Ann-Marie MacDonald in the Context of Hugh MacLennan and Alistair MacLeod: Gender Formation in Three Cape Breton Writers

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Abstract

The ways in which two male authors, Hugh MacLennan and Alistair Macleod, marginalize their female characters in *Each Man's Son* (1951), *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* (1976), and *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories* (1986) respectively, becomes apparent through a feminist and cultural reading of their texts. These male authors' limited exploration of female identity in their Cape Breton stories is expounded upon by Ann-Marie MacDonald's treatment of gender identity formation in her novel *Fall On Your Knees* (1996). MacDonald subverts certain female stereotypes through gender role reversals and an exploration of female rituals and female memories. By bringing a feminist and postmodernist reading to four different fictional texts about the same region, this thesis will examine gender identity formation in these Cape Breton texts and will argue that such formation is intertwined with issues of ethnicity, class, religion, gender stereotyping, and storytelling. MacDonald consciously focuses on gender definitions in order to comment on the complexity of gender identity formation for both female and male characters in fictional accounts of Cape Breton.

I. Introduction

All fiction, whether it is in the form of a novel or short story, tells a particular story from a particular point of view. It reflects certain times, places, people, events, and ideologies that have shaped and continue to shape human sensibilities. In this way, literature holds an essential place in society inasmuch as it not only serves as a form of entertainment but also as a medium for transmitting cultural attitudes and beliefs. For example, a novel such as *1984* by George Orwell reflected collective anxieties about technology and governmental control at a time when these issues were in the forefront of readers' minds. While it may be presumptuous to assert that this novel may have affected the course of history and ideology in the twentieth century, one may comfortably assume that it had enough impact on readers to make them think about the direction in which countries and societies were moving. In short, literature and life are interactive. This is often how literature, especially fiction, works within social and cultural frameworks of specific times and places.

Recognizing the ways in which fiction and reality interact on a global level is important, but oftentimes it is necessary to examine their interaction at a more localized and personal level in order to appreciate truly their powerful connection. By looking at specific genres or, in the case of this thesis, at regional literature, the reader can examine universal themes and symbols on a smaller, more intimate scale and identify issues central to an understanding of humanity and culture. Regional literature, which includes works by Hugh MacLennan, short stories by Alistair MacLeod, and the novel *Fall On Your Knees* by Ann-Marie MacDonald, tends to employ universally identifiable subjects in a way that shows their connection with specific people, places and

time periods. For example, each of these author's works deals with gender identity and the formation of masculine and feminine ideals. However, instead of examining these issues in New York City or Paris, these authors have intentionally chosen to present their subjects in a certain way simply because the plots are set on the eastern Canadian island of Cape Breton. The authors further control how their subjects will be interpreted by choosing distinctive time periods during which their stories unfold. In the case of MacLennan's novel, *Each Man's Son*, the patriarchal system that Ainslie represents and struggles to maintain is reflective of attitudes common during the time in which the story is set. Similarly, MacLeod's short stories are representative of a general time period, the last fifty or so years, during which anxieties about the preservation of the specific male Celtic tradition have occupied the minds of many Cape Bretoners. Finally, *Fall On Your Knees* begins at about the same time as *Each Man's Son*, but the action of the story spans almost fifty years. MacDonald is conscious of many of the same gender issues as her male predecessors but the way in which she presents time as a cycle rather than as a specific moment requires the reader to think differently about those same themes and symbols.

Stories are uniquely important to the culture of Cape Breton because of its intense connection with its Celtic past. Traditionally, the people of Cape Breton have lived difficult and stark lives. The island is isolated and the climate and landscape are often fierce and unmanageable. When the first Scottish settlers arrived there in the 1700s, they came equipped only with their perseverance and strong Celtic heritage. By clinging to their past and their traditions, marked by stories of heroic Highland warriors and constant struggles against outside forces, the new settlers and their descendants were able to adapt to Cape Breton. However, along with preserving their heritage, these settlers also preserved the patriarchal Highland clan system. Women in Cape

Breton, as in most places, were still marginalized and expected to fulfill maternal roles as prescribed by men. They were thought of as merely functional members of society and were always defined relative to patriarchal gender constructions of masculinity and femininity. In other words, the men in society were important because they worked as farmers or miners, bonded with each other through various physical rituals such as brawling and drinking, and, as the primary transmitters of culture, passed their phallocentric legacy on to their sons. Women were just mothers and, since mothers are also domestic and are rarely public figures, it was easy enough to ignore their experiences and concerns in favor of the more prominent male stories.

The male characters in MacLennan's *Each Man's Son* and MacLeod's *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* and *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories* are at the forefront of each narrative while the female characters appear as maternal figures. The women in many cases appear as merely domestic contrasts to the public male world of the coal mines, taverns, and, in the case of *Each Man's Son*, the hospital. Because of the way in which masculinity is defined according to the Celtic and patriarchal traditions, the men in these stories relate to one another through their occupations, whether they are fishermen, farmers, coal miners, or doctors. Men tend to be silent and stoic, always bearing their burdens internally so that eventually, as in the case of the narrator of MacLeod's "The Closing Down of Summer," they lose the ability to articulate their thoughts and feelings. In order to compensate for this lack of articulation, the men rely on their physicality to provide a means of interaction and male bonding, which always leaves women at home waiting or taking care of their children.

In *Each Man's Son*, Ainslie's problem with his own gender identification is inherently intertwined with his ethnic identification and his need to feel

intellectually superior to both the miners and his wife of English descent. He is caught between his loyalty to his Scottish heritage and the need to continue his legacy and the fact that he has educated himself beyond that particular class of men. Gender construction in this novel becomes a dual issue and it seems that MacLennan solves it rather quickly and nicely with a happy ending for both Ainslie and Margaret, and perhaps Alan as well. Ainslie is supposed to represent a modern version of the Highland warrior known well in the patriarchal Scottish tradition, yet the correlation seems to fall short because of the duality of Ainslie's allegiances. What it means to be a man for Ainslie undoubtedly gets confused amidst the sub-plot of the thwarted boxer Archie MacNeil, Ainslie's hypocritical attitude toward the miners and his wife, and his inability to admit when he is at fault.

The problem with the male Celtic legacy in Cape Breton becomes clearer when the reader recalls the words of the narrator in *Fall On Your Knees*: "Memory is another word for story ..." (270). This statement is perhaps even more accurate when applied directly to Cape Breton, where much of the cultural history is derived from a living oral tradition dating back to ancient Scotland. The collective memory is preserved in stories told from one generation to the next. Yet, many of these stories are about men and what it means to be a man. The stories circulate amongst everyone within the culture and transmit important codes of behavior regarding everything from family life to drinking and brawling. According to the Scottish tradition that MacLennan and MacLeod deal with, it is clear that the transmission of culture from father to son is very important while the transmission to females is, in many cases, an afterthought, and certainly not essential. In other words, the collective memory is that of men, and the patriarchal structure of the Celtic tradition requires that the traditions and codes

of behavior represented by that collective memory be maintained by males, thereby excluding at least half of the population.

Over the last twenty to thirty years, various theoretical frameworks have been developed in an attempt to account for the problem of a male dominated culture and literature such as that found in Cape Breton. The strides made by feminist and cultural theorists have catapulted the concept of gender identity formation and its effects on both men and women into the consciousness of readers and authors alike. It seems that one cannot read anything these days without being made aware of how gender definitions and distinctions are at work within a given short story or novel. While the heightened consciousness of these issues cannot be entirely claimed by any one group or theoretical framework, it is certainly one of the subjects that postmodernist theorists have concentrated on in relation to literature. As a result, many contemporary authors have incorporated what can be described as postmodern techniques into their works. These techniques include focusing on traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity and then reversing or altering them to create new definitions, using traditional metaphors and symbols in ways that disrupt the balance of power within patriarchal frameworks, and altering the ways in which readers perceive the time-place continuum. Of course, these techniques are not unique to postmodernism but they are the ones used by many postmodernists in order to situate themselves at the center of the gender issue, and authors such as Ann-Marie MacDonald have done this with great accuracy and success.

It is clear that the plot of *Fall On Your Knees* revolves constantly around the issue of gender identity formation and patriarchal definitions of masculinity and femininity. Unlike MacLennan in *Each Man's Son* and MacLeod in his short stories, MacDonald portrays the heroic Scottish tradition as one that is not only damaging to the female characters but also to principles of anti-racism and anti-

classism. The Celtic legacy in Cape Breton is derived from patriarchal attitudes about masculinity, femininity, ethnicity, and power distribution and therefore open to criticism by contemporary theorists focusing on these issues. While the two male authors portray this tradition as something that connects Cape Bretoners with their past and their culture, MacDonald shows how this tradition fails all of the characters in her novel, including the men. Whether MacDonald's techniques for exploring these issues can be claimed as solely "postmodern" is not as important as recognizing their impact on the literary development of Cape Breton. *Fall On Your Knees* encourages the reader to question many of the ideals presented in previous works about Cape Breton and how they either support or maintain the patriarchal system of gender identity formation within that culture.

MacDonald's decision to focus on the female characters in *Fall On Your Knees* is immediately significant when discussing patriarchal definitions of masculinity and femininity. Instead of defining women according to male models, MacDonald presents the dominant culture in the figure of James and then shows how its intrusive and destructive nature affects characters such as Materia and Mrs. Luvovitz. She also presents a series of female characters, such as Kathleen and Rose, who do not fulfill their roles according to dominant ideologies. In doing so, MacDonald forces the reader to look beyond the stereotypical roles of wives and mothers. Also, the author clearly reveals that there is often more to gender stereotypes than is apparent on the surface. For the women in this novel, a rich culture develops out of the problems they encounter in dealing with their marginalized and stereotypical roles. This female culture forms its own legacy as it is passed from Materia to Frances, then to Lily and finally on to Anthony who, at the end of the novel, appears to represent the hopeful intersection of both female and male identity. The female characters

also use language, usually foreign languages, as a way of communicating their own culture from one woman to another. In addition to incorporating various female experiences such as domestic rituals, lesbianism and maternity into the novel, MacDonald also employs ethnicity as a point of intersection in a way that MacLennan and MacLeod tend to avoid. In fact, in reading *Each Man's Son* or MacLeod's short stories, one receives a very one-sided view of Cape Breton, one in which skin color is hardly an issue. In reality, Cape Breton is a site of ethnic and religious diversity which MacDonald intentionally brings out in her portrayal of the island. By revealing this "other" side of Cape Breton, MacDonald is again calling the reader's attention to issues of stereotyping and marginalization.

In *Fall On Your Knees*, MacDonald represents the ineffectiveness of traditional ideologies of gender construction in the lives of the Piper women through characters such as James. While characters such as Kathleen and Frances subvert traditional definitions of gender, James represents the patriarch of the Piper household and he personifies every aspect of the dominant ideology of power and containment. He, along with Mahmoud, is the primary transmitter of racism, sexism, domestic abuse, and denial, all fundamental examples of a system based on unequal power distribution and the subversion of the supposed "others" in society. James, like Ainslie in *Each Man's Son*, is a failed Scottish hero. On the other hand, Frances emerges from the story first as a female version of a Christ figure and finally as an anti-heroine simply trying to deal with a life destroyed by the effects of sexual abuse. The fact that there are no heroines at the end of *Fall On Your Knees* is significant because it indicates that the new legacy will be based on real history rather than on heroic mythologies and patriarchal ideologies.

By the end of *Fall On Your Knees*, the reader returns to where he or she began. It is clear that instead of following the linear pattern of MacLennan in *Each Man's Son* or the reflective pattern of MacLeod's stories, MacDonald has played with the time-place continuum so that the novel is indeed representative of a cycle, constantly reverting to its beginning when it reaches its end. This is a different way of telling a story which in reality is, as MacDonald has stated, the act of remembering past events, emotions, and possibilities. The novel's narrative perspective also shifts from character to character and tends to reveal the many sides of every story. The reader is made keenly aware of the fact that the issues dealt with in the novel cannot be simplified and that there are rarely "happy" endings. The female legacy has become the new transmitter of a collective memory and, as Lily demonstrates at the end of the novel, a new oral tradition is created that accounts for the female experiences of patriarchal gender definitions and marginalization. The final lines of the novel indicate that the Piper girls' stories will, as they are passed from Lily to Anthony, constitute an entirely feminine cultural legacy.

In addition to the fact that *Each Man's Son*, the stories of *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* and *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories*, and *Fall On Your Knees* all share a common location for their plots, each story deals with gender identity formation and the effects that patriarchal concepts of masculinity have upon a society. They each tell a different story of Cape Breton and of how its roots in Celtic tradition have shaped its people. Because storytelling occupies such an integral position within Celtic tradition and Cape Breton is still so closely connected with its Celtic past, the stories told in these works are important additions to the continuous history of Cape Breton. It would be untrue to claim that Hugh MacLennan and Alistair MacLeod are bad writers or that they are attempting to promote patriarchal agendas in the works examined for this

thesis. However, it is fair to claim that *Each Man's Son* , *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, and *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories* significantly reflect a patriarchal discourse in representing the stories of men. These stories are reflective of the dominant Scottish tradition in that region and tend to ignore the experiences of female gender identity formation and stereotyping. Therefore, as this thesis will argue, *Fall On Your Knees* is an important contribution to the literary tradition of Cape Breton because it consciously situates itself amongst the issues of patriarchal gender definitions and female marginalization in Cape Breton.

II. Three Traditional Texts and Gender Identity Formation

Throughout Cape Breton's literary history, readers have encountered writers descended from a tradition rich in Scottish and Irish folklore, gender archetypes and religious images and teachings. Hugh MacLennan, for a long time considered the island's most notable author, gives his audience a rather stereotypical version of his native island in his novel *Each Man's Son*, complete with hard-line Calvinism and the bleak darkness of the coal mines. However acclaimed MacLennan may be, his work often, but not always, ignores the immense Catholic tradition found on the island as well as the lives and voices of women living in the midst of this traditionally male-orientated, Celtic social structure. Occasionally, the reader is offered insight into the troubled lives of the females in *Each Man's Son*, but in general the female characters are lacking in depth. MacLennan's writing in this particular novel is, at best, clear and insightful and, at worst, self-obsessed and haunted in its exploration of the protagonist's strict Protestant childhood and Highland roots. According to Roger Hyman in his essay, "Too Many Voices, Too Many Times: Hugh MacLennan's Unfulfilled Ambitions," "MacLennan's predilection is to explain -- first, last, and always -- to emphasize the prosaic rather than the poetic, the rational rather than the emotional, the philosophical rather than the imaginative" (314). With *Each Man's Son*, MacLennan attempts to present his main character, Ainslie, as the traditional Scottish hero, but instead, as Hyman has observed, quickly gives

way to his essayist background. Ainslie therefore becomes preachy and problematical in his dealings with other characters and lacks any capacity for intimacy. MacLennan seems to have failed in his endeavor of recasting the traditional Scottish hero amid Cape Breton's coal mining community.

Ainslie's interactions with others and his seemingly irreconcilable allegiances to both the Scottish tradition and to classical education relate directly to the traditional concepts of masculinity and femininity found within patriarchal cultures. The Celtic tradition is steeped in the problematical nature of power struggles and imbalances that characterize patriarchal orders everywhere and eventually serve to marginalize women and their concerns. When one is discussing literature, the concepts of gender construction and gender identity have emerged as central issues for many contemporary feminist theorists. Since the key to MacLennan's stereotyping and marginalization of women lies in his perception of masculinity, a reader must consider how he arrives at a "cult of masculinity" to which characters such as Ainslie and Archie gravitate and from which characters such as Margaret and Mollie are excluded. Therefore, analysis of MacLennan's construction of gender and gender identity is integral to understanding the ways in which he treats his female characters in *Each Man's Son*.

From the first pages of *Each Man's Son*, it is clear that the author is developing not only a story but also a cultural outlook. Through an oftentimes overly didactic style, he reveals how the Celtic code of manhood, which ultimately intertwines with concepts of ethnicity and gender, works within the

social structure of Cape Breton. While Ainslie and Margaret, Mollie and Alan, and Archie are obviously the main characters of the novel, the miners are like a collective character who is continually present. The miners appear to represent the cult of masculinity at its most basic and physical level. Each day they toil together in the "black and monstrous" colliery (7), and each Saturday night they gather ritualistically at taverns to drink away their pay so that they are doomed to continue a life of perpetual poverty. In Ainslie's eyes, the miners' drinking and immanent brawling represents their stubbornness and foolishness, yet they are also integral to the Scottish tradition Ainslie so admires (42-43). Even as Ainslie chastises the miners for their behavior, the reader also recognizes MacLennan's sympathy for these men who appear to be the last in a long Celtic tradition of heroism and physical honor. In fact, a tone of respect can be detected in Ainslie's thoughts about the miners' lives and in his conclusion that "ultimately the mines would break them all" (42). Ainslie is repulsed by their mindless drinking and fighting yet seems fascinated with their camaraderie, from which he is excluded (42).

Included in the collective character of the miners is Archie MacNeil, who is pursuing a boxing career in the United States when the novel opens. At first, a reader might think that Archie has escaped the dangers and the fate of the miners, but MacLennan soon makes it clear that Archie is broken in his attempt to escape the mines. Ainslie's rejection of Archie's profession as a "brutal spectacle" and nothing more than men beating each other senseless (34) does little to convince a reader that the author is unsympathetic to the plight of Archie.

On the contrary, the tragic ending in which Archie is reduced to little more than a raging animal reinvokes the archetype of the wandering Highland warrior finally destroyed by uncontrollable forces. In other words, the male legacy of the warrior/ hero of Celtic tradition, based on brute strength and persistence, is upheld by MacLennan's decision to have Archie die in the final scenes of the novel. Nonetheless, this definition of masculinity becomes problematic for Ainslie because it conflicts with his personal masculine ideal based on education and "bettering" oneself (34).

The fact that Ainslie has essentially educated himself beyond the level of the average miner, and has therefore expanded his horizons beyond the cultural legacy the miners represent, raises specific problems for Ainslie and how he defines both gender and ethnicity. On one hand, Ainslie's denigration of his wife's English Loyalist background and her father's apparent subservience to her mother appears to reflect the belief that one must be Scottish in order to be a real man (39). However, Ainslie's dislike of the miners' way of life and his emphasis on Alan's education illuminates another definition of masculinity which is contradictory and unclear. In the end, Ainslie comes across as a complicated, self-deluded male-chauvinist instead of as the classical hero MacLennan had intended him to be.[1] Needless to say, the way in which MacLennan presents

[1] In the chapter "New Departures: *Each Man's Son*" in *Hugh MacLennan: A Writer's Life*, Elspeth Cameron discusses at great length the publication history of *Each Man's Son*. According to Cameron, after the disappointment of his preceding novel *The Precipice*, MacLennan: "decided to go right back to his own roots, to the life he had known as a child in Cape Breton" and what he had imagined as a life "as primitive as anything in Greek tragedy" (227). It is clear that MacLennan intended his main character to be modeled on the ancient Highland hero; however, the way in which Ainslie deals with gender and ethnic issues in the novel poses many problems for most readers and perhaps defeats his original intentions for his heroic doctor.

both masculinity and ethnicity in *Each Man's Son* reveals serious conflicts in the lives of male characters such as Ainslie. In Archie's case, the author's presentation of issues regarding masculinity and ethnicity foreshadows MacLennan's stereotyping and marginalization of female characters in *Each Man's Son*.

Because gender identity is so ambiguous throughout this particular novel, female gender construction is often oversimplified. In many cases, it is also reduced to common stereotypes and anecdotes. In general, women function in society only as mothers and when they fail in this capacity, they are either ignored or their stories are reduced to the level of humorous anecdotes. This occurs in the story of Big Annie McPhee and her accusation of rape heard before Magistrate McKeegan (42). According to this tale, Big Annie's accusation is immediately dismissed and is ridiculed by the men in the courtroom because it is assumed that the prisoner would be unable to "rape the likes of" a woman as large as Annie. By marginalizing women in this way, MacLennan calls further attention to the male ideal which demands that men fulfill various roles. In other words, male identity is constructed according to the various roles men are expected to fulfill in society, such as fathers, workers, husbands, scholars, etc. As Donna Smyth has observed in her essay "Con-texts of Desire in the Kingdom of the Father," "MacLennan seems to have agreed with Freud that only the male can be the culture maker" (144). This belief does in fact materialize throughout *Each Man's Son* in a way that obviously relegates females to a maternal function.

From the first chapter of the novel, the reader is constantly reminded that Mollie MacNeil has a child for whom she will probably be unable to provide a decent life while the well-to-do doctor and his wife remain childless. Early on, the narrator provides the evidence for Margaret's obsession with her inability to reproduce: "It was an hour of the day that always made her feel lonely, and the persistent wish for children filled her once again" (28). Her husband's colleague, Dr. MacKenzie, confirms Margaret's sense of emptiness by offering a common male perception: "It would be easier for Margaret if she had had children" (60). The idea that motherhood and maternal feelings could compensate for all that is deficient in a woman's life is a theme that is followed through the entire novel. In fact, it is what spawns Margaret's constant sense of guilt not only in terms of her personal failure to procreate but also in regard to her interpersonal relationships with her husband and Mollie. The narrator states her feelings quite bluntly as "the subterranean guilt of failure which every childless woman knows" (201). Since the women in this novel are most often identified by their role in the propagation of the community, it is impossible for Margaret to view herself as anything other than a failure both as a woman and a wife.

Another stereotype MacLennan presents in his novel is the image of the intellectually deficient female. As a result of popular assumptions about gender, women, even up to the time about which MacLennan is writing, were perceived as incapable of understanding intellectual concepts. Early in *Each Man's Son*, the author introduces Dr. Ainslie, the overworked and slightly neurotic surgeon,

and his childless wife, Margaret, as important members of their community, yet somehow separated from it by the unique privileges of education and class. Dr. Ainslie spends his free time attempting to learn Greek while his distraught wife looks on, helpless to ease the inner turmoil caused by Ainslie's obsession with intellectual and Calvinistic perfection. Ainslie is caught exactly between the Scottish cult of masculinity as represented by the miners and his father's ideal of the educated and moral man. This pursuit of scholarly advancement serves as an important signifier of the difference between the men in the novel, who understand things, and the women, who are always helpless to penetrate circles of knowledge. As the narrator explains: "She [Margaret] hated that volume as a woman hates her husband's mistress. She feared it because it stood for something in his nature she could never touch" (25). The narrator makes a very clear connection between Ainslie's obsession and Margaret's fear of that obsession. Ainslie's classical education and desire to preserve his feeling of intellectual superiority over both the miners and Margaret fundamentally alienates Margaret. In fact, she is doubly excluded from Ainslie's experience of the world because of her gender and because of her English Loyalist heritage. Margaret is ultimately marginalized to a stereotypical role as wife and domestic. Educational and intellectual endeavors are thereby reserved for pursuit by the Scottish male.

The narrator contrasts Margaret, the English female, and Ainslie, the Scottish male, even more by highlighting how different, or "other," Margaret's experience of the world is from her husband's: "To Margaret, words meant

exactly what they said. To her husband, words always meant either more or much less than they did to her" (36-37). Clearly, the author is presenting Margaret as practical and straightforward while Ainslie is a thinking individual . However, because the novel is entirely focused on the thoughts and actions of the male characters, the author's representation of Margaret in this statement can be perceived as an oversimplification of female experience. Furthermore, Margaret is reduced to being a two-dimensional character when the narrator explains: "Self-analysis was not easy for Margaret and it generally made her uncomfortable" (170). MacLennan seems to be perpetuating a patriarchal ideology of gender identity formation by presenting her as simple, practical, and lacking in any sense of self-awareness.

We are aware from the outset of the novel that although Dr. Ainslie suffers from a fairly acute case of Calvinistic guilt and "hypertension" (59), he is a highly intelligent man and a fine example of elite education. MacLennan's belief in the power of a classical education emerges in this presentation of a more or less self-made man. An important statement Ainslie makes toward the end of the novel reinforces this: "Individual men, following ideas of their own, have given the world everything we value" (198). The gender-specific reference is consistent with Ainslie's belief in the ideal self-made man. The professional men of the community are the ones who are shown to be capable of achieving a level of intellect of which the females are believed to be incapable. Margaret is intentionally marginalized because she cannot practice any kind of self-analysis beyond the outwardly obvious. As Ainslie himself admits, Margaret is not the

only woman who suffers from this innate lack of understanding. "Mother thought it was more important for us to eat than to learn," he explains to his colleague (188), implying that such an idea was typical of a woman who could only function maternally.

Aside from fortifying certain stereotypes about the female mind, *Each Man's Son* implies other common beliefs about female identity in society. With the perpetuation of these stereotypes, there appears a contradiction in MacLennan's writing. Dr. Ainslie clearly adheres to the patriarchal tradition which consistently defines women as the "weaker" sex (202). However, earlier in the novel he explains to his colleague, Dr. Weir, that "Women are far more courageous than we are ..." (84), and the narrator later admits that Ainslie tragically overlooks "the strange and mysterious strength of the weak" (202). The question must be asked: Are women weak or are they strong and "courageous"? The answer appears to lie in yet another female stereotype constructed as a result of the complexities of masculine identity formation.

The two main female characters in *Each Man's Son* represent an interesting yet conventional opposition in which motherhood acts as a constant pivot. Mollie MacNeil is a doting mother struggling to provide an alternative life for her son. Her husband has, for all intents and purposes, abandoned her. She is poverty-stricken and uneducated. In light of her hardships, she seems to be rewarded for her dedication and innocent acceptance of the world with a son. Archie, her husband, observes from a physical distance her emotional separation from him at the time of the birth of their son: "Mollie was far away.

She had always been far away. Far, far away ever since Alan was born" (113). Although Mollie is clearly disturbed by the options open to her and the choices she must make where her son is concerned, we never doubt her love for and devotion to Alan. There are other references to maternal satisfaction in the novel, specifically in the case of the Eldridge household. Despite Dr. Ainslie's derision, the Eldridge family, which "had always been quick with changing female moods" (77) is generally presented as a happy, functional group. The women appear content because they continue to fulfill expectations of motherhood: "until her father's death there had generally been a baby on the way, a baby just arrived, or an older girl falling in love" (77). Unfortunately, this traditional role leaves little room for variation; therefore, Margaret, who has been surgically sterilized, becomes alienated from her community not only because she is not Scottish but also because she is not a mother. Margaret becomes a symbol of the quintessential "other" because of her dual exclusion whereas Mollie is more recognized in part because she is Scottish, a redeeming quality according to Ainslie.

Female guilt is a theme that has surfaced throughout human history, especially in relation to the inability to fulfill maternal expectations. It is reinforced by religion and other social structures as well. In *Each Man's Son*, MacLennan presents it in a way which feminists would consider narrow-minded and chauvinistic. Characters such as Margaret in *Each Man's Son* tend to internalize a sense of female accountability. For example, the narrator often

comments on an unexplainable feeling of guilt Margaret constantly carries with her (26, 170). Dr. MacKenzie points to this in a conversation with Dr. Ainslie:

> Your hope of children disappeared forever in that operation. And yet you probably never told her how disappointed that fact made you. Dan, boy, can't you imagine some of the questions a defeated woman can ask herself in the nights? (62)

If Margaret is "defeated" in such a fundamental way, then it follows that the defeat might also pervade other aspects of her somewhat troubled existence. This is, in fact, true. The narrator informs us from the moment Margaret is introduced that she believes that all her marital problems are in some way her own fault: "She knew he was keeping his emotional distance from her. They had quarreled far too much lately, Margaret thought, and she knew now ... that much of the misunderstanding had been her own fault" (28). Although one could make the argument that Margaret is actually at fault for very little other than craving some satisfying companionship, let us grant that she is indeed at fault for not always communicating her thoughts and feelings to her husband. However, her husband similarly fails to communicate his feelings to her for a variety of reasons, including, among others, his obsession with constructing a male Celtic legacy and the ambiguousness of his place within the social structure of Cape Breton. On the other hand, Margaret is guilty of pushing the trusting Mollie into the arms of Camire for her own benefit rather than that of Mollie and Alan. By doing so, Margaret can be seen as a catalyst for Mollie's decision to leave the island. However, the novel's position on whether her

encouragement actually influences Mollie's decision and the novel's tragic ending is vague at best.

Whether or not women in the novel are actually guilty in some fundamental and essential way is irrelevant. Women have traditionally internalized this particular burden and attempted to compensate for it by fulfilling the expected maternal role. Of course, this is an ancient concept, easily traced to the story of creation in the Hebrew Testament. As the creator of original sin, Eve is encouraged to redeem herself by procreating. In a similar way, all women, as descendants of Eve, are destined to do penance for their sins, which, according to MacLennan's novel, consist of everything from quarreling with one's husband to being sterile. In other words, Margaret, who has a sense of deeply internalized female accountability, continually blames herself for all the problems between her and her husband. In accepting the blame for these problems, Margaret symbolically relieves her husband and the male ideology that he represents from accountability. Similarly, Ainslie's mother relieved her children of burdens in ways that Ainslie in his ignorance has misconstrued. When Ainslie incorrectly recalls that his mother valued food over education because she lacked his father's "will power," Dr. MacKenzie counters his friend's unfair assumption (189). He reveals that Ainslie's mother indeed yielded her own portion of food so that her sons could survive, thereby causing her own terminal anemia. As MacKenzie notes, she sacrificed herself for her sons, and he encourages Ainslie to recognize the power of the female will.

Thus, in this novel, MacLennan is invoking a tradition of masculine identity which inherently reduces femininity until it is identified only with stereotypical maternal qualities. Therefore, it is not surprising that his female characters are one-dimensional and marginal when compared with his modern hero, Ainslie.[2] The narrator provides a dramatic look into Ainslie's desperate and egocentric need to continue his lineage:

> He wished he had a son. To work as he did now was senseless. To work for a son's future would give purpose to the universe. He wanted a son who would grow into a learned man and a daughter who would be gentle and admiring of him. (85)

This desperation is what leads to Ainslie's denial of Margaret and Mollie's concerns when he becomes both physically and mentally obsessed with nurturing Alan MacNeil, the son of Archie MacNeil: "As yet, he thought only in terms of the boy's future and what he might be able to do for such a lad. For the moment Mollie was forgotten" (138). The irony of this statement lies in the fact that Mollie never really exists for Dr. Ainslie. If she had, he would have thought more deeply about his course of action with the child. In Chapter 21, the narrator provides profound insight into Dr. Ainslie's character, confirming the subtle misogyny at work within the novel: "Why was something within him saying that Mollie MacNeil was unimportant, that her feelings did not matter? Why did something within him say that she could be disregarded ...?" (184).

[2] Cameron, in recalling the publication history of *Each Man's Son*, explains that MacLennan did indeed include more scenes involving Mollie in his first version of the novel but was required by his editors to remove many of them. Although no copies of that original version still exist, it is questionable as to whether the inclusion of those scenes would have changed the problems a reader may encounter when analyzing MacLennan's presentation of femininity and gender construction (232-233).

The answer to these questions is simple; he can disregard her and other women because his culture has always, throughout history, given him permission to do so. In this atmosphere, the women do nothing to assert their presence, thus perpetuating their own marginalization. This is apparent in Mollie and Margaret's refusal to interfere with Dr. Ainslie's megolomaniacal obsession with Alan (202).

The male desire to establish a dynasty which surfaces as an important issue in *Each Man's Son* explodes in Alistair MacLeod's work as the main issue in his short stories. In both volumes of short stories, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* and *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories*, the main characters are Scottish males and generally the themes relate to their concerns and activities. In fact, very few significant female characters emerge from the stories and those that do tend to be, like MacLennan's females, stereotypical and marginalized. The women conveniently serve as literary devices whereby men's thoughts, feelings and actions are explained or revealed. However, in some stories such as "The Road to Rankin's Point," the reader glimpses the strength of will that lies behind the survival, as well as the bitterness, of many women living in a changing Cape Breton environment. Yet, in each story, we encounter a central male figure and can identify themes that illuminate a male world in constant dialog, through plot, character and symbolism, with its past, present and future.

While MacLennan tends to stereotype women in *Each Man's Son*, MacLeod presents similarly stereotypical but oftentimes sympathetic image of women as domestics and mothers. An important example of this occurs in "In

the Fall," in which the narrator's mother constantly repeats her reason for selling her husband's horse: "We'll just have to sell him ... it will be a long winter and I will be alone here with only these children to help me. Besides he eats too much and we will not have enough feed for the cattle as it is" (7). The mother appears insensitive and cruel, yet her reasoning is quite logical and asserts the survival of her children over her husband's sadness. In this way, she exhibits maternal tendencies similar to those of Ainslie's mother in *Each Man's Son*. Furthermore, her determination coincides with that of the grandmother in "The Road to Rankin's Point": "No one has ever said that life is to be easy. Only that it is to be lived" (150). One of the most ironic aspects of MacLeod's stories is that despite their focus on men, they tend to reveal women as true survivors. The women persist often by hardening themselves to the harsh lives they inevitably face in Cape Breton.

The character of the hardened woman comes through most obviously in the descriptions of female physical appearances. The first female introduced in *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* is the practical mother, described rather critically by the narrator: "Her hair which is very long and very black is pulled back severely and coiled in a bun at the base of her neck ..." (8). Later, the narrator's description of his son's grandmother in the title story yields a similar perception: "The woman at the stove is tall and fine featured. Her gray hair is combed briskly back from her forehead and neatly coiled with a large pin at the base of her neck" (60). This description of the stoic, domestic female is common in

MacLeod's stories and demonstrates how the male characters retain a limited perception of femininity.

The limitations imposed on women cause many of MacLeod's female characters to become not only physically exhausted but also embittered and resentful. In these stories, MacLeod develops a physical representation of the effects such a hard life has on women, who are denied a voice and are encouraged to endure pain silently in the kitchen or the bedroom while men seek various physical outlets. However, not all of MacLeod's females are one-dimensional and emotionally inept. For example, the seemingly cruel way in which the mother in "In the Fall" must remain practical and maternal is subtly contrasted with the emotion the narrator of the story observes between his parents as they walk back through the storm arm in arm:

> I stop and turn my face from the wind and look back the way I have come. My parents are there, blown together behind me. They are not moving, either, only trying to hold their place. They have turned sideways to the wind and are facing and leaning into each other with their shoulders touching, like the end-timbers of a gabled roof. My father puts his arms around my mother's waist and she does not remove them as I have always seen her do. Instead she reaches up and removes the combs of coral from the heaviness of her hair. I have never seen her hair in all its length ... It surrounds and engulfs my father's head and he buries his face within its heavy darkness, and draws my mother closer to him. I think they will stand there for a long, long time, leaning into each other and into the wind-whipped snow and with the ice freezing their cheeks. (23)

This simple scene is clearly packed with emotion and sympathy for both the mother and the father in this story. But it is important to note that these glimpses

occur sparsely throughout MacLeod's work and the general presentation of his female characters is usually less revealing.

MacLeod's interest in male lives may be a direct result of another stereotype at work in his two volumes of short stories. "The Return" is one narrative which clearly contrasts the sterility of urban society with the more organic experience of living in a rural community which survives off land and sea. The contrast is a fair, although rather romanticized, one to make except that the primary vehicle for it is the narrator's mother. She strongly disapproves of her husband's homeland and its distinctively "earthy" culture: "'Ten years,' she snaps at my father, 'ten years I've raised this child in the city of Montreal and he has never seen an adult drink liquor out of the bottle, nor heard that kind of language'" (74). Just as the issues of gender and ethnicity are intertwined in *Each Man's Son*, so similar combinations occur with respect to gender and class in "The Return."

According to Harold Barratt, the narrator's mother is an "insensitive" and "somewhat shallow" woman who is unable to recognize the "tragic dignity" of her father-in-law's life (179). However, because the mother in this story is from an entirely different cultural background, it is clear that she does not appreciate the "social cohesion and ethnic homogeneity" (Frank 204) that results from the clannish nature of Scottish culture in Cape Breton. Of course, this is the very culture from which MacLeod is descended from and which he espouses in most of his short stories. It is a cultural legacy from the Highlands of Scotland which MacLeod views as surviving in the isolation of Cape Breton as the "echoes of an

earlier time" and "that which ... is familiar and well known" ("Inverness County" 37). The tone of "The Return" is such that the reader is expected to recognize that the narrator's mother misunderstands her in-laws' lives not only because she represents urban polish and a cultural identity removed from the physical labor and emotional attachment to place as expressed by the Cape Breton Scots, but also because she is eternally the worrying mother.

More frequently in MacLeod's work, female identity is defined in terms of a woman's connection with domesticity. Through examples in his two volumes of short stories, the author clearly defines a woman's place in Cape Breton society. By this I mean that women appear more or less on the margins of social life, in a domestic world full of children, cooking and mending that never penetrates the other parts of the intricate social experience. In "The Road to Rankin's Point," the narrator defines his grandmother's life in terms of her role as a mother:

> The awareness and memory of dirty diapers and bed wettings and first attempts at speech and movement; of the birth and death of Santa Claus and of the myriad childish hopes and fears of the lost time; of the lonely screaming nightmares of childhood terror; of nocturnal emissions and of real and imagined secret sins. (143)

It is obvious that the maternal role is important for all societies, but in MacLeod's stories the women are rarely portrayed as doing anything else. According to these stories, women do fulfill the expectations created for them by a patriarchal culture because they rarely, if ever, question those expectations.

One interesting and provocative connection made between women and domesticity occurs in the first story of *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other*

Stories. "The Closing Down of Summer" is narrated by an aging miner who feels alienated from a world of modernization. In particular, he explains how his wife's attempt to embrace domesticity has created a rift between them and has contributed to his alienation. Her way of dealing with mandatory domesticity is to retreat into a world of "porcelain and enamel and an ordered cleanliness" that reminds the miner of how removed from normal experience his life-threatening occupation seems to be. However, his wife's obsession with "avocado appliances and household cleanliness" hints at the unique form of alienation experienced by females who are relegated to domestic and maternal functions. Her gender has been constructed according to the demand that women marry and produce children. Then as the children grow up and leave, she must find other outlets for her energy, always remembering that her place is in the confinement of her household. Her husband observes that in order to survive her alienation she eventually depends on the "vicarious experiences provided by the interminable soap operas that fill her television afternoons" (18). Both the miner and his wife are alienated from each other by their work. However, while the miner seems to take pride in his work because it is part of the male legacy he has inherited, the wife receives only material compensation for the loss of her husband and children. By the end of the story, the wife can identify only with images and personalities she finds on television.

In addition to developing the preceding stereotypes, MacLeod also presents a rather ambivalent picture of maternity in his short stories, perhaps because as a male writer he is removed from such experiences. The mother in

"In the Fall" must constantly remind her husband of the difference between their gender specific roles:

> I am alone here with six children and I have more than enough to do; the money for his feed could be spent on your children; don't your children mean more to you than a horse; it is unfair to go and leave us here with him to care for. (14)

In the other stories found in both *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* and *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and other Stories*, as well, the female identity is defined according to male expectations and the "mother" archetype. The women are always wives or mothers before anything else. Sometimes they are grandmothers, but nonetheless, their identification with maternity remains solid and intact. They are clearly defined in terms of their reproductive role and domestic capacity rather than by standards of outside achievement as are the men.

While all the women in MacLeod's stories participate in society in a stereotyped manner, carrying out domestic activities with little or no vocal representation, the author does imply the existence of a unique form of female suffering. The image of the lone female, bearing the burden of familial stability and woe, appears only briefly in stories such as "The Golden Gift of Grey," "The Boat," and "In the Fall," but with a poignancy that resounds throughout the stories in both volumes. The narrator in "The Golden Gift of Grey" recalls how his mother "bore her burdens silently," yet the nature of those burdens is never fully revealed (92). Aside from the grandmother's story, as told in "The Road to Rankin's Point," this small passage from "The Golden Gift of Grey" is one of the few reminders that amidst the male stories and the heartache accompanying

them, females in Cape Breton were also experiencing the effects of socio-economic hardships with an intensity all their own. The mother in "The Boat," on the other hand, is portrayed as fiercely outspoken and resistant to the changes that are threatening the world she wants her daughters to maintain:

> Each [daughter] would go into the room one morning when he was out. She would go with the ideal hope of imposing order or with the more practical objective of emptying the ashtray, and later she would be found spellbound by the volume in her hand. My mother's reaction was always abrupt, bordering on the angry ... Thereafter my mother would launch a campaign against what she had discovered but could not understand ... Sometimes she would say softly to her sisters, "I don't know what's the matter with my girls. It seems none of them are interested in any of the right things." (112-113)

In this particular story, it is the female who is attempting to preserve what is "right," the legacy of the male fishermen, against imminent cultural changes brought on by economic difficulties and twentieth century progress (113). Just as MacLennan makes a clear distinction between Scottish women and English-descended women in *Each Man's Son*, so MacLeod also distinguishes between these two ethnicities by portraying the fisherman-descended mother as pragmatically opposed to her husband's very Scottish connection to storytelling and the Highland agricultural tradition.

This Highland male tradition is also at the center of the narrator's recollections in "In the Fall," the first story of *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*. While the father in this story struggles to overcome his grief at selling his horse for feed and his wife continues to deliver a series of practical reasons for discarding the animal, the reader is subtly introduced to a long-standing Celtic tradition

which underlies all of MacLeod's work: the passing of stories from one generation to the next. The narrator of "In the Fall" explains: "He [his father] has told us the story many times even though it bores my mother. When he tells it David sits on his lap ..." (11). One can find this element of oral narrative in each of MacLeod's stories and it reflects the importance of storytelling in the Gaelic culture of Cape Breton (Barratt 183). MacLeod's characterization is so clear and precise that story after story reads as if it is currently being passed from one generation to the next. However, this very aspect of MacLeod's work is what emphasizes its significant absence of female voices. The stories are told like the heroic Highland tales of old, from father to son, and rarely include female counterparts or experience.

In addition to the legacy of male storytelling, MacLeod's fiction illustrates the many other ways in which males connect with their past, present and future. For example, the men in both volumes of short stories are consistently connected with their physical bodies and work. In her article entitled "Existential Maritimer: Alistair MacLeod's *Lost Salt Gift of Blood*," Frances Berces observes, "Commenting on the emotional effects of region -- the 'landscape of the heart' -- he has likewise mentioned the profound effects physical life can have on emotional life" (114). Just as MacLennan's miners in *Each Man's Son* are consistently connected through their physical selves and labor, fishing, brawling, farming, so MacLeod's male characters are also capable of connecting on a physical level, highlighting their inability to express themselves in meaningful ways. The men in these stories often relate to one another through purely

physical activities, demonstrated when discussing sexual intercourse or sexuality in general. Because of its universality, male sexuality becomes a fundamental form of expression for the men in the stories.

In the title story of MacLeod's first volume, the narrator's sexuality is what links him to the experience of the older male character. He begins to recall how his sexual indiscretion with the man's daughter years earlier not only produced an illegitimate child but also invaded the man's property, a rape of his life which consequently connects the two men for life. In another story, "The Return," the narrator is relating the events of a trip he takes with his parents to visit his father's homeland of Cape Breton. Against his mother's wishes, he is allowed to wander the countryside with his numerous cousins and experience life on a farm for the first time. In addition to showering with his grandfather and the other miners, the boy participates in another male bonding experience in which he is permitted to watch the mating of a cow and a bull. The owner of the animals is initially scolded by his wife for allowing the children to participate in the scene. However, the narrator observes:

> The chastised old man nods and looks down upon his shoes but then looks up at us very gravely from beneath his bushy eyebrows, looks at us in a very special way and I know that it is only because we are all boys that he does this and that the look as it excludes the woman simultaneously includes us in something that I know and feel but cannot understand. (82)

In other words, the man is including the boys in the legacy of male sexuality that will often serve as their only form of expression, however intrusive it proves to be. Of course, this initiation into the world of male sexuality points to a larger,

more general pattern of initiation rituals found within patriarchal cultures and within the constructions of male gender identity in MacLeod's writing. This silent understanding is one of the ways in which the Celtic male legacy is transmitted from generation to generation.

The explanation as to why the men of MacLeod's stories are consistently compelled to propagate this male legacy may lie in the ancient Celtic concern for one's lineage and the preservation of the past. Since many of Cape Breton's settlers are descended from the warring clans of Scotland, their traditions and customs have survived for hundreds of years in the eastern Canadian island's isolation. One of the most important of Celtic pastimes in Cape Breton is the tying of the past to both the present and the future. Most of the stories in MacLeod's two volumes begin in the present and then revert to past generations; hence the past insists "on intruding upon the present" (Hodgins 12). These flashbacks are often triggered by a present event in the narrator's life. Although all of MacLeod's fiction focuses on the characters' connection with their past and how the Scottish tradition will be continued, some stories express the theme more poignantly than others.

"The Return" in particular focuses on three generations of males from a Cape Breton family. Early in the story the "grandmother" clarifies how much the male lineage means to Cape Bretoners when she tells her son that "a man always feels a certain way about his oldest son" (77). She continues to reveal how distraught the family has become concerning their traditional values and

whether, under the circumstances, their way of life will continue according to past generations:

> I have lost three children at birth but I've raised eight sons. I have one a lawyer and one a doctor who committed suicide, one who died in coal beneath the sea and one who is a drunkard and four who still work the coal like their father and those four are all that I have that stand by me. It is these four that carry their father now that he needs it, and it is these four that carry the drunkard, that dug two days for Andrew's body and that have given me thirty grandchildren in my old age. (79)

The old man's speech embodies all that "The Return" and all of MacLeod's fiction is about in one way or another. At the beginning of their stories, the characters all appear to be on the verge of making decisions. Will their blood lines continue as they have for hundreds of years or be destroyed in return for what is often deemed the "better" life. Just as the narrator of "The Vastness of the Dark" learns that a result of his pursuing a supposedly "better" life away from Cape Breton will be the constant memory of his past, so all the male characters in MacLeod's stories seem poised on the verge of cultural extinction.

More often than not, the narrator of these stories either foresees the disappearance of his legacy or increasing alienation for those who maintain it. In other words, many, if not all, the stories investigate anxieties about a rapidly disappearing way of life. For example, the head miner, who is the narrator of "The Closing Down of Summer," predicts how his work in the world's mines will allow his descendants to pursue cleaner, safer lives outside of Cape Breton, thus ending a tradition of hard, physical labor: "For all of us know we will not last much longer and that it is unlikely we will be replaced in the shaft's bottom by

members of our own flesh and bone. For such replacement, like our Gaelic, seems to be of the past and now largely over" (22). Here, the dying Gaelic language symbolizes how lives change and how an ancient culture disappears under the pressures of modernization. The problem with MacLeod's presentation is that he romanticizes the lives of the Cape Bretoners so that even their stoicism and perseverance seem noble against the cruel backdrop of a desensitized and alienated modern society. According to Jon Kertzer's review of *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, "The weakness of the book is a tendency to excess" (51). Not only is MacLeod excessive in his romanticization of poverty on an isolated island, such as in "The Vastness of the Dark" when the narrator realizes after only a few hours how much cleaner his life on the island was, but also in his romanticization of female lineage and experience. MacLeod constructs his male identities according to traditional definitions of masculinity in which men are the makers and transmitters of culture (Smyth 144). However, MacLeod seems unsure of how traditional Scottish heritage will survive in a quickly changing world in which the heroism and perseverance of ancient times does not outweigh economic and technological progress. In other words, a Highland farmer can no longer sustain his way of life in light of modern mass production. Therefore, the emphasis on the definition of masculinity in Cape Breton tends to allow little room in the stories for concentration on how these same issues affect female gender identification. What matters in these stories are the male experiences of a particular culture and whether those experiences will lead to

the continuation of male traditions. The stories do not focus on who the females were who birthed the male characters.

MacLeod's focus on a male legacy consisting of storytelling, male bonding, self-sacrifice and concern for one's lineage emanates from a general preoccupation with preserving the Celtic past and its traditions. "MacLeod's Cape Bretoners belong to some Celtic heroic age in which men are proud, willful, and unhobbled by hubris," explains Fraser Sutherland in his article "Modern Myths: *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories*" (35). In each of the stories from the author's two volumes, the reader is bombarded with references to past generations and their traditions, although many times no reason for keeping the tradition alive is offered except for the feeling of continuity it brings to a quickly fading culture. The concept of continuity becomes important for the protagonists simply because their culture is on the threshold of disappearance. One example of this occurs in "The Boat," a story told by an adult narrator. His father drowned during an autumn storm while fishing the same grounds "his father fished before him and there were others before and before and before" (*The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* 124). Whether his father jumps or falls overboard is never clear, but his son recalls: "And you know also, the final irony, that your father like your uncles and all the men that form your past cannot swim a stroke" (124). The father, who makes his living from the sea ironically never learns to swim because he wishes to pursue a life of education rather than that of the seaman his wife wants him to be. The economic pressures endured by the lower classes in Cape Breton, usually

consisting of farmers, fishermen, and miners, are at work within the family structure of this story's narrator. The complex interaction of gender, economic, and class factors serve to illustrate the discrepancies in the father and mother's relationship to their past and tradition. MacLeod's haunting repetition of "before" and references to past generations drive the theme behind such stories so that the reader is left with a sense of the cycles of men and nature.

The narrator of "The Closing Down of Summer" also exemplifies the preoccupation that Cape Breton men have with tradition. As he and his comrades prepare to journey to the mine shafts of Africa via a Toronto-based company, he explains how they will save the small bits of spruce that stick to their cars, "much as our Highland ancestors, for centuries, fashioned crude badges of heather or of whortleberries to accompany them to the battlefields of the world" (11). These tokens are meant to serve as reminders of their homeland while they toil in the mines in Africa. In this story, tradition seems to exist and is valued, for the sake of preserving a dying culture surrounded by an ever-changing, industrialized world: "We have perhaps gone back to the Gaelic songs because they are so constant and unchanging and speak to us as the privately familiar" (19). While recent revivals in interest in Gaelic culture have begun to ensure that culture's survival, it is apparent that MacLeod was concerned with the effects of modernization on Cape Breton at the time of his writing this story. This reason addresses what Jon Kertzer calls "a wider Canadian drama: the modernization and erosion of traditional, rural communities" (51).

Alistair MacLeod picks up on these themes in an interview he gave during a writer-exchange program in Edinburgh: "When people from Scotland went over there [Cape Breton], they went to a large extent in family groups ... and carried with them the whole body of whatever it is that people carry with them -- folklore, emotional weight" (Nicholson 92). Examples of the types of "emotional weight" the Scots brought with them to Cape Breton would include their patriarchal yet democratic clan system, and their intense emotional connection with the land and their chaotic past. Once in Cape Breton, they added to their experience in the "dangerous, difficult, dirty work" of occupations such as mining, fishing, and farming (MacKinnon 3). Because the early settlers lived in relative isolation in Cape Breton for almost two centuries, the concept of a Scottish legacy -- that is, stories, work and cultural attitudes passed from father to son -- remained intact. However, inherited patriarchal concepts of masculinity and femininity also remained constant. Ultimately, the collective memory, as preserved by the Scottish tradition of storytelling, reflected the male Cape Bretoners' "clannish intimacy" and "restless natures" (MacKinnon 3) but it marginalized or ignored the more private experiences of the females on the island.

In both *Each Man's Son* and Alistair MacLeod's short stories, women in traditional rural communities are marginalized and appear voiceless as a direct result of a legacy of masculinity in the Gaelic culture that both writers are invoking and illustrating. Because of the problematic nature of gender definitions within the Celtic tradition, women in these works are often one-dimensional characters and are constantly defined according to their maternal

role in society alone. The male tradition that emphasizes male physical strength and the importance of male ideals in forming cultural standards is what forces these women into the background of the male stories. In addition, in a phallocentric culture such as that found in Cape Breton, the importance of masculine cultural transmission seems to outweigh that of female cultural transmission, thereby relegating female experience and the problematic concepts of maternity and ethnicity to the margins of social concern. In other words, the public world of the Scottish male members of society, which revolves around hard physical activities such as mining or drinking and a romantic attachment to one's past and homeland, is what has occupied the forefront of writing about Cape Breton. While it is obvious that both male and female members of society experience the effects of the wider cultural implications of poverty, physical displacement, hard labor, and patriarchal ideals of masculinity and femininity, readers rarely receive an authentic version of this experience with regard to women. For MacLennan and MacLeod, gender identification is intrinsically tied to the concepts of maternity, ethnicity and class which becomes problematic simply because these authors almost always present these issues from the male perspective.

III. *Fall On Your Knees*, Stereotypes and Ethnic Culture

Hugh MacLennan and Alistair MacLeod wrote about what they knew -- that is, a male experience and a male world. However, in the literary climate of the postmodern era, readers and critics alike must certainly recognize the void left in the Cape Breton story by these writers who, perhaps without intention, marginalized and stereotyped female characters and experience in their accounts of the island's culture. The concepts of masculinity these two authors present in their work are recognizably problematic in that they define gender identity according to patriarchal codes of power disbursement and generally alienate both men and women on a fundamental level. In short, the Celtic cult of masculinity as revealed by MacLennan and MacLeod is both limiting and unrealistic in relation to female characters and experiences. The tradition of focusing on men as the creators and transmitters of culture essentially marginalizes women to their maternal function in society and places impossible expectations on male characters. This is most apparent in the tone of resignation found in MacLeod's "The Closing Down of Summer," which seems to predict the immanent defeat of the Scottish tradition in Cape Breton.

The theme of gender identity formation and female marginalization is embraced by a contemporary author like Ann-Marie MacDonald, who has attempted to rewrite the Cape Breton story according to and taking account of female lives and representations. In her recent novel *Fall On Your Knees*,

MacDonald reveals a world of terror, heartache, and alienation that is an interesting contrast to the male-dominated worlds of *Each Man's Son* and MacLeod's short stories. *Fall On Your Knees* does in fact deal with many of the same issues as the earlier stories, such as gender, ethnicity, class struggles and religion, but from a very different perspective. Although MacDonald herself is not directly from the island, her fictional account of the Piper family, situated in New Waterford at the turn of the century, forces the reader to reevaluate what he or she has read about Cape Breton in the past.[3] While much of the plot may not be specific to Cape Breton, the drama that unfolds around the Piper girls and the growing coastal town is certainly punctuated by the island's distinctive culture, history, landscape, and religions. Despite the fact that the central pivot for the story happens to be the patriarch of the family, James Piper, it is clear that he is not the focus of the story but is merely a figure around whom the drama occurs.

What brings *Fall On Your Knees* to life are its diverse female characters, ranging from the child-bride Materia to the alienated Kathleen and her troubled sisters. Adrienne Rich, in an article entitled "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," defines the kind of re-vision MacDonald is conducting as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (18). In addition, she claims that re-visionist writing is "more than a chapter in cultural history: It is an act of survival" (18). With each of her

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[3] According to the interview in *Chatelaine*, MacDonald grew up more or less in Ontario but her parents are both transplanted Cape Bretoners. MacDonald did, in fact, spend most of her childhood summers on the island (80).

female characters, MacDonald revises the role and image of the traditional female and, therefore, gives insight into the variations on female characters not represented in works by authors like MacLennan and MacLeod.

Fall On Your Knees draws on many traditional images and literary patterns but it is clearly a postmodern work. MacDonald consciously situates the story within a framework of distinctive metaphor reversals and a cultural awareness that is not unique to postmodernism but which is certainly the material with which postmodernist writers and theorists are most concerned. According to Linda Hutcheon in her book *The Canadian Postmodern*:

> In general, both feminism and postmodernism 'situate' themselves and the literature they study in historical, social, and cultural (as well as literary) contexts, challenging conventions that are presumed to be literary 'universals,' but can in fact be shown to embody the values of a particular group of people ... (108)

MacDonald does in fact "challenge" many of the themes, symbols, and conventions employed by earlier writers such as MacLennan and MacLeod. She is offering a "counter-ideology" that is subversive to the dominant literary culture of Cape Breton because it fails to provide heroes or heroines or romanticize a past that seems to increase in happiness relative to the years the author spends away from the subject (Deer 9). If the men of a day gone by are the heroes of MacLennan and MacLeod's work, then MacDonald presents another picture of a past which is continuing and is colliding with the present.

The women of *Fall On Your Knees* are not longing for a beautiful past because they are fairly convinced that, for them, as females living within a

patriarchal order, the past has always meant oppression and pain. At one point in the novel, Mercedes longs to remember a more pleasant past but recalls rather quickly that it does not exist for her or her family (430-431). Instead of pretending that their history consists of old Scottish heroes surviving the hardships of the Cape Breton landscape and valiantly providing for their families according to age-old traditions, the Piper women are forced to establish their own history according to a different ideology. The romantic, epic tradition does not work for them because it does not fit their experience and understanding of the world. Therefore, *Fall On Your Knees* becomes for the reader the retelling of the Piper epic according to the codes and traditions that the women of the family establish and shape. These women create their own story in various ways, such as breaking gender norms and stereotypes and focusing on their own unique languages and culture separate from the dominant culture. MacDonald portrays this using many of the techniques associated with postmodernism such as concentrating on the political and social implications of language, on metaphors, and on the tradition of storytelling that is so integral to an understanding of the culture of Cape Breton.

In order to reverse the gender stereotypes presented in other novels about Cape Breton, MacDonald must first define what those stereotypes are and what they mean for the characters in the novel. Masculinity dominates the writings of MacLennan and MacLeod and is likewise a constant force within *Fall On Your Knees*. However, MacDonald portrays traditional rituals of male bonding and male power in a negative way through the character of James, the

primary transmitter of the patriarchal belief system. James attempts to fulfill a masculine ideal in a way similar to that of Ainslie in *Each Man's Son*, and, in the process, must sublimate the females in his life in order to retain a sense of superiority. One of the most obvious ways he asserts his power is by reducing the female characters to mere stereotypes. For example, James thinks his young wife, Materia, is not living up to his expectations of her as a wife and mother. After months of taking on the household chores and cooking, the tasks traditionally accomplished by the female of the house, James is fed up with what he interprets as Materia's laziness or "simple-mindedness." One day while she is playing the piano, he decides to force Materia to fulfill her role as a housewife, so he locks the piano and yells: "I'm not cooking anymore and I'm not cleaning. You do your job, missus, 'cause Lord knows I'm doing mine" (25). In this small passage, the reader receives a clear definition of both traditional gender distinctions and common expectations for females. In a patriarchal society, women are expected to adopt the role of cook, maid, seamstress, and nurse upon entering marriage. However, it is obvious that in Materia's case, these norms do not necessarily apply because she is still just a child. While the reader does not expect her to have been adequately schooled in the "domestic arts" at the young age of fourteen, Materia clearly does not live up to James's version of the ideal wife and mother.

The expectations James carries with him into this marriage are unrealistic and representative of a dominant ideal. According to this definition of feminine identity, it is expected that Materia will not only fulfill her natural role as a

mother, but also that she will enjoy her designated role. The idea that motherhood will not unfold for Materia in the traditionally portrayed way is foreshadowed early in the novel when the narrator explains:

> He [James] built her a hope chest out of cedar. He waited for her to start sewing and knitting things -- his mother had milled her own wool, spun, woven and sown, a different song for every task, till wee James had come to see the tweeds and tartans as musical notation. But the hope chest remained empty. Rather than make Materia feel badly about it, James put it in the otherwise empty attic. (20)

In building Materia this chest in the hope that she will follow in the footsteps of his dead mother, James is already setting his child-bride up for failure. He symbolizes that male romantic tradition that paints a picture of Victorian civility, order, and contentment in the domestic sphere and cannot accept anything less than what he fantasizes his mother was like. Once again, the reader must recall that James' young bride is psychologically, socially, physically, and emotionally immature. The issue for Materia, then, is not whether she has a choice to become a mother or not, for she clearly does not, but whether she possesses the skills with which to fulfill James's expectations of what mothers do. In other words, Materia is doubly hindered by gender and age. But for James, who cannot see past his own fears in a changing world, she is simply not a good wife or mother because she does not fulfill her duties, does not seem to enjoy or be grateful for her pregnancy, and certainly does not show any signs of changing to meet his standards.

The reader of *Fall On Your Knees* should take into account from the very beginning of the book how Materia's relationship with James and with her own

maternal role will affect her daughters. The ambivalence that results from years of trying to come to terms with her situation creates in Materia a kind of absence that both James and Kathleen despise, although for different reasons. While one may easily see how Materia's seeming emptiness does not fit into James' fantasy of the perfect wife with "soft hands" (9), how it influences her daughters' lives, especially Kathleen's, is slightly more complicated. The "blank face on her mother" is what makes Kathleen think of her as a "baby factory" and causes Kathleen to assert that her own "life will not be like that" (83). In a ground-breaking novel about motherhood in America called *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich claims that "Many daughters have lived in rage at their mothers for having accepted too readily and passively, 'whatever comes.' A mother's victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches for clues as to what it means to be a woman" (243). It is this exact sentiment, along with James' constant encouragement, that drives Kathleen to pursue a career when most other girls were training to become wives and mothers. She is desperate to escape marriage and domesticity. Kathleen even goes so far as to tell Mercedes that "marriage is a trap" (100-101). Nonetheless, this does not prevent Mercedes from wondering why Kathleen would not want to "get married and have babies like Mumma" (100-101), which is, ironically, something Mercedes fails to accomplish. Mercedes' internalization of the ideology that requires women to function only in a domestic atmosphere serves to reinforce

how inadequate the patriarchal ideologies of gender roles in marriage and motherhood are for the women in this novel.

Another influential stereotype depicted in this novel reflects the ancient myth of female impurity and guilt found in the Genesis story of the Bible. Throughout history, women in life and female characters portrayed in various forms of art, including literature, have borne the initial burden of Eve's transgression, thus reinforcing the archetype of the innately guilty female. If one even skims the first parts of the creation story, he or she cannot ignore how easily the blame for humanity's problems is set on one woman: "The man said, 'The woman whom you gave me to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.' Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?" (Gen. 3:12-13). In *Fall On Your Knees*, MacDonald emphasizes this stereotype in order to contrast it with the sin committed by James with his daughters. The way in which this archetype permeates society becomes clear during Kathleen's traumatic labor when the narrator informs the reader that the male baby was "all set to arrive head first like a good mammal" (136). Thus, the responsibility for Kathleen's death is shared by Materia as well as by the female child who caused the breach birth: "Technically, therefore, the female twin is responsible for the death of the mother ..." (136).

Because the female characters appear guilty of little else than extreme innocence and their gender, the reader is forced to question the validity of this female archetype against the backdrop of the sin of incest, which seems much more serious a crime than anything in which any of the Piper girls participate.

Technically, Kathleen's death is caused by nature and not by any human action, despite James's desperate attempts to lay the blame on his wife. On the other hand, James's actions, the incest he commits with both Kathleen and Frances, are, in the eyes of most cultures, unnatural acts. While James is guilty of containing any power his daughters may have attained through his incestuous acts, Frances subverts his power by inadvertently destroying her father's one chance at continuing a patriarchal legacy. In drowning Kathleen's male child, James's one male heir, Frances unknowingly asserts the plot's concentration on a female story. MacDonald is perhaps setting this comparison up intentionally, thereby comparing the girls' supposedly innate guilt with that of their truly guilty father. The women in this novel are relatively innocent and constantly attempt to compensate for a feeling of guilt that exists as part of their female identity according to patriarchal definitions of gender. Most readers will recognize immediately that James is, indeed, the one guilty of the greatest sin, even if he himself is a victim of the patriarchal order.

Even as one acknowledges James' accountability in the narrative, determining who is right and who is wrong is not so easy a task, and may, in fact, be a futile exercise. The importance of the issue of innate female guilt remains throughout the entire novel, driving many of the female characters to chastise themselves for events they do not control. The effects of this patriarchal archetype can first be identified in Materia's belief that it is something "within herself" which is keeping her from loving her newborn (39). As the years pass and it becomes clear that James harbors the potential to molest his own

daughter, Materia increasingly takes responsibility for her husband's actions and absolves him from guilt by invoking the female archetype of Eve. According to the narrator, "Materia knows now who sent Kathleen, and why. It's her own fault God is forced to work in this way. Through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault" (62). The change in point of view in these lines is significant because it underlines how Materia's words are those of a real Catholic prayer. The world in which the Pipers live is inundated not only by general patriarchal images and symbols relating to gender roles, but is also bombarded with the dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church, another patriarchal institution which has traditionally ensured female subservience by holding women accountable for the creation of "original sin."

As this story progresses, the rituals in which the women force themselves to partake in an attempt to atone for some invisible mark they bear begin more and more to resemble the lives and trials of saints. In fact, in a recent interview for *Chatelaine*, MacDonald reveals how she first pictured the three Piper children: "I saw three girls, like saints" (85). This image comes through in the novel with a character such as Mercedes, who seems to suffer for some unnamable and unidentifiable offense. For the most part, she appears to be the perfect daughter, following every order to the letter, excelling academically while also tending the household, and nurturing religious fervor. However, Mercedes' religious devotion turns into a dark obsession which, like her mother before her, requires her to admit to her own innate guilt as a female.

Her self-loathing begins innocently enough in her relationship with Helen Frye. According to the narrator, "Whenever Mercedes has had a particularly lovely time with Helen, she feels a bit guilty" (197). Mercedes attempts to understand her feelings of guilt by labeling them as products of her concern for Frances's well-being. However, Mercedes' perceived guilt eventually leads her into the basement where she "chews and swallows" coal in an attempt to atone for some unknown thing that is causing her to feel a sorrow that "overwhelms her" (275). Therefore, as a hideous example of the effects this and other female stereotypes have on women's lives, Mercedes actually internalizes the stereotypes until she is socially and spiritually paralyzed. She becomes a symbol of the unnatural act that is not only eating its way through the Piper family, but is also legitimizing prevalent gender distinctions and orders.

From the pages of this novel, rife with tragedy caused by damaging stereotypes and miscommunication, yet another picture of female behavior and character emerges. Once in awhile, the author provides a glimpse of possibility and hope for the women who are strong enough to pursue alternative roles. It is obvious that the patriarchal order is the root of the problems experienced by the Piper family and that the women need to find ways of defining themselves outside of that order if they are to find any kind of happiness at all. Materia tries to separate herself from what she calls the "Old Country" by marrying James, but her plan backfires when it becomes apparent that James represents another culture based on a similarly patriarchal code of gender distinctions. For her part, Kathleen is slightly more successful in her attempt to break away from

patriarchal gender norms. Kathleen is the intelligent beauty with the ready-made opera career. She consciously rejects the customary domestic role in favor of a career, a move which was highly unusual for most women during the first decades of this century.

Whether her parents realize it or not, early in the story Kathleen separates herself from the expectations of a traditional female role: "In the schoolyard Kathleen came alive, but in the oddest way, showing an alarming tendency to play with boys" (41). The reader's first reaction may be to decide that Kathleen is a tomboy, but this label is somehow insufficient for describing her because it reflects the language of the patriarchal order. Judging from the accounts later read in her diary and her eventual adoption of lesbianism, one must recognize Kathleen's attempt to create a new order, one wholly removed from the male domination she has known. However, even as early as her grammar school days, Kathleen appears to incorporate the best of both worlds into her life to redefine what it could mean to be female in society:

> Other little girls weren't interested in swordfights or in who could enact the most spectacular death scene. Other girls were preoccupied with meticulous feminine arcana of which Kathleen knew nothing; what was more, none of them had careers. Initially her schoolmates had vied for Kathleen's friendship -- she was so pretty, so smart. But she failed to decode pecking orders, declined gracious invitations to braid other girls' hair and made a lasso of the skipping-rope. They put her down as odd until, finally, they shunned her altogether. (58)

Apparent in this passage is the heartache and loneliness Kathleen experiences in trying to make sense of her own difference in her society. She clearly does

not fit any stereotype she is familiar with, yet, she is still too young to make the conscious decision to create her own society based solely on artistry and female relationships. From a postmodern perspective in which writing is so self-conscious, one could say Kathleen is bound for better things despite the tragic intrusion of the dominant order that causes her death. Kathleen does, at least for a little while, transcend the domestic female stereotype.

According to a review of *Fall On Your Knees* by Lorna Jackson, "MacDonald has used the skill of a method actor to develop characters -- including many children -- far beyond stereotype" (29). This is perhaps inaccurate when one thinks of male characters such as Mahmoud and, to some extant, James, who are the principal propellants of the patriarchy, but it is a fair observation about characters such as Materia, Kathleen, and Frances. It is interesting to see how Frances, even though she knew her older sister very briefly, tends to mirror the revolutionary actions and sentiments expressed before her by Kathleen. Even as a young girl, Frances "has already learned that boys and fishermen have a richer vocabulary than girls and nuns" (191), and she also prefers the more liberating company of sailors and traveling artists to that of her female schoolmates. The parallel between Kathleen and Frances becomes even stronger when it comes to their seemingly healthy attitude toward their bodies. In her diary, Kathleen confesses freely:

> I look at myself naked. Yes, this is my confession. In the full-length mirror in the armoire in my room. I look at myself just to remind myself that I'm there. No, I look because I like to look and that's how I know it's wrong. But how could it be? I feel an ache. I want someone to see me and

touch me before I'm old. (459)

Here, one can identify the tension Kathleen feels in being caught between the traditional teachings of patriarchal institutions like church and school and the new order she will eventually choose to forge, using her own life as a model.

Frances also expresses radical emotions when it comes to her body image. After she has entrapped Leo Taylor and is obviously pregnant, she comes into new contact with herself and her body. Instead of internalizing the constant claim that she is "bad" and somehow impure, Frances discovers that her pregnancy reminds her that, as a female, she is, in fact, "in the presence of something bigger - namely herself" (416). The narrator even employs the language of autoeroticism to describe Frances' newly developed confidence and self-worth: "Her body is making love to itself ... This is how the Blessed Virgin visits us, she inhabits our own flesh and makes love out of it" (416). For Frances, in her enlightened and liberated state, the "Blessed Virgin" takes on different meanings and becomes a truly female symbol, one which takes into account female experiences of love and self. In one way, Frances is changing her world by reclaiming symbols that have been stolen and degraded in order to serve dominant agendas. Instead of embodying chastity, self-denial and Catholic notions of purity, the Virgin Mary expresses the beauty of the female body's potential for creation and continuance.

It is by focusing on alternative constructions of gender identification such as Kathleen and Frances' attitudes toward their bodies that MacDonald capitalizes on the dominant culture's perception of females as "others." The

author creates a world that is decidedly "other" than, but equally as important as, the male world that readers traditionally encounter. One aspect of female marginalization that MacDonald elaborates upon is domesticity. Materia, Mrs. Luvovitz, Mercedes, and most other women such as Teresa or Adelaide, serve as domestics, whether they fulfill the role of "wife" or not. And while most modern critics may view this relegation into the domestic sphere as limiting, MacDonald shows how domesticity serves as common experience for many women. The female characters share in carrying out the daily household rituals so that they create a kind of barrier around themselves, one in which life is stable, predictable, musical and, in short, happy.

Late in the novel's action, Mercedes reflects on a "time she knows could not have existed" because her experience is so far removed from that of her predecessors (430). She remembers the time "when Mumma was alive and we were all happy ... In the kitchen with Mumma and the Old Country" (431). It is not in school or at church that Mercedes ever finds true happiness, but rather in the memories of her childhood in the kitchen with her mother. Furthermore, the fact that the time to which Mercedes refers is also the time when their father was absent, fighting in World War I in Europe, is of great importance. The women are able to bond freely in the kitchen at that time because the male presence has disappeared. They retain their domestic roles but use them as ways of communicating female experience to one another. This is made even clearer later in the novel when Mercedes confronts Lily about the "birds and the bees" and Lily constructs a dough version of the sexual act right before her sister's

scornful eyes (424-425). Instead of participating in a verbal explanation of sex, Lily clearly communicates to Mercedes through her dough sculpture that Frances has already explained the details of procreation to her. This is significant because it shows how the Piper girls have learned to use familiar domestic objects, such as dough, to communicate with one another.

Since the female characters' experiences are so clearly the focus of this novel, even the many domestic rituals they perform with one another or for one another are imbued with special communicative meaning. Serving tea in times of crisis is one of the more common rituals in Cape Breton and tends to have a calming, bonding effect on the women in *Fall On Your Knees.* It seems that since they are in the kitchen most of the time anyway, sharing a "cuppa tea" (28, 395, 406, 566) while relating details of any given situation is a logical custom. After months of encountering the pregnant, half-delirious Materia wandering the shore with no explanation of her presence, Mrs. Luvovitz finally gets the chance to satisfy some of her curiosity when the young girl lands on her doorstep looking for cooking advice (28). The first thing Mrs. Luvovitz does after ushering Materia into her kitchen is serve her a "cuppa" because "all would be revealed, she'd see to that" (28), but not before the crisis is stabilized by the bonding ritual. It appears that once two women share tea in this way, much as do Adelaide and Teresa later in the story, they establish a bond that is difficult to break. With tea finished, Mrs. Luvovitz proceeds to teach Materia to cook in order to maintain peace at the Piper house (29). From then on, the two women maintain a friendship that is based on "food, children, the old yiddish songbook"

and an intense understanding of common experience (86). However, their friendship is not to be dismissed because it revolves only around domestic activities. These activities have clearly become the counterpart to "male bonding" and are therefore highly important relationships.

In addition to bonding through domestic rituals, the female characters often complement those rituals by personalizing them with music or songs. In fact, music plays a central role in this narrative by bringing women together within the patriarchal system. Yet, this music is rarely the kind that James would approve of because it is usually ethnically charged. For example, the popular ragtime Materia plays on the piano or the Celtic music played on doorsteps throughout Cape Breton is in constant conflict with the classical opera music James perceives as sophisticated and proper. In general, the women in this society use alternative forms of music and song in order to communicate their thoughts and feelings. The music, often foreign or popular music, becomes the musical form preferred by the women in *Fall On Your Knees*. Another example of the female preference for ethnic music occurs when the reader learns that Materia still prefers her Lebanese recordings over James's classical music (90). Later on, Kathleen falls in love with the new musical sub-culture of jazz she finds in the back-alley clubs of New York (473). It is logical that the women, who are themselves marginalized, would gravitate toward artistic forms that are also marginalized by the dominant culture.

Yet, even James recognizes the important link between music and domesticity when remembering that his mother had "a different song for every

task" (20), specifically for sewing and knitting. The music and domesticity are literally interwoven for women in MacDonald's Cape Breton to the extent that "the tweeds and tartans" are viewed as "musical notation" (20). From this point on in the novel, music, women, and domestic rituals are uniquely linked, thus providing another example of female bonding. Music constantly threads through the lives of the Piper women through the presence of the piano in their living room. It has its most profound effect when it is transported into domestic activities. Perhaps the most poignant use of music and rhythm appears in a scene in the Piper kitchen in which Materia plays the Lebanese records sent to her by her sister and teaches Frances and Mercedes the "dabke" while preparing supper. "The *dabke* is all about hips and breeze whereas if you find yourself at a *ceilidh*, Celtic step-dancing is all about feet and knees. Both can be danced in a kitchen by anyone," explains the narrator (90). Although Lebanese dance and music seem to be privileged to a certain extent over their Celtic counterparts, it is stressed that any kind of music and dance can be performed to accompany a domestic task. For the Piper women, and presumably for other women relegated to the domestic sphere, the kitchen is the center of female productivity as well as social and artistic center.

Beyond sharing and communicating through actual domestic activities and music, physical contact is very important for the women involved in this narrative. Feeling another woman's hands or the closeness of another woman's body is presented as a positive and integral aspect of female bonding, and this is certainly not restricted to female relatives. For example, soon after Materia

performs the cesarean section that causes Kathleen's death, she flees James' wrath and seeks solace with her friend Mrs. Luvovitz. Without one word exchanged, Mrs. Luvovitz fills a tub of hot water and "washes her gently, no scrubbing, no cloth, with her soap-sliding hands only, as though Materia were a newborn" (162). While Mrs. Luvovitz's actions are soothing and enable Materia to compose herself to a certain extent, the narrator's description of the scene is undeniably sensual and maternal. A similar situation occurs when Lily finally realizes she must leave Cape Breton in order to survive and Frances "opens her nightgown and guides Lily's mouth to drink" (451). At this point, the reader finally receives an explanation for Frances's strange craving to suck on raw dough after her father rapes her (151). Also, the connection between female bodies explodes with eroticism and it is clear that MacDonald is constructing a very specific metaphor. If the women in this story want to survive in any way, even in memory, they must derive their strength from each other's experiences and literally from each other's bodies. They must learn to revel in their own physical similarities in much the same way Kathleen finds new life and happiness in a lesbian relationship.

The lesbian relationship that forms between Kathleen and the New York piano "virtuosa," Rose, is itself an important symbol of an alternative form of culture. This culture is based on female interpersonal relationships and common experiences of sexuality, oppression, and stereotyping. In *Heterosexual Plots & Lesbian Narratives*, Marilyn R. Farwell suggests that the presence of lesbianism in any novel presents both a "utopian" vision and the deconstruction of

patriarchal value systems (17). Lesbianism in *Fall On Your Knees* definitely challenges the "power-obsessed, authoritarian, violent, and inherently self-destructive" social order James symbolizes (Mellor 245). When Kathleen first realizes she is sexually attracted to her friend Rose, she writes in her diary: "I felt like I did sometimes with David. Wet. Not just from the pond. That's how I know how bad I really am" (494). But, the relationship that eventually ensues can be viewed as the most functional relationship in the entire novel, so the reader recognizes that Kathleen's attraction is in no way "bad" or wrong for her. Lesbianism is improper and unthinkable according to the dominant male culture because, in this novel, any female coalition, whether it is social or sexual, can be seen as potentially destructive to the dominant order.

As the one healthy sexual relationship presented in this entire novel, the lesbian love affair can also be perceived as a possible answer to the inadequate heterosexual relationships demanded by the dominant culture. "From the pens of women writers of the last twenty-five years, the lesbian subject appears as a powerful discursive and political tool for challenging the asymmetrical gender codes in the narrative," claims Farwell (17). This is true in *Fall On Your Knees* which demonstrates how lesbian relationships, based on common experiences of art and body in Kathleen and Rose's case, are models for a new social order. The narrator relates Kathleen's enthusiasm for a future different from what was traditionally expected for most women: "Making love with the New Yorker is an experience which announces to Kathleen that the present tense has finally begun. It's summer now. For Kathleen the Present is a new country,

unassailable by the old countries ..." (176). Her enthusiasm for the future becomes ironic in light of her tragic ending, caused by James' violent enforcement of patriarchal dominance. This, however, does not diminish the impact made by this relationship on the narrative or the reader.

Just as lesbianism is offered as one possible positive alternative to the dominant order, so are mercy killings presented as another, more sinister, way in which women in this novel assist each other in overcoming seemingly impossible hardships. Instead of struggling to redefine their lives according to different standards, these women see death as the only alternative path. However, their "killings," or, in some cases, fantasies of killing, can be interpreted as malicious and vindictive as well as merciful and sympathetic. For example, immediately after Materia identifies James' incestuous designs on their teenage daughter, Kathleen, Materia thinks about ending the situation before it begins. She puts Kathleen to bed and, when the girl falls asleep, Materia "takes a pillow and places it over the sleeping face" (61). Although she removes the pillow immediately, Materia clearly believes her daughter would be better off dead than be a victim of incest. Materia's feelings toward Kathleen seem to be a complex combination of jealously, resentment and empathy. However, no matter what Materia's reasons for imagining the death of her daughter may be, she clearly sees murder as a possibility. The sentiment is later echoed when Mercedes fantasizes about pushing Lily over the cliff by the seashore and onto the jagged "rocks below" (262). Having once again fled from James' wrath , leaving Frances to receive the beating of a lifetime, Mercedes can imagine that

only death could release her innocent sister from the misery plaguing the Piper family.

In addition to introducing the possibility of mercy killings into the narrative, this scene foreshadows Materia's desire to spare her daughter the pain and agony she would suffer if she survived her pregnancy. Materia makes what is perhaps the hardest choice any mother must make, that is, whether to save her child or her grandchildren. Yet, the narrator tells us she would have chosen the former if it were not for the insidiousness of James' crime. So, while Kathleen struggles to give birth to the inverted twins, Materia "gently closes her daughter's eyes, then takes a pair of scissors ... and plunges the pointier blade into Kathleen's abdomen just above the topography of buried head" (135-136). If one were to read Kathleen as dead already, then Materia's choice would clearly appear as the correct one. However, Materia's justification is problematical based on her Catholic education. While Materia does do "the right thing by allowing the mother to die and the children to live," the narrator must ask: "So why does Materia die a few days later of a guilty conscience?" (137-138). Of course, no matter what Materia chose to do, she would have been committing a sin according to traditional Catholicism, and in this case her sin was doing "the right thing for the wrong reason" (138).

At the close of the novel, Mrs. Luvovitz stands at Frances' grave site and recalls the troubles the Piper women endured during their lifetimes. She also makes what is perhaps the most poignant observation in the novel as she scans the horizon: "Mrs. Luvovitz ... reminds herself of what she has learned: that

nothing in life is not mixed" (560). If one looks back over the course of the narrative, he or she can see that it is this theme that drives each event and the overall action toward its revelatory ending. From the first chapters, the theme surfaces in the coupling of Materia, the pretty Lebanese immigrant, and James, the very Scottish Cape Bretoner. Even Frances's childish play with her dolls foreshadows how combining two opposite ways of life can produce happiness:

> Frances made the doll dance quietly for a while. She made her go home and make molasses cookies for her children. "Now be good," said the dancer to her children, "I'm going to study. And afterwards, if I'm not too tired, maybe we will go to the Old Country." (173)

Most psychologists agree that childrens' play reflects the ideals and norms of the society in which they live. Therefore, in the preceding passage, one can identify Frances's attempt to combine the public life of socializing, education and travel with the domestic life she is most familiar with, thereby producing a woman who presumably can "do it all." The combination theme is reinforced with Kathleen's acceptance of "coloured" suitors and the consummation of her relationship with Rose. Furthermore, Frances's desire to carry Leo Taylor's child demonstrates the Piper girls' attempt to transcend traditional gender definitions and ethnic distinctions. Finally, the tragic outcome of the Piper story occurs because of James, Mahmoud, and Mercedes' insistence on the maintenance of the prevailing power structure.

Despite James, Mahmoud, and Mercedes' effort to maintain the status quo, the message of integration penetrates to the core of the Piper story. As soon as Kathleen reaches New York and begins to experience life away from her

father's narrow view of life, she embraces a world dominated by the interaction of black and white, good and bad, young and old, the past and the present. With specific regard to color, she writes optimistically in her diary: "I fail to see why colour should cause such a commotion" (473). MacDonald seems to be suggesting that a system based on the acceptance of differences, especially racial and gender differences, is the appropriate alternative to an oppressive social order. This point is clarified through the idealization of the "Coke Ovens" community, in which people of various religious, social and racial backgrounds live together harmoniously. The narrator describes this area of Sydney as "a cozy community" (57). The fact that all the houses in this area are "painted everything but white" is of particular interest because it emphasizes the interaction of color.

The Coke Ovens of Whitney Pier thrive on color and are products of the successful integration of differences. MacDonald's portrayal of the families within this community is also favorable, which adds to its importance as a symbol of a functional society. In particular, Leo Taylor and his family, although they have their own share of problems, appear as caring, loving, accepting, and generally happy individuals. Their example of a healthy family unit is most prominent when Adelaide approaches Mercedes with regard to her husband and Frances's child. Adelaide offers to adopt the child and "welcome" it into her family as her "own," despite the fact that it is a product of her own husband's infidelity (395). The Taylors are a family free from the festering sins of dominance and incest that are eating their way through the Piper family.

Therefore, they are able to exhibit a kind of openness and caring that even Mercedes, the supposedly devout Christian, is unable to develop. And, even though the Taylors seem to offer an alternative option, Mercedes prefers to banish the reminder of her own failure to fulfill her maternal role to an orphanage and leave her sister to live the rest of her life believing the child died soon after birth. However, the subversiveness of Frances's desire for integration persists and grows into a reality even if she is unaware of it.

While Kathleen is the first of the Pipers to embrace gender and ethnic differences, her early death quickly contains any subversive effects she may have produced. On the other hand, Frances succeeds in her efforts to connect with and accept "otherness" through Teresa and her brother, Leo Taylor. As a child, Frances is enthralled by Teresa and her apparent ethnic difference. Frances immediately identifies with the warmth and maternalism she senses in Teresa: "What she [Frances] wants is everything about this fabulous woman, who is surely a queen from some far-off place" (121). Kathleen immediately intrudes on Frances's fascination by reminding her that she should not take candy from strangers and especially not from "coloured strangers" (121).

However, Kathleen's warning is lost on Frances, who feels connected to Teresa and the Taylors in an essential way. Later in her life, Frances takes to sneaking into the Mahmoud household to steal little objects and jewelry. She often crouches by the basement door so that she can watch Teresa cooking at the stove. "What Frances really wishes she could steal or be stolen by ... is Teresa," relates the narrator (320). Her penchant for Teresa, and eventually for

Leo, reinforces the novel's overall theme of integration and duality. In psychological terms, Frances is obviously attempting to join the two sides of herself in order to create a functional whole. Since Teresa is certainly representative of "otherness" for Frances, desiring to be involved with her is symbolic of this attempt. It is also intertwined with Frances's relationship with her mother, who is also, according to social distinctions, "coloured." Each time Frances wishes to come in contact with Teresa, the reader is reminded of a night in Frances's memory when she awoke to find "a black woman staring down at her" (161). This woman, who Teresa later assumes was Materia, "reaches out and lightly strokes Frances's forehead" and then does the same with Mercedes, leaving a mark of ashes resembling those administered on Ash Wednesday (161). Materia's actions seem to anoint her two surviving daughters in another attempt to protect them, and Frances retains the association between her mother, blackness and protection for the rest of her life. In fact, the incest she suffers, similar to Kathleen's, promotes in her a preoccupation with Teresa and Leo, also representatives of "others," to the point of obsession.

Domestic rituals, music, lesbian relationships and other forms of female bonding are essential to the development of an alternative female culture in *Fall On Your Knees*. Nevertheless, the one element that really brings women together throughout the story is the nature of language, specifically foreign languages. According to the definitions of masculinity and femininity represented by the dominant culture in this novel, women occupy a place in society that is fundamentally "other" than that of men. Traditionally, dominant

cultures believed that women are more delicate than men and therefore are more sensitive than their male counterparts to certain kinds of language, such as swearing or descriptions of bodily functions. Furthermore, because women's tasks were of a domestic nature and considered untainted by the outside world, women were seen as being in need of protection from the coarser male world. MacDonald deliberately reverses this stereotype by illustrating that women's lives, which focus on the very messy tasks of childbirth and childrearing, are actually unfit for male ears. When Adelaide considers explaining the details of the Piper's lives to her husband, the narrator reveals:

> ... there are some things that are right to tell a woman friend, but otherwise indecent to repeat. Some things, when discussed with a dear husband or brother are only poison ... This is woman's work. Men are unfitted for it by nature and should be protected from it the same way women shouldn't have to go down into the mines. Men are so innocent. (354-355)

Here, one can see how the same terms and stereotypes traditionally reserved for describing women in a dominant society are reversed and used to describe men. This points directly to the irrelevance and inaccuracy of the stereotype itself. At the same time, the reversal alludes to the fact that language can be used by an oppressed group in any society to overcome or subvert the dominant group's control.

Most of the female characters in this narrative usually adopt a foreign language which speaks to their experience as "other." Within the first few pages, the reader learns that James associates happiness in life with his mother's use of the Gaelic language to exclude his father from their relationship:

"It used to make his father angry when James and his mother spoke Gaelic together, for his father spoke only English. Gaelic was James's mother tongue" (7). Although Gaelic is commonly used in Cape Breton, it is certainly used by James's mother as a way of distinguishing herself from James's father. This association is significant to the development of the themes of marginalization and integration MacDonald appears to be emphasizing. It is the first instance of many in which a female capitalizes on her position as "other" by speaking a non-dominant language. Therefore, just as the men in this society exclude women from participating in anything other than domestic activities, so women in turn exclude men from their lives through their use of language. In effect, the women empower themselves through their use of languages that are foreign to the men who dominate their lives.

Just as James's mother employs Gaelic, so Materia and her daughters use Lebanese in order to gain some control over their lives. As the years of unhappy marriage progress for Materia and she falls deeper into depression, she begins to reject English in favor of her native Lebanese despite James's protests. In time, she barely uses English at all and literally loses her grasp of its grammatical structure: "Prepositions were the first to fall away, then adverbs crumbled, along with whole clauses, until Materia was left with only the most stolid verbs and nouns" (86). The language MacDonald uses to describe Materia's rejection of English invokes the image of a tumbling empire. As each part of English speech falls away from disuse, Materia must learn to communicate in alternative ways. She ultimately rebuilds her communication

base by reclaiming her native tongue, which will also serve as the Piper girls' "mother tongue" for the rest of their lives.

Lebanese serves as an agent of comfort and joy throughout the tragic tale recalled in *Fall On Your Knees*. By retelling the stories and singing the songs their mother taught them in Lebanese, the Piper girls, especially Frances and Lily, are able to call upon a certain kind of strength derived from oral transmission. Since James is distinctly opposed to things foreign, a reflection of Western culture's devaluation of orality in favor of books and writing (Fielding 5), the girls learn quickly that Lebanese is their private language, reserved only for communication amongst themselves. The narrator refers to it as their "bed language" (243), which, of course, alludes to the modern term "pillow talk." Yet, the reader is also aware that: "Lily has not even a rudimentary understanding of Arabic; it is, rather, dreamlike. At night in bed, long after lights-out, she and Frances speak the strange language" (242-243). The significance of Lebanese does not reside in its grammar or vocabulary but rather in what it represents. For Frances and Lily, it is a female mode of communication, passed on to them from their mother, even if they playfully subvert its formal structures:

> On quite sober nights, Lily confides her fears.
> "Frances, do I have to go to Lourdes?"
> "No. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do."
> Lily tucks her little foot between Frances's ankles.
> "Frances. Al akbar inshallah?"
> "In fallah inti itsy-bitsy spider."
> "Ya koosa gingerbread boy kibbeh?"
> "Shalom bi' salami."
> "Aladdin bi' sesame."
> "Bezella ya aini Beirut."
> "Te' berini."

"Te' berini."
"Tipperary." (295)

Obviously, the words do not have to make sense in order to carry meaning for these two young girls.

Unlike English, Lebanese also seems to connect the girls with the animal world. In the moments after Teresa shoots Frances, Trixie, the cat, returns home leaving a trail of her owner's blood. However, she hides behind the furnace in the basement and comes out only when spoken to in Lebanese (405). One may not go as far as to invoke the traditional connection between women and nature here, but it is possible to assume that the Lebanese language does provide a specific bridge between the natural world and the Piper women. In this particular instance, it is this bridge that helps to save Frances's life. On the other hand, Frances and Lily's use of the secret language is also brought to Mercedes' attention, clueing her to what she believes to be the subversive effect Frances has on her candidate for sainthood. As a result of her obsession with being the "good one" in the eyes of her father, Mercedes adopts the role of the enforcer of dominant stereotypes and ideals. Because she is a female, her support of the patriarchy is perhaps the most destructive force against which the other women must fight in order to preserve their exclusive culture, identity, and legacy.

By focusing so much of the narrative on the development of a female culture and a system of relationships, MacDonald brings issues regarding gender identity formation into the forefront of the reader's experience of this

novel. The narrative contains many elements subversive to the dominant culture as represented by James and Mahmoud. For example, the inclusion of lesbianism and inter-racial relationships clearly defies the value systems James and Mahmoud attempt to instill in their descendants. In addition, MacDonald presents a counter-discourse about female experiences in Cape Breton in the same way MacLennan and MacLeod reflect a cult of masculinity in their stories. In general, these techniques work well with MacDonald's manipulation of time, place, traditional symbolism, and storytelling in order to reverse the gender definitions and distinctions maintained by the dominant male culture in Cape Breton.

IV. Representations of Dominant Cultures and Modes of Storytelling

In *Fall On Your Knees*, MacDonald presents a dominant social order in Cape Breton that exhibits many of the same attributes as a patriarchy. According to Adrienne Rich, a patriarchy is

> ... the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men, by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor – determine what part women shall or shall not play ...
> (*Of Woman Born* 57)

This kind of social order dominates the world of the Piper women in this novel and is clearly represented by characters such as James and Mahmoud. The ways in which MacDonald has her female characters learn to cope with their lives as they exist under this order serves to subvert the many dominant attitudes and institutions that James and Mahmoud represent. For example in addition to monetarily supporting their families, both James and Mahmoud attempt to assert their roles as absolute patriarchs in their families. They try to continue their legacy of racist, sexist and violent attitudes by controlling their wives' and daughters' lives. However, MacDonald subverts James and Mahmoud's efforts to maintain dominant cultural attitudes by presenting the negative effects these attitudes have on the female characters in the novel. Furthermore, the way in which the female characters create an alternative, more

functional, culture in response to patriarchal oppression illustrates the ineffectiveness of the fathers' dominant culture.

As representatives of this dominant order, James and Mahmoud are the principal purveyors of the intrusive and abusive dominant order. Perhaps the most identifiable aspect of this system comes through in the form of the persistent racism present throughout the narrative. Early in the novel, the reader is introduced to the racial problems that will plague each character when Mahmoud has James, the "enklese bastard," attacked and beaten for running away with his daughter. After severely beating him, Mahmoud's sons force James into a Catholic Church so that he can be converted. In response to their rough treatment, James throws a variety of racial slurs their way, including calling the sons "oily bastards" (16). However, James does not restrict his prejudice to visibly different cultures. In fact, he simply dislikes anyone who is not of white male and Celtic Protestant descent:

> What James resented most was that *enklese* nonsense. He wasn't English, not a drop of English blood in him, he was Scottish and Irish, like ninety percent of this God-forsaken island, not to mention Canadian. (19)

James also views his new in-laws simply as "filthy black Syrians" (19). In this short passage, the reader is literally pushed into James' rather disturbing mind and his deep-seated resentment toward almost everyone who does not conform to the dominant culture's ideal. His need to assert power over individuals whom he views as "other" than himself is one of the many manifestations of the

dominant culture in Cape Breton. In order to justify oppressing others, James must first degrade them so that he can maintain a perceived superiority.

Degradation of other races, cultures, and religions is fundamental to justifying racist attitudes and practices, and Mahmoud employs the same tactics as James in order to assert his authority. In remembering how he and his family eventually arrived in Cape Breton, Mahmoud reveals certain similarities between himself and his supposed rival, James. Mahmoud's wife, Giselle, was about the same age when he married her as was Materia when she ran off with James. Moreover, they were forced to flee their homeland because Giselle's family was about to throw Mahmoud in jail and "stick her in a convent" (338) because her family viewed him as an Arab rather than a European. It is ironic that Mahmoud himself was at one time a victim of the same attitudes he possesses against James. However, Mahmoud qualifies this story and justifies his banishment of the Pipers: " ... but that was different, oh very. That was in the Old Country where they had everything in common ... for one thing, he and Giselle were both from the same race, culture, language and faith" (338).

Mahmoud's desire for racial purity and his racism are attempts at justifying his own difference from the Aryan population of Cape Breton. For example, he discriminates against the Jameel family even though both the Jameels and the Mahmouds arrived in Canada on the same boat from Lebanon together: "The Jameels are Arab. We Mahmouds are more Mediterranean. Closer to being European, really" (327). This attitude implies Mahmoud's need to justify himself as a result of his insecurity with his own racial differences. The

justification of one's own race becomes part of the problem with patriarchal attitudes and class distinctions that are passed from one generation to the next. This is most apparent when Kathleen responds to Rose's accusations that her mother is an "Ayrab" with almost the exact words of her grandfather: "Well anyhow, a lot of Lebanese come from the coast and they're more Mediterranean, more European, you know. Not like Arabs" (503). Rose proceeds to point out to her that "coloured" is not white, no matter how Kathleen tries to justify her attitudes.

Another way in which James exhibits his racism is by claiming that other cultures are inferior to his own because they are less civilized. He views the customs, practices and beliefs of the other cultures portrayed in the book, especially Lebanese and Jewish cultures, as "barbaric" or "backward" (14) simply because they are different from his own. On his first "date" with Materia, he learns that she is "betrothed to a dentist" and that she has been "promised since she was four" (14). James considers this to be "backward" and "savage" (14). By contrast, Materia responds simply that: "It's the custom" (14). At her rebellious age, Materia obviously does not necessarily agree with the custom either and if this were the only reference to the barbarity of her culture, a reader might dismiss the couple's comments as youthful rebellion. However, after they are married and Materia, out of fear and despair, turns to Mrs. Luvovitz for advice on domesticity, James observes that "she had finally started acting like a wife, even if the results were on the heathen side" (30). Even though James attempts to qualify his prejudice by saying that "Compared to Materia's family,

the Luvovitz's seemed downright white" (30), he believes that the Luvovitz family is "heathen" because they are Middle Eastern and are therefore categorized along with the Mahmouds. Despite James's beliefs, MacDonald reveals throughout the novel that the Lebanese culture and the Jewish culture are very different from one another and thereby James's attitudes are subverted.

Racial oppression is based on the fear of and our power over aspects of life which we do not understand, usually different cultural practices, languages or religions. Therefore, when many of the characters in *Fall On Your Knees* encounter people and cultures that differ from their own, they become defensive and create mythologies in order to divert attention from their own ignorance and justify their own assertion of superiority over those peoples and cultures. Racism, as well as patriarchal ideas and discrimination, is a learned reaction, and the reader recognizes early in the story that James and Mahmoud's preposterous and uninformed misconceptions about other cultures are being quickly transferred to the next generation. This is apparent in the schoolyard at Holy Angels where the other girls in Kathleen's class "salve their corrosive envy and allay their fear of Kathleen, the antisocial prodigy, with an invigorating dose of racial hatred" (97). The girls tell anecdotes about "the coloureds" in Cape Breton: "My uncle saw a coloured woman driving a cart with a load of coal, the next morning he was dead" (97). This form of scapegoating is prevalent in most societies that practice racism because it is a quick and easy way of transferring social anxieties and collective guilt on to a particular group, thus relieving the

dominant group from accountability. The story could just as easily have been told by James himself.

In particular, the black characters in this novel endure intense discrimination inflicted by the dominant culture in Cape Breton. Because it is so easy to identify blacks by their skin color, they suffer the brunt of society's discrimination, even from people like Mahmoud who is himself discriminated against. Upon leaving Cape Breton, Kathleen is clearly an agent of her father's racism and dominance. Her first encounter with Rose as an accompanist reflects the intensity with which she has internalized her father's teachings: "But the pianist is doubly inaudible because she is black and therefore outside any system that matures and advances a classical virtuosa" (125). However, because of her experiences in the jazz clubs of New York and with Rose, Kathleen is one of the few characters who seems able to overcome her racist background. By the end of the novel, Kathleen claims she sees no color.

On the other hand, other characters are too ingrained in the dominant social order ever to attempt to reverse it. James, as we have seen, is probably the most obvious symbol of continuing racism, although he is certainly challenged for that position by Mahmoud. He makes various racial comments, often directed at James, throughout the narrative, but his prejudice is at its pinnacle when he accuses Teresa of stealing and fires her, despite her numerous years of faithful service and the absence of evidence of her guilt. The reader learns just how entrenched in this society racism is as Mahmoud ruminates on the situation:

> What enrages Mahmoud is that he let himself be lulled into trusting Teresa -- into thinking she was different. That's when the viper strikes. He should never have forgotten her colour. They can be the nicest people in the world, but, like children, they mustn't be overburdened with responsibility. They're like the worser sort of woman that way ... (326)

As James and other characters have also demonstrated throughout this novel, Mahmoud is simply expressing a dominant cultural agenda, which happens to include the oppression of every person who does not fit the social norms prescribed by the dominant members of society. Mercedes also becomes a symbol of the dominant social order when she decides that Frances's illegitimate child must be removed from Cape Breton in order to protect the family. She claims that "Illegitimacy is a terrible but invisible blot, whereas miscegenation cannot be concealed" (393). The hierarchy of social requirements is self evident in this statement, as is Mercedes' own jealousy of her sister's pregnancy. However, the broader patriarchal order which requires racism and the subjugation of minority groups is what truly drives Mercedes to dispense with the child, thus alienating herself and others.

Another important issue in *Fall On Your Knees* is the debate over whether the Mahmouds are white or "coloured." The controversy persists throughout the narrative and is important in revealing the arbitrary nature of racial distinctions. It appears that from James's perspective, anyone who is not of pure Celtic descent is inherently "coloured," whether it is visibly obvious or not, as is the case with the Jameels (359). He is obviously discriminatory toward Middle Easterners and their culture by the way he attempts to free his household of any

Lebanese artifacts: "Frances is already home playing piano ... playing Mumma's forbidden music from the hope chest - Daddy says it's coloured music, put it away" (242). Again, this attitude is passed on to Mercedes, who internalizes her father's hatred of color and dark skin: "She never fails to wear a hat and gloves, not just out of seemliness but because, summer or winter, she darkens rather too readily" (253). However, the reader is later informed that the Piper girls are generally of fair complexion, leading one to believe that Mercedes has so internalized her father's racism that she imagines that her ethnic background must be visibly apparent. Nevertheless, none of these distinctions clarifies the racial issue regarding the Mahmouds. James thinks to himself while trading moonshine with Jameel:

> Besides ... while Jameel is not black, he sure as hell is coloured, 'cause he sure as hell's not white. James is grateful that his girls turned out so fair. But there's obviously a morbid tendency in the blood they inherited from Materia that made Kathleen lean towards colour. (359)

Because this issue is never resolved in the novel, the reader is invited to participate in the narrative in a way that is typical of postmodernism. If one follows James's argument as it appears above, then the blame must fall on Materia and her father because of their inherent "blackness." On the other hand, most modern readers, thanks to headway made by both the feminist and civil rights movements, will recognize that racial issues in this novel are not as simple as distinguishing white from black, and there is perhaps no one to blame, except the existence of an oppressive social order.

Similarly, the gender concerns found within this narrative mirror the detrimental effects that a patriarchy inflicts on most societies. Mahmoud and James' sexist attitudes towards, and expectations of women are those most symbolic of a patriarchal order, although the Catholic Church also plays a major role in enforcing dominant cultural ideals. When the Mahmoud family first arrives in Cape Breton, Mr. Mahmoud exclaims: "Look. This is the New World. Anything is possible here" (14). Materia recalls this when she decides to run away with James, but the narrator explains: "She's been too young to realize he was talking to her brothers" (14). In addition to the scene already mentioned in relation to Mahmoud's attitudes toward Teresa, he exhibits a common patriarchal belief that women are not only limited by their sex but also by their roles as exchangeable property:

> It wasn't so much that the piano tuner was "enklese," or even that he was not a Catholic or a man of means. It was that he had come like a thief in the night and stolen another man's property ... There was a word for all this in the Old Country: 'ayb. There was no translation, people in this country couldn't know the depth of shame, of this Mahmoud was certain. There was no taking her back, she was ruined. (17)

James expresses similar attitudes in his insistence that Materia fulfill his expectations in regard to her role as wife and mother. However, by the end of the story, neither James nor Mahmoud is particularly happy with his life and one could go as far to say that they too are victims of patriarchal definitions of gender. Sexism, as is evident in *Fall On Your Knees*, is based on many of the

same premises as racism and MacDonald attempts to subvert its power by revealing the ineffectiveness of its main transmitters.

Another way in which James and Mahmoud represent the patriarchal order is by employing physical abuse, in Mahmoud's case, and both physical and sexual abuse in James's case. Domestic physical abuse is one of the most prevalent ways in which males in *Fall On Your Knees* enforce patriarchal codes as well as assert power and dominance over females. It is true that Mahmoud never actively "beat his daughters" in *Fall On Your Knees*, but he also claims it as a "weakness" and "the root of the problem" that he'd "never been able to bring himself to raise a hand to any of his girls" (16). With this introduction to abuse, the stage is set for James's persistent need to inflict his authority on his "bad" daughter, Frances. In two separate instances, James brutally beats Frances for no apparent reason or for something she has not done, and the reader is informed that these were not isolated events. Following one particularly horrendous beating, James drags Frances up to Mercedes' room where Mercedes observes "Frances's head bobbing and lurching" (212). The narrator tells how Mercedes is forced to look away because "she can't stand it when Frances grins with a bloody lip" (212). In the description of the other specified beating, the reader encounters a scene in James's work shack which, despite its apparent brutality, appears orchestrated with skill and rhythm. It is at this point that MacDonald accentuates the extremity of James's obsession with control and power. Yet, the reader is acutely aware that the only power he really can exert is over his young, almost powerless daughter through physical abuse.

Inherently linked with physical abuse are not only the implications of the dominance, authority, and power belonging to patriarchal societies but also the variety of justifications invoked in support of an excessive use of violence. James rationalizes his own abuse of Frances, both physically and sexually, in one of the most common ways -- that is, by convincing himself and others that she is innately "bad" or damaged in some way. In the world James has constructed for himself, Mercedes and Lily are the "pillar" and the "precious" one respectively simply because they adhere as best as possible to his norms, expectations and stereotypes. Conversely, Frances acts outside of those norms in various ways, such as smoking, swearing, playing with boys, and hanging out in seedy bars. According to James, there is something about Frances that is wrong so it does not matter what he does to her. It is possible that James continues to blame Frances for the death of his one male heir and the subversion of patriarchal authority. However, this is a weak explanation for the intensity with which he abuses Frances and the reader must wonder whether even James is convinced about his own justification.

While Frances is rebellious and often indecorous, it is hard to say that she is innately "bad" or evil as a result of the fact that she has endured numerous years of suffering at James's hands. We might even expect her to be more rebellious considering how her life turns out. In fact, the narrator clearly hints at the doubt which once in a while creeps into James's life and reveals that he is truly a pitiful character: "He [James] savours a feeling of normalcy for the first time in years. In the increasing absence of Frances, it has become possible

for James, now and then, to feel like a good man" (297). Here, the reader is allowed a moment with what is perhaps the "real" James, a scared, lonely, pedophile who, in a desperate attempt to deal with his life, ends up ruining the lives of the women in his family.

Frances and Kathleen also suffer extreme sexual abuse at the hands of their father. In Kathleen's case, the seed of incest is planted long before Mercedes and Frances are born. One day when Kathleen is still just a teenager, she sneaks up on her father as he tunes the piano and in fright James slaps her. When he realizes what he has done, he hugs her but, as he holds her tightly, he gets an erection and is suddenly aroused by her hair which smells "like the raw edge of spring" and her fragrant skin and breath (61). Before the incident goes any further, James snaps out of what seems to be a trance and "lets her go and draws back abruptly, so she will not notice what has happened to him" (61). As he runs out into the yard and vomits, Materia, who has witnessed the entire episode, realizes the gravity of the situation and decides then and there to make herself utterly available sexually to her husband's needs in order to "prevent a greater sin on her husband's part" (63).

James spends the years following this first incident attempting to rationalize his actions and reasserting his power in other ways. According to Jean Renvoize, "Incestuous fathers are as adept at rationalizing their behavior as the rest of us" (70). James claims, " ... he was overworked. He hit his daughter by mistake and got terribly upset. In the ensuing panic, there was a physical accident. Meaningless. Hanged men get hard-ons, for heaven's sake"

(65). Of course, his justification does not prevent the culmination of this episode, when, years later, James discovers Kathleen and Rose in bed together in New York and proceeds to rape and impregnate his daughter. Most psychologists specializing in incest and family relationships agree that

> ... most incestuous activity is not essentially sexually motivated ... it is other issues to do with power, with anger, with not being able to deal with frustration, with not being able to effect changes in their lives ... (Renvoize 96)

It is apparent that this applies directly to James and the incest he commits repeatedly with his two daughters. In each instance, he resorts to rape when situations, such as encountering Kathleen in a sexual act with a black woman, become overwhelming and he is powerless to explain or deal with them.

The situation is similar with regard to James's incest with Frances, except that Frances is still just a child of four or five. The incest occurs the night of Kathleen's funeral, presuming it happens only once, and is just as gruesome as the rape scene because of Frances's age (375-376). Mercedes witnesses the act as she hovers at the bottom of the stairs and the image of Frances struggling to keep eye contact with her sister as her father keeps "operating" underneath her dress is particularly haunting. After their father falls asleep and Frances is able to slide off his lap, she informs Mercedes that: "It doesn't hurt" (376). The recognition that occurs between these two children on that particular evening is not only what constantly drives Mercedes to "forgive" Frances for the rest of her life but is also what serves to reveal James as just a dirty, lonely old man. He

certainly fits the common image of the "dirty old man," with his "mouth open a little" and his little puppy whimperings (375).

However, he is also able to rationalize this incident by pleading drunkenness: "As for the night of Kathleen's funeral -- well, he won't be touching another drop of anything stronger than tea from now on" (169). In addition, he employs the same justification here that he uses in relation to his incessant beatings inflicted on the girl. In other words, he convinces himself that it is acceptable to commit incest with Frances because she is inherently "bad" (71), and therefore perhaps deserves this kind of treatment. What is most important to remember when considering this particular plot line in *Fall On Your Knees* is that incest and physical abuse seem to be James's only modes of securing authority over the females in his family. In raping Kathleen and molesting and beating Frances, James is using force and authority in order to keep the women in his life in line with dominant cultural attitudes. These tactics happen to coincide with those employed by a patriarchy in the interests of enforcing the dominant social structure.

By the end of the novel, the impression of James that the reader is left with is at best, pitiful, and at worst, almost demonic and predatory. Either way, he is unlikely to be perceived as a likable character and it is implied that he is meant to symbolize the dark forces at work in any patriarchal institution or, in Lily's terms, the Devil. Early in the novel, the narrator reveals how Leo Taylor, a more or less respectable and likable character, feels about James: "Leo has always sensed something about Mr. Piper -- the thing you sense about certain

dogs" (80). What that "thing" is is ultimately left to the reader's discretion, but associating James with anything canine is likely to evoke negativity. Toward the end of the story, Mrs. Luvovitz appears to reiterate Leo's intuition: "What happened? I should have done something. Gone over there. He didn't deserve to have daughters, there was something wrong there ..." (560). While these statements alone are not enough to cause one to associate James with the Devil, the prominence of Catholic beliefs, James's actions, and an important suggestion made by Lily do point the reader in that direction.

During a somewhat philosophical discussion between Frances and Lily, Frances alludes to the fact that the Devil lives at the Piper house:

> Lily stays sitting. "Frances. What if Ambrose is the Devil?"
> "He's not the Devil. I know who the Devil is and it isn't Ambrose."
> "Who's the Devil?"
> Frances crouches down as if she were talking to Trixie, "That's something I'll never tell you, Lily, no matter how old you get to be, because the Devil is shy. It makes him angry when someone recognizes him, so once they do the Devil gets after them. And I don't want the Devil to get after you ... The Devil lives with us."
> "No he doesn't."
> "You see the Devil everyday. The Devil hugs you and eats right next to you."
> "Daddy's not the Devil."
> "I never said he was ..." (269)

Even though Frances denies the association, the suggestion that James is in fact the "Devil" remains for the reader to ponder. He may not literally be Satan in the biblical sense, but to Frances and Lily "the Devil" represents any person who is bad and vice versa. Hence, James becomes a symbol of sin and betrayal and, ultimately, of the devil incarnate.

The unsavory dimensions of James's character are reinforced by his tendency to use demaning language in describing women, primarily Materia. He attempts to reduce women by describing them as animals, thus justifying patriarchal control. Since many people have had little sympathy for animals because they were believed to be lesser in every way than human beings, therefore in need of domination and organization. Soon after they are married, James begins imagining Materia as an animal who is neither intelligent nor important. One day while Materia is pregnant with Kathleen, James walks into the kitchen to find her gorging herself on cookie dough. He proceeds to throw the bowl at her at which point she runs from the house and vomits over the side of the porch. As a part of this scene in which the reader is meant to sympathize with Materia's inexperience and youth, James thinks to himself, "You'd think by now she'd know enough not to bring it on, a dumb animal knows not to make itself throw up" (25). At this point, James perceives his wife as something less than a "dumb animal," which he believes justifies his treatment of her.

As time goes on, James comes to view Materia in terms of animal metaphors that constantly degrade and destroy her humanity. He especially likes to describe her as "bovine" when she eats or bounds around the household carrying out daily chores or cooking (67). She is also described as recovering from a miscarriage "like a heifer" (83), implying that Materia's maternal role is nothing more than a public breeding. The most poignant and deliberate moment in which James finally and absolutely degrades Materia occurs directly following Kathleen's death:

> James tells her, "Who's the killer eh? Who's the killer?! God damn you, God damn you, damn you–" He begins to punctuate the curses by slowly slamming her head into the wall. Her eyes are trying to reason with him, but without the help of words her eyes become a horse's eyes, as mute, as panicked. (145)

Indeed, Materia is just as ineffective in reasoning with her grief and anger-stricken husband as a horse might be because he has already decided who is to blame for Kathleen's death. It is ironic that he never seems to blame himself, even though it is his rape that causes Kathleen's tragic death. On the other hand, he does not hesitate to blame Materia because he has already devalued her to the extent that further guilt should mean nothing to her. Because she is equated with any old farm animal, transferring his guilt to her should have little or no effect, according to James's theory. Nevertheless, James's use of these animal metaphors serves to subvert his authority rather than asserting it, because it is expected that the reader will recognize Materia's humanity and empathize with her predicament.

Compulsory motherhood has always been viewed as a detrimental code belonging to a patriarchal society, yet the myths surrounding motherhood and the maternal experience persist even in modern literature. The institution of motherhood, often seen as one of the most pervasive patriarchal institutions, is based on myths that motherhood is always a desirable and pleasurable experience because of women's physical predilection for childbirth. In order to support these myths, the darker, more painful side of maternity was left out of most literary works and instead, readers would encounter an edited version of

the sexual act and the blissful afterglow of the mother as she gazed at her newborn, usually long after the childbirth itself. So, until the mid-twentieth century, it was still considered improper to discuss sex explicitly. Furthermore, the possibility that a mother was displeased with motherhood did not exist. But now, as women search for more authentic female experiences to which they can relate in literature, authors such as Ann-Marie MacDonald are presenting the other side of motherhood, the one most authors are reluctant to discuss.

In *Fall On Your Knees*, MacDonald explores the institution of compulsory motherhood through the eyes of those who really experience it, the women in society. Rather than the picture of maternal bliss we often expect, MacDonald's female characters are trapped in unwanted and traumatic pregnancies and are plagued by infanticidal desires which society tells them are wrong and evil. For example, during Materia's first pregnancy, it is clear that she is neither pleased with her condition nor able to deal with the intense emotions and bodily changes she is experiencing. James notices: "By midsummer she was three months pregnant and crying all the time" (23). He wonders why she seems to have faded into a nearly catatonic state and recalls a great misconception about motherhood: "... weren't women supposed to be happy about something like that?" (23). While James fails to understand or sympathize with Materia's condition, one can see how any girl at fourteen might react to pregnancy when most adult women have a difficult enough time with it. Oftentimes, women have suffered "physical and mental breakdowns" as a result of their inability to deal with the changes pregnancy causes or to reconcile their confused emotions with

the patriarchal ideal of the blissful mother (53). All of a sudden, women's lives are thrown into massive upheavals and restricted in various ways and, according to *Fall On Your Knees*, no one attempts or intends to explain anything to the pregnant woman. Therefore, women are often overwhelmed by maternity and, having no information with which to make sense of everything, it is common for women to suffer incurable depression and fail to meet society's standards for the "good" mother.

Another way MacDonald elaborates on the less appealing side of compulsory motherhood is by focusing on the danger involved in the actual process of childbirth. According to Jane Lewis: "Motherhood was undoubtedly a dangerous business; as late as the 1930s mothers ran a greater risk of mortality than did coalminers" (11). The opening pages reveal that death was always a possible result of childbirth during the early part of this century: "All he [James] wanted at fifteen and a half was to hear his mother play the piano once more, but she was dead of a dead baby before he finished the job" (8). By taking such a casual tone when referring to something so serious, the narrator is revealing the commonness of the occurrence and its normalcy within turn of the century Cape Breton. This undeniable potential for maternity to end in death for either the mother or the child, or both, is illuminated in *Fall On Your Knees* not only with James's mother but even more poignantly with Kathleen's tragic death. During the difficult labor, Materia realizes that it is a "breech birth" and that "someone will not get out of this room alive" (135). She knows she has a choice to make between saving the life of her daughter or those of the babies. In just a

few moments, Materia chooses to spare the lives of the children and plunges the scissors deep into Kathleen's stomach in order to extract the newborns. "Typically, under patriarchy, the mother's life is exchanged for the child; her autonomy as a separate being seems fated to conflict with the infant she will bear," explains Adrienne Rich (166). This is certainly the case with Kathleen, even though Materia later reveals that had it not been for James's role in the pregnancy, she would have chosen to spare her daughter's life instead, thus demonstrating the strength of a maternal bond.

However, if a female were to survive childbirth itself, the pain and agony did not end but rather continued through rituals such as breast feeding. For example, once Kathleen is born, Materia's attitude toward motherhood does not improve according to James's standards. Instead of bonding with her child, she stays in bed all day, leaving Mrs. Luvovitz to feed the newborn with an eyedropper (30). Materia is obviously in no condition to perform what James considers to be her maternal duties because "Institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than selfrealization, relation to others rather than the creation of self" (*Of Woman Born* 42). One can see how inadequate a maternal role will be for Materia because at her tender age she was just barely beginning to explore her life when she ran off and married James and soon found herself pregnant. Yet, James cannot understand Materia's feelings and he proceeds to drag Materia downstairs in an attempt to force her to breast feed. However, in the absence of lactation, Mrs. Luvovitz must perform a painful technique in order to stimulate

her mammary glands (30). Then, just a few weeks later James grabs Kathleen from Materia's breast "in horror" because he thinks she has somehow cut Kathleen, who is sitting and grinning a smile "bright with blood" (33): "Materia sat there, mute as usual, her dress open, her nipples cracked and bleeding, oozing milk" (34). This particular image seems to portray an almost grotesque parody of the Madonna figure, but instead of the docile mother looking down on her heavenly child, the scene is reversed into one of pain, blood and the horrendousness of enforced motherhood.

In addition to the obvious Catholic symbols MacDonald uses, such as the statue of the Virgin Mary at Mount Carmel Church, to emphasize the existence of a patriarchal order, there exist other more obscure but equally as powerful allusions to common Christian motifs found throughout literary history. The most prominent example is Frances, who appears to take on the sins and salvation of her family in much the same way as Christ became the scapegoat for his society. In her review of *Fall On Your Knees*, Shelley Page contends: "Frances, well, she's the heart of the book ... She must carry the weight of the family's pain and misfortune, and she must also contend with their father, James, and the monster living within him" (47). This observation is confirmed by the various forms of suffering Frances must endure and the other characters' designation that she is in fact the "bad one" of the family, as if there must be someone within every family to claim that role so that the people around him or her can feel better about themselves. The narrator explains: "Mercedes knows Frances is bad but

loves her anyway, because however hard it is to be the good one in the family, it is harder still to be the bad one" (376).

In an earlier scene, Frances literally assumes blame for putting an old picture of Kathleen on the piano for James to see even though it was Mercedes who placed it in full view despite her father's decree that nothing reminding him of his dead daughter remain in open view. After he severely beats Frances, Mercedes tries to soothe her injuries and get to the bottom of Frances's martyrdom:

> Mercedes squeezes out the cloth, "You shouldn't make him angry like that."
> "He deserves it."
> "You're the one who gets hurt."
> Frances swallow carefully. "I'm sorry about your things."
> "It's alright, Frances. You didn't have to take the blame for the photograph."
> "Yes I did."
> "Why?"
> "It's just the way it is Mercedes. You can't change the way it is." (263)

Frances's acceptance of "the way it is" is similar to Christ's acceptance of God's decision to have him die in order to alleviate the suffering of others. While Frances is perhaps modeled on the Christ archetype, she is also unique because she is female and does not actually die for her family's sins. MacDonald uses this archetype to further subvert the authority of the dominant culture. By allowing Frances to continue living, she is modifying the traditional Christ motif, which is normally imbued with the attitudes and beliefs of a patriarchal society, so that the reader is made conscious of how different these female stories are from male stories.

The differences existing between various types of storytelling are of the utmost importance to MacDonald in writing *Fall On Your Knees*. The novel itself, with its nonlinear structure and shifts in point of view through time, reflects postmodern criticism of traditional narrative forms and techniques. According to Marilyn Farwell, "Readers are conditioned to expect a narrative pattern that sets up a series of events that are logically or chronologically related" (47). This is true of many literary works, both past and present, but a postmodern and/ or feminist work usually resists the expected pattern and extracts new meaning from a text based on that resistance. "The feminine disruption of sequence ... signals a rupture of the male symbolic order," claims Farwell (47). The way in which the narrator of *Fall On Your Knees* begins the narrative after it has already ended certainly reverses our expectations because the traditional linear model for narrative would require that it begin, as it were, at the beginning. Then, as the story progresses, the reader often encounters flashback scenes which at first seem out of place and obscure but eventually make perfect sense when a particular character reflects on certain events. For example, throughout the novel at very strategic moments, MacDonald includes excerpts from the letter James received informing him of Kathleen's involvement with "godless" music and activities in order to foreshadow the climax in which James rapes Kathleen. These excerpts are important not only in foreshadowing the climax, but also in emphasizing the theme of how various social codes and expectations intrude upon and limit each female character's life and ambition. In a book entitled *Telling Stories*, Michael Roemer says, "When our expectations are disrupted, the

story appears to lose its precluded form and to take on a spontaneous life of its own" (26). Even though the reader is aware of James's tendency for incest, the revelation that he raped Kathleen sheds a whole new light on the story, mainly because we are so sure the tragedy occurred as a result of Kathleen's own irresponsibility.

Another integral postmodern technique MacDonald employs in *Fall On Your Knees* is discussing literature itself within a literary work, or, in other words, metaliterature. One aspect of writing which is often associated closely with postmodernism is hyper-self-consciousness. This idea of self-consciousness may appear obscure at first but becomes clearer when one realizes that a work of literature not only reveals a story but also sometimes comments on storytelling and its unique position as a work of fiction. At one point in this novel, the narrator comments, "The world should not be organized to require heroines, and when one is required but fails to appear we should not judge" (316). This statement, made in the context of Camille's situation but certainly more widely applicable for the entire story, serves two purposes. First of all, it warns the reader that *Fall On Your Knees* is not a traditional story and so one should not expect it to follow traditional narrative models. In other words, the reader should not expect any heroines to save the day in the end, because, as we know from the final lines, the only heroine MacDonald offers is storytelling itself. The second purpose this statement serves is to comment specifically on the uniquely female narrative and the postmodern refusal to provide readers with predictable situations and characters.

In another particularly intuitive moment, as Adelaide waits alongside her family and the Pipers for news as to whether Frances will survive the shooting, Adelaide thinks to herself: "I could write a book. I really could" (406). Her awareness of her own story as a piece of literature deliberately brings into the forefront MacDonald's implementation of postmodern literary techniques. She reminds us that we still do not know who is recalling this story and who said the opening lines: "They're all dead now" (1). In fact, for all the reader knows, this entire novel could be Adelaide's thoughts made into words. Whether or not Adelaide ever got around to writing her book is never clarified, but what is more important is that there does exist a book within this book, or literature within literature, in the form of Kathleen's diary. Judy Nolte Lensink has commented that " ... diary-writing is one way in which women have made coherent their experiential lives" (42). Therefore, concentric levels of commentary can be identified in *Fall On Your Knees* because the reader can find a female novel within this female story. By including Kathleen's diary in its entirety in the larger text, MacDonald is once again elaborating on the importance of female storytelling and perspective in a culture which generally marginalizes and suppresses the stories, customs, languages, and cultures of "others."

Much of *Fall On Your Knees* relies on relativity and the very different perspectives each character expresses in relation to the same things. Once again, Adelaide probably best represents the importance of varying perspectives when the narrator describes her as believing "that all children should have enough grown-ups around who love them so that one can tell them to fight, one

can tell them not to and one can tell them not to worry so much" (357). The novel demonstrates "multivoicedness" in a way that connects each character distinctively through opinions, thoughts, attitudes and actions. With each event in the novel, MacDonald presents a variety of perspectives, using each character's perspective to illustrate that everything in life is relative or "mixed." A perfect example of MacDonald's skill at presenting various sides of every story occurs in the first few chapters when James and Materia first get married. Mahmoud's perspective on the situation is that James "came like a thief in the night" and stole "another man's property" while James views the event slightly differently. In fact, the reader never really gains insight into what motivated James to run off with such a young girl except that he seems to think he was "ensnared" by her "animal nature" (34). This and other examples show that, "Like all structures, story integrates and relates. The narrative relates all of its parts to each other and is, in turn, 'related' by a narrative to the audience" (Roemer 11). Without all the different but related views, the story would perhaps become one-sided and supportive of a particular ideology, which is precisely what MacDonald appears to be trying to avoid. Instead of a dominant, linear perspective, the reader is given a more organic narrative which constantly changes and interacts with each character and event.

In relation to specific postmodern concerns, *Fall On Your Knees* also suggests how culture and ideology is transmitted through family structures. In other words, the stories and teachings the characters receive are what shape them as individuals. Furthermore, the reader gets a first hand look into

interfamilial relationships, in which certain members of the newer generation of a family identify with certain members of the older generation in order to construct their own ideologies. According to Michael Roemer,

> Our relationship to family is necessarily complex and contradictory. We are at once determined by it and determined to free ourselves of it. It shelters and bonds us but must also cast us out. It has the power to nurture *and* undermine, to wound *and* to heal, to sustain *and* strangle. Not infrequently, it does both. Those who are closest to us are the most dangerous; those who love us can also destroy us. (15)

The dual forces at work within family dramas that Roemer delineates here are certainly what help to shape the personalities of characters such as Mercedes and Frances. Although the two girls are subjected to the same dominant ideology, each reacts to that ideology differently. Frances clearly identifies closely with Kathleen and their lives seem to follow similar paths and contain similar events. Mercedes, on the other hand, relates more strongly to her mother's domestic role and later with the patriarchal standards James represents.

MacDonald gives many examples of how the two girls grow separately within the same household, often by contrasting Frances's role in playtime with that of Mercedes. Usually, Frances is the one "at the reins of the covered wagon" and "the boss of everything" while Mercedes settles in the background as "the pioneer mother with the babies" (111). As they mature, the girls' attitudes continue to diverge: "Mercedes pictures a white palace, and Kathleen sitting on a throne next to a handsome prince. Frances sees a castle with

mermaids swimming in a moat full of ginger beer and Kathleen holding a sword, singing on a balcony" (131). The variation in these two views of their older sister in New York illustrates how Mercedes is an agent of a more traditional concept of female roles in society while Frances identifies with her more assertive, progressive role for women. Similarly, when the two girls kneel outside the bedroom in which Lily lies dying of polio, they pray for her recovery and offer very different versions of penance in return for the health of their new "sister":

> And they told her all the nice things they would do together when she got well.
> "We'll have candy for breakfast," promised Frances.
> "We'll join the choir," Mercedes pledged.
> "We'll put on a beautiful ball gown."
> "We'll cook lovely things for Daddy."
> "We promise, Lily."
> "We swear."
> "On our graves."
> "On our bones." (173)

The subtle differences in what each girl promises reflect progressive rebellion and traditional conformity respectively, thus showing how two stories can emerge simultaneously from the same event.

The act of storytelling in Cape Breton has always been revered as cultural necessity and communal event. It is based in the oral tradition that has for so long been a part of most communities and cultures, especially those descended from Celtic origins. According to Margaret Atwood, also associated with the postmodern penchant for orality, "Writing on the page is after all just a notation, and all literature, like music, is oral by nature" (26). The opening statement of

Fall On Your Knees, "They're all dead now," invites the reader into a kind of oral tale. The abruptness with which these words stand out on the page implies that the story that follows is indeed being told around a kitchen table or on a front porch at sunset. Then, the ending comes full circle in that Lily invites Anthony to "sit down and have a cuppa tea" while she tells him about his dead mother and perhaps the rest of the Piper tale (566). As Frances reminds us earlier at Lily's departure from the island, this is just another story that has become part of a female oral tradition (450). It is implied by the end of the novel that it is this story, told and retold, that will preserve the female lives and communities the characters struggled to create against the patriarchal backdrop. In *Telling Stories*, Michael Roemer explains: "Even today, stories can create a temporary community through our shared responses ..." (234). In other words, in addition to Lily's becoming a transmitter of a new female culture through her oral storytelling, the reader realizes that by reading this novel, he or she has also become a participant in this new culture based on the transmission of female stories. These stories are simply versions of history, as Margaret Atwood explains in "An End to Audience":

> Anyone from rural Nova Scotia is well-steeped in what we now call the oral tradition but which they didn't call anything of the sort ... They were just things that had once happened. (26)

Therefore, for women who are constantly devalued and oppressed, a reclamation of the past through oral storytelling is an outward assertion of strength and subversion of patriarchal dominance.

The real crux of Ann-Marie MacDonald's novel, in addition to dealing with relatively important issues for both women and men, lies in the assumption that story and memory are actually one and the same. When one considers this intensely, he or she would perhaps agree that all stories are truly based in some memory and therefore every story essentially reflects the unique slant and interpretation of its teller. As we are well aware, because of their basis in memory, stories tend to change and metamorphose throughout time and with each passing moment, a story changes to accommodate the teller's exact mood, feelings, emotions, and situations at that exact moment in time. One can observe this process at work in *Fall On Your Knees*, as Materia's memory of her family evolves while the years pass slowly. Finally, her version of her father in particular is different from the man she would have described when she was thirteen and disowned. The narrator's tone is almost nostalgic as he or she explains:

> Materia watched it all from a great distance, and as the years flew by she missed her father more and more, forgetting everything but that he had once cared enough for her to find her a husband. (37)

As the story progresses, the reader is a witness to the evolution of a narrative and how a story changes with each teller's perspective and specific concerns. For Materia, her recollection of her father eventually evolves into a more or less positive description as a result of her isolation from familiar faces and cultures and the monotony and persecution of her daily life. Mahmoud's authoritarian

attitudes come to equal caring for her in light of James's seemingly directionless cruelty.

Cape Breton itself is also presented as a representation of how memory tends to change when enough time has elapsed. The narrator tells the reader, "Cape Breton is not a pearl -- scratch anywhere and you'll find coal -- but someday, millions of years from now, it may be a diamond. Cape Breton Diamond" (88). MacDonald seems to be saying that the natural and cyclical forces of time, the dirt, grime, hardship and oppression that Cape Breton represents for the characters in this novel, and for the many people who have been forced to leave the area over the years, will eventually erode away, leaving only the pleasurable stories to be passed on to future generations. The memories that were once very real to each Cape Bretoner, such as the image of the "plundered" Kathleen lying dead in her labor bed, will evolve to reveal an essential goodness and purity lying just beneath the rocky surface of life in Cape Breton (136). However, in Kathleen's case, the narrator suggests that the fact that she has been raped and mutilated by her father and mother, and symbolically by the dominant social structure itself, will perhaps prevent her story from becoming a "diamond" (136). In contrast though, Lily's dedication to Frances's story seems to make up for the tragic story of Kathleen, and it is Frances's story that will go on to construct a female oral recollection of life in Cape Breton.

By the time the reader reaches the end of this novel and its surprising outcome, he or she must turn directly back to the first page and reread the

words: "They're all dead now" (1). Roemer explains that all stories are "over" before they begin and postmodern literature tends to be very self-conscious about its existence as memory rather than as an element displaced from real lives and events (3). Furthermore, in keeping with postmodern literary techniques, Roemer believes that, "By the time it is told every story is over, as if to suggest that, given our limitations, we cannot know an event of any complexity until we look back on it" (14). The ending of *Fall On Your Knees* invites readers to participate in this organic cycle of memory and storytelling by leading them right back to where the story began, that is, at its ending. Shelley Page believes that the initial statement of the novel "sends you searching for a hint as to why those you'll come to cherish must die" (47), but the ending reminds readers that the answers lie in the telling of the stories themselves rather than in any external reasons. Finally, the reader must agree with the narrator in asserting that " ... memory plays tricks. Memory is another word for story, and nothing is more unreliable" (270). For *Fall On Your Knees*, a novel that is flooded with various versions of the same incidents, this is especially true because the reader is never really sure whose version is the correct one. One must conclude that, with stories and memories, there is perhaps no "correct" version, only variations and combinations of every version.

Within the narrative of *Fall On Your Knees,* MacDonald creates a female legacy for the novel's female characters. This legacy draws on traditional symbols and forms but employs them in ways that better reflect female experiences and concerns. Patricia Jaeger, author of *Honey-Mad Women:*

Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing, believes that women often choose to write novels because the form's "multivoicedness allows the interruption and interrogation of the dominant culture" (31). This observation is literally played out in this novel in which each character's perspective or voice is slightly different but still equally valued. Marilyn Farwell believes that "violence and oppression" are encoded in the traditional, male literary model, but that by varying and questioning those models, female narratives also subvert the dominant literary and social structures (31). The author requires that the reader actively interact with the story and its characters and participate in the subversion of dominant philosophies and orders. The techniques MacDonald employs, such as gender and stereotype reversals, placing emphasis on female bonding as opposed to male bonding, analyzing the effects of language, playing with representations of a traditional cultural system and, finally, creating an interactive discussion of story and memory, brings into the forefront of this novel the ultimately important issue of self-consciousness, both on the part of the storyteller and the reader.

V. Conclusion

For many theorists today, the concept of gender identity formation occupies an important place in the ever-changing and developing body of literary theory. As a result of strides made in the last few decades by feminist and cultural theorists, most informed readers approach fiction from a perspective which is keenly aware of the ways in which patriarchal ideologies and gender definitions are ingrained in our culture, including our literature. These ideologies and definitions often appear in the shape of stereotypes resulting from inaccurate gender distinctions and the marginalization of particular groups of people, usually seen as "other" in relation to the dominant group. Ancient Celtic society was one culture that employed patriarchal ideologies and tended to marginalize women to a domestic realm where they functioned only as maternal figures. This is, of course, the tradition that followed the first Scottish settlers to Cape Breton and that persists in the island's culture to the present. It is also the tradition depicted in *Each Man's Son*, Hugh MacLennan's novel about Glace Bay, and most of Alistair MacLeod's fiction about Cape Breton.

According to *Each Man's Son* and MacLeod's short stories, the culture of Cape Breton is dominated and formed by men. Male stories are heroic, even one as tragic as Archie MacNeil's, and are punctuated by silent stoicism. The force that drives men to continue their legacy is sometimes stronger than any other commitment in their lives. However, this tradition brings with it two distinct problems. The first is that one must question just how realistic this heroic tradition is for any member of a culture that is not only quickly declining but is also based on a patriarchal system of gender construction. This points directly to the second problem, which is that the Scottish tradition of masculinity in Cape Breton deliberately marginalizes or ignores the experiences of women within that

culture. These literary works more often than not show that men are men because they are heroically silent, physical, and, most importantly, masculine. By contrast, women are women because they are mothers.

Ann-Marie MacDonald takes this same notion of patriarchal gender construction and uses it to illustrate just how ineffective and detrimental such frameworks are for everyone within a particular culture. Her presentation and reversal of female gender stereotypes reminds readers to look beyond the obvious surface of each situation. Furthermore, she allows her characters to employ their positions as marginal members of society to their advantage so that they are able to build a kind of sub-culture within the patriarchal order. The women in this novel claim powerful symbols normally controlled by the dominant culture, such as language and maternity, for their own and adjust them to fit specifically female needs and experiences. Finally, through her female characters and their cycles of experience, MacDonald creates a female counterpart for the male-dominated oral tradition in Cape Breton. In essence, MacDonald de-constructs and rearranges the Celtic tradition so that it reflects a more inclusive memory as opposed to a male memory.

An examination of *Each Man's Son*, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories*, and *Fall On Your Knees* , clearly reveals that each of the authors has consciously decided to present a particular perspective with respect to the issues of gender identity formation and marginalization. With each story, the reader gains further insight into the culture of Cape Breton and the effects that the patriarchal Scottish tradition has had on this region. While MacLennan and MacLeod certainly present interesting and poignant versions of experience in Cape Breton, it is important to remember that these are male-specific perspectives that follow in the tradition that tends to adhere to patriarchal definitions of gender. In contrast, MacDonald subverts

traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity in order to expose an alternate system of values as created by the Piper women. Ultimately, this system gives readers a more inclusive picture of the experience of living with the economic, social, and cultural hardships that accompany the lives of most Cape Bretoners.

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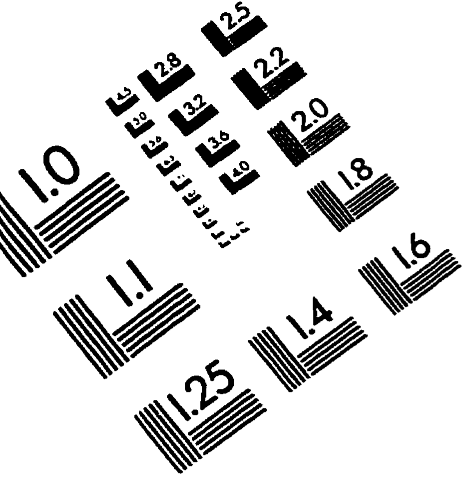

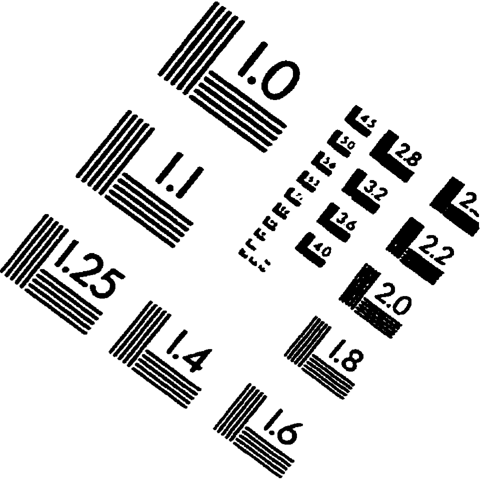

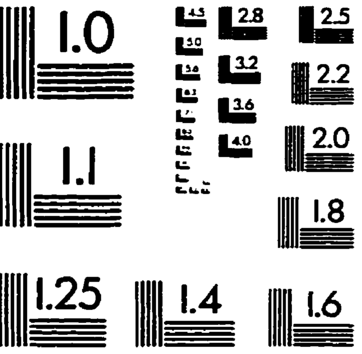

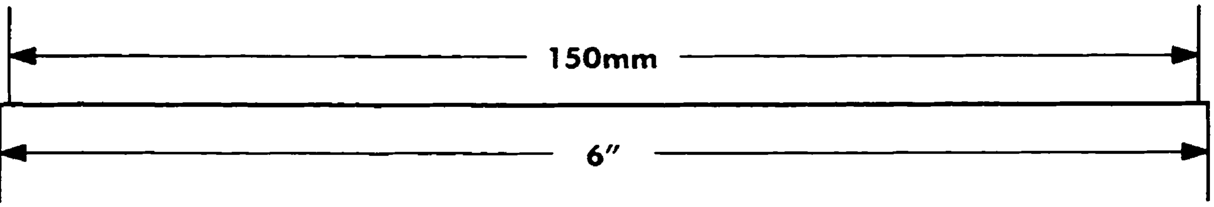

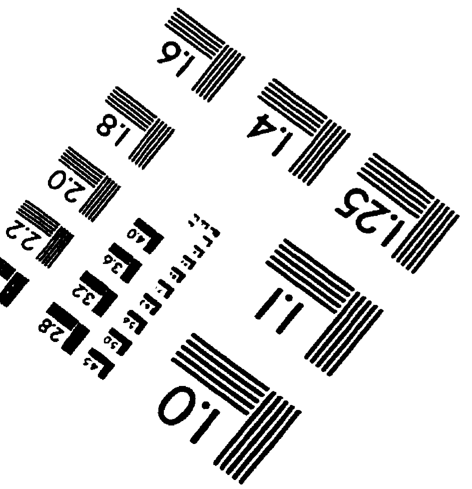

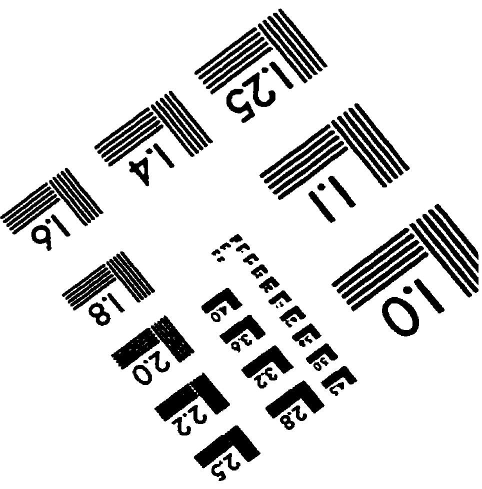

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