal non-human force, like the external storm. The house, the symbol of "human meaning," is abandoned, love and warmth having been sacrificed to impersonal sexuality. Ann is no less "looted" and "abandoned" than the house, but she has a valuable insight into her love for John: "With him lay all the future. For tonight . . . she would try to make amends" (p. 118).

Martha's concern for John, in "A Field of Wheat," does not overcome her isolation from him. Paul's sudden insight into Ellen's despair, in "The Lamp at Noon," is not enough to save her and their baby. Similarly, Ann's resolution comes too late. In a passage similar to that in which Paul hears Ellen's cries embodied in the shrieking wind in "The Lamp at Noon," Ann has a dream-vision induced by the flickering shadows of the fire:

There was one great shadow that struggled towards her threateningly, massive and black and engulfing all the room. Again and again it advanced, about to spring, but each time a little whip of light subdued it to its place among the others on the wall. Yet though it never reached her still she cowered, feeling that gathered there was all the frozen wilderness, its heart of terror and invincibility. (pp. 114-115).

In this fusion of internal and external worlds, Ross foreshadows the end of "The Painted Door." The looming shadows are literally the shadows of

the fire. They are, imaginatively, Ann's vision of John struggling and advancing through the storm to her, as he has promised. They also suggest the shadowy morals and motives, the tangle of fears, desire and guilt that Ann must live with because of her adultery. There is a prophetic quality to Ann's dream, just as there is to the "demented" wind in "The Lamp at Noon." The "frozen wilderness" is revealed to be in man as well as in his environment.

With the cyclical and ironic return of calm after the storm, human destruction is revealed. In a dramatic gesture of his love, John had returned, as promised, to Ann through the storm. Having discovered the lovers, he staged what appears to be his accidental death in the storm. Ann's discovery of the smear of fresh paint on John's hand tragically confirms her dream-vision, and betrays John's secretive, sacrificial and, possibly, despairing suicide. The white, snow-like, paint that betrays John's secret symbolizes the whole complex process of betrayal and incommunicative love in "The Painted Door." Ironically, John, in returning to and in sacrificing himself for Ann, confirms his love for her. Ann too has previously realized her love for John, but for both of them this affirmation of love comes too late and dies in isolation. As in "A Field of Wheat" and "The Lamp at Noon," Ross concludes "The Painted Door" with a powerful scene expressing the pathos of repressed love. The final picture of Ann's discovery of John, frozen and rigid, emphasizes the tragedy of human isolation. It crystallizes, as Margaret Laurence notes in her "Introduction" to The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories, "the process of emotionally freezing to death [which] was begun long before."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Margaret Laurence, "Introduction" to The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories, p. 11.

The climax of this story fuses the recurring external and internal images into a symbol of death, isolation and emptiness. The "frozen wilderness" is the world around John and Ann; it is also within John, in his death, and within Ann, in her sense of guilt and desolation. The paint, part of Ann's earlier attempt to civilize and humanize her shelter, becomes, finally, a symbol of death, destruction and the inhuman external world. It, like the lamp in "The Lamp at Noon," is an organic symbol.

The cold, emptiness and loneliness which Ann has struggled to resist on several levels is master. The cold of the storm desolates and loots the house, destroying the human, warming influence of Ann. The impersonal sexuality of the cool Steven loots and desolates the love of Ann and John, leading John to seek the external fulfilment of his internal "stonelike hopelessness" (p. 115). In Ann's implicit guilt and hopelessness there is a further triumph of cold and emptiness, a further assault on human meaning and an end, in defeat, to her internal struggle. The complex, tragic irony of the role of environment is detailed by John Moss in his book Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction:

The winter landscape fulfils Ann's expectations of it, reproaching her by its possession of her husband's body, both metaphorically, as he is the looming shadow, and literally, as he stands frozen rigid against the fence. The frozen prairie also satisfies John's stolid expectations, offering . . . the medium for the expiation of his dogged fidelity. Only nature is constant, giving him without compromise the death he asks of it. The prairie storm provides . . . an appropriately dynamic context which dominates their lives . . .<sup>10</sup>

The final scene of "The Painted Door," like those of "The Lamp at Noon" and "A Field of Wheat," illuminates the essential, elemental qualities of lives. John is, to the end, loyal and "stolid," defining himself by

<sup>10</sup> John G. Moss, Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p. 114.

his gesture of sacrifice. Ann is, presumably, left with a burden of guilt for the rest of her life. Her future is defined by her discovery of the smeared paint, for that is the moment of discovery she will re-live. Essential, elemental human conditions are revealed by the erosive calamity of John and Ann's experience. The single incident of betrayal, like the storms in "A Field of Wheat" and "The Lamp at Noon," concentrates the vicissitudes of a life-time into one revealing incident, one moment which crystallizes the essences of characters. In accommodating human expectations and giving them concrete form, the landscape in "The Painted Door" externally mirrors the internal human plight. John's death mirrors his internal emptiness, the death of purpose and hope in his life. John's internal sense of despair and his enduring loyalty to Ann are together given dramatic immediacy in the form of his death.

The calm-storm-calm cycle, together with several image patterns, expresses the isolation and futility of the human struggle. There are, for example, the references to the "double wheel" around the moon at the beginning and end of the story which create a cyclic pattern. More pointed than this are the eight variations on "The fire crackled and the clock ticked" (p. 102) which, in contrast to the brooding external silence and the faint wind create a further source of tension in Ann. With the conclusion of the story, however, and the final reference to the "idiot content" (p. 118) of the ticking clock, Ross infuses this motif with a new, thematic rather than technical function. Instead of the lamp lit at noon as an external symbol of human futility, there is in "The Painted Door" the clock which ticks, heedless of the human tragedy and therefore in "Idiot content." It complements the indifferent prairie landscape, but also gives that landscape the necessary human

focus and relevance in a concrete image. It gives the indifference of a diffuse, dynamic environment a concise, easily recognizable and humanly relevant symbol. Just as Ellen in "The Lamp at Noon" marshalls her emotions into one bitter articulation of the futility symbolized by a lamp lit at noon, so too in "The Painted Door" a concise reference to the "idiot content" of the ticking clock points dramatically to the indifference of the external world to the internal, human predicament.

The various contrasts of exposure and shelter, sound and silence, hopelessness and purpose, sexuality and love, and death and life are subsumed in the essential tension of cold and warmth, sustained throughout the story and culminating in the final discovery of John by Ann. The conclusion unites the image patterns into a powerful evocation of many emotions. Ann's discovery of John's sacrifice speaks of enduring love tragically repressed and betrayed, of a legacy of guilt and self-laceration, of persistent loneliness and emptiness in an unpredictable world. The story is not only a stunning creation of atmosphere; it is a sympathetic portrait of human frailty. It is Ross's most orchestrated story, poetic in its rich and disciplined imagery which builds to a suggestive, symbolic climax. "The Painted Door," with its great human insight and compassion and its flawless mastery of the external and internal worlds, represents Ross's finest vision of the adult reality. It is therefore not surprising that "Not by Rain Alone," the next story to be examined, suffers from comparison to "The Painted Door." "Not by Rain Alone" does, however, demonstrate the nature of Sinclair Ross's artistic development, a development which is primarily technical and only secondarily thematic: Part II of "Not by Rain Alone," "September Snow," originally published several years before "The Painted Door," depicts a winter landscape with

markedly less technical sophistication than does "The Painted Door." Consequently, its themes are less fully realized than are those of "The Painted Door."

"Not by Rain Alone" is the title of a two-part story first published as such in 1968 in The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories. The first part, originally published in 1941 as "Not by Rain Alone," is now entitled "Summer Thunder." "September Snow," the second part, was published under that title in 1935. By rearranging and combining these stories, Sinclair Ross again examines the human struggle in relation to the rhythms of the material world. In "No Other Way," there is the pattern of Hatty's chores. In "A Field of Wheat," there is the pattern of calm-storm-calm, as well as that of Martha's chores. In "Not by Rain Alone," there are the additional ironic cycles of generations and seasons. The struggles of one generation anticipate those of the next, and the snow storms of winter follow the drought of summer. Conditions do not improve from one age to the next or from one season to the next. The prophetic fear of Martha in "A Field of Wheat," Ellen in "The Lamp at Noon" and Ann in "The Painted Door" is of endless years of "going on" without any hope of improvement. This fear is realized in "Not by Rain Alone."

"Summer Thunder" is little more than a study of atmosphere, as experienced by Will, a young farmer. His life is grim; like John in "A Field of Wheat," he has invested his whole future in his dying crop of wheat. His internal dreams, however, find little encouragement in the external world:

The dry spell now had lasted sixteen days. Anxiously Will kept count. Sometimes in the evening there were thunder clouds banked steep along the west, but always they glimmered with summer lightning for a while, then drifted south and



disappeared. The days were still, brassy, pitiless. Swift little whirlwinds scoured across the fields; in their wake there closed a hushed, oppressive immobility.<sup>11</sup>

"Summer Thunder" is characterized by this atmosphere of "oppressive immobility" throughout; it is evident in both Will's weary movements and his squalid little house. There is the external reality of the drought, as destructive as any storm, and the oppressively grubby details of Will's life. Little wonder, then, that he struggles against an inner sense of hopelessness. The word-choice, in the above passage, of "still," "brassy," "pitiless" and "hushed" suggests that Will is assaulted by his environment. Like the prairie women caged by external storms, Will internalizes his immediate environment: "he had lived with it now so many weeks in a kind of pitted sympathy, sensitive to every change in wind and sky, that . . . it was as if he himself could feel the whole field slowly sear" (p. 52). Will sears with his land, just as in "A Field of Wheat," John dies with the death of his wheat and in "The Lamp at Noon", Paul is stripped as naked as his land. There is again in "Not by Rain Alone" the close relationship, the "pitted sympathy" between man and landscape, internal and external worlds, credible because of the human proximity to and dependance on the land.

Will, like the prairie women, lives an isolated and caged existence. It is broken only by occasional visits to Eleanor in town. Like the fictional prairie women seen in this chapter, he is torn between the urge to rebel and the need to submit: "his eyes were quick with a kind of anger and resentment. The submissive quiet that at last the seasons teach, the acceptance and belief--here it was still in conflict with the

<sup>11</sup> Sinclair Ross, "Not by Rain Alone," in his The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories, p. 52.

impetuousness of youth" (pp. 52-53). The "seasons," the recurring vicissitudes of life, do perhaps teach Will "submissive quiet" in "September Snow," but in "Summer Thunder" he is torn by "a sense of futility that his youth could not accept, that yet seemed sprung from a lot he knew inevitable" (p. 59). He resents the drought, yet he must accept it. John in "A Field of Wheat" is obsessed with the wheat that will sustain his family economically; Paul in "The Lamp at Noon" has a blind belief in his land; Will in "Summer Thunder" also believes in his land and awaits the end to the drought "so that he might ask Eleanor to marry him, give her the things that she deserved" (p. 53). The prototypical inarticulate farmer, he resembles John in "The Painted Door": "Struggle, sacrifice--that was what he wanted now, some way to prove himself, prove to her how much he cared" (p. 53). Will's crop is dying; he struggles to accept this, and forget Eleanor, but cannot. He is torn between "wanting her and trying to be resigned" (p. 59).

Will's inner struggle is played out against the context of his dreary external life, his listless performance of farm chores. This external drudgery does provide a certain narrative structure, as in "No Other Way." More importantly, it triggers memories which expand the dimensions of Will's inner conflict:

At the well they [the horses] kept him pumping till his shoulders ached. . . . He remembered how his mother used to pump, how she would rise with the up-stroke of the handle to her toes, then buckle herself and wince to bring it down. Summer and winter, twice a day for years . . . He pitied her suddenly, thinking that her labour too had all been waste.

(p. 53)

There is, first of all, in this passage the rhythm of the mother's labour, the up and down strokes. The same cycle is evident in Will's pumping, and, on a larger scale, in the seasonal cycle of "Summer and winter,

twice a day for years . . . ." The above passage links Will's past and present in a futile rhythm. The link is extended to the future by the image of Will's mother: "He remembered this afternoon--thinking of Eleanor again, asking himself whether he would want to offer her the same" (p. 54). The past mirrors the present and anticipates the future; there is the authorial assumption that each season will offer, each generation will experience, "the same." There seems no alternative to the life of drudgery, "no other way" again.

The external reality of Will's chores reflects his internal struggle. Human responses to this dreary reality again point to internal developments; Will's routine triggers the whole process of memory, of disgust with the past and fear of the future. The external routine therefore provides an adequate narrative form, but also is the vehicle for the thematic statement of the futile cycles of life, the endless, recurring drudgery. The process of external reflecting internal is even important in the brief account of Will's horse Bess, who has a "spirit that his plows and wagons couldn't tame" (p. 54). Only Bess's internal spirit of freedom remains; externally, she is no longer sleek and graceful, but a shadow of her former self, a reproach to Will, a reflection of his failure. The external realities of wearying chores and the external degradation of Bess by such chores trigger in Will a range of emotions. Past and future, despair and hope are set to war in Will by his present plight. A similar process is used to explore Hatty's psyche in "No Other Way" but is less restrained and therefore less effective.

The atmosphere within Will's house is even more depressing than his external chores; it is ample evidence of the penetrating, immobilizing influence of the drought on man's inner spirit. It is not so very

different from the literal invasion by sand or snow of human shelters:

There was still the pile of dirty dishes on the floor, the rusty little stove, the swarming flies. . . . In such a heat he couldn't bring himself to start a fire. It was the night to see Eleanor and get his week's supply of bread; he could take another new blade and shave all right again without the hot water. . . . The way the flies were swarming everywhere he didn't feel hungry anyway. The dishes would have to wait till it was cool. (p. 57).

The lethargy and indifference of Will is a direct result of the oppressive heat. It further discourages him; the heat causes fatigue and listlessness, leading to neglect of the house, leading to internal depression: "The beard and sweat and dust depressed sometimes--confirmed the feeling of incompetence with which on trying days the stones and the dirty shack oppressed him . . ." (p. 57). The interaction of man and landscape is itself a vicious circle, environment both reflecting and worsening man's internal state. In the passage quoted above, heat and stillness are external forces invading the human world and influencing it. They invade just as the dust invades Ellen's shelter in "The Lamp at Noon."

As a contrast to this grubby, dirty shack there are the ominous thunder clouds to which Will responds not in despair but with hope. The shack and the clouds represent the two emotional extremes, the referents of pessimism and optimism: "the same slow piling-up of thunder clouds, the same hushed boding of a storm. He stood motionless, his lips and eyes strained suddenly with eagerness again . . ." (p. 57). Will is another farmer who fixes all his internal dreams on an unpredictable external phenomenon. Within the confines of "Summer Thunder," those dreams are realized in part, but also remain somewhat uncertain. Before the rather artificial resolution to the story, Will has a prophetic

insight into his future with Eleanor:

At the best they would grub along painfully, grow tired and bitter, indifferent to each other. It was the way of the land. For a farmer like him there could be no other way. (p. 57)

This is the message conveyed by Will's memories of his parents' struggle.

It is the tragic paradox, the "way of the land" explored in "A Field of Wheat," "The Lamp at Noon" and "The Painted Door," where the necessity of economic survival dictates that the land overrule personal concerns, that there be "no other way." In spite of this cautionary prophecy,

"Summer Thunder" ends on an optimistic note with Eleanor agreeing, after her sudden appearance, to marry Will regardless of the fate of his wheat.

The clouds, although "dark and threatening" (p. 60), remain "uncertain of their way" (p. 60). The story therefore concludes ambiguously; the hope of Will and Eleanor is balanced against the informing, pessimistic cycle of the generations, and the rain-bearing clouds remain "uncertain."

There is an unfinished quality to the human experience in "Summer Thunder," a sense of expectancy and uncertainty, so that "September Snow" is a natural complement to and completion of the human struggle begun in "Summer Thunder."

In "Summer Thunder" there is again the correspondence between internal and external worlds and the conceptualization of life as an unending struggle in a "pitiless" environment. The drought is a storm only in terms of the devastation it brings to the wheat and to human hopes; it is not an active, exciting force which can engage man in a dramatic struggle. Therefore, the drought is not an actor in but a context for the human struggle. "Summer Thunder" creates an oppressive atmosphere but suffers from a lack of compelling human action. Will's internal struggle is not enough; he does need, as a character, "some way

to prove himself" (p. 53), to reveal his essential nature. Perhaps this is supplied in "September Snow," which in several ways provides a balance to "Summer Thunder." If the first part of "Not by Rain Alone" depicts the oppressive atmosphere of the drought, the sense of waiting--for rain and for a better future--then the second part of the story examines, in human action, the life of Will and Eleanor after the drought. "Summer Thunder" shows Will and Eleanor as relatively youthful and optimistic. "September Snow" completes the seasonal cycle, and the cycle from human optimism to pessimism, from the promise of love to the reality of its failure.

"September Snow" confirms the prophetic memories and fears of Will in "Summer Thunder." The rain that had been denied Will in "Summer Thunder" falls in "September Snow," but in a mocking context. It now anticipates a destructive snowstorm. The rain, like the storms in other stories examined in this chapter, creates an oppressive, internalized "lineless blend of sky and prairie" (p. 60). The looming storm again endangers the farmer's livelihood: "It would kill the late calves. He had seen wild blizzards in September" (p. 60). Will is therefore compelled by economic necessity, by "the way of the land" (p. 57), to venture out in the storm in search of his endangered calves. He must temporarily abandon the pregnant Eleanor, who, like Ann in "The Painted Door" and Ellen in "The Lamp at Noon", is left alone to experience the oppressive external storm. Eleanor reacts to this necessity in a familiar fashion: "'I wish you wouldn't go--all you think about is crop and cows'" (p. 61). The note of protest in her voice indicates that marital conflict is now a part of Will and Eleanor's life together. The unhappy marriage of Will's parents, glimpsed in "Summer Thunder," anticipates

that of Will and Eleanor in "September Snow;" the cycle of conflict now plagues the second generation.

Will, like John in "The Painted Door" and Paul in "The Lamp at Noon," performs his isolating duties out of a sense of responsibility and love, but is consequently alienated from his family. Will has good reason to abandon Eleanor temporarily in search of his cattle: "It was the baby he was thinking about, how much it was going to cost" (p. 61). Genuine love is the rationale, from the husband's point of view, for his devotion to his chores, but ironically, as in "A Field of Wheat" and "The Lamp at Noon," this love is somehow twisted into an alienating force. As in these other stories, there is an inner logic and an inevitability to the plight of the man and woman; there are no simplistic villains, only the necessary circumstances of life. If the positions of Will and Eleanor are familiar, so too is Eleanor's explanation of her resentment: "'It's the wind, that's all--waiting for you and watching it get dark'" (p. 61). Eleanor internalizes her environment, feeling the wind imprison her. She looks out, like Ellen in "The Lamp at Noon" and Ann in "The Painted Door," from her window at the "sinister" and "engulfing" storm: "A senseless dread had siezed her as she looked out into the night and snow . . ." (p. 61). Eleanor, hopeful at the end of "Summer Thunder," is by the beginning of "September Snow" another distraught prairie wife; already, something of the uncertainty of the "dark and threatening" thunder clouds has been revealed. Just as Paul in "The Lamp at Noon" ignores the internal panic revealed in Ellen's eyes, Will in "September Snow" disregards his better judgment: "Her voice had been like that of late--high-pitched and irritable. The baby coming, he told himself; another couple of weeks she'll be herself again" (p. 60). A final

reference to the tone of protest in Eleanor's voice comes at the end of this story, and creates another cyclic pattern; it also evokes a significant response from Will.

Ross chooses not to chronicle Eleanor's lonely vigil in the house, and follows instead Will's external struggle with the storm, the concrete embodiment of the abstract "struggle . . . to keep out of debt" (p. 61). The emphasis in "September Snow" is on physical action as a metaphor for human insignificance in the natural world:

But they [his cattle] resisted stupidly and only huddled closer to the fence. He gave up finally, clammy with sweat and cringing before the wind. The snow was thick . . . When he turned to face it, it chopped short his breath. He climbed back through the fence and with his body hunched forward started into the storm. (p. 63)

Like Hatty's cattle invading her garden, Will's calves are indifferent to their master's efforts. There is a variety of tactile imagery employed to emphasize man's puny struggle. In the above passage, Will "cringes" and "huddles" before the overpowering wind, again the main environmental force and metaphor for the calamitous external world. Elsewhere in the account of Will's struggle in the snowstorm, Ross describes the "wet snow [which] slapped on his face" (p. 62), the "fine barbs of sleet that felt like prickly hairs against the skin" (p. 60) and "the wind . . . like a needled wall" (p. 64).

The storm launches a real assault on man, and forms a barrier between Will and Eleanor. In its storm motif, "September Snow" resembles "A Field of Wheat," "The Lamp at Noon" and "The Painted Door." It followed "No Other Way" by only a year, however, and its publication preceded that of "The Lamp at Noon" and "The Painted Door." The very tactile, personal account of the storm's effect on Will, quoted above,



can therefore be linked not only to the storm motif in other stories but also to this similar account of Hatty's struggle in "No Other Way": "the cows dodged in and out from side to side, indifferent to her screams and yells. The bristly butts of the sheaves . . . were like needles on her face and hands. The dust rose in dense choking clouds, stinging her eyes . . ."<sup>12</sup> In these early stories, Ross describes the literal, physical, relentless assault of environment on man. Later, in a story such as "The Painted Door", this essential motif is complemented by the more subtle use of landscape as a dynamic, mirroring context for the more fundamental internal struggle.

Will is forced to seek shelter from the storm. John in "A Field of Wheat" retreats, after the devastating hail-storm, to the solitude of his barn, there to weep. Paul escapes from his argument with Ellen in "The Lamp at Noon" into the "cavern-like obscurity"<sup>13</sup> of his barn. Similarly, Will retreats into another metaphorical womb, tunnelling into a straw-stack. There, he, like Paul, has a sudden imaginative insight, triggered by the storm, into his wife's state of mind:

Her face came back to him, the strange flash in her eyes and her tight mouth. She would be waiting for him, pacing through the house, window to window, trying to peer out, afraid he might be lost. Sometimes a woman did queer things when she was expecting a baby. (p. 64)

Eleanor, like Ellen in "The Lamp at Noon," expresses in facial gestures her internal panic. Like Ann in "The Painted Door" she paces, and she is another fictional woman who peers out at the external storm, somehow absorbing something of that external chaos. Will's insight, like Paul's

<sup>12</sup> Sinclair Ross, "No Other Way," p. 80.

<sup>13</sup> Sinclair Ross, "The Lamp at Noon," p. 19.

in "The Lamp at Noon" and like Ann's instinctive knowledge that John would return to her through the storm in "The Painted Door," is tragically unheeded, for he remains within his shelter, his womb, while his wife is dying in child-birth.

With the ironic calm after the storm, a landscape emerges which anticipates the scene Will is to confront at home:

The buildings were . . . suspended in the empty blur of sky and snow with an aloof, unfamiliar detachment that chilled and dispirited him. . . . The field was wrinkled with sharp, furrow-like drifts that sometimes supported him and sometimes gave way unexpectedly. (p. 65)

The drifts are treacherous, as uncertain as the thunder clouds in "Summer Thunder." The land makes no promises. At this stage Will too internalizes his surroundings, for he is "chilled and dispirited" by the scene. Ironically, apart, Will and Eleanor share a chilly response to the landscape, just as, too late, Paul and Ellen respond to the futility of the lamp lit at noon. In the above passage there is, again, the fusion of land and sky, the oppressive, imprisoning "blur of sky and snow . . ." As in the description of the external world in "The Painted Door," there is in the above passage an emphasis on the empty, detached impersonality of the landscape and its corresponding effect on man.

The final scene of Will's return home is a dramatic fusion of internal and external worlds. As in "A Field of Wheat," "The Lamp at Noon" and "The Painted Door," the storm in "September Snow" batters its way into the human shelter:

The snow was mounted right across the kitchen, curled up like a wave against the far wall, piled on table and chairs. Even on the stove--the fire must have been out for hours. He shivered as he stepped inside. (p. 66)

Will shivers as much in response to his internal fears as to the external

cold: "There was a dingy chill that he had not felt in the open air" (p. 66). Eleanor is discovered "on the bed, half-undressed, her face twisted into a kind of grin, the forehead shining as if the skullbones were trying to beat through the skin" (p. 66). There is the suggestion that she, like Ellen in "The Lamp at Noon", is deranged. At any rate, she dies in child-birth, becoming as "white" as the external snow, overpowered, like John in "The Painted Door," by the cold external world of circumstance. Will, who in "Summer Thunder" lived in "pitted sympathy" (p. 52) with his dying wheat, is ironically much less in touch with Eleanor: "He sat still beside her, not understanding. Finally the doctor had to tell him she had just died" (p. 67). This is a poignant comment on the tragic distance between man and wife, the necessary "way of the land" (p. 57). Love is once more twisted and repressed, overruled by the dictates of the land.

As do most of the stories examined in this chapter, "September Snow," Part II of "Not by Rain Alone," concludes with an ironic contrast of the apparently pacified, mollified natural world and the devastated, numbed human protagonist. The promise of spring in the air, and the birth of Will's child, are balanced against the death of Eleanor. As in "The Lamp at Noon" and "The Painted Door," the final response of man is barely suggested, as Ross instead concentrates on his initial, numbed shock: "They talked to him about the baby, somebody held it up for him to see, but he went to the door and stood blinking at the glitter of the sun . . ." (p. 67). The contrast of man and landscape mocks humanity, but also perhaps gives it a certain grandeur, elevating it to a cyclical pattern that is one with the cycle of the seasons. Hearing his child cry, Will "seemed to be listening to the same plaintiveness and protest

that had been in Eleanor's voice of late" (p. 67). Now, too late, Will responds to that note of protest and he shares Eleanor's "plaintiveness," just as Paul shares Ellen's concept of the lamp lit at noon. This final reference to Eleanor's voice, like the recurring references to the lamp in "The Lamp at Noon," indicates that Will has also been defeated, for he too identifies with the plaintiveness in the voice of the child. Also, the cry of the child echoes that of Eleanor, so that the cycle of despair has passed from Will's mother to Eleanor to her child, whose voice already has that tone of protest, that familiar response to calamity. Will's "twinge of recognition" (p. 67) indicates his own internal development, and points to the latest cycle of futility, initiated by the child's cry. That cry is comparable to the lamp lit at noon, in that both are external phenomena which trigger significant human responses, which act as signposts of human development, external referents of internal progression.

The gloomy prophecies of "Summer Thunder" are realized in "September Snow," as Will truly learns "the submissive quiet that at last the seasons teach . . ." (p. 52). The pattern of the seasons, of succeeding generations, brings no improvement. There is cyclical struggle and uncertainty, cyclical external indifference to man, death anticipating death: Eleanor's death in child-birth is prefigured by the death of a horse while foaling in "Summer Thunder." Ross's fatalism is relentless, his cyclical patterns serving narrative and thematic functions. The literary structures are, however, perhaps too dominant, for there is a dogmatic earnestness in the content as well as the title of "Not by Rain Alone." The two parts of this story benefit from being combined, the emphasis on atmosphere in Part I balanced by the focus on human action in Part II.

There still remains, however, the problem of Ross's treatment of Will and Eleanor, who seem rather shallow exemplars, inhibited as characters by Ross's ubiquitous pessimism. The dynamics of their relationship, of love and conflict, are not fully explored. Neither are the dynamics of the intricate winter landscape given freedom to develop in Part II of the story. There is a range and complexity to Ann's emotions in "The Painted Door;" there is an explored, illuminated depth to Ellen's panic in "The Lamp at Noon;" in "Not by Rain Alone," there is a simplistic view of the relationship between Will and Eleanor. Because of this superficiality in its characters and their relationship, "Not by Rain Alone" resembles the early stories "No Other Way" and "A Field of Wheat" more than the major pieces "The Lamp at Noon" and "The Painted Door."

Will is seen, in Part I, in an attitude of waiting, for rain and for a better future. In Part II he is portrayed in a struggle with the elements. There is a simplicity to his various poses, and also to Eleanor's convenient, but not inevitable, death, that resembles the elemental simplicity of events in "A Field of Wheat." Unfortunately, what is poignantly revealed about the human condition in "A Field of Wheat" is rigidly asserted in "Not by Rain Alone." The literary and philosophical cycles in the latter story inhibit a dynamic interaction of man and landscape. The elements essentially perform a simplistic, malevolent role in this story. The landscape does not mirror the internal condition of man to the extent that it does in "The Painted Door," although it again supplies a metaphor for the futile human struggle. In both sections of "Not by Rain Alone," accounts of external phenomena are followed by some human confrontation, but the two realities are not successfully integrated. A central symbol, such as the lamp lit at noon

or the smear of paint, is needed to fuse external and internal worlds. The child's cry performs the function of evoking a significant human response, but it does not emerge as an organic, dominant, expanding symbol. It is constricted and limited to an ironic, cyclical and editorial role.

The symbol to which hopes and despair can in turn be fixed, which can develop and intensify characters, is absent from "Not by Rain Alone." Symbols such as the lamp and the smear of paint illuminate the human experience presented in "The Lamp at Noon" and "The Painted Door." These concise and concrete symbols give inhuman, diffuse and massive landscapes a specific human application, translating the external, impersonal lessons of the natural world into human terms. Lacking such symbols, "Not by Rain Alone" does not rise above its immediate details; it does not deserve its pessimism, for that attitude is not arrived at by means of an inevitable, internally logical sequence of events. The symbol, in Ross's short stories, elevates the mundane to the dramatic, fuses the ordinary detail to the extraordinary insight. It is unfortunately absent from "Not by Rain Alone." In "Nell," the final story to be examined in this chapter and another variation on the theme of the adult struggle, it is present: an ordinary bottle of ketchup comes to symbolize enduring human love. This modest symbol, developing naturally out of a flexible rather than rigid narrative structure, sets "Nell" apart from "Not by Rain Alone" as a less ambitious but perhaps more successful story.

First published in 1941, "Nell" examines the plight of the prairie wife, but does not use the familiar storm motif to intensify that plight. It is an unassuming and simple tale, bearing striking

similarities to "No Other Way." Neither story uses the storm motif which is so important in the other stories examined in this chapter. Both stories describe prairie women caught in unhappy marriages to rather shiftless husbands. Both stories chart a traumatic visit to town, which is a futile attempt at marital reconciliation. "Nell," however, is a more restrained account of marital conflict, and is therefore more successful than "No Other Way." It wisely and economically avoids the mental vacillations of Hatty Glenn in "No Other Way."

"Nell" opens with a scene similar to the initial presentation of Hatty Glenn at work in her garden:

Nell had been hoeing in the potato patch since noon. She was a tall, spare, raw-boned woman with big hands, high cheekbones, and a crooked, jutting nose. . . . In her voice when she raised her head and started muttering to herself there was the same stolid quietness, though the actual words were bitter and resentful.<sup>14</sup>

Although Nell resembles Hatty Glenn physically, there is in her a "stolid quietness," a calm markedly different from the near hysteria of Hatty. There is, then, a check to the danger of shrill rhetoric in "Nell" that was not present in "No Other Way." Nell's bitter words echo those of other prairie women noted in this chapter: "Every Saturday off to town, throwing his money away. Never a thought for me or Tommy. And I work hard too" (p. 32). Nell's complaint is essentially the same as that of Hatty Glenn, of Eleanor in "Not by Rain Alone" and Ann in "The Painted Door." All of these characters insist, pathetically, on their womanhood to husbands who neglect them. Nell's husband George, like Dan Glenn, is one of the more irresponsible husbands whose negligence is a human

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<sup>14</sup>Sinclair Ross, "Nell," Manitoba Arts Review, 2, No. 4 (Winter 1941), 32.

caprice, not an imposed and necessary "way of the land."<sup>15</sup>

Nell is in sharp contrast to her youthful-looking husband: "He was slight and good-looking, with fine, rather delicate features . . . in contrast to her own big bony face . . ." (p. 33). Similarly, Hatty Glenn "was an ugly old crone, and he [Dan] was the same as twenty years ago. Erect, lightfooted, not a wrinkle of grey hair."<sup>16</sup> Nell, like Hatty, is committed to the rhythm of her chores, and responds significantly to them. She goes from her garden to her kitchen to preparing a grocery list. Ketchup, a favourite of George's, is high on the list; this seemingly insignificant detail assumes considerable importance at the end of the story, where a repeated reference to it signals Nell's internal nature. The same process informs the recurring references to Hatty's economic calculations, the cyclical pattern of chores in "A Field of Wheat," the repeated references to Eleanor's voice in "Not by Rain Alone" and Paul's recollection of Ellen's bitter words in "The Lamp at Noon." In each case, the recurring external phenomenon evokes significant human responses which reveal developments in character and meaning.

Nell determines to accompany her husband to town, just as Hatty breaks her pattern of chores and in a futile assertion of her femininity goes to town with Dan. Nell's intention is to inhibit George's activities, for "he couldn't stay so late if she were there" (p. 34). Her expectations are, like Hatty's, proven wrong in time. Also, Nell, like Hatty, suffers acutely when removed from her familiar environment and her reassuring chores:

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<sup>15</sup> Sinclair Ross, "Not by Rain Alone," p. 57.

<sup>16</sup> Sinclair Ross, "No Other Way," p. 80.



Nell walked back to the grocery side and leaned awkwardly against the counter. Her good shoes were pinching. She was conscious of her bare, sunburned arms. . . . Other women were talking and laughing together in little groups, but she knew no one. . . . Nell glanced down nervously at her own dress . . .  
(p. 36)

Nell's almost physical sense of displacement echoes this strikingly similar account of Hatty's trip to town: "Then, suddenly she was conscious of her hands, wrinkled and red, like forked carrots grown in lumpy soil."<sup>17</sup> In both women, external discomfort mirrors internal embarrassment and social unease.

Nell is virtually abandoned by the presumably drunken George to find her way home late at night with her son. Significantly, she remembers to take with her, from the store where she has spent so many painful hours waiting for him, George's ketchup. This simple, remembered act speaks of Nell's enduring, if somewhat pointless and unrequited, love for her husband. If Hatty's final words seem a rather self-conscious, authorial affirmation, Nell's simple act has a much greater natural symbolism. Her resumption of her thankless chores, like Martha's resumption of her supper preparations at the end of "A Field of Wheat," is a significant affirmation of life. The normal daily routine is in the lives of Hatty, Martha and Nell a positive element. Most in evidence in "No Other Way," this pattern is paradoxically most effective in "A Field of Wheat" and "Nell," where it does not rigidly dominate and limit character and meaning. In the latter stories, the pattern surfaces only when thematically necessary. The cyclical re-emergence of the seemingly insignificant ketchup, signalling Nell's complex loyalty to her unappealing life, speaks suggestively of enduring love, of acceptance of and submis-

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

sion to one's fate. There is an ambiguity to her final act which clouds any simple interpretation of Nell, for she can be either pitied or admired for her loyalty. She cannot, however, be so easily dismissed as can Hatty Glenn, a much less subtle creation. Hatty's struggle is all too faithfully and literally rendered, its slightest variation articulated and therefore rendered trivial. Nell's struggle is powerfully understated, and her husband is adequately defined by his actions rather than by invective. Nell's final symbolic gesture is more ambiguous, yet more natural, than Hatty's final posturing.

"Nell" deals with material almost identical to that treated in "No Other Way" but reveals considerable stylistic improvements over that story. The result is, in "Nell," a sensitive and unpretentious illumination of a struggling woman. In this particular stylistic re-working of a thematic core, there is evidence of Ross's general progression as a short story writer, for the refinements charted in this chapter are primarily of a stylistic nature. The themes and the essential human experiences presented do not vary greatly from one story to another, but they are handled with increasing depth and sophistication, for increased technical mastery quite naturally adds new resonance to the recurring themes. Thus "Nell" charts the same territory as does "No Other Way" but with greater assurance and ambiguity. Similarly, Part II of "Not by Rain Alone," "September Snow," portrays a literal winter landscape; "The Painted Door," published several years after "September Snow," creates a dynamic, metaphorical and mirroring winter landscape. This is not to say that there is an invariably chronological improvement in Ross's stories, but that his method is one of refining and re-working familiar material. It is this method that is the key to the transformation of

the vapid "No Other Way" into the much finer "Nell." Ross's lean and subtle prose is to some extent, therefore, an achievement as much as a gift.

The stories analyzed in this chapter are among Ross's finest, and most widely known. Depicting adults engaged in a cycle of conflict and struggle which promises no relief, these fictional documents of the Depression articulate most forcefully Ross's vision. Further, several of these stories, including "The Lamp at Noon" and "The Painted Door," seem virtual masterpieces. In these stories of adult conflict, both form and content are complex elements. They are unified in the storm motif, which provides both a compelling, suspenseful narrative form and a dramatic embodiment of Ross's pessimistic view of the human struggle.

One can trace in these stories the development of a rather sophisticated approach to character portrayal. Hatty Glenn, for example, is shrill and one-dimensional, performing unswervingly the role of embittered hag. Nell, in the story of that name, has an added internal calm which individualizes her fairly typical role of suffering wife. Ann, in "The Painted Door", is a complex figure motivated by many forces. Sinclair Ross's various farmers and farm-wives do not greatly overlap from one story to the next. Some, like Hatty Glenn in "No Other Way" or Eleanor in "Not by Rain Alone," are one-dimensional because they lack personal dynamism to balance their similar external roles. Generally, however, Ross succeeds in creating complex characters who have memorable, individual features.

Again, in the stories examined in this chapter, human responses to symbols of external reality are important. Thus, in "The Lamp at Noon," Paul responds to the lamp which symbolizes his unhappy existence.

In "A Field of Wheat," the wheat is initially a symbol of hope for John and Martha, but when it is destroyed by the hail-storm its role changes dramatically, and it evokes not hope but despair. Similarly, the lamp seems for Paul at first a symbol of hope but is changed to one of bitter, mocking futility. The destructive external world of these stories, a metaphor for the gravity of the human struggle, needs such concrete symbolic referents as the lamp lit at noon. The external chaos needs to be interpreted in terms of seasons, cycles and its concrete human effects; otherwise, its lessons and its impact are too vague and diffuse for human understanding. Human responses to external phenomena are thus necessary to articulate Ross's particular outlook.

The external world of unpredictable storms acts as a mirror and a foil for the human struggle. Ross's concern is with the survival of man, on the most individual, elemental level. His characters therefore argue about the land and the life of the land as would a Christian and an agnostic. The land is imbued with a spiritual existence, the validity of which is never assured. There is a fierce debate in these stories between optimism and pessimism, between belief and disbelief in the land. Ross seems to remain a sceptic, for the external or spiritual realities are portrayed as unable to assist man. If there is hope, it stems from within man, from his submission to and therefore recognition of his fate, his acknowledgement of and participation in the natural world. While there is "no other way," there is at least this one "way" of courageous acceptance and "going-on."

**CONCLUSION**

For a man such as Sinclair Ross who was never able to support himself as a professional writer, the short story seems almost an ideal art form. Certainly, the seventeen year lapse between the publication of Ross's first and second novel testifies to some of the practical economic difficulties he must have encountered in his writing. Something of these difficulties, and of his remarkable tenacity, can be glimpsed in these comments appended to Ross's first published story in 1934:

No Other Way was written three years ago and has been re-written twice. Mr. Ross says he has written two novels--"failures, which publishers write me are interesting and compelling, but of small commercial possibilities. I am now starting to work on short stories, hoping gradually to build up a better technique without the cramping grind that writing a novel after office hours demands."<sup>1</sup>

What is significant, for our purposes, is that Ross apparently carefully wrote and re-wrote his stories in the attempt to "build up a better technique . . ." This seems entirely consistent with the sort of development I have found in his stories, a development primarily in technique leading secondarily to greater thematic complexity. The situations and characters Ross explores in his stories are limited in variety; it is Ross's unique manipulation of these rather mundane, recurring elements that accounts for much of his artistry. The stories are to be admired for their depth of penetration, for they are rather limited in their range, their breadth.

This technical mastery is most evident in the bond Sinclair Ross establishes between the internal and external realities of man. As Roy Daniels noted in "Literature: Poetry and the Novel" in The Culture of Contemporary Canada, edited by Julian Park, Ross's forte is

<sup>1</sup>Sinclair Ross, "No Other Way," Nash's Pall Mall Magazine, XCIV, No. 497 (October 1934), 80.

his ability, within a rigidly circumscribed area, to convey the exact and convincing relation between the external and internal worlds, the effects of environment upon the character. His world is sparsely furnished, but the interrelation of its parts is clear.<sup>2</sup>

Ross's manipulation of external and internal worlds represents, however, more than evidence of environmental determinism. It is a fusion of form and content, of dramatic tension and thematic statement. Especially in the stories of childhood soaring and of adult conflict, the interdependence of a character's internal and external worlds serves a whole complex of functions. Thematically, the external world of soaring youths and struggling farmers is capricious; it reveals to boy and man alike a painful reality: man is not master of his fate and he cannot fulfil his dreams. The boy's soaring dreams and the farmer's illusions of prosperity are both crushed by the external reality. This is the essential thematic role of landscape and atmosphere in Ross's short stories, but there are related technical functions. The external world mirrors the internal human plight of Ross's characters, and even provokes or seems to comment ironically on human developments. The result of Ross's perfection of this technique is that, in a story such as "The Painted Door", for example, he is able to compress, yet retain, an intricate, even novelistic, texture of imagery, character development and meaning. Bridging the mental and physical landscapes, Ross thus etches the subtleties of each. The nature of such writing is economic; above all, it is symbolic.

Faced with the problem of giving human significance to a diffuse and mysterious natural world, Ross creates, for his characters and his

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<sup>2</sup>Roy Daniels, "Literature: Poetry and the Novel," in Julian Park, ed., The Culture of Contemporary Canada (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957), p. 45.

readers, certain symbolic referents. There is, for example, the lamp in "The Lamp at Noon" and the music of the cornet in "Cornet at Night." Each is a specific, concrete phenomenon on a scale man can grasp. Essentially, the lamp and the music evoke significant human responses which link external reality to internal dreams or fears. By thus evoking human responses, these referents crystallize internal developments in man, giving the diffuse external world of circumstance a focus for man. The moment of internal reaction to the external reality is the moment of self-realization, the genesis of critical insight into life and the moment of crisis in the human spirit. Such moments make vivid sense of the "lessons" of the enigmatic external world of circumstance. The lamp and the music of the cornet are symbols which develop much like human characters, which interpret external reality. There are many other such symbols in Ross's stories. There are the symbolic moments of soaring on imaginary steeds, the symbolic acts of retribution and purgation and the symbolic confrontations with the stormy universe.

Conflict is an integral part of Ross's vision: children and adults alike struggle against an oppressive external environment or against internal terrors of panic, guilt and loneliness. Reflecting the bleak social conditions of the Depression, Ross's tales of the prairie reality are still relevant and moving. This is in a sense surprising, given the narrow range of these stories. The explanation lies in the fact that Ross's prairie characters struggle against the roles imposed on them by environment and circumstance. Externally, these characters operate within such fairly predictable roles as stolid male provider, bitter wife and troubled youth. Within these stereotypes, however, Ross creates complex characters who struggle to assert their besieged



humanity. The authentic portrait of the Depression serves as an extended metaphor for man's search for meaning and purpose. The stark, elemental atmosphere of these stories serves as a perfect context for an examination of fundamental human issues of physical, spiritual and imaginative survival. Thus in "A Field of Wheat" John weeps and his tears are evidence of his lingering internal life, his struggle to preserve his humanity. So too does the music in "Cornet at Night" reveal not an isolated, but a universal, sense of regret for the loss of innocence, and an enduring aspiration for the beautiful. Such elements humanize what might otherwise be predictable characters and situations: it is again the manipulation of external and internal worlds, the tension between external role and internal need, that contributes to the individuality of Ross's characters.

One can rank the short stories of Sinclair Ross, in retrospect, without difficulty. Of the three types of story examined in this study, only those examined in the second chapter seem, in general, seriously flawed. With the exception of "The Runaway," Ross's studies of the misfit reveal an uncharacteristic imbalance between the vital elements of character, atmosphere, action and meaning. These failures, then, inadvertently emphasize Ross's ability, so evident in his stories of childhood soaring and adult conflict, to fuse, as John G. Moss notes in his review of Whir of Gold, "the pattern of events in each narrative with its themes, and finely orchestrate(s) the imagery of prairie and farmstead in a sensitive correlation with his characters' emotions and experiences."<sup>3</sup> This power to fuse action, character and environment into

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<sup>3</sup>John G. Moss, rev. of Whir of Gold by Sinclair Ross, The Fiddler, No. 90 (Summer 1971), p. 126.

one brief, brilliant illumination is one of Ross's great gifts as a short story writer. It is a gift often absent in those tales of misfits by Ross which have fairly urban or contemporary settings. There is, therefore, some support from the stories to the familiar contention, generally based on a comparison of Ross's novels, that his best work reflects his prairie heritage. This is not to classify Ross as a regional writer in any pejorative sense, but to locate his imaginative centre.

If anything, Ross has examined universal problems against the suitably dramatic and elemental background of his deeply internalized childhood environment. In his finest stories, he fuses the universal, climatic rhythms with the human cycles of dream and reality, hope and despair, birth and death. The human struggle is then infused with something of the grandeur of the natural world. The certainty of the cyclical patterns, of calm after a storm and the return to mundane reality after the visionary soaring, is therefore not altogether pessimistic. Ross's melancholy insistence on man's limited role in the universe, on his inability to sustain dreams and control his destiny, is balanced by a more hopeful element. In the brilliant, bittersweet tone of these stories there is Ross's compassion for his struggling characters, there is his respect for their redeeming capacities for love, imagination and endurance. Ross illuminates the beautiful and the terrible in the complex grandeur of the human spirit. His unique ability to reveal in orchestrated, allusive language the dramatic in the commonplace, the symbolic in the literal, the internal in the external assures him a secure reputation as a master of the short story, and confirms the truth of Robert Fulford's observation that "no one can write about Sinclair Ross . . .

and fail to notice the extent to which his audience proved unworthy of the literature he gave it."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Robert Fulford, "Notebook," Saturday Night, 87, No. 7 (July 1972), 4.

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