

原 著

## Rachel's Quest in *A Jest of God*

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### Abstract

The protagonist of *A Jest of God* is a 34-year-old school-teacher. She is incessantly spinning her fears and is trapped in them. Her sexual encounter with Nick, a materialized person of the shadow prince in her dream, liberates and satisfies her sexual yearning. In her agony of imagined pregnancy, Rachel gets strength to cope with the problem. Rachel matures to take the initiative as her and her mother's roles become reversed. She who descended into the death world comes back with the strength to achieve at least a partial victory.

*A Jest of God* was published in 1966 as Margaret Laurence's second work with Canadian settings. It won the Governor General's Award for the year. Different from other Manawaka stories whose protagonists successfully got away from Manawaka at younger ages, Rachel, the 34-year-old school-teacher in *A Jest of God*, is the only protagonist who is locked in Manawaka near the end of the story. In that sense, she is compelled to live in a smaller world than the other protagonists of Manawaka stories.

Margaret Atwood rightly describes Rachel as "a woman trapped in a prison" and says that Rachel's prison is smaller and more tightly locked than any of the other Manawaka protagonists.<sup>1)</sup> Margaret Laurence says: "Her martyrdom had been at least partly self-chosen, although it took her a long time

to see it, but she does see it at the end, as indeed probably all martyrdoms are at least partly self chosen."<sup>2)</sup> Aritha van Herk pays attention to the word, "spinster" and interprets it "a woman whose occupation is to spin. To spin a yarn, a story"<sup>3)</sup> but what the unmarried Rachel is actually spinning is her fear, her trap. The nature of Rachel's fear, how she is locked and trapped in the fear, how she copes with it, and how she gets her inner freedom will be clarified through her relationships with people around her.

The story covers only a short span from the end of a school year to the beginning of a new one. That is the period when school teachers have some change in their routine. So it happens in Rachel's life and becomes her turning point. The story consists mostly of Rachel's monologue. This first-person narra-

tive is effective in presenting a somewhat neurotic protagonist.

Rachel is always afraid of the self-confident and authoritative principal. Under his tight supervision, Rachel loses her self-respect. Every time he talks to her, she fears she did something wrong. His confidence in his way of administering his school forces her to betray James, one of her students she feels is special. Margaret Laurence writes that James "always seems about to take off like a sparrow and miraculously fly," (p. 9)<sup>4)</sup> and Kenneth James Hughes says James when he leaves his classroom is "a symbol of free spirit."<sup>5)</sup> Rachel's affection towards him reveals her yearning for freedom from all kinds of pressure of the petite bourgeoisie to which she belongs.

Introvert Rachel also fears the Tabernacle - their fundamental belief, gift of tongues or ecstatic utterances of its members. Rachel confines her feeling in herself and cannot accept this outburst of emotion. Yet she is the one whose emotional outburst occurred in the middle of the service at the Tabernacle, under her extreme strain of wanting desperately to get away from there. Rachel, who tells her lover Nick, that she envied Ukrainian children in her childhood because they looked more resistant and more free and more outspoken, fears the gift of tongues and extremities of outspokenness. Yet she cannot accept her mother's conventional belief either. These opposite beliefs are symbolized in the very different pictures in their churches: "Jesus, bearded and bleeding, his heart exposed and bristling with thorns like a scarlet pincushion," (p. 36) and "Jesus expiring gently and with absolutely no inconvenience, no gore, no pain, just this nice and slightly effeminate insurance salesman who, somewhat incongruously, happens to be clad in a toga, holding his arms languidly up to

something which might in other circumstances have been a cross." (p. 47) Rachel cannot find her place in either of these churches. Her outburst of her distaste for the Tabernacle leads Calla to show lesbian love towards her. In her strong anger at Calla, Rachel strangely feels relief. Clara Thomas says, "anger gives her, for once, a self-justification and the power to act."<sup>6)</sup> Although Rachel tells Nick, "In my family, you didn't get emotional. It was frowned upon." (p. 94), she is here partly successful in liberating herself to express her feeling explicitly.

Rachel's mother always behaves as if she cares about Rachel very much. But on the contrary, she is, in fact, very demanding and asks Rachel to serve her as a dutiful daughter. Rachel thinks, "her weapons are invisible and she would never to admit even to carrying them, much less putting them to use." (p. 46) Her mother talks to her as if she is a 12-year-old child but she is dependent on her daughter in every way and makes Rachel feel she is either too young or too old. When Rachel falls in love, she perceives her mother's unspoken egoistic concern, "What becomes of me?" Atwood refers to the characteristics of Canadian literature as follows:

In Canadian literature the family is handled quite differently. If in England the family is a mansion you live in, and if in America it's a skin you shed, then in Canada it's a trap in which you're caught. The Canadian protagonist often feels just as trapped inside his family as his American counterpart; he feels the need for escape, but somehow he is unable to break away.<sup>7)</sup>

Rachel's mother is truly a trap and denies Rachel freedom by using her own weak heart as a pretext, although Rachel thinks, "No one could say mortality had very noticeably laid claws on her, not yet. Except when she is ill, of course." (p. 68)

To Rachel, her mother seems to be immortal. Rachel's thinking that no one dies among her people on this side of the tracks, only people on the other side of tracks, and that "the Scots knew how to be almightier than anyone but God" (p. 71) shows how the Scots whom Rachel belongs to are arrogant. Only Rachel's father knew people are mortal because he fought in the World War I and could not find his place among the people who think themselves immortal. Rachel thinks, "Immortality appalled him, perhaps as much as it does me." (p.48) He never would go to the Armistice Day parade and would stay downstairs at the funeral parlour all that night.

Rachel's lover Nick is a Ukrainian. Trapped in petite bourgeoisie morality, Rachel can yet jump over the discrepancy which lies between the Scots and the Ukrainians, oil and water, only by the help of enormity of her sexual yearning which makes her want to touch even the principal whom she dislikes. When her mother says implicitly that Nick is a milkman's son, Rachel does not flinch in thinking she is an undertaker's daughter. The place of their first love-making should be the "neutral territory" (p. 92) beside the river. Helen M. Buss refers to the word "neutral" as follows:

• • • it's quality of being outside Rachel and Nick's two worlds of town and farm, places where they both feel imprisoned by convention, indicates their implicit yearning for hierogamy.<sup>8)</sup>

Nick, who once lived in Manawaka but ran away from there refusing to succeed his father's work, is the only person from outside of Manawaka in this story. He suddenly appears in Rachel's life. He is a materialized person of Rachel's shadow prince whom she conjures up in her dream to console her sexual yearning. Her mother refers to Cinderella

when Rachel rushes back home from her date with Nick. Kenneth J. Hughes points out that the prototype of Cinderella looms in this story and refers to other prince prototypes besides Cinderella's prince - the shadow prince, Anthony with whom Queen Cleopatra was infatuated and Hamlet to whom Rachel plays her Ophelian role. Hughes says that Rachel is tempted to these prince prototypes but she does not desire palaces, and neither does she completely fit herself into these princess roles.<sup>9)</sup> Rachel who imagines herself wandering "lonely as a cloud" (p. 86) becomes very involved in the affair and the feeling of "this peace, this pride, holding him." (p. 98) She thinks she can talk more freely because Nick is easy to talk to and easy to listen to, but he does most of the talking.

She feels security with Nick as follows: "I think that when he is with me, I don't feel any fear. Or hardly any. Soon I won't feel any at all." (p. 100) But Rachel is free from fear only when she is with Nick. "I'm not afraid when I am with him, but when I'm not with him, it seems to return." (p. 137) Here lies the limits of his power as the shadow prince. Nick's words to Rachel in their making love, "Relax, Rachel," which are repeated in her dream and also by Dr. Raven when she gets an internal examination reveal that the problem is her tenseness. Rachel gradually learns how to free herself until at last she utters her true desire that she wants a child, "If I had a child, I would like it to be yours." (p. 154) Nick has to confess that he is powerless to grant her demand: "I'm not God. I can't solve anything." (p. 154) When Rachel becomes most truthful to her feeling, Nick has to disappear like the shadow prince in her dream because a child which is very real and Nick who lacks reality are never be compatible. At her utterance of these words when she is happiest, the situation changes. She senses this change and

feels she and Nick are apart.

Through Rachel's love affair with Nick, she is always worried about the possibility of being pregnant. She fears how her mother will be upset to know her pregnancy and how people of the town will talk about her. Trapped, Rachel repeats inwardly the same question her mother asks, "What becomes of me?" Still, throughout the story, Rachel desires a child. At the beginning of the story, she tries not to call her students "my children" and then tries to justify to call them so thinking that other teachers also call theirs like that. Rachel's jealousy towards James's mother shows that she feels maternal affection towards him. Every year she has new student and after a year they will be away from her. The repetition of temporary relationships with her students makes her feel "fertile". What she wants is a permanent relationship. She repeats inwardly her desperate desire to have a child, "Nick, give it to me," (p. 124) and she only imagines that he is very glad to know she is pregnant and assures her everything will be all right. In the agony of Nick's leaving and her belief that she is pregnant, she thinks as follows:

When I think of it like that, away from voices and eyes, it seems more than I could ever have hoped for in my life. How I feel about it does not depend on how he might feel or might not feel. Whatever he felt, or anyone, it would be mine and I would want it to be . . . If I did not have to consider anything else, I could feel only warmth at being its place. (pp. 165-166)

Look - it's my child, mine. And so I will have it. I will have it because I want it and because I cannot do anything else. (p. 177)

I am not going to lose it. it's mine. (p. 179)

Here her strong resolution to have a child persists although in the turmoil she almost tries to kill herself or tries to get rid of her

child. Here she finds strength to fight against her situation. She is not dependent on Nick any more.

Hector, who manages the funeral parlour downstairs after Rachel's father's death, is another person she can talk to easily. He has a belief that an undertaker should sell "relief" and "modified prestige" a kind of pride for the family. Rachel, who has never been married and is annoyed by the possibility of pregnancy only because it is out of her social norm, is led by Hector "like a bride up the aisle" (p. 132) in the chapel at the funeral parlour. He not only provides her a decent ceremony to be a mother but also appeases her mourning for her father's unhappy married life by telling her that her father got the life he most wanted. Later when Rachel is leaving Manawaka, Hector says he does not care what kind of operation she got, in spite of what the people in Manawaka might say about her. Here he is offering her a kind of modified prestige.

At Dr. Raven's waiting room, Rachel feels she is going to be sorted out at "death's immigration office". (p. 183) Dr. Raven's diagnosis that she has a tumor in her womb does not give her relief but causes her mourning. Her voice answering him is "the voice of some woman mourning for her children." (p. 187)<sup>10)</sup> But her words under anesthesia, "I am the mother now" (p. 191) change her from a dependent 34-year-old child to a mature adult woman who can cope with her problem.

Rachel who was once consoled by Hector's word, "There, there. Never mind. It'll be all right." (p. 134) becomes the one who consoles her mother who is now her "elderly child" frightened at the idea of moving away from Manawaka where she used to live for so many years. Like Hector, Rachel says, "Hush, it will be all right - there, there." (p. 203) Rachel does not need Hector's modified

prestige any more and lets the people gossip about her. Rather, she thinks: "I like it better this way. it's more fitting."(p. 207) Social norms do not annoy her any more. She also realizes her stupidity in worrying about her mother's health and now thinks "I'm not responsible for keeping her alive. There is, suddenly, some enormous relief in this realization."(p. 202) This matured Rachel is not annoyed by Calla or the principal. Once she interpretes things differently, things look differently. She can at least admit that Calla loves her. She understands that it is unnec-

essary to be afraid of the principal.

The epigraph of this story, ". . . I was swallowed one time deep in the dark/And came out alive after all,"<sup>11)</sup> has already prophesied Rachel's survival. Rachel is swallowed by fear, and through Hector's funeral parlour, she comes out alive with the strength to cope with the problems.<sup>11)</sup> Rachel has now a reversed role and takes the initiative. Her wondering whether it is some partial triumph hints that anything may happen in her future. But she will never be crushed again because she is the mother now.

#### Notes

- 1) Atwood M (1988) Afterword of *A Jest of God*. McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, pp 213.
- 2) Gibson G (1973) *Eleven Canadian Novelists*. Anansi, Toronto, pp 201.
- 3) Herk A (1988) The Eulalias of Spinsters and Undertakers. In Gunnars K, eds. *Crossing the River: Essays in Honour of Margaret Laurence*. Turnstone Press, Winnipeg, pp 135.
- 4) All citations with pages are from Laurence M (1988) *A Jest of God*. McClelland and Stewart, Toronto.
- 5) Hughes K (1988) Politics and *A Jest of God*. In Verduyn C, eds. *Margaret Laurence: An Appreciation*. Journal of Canadian Studies/Broadview Press, Peterborough, pp 120.
- 6) Thomas C (1988) *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*, McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, pp 84.
- 7) Atwood M (1972) *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Anansi, Toronto, pp 131.
- 8) Buss H (1986) Margaret Laurence's Dark Lovers: Sexual Metaphor, and the Movement toward Individualization, Hierogamy and Mythic Narrative in Four Manawaka Books. *Atlantis*, 11 (2) spring, 100.
- 9) Hughes K (1988) Politics and *A Jest of God*. In Verduyn C, eds. *Margaret Laurence: An appreciation*. Journal of Canadian Studies/Broadview Press, Peterborough, pp 111.
- 10) See Jeremiah 31 : 15.
- 11) About this descent pattern, see Morley P (1991) *Margaret Laurence: The Long Journey Home*. McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, pp 42-43.

## 「神の戯れ」のレイチェルの探究

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## 要 約

カナダを舞台としたマーガレット・ローレンスの二番目の作品、「神の戯れ」の主人公は34歳の未婚の教師である。彼女はマナワカの町の狭量な価値観に縛られ、口やかましい母親、熱狂的キリスト教を信奉する友人との間で逃げ場のない息苦しい暮らしを送っていた。ニックとの出会いは彼女に性の満足と精神的解放をもたらす契機となった。ニックが去った後、妊娠したと思い込んだ彼女は死の淵をさまよひ、苦悩の極みの中から、それに打ち勝つ力を得ることができた。