

SINCLAIR ROSS'S AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSE:  
THE PATRIARCHAL TRADITION AND ITS EFFECT ON A  
NON-FEMINIST NARRATIVE

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Shannon Marie Sofko ✓

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## Abstract

Sinclair Ross's As For Me and My House has been of critical interest virtually since its first appearance in 1941. While critics have concentrated their attention on the reliability of Mrs. Bentley as a narrator, their attitude toward her has varied. Immediately following the release of the 1957 New Canadian Library edition, critics perceived Mrs. Bentley as "pure gold and wholly credible" (Daniells 37). Later critics completely discredited Mrs. Bentley as an objective and reliable narrator, asserting that "she is often surprised and shocked by contingencies she did not anticipate and cannot really follow" (Cude, "Beyond Mrs. Bentley" 77); others remarked on the complexity of the narrative, suggesting that "Sometimes her observations are objective and reliable.... At other times, she is unreliable indeed..." (Moss 140).

While the vast majority of criticism now supports the contention that Mrs. Bentley is an unreliable narrator, there remains one critical issue that has been largely overlooked: that there is a consistent pattern to Mrs. Bentley's lack of reliability, explicable in terms of the 1930s prairie patriarchal environment of the novel.

Chapter One of this study defines the male-constructed social environment Ross creates in the novel, and concludes that as a result of forcing characters into debilitating stereotypical roles, the society prevents its members from experiencing personal fulfilment. Chapter Two examines Mrs. Bentley as a biased and largely unreliable focalizing agent, and considers the power relationship between the main characters in terms of composition and structure. Chapter Three explores the extent to which the characters have internalized their society's values and gender definitions to the detriment of their own personal growth and freedom of being. The Conclusion examines the ending of the novel and argues that, although escape from their life of hypocrisy and stereotype would augur for an optimistic interpretation, on close examination the text reveals that the fundamental dynamics between Mrs. Bentley and Philip remain the same, and as a result, escape is impossible.

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my Mom,  
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for all of her "unacknowledged" work;  
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## Introduction

Sinclair Ross's As For Me and My House received favourable Canadian reviews with its original release. The most notable review was that of Robertson Davies in the Peterborough Examiner, in which he not only suggested the novel was a "first-rate book[ ]...which will reflect credit upon this country" (16), but in which he also outlined the matters which were to become of primary critical interest after the 1957 reprint: the relationship between Philip and Mrs. Bentley, of which Davies wrote that "Mr. Ross seems to understand his characters perfectly, and the relationship between [them]...though complex and perverse, is entirely credible" (17). The nature of Mrs. Bentley's narration, to Davies, reflected that "Mr. Ross is keenly aware of the subtleties of the human mind but he knows when to let the reader draw his own inferences..." (17). Regarding the subject of Philip as a failed artist, Davies saw that he was "a hypocrite, but never one of those happy hypocrites who is unconscious of his own hypocrisy" (17). Aside from initial reviews, little else was written about the novel until the New Canadian Library reprint in 1957.

In the Introduction to the 1957 New Canadian Library paperback edition of As

For Me and My House, Roy Daniells opened the debate with regard to the nature of Mrs. Bentley's narration, writing that

she is pure gold and wholly credible. Precariously she sustains an equilibrium from day to day between tough and tender mindedness, between realism close to despair and an idealism that keeps the gyroscope spinning when the pathway ahead narrows to become a mere filament across the gulf. (37)

Daniells accepted Mrs. Bentley's diary as an accurate and objective record of herself, her husband, their relationship, and the town of Horizon. In 1960 Warren Tallman lent support to this view of Mrs. Bentley by suggesting that "The novel is a projection through the medium of Mrs Bentley's remarkably responsive consciousness..." (41), and Sandra Djwa, who viewed the novel as a Puritan "psychological search for self" (54), found she was "inclined to believe that Mrs Bentley is no more or less culpable than she might be expected to be under her circumstances" (61). Initially Mrs. Bentley was thus viewed by critics as both a reliable narrator and a positive force in the Bentleys' struggle for personal freedom.

Later critics took issue with such claims. Alternate views of Mrs. Bentley began to take shape. In the late 1960s, in his article, "Sinclair Ross's Ambivalent World," W.H. New suggested that within the text it is

the ambivalence itself which is desired — not based on an indecisiveness about who his character really is, but emerging out of a carefully constructed web of viewpoints, Mrs Bentley's and ours, pitted ironically against each other so that we come to appreciate not only the depth and complexity of the narrator and her situation, but also the control in which Ross artistically holds his words. (49)



New was one of the first to note the lack of consistency within the narration as well as the role the reader must play in creating a more objective view of the characters and events within the novel. In his 1973 article "Beyond Mrs Bentley," Wilfred Cude further discredited Mrs. Bentley as an objective and reliable narrator by observing that "Professor Daniells is not correct when he claims Mrs Bentley 'sees...the whole situation with exquisite and painful clarity'; on the contrary, she is often surprised and shocked by contingencies she did not anticipate and cannot really follow" ("Beyond Mrs. Bentley" 77).

John Moss further complicated this assessment of Mrs. Bentley in his analysis of the complexity of her narration which, in his opinion, was predominantly unreliable, and only had occasional moments of reliability:

To consider Mrs Bentley unreliable is an evasion. Mrs Bentley observes and interprets the world that she lives in, occupies, often revealing far more of it than she intends. Sometimes her observations are objective and reliable, her commentaries fair and perceptive, while the world revealed appears a sham. At other times, she is unreliable indeed, and the world appears a solid separate place. (140)

David Stouck, in his 1974 article "The Mirror and the Lamp," aptly noted that "Mrs. Bentley's reliability as narrator assumes more complex dimensions, for her words must always be weighed against her desire to possess Philip and to be a mother" (98).

Over the years, a new attitude to Mrs. Bentley gradually developed, wherein the reader was seen as having to play an active role in determining the extent to which Mrs. Bentley's narration could be considered reliable. In order to be able to

determine this degree of reliability, the reader must look to those elements which are behind those aspects of Mrs. Bentley's narration that are obviously biased; only then can an alternative and more realistic interpretation of characters and events be determined. To ascertain which characteristics bias Mrs. Bentley's narration, the reader must look to the two alternate definitions of self which are presented in the novel and see the extent to which a patriarchal system of imposed values informs and regulates human activity and self-development.

The process of self-definition unfolds symbolically within the physical framework of the novel, and comprises predominantly three domains: the open prairie, the town of Horizon, and the House of Bentley. With regard to the two main characters within the novel, each of these domains acts symbolically either as a threat or reinforcement to the definition of self each would like to maintain. The open prairie represents what could be termed an "unprescribed" and "undefined" view of existence, one in which individuals must struggle on their own to establish any sense of significance in their lives. The town of Horizon, in contrast, represents a framework of existence based on social norms and traditions, the principles of which are founded predominantly on the Western prairie patriarchal tradition. The House of Bentley is the theatre in which the drama between these two opposing frameworks of self-definition unfolds between the two main characters, each of whom subscribes to an opposing definition of self. Basically Mrs. Bentley subscribes to, and is influenced by, the social definition of self, while her husband leans in the opposite direction.

In connection with these two opposing definitions of self can be found several subsidiary motifs. Associated with Mrs. Bentley and her quest for social self-definition are the existence of false fronts, hypocrisy, and the fear of the unknown. As a result, the reader must recognize that Mrs. Bentley's narration is always biased in favour of upholding these social constructs. In his struggle toward a more autonomous self-definition, Philip Bentley for the most part rebels against these values. It is around this central conflict that the novel takes form and the nature of Mrs. Bentley's narration is brought into question.

The most obvious example of this conflict between social and autonomous self-definition can be seen symbolically in the opposition between the prairie landscape and the town with its false-fronted stores and homes. These opposing forces serve to reinforce the conflict which is at the core of this novel: whether to accept socially defined boundaries and arbitrarily assigned significance to one's existence (symbolized by the false fronts), or to reject society's values and struggle to understand the meaning of one's life with reference to the raw and undefinable power of the nature around them.

Mrs. Bentley, in choosing the former rather than the latter, lives in fear of her natural surroundings. As D.G. Jones notes in his work Butterfly on a Rock,

Throughout the novel th[e] authentic but inarticulate life is associated with the world of the open prairie which lies outside and appears opposed to the world of the town. Mrs Bentley's attitude to the land is consequently ambiguous. It both draws and repels her.

The terror in regard to nature which Northrop Frye sensed in [Canadian] poetry is distinctly felt and articulated in Ross's novel.... The wilderness has become the mirror of Mrs Bentley's suppressed vitality. It is naturally hostile and deliberately opposed to her conscious will and to that conception of herself which her will sustains. (45)

The "conception of herself" which her "conscious will... sustains" is that which society expects and has helped to create. Rather than struggle to find a self-definition which incorporates both her natural disposition and the vastness of the unknown represented by the prairie, Mrs. Bentley limits her sense of significance and self-definition to that which her society provides.

Philip, in contrast, uses art as a means to record his desire to escape from the stifling nature of the town and the social standards it represents. Philip draws sketch after sketch which records "his own situation and his desire to escape from it" (McMullen, Sinclair Ross 79). In one particular drawing of Philip's, Lorraine McMullen notes that:

Here the reader can see that the false-fronted stores 'in steplike sequence' indicates the endless succession of small prairie towns which have been Philip's past and which stretch in endless progression into the future, 'a stairway into the night.' The figure hurrying away can be interpreted as a reflection of Philip's desire to escape from this endless repetition of small towns. Sketches such as these contribute to Ross's portrayal of Philip — the hopelessness, frustration, and despair of his marriage and of his situation as a minister in this town. (79)

Mrs. Bentley's fear of the wilderness and Mr. Bentley's disdain for the town give voice to their opposing definitions of self. Mrs. Bentley, afraid as she is of the unknown, "suppresses her vitality" and assumes society's values, which are represented by the

town. Philip, in contrast, longs to escape from the town and in so doing, free himself of his hypocritical roles both as minister and Mrs. Bentley's husband, and "have an opportunity for the life which he believes he was intended to have" (McMullen, Sinclair Ross 81).

Mrs. Bentley's assumption of the town's mores results in yet another conflict between her and Philip, as she supports "Horizon itself, the small community nurturing its prejudices and its jealousies in the decrepit false front buildings that line its Main Street" (Woodcock 31). This is the society which has created the "self" which Mrs. Bentley tries to sustain. Moulding herself in response to their needs, Mrs. Bentley assumes, in the words of Wilfred Cude, "easy endorsement of the rites of hypocrisy" ("Turn It Upside Down" 474) as she "nonchalantly identifies with the false fronts and hypocrites that so bedevil him [Philip]" ("Turn It Upside Down" 475).

The domain in which this drama is most notably played out is the House of Bentley, which houses Mr. and Mrs. Bentley and their tenuous relationship. Given the above, the House of Bentley is divided. Philip, painfully aware of the hypocrisy of his position as a minister, painstakingly avoids hypocrisy in any other form, attempting at every turn to escape from it through his art and his relationship with Judith. Mrs. Bentley, in contrast, while reserving the right to criticize others for their hypocrisy, enjoys their acceptance of hers. As Mr. and Mrs. Bentley are mutually incompatible, their marriage steadily disintegrates as Mrs. Bentley builds her own world of the town, its people and her diary while Mr. Bentley builds his of the landscape, Judith, and his

art.

In contrast to the hypocritical self which Mrs. Bentley attempts to maintain, Philip works to create an autonomous self.<sup>1</sup> As John Ferres maintains:

Bentley's search for an authentic self compels him to reject the church's way.... Finally, he tears down the facade of his old self, but the new, authentic self must be forged in a secular, humanist crucible of art rather than in the empty chalice of the church. (5-6)

Having hoped to use the Church as a means of acquiring the education he needed to advance his career in art, Philip is "prevented from doing so by an inanition of the soul that arises from marital responsibilities, economic conditions, and guilt over abandoning his flock" (Ferres 7). He is thus trapped in a role he neither wanted nor envisioned for himself, and his struggle to escape from it permeates the novel.

Each of these physical domains, the landscape, the town, and the house, thus represents either a barrier or a refuge for a particular type of self-definition. The landscape offers an autonomous definition of self, the town offers a definition of self based on social convention and tradition, while the house is the place in which the two come into conflict.

While Philip's autonomous definition of self would, if embraced, obviously result in greater freedom for the individual, the question then becomes: why would anyone choose a socially imposed definition of self, with its attendant false fronts and

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<sup>1</sup>For the purposes of this thesis, "autonomous self-development" is defined as human development based on personal interests and abilities rather than on the pressures of social influences and gender stereotypes.

hypocrisy? The answer lies in the patriarchal dimension of the environment in which Mrs. Bentley lives, traditional models of behaviour which exert themselves so forcefully that few even consider rebelling against them, and those who do face an endless struggle in overcoming them.

This thesis will first explore the nature of the patriarchal tradition by examining the social environment it creates, and show how it pervades the non-feminist narrative of the novel, undermines the characters' attempts to find autonomous self-definition, and ultimately affects Mrs. Bentley's narration.

Chapter One draws on Jean Miller's Toward a New Psychology of Women in order to define the male-constructed social environment Ross creates in the novel, one which attempts to force characters into stereotypical "female" and "male" roles. The chapter concludes that as a result of none of the characters being able to conform completely to these unsuitable and debilitating roles, characters are unable to experience autonomous fulfilment.

Chapter Two examines Mrs. Bentley from a narratological perspective as a focalizing agent, and considers the power relationship between the main characters in terms of the composition and structure of the text. Mrs. Bentley's focalization, her choice of words, and her exclusions and inclusions reveal a set of values that is strongly influenced by the preoccupations of the society in which she exists. Chapter Two concludes that Mrs. Bentley, although the prominent focalizer of each character, is a poor "filter" through which to view the characters and actions around her. Indeed,

without realizing it, she perpetuates the environment she claims to find so suffocating.

Chapter Three examines the relationship of art to the lives of the main characters, and discusses the extent of their submission to the environment as described in Chapter One, that is, the extent to which they have internalized their society's values and gender definitions to the detriment of their own personal growth and freedom of being. The chapter also explores the extent to which the novel implicitly argues for an environment free of imposed hierarchies and strict gender definitions.

The concluding chapter discusses the novel's ending, suggesting that the unhealthy environment seen throughout in the obviously unhappy lives of the two main characters is not relieved at the book's conclusion. Although Mrs. Bentley, Philip, and Philip junior appear to be making a new life for themselves, on close examination the text reveals that the dynamics between Mrs. Bentley and Philip remain the same, and thus significant change is not likely.



## Chapter One: The Social Environment

As For Me and My House explores the relationship of the forces of society to the individual, and examines the extent to which these forces subjugate and prevent autonomous self-development. Operating on the assumption that “women have equal worth with men in respect of their common nature as free persons” (Charvet 1), and assuming the “nature and value of persons is independent of gender” (Charvet 2), the reader is able to delineate in As For Me and My House a world in which very few attempt autonomous self-development, and of those who do, none succeeds.

In general, a lack of autonomous self-development results when people are not free to “do what they wish without being interfered with by others” (Charvet 7). As social beings, people are influenced by their social environment, and if this environment is laden with inequities, biases, and stereotypes that privilege highly-codified and restricting views of human behaviour, autonomous self-development for male and female alike becomes very difficult to achieve. In As For Me and My House, the reader is able to delineate such an environment and explore the effect it has on its members. Because each individual within the text is expected to conform to one of

society's gendered roles, autonomous self-development, as the product of a vision of one's potential independent of society's expectations and demands, is never achieved. Furthermore, it also emerges that social acceptance and autonomous self-development are mutually incompatible; a character is unable to obtain one without losing the other. Thus personal integrity is virtually impossible to attain in Ross's world as well.

In As For Me and My House the main impediment to autonomous self-development is the patriarchal environment in which the characters exist. The patriarchy which looms over them is that of the 1930s prairie environment, depicted, in physical terms, by the following description of Horizon recorded by Mrs. Bentley in her diary:

I turned once and looked back at Horizon, the huddled little clutter of houses and stores, the five grain elevators, aloof and imperturbable, like ancient obelisks.... It was like one of Philip's drawings. There was the same tension, the same vivid immobility, and behind it all somewhere the same sense of transience. (78)

Obelisks, representative of the Western male tradition of dominance have, in the 1930s prairie environment, been replaced by the elevators which stand prominently and loom menacingly over "the huddled little clutter of houses" (78), houses being closely associated with the female in prairie literature.<sup>1</sup> That the grain elevators,

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<sup>1</sup>Obelisks, aside from their visual appearance as phallic symbols, represent the Western system of patriarchy in that they celebrate the male line of Pharaohs who ruled Egypt from 3200 BC to 300 AD and whose function it was, according to the world history book The Last Two Million Years, "to maintain the whole order of the universe, established at the moment of creation and embracing not only the social and political structure of Egypt but also the laws of nature, the movement of the heavenly bodies, the rotation of the seasons and the annual flood and fall of the Nile" (64). Admired

as new symbols of male permanence and phallic supremacy, are undoubtedly filled with little or no grain, as a result of the Depression, is significant in suggesting that any society so rigidly structured and tenuously supported is neither prosperous nor secure. The sense of transience is thus produced by the very symbols meant to suggest permanence and immutability, just as the society which these symbols represent inhibits the development of its members rather than encouraging their growth and prosperity. The result is a feeling of tension and immobility, as members of this society struggle in vain against the social forces and traditions which are so much greater than themselves.

As several critics have established, As For Me and My House depicts a town in which there is a rigid and "a fixed notion of gender" (Moss 143). The female role in this environment is defined by Kroetsch as "containing, nurturing, protecting, [and] mothering" (117) while the male role, in contrast, is described as distant and silent (117). Godard further adds to this train of thought by remarking that the notions held by the characters within the fictive milieu reflect the belief that reason is masculine while emotion is feminine (137). Such restrictive definitions of the male and the female create characters who "have been obsessively dominated by a compulsion to conform

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by Western civilization ever since, Egyptian obelisks exist in the nations which have more recently set the course for Western patriarchy: England, France, and the United States. That houses are associated with the female in prairie literature is referred to specifically by Kroetsch, who notes that "The basic grammatical pair in the story-line (the energy line) of prairie fiction is house:horse. . . . To be in a house is to be fixed: a centering upon stasis. Horse is masculine. House is feminine. Horse: house. Masculine: feminine" (114). More generally, it has also been a social tradition of prairie history that women "keep the home fires burning," being responsible for "hearth and home."

to what they believe to be society's expectations of them as respectable citizens, and their behaviour reflects that compulsion" (Matheson 163). Characters thus do not develop according to their personal interests and abilities, but rather in response to the definition imposed upon them by their society. As such, most characters opt for the security and status that come from being part of the status quo because, as Matheson observes, they have "so little faith" in themselves that they "may always have feared genuine freedom with all its attendant risks and uncertainties" (173).

The relationship between Mrs. Bird and her husband, Horizon's only medical doctor, is clearly patterned along these gender stereotypes. The following monologue by Mrs. Bird, listened to and recorded by Mrs. Bentley, clearly illustrates the patterns the aforementioned critics have discussed:

Provincial atmosphere — it suffocates. The result is it's always a man's world I live in. The dominating male — you'll understand when you meet the doctor. Even worse, a doctor's world. Cold, scientific. I wasn't quite meant for it either...(29). The doctor and I have written several papers...you'll read them some day. In his own way he's an authority — and I lend the human touch. (114)

In this instance Mrs. Bird states how she has been reduced to the role of a peripheral nurturer, attempting to help her husband bring his thoughts and talents, which are assumed by both to be central, to fruition. She is protecting and mothering in that she is attempting to "make a great scientist of the doctor" (Cude, "Beyond Mrs. Bentley" 86), anticipating the manner in which Mrs. Bentley has attempted to make something

out of Philip. These attempts derive mainly from insufficiencies both within themselves and their husbands for which they are trying to compensate. In the Birds' case, it is she who provides the emotional element and "lend[s] the human touch," while he is regarded stereotypically as the voice of reason, being "an authority" associated with the scientific. She views her life as having primary significance in terms of her ability to complement his sense of self and his personal ambitions. While she meets his needs, hers are never addressed, almost to the point where she assumes his and can no longer differentiate them from her own. Mrs. Bird has accepted the gendered definitions completely; all reason is invested in her husband, while all "heart," or the "human touch," is invested in her. Significantly, not only are these attributes given sexual exclusivity, but "heart" and the "human touch" are clearly not viewed as being of equal substance or importance, even by Mrs. Bird herself.

Jean Miller's assertion in the mid 1980s that "Our understanding of all of life has been underdeveloped and distorted because our past explanations have been created by only one half of the human species" (xi), accurately and succinctly describes the Western male-constructed social environment of As For Me and My House. Critical interest in this environment has come to the fore in the 1990s, with Frank Davey asserting that, in As For Me and My House, "men and women are essentially different ...there's a 'man's way' and a 'woman's way'..." (189). As a result of the gender defined environment, Mrs. Bentley becomes a woman whose

sense of herself is almost completely dispersed in the lives of others, represented only in her intercourse with others, displaced into the acts of others to the point of achieving motherhood through the imaginative literary and actual shaping of another woman's life... [Mrs. Bentley is an] imprisoned female, suffering as much from her implication as her imbrication in patriarchy. (Buss 203)

The struggle for all characters within the text to develop an autonomous definition of self within this environment is thus similar to the 1930s farmer's plight of attempting to grow a crop in the prairie dustbowl — the effort is heroic, but futile.

According to Jean Miller, the key elements defining a patriarchal environment are those of domination and subordination. Domination and subordination are based on a permanent state of inequality that manifests itself in two distinct ways. The dominants, with reference to the subordinates, label; use actions that are destructive; define acceptable roles; encourage psychological characteristics that are pleasing to themselves; and impede free and wide-ranging development. In all, dominants determine what is perceived as "normal" in a culture. The subordinates, in response, avoid honest reaction to destructive treatment, so as to avoid economic hardship, social ostracism, and psychological isolation; hide their defiance; absorb the untruths created by the dominants; and in some instances imitate the dominants in order to gain acceptance by them.

The dominant and subordinate role-playing characteristic of a patriarchal environment finds expression within As For Me and My House from the outset:

It's been a hard day on him [Philip], putting up stovepipes and opening crates, for the fourth time getting our old linoleum down. He hasn't the

hands for it. I could use the pliers and hammer twice as well myself, with none of his mutterings or smashed-up fingers either, but in the parsonage, on calling days, it simply isn't done. In return for their thousand dollars a year they expect a genteel kind of piety, a well-bred Christianity that will serve as an example to the little sons and daughters of the town. It was twelve years ago, in our first town, that I learned my lesson, one day when they caught me in the woodshed making kindling of a packing box. "Surely this isn't necessary, Mrs. Bentley — your position in the community — and Mr. Bentley such a big, able-bodied man —."

So today I let him be the man about the house, and sat on a trunk among the litter serenely making curtains over for the double windows in the living-room. (5)

As "Mrs. Bentley," our narrator is always labelled with reference to her husband, the Reverend Mr. Philip Bentley. She is his wife, and thus her personal identity is his name; we never learn her first name or her maiden name. Because he is a small town parson, she sees herself as having to play the role of a "well-bred Christian" wife; because he is defined as "a big, able-bodied man," she should play the part of a small and weak-bodied woman. Throughout this passage Mrs. Bentley bitterly describes herself in the process of having been labelled as a subcomponent or a substandard version of her husband or dominant counterpart. In the act of reprimanding her, the spokespersons for the dominant ideology clearly define her "acceptable role," impede any development not within the confines of that role, and encourage as tolerable only submissive and passive behaviour. In this way the dominant patriarchal ideology is clearly established from the outset of the novel.

As a subordinate, Mrs. Bentley appropriately hides her defiance, visibly bending to the dominant culture's wishes, but saying to herself that she "let him be the man

about the house" (emphasis added), thus capitulating but nonetheless maintaining, in her own mind, a semblance of control and influence. However, despite the underlying bitterness with which she describes this interaction, it is evident that Mrs. Bentley is admittedly very concerned with appearances and the opinions others hold of her, for she would not have capitulated to such people without on some level accepting the validity of their criticism. This in turn suggests that she holds Philip accountable for his inability to fulfil his "male" role more satisfactorily, a male role she accepts more or less uncritically. This, coupled with the fact that the dominant ideology is forced on Mrs. Bentley by other women in this instance, illustrates Miller's observation that subordinates absorb the untruths of the dominants, in Mrs. Bentley's case, virtually to the point of acceptance, and participate in the enforcement process of both themselves and their peers. It is also interesting to note that Mrs. Bentley sits serenely "on a trunk among the litter," very much a visible picture of where she has been placed in this society. Furthermore, her "serenity" suggests that she may not be all that unhappy in her enforced role. In As For Me and My House, characters behave in ways that are very much the product of the long-standing traditional Western patriarchal environment. The system of patriarchy by which they are influenced may also be focused more specifically into the Depression mentality of the 1930s prairie. This patriarchy is typical of all patriarchies in having at its foundation the system of dominance and subordination which Miller explores, but at the same time also has specific characteristics with respect to time and place.



To be female in the prairies during the Depression was to be very narrowly defined. Of the three main political and social organizations, only the Farm Movement “attempted to create a role for women as equal partners with the men in their movement, but because of the sexist mindset of many...they were able to achieve only the state of junior partners” (Taylor 90). Otherwise women’s roles continued to be traditionally defined. The Homemakers’ Clubs fought to “elevate women’s traditional role” and “encouraged the woman to live a life of service to others in their homes and communities” (Taylor 82). According to Georgina Taylor, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) also saw women providing mainly support work, which “involved four categories: work at home to free other people, usually men, to work for the CCF; supplying and preparing food for CCF gatherings and billeting CCF people; fund-raising; and election support service” (86). Women in the 1930s were predominantly “behind-the-scenes” workers, working toward success and personal fulfilment for their male counterparts, but rarely for themselves. Thus, even the most socially progressive elements, like the CCF, were heavily patriarchal.

Taylor further observes that “it is plain that sexism affected the participation of women [in the political process] and forced them to make difficult choices” with respect to supporting “a women’s organization where men did not prevail,” or joining “groups dominated by men” in which “the women were discriminated against” (88). In As For Me and My House, Mrs. Bentley has been forced to make a similarly difficult choice: whether to fulfil her own potential or to dedicate her life “to the

service of others,” acting as a “support” and “behind-the-scenes worker,” as the prairie patriarchy of the 1930s dictated. Mrs. Bentley was obviously a talented piano player. As an adolescent, she began to play the piano and asserts that by the age of nineteen she could play Beethoven’s Appassionata Sonata and Chopin’s Polonaise in A flat Major. Obviously having the talent to succeed in her own right via the piano, she writes: “My mother always saw me playing a concerto in white velvet, white to make me conspicuous against the black dress-suits of the orchestra” (198). In this vision, she is an equal pitted against the predominantly male orchestra, asserting and maintaining her own strength, and receiving, as a soloist and thus a realized individual, most of the glory. Pressured by tradition, however, Mrs. Bentley “could only edge away from such notions in embarrassment, and think to [her]self it was like buying wallpaper before you had a house to put it on” (198). Mrs. Bentley, self-defined as an adornment rather than the main attraction, thus relinquishes herself to “accompanying him [Percy Glenn]” (102), her musical counterpart who eventually achieves fame and success, and uses the piano to win Philip, “Submitting to him that way, yielding [her] identity — it seemed what life was intended for” (22).

The “received doctrine” (Code 195) of the 1930s prairie setting does not allow for self-defining, assertive women, but rather conditions women to “behind-the-scene support.” This is a position for which they require considerable training in diplomacy, hypocrisy and suppression of the self, as Mrs. Bird eloquently states: “Always let a man think how fine and tolerant he is to put up with you. That’s the formula

for marital success. I follow it myself and know it works" (114). Unfortunately, it is undoubtedly this type of "received doctrine — the findings of the acknowledged experts in society" which has limited the range of Mrs. Bentley's "very possibilities of being" (Code 195). This, combined with her "intellectual 'akrasia,' an entrenched reluctance to enquire further lest one face the necessity of having to 'reconsider a range of treasured beliefs'" (Code 197), Mrs. Bentley continues to be restrained by an "acculturation process" in which such stereotypes become "both deep-seated and tenacious" (Code 197).

Laura Kirby is also restrained by this same "acculturation process," except she has rejected one generic role in favour of another. To begin, Laura was, like most 1930s women, associated with the house. She was the wife of Stanley and mother to three small children; she fulfilled the role of caregiver and support worker. After a brief affair, however, Laura Kirby rejected the world of the subordinates and entered that of the dominants:

For Laura is a thorough ranch woman, with a disdainful shrug for all such domestic ties. There's a mannish verve about her... and at the same time a kind of glamour, to confirm all you've ever imagined about an older, more colorful West.

She wears a bright red bandeau over her hair, a man's shirt and trousers, and for riding fine leather chaps studded with silver nails. She breaks broncos and punches cattle a match for any cowboy. They call her familiarly by name, give her backside every now and then a companionable cuff, and saddle her little buckskin stallion with the bunkhouse counterpart of gallantry. (122)

Laura is thus closely associated with the horse which, as we have seen, is a prairie fiction symbol for the masculine.<sup>2</sup> The cowboys whom she employs accept her, "giv[ing] her backside every now and then a companionable cuff" (122), while the women folk around her perform her support work, with Annie doing all of the cooking, and Mrs. Bentley giving herself "practically a full-time job" (122) looking after Laura's three children. As well, Laura is clearly being associated with the most romantic of prairie masculine traditions, that of the "older, more colorful West" (122). Laura is, however, a "woman who models herself after male role models achiev[ing] success by becoming an honorary male" (Overall 181). In order to be accepted in this role as a pseudo-male, Laura must rescind all of her "feminine" attributes, and reject and ridicule all that is not "masculine." She, in effect, must guard her "masculinity" more tenaciously than the male characters, as it is socially not her birthright. The following passage illustrates the interplay of female and male roles heretofore discussed. The position of subordinated female is played by Mrs. Bentley; that of the dominant male by Philip; and that of honorary male, by Laura:

Just before noon Laura came in and said he [Philip] was sitting out in the sun near the river without a hat. I said it might be better to leave him alone, but she insisted on taking him out one of Stanley's sombreros.... Laura said she had brought a hat for him, and he snapped back he didn't want it. I suggested meekly he could wait and paint when we got back to town.... I motioned Laura to come away, but instead she went behind him and tried to crush the hat down over his head. (133)

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<sup>2</sup>According to Kroetsch, "To be on a horse is to move: motion into distance.... Horse is masculine" (114).

Aside from being rather comical, this passage illustrates the power relationships among the three characters. Mrs. Bentley, as a “feminine” character, “suggests meekly” and “motions”; Mr. Bentley, as a “masculine” character, “snaps back,” and Laura, the defensive “honorary male” “insists,” and “trie[s] to crush the hat down over his [Philip’s] head.”<sup>3</sup> Their actions and the language used to describe their actions clearly delineate the patriarchal hierarchy which structures their relationship and which impedes each of them from harmonious interaction.

Thus, both Mrs. Bentley and Laura Kirby are in one respect in similar positions, for they have, as coping mechanisms, each chosen one of the stereotypical roles available to them in the prairie patriarchy of the 1930s. However, as a result of their respective choices, they have both had to suppress part of their personalities; for Mrs. Bentley this has entailed the sacrifice of personal artistic self-fulfilment, while for Laura it has been at the expense of a developed emotional life. It becomes very clear, however, that the loss Mrs. Bentley and Laura experience is a necessity if one wants to survive within the patriarchal environment of the text. In no instance is this necessity more apparent than in the case of Judith West.

Judith West, like the Depression West itself, resists being moulded and manipulated by men. She is an independent loner who “would transgress gender and class

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<sup>3</sup>That Laura “tries[s]” to force the hat on Philip’s head implies she was unsuccessful, just as her attempt to try to be a male is ultimately doomed.

roles, who would refuse conceptions of the normal, the familial, who looks for 'something more' than what she has rather than attempting to defend. . . an inherited world" (Davey 187); instead, Judith seeks a career for herself rather than trying to support her family, and she refuses marriage in favour of an affair. As a result, it is no wonder that Judith is the target of the conformity-enforcing elements within Horizon. Having left home at the age of seventeen to pursue training and a job in the city, Judith is forced, presumably by economic circumstances beyond her control (that are themselves products of the patriarchy), to return to Horizon penniless, to be ridiculed by the townspeople as a "little country upstart" (16), and to seek internal solace in late evening wanderings around the town, contemplating that it would not be "dramatically right" if there were not "something more than cows and pigs and people like Dan" (74).

Unlike Mrs. Bentley and Laura Kirby, Judith refuses to choose between the rigid and mutually exclusive feminine and masculine roles the patriarchal society of Horizon has defined. As a result of her independent nature, Judith manages to fulfill herself (however briefly) as an individual, realizing all the "totality of possibilities which life offers, possibilities which cannot be grasped or merely pass unnoticed" (Ricou 70). Judith's triumph over the forces around her, symbolized within As For Me and My House by the wind, is well evinced in the following passage:

The wind was too strong for Philip or the choir, but Judith scaled it when she sang alone again before the closing hymn.

The rest of us, I think, were vaguely and secretly a little afraid. The

strum and whimper were wearing on our nerves. But Judith seemed to respond to it, ride up with it, feel it the way a singer feels an orchestra. There was something feral in her voice, that even the pace and staidness of her hymn could not restrain. (51)

Unlike the rest, who cower in fear when confronted with all the possibilities and risks genuine freedom and autonomous development would offer, Judith responds to the challenge and allows it to make her stronger. As the wind may also be seen to symbolize natural force and potential, Judith's ability to "ride up with it" also represents her ability, which is unique in the novel, to accede to her nature. Unfortunately, however, rather than being an inspiration to others, in their fear she is shunned and ridiculed by the townspeople. One cannot help but believe that the harsh, physical environment that kills her after the birth of her child is but a mirror of the psychologically and socially harsh climate that she has experienced in life:

Judith's baby was born Monday night, a month before its time. Judith died early Tuesday morning.... In the afternoon she went for a walk, refusing to let her sister go with her, and promising to be back within an hour. But the fields were soft and sticky, and the hard walking exhausted her. About dusk a neighbor boy out hunting cattle found her resting on a stone pile, cold and ill already, and wandering in the mind. (211)

Thus, as Helen Buss suggests, through the only character who steadfastly resists the stereotypes and gender biases of her society, Ross

speaks of a world... that does not demand such scathing binary opposites, such rigid gender-sex stereotypes, a world contained in that gift of oranges and Judith's tears, a world in which mothering does not demand the death of the voice that scales the wind, in which adult womanhood is not a condition of lack, a condition that requires the death of the female voice in the birthing of sons. (207-208)

Judith's death thus exemplifies the inability of Horizon's social environment to sustain the growth of an independent and autonomously self-developing member. Just as the prayers for a physical environment to nourish the crops remain unanswered, so the need for a changed social environment which allows for positive human growth, in the form of autonomous self-development, is negated as well. In this manner the environment in As For Me and My House does not allow for an egalitarian relationship between women and men, and it is not only the subordinates within this environment who are affected.

One of the ironies associated with the patriarchal ideology, which places males in a position of dominance with respect to their subordinate female counterparts, is that it also exerts its toll on those it supposedly favours. Philip Bentley, for example, appears to be empowered in many respects: as a male clergyman through his gender; through his social position as father, both to his congregation and to his adopted son Steve; and through his affiliation with, and presumed proximity to, the Protestant God, the deity at the top of a long-standing masculine hierarchy and Supreme Patriarch. On close inspection, however, Philip does not flourish in this environment. Rather, he is restrained and tormented by its confines to the extent that his patriarchal society will not tolerate the development of his artistic talent, which is deemed "feminine" (and therefore unworthy or subordinate).

Significantly, it is the "honorary male" Laura who makes the reader aware of the patriarchy's intolerance towards artistic endeavours, taking "an unaccountable



dislike to Philip" (123) as a result of his artistic nature. As a result, Laura must try to invalidate Philip in order to validate her own pseudo-male persona. To this end, with regard to Philip's raising the young boy Steve, Mrs. Bentley writes that Laura "told me bluntly he wasn't the right kind of man to bring up Steve. I asked her why, and, her voice pitched incredulous she said, 'And have him go round drawing little pictures too?'" (123). Mrs. Bentley's only response is: "I must admit that Philip isn't showing up to advantage here" (123). As such, the reader is able to determine that artistic dispositions and pursuits are not tolerated within the masculine tradition as defined by this text through Laura, the very masculine "honorary male," and the masculine ranchers.

As the illegitimate child of a dead father and a waitress mother, Philip initially rejected the town and the traditions which disinherited him, and turned to art to express his disenchantment. With no other avenue available to him as a young man, however, he embraces the same traditions which rejected him, making a "hero of his father... resolv[ing] to be another like him" (40), and joining the Church, which was

a hard acceptance. This Church that had tolerated him, that stood for the respectable, self-righteous part of the town, that all these years he had pitted himself against; he was to turn to it now, be humble about it, pull a grateful face.

It was his pride against what he wanted most from life, his instincts to be frank and upright against his instinct to fulfil himself. Days when to go was sane and right, against days when he dared not go and face himself. And always the urge to create, the belief that he could create. Always the encroaching little town, always the train, roaring away to the world that lay beyond. (43)

Rather than pursue a career seen by the patriarchy as “unmanly,” Philip chose to subordinate his art to a traditionally male role, that of a clergyman. Accordingly, he becomes part of the male tradition, subsequently marrying and longing for a son of his own as a substitute for genuine creativity. Unable to escape the patriarchal traditions, Philip did not pursue a career in art, but rather turned to the pulpit and “lost the enthusiasm and zest for such things” (32).

Philip’s inability to accept the consequences of his decision completely is the fundamental cause for unrest within his marriage as well. Mrs. Bentley, in opting to forsake an alternative life as a self-sufficient pianist wished, in winning Philip over and marrying him, to mould herself into the generic role society has impressed upon her. Philip, however, through his lack of inner “masculine virtues,” forces her to recognize not only his own shortcomings as the husband and provider she wanted, but her own shortcomings both with regard to the role she wanted to assume (to live vicariously through him) and the role she forsook, that of a concert pianist. In marrying Philip, Mrs. Bentley

must build a myth out of his past and personality which will in effect justify her continuing existence. But this myth depends on Philip’s masculinity, his function as the heromale, and this function she repeatedly usurps. To build the myth, she must shape the man; and in shaping the man, she destroys the myth. (Moss 142)

Mrs. Bentley, acting against her own nature, longs for a traditional female role while Mr. Bentley longs to escape from his traditional male role. Philip, originally having

craved “respectability,” married Mrs. Bentley, who admits she suppressed her personality in order to secure him. By marrying one another they are forced daily to acknowledge their false fronts and the barriers they create both between the two of them and the respective futures both envision for themselves.

Paul Kirby also provides an example of the manner in which the novel’s patriarchy diminishes and restricts an individual’s potential for autonomous development. Although Paul’s primary interest was more than likely horses while he lived on the ranch, this living, vibrant and passionate interest later becomes replaced by philology, a comparatively dead and stagnant pastime. Devoid of any personal associations, Paul’s objectivity and strict adherence to the original meaning of a word, rather than its subsequent growth and thus potential multiplicity of meanings, not only limits his understanding of the world, but impedes communication and understanding between himself and others:

Paul Kirby dropped in later to spend the evening, but I asked him would he come tomorrow for supper instead. “Nausea,” I explained. “I’m afraid he [Philip] wouldn’t be very good company.”

He looked so severe for a minute I thought I had offended him, but it was just that nausea is from a Greek word meaning ship and is, therefore, etymologically speaking, an impossibility on dry land. (47)

Like the patriarchy itself, Paul relies on history and tradition to define the boundaries of meaning to which he subscribes, rather than allowing himself and his personal experience to shape his framework of understanding. As W.H. New observes:

Paul’s problem is that he cannot live outside his world of facts. Whereas

he thinks he knows what's around him and withholds himself from it, others are encountering, experiencing whatever is there. (51)

Paul thus uses words and philology as a protective barrier to personal experience, and in this way his autonomous development is restricted by the patriarchy, represented in this instance by the very language it has created and through which it is reinforced.

This view of Paul is further supported by the nature of Paul's relationship with his physical environment and the horse. Born and raised on the ranch, it is Paul "who directs the Bentleys out of town, back to nature" (Kroetsch 115), and it is he who suggests that "You can't ride a horse and feel altogether worthless, or be altogether convinced that society's little world is the last word" (48-49). As such, Paul is associated with the prairie landscape and reflects an understanding of what it is to be free of the town and its attendant values. Paul's association with the prairie landscape and the horse become corrupted, however, as a result of his formal education and his living in town. As a result, Paul tells Mrs. Bentley

that that was the worst penalty inflicted by education, the way it separates you from the people who are really closest to you, among whom you would otherwise belong. Himself now, a ranch boy with a little schooling, he fits in nowhere. (28)

Although Paul continues to try and assert himself against the false-fronts and hypocrisy of the town, encouraging Mrs. Bentley not to become a "fly-flap" (174), and insisting "that belly is a perfectly good, respectable word," even though "the town is pursing its lips against such sanctions of vulgarity" (93), his growing distance from

the ranch and his corrupted relationship with his horse foreshadow imminent doom. Paul, while in town, becomes but a shadow of the cowboy he presumably was when on the ranch, becoming “a country dandy, capering about on his horse in cowboy finery” (Cude, “Beyond Mrs. Bentley” 79). The most memorable description of Paul’s riding is a scene in which Paul, “rigged out in all his cowboy togs” (53) is forced to control his horse, Harlequin, as a result of Harlequin having “reared and bolted” (55) after having been struck by tumbleweed. Mrs. Bentley writes that “both looked ashamed when they came back, Harlequin’s sides jerking in and out as if they were going to burst, Paul leaning over to pat his shoulder, doing his best to be nonchalant” (55). As such, Paul’s relationships to both the ranch and the horse are corrupted as a result of his association with the town.

In this way As For Me and My House not only depicts the present state of the patriarchal hierarchy and its effects on the women and men within it, but looks forward to, while it simultaneously denies, women like Judith who yearn to be self-developed and free. Mrs. Bentley, Philip, Laura and Paul have, in rejecting autonomous self-development, negated that aspect of their personality which, if developed, might have made them whole: Mrs. Bentley has denied her ability to fulfil herself as a concert pianist; Philip has denied the chance to devote his life to art; Laura has rejected the emotional capacity to incorporate her husband and her children into her life as a ranch woman; and Paul is prevented from freely experiencing the life around him.

Unfortunately, what is made clear within the novel, particularly through Judith’s

pregnancy, the town's reaction, and her subsequent feelings of guilt, is that by definition humans are social and physical beings, and as such, before a person can survive in a world such as this, everyone must encourage a more harmonious environment so that spirits such as Judith's can flourish, and people like Mrs. Bentley, Philip, Laura and Paul need not become one-dimensional figures, restricting themselves to that aspect of their personality which their society is willing to accept.

The present social environment depicted in As For Me and My House is neither meeting the needs of its people nor enhancing their growth in any way, but is rather stifling their development. In this way the novel suggests that, as with the physical environment of the dustbowl prairies, the social climate also needs to change in order to allow for the growth of autonomous self-developing and independent people.

## Chapter Two: Narrative Bias

The patriarchal values discussed in Chapter One which permeate Horizon are also reflected within the narration itself. Mrs. Bentley's narration, far from being objective, is imbued with the social and gender-biased mores she has absorbed from her surroundings. As such, on close examination, her narration is coloured by a set of arbitrary values that are the product of the society in which she exists.

The accuracy of Mrs. Bentley's narration in As For Me and My House has been in question since Roy Daniells naïvely assumed that Mrs. Bentley was, as a narrator, "pure gold and wholly credible" (Daniells 37). Since then, critics have been less sympathetic about Mrs. Bentley's narration. Stephens suggested that, as "She plays her cards too closely to her vest" (21), there are many inconsistencies within the narrative which are never accounted for or resolved. For example, Mrs. Bentley recognizes Judith's sexual advances towards Philip, but does not openly acknowledge the same actions of Paul toward her as anything but gestures of friendship. Similarly, with regard to the townspeople of Horizon, Mrs. Bentley repeatedly finds fault with the female characters yet is sympathetic and understanding in her interpretations of

the male characters' actions. These and other inconsistencies result in what Lorraine McMullen calls "an ironic gap between the narrator and the reader as the reader attempts to establish the accuracy of Mrs. Bentley's assumptions and of her interpretations of others' behaviour and, indeed, of her own motives and actions" ("Mrs. Bentley: Her Journal and Her Marriage" 104).

As a result of Ross's insistence that, given the unreliability of his narrator, the reader must play an active role in the deciphering and interpreting process within the novel, two dominant perspectives emerge in As For Me and My House. Some time ago Laurence Ricou pointed out that Ross "delicately exploits the tension between Mrs. Bentley's point of view and the reader's perspective" (66), recognizing that "it is the effective counterpoint of her opinion and the objective judgement the reader is encouraged to make which enhances the sense of psychological complexity" (66) within the novel. Although Ricou's assumption concerning the reader's objectivity is itself a bit naïve, in light of recent developments in the theory of narrative, a comparison of Mrs. Bentley's perspective with their own enables readers to see Mrs. Bentley not only as a focalizing agent, but an eccentric one at that. Although Ricou explores the nature of Mrs. Bentley's "subjectivity" with regard to the "barrenness of the land" as "a precise reflection of the emotional sterility of the Bentleys" (Stouck, Five Decades of Criticism 65), this chapter will explore specific interactions within the text which allow the reader to question her interpretation of characters and events and to recognize the viability of alternate interpretations, even though they may differ



from those recorded by her.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter will investigate in detail the dichotomy between “the vision” — that is, the novel’s events — and “that which is...perceived” by Mrs. Bentley. It soon emerges that her vision is heavily coloured by an androcentric bias in her role as narrator. Although the origin of this androcentric bias is never stated explicitly, Mrs. Bentley’s inequitable treatment of men and women would appear to stem from two sources: her unthinking acceptance of her society’s patriarchal values; and the manner in which she sees herself as a “mere” woman who desperately needs to protect her role as Philip’s wife. As such, in recording the characteristics and actions of those around her, Mrs. Bentley reflects through her use of language the gender stereotyping and the privileging of the masculine over the feminine that exists within a patriarchal environment. As well, she exhibits a dislike of women and a generally favourable appreciation of men.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>It is more helpful to view Mrs. Bentley from a narratological perspective as a focalizing agent by means of accessing the issue of her credibility. As a focalizing agent, Mrs. Bentley’s credibility is restricted by the nature of “focalization,” a term defined by Mieke Bal in *Narratology* as “the relations between the elements presented and the vision through which they are presented,” or, more specifically, “the relation between the vision [meaning the novel’s events] and that which is ‘seen,’ perceived” (100). By establishing the nature of the relationship between “the elements presented” and Mrs. Bentley’s “vision” of them, the reader is able to question the credibility of Mrs. Bentley’s narration.

<sup>2</sup>Having sacrificed so much in order to secure Philip, and as a result of their tenuous relationship, Mrs. Bentley often envisions other women as threats to the fragile security she enjoys in her role as Philip’s wife. Accordingly, Mrs. Bentley attempts to find fault with other women in order to detract from her own self-perceived inadequacies as Philip’s wife. With regard to the men within her environment, Mrs. Bentley uses them to soothe her fear that she is a dowdy matron who can no longer be attractive to Philip. She uses a letter from her former duet partner to “worr[y] Philip with amorous attentions in the middle of the afternoon” (102), and she dances and goes out with a young cowboy, “hoping absurdly Philip might see [her]” (128) and presumably be jealous.

As a result, in order to extract "the vision" from "that which is...perceived," the reader must compensate for Mrs. Bentley's biases and presumptions. The manner whereby one achieves this is through a repeated questioning of Mrs. Bentley's interpretations of the characters and events she describes, and by keeping in mind the arbitrariness of her gender-based assumptions concerning "proper" female and male behaviour, many of which, although they can be seen only implicitly, are behind most, if not all, of her interpretive responses. By so doing, the reader is able to formulate alternative interpretations from those provided by the narrator herself.

Because she assesses and interprets every character and event in relation to her need to secure her role as wife to Philip, together with her basic acceptance of the patriarchal society's values, Mrs. Bentley's narration becomes more complex than one might expect. Occurring in the form of a personal diary, Mrs. Bentley's narration allows Ross to reveal, in the words of Ken Mitchell, "Mrs. Bentley's character in some depth, taking his readers into that mysterious territory behind the eyes, where a character may see one thing and believe the opposite" (29). To further complicate matters for the reader, Mrs. Bentley's diary is also

characterized by concealment, which takes the form both of dismissing essential information and of providing 'honest' self-appraisals; on the other hand, such narratives evidence the 'criminal who wants to be caught' syndrome and therefore involve the unconscious dropping of clues: the projection onto others of one's own motives and the inadvertent trapping of oneself in contradictions. (Hinz and Teunissen 148)

As a result, the reader may arrive at alternative assessments of characters and events

recorded by Mrs. Bentley by taking note of the “unconscious clues” she leaves, the contradictions with which she surrounds herself, and the manner whereby she projects her own motives onto others. The first instance in which Mrs. Bentley undermines her female characters occurs with the introduction of Miss Twill and Mrs. Finley. In both instances, Mrs. Bentley defines them as “types,” lacking unique individuality. At the departure of Miss Twill after her first visit to the Bentleys, Mrs. Bentley writes, “So we got rid of her at last, and steeled ourselves for the next one” (6, emphasis added), a remark suggesting that all such visits and visitors are essentially the same. Later, Mrs. Finley is introduced as a character of whom “There’s one at least in every town, austere, beyond reproach, a little grim with the responsibilities of self-assumed leadership — inevitable as broken sidewalks and rickety false fronts” (8, emphasis added). In both cases the reader is left with the impression that specific women are nothing more than part of non-diverse groups of people whose characteristics, which are generally negative, change little from person to person and from place to place, and that individual women have no individuality apart from the sociological niche they occupy.

Mrs. Bentley further reinforces this notion with her description of the women after their first church service at the Partridge Hill schoolhouse:

After the service the women came up fidgeting with their ungloved hands to invite us soon to visit them. They were all wind-burned, with red chapped necks and sagging bodies. For a quarter of an hour they stood round the steps in sharp-tongued little groups, heartened by the spring again, discussing crops and gardens. (27, emphasis added)

These women are all a generic "type" as well, described as moving and acting as a unit. Mrs. Bentley attributes to all of them the same actions, behaviour, physical appearance, interests, character dispositions, and formation. Again, as with Miss Twill and Mrs. Finley, the characteristics which "typify" them are not positive but negative characteristics. The women are physically unattractive and "sharp-tongued." The visual image of the women being clustered in little groups further prevents the reader from distinguishing the individuals from within this description, and also denies that they even could be so distinguished.

In contrast, Mrs. Bentley at no point suggests that the male characters are "types" of whom "there's one at least in every town," nor does she ever portray individual men as members of a generic group. Instead, the reader is introduced to each male character individually and his attributes, which are generally positive, are presented as peculiar to himself. The few instances in which similarities exist, they are always of a positive nature. As such, Paul Kirby is a "nice, quiet-spoken young man" (10); Joe Lawson has "the same slow strength" (27) as Philip; Albert Downie is "confident and kindly" (108); and Philip is "A strong, virile man, right in his prime" (14). Even in Mr. Finley's case, the one occasion where she appears to assess a male negatively as a "meek little man," she sees a "triumph" in his meekness.

Mrs. Bentley's refusal to acknowledge diversity in her descriptions of the female characters is further reinforced through her naming practices within her diary. Generally speaking, female characters are never presented with both their first names

and surnames, but only their surnames, thus removing the emphasis from that part of their name that denotes individuality in the individual woman; instead, she concentrates the woman's identity on the name of her husband and her married state. As such, Mrs. Finley, Mrs. Wenderby, Mrs. Ellingson, Mrs. Lawson, Mrs. Holly, Mrs. Pratt, and Mrs. Downie are never freed, in the eyes of the reader, from their association with their husbands. In contrast, Philip Bentley, Paul Kirby, Joe Lawson, and Albert Downie are assigned independent identities through the emphasis placed on their names. The limitations this imposes on the reader's understanding of the characters is never more apparent than with the Reverend Mr. Philip Bentley and Mrs. Bentley for, as Frank Davey writes:

Although she is the narrator of As For Me and My House, and although most of its male characters carry both first names and surnames, she is identified only as 'Mrs. Bentley.'.... [A] reader can construct him as 'Philip' or 'Philip Bentley' or 'Reverend Bentley' and as occupying the various roles those names suggest, but can construct her as only 'Mrs. Bentley.' One can construct him as young or middle-aged, as a student or as a minister, but construct her only as a married woman. One can 'tutoyer' Philip, address him within an intimate discourse but, despite experiencing the narrative through what should be another intimate discourse, a diary, one must continue to consider 'Mrs. Bentley.' (180)

Although there may appear to be exceptions to this female rule with the likes of Judith West, Josephine Bird, and Laura Kirby, one soon recognizes that the only reason that these three are presented with first name and surnames is that they assume, to varying degrees, masculine roles.

In keeping with Mrs. Bentley's espousal of the patriarchal value system is her not

surprising admiration of the “masculine” female. Mrs. Bentley does not celebrate the traditional patriarchal notion of a “successful” female role, that of a woman constantly giving as a wife, mother and active towns person. Female success within the text falls predominantly to women who assume what are traditionally masculine gender characteristics. Ambitious, liberal-minded, and indifferent to a traditional female role, these women become women whom Mrs. Bentley treats with the same respect and tolerance as the male characters.

Although a reason for this is never given, there are at least two possible explanations. The first stems from within Mrs. Bentley herself. Mrs. Bentley never mentions a father when describing her childhood, and the glimpse of her mother examined above suggests a woman who was more independent and ambitious for her daughter than would have been the norm. As such, Mrs. Bentley may have formed an unusual opinion that male and female success is measured on the same grounds. The second possibility is simply that Mrs. Bentley may be attempting to respond to a category for which the patriarchal system normally does not acknowledge positively — women successful in ways that are traditionally “masculine.” As such, instead of enlarging the scope of possibilities for women, Mrs. Bentley stays within the confines of the system, doggedly admiring anything “masculine,” either in a woman or a man. Thus, as Frank Davey writes, Josephine Bird “foregrounds the male-female issue by complaining early in the novel about the ‘dominating male’ and of having to live in ‘a man’s world’” (181). Laura Kirby, as a defiant ranch woman, assumes a completely

male disposition as an “honorary male,” and is “the only married woman whom Mrs. Bentley can manage to call by her given name, and the only one never called by the text ‘Mrs.’” (181). Judith as well is presented as a masculine character, “sometimes stooping in the harvest fields like a man” (16). Thus, the complexity and familiarity with which Mrs. Bentley allows the reader to experience the characters is consistent, based as it is entirely on their approximation to an ideal of masculinity consistently endorsed, and this is reflected in part by the manner in which she names all the characters within her diary.

It would be unreasonable to assume that Mrs. Bentley is not as familiar with the names of the women she interacts with as she would be with those of the men. The consistency with which she restricts the use of first names, combined with her omission of her own first name from the entire diary, reinforce the idea that these omissions, as they form a pattern, are deliberate, rather than accidental. These omissions not only establish a formality and distance between the reader and the female characters that does not exist between the readers and the male characters, but make it more difficult to see these characters as unique, prominent, or intrinsically significant. Undoubtedly some of this bias stems from Mrs. Bentley’s dislike of women, of which she writes “‘I never get along with women very well’” (Daniells 39). As Daniells notes, such a statement “is worth a dozen pages of her usual record” (39).

Significantly, Mrs. Bentley responds to Steve Kulanich in a manner similar to the way she treats the women. In her insecurity, Mrs. Bentley treats him as she would

any other recognized threat to Philip's time and attention, and even admits that "[she] seemed to feel [her]self vaguely threatened" (56), as she did with Miss Twill and Mrs. Holly. She attempts to undermine Steve subtly by criticizing his taste in pictures, by "smil[ing] round craftily at Philip to remind him how critical he always is of my taste" (69); questioning the display of his lithograph of the Virgin Mary and his mother's crucifix; and criticizing the clothes Philip and he buy. This immature reaction is once again recognized by Philip, as it was in her interaction with Mrs. Holly, and Mrs. Bentley writes of Philip, "His eyes had been on me the same way all day, daring me to look my disapproval" (69). In this instance, Mrs. Bentley once again acknowledges the accuracy of Philip's reaction, stating "I like Steve, and at the same time I resent him. I grudge every minute he and Philip are alone together" (69).

Steve's role is, however, slightly more complex than the others in that he is not merely a threat to Mrs. Bentley. Mrs. Bentley also recognizes him as the child they never had, and as such, she is able to play the role of a mother, a role she both values and appreciates as a natural complement to that of wife. Of her newfound son Mrs. Bentley writes:

I didn't know anything like that could happen to me. It was as if once, twelve years ago, I had heard the beginning of a piece of music, and then a door had closed. But within me, in my mind and blood, the music had kept on, and when at last they opened the door again I was at the right place, had held the rhythm all the way. (91)

Mrs. Bentley becomes protective of their new family and willingly defends it against the opinion of the town, "putting [their] false front up again, enlarged this time for



three" (81).

Mrs. Bentley further presents a biased view of the female characters within the text by concentrating her interest and concern on a few difficult women rather than turning her time and attention to those of a more reasonable disposition. As such, Mrs. Bentley is constantly drawing our attention to the petty problems of the town women, be they Mrs. Pratt, the postmistress, who on the arrival of Mrs. Bentley's hat from out of town, makes sure Mrs. Bentley hears "all week about people who earn their money in the town but spend it somewhere else" (72); or Mrs. Finley, who crusades to keep Paul from using the words "belly" and "sweat" with reference to her and her daughter, both of whom prefer the more genteel "stomach" and "perspiration." The females to whom Mrs. Bentley turns her attention are those whose actions are easily characterized by herself as "bickering and petty and contemptible" (58). This interpretation is reinforced by Josephine Bird who states that, in her shifting from the masculine world of medicine to the social climate of the townswomen, "There are days when I positively loathe streptococci. Then an afternoon of bridge or tea and I realize there are things more virulent" (29-30).

Such limited and limiting views of women within the text soon exhibit themselves as such. With Mrs. Bentley focusing her own attention, as well as the reader's, almost exclusively on the aforementioned females, one's attention is rarely turned to the farm women who might well provide an alternate, and noticeably richer and more stimulating social environment in which Mrs. Bentley could exist. Instead, Mrs.

Bentley resists forming bonds with the farm women, never returning to the Lawsons' to play the piano for their dying son, even though Joe Lawson invites her on behalf of himself and Mrs. Lawson, stating "We'd like it if you could come round some time and play for him" (50). As caring and attentive parents, faithful parishioners, and generous acquaintances, it is clear they are kind and friendly people. Even so, Mrs. Bentley at no point makes any effort to develop a relationship with them. As well, it is Philip who must draw to the reader's attention that not all female characters are as difficult as those in town. Mrs. Bentley writes that Philip

told me how popular I was among the farmers: at every place, while he was in the yard or stable talking to the men, the women had come out and made him promise to bring me the next time too. (86)

Thus, the reader senses that the female environment is neither as one-dimensional nor as trite and stifling as Mrs. Bentley suggests, but rather that Mrs. Bentley restricts herself to the difficult and petty women within her environment rather than the friendly and thoughtful ones. As such, Mrs. Bentley is deceiving herself and the reader by falsely presenting all female action from such a narrow and negatively biased view, one which the reader must overcome. The manner in which the reader may do so is by entertaining alternate, and perhaps more plausible, interpretations of the actions Mrs. Bentley records.

For example, the analysis Mrs. Bentley provides of Mrs. Ellingson, the Bentleys' neighbour, may easily be re-interpreted by the reader. Mrs. Bentley suggests to the reader that Mrs. Ellingson,

with social ambitions of her own. . . is quick to see I may be useful. Someday, with my prestige as a pry, she may work her way through the guarded doors of the elect. Whenever I want to have a tea, she says, she'll bake a cake and come in and help. (58)

The reader realizes, however, that this is an unfair and arbitrary evaluation of Mrs. Ellingson's motives. Although Mrs. Ellingson has been friendly to Mrs. Bentley, bringing her eggs and geranium slips, she has been honest with her as well. A person wanting to use someone to climb the town's social ladder would not remark that Mrs. Bentley "look so scared I maybe tank she vaste her time" (19) when first using their leaning privy, nor would they come over "in high dudgeon. . . to tell us we'll get no more eggs from her" as a result of El Greco's taking "a mouthful of feathers out of one of [her] hens" (110). As such, Mrs. Ellingson is a much more well-rounded character than Mrs. Bentley's analysis would suggest, and the reader might more plausibly suggest that Mrs. Ellingson is a typical neighbour, befriending the Bentleys through small gifts and offers of help, but not being afraid to voice matters of disagreement. Had Mrs. Ellingson viewed Mrs. Bentley purely as the latter suggests (as a social climber and sycophant) surely she would be more deferential and would never make Mrs. Bentley the object of her humour and the recipient of her voiced irritation. In brief, the text shows the reader that Mrs. Bentley's assessment is arbitrary and not based on a full listing of all the facts.

As well as dismissing information which would provide much more complete descriptions of the female characters, Mrs. Bentley also limits her possible interpretations of the female characters and their actions by projecting on to them many of her own feelings of inadequacy. Thus, on first meeting Miss Twill, who looks at the Bentleys' piano, Mrs. Bentley writes that she "looked the piano up and down reprovingly" (5-6), and suggests that she "all but said, 'If they were really Christians now they'd sell such vanities and put the money in the mission-box'" (6). As well as sticking words into Miss Twill's mouth (Miss Twill has not actually said anything about the piano), Mrs. Bentley assumes the worst about this interaction. Instead of assuming that a choir director might have an interest in musical instruments, or be interested to discover that the new minister and his wife have a musical background, Mrs. Bentley reacts to her own feelings of guilt about what she perceives as her and Philip's lack of true devotion to the Church, and reflects that in her interpretation of Miss Twill's look and statement.

Philip reaffirms this diagnosis of Mrs. Bentley's habits with his remarks after a visit by Mrs. Holly, during which Mrs. Bentley "abruptly...left them and went back to [her] scrub-pail in the kitchen" (36). Mrs. Bentley writes that Mrs. Holly "ignored" Mrs. Bentley and asked Philip "languid, unnecessary questions" (35) about Sunday School; in fact, Mrs. Bentley was simply attributing these characteristics to Mrs. Holly as a result of her own feelings of inadequacy about not being more "presentable," which Philip realizes:

He had to call me in when she was ready to go, and I was steeling myself so hard against his anger that it was all I could do to be civil. As soon as we were alone he said I might have tried to endure them a few minutes longer. Hardest of all, he knew why I hadn't stayed. "It's nobody's fault but your own that you aren't more presentable in the morning. And when somebody catches you it doesn't help to go off about it in the sulks." (36, emphasis added)

In this way, Mrs. Bentley's interpretations of the women's statements and actions are much more a reflection of her own feelings of inadequacy than they are the result of their negative behaviour.

In contrast, the manner in which Mrs. Bentley records her encounters with the men is much more sympathetic and understanding, in that she attempts to understand the reasons behind the male characters' looks or remarks, and tries to make up for their perceived inadequacies. For example, within the text "weakness" is generally looked down upon in men. When Mrs. Bentley notices this characteristic in Mr. Finley, she turns it into a strength:

Her [Mrs. Finley's] husband, for instance, is an appropriately meek little man, but you can't help feeling what an achievement is his meekness. It's like a tight wire cage drawn over him, and words and gestures indicative of a more expansive past [in other words, he is not really meek, but is only pretending to be], keep squeezing through it the same way that parts of the portly Mrs. Wenderby this afternoon kept squeezing through the back and sides of Philip's study armchair. (9, emphasis added)

Similarly, when Paul defines the philology of "company" for the Bentleys, she writes "There was an inflection to his voice you couldn't define..." but then carries on to do so, in a manner that is sympathetic to Paul: "almost hurt, almost complacent,

that made me wonder had a sophisticate one time laughed at him" (48). In this way Mrs. Bentley is an understanding and sympathetic narrator when recording the nature and statements of the men in her narrative.

Perhaps the most cogent examples of Mrs. Bentley's subordination of the feminine to the masculine occur in connection with her relationships with Judith West and Paul Kirby. In both instances Mrs. Bentley changes her initial gender assessment of them from that of masculine, during which time she privileges them and describes them with strength, to that of feminine, at which point she depicts them as weak and underprivileged. Interestingly, Mrs. Bentley "feminizes" Paul at the end of the novel for the same reason she chose to see Judith as masculine: to avoid coming to terms with the sexual threat he poses her. If Paul is feminine, then he can no longer be a threat, and her monopoly on sexual morality versus Philip's immorality, which necessitates the "feminizing" of Judith, is maintained.

For example, with regard to Judith West, Mrs. Bentley's first assessment of her is that she is not a threat to her marriage. This is seen in her initial assessment of the congregation's women (which includes Judith) when she remarks that "it would have taken an imagination livelier even than mine to find much to be afraid of there" (15), Judith being but "a shy, white-faced young woman" (15). She also sees in Judith an independent, self-determining young woman free of the social constraints of which Mrs. Bentley is a part. As such, Mrs. Bentley writes "I think I'm going to like Judith... maybe because... I sensed an attitude towards her a little hostile and

contemptuous, and because there's a perverse, rebellious part of me that instinctively feels it must be against Horizon rather than with it in its dislikes and prejudices" (16). Mrs. Bentley thus reacts to Judith as she normally would to a masculine character, and, as a result, rather than re-orienting her perceptions of the feminine to include the likes of Judith West, Mrs. Bentley treats her as a masculine character, emphasizing such aspects of her as the fact that she "stooked and drove a binder and a grain team" (74) and how she longs to struggle for an existence that is "At least a little more dramatically right" (74). Based on her initial categorization of Judith as a masculine character, secure in her belief that Judith can pose no sexual threat, Mrs. Bentley repeatedly misreads or fails to acknowledge any feminine characteristics within Judith. For example, she ignores the fact that Judith obviously has some traditionally-defined attractive feminine characteristics, as a young farmer named Dan would like to marry her.

As a result of interpreting Judith as a masculine character, Mrs. Bentley has difficulty reconciling Judith's actions and ideas with her physical being. Thus, in response to Judith's search for that which is "dramatically right," Mrs. Bentley writes that "[she]'d have understood better had it been someone else" (74), as Judith is "so slim and frail" (74). As well, Mrs. Bentley completely misreads Judith's and Philip's attraction to one another. So entrenched are her stereotypical criteria whereby she evaluates people that she does not notice in Judith what she fears so much in other women: not only is Judith attracted to Philip, but she is attractive to him as well.

Armed with an unwillingness to see Judith as anything but masculine, however, Mrs. Bentley misreads their relationship from the beginning:

Presently we were alone except for Judith, who usually stays a few minutes after the choir to gather the hymnbooks and music. Then she came over and looked up at him [Philip] for a minute too. He met her glance, and for the first time I saw the whiteness of her face give way to a little flush of color. She turned to go, but I asked her would she like to come with me for a walk. There was something about Philip's expression just then that warned me that it might be to my advantage to leave him and Steve for a little while alone (73).

In hindsight, the reader realizes that it is likely not Steve with whom Philip would like to be left alone. This misinterpretation of Judith's actions by Mrs. Bentley continues to the point that, even though Mrs. Bentley begins to recognize Judith's actions as those of a woman interested in Philip, she does not associate them with Judith herself, nor does she lend them any credibility in being able to attract Philip.

As the romance continues, Mrs. Bentley begins to shift slightly in her attitude toward Judith, and the reader notes that when recording the interaction between Philip and Judith, his actions are privileged over hers:

She [Judith] was wearing a new blue and white print dress today that she made herself for a dollar and a half. It was becoming, though, and I rather think she had it on for Philip's benefit.

She still doesn't know. If she did she wouldn't have come here today and sat looking at him so admiringly right in front of me. (142)

While Judith's admiration for Philip is interpreted as an infatuation, in which she appears somewhat foolish for making her attraction obvious in front of Mrs. Bentley, Philip's similar attraction to Judith is attributed to pride in his ability to draw, as



Mrs. Bentley writes, when Judith admires a sketch of her that Philip has drawn: "It was his turn now to color. He straightened his tie, fidgeted, looked out the window. But I could tell, just the same, that her admiration pleased him" (94). Although the reader realizes that Judith and Philip are reacting similarly, in one instance Mrs. Bentley dismisses it as merely unconscious and misguided infatuation, and in the other, to pride in artistic achievement. As Wilfred Cude suggests, Mrs. Bentley has a "tendency to misunderstand events that concern her greatly" ("Beyond Mrs. Bentley" 77), suggesting that

Mrs Bentley's account of Philip's affair with Judith is a black comedy of incomprehension, laden with situational ironies. During the first Sunday service at Horizon, she scans the pews for a possible competitor, concluding 'not that there was anyone tonight'; but after the service, she joins Philip in meeting the choir, and later devotes five paragraphs to an exploration of her favorable reaction to Judith. When she discovers Philip feverishly trying to sketch Judith, she attributes his passion to a lust for art, and naïvely observes 'he's out of himself, wrestling.' When she shows Judith the resultant drawings, she takes note of the confusion that both Judith and Philip obviously feel, and innocently adds 'I could tell, just the same, that her admiration pleased him.' Even when Judith arrives at the house, delightful in her rouge, her hesitancy, and her prettiest clothes, Mrs Bentley revels in both her titular possession of Philip and Judith's apparently helpless infatuation. 'I think that was maybe why I asked her — to watch her eyes follow him, her breathing quicken a little — to look then at him, and know how completely it was wasted. (Cude, "Beyond Mrs. Bentley" 77-78)

In such an interpretation of Philip and Judith's interaction, Mrs. Bentley not only reveals a shifting attitude toward Judith, but reaffirms her tendency to interpret feminine actions as lesser and more trivial than those of men as well. Mrs. Bentley's

initial assessment of Judith as an independent, and thus “masculine” figure is fundamental, to the point where Judith’s obvious sexual allure is seen as an incidental or trifling characteristic, an aberration, subsumed under the larger rubric of her essentially masculine nature, which prevents her from ever being seen as a genuine sexual threat.

Presented with evidence of a relationship between Judith and Philip she cannot ignore, however, Mrs. Bentley must recognize Judith as a woman and a threat to her relationship with Philip. At that moment Mrs. Bentley begins to treat Judith as she does the other female characters within her diary. Upon Mrs. Bird’s telling Mrs. Bentley of Judith’s pregnancy, Mrs. Bentley neatly “typifies” Judith as she did with Miss Twill and Mrs. Wenderby at the beginning of the novel, suggesting that “she’s the kind of girl that unless she cared a great deal for someone —” (192, emphasis added) and, while playing the role of “any other safely married matron,” suggests to Philip that “Sometimes its the mild, innocent kind that are the sly ones. A woman usually knows what she’s about” (193, emphasis added). Later she sends a gift to Judith, “deliberately to hurt her”<sup>3</sup> (193), finally stating, upon the news of Judith’s

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<sup>3</sup>Hinz and Teunissen explain Judith’s reaction to the oranges in the following manner:

That Judith weeps when Mrs. Bentley sends her oranges is explicable either as the natural reaction of an outcast to a gesture of sympathy or — if the oranges are meant to brand her as a prostitute [“The selling of oranges identified the prostitutes of the Elizabethan theatre”] — as the equally natural reaction of a woman who feels betrayed by an erstwhile friend. (153)

baby's birth and her subsequent death that

For me it's easier this way. It's what I've secretly been hoping for all along. I'm glad she's gone — glad — for her sake as much as ours. What was there ahead of her now anyway? If I lost Philip what would there be ahead of me? (212)

Thus, with her final entry about Judith, the reader is able to note that, although Judith maintains a personal consistency of character, Mrs. Bentley has changed utterly with regard to her attitude towards, and interpretation of, Judith's character. With regard to Mrs. Bentley's treatment of her, Judith begins as a self-determined, ambitious, and rebellious masculine figure. By the end of the novel, in order to assert her sexual morality over Philip's marital infidelity, Mrs. Bentley is forced to re-categorize Judith and adjust her reaction and interpretation of her. Accordingly, Judith becomes a "typical" female whose death appears to confirm one of Mrs. Bentley's most basic contentions: a woman has no hope of survival without a man.

Mrs. Bentley has a similar shift in attitude toward Paul Kirby. Mrs. Bentley's initial reaction to Paul is to set him up as a potential rival to Philip for her attention. On first meeting Paul, Mrs. Bentley assumes that Philip subconsciously responds to Paul as a potential rival, suggesting, at the conclusion of their first trip to Partridge Hill, that Philip drew each of their pictures very well, "except that he screwed Paul's face up a little, and by way of contrast, for my benefit, made his own expressionless and handsome like an advertisement for underwear or shaving cream" (12). As such, Mrs. Bentley records an interaction which more likely reflects her own expectations

of male behaviour than the competitive tension she suggests exists between Philip and Paul at this early date.

Paul's actions in his subsequent courtship of Mrs. Bentley are very similar to Judith's with Philip; Paul's actions, however, are privileged to those of Judith. Paul is no different from Judith in her new dress when he shows up at the Bentley household in his "Sunday best":

Paul's been shopping too. A new blue suit with a fancy stripe, stunning tan shoes, and a pearl-gray fedora that against such a weather-tanned complexion makes him look like a farmer at a picnic in his Sunday best. He arrived to go to Partridge Hill this morning with a slightly sheepish air, feigned a look of surprise badly when I said how nice he looked, and then went out to the kitchen for a drink so that he could steal a glance or two at himself in the little mirror that hangs above the sink. (71)

Although Judith's dressing up is mocked as a failed attempt to attract Philip, Paul's actions after church are attributed to nothing in particular. After church, Paul's behaviour suggests to the reader that he may realize he has been too open in the pursuit of the minister's wife. But Mrs. Bentley attributes his shyness to a realization that he is "naïvely" dressed when compared to Joe Lawson in his overalls:

Joe Lawson, the man who looks like Philip, was sitting across the aisle from him [Paul], just a freshly-ironed work shirt on, and blue overalls nearly white with washing. And Paul, dressed up so naïvely in his finery, felt it a rebuke. Other times he stands round talking after the service, but in shame for his shoes and fedora today he slipped off to the car and waited in the back seat till we were ready to go. (72)

Interestingly, at the very end of the novel, Mrs. Bentley must finally acknowledge Paul's amorous advances toward her. Unable to attribute them to a lofty pursuit such

as social consciousness or pride in artistic achievement, she accurately interprets them as courtship advances. However, unable to acknowledge openly her attraction to a masculine Paul, she conveniently chooses now to see Paul's actions as "womanish":

I'd never thought of him [Paul] like that before, but there was such a strained, helpless look in his eyes that suddenly I felt the windows all accusing me. Somehow it seemed that they all must know now, too. I couldn't refuse him, but I was such a coward I walked in misery till we had left the town behind. All the time I had thought it was only Philip, something he was trying to imagine. Paul had been silent with me often before, thoughtful, masculine, self-sufficient silences, but this time it was just a helpless, numb one of awareness, like a woman's, and I could tell by it that he was suffering. (207-208, emphasis added)

Before, as a masculine but sexually non-threatening character, Paul was silent in a "thoughtful, masculine, self-sufficient" way, but now with "a helpless, numb, silence," and a "strained, helpless look in his eye," Paul exhibits in Mrs. Bentley's eyes, characteristics "like a woman's." In fact, although Paul undoubtedly maintains consistency of character throughout the novel (like Judith) what is reflected here is Mrs. Bentley's change in attitude when such change became psychologically convenient, if not also essential if she is to preserve her moral supremacy in the marriage.

Another instance in which Paul is privileged over Judith, both as a result of Mrs. Bentley's gender bias as well as her need to assert her moral superiority over Philip, is with regard to the recording of the culmination of the two affairs. Having acknowledged that "Sweet and innocent and all the rest, [Judith]'s nevertheless another woman" (144), Mrs. Bentley records her sexual encounter with Philip as the result of much speculation. Of the encounter between Judith and Philip that supposedly

results in the birth of their son, Mrs. Bentley writes:

I woke at last with a start and sat up. It was dark. Philip wasn't beside me.... Then I slipped out of bed and tiptoed stealthily through the living-room to the kitchen....

Then I heard her laugh. A frightened, soft, half-smothered little laugh, that I've laughed often with him too. There's no other laugh like it. I put my hand out to the door, but didn't open it. I wanted to, but there seemed to be something forbidding it....

...it comes into my mind that what has happened is adultery — that he's been unfaithful to me, that I have a right now to be free. (162-163)

Mrs. Bentley, in effect, has seen nothing, but has assumed that the laugh is of a sexual nature, the laugh she hears is Judith's, there is a man in the room with Judith, the man in the room is Philip, and furthermore, that their encounter is a sexual one. All Mrs. Bentley objectively knows is that there was a woman laughing in the shed.

When recording what the reader cannot help but deduce is the culmination of Mrs. Bentley and Paul's amorous attentions toward one another, however, not only does Mrs. Bentley not offer any speculation, but she portrays it as an innocent exchange focusing on the baby. After cooking dinner and playing the piano for Paul while Philip is away, even though Mrs. Bentley knows "It wasn't fair to ask him, understanding things now as [she] did" (213), Mrs. Bentley turns the reader's attention to the baby, asking Paul to hold it and writing that

the baby, because he wasn't being held right, started to whimper then, and Paul carried him back to the bedroom, and laid him on the bed...and then motioning him after me went on tiptoe to the living-room again. (213)

The only clue to the fact that something other than what is recorded has happened follows in the next paragraph:

And just come in, unheard through the storm and rattling windows, Philip was standing there. He glanced at us, then without a word stalked out of the kitchen to wash. I told Paul to go now, thinking I could explain things better by myself. But Philip had seen enough, and wouldn't give me the chance. (213, emphasis added)

Of what has Philip “seen enough”? Why does Mrs. Bentley ask Paul to go, “thinking [she] could explain things better [her]self”? Obviously more has taken place than Mrs. Bentley has recorded. Feeling threatened by the idea of being held morally accountable, immediately following this exchange Mrs. Bentley plays her trump card with regard to Philip’s infidelity:

And then, slow and deliberate at first, gradually quickening, his contempt and bitterness found words. Words that stung me — that coming from him at such a time I couldn't bear, that made me wheel on him, go blind. I ran to the bedroom door, flung it open, and showed him the baby. “Your baby!” I cried. (214)

By so doing Mrs. Bentley is able to direct attention away from her own marital transgression and more severely implicate Philip in his. Mrs. Bentley thus maintains her monopoly on sexual morality while at the same time illustrating the gendered assumptions through which her narrative has been filtered: speculation and condemnation of female characters, leniency and tolerance with respect to male characters, and perhaps even the socially often accepted double standard that makes it more acceptable for a man to have an extra-marital affair than for a woman to do so.

In conclusion, Mrs. Bentley's focalization involves a complex web of her androcentric expectation of women and men and of their interaction. Mrs. Bentley operates as a filter which describes all characters and interprets all events with reference to a world which assumes the masculine is of a thoughtful, complex and diverse nature, while the feminine is the opposite, being simple, weak, and helpless. As such, "the vision" and "that which is...perceived" by Mrs. Bentley are two distinct realities. The first is a reality in which women and men exist within a patriarchal environment, while the second is a reality in which this existence in a patriarchal environment is further enhanced by a narrator who stereotypes characters and privileges the masculine over the feminine in her personal reaction to characters and to events.



## Chapter Three: Artistic Pursuits

While Chapter One examined the social framework of Horizon, which gave structure and significance to the lives of its citizens, and Chapter Two revealed the degree to which the narration was at once the product and reflection of that framework, this chapter will examine the social milieu in As For Me and My House as one which condemns the impulse to live autonomously, and from which grows the fundamental conflict that permeates the text: whether to accept a man-made framework of patriarchal significance, present throughout society in its rules and values, or to struggle to capture glimpses of a greater significance, a philosophical understanding of the meaning of one's life. This chapter will study the philosophical assumptions which exist within the novel, and which are rooted in a belief in the value of autonomous self-development and the awareness of a significance of life which is beyond conventional human understanding.

As society is the medium through which individuals are coerced into conformity, so art is offered as a vehicle to philosophical understanding. While society within As For Me and My House is closely linked to the physical, its temperament being

broadly reflected in the drought-ridden, harsh climate and more specifically in the false-fronted houses of Horizon, art, in contrast, is associated with the spiritual and the intellectual, "giv[ing] significance to life's meaninglessness" (Godard 124). That art should be accorded this position within the text is not unusual, since a major attribute of art has historically been to "establish an order in things; to order the chaotic and personal into something perfectly controlled, conscious and capable of lasting vitality" (Bolam 39). As a result, art becomes the only means through which the main characters are able to escape from the social restrictions of Horizon, and it may be the only means whereby the reader is able to determine the extent to which the main characters have either submitted to social conformity or escaped to autonomous self-definition and philosophical understanding.

Although art is generally seen as a means through which characters are able to develop and transcend socialization autonomously within the text, art is presented as being able to serve two opposing functions. First, art can act as an agent of autonomous self-fulfilment, through its ability to focus individuals intellectually and spiritually inward so as to overcome that which socially and physically oppresses them. But art can also serve as an agent of social reinforcement, through its ability to entertain, manipulate, and lend support to stereotypic notions of feminine and masculine attributes. In the former instance, art becomes the vehicle whereby individuals can grow as persons unique and distinct from their social environment, while in the latter instance socialized art acts a vehicle to reinforce social standards.

The text suggests that an individual, in effect, is a microcosm of humankind. Thus, once characters begin to look inward spiritually and intellectually, they simultaneously look outward, achieving glimpses of understanding of a larger context in which they can define their existence. Once individuals have gained access to this realm of consciousness, they attempt to create, and give their lives shape and form. Characters are then searching for a greater understanding of themselves, trying to establish and create a self in harmony with both their natural environment and their innate personal characteristics.

This larger personal framework that would, if found, give significance to one's life exists in direct contrast to the arbitrary and man-made notion of significance that society offers its members. There, the criteria of meaning extend only to the outer boundaries of the community, which is assumed to have universal significance, eclipsing the philosophical void, which is simply ignored. Here, one's significance is presumed to be entirely dependent on one's position in that community. One's capacity for happiness and suffering is in turn presumed to be entirely dependent upon one's status, reputation, and wealth, together with the interactions one has with other conforming members of one's community; although relationships may change, the values and mores they hold are presumed to be immutable. The larger framework, in contrast, has no limitations, and is fluid and dynamic. The man-made framework is represented in the text by social conventions, while the philosophical framework is evinced only in the autonomously developed individual. As earlier stated, the vehicle

common to both frameworks is art, and the manner in which it is used and conceived acts as an indication of the significance of life the character chooses to adopt.

Philip Bentley acknowledges these two opposing frameworks which give meaning to the characters' lives within the text, referring to them as the "illusory" but larger and more meaningful world of "the void," which has as its vehicle human creativity and art, and the "common-sense" world of society:

Religion and art... are almost the same thing anyway. Just different ways of taking a man out of himself, bringing him to the emotional pitch that we call ecstasy or rapture. They're both a rejection of the material, common-sense world for one that's illusory, yet somehow more important. Now it's always when a man turns away from this common-sense world around him that he begins to create, when he looks into a void, and has to give it life and form. (148)

The tension within As For Me and My House results from the opposition of these two frameworks. The "material, common-sense world" within the text is composed of the town, its patriarchal hierarchy, and all of its clearly-defined false fronts. This "common-sense world" inhibits autonomous self-development and encourages conformity through the enforcing of gender-specific stereotypes of behaviour. The "illusory" world, in contrast, is represented by intangible natural forces such as the wind. It encourages internal, autonomous self-development, the rejection of the "common-sense" ways of the town, and a yearning to give "life and form" to the "void."

In the novel, the means whereby "life and form" are given to this "void" fall predominantly to music and drawing. That art, used in the more general sense, is given this position within the text is not unusual, as art has been seen by many to

capture this quality. Philip Beam describes how drawing is able to capture these two realities, but instead of naming them “illusory” and “common-sense” as Philip Bentley does, he labels them the “infinite” and the “finite”:

If the finite world is that portion of the visible world which falls readily within the limits of clear human perception, the infinite lies, by implication, between the fringes of clear perception and the vanishing point. That such a region exists is a matter of common experience, for we are surrounded by things we can dimly sense but only partially understand. The bulk of the cosmos still lies beyond our mental reach, mysterious, uncertain, unknown. Yet that is not to say that it can have no meaning for us. (143)

The “infinite” within the text has been alluded to by many critics as “that part of his [Philip’s] life which both he and his wife have persistently denied” (Jones 46), “the wind and the wilderness” (New 48), and a world of “spiritual values” (Cude, “Beyond Mrs. Bentley” 91). Philip repeatedly struggles to give shape and form to the “infinite,” drawing a series of false-fronted stores which retreat in “steplike sequence — a stairway into the night” (23), trying to capture “the strange swift whiteness of [Judith’s] face [which] eludes him” (33), and creating pictures in which “You sense a flow, a rhythm, a cycle” (91) that makes you want to “smudge...out” the little town and “let the underlying rhythms complete themselves” (92).

As Philip suggests with his aforementioned definition of religion and art, it is the “infinite,” or an underlying spiritual essence that Mrs. Bentley defines once as “insight,” which he is interested in capturing in his drawings and paintings. His lack of success in capturing the “infinite,” however, may be explained in two ways: first,

that his subject matter is invariably restricted by the confines of a dominating realism; and secondly, that the elusive quality of the "infinite" is such that it can never be completely captured. More important than the degree to which Philip is successful or unsuccessful, or the reasons for his success or lack thereof, is the never-ending struggle to which he subjects himself in order to attempt to give form to the unknown. As Bolam and Henderson write:

Faced with the profound chaos of life, felt in his own person, the artist must create order. Forms, the essence of all art, are the achieving of order. But such forms are not just a tidying-up — the rationalizing mind can do that. They are not the solving of a jigsaw puzzle — each creation is always a new and unique answer. They are not just a personal prop for the artists — for a form is weak and without communication, unless it is supra-personal. Above anything else, the forms of art are power. (73)

Philip is thus an example of one who may be attempting to use art to escape from the society around him in order to create and achieve an understanding of that which is greater than himself, knowing that in order to discover his own significance he must "face the void and attempt to comprehend it through imaginative creation" (Ricou 72).

Throughout the history of humankind music has also been valued as a vehicle to a greater philosophical understanding, an understanding which is at once more introspective, with respect to individual internal self-development, and outward-looking, with respect to its associations to the external realm of the spiritual. In the following passage Ernst Bloch makes a similar claim for music that Philip Beam made for art, namely that there is a need for people to turn to music as a form of expression for

the self-development and spiritual growth that our present environment no longer accommodates:

But should there not be a visionary hearing at hand, a new seeing from within?... But a time will come when the note will speak, and speak out, a time when the true vessels of light will be finally installed in the higher self.... And so let us assign to music the primacy of something otherwise ineffable. Music — this kernel and seed, this reflection of the brightly illumined death-night and of eternal life.... It takes us into the warm, profound, Gothic sanctum of the interior which alone is shining even in the midst of obscure darkness. Indeed, this alone remains the only possible source of the radiance whose task is to demolish and disperse confusion, the barren power of what merely exists.... (138–139)

Music thus also allows one to overcome the everyday forces that scatter one's efforts and concentrate on developing a strong interior able to resist these outside distractions and subsequently move beyond to a spiritual realm. In this way music rejects social conformity in favour of autonomous development, much in the same way that Philip Beam suggests art is able to capture this "unknown."

Art and music may also be used for less lofty interests as well. For more practical purposes, they may be used as social mechanisms to entertain, manipulate, and reinforce conventional values<sup>1</sup>, provoke specific memories, or even simply to draw attention to the artist. In other words, art and music may be used to help an individual exceed the limitations their physical and social environments put on them, or

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<sup>1</sup>Examples of these different uses of art can be seen in a comparison of Cezanne with Norman Rockwell, or Verdi with Rogers and Hammerstein. The latter in each comparison use art to reinforce conventional attitudes while the former use art to reject social conformity in favour of a purer artistic expression.

it may be used in conjunction with the values of society to reinforce those very same limitations.

As such, the novel illustrates the battle between two opposing conceptions of art, neither of which is explicitly articulated: the “illusory” world which has as its vehicle art, and as its end, autonomous self-development; and the “common-sense” world which has as its vehicle socialized art, and as its end, social conformity. The battle manifests itself most visibly as

the debate between the art that makes life, and the art that would assert it is life; between the art that makes its appeal to its own internal universe, and the art that makes it to the reality and texture of the material world and the social order and our familiar concepts of person and time. (Godard 124)

The result is that each character within As For Me and My House must make a decision whether to perform socialized art and to be subsumed by the conformist social tendencies of Horizon, or to struggle, and through art achieve autonomous self-development and glimpse the “unknown.” Socialized art has the effect of weakening the character’s ability to withstand the pressures of society, while the former allows individuals to cultivate the inner strength needed to resist the conformist pressures of their social environment and to strive to develop themselves and understand the “void.”

As such, it is possible to ascertain whether the characters autonomously develop by measuring the degree to which their use of art attempts to achieve intellectual and spiritual growth. There are several elements of art which become important in



establishing whether the art fulfils the “theoretical criteria: that art should express strong emotions, akin to religious experience, and that it should generate an aesthetic excitement through the strength of its formal qualities” (Kaye 108); and whether it contains the “sensitivity that is equated with the quintessential artistic spirit” (Godard 128).

For example, within the town as a whole, art is not used to further one’s philosophical understanding of life, but is used to reinforce the “common-sense” world and encourage social conformity. Mrs. Bentley chooses to play Handel’s Largo for Paul Kirby “because it was simple and steadfast, and good for a man” (11–12), and plays “lifelike marching pieces to suit a boy” (91) for Steve, thus reinforcing the stereotypical images of males. Mrs. Bird’s view of music is also a socialized one, as she uses it as a barometer of social status. She justifies her befriending Mrs. Bentley on that basis:

That’s why I dropped in on you, my dear. I heard your piano up on Main Street — young, sparkling, jubilant — and I said, ‘There, Josephine — there’s an expatriate too. You’ll find the spring you’re looking for — someone akin to you —’ . . . . Intellectually, you see, the doctor and I are alone here. Provincial atmosphere — it suffocates. (29)

Far from being expatriates, Mrs. Bird and Mrs. Bentley use their appreciation of music as a means of defining themselves in a traditional manner. In this instance Mrs. Bird uses music to gain status by separating the town’s educated (herself, the doctor, Mrs. Bentley and the Reverend Mr. Bentley) from the working class, and in turn distinguishing herself and Mrs. Bentley as being above the “provincial atmosphere” of the rest of the town. Similarly, Mrs. Bentley uses music to her own self-gratifying

end as well. She uses her music egotistically to win Philip's attention; to prove to Philip "how easily if [she] wanted to [she] could take the boy [Steve] away from him" (63); to "outshine" the Lawson boy (28); and to "return to grace" (46) in the eyes of Horizon's town ladies. As such, the music itself is unimportant to her; her sole interest in music is how it may be used to her own social advantage.

Art occurs on a larger social scale in the form of the Church choir and the town play. The Church choir is defined from the outset as a social mechanism, the leader of which uses it to reinforce tradition, rather than to add to the nature of the spiritual celebration they are supposedly undertaking. Mrs. Bentley sarcastically observes that

All the musicians in the town, it seems, are a backsliding lot, who want strange new hymns that nobody knows at an ungodly pace that nobody can keep up with. In Miss Twill's choir they sing the old hymns, slowly.  
(6)

The inability to break with tradition suggests that the members use the choir to maintain the status quo. This maintenance of the status quo applies not only to the music, but to the members of the choir as well, as they use it as an opportunity to display their disapproval of Judith West: "Miss Twill and the matrons, however, don't quite approve of her, and there was a tight-lipped silence for a minute when I remarked after service how well she [Judith] had sung her solo" (15-16); musicianship and Christian tolerance and acceptance take second place to social concerns, even in the Church choir.

The town play and intermission music reaffirm that the townspeople's use of art

is not for the sake of art itself, but rather to fulfil personal and social interests. Mrs. Bentley, for example, uses the opportunity to show off and to attempt to re-attract Philip:

The desire and will to reach him still is there, but I doubt whether it can make up for the rest. I'll have different clothes for one thing. Instead of a big, handsome grand piano it will be an old cracked one with a noisy pedal. Instead of an expectant audience there'll be youngsters in the front rows chewing gum and munching apples. I know all that. And I'm older, and he's had me now twelve years. (185)

Instead of being interested in the pure expression of the music, Mrs. Bentley is preoccupied only with that which should be of secondary concern: what Philip and others will think, what she will look like, and the appearance of the instrument she will be playing.

The women within the play have concerns similar to Mrs. Bentley's regarding their intermission performance. Mrs. Holly, who "looks attractive" and "knows it," "insists that in one scene anyway she wear her new blue taffeta," even though she is playing the part of a "poor, unsophisticated country girl" (188), while "Mrs. Bird spends five minutes dying" in the last act of the play and, when encouraged by Mrs. Finley to shorten her death to three minutes, says she "took elocution lessons once, and with a tide of bosom says that art is long and Mrs. Finley [is] just a small-town Philistine" (188).

The tension that exists between these two opposing states of being exhibits itself

within the main characters and their relationships with one another. Philip, Judith, and Mrs. Bentley, before she met Philip, "respond to a force or presence which cuts across artificial categories of meaning to expose a fundamental underlying authenticity" (Dubanski 91), and they do so through their particular artistic medium. However, Horizon, and Mrs. Bentley, after she met Philip, withdraw from attempting such a realization for themselves, and also attempt to prevent Philip and Judith from doing so as well. The tensions between the opposing forces result in unhappiness and strained relationships for all.

Before she met Philip, Mrs. Bentley possessed a rebellious and self-assertive nature which allowed her to remain distinct from her social environment, and her relationship to her music was selfless. Mrs. Bentley writes that at a young age "The only thing that really mattered for me was the piano. It made me self-sufficient, a little hard. All I wanted was opportunity to work and develop myself" (22); as a result, while "Other girls fluttered about their dresses, [and] what their friends thought about the pieces they played...I never thought or cared for anything but the music itself" (198). At the age of twelve, Mrs. Bentley was able to lose herself in the music, reject the social role models around her, and attempt to develop the artistic talents that existed within her, having said that "All I wanted was opportunity to work and develop myself" (22). In this sense she was trying to use art to develop autonomously. At the age of nineteen, however, Mrs. Bentley began to capitulate to her environment, and her view of art changed. The first step in this process was her relationship with

Philip Bentley, for once she met him, "from then on [she] had another goal" (142) and the "piano took second place" (22). Since then, Mrs. Bentley no longer played for the music itself, but rather "to reach him, [and] make him really aware of [her]" (185), "Submitting to him that way, yielding [her] identity — it seemed what life was intended for" (22). In this act, Mrs. Bentley replaced her own self-development and potential to reach the "illusory" world in order to locate herself in the world of the "common-place." Her non-material needs were subordinated to the more immediate demands of her physical and social environment. Romance and marriage being acts of conformity, Mrs. Bentley's attraction to Philip thus results in her bonding to him in a conventional manner in order to achieve a conventional end.

As well during this time frame, her initial musical interests shift from Beethoven's Appassionata Sonata and Chopin's Polonaise in A Flat Major (141), two works of great depth and emotional intensity, to Liszt's Rhapsodies, which appeal more for their flamboyant delivery than their meaningful content. As Kaye remarks of this process:

She succeeded at nineteen, and at that recital met Philip, who thenceforward replaced Chopin as her idol. Liszt, her other favourite composer, was never a goal, but always a means. It is Liszt's rhapsody (which remains unidentified, in contrast to the Chopin piece) that she plays, at age twenty-two, to win Philip. She is successful this first time, and her performance elicits his proposal; she is unsuccessful twelve years later when she fails to win him back in Horizon. Liszt, then, becomes sort of an adjunct to Chopin in the novel, as he was to some extent in real life. (101)

Mrs. Bentley further adds to this interpretation of Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody by

mentioning none of the interpretive and emotional qualities needed to perform it, but rather suggesting it is something “loud and brilliant” (184), full of “octave and arpeggio work” (189) that requires “strong hands and steady nerves” (186) to play. Tonal and expressive sensitivity, which the works of Chopin and Beethoven are noted for, are never mentioned.

While in Horizon, “music makes Mrs Bentley, despite her protestations of her dowdy nondescript appearance, into an amalgam of Pied Piper...” (McMullen, “Mrs. Bentley: Her Journal and Her Marriage” 107). She begins to use the piano to attract and control people for her own purposes, and to draw attention to herself. After listening to the sickly Lawson boy play for the Bentleys and his family, Mrs. Bentley “played quietly at first, for his father’s sake not wanting to outshine the boy, then gradually forgetful of [her] good resolve, releasing [her]self” (27–28). She plays to win over the matrons of Horizon who are offended at Philip’s indifference to their cold remedies, by performing

Chapel Chimes for them finally, imitating the sound of bells to everyone’s astonishment and my own return to grace. They decided music was nice in the home, and told me what fine musicians their sisters and cousins used to be. (46)

She also uses her talent to win the attention of Steve, playing “vindictively, determined to let Philip see how easily if [she] wanted to [she] could take the boy away from him” (63). Her interest in music becomes corrupted — she is no longer interested in the pure aesthetic properties of music, but rather the social advantages or personal attention

it may win for her. Music thus simply becomes a tool for Mrs. Bentley to use to consolidate her social standing.

The person in Horizon who is most susceptible to the influence of Mrs. Bentley and her piano playing, however, is Paul Kirby. As with Philip, Mrs. Bentley also wins over the young school teacher with her self-gratifying use of the piano. When she first meets Paul and they travel to the school house for a mis-scheduled service, she plays Handel's Largo for him, and his compliments cause her to

like[ ] him for that. The musician in [her] dies hard, and a word of praise still sends [her] blood accelerando. 'Come then and spend an evening with us soon,' [she] invited recklessly. It was dangerous, but with [her] vanity up that way [she] didn't care. 'I'll play the piano for you if you like - and then you can go off with Philip and look through his books.' (12)

Her piano playing has become nothing but a social mechanism to manipulate those around her and to fulfil her need for social recognition. Ultimately, through the playing of the same Liszt Rhapsody that had caused Philip to stand "waiting for [her] afterwards, erect and white-lipped with a pride he couldn't conceal" (185) she re-learns and causes, in the words of Philip, "the fool" Paul to "prostrate himself" (190). Music is thus for Mrs. Bentley not a vehicle for personal development, but is rather a social tool of manipulation:

Her focus is always on the audience, on her pleasing them. In her hunger for applause, she might as well be a clown as a pianist.... Mrs Bentley knows that Philip cannot bear the Liszt, but she persists in playing it — as he knows — to capture an audience, an audience that can only be Paul. We too have learned that Mrs Bentley has fallen into the trap of the expressive fallacy. (Godard 129-130)

As a result of this misuse of her art, Mrs. Bentley's attitude toward herself and her playing changes. Neither is anything she can be proud of any longer. She plays in her house in town, "Sedately, though, with the soft pedal down, for the house sits so close to the sidewalk that [she] could hear every footstep going past" (18) and she feels "dowdy and ugly and awkward" (189) when walking across the stage to perform. In erecting her false-front, she is left feeling "crushed and empty...with an urge to slip away somewhere and cry alone" (189).

Mrs. Bentley's art thus declines throughout her life from that of art for art's sake, to that of the "common-sense," and she simultaneously personally declines from autonomous self-development to social conformity during the process. As her interaction with art moves from the unconventional to the conventional, Mrs. Bentley relinquishes any hope of obtaining the "illusory" world her husband struggles so hard to reach, and becomes one with the "common-sense" world of Horizon.

The one character within the text who recognizes and yearns for the "illusory" world is Philip Bentley. As a child Philip is introduced both to the "common-sense" reality and the "illusory" one through each of his parents. Philip's mother was a waitress who bore him out of wedlock. As a result, he was forced to endure the contempt of their small town, and "Gradually he came to feel that for all the ridicule and shame he was exposed to, it was his mother to blame" (40). As a result of his being fatherless, Philip was ostracized and existed on the periphery of society. In order to escape, Philip turned to the Church in the hope of forwarding his artistic



interests. Unfortunately, while Philip's artistic interests allow him to pursue the "illusory" world, his joining the Church and marrying Mrs. Bentley restrain him within the world of the "common-sense." Through his association with art, Philip, unlike Mrs. Bentley, never completely capitulates to the conventional world around him, although through his marriage and profession he is undeniably deeply immersed within it.

A conventional minister who nonetheless has an artistic sensibility, it is not surprising that Philip is initially attracted to Mrs. Bentley as a result of her apparent relationship to her art:

He came to a recital once to hear [her] play. . . . He stood waiting for [her] afterwards, erect and white-lipped with a pride he couldn't conceal. And that was the night he asked [her] to marry him. (185)

Unfortunately for both of them, this performance also marks the division of Mrs. Bentley's attentions; she is no longer solely concerned about the music, but also about her appearance while playing the music, and the effect it has on Philip and others. The beginning thus marks the end, and when Philip recognizes that Mrs. Bentley's art is completely overwrought with social concerns, he turns from her in search of a private, purer artistic expression, struggling to find this within himself, through his paintings and drawings, and Judith.

The art to which Philip dedicates himself is not the socialized art to which his wife has fallen prey. Philip realizes the higher potential of art, unlike his wife, and states that "A picture worth its salt is supposed to make you experience something

that he calls aesthetic excitement, not send you into dithyrambs about humanity in microcosm" (106). Philip's philosophy of art thus places it as a vehicle to the "illusory" world, not that of the "common-sense" of every day human experience. He further reinforces this point by explaining the difference between Mrs. Bentley's socialized art and his own:

'You can't be detached about your own work,' he said presently. 'You feel it too much — and the right way is only to see it. That's your trouble, too. These things all mean something to you because you've lived in these little Main Streets — with me while I was doing them. You're looking at them, but you're not really seeing them. You're only remembering something that happened to you there. But in art, memories and associations don't count. A good way to test a picture is to turn it upside down. That knocks all the sentiment out of it, leaves you with just the design and form.' (202)

Philip thus concentrates on the art itself, that part of it which attempts to give "shape and form" to "the void," while Mrs. Bentley cannot ignore the personal and social associations of the memories the pictures provoke in her. That Philip's artistic intention is of a purer nature than Mrs. Bentley's (although it is not necessarily of a technically high quality) is further understood implicitly in that he never uses it for the same corrupt purposes she uses her music: to attract attention to herself, to "win" people over, or to hurt others. As Ryszard Dubanski aptly notes,

Throughout the novel Mrs. Bentley is engaged in what might be described as an elaborately choreographed game of chicken with the prairie. Always needing to escape the tense, stifling atmosphere at home and to breathe freely, she finds release by going for long walks. She goes as far as the outskirts of town, looks out on the wilderness that stretches before her, and then hurries home: "There was something wild and ghostly about

it, like a skulking, primeval terror, and I was glad to reach the lights again, and the safety of the house." In other words, she edges toward the precipice, an abyss of chaos and non-meaning opens at her feet, and then she returns to the tenuous rationality of Horizon. Philip, on the other hand, is not afraid to look into the void. In a sort of heart-of-darkness vision, he recognizes something "out there," a core of real experience that lies behind the threatening prairie image, and he moves closer to it through his art. He wants to capture eternity on his canvas; and his quest is elaborated in aesthetic terms. (91)

The tension Philip experiences within his marriage has its base in this very issue. While Philip attempts to develop autonomously through art and give form to the "void" that is the "illusory" world, Mrs. Bentley longs to conform socially, use art as a mechanism to do so, and be part of the "common-sense" world around her. As a result of being pulled simultaneously in the direction of the "illusory" and the "common-sense," Mrs. Bentley sees Philip as one who

made a compromise once, with himself, his conscience, his ideals; and now he believes that by some retributive justice he is paying for it. A kind of Nemesis. He pays in Main Streets — this one, the last one, the Main Streets still to come. (25)

Unlike Mrs. Bentley, in order to attempt to achieve this world, Philip does not subordinate his art to egotistical and social ends as has she. Instead, Philip

pierces this workaday reality of ours, half scales it off, sees hidden behind it another. More important, more significant than ours, but that he understands only vaguely. He tries to solve it, give it expression, and doesn't quite succeed. (133)

As such, Philip is constantly locking himself in the study, insisting his drawings are, as recorded by Mrs. Bentley, "the only part of life that's real or genuine" (33).

That Philip longs to capture the “illusory” is obvious in his drawings as well. The first of his drawings is of a “solitary street lamp, pitted feebly and uselessly against the overhanging darkness,” with a series of stores “retreating, [in a] steplike sequence — a stairway into the night” (23). In his drawing of Judith he attempts to capture the “strange swift whiteness of her face [which] eludes him” and causes him to be “out of himself, wrestling” (33). In a picture of a horse on the prairie in which “You sense a flow, a rhythm, a cycle” (91), Philip draws a town which is “in contrast... an upstart, mean complacency” (91). As Mrs. Bentley writes, “The town shouldn’t be there. It stands up so insolent and smug and self-assertive that your fingers itch to smudge it out and let the underlying rhythms complete themselves” (91–92).

As well, Philip keeps his art a private act, unlike Mrs. Bentley who performs predominantly for an audience, for while she is around “he’s actually helpless to draw a single line. He can’t even sit out here in the livingroom with [her] and read or write” (57). The same holds true for Philip when he tried to write his book. Mrs. Bentley observes somewhat ruefully that “still the artist in him was uppermost, and instead of trying to make his story popular and salable, he pushed it on somberly the way he felt it ought to go” (45), ignoring the other, “kindlier” reality “that he’s never seen or understood” (40).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Philip does understand this “kindlier” reality, but to him it is more undermining than kind. Although this lack of “socializing” his art is generally true, Philip does produce “socialized” art twice in the novel. Once, as a sketch of himself, Mrs. Bentley and Paul, as an introduction to the missing congregation, and secondly, in the form of a picture of a bull for Laura. Unlike Mrs. Bentley’s art, however, Philip never uses this to manipulate or hurt anyone.

In this way, Philip struggles to give form to the “void.” Wanting to give form to the “void” causes the characters, in the words of Godard, to “Repeatedly... attempt to assert their presence against oblivion” (124). In an attempt to create “comforting totems” which could “withstand the threat of nothingness hanging over [them]...” (Godard 123), the text allows the citizens of Horizon two options: first, to conform outwardly to society and allow its standards and regulations to give apparent meaning and structure to human existence; and secondly, to reject society, face the “void,” and attempt to assert themselves within it through the vehicle of art. While Mrs. Bentley chooses the former, Philip chooses the latter.

What Philip struggles to find within himself, and that which he initially sensed in Mrs. Bentley, he finally finds in Judith West. Judith, to begin with, asserts herself as someone “not a coward for the things [she] want[s]” (74). Like the young Mrs. Bentley, her relationship to her art is pure, and she is “a full, deep contralto, untrained but sensitive, [and] incredibly powerful for [being] such a white-faced slip of a girl” (15). As well, Judith has “something feral in her [music] that even the pace and staidness of her hymn could not restrain” (51).

Even though the town disapproves and talk abounds, “In summer she’s been heard singing off by herself up the railroad track as late as ten o’clock at night” (16). Judith, like Philip, does not use art as a vehicle to social conformity, but rather as a vehicle to escape from it. As well, like Philip, when her art does take on a social dimension, it is purely to provide help or pleasure to those around her. Judith helps those in her

choir, as "Her voice had a strength and fullness that always helped the others [in the choir]" (193).

The culmination of Judith's position as one who attains the "illusory" world through autonomous development via her art occurs during her singing in a church service:

The wind was too strong for Philip or the choir, but Judith scaled it when she sang alone again before the closing hymn.... It's seldom he [Philip] listens to music, but as soon as she [Judith] began tonight he turned in his chair behind the pulpit and sat with his eyes fixed on her all the way through the hymn.... Even after she had finished he sat a few minutes without stirring. There was an uneasy clearing of throats and rustling of hymn books as the congregation waited for him. They seemed trying to assure themselves of their existence and reality, to put the walls back in place and brace them there. (51-52)

All realize, on some level, that Judith has transcended their material reality and reached the "illusory" world. In the presence of true art the congregation is made aware that their conventional world is not absolute and unvarying but very small and arbitrary. Philip, however, is the only one who does not "put the walls back in place and brace them there" (52), but rather, for a brief moment, joins with Judith and finds a soulmate in his search for the "illusory" reality. The outcome of their relationship is that Judith dies in giving birth to their son.<sup>3</sup> A social outcast until the

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<sup>3</sup>Although the proof Hinz and Teunissen provide for Mr. Finley as the father of Judith's child is quite compelling, this thesis assumes Philip is the father, based on the evidence supporting Judith's and Philip's attraction to one another, combined with Philip's apparent corroboration of Mrs. Bentley's accusation that he is the father:

I ran to the bedroom door, flung it open, and showed him the baby. "Your baby!" I

end, in death Judith is allowed to escape from the restricting “common-sense” reality in which she has been forced to take part. Philip, however, never having escaped his social environment to the extent Judith did, is forced, through Mrs. Bentley’s blackmail, to become even more of a role player than he was before.

Thus Mrs. Bentley, the social conformist, acknowledges at the end of the novel that her “fingers are wooden. Something’s gone dead” (199); she has denied herself autonomous self-development and, as such, part of her, and her ability to interact with her art, has gone dead. Judith dies an example of the triumph of conservatism over the unconventional. Philip will be forced to discontinue his artistic struggle as a result of his business responsibilities, while Mrs. Bentley will continue to move the new family into the “common-sense” reality. In such an ending Ross suggests that rural Canadian society is anathema to any kind of creativity. Judith dies, Philip is rendered completely hypocritical and is emasculated in his new role as a small businessman, and Mrs. Bentley’s “triumph” is actually her final defeat, her ultimate capitulation to the “common-sense” world.

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cried. “Yours —” and he stopped white a moment, and said in a slow hollow voice, “You were with her then — and she told you —” I steeled myself... then shouted no, she hadn’t told me, that I had always known, that I had wanted the baby so that in time his son would be my son too. (214)

## Conclusion: No Escape

The conclusion of As For Me and My House, rather fittingly, has puzzled readers as much as the body of the text itself. The ending depicts Mrs. Bentley, Philip, and their new son leaving Horizon to open “a secondhand bookstore in the little city where [they] used to live” (209). Although initially Mrs. Bentley had envisioned operating a bookstore that sold music as well as used books, she decides that, were she to work alongside Philip, “in a month or two [she]’d be one of those domineering females that men abominate” (210), and as such she will teach piano and tend the baby instead. Although Mrs. Bentley sees this move to the city as a positive transition, in that she has been able to free Philip from the Church she believes she has kept him in “for these last twelve years” (141), the text itself encourages a more negative reaction which depicts implicitly Mr. and Mrs. Bentley abandoning their respective artistic aspirations in favour of a purely commercial existence.

Although some critics claim that the novel’s ending is a positive one, suggesting that “New life is struggling to be recognized all around them, as old life sinks into the ashes of the past behind them” (Mitchell 50), it is clear that the Bentleys have



not begun a new life, free of their past difficulties, but instead are returning to a city in which they have already lived to run a used, secondhand bookstore, assume stereotypic gender roles, and raise a son whom Mrs. Bentley does not want to be able to distinguish from his father; not much in the scenario is truly new or qualitatively different from what we have seen. Most significantly, the creation of such a scenario has come at the expense of autonomous self-development for all concerned, and depicts the ultimate sacrificing of the “illusory” world to that of the “common-sense.”

When Mrs. Bentley first mentions wanting to save one thousand dollars in order to buy a bookstore and leave Horizon, she is not upfront and honest with Philip about it, but rather writes that of the money she puts away “I’ll say, maybe, that it’s for Steve’s education, or a trip to Europe. I’ll even go to Dr. Bird for a tonic, and come back and tell Philip there’s an operation coming up” (140). In so doing, Mrs. Bentley not only maintains the false fronts and secrecy which have plagued her marriage to Philip, but also demonstrates the same manipulative tendencies which frustrated their relationship as well.

While Mrs. Bentley’s negative characteristics do not change in light of this new-found escape, Philip Bentley’s do, and not for the better. When Mrs. Bentley “talk[s] of getting out of the Church and starting up in a little store somewhere,” hoping Philip would “be able to study and paint again” (156), Philip responds in a manner which denotes a rejection of the search for the “illusory” world he has struggled to find, and an acceptance of the “common-sense world” he has so long tried to avoid:

He laughed then a laugh like all his little pebbles clicking quick and hard one after the other on the rock across the ravine, a dead, vacant laugh that he intended to be reckless.

‘That’s over now. It’s just that I’ve been a long time growing up. How hard life is, you know, pretty well depends on yourself — whether you want to keep keyed up for something beyond yourself all the time, or whether you’re willing to accept things at their face value. Steve’s been good for me. The last few days I’ve been really down to earth, looking myself over. The way he dropped out on me — the unimportance of it to everyone else — it made me realize you’re a fool but to be just as casual with life as life is with you. Take things as they come — get what you can out of them. Don’t want or care too much for anything.’ (156–157, emphasis added)

Philip’s now being “down to earth” suggests much with regard to his search for an autonomous definition of self. “[A]ccepting things at their face value” and wanting to “Take things as they come [and] get what you can out of them” describes an eminently conventional approach to life developing in Philip. This attitude, which stands in stark contrast to the Philip who had refused to demand his complete salary from drought-ridden farmers whose poverty “hurt him” (173), is more reminiscent of the materialistic Mrs. Bentley and the “common-sense world” of which she is a member.

That Philip is initially a grudging and indifferent participant in his own escape from the Church and Horizon is reflected in the only exchange he has with Mrs. Bentley on the subject, specifically in response to the subject of collections:

[She] asked him didn’t he want to get out of the Church, didn’t he admit that saving a thousand dollars was the only way. He smiled a little with his lips and let his eyes stare blank ahead, pulled back his pad to scribble a little dwarf with a conical head and said, ‘It sounds all right.’ (179)

With the drawing of his dunce-like little dwarf, Philip clearly undermines the idea itself and the process through which it is to be achieved. The drawing both serves to void the notion of any credibility, but also reflects his own view of what a thoughtless and small caricature of his former self he will become as an active participant within the plan.

Philip reveals more seriously the death of his search for the "illusory" world in his final sketch and painting of the "two horses frozen on their feet" (201). According to Philip, these two horses "had drifted against a fence and perished there, too spent to turn again and face the wind" (201). Mrs. Bentley remarks that the painting clearly depicts "The way the poor brutes stand with their hindquarters huddled up and their heads thrust over the wire, the tug and swirl of the blizzard, the fence lost in it, only a post or two away..." (201). His painting thus symbolically foreshadows the death of Judith and Philip's philosophical search for self-significance as well as their death as artists. "[T]oo spent to turn again and face the wind," Philip and Judith's search for self perishes. "[T]he tug and swirl of the blizzard," accurately reflect the "common-sense" climate of their social environment, which, as it is too great for them to overcome, forces them to succumb to spiritual and artistic paralysis and death.

Given Philip's abandoning his search for the "illusory" world, it becomes difficult to interpret his christening into the lesser realm of the "common-sense" as anything but negative. Thus, when "Philip sa[ys] cautiously that he had written Tillsonborough offering them a settlement" (209) in which the Bentleys would receive six hundred

dollars of the total one thousand owing within the next two months, the reader does not welcome his initiation into this economic, self-serving role. As Phillip becomes more complacent and self-satisfied, the reader also realizes that this will have a negative effect on Philip's art as well. Rather than being "able to study and paint again" (156) as Mrs. Bentley had suggested, the reader realizes that Philip is proceeding in the exact opposite manner of Paul's appropriate description of a true artist:

'They're all like that,' Paul tried to put me at my ease when we came out. 'Why there was a French artist who decided one day he couldn't stand his business or family any longer, and just walked off and left them. It's a good sign.' (169)

Unlike this description of Gauguin described by Paul, Philip, rather than rejecting his family for art, is rejecting art for his family. As such, the reader realizes Philip will never be a true artist wrestling with "the void" to find autonomous self-definition unless he leaves the city, the bookstore, Mrs. Bentley, and his son, something which seems unlikely to happen. The text suggests, however, that the alternative, complete devotion to art and a philosophical search for self-definition, would have had an equally disastrous end on the partially socialized Philip.

Developed in close parallel to Philip's character, El Greco, the Bentleys' dog, is used to reinforce much about Philip's character. In this passage, although Mrs. Bentley sets up the initial comparison, Paul's additional commentary is one in which the reader immediately recognizes Philip:

El Greco's been moody and mopey lately, ever since Minnie left, and Philip [who has recently lost Steve] has taken to consoling him...the two

of them so long and gaunt and hungry-looking... when he [Paul] saw El Greco turning away from his food he said we ought to sell him. He's a wolfhound; he belongs out in the country running down coyotes.... But El Greco heard and wouldn't let it drop so easily. He gave a little whine, then started scratching at the door, and rallying to him Paul spoke up again. "It really isn't right, such a fine dog going to waste, playing in the street and making a fool of himself. He was down by the school the other day, standing stock still with his legs apart and a string of little youngsters ducking underneath his belly singing London Bridge Is Falling Down. I whistled him away, but in a minute or two he was back again. That's why he hasn't any appetite. He's ashamed inside — knows this isn't where he ought to be." (179)

Just as El Greco has been tamed into a role in which he "mak[es] a fool of himself," so Philip has been conditioned into the role of a minister, the entire while being painfully aware of his inability to fulfil such a role effectively, as his interaction with his parishioners suggest:

After service this morning at Partridge Hill a woman came up to us and said it was well to be a preacher, money to spend, not much to do, a car to drive round the country in. They won't thresh a bushel this fall. They won't have potatoes even, or feed for their children and pigs. It's going to be a chance, she says, for the Lord to show some of the compassion that Philip's forever talking about in his sermons. She has five children. This winter they're going to need shoes and underwear....

Philip's been changing of late, growing harder, more self-assertive, but today again he winced. He couldn't answer her. He just stood wetting his lips till she saw how it was with him and said, "You never mind — I'd no right saying such things anyway." Then she put her hand on his sleeve as if he were a boy in trouble, and without looking up again hurried off to her democrat. (149)

Philip, like El Greco, "scratching at the door," has used his art to attempt escape. Too afraid to leave completely the safe confines of the conventional world, however, Philip has remained divided between the two worlds, just as El Greco does during his

first attempted escape to the coyotes:

Later when Paul was going, he [El Greco] slipped out through our legs and disappeared up the street. We stood on the step a minute listening for him, then as his deep bay came back Paul looked at our anxious faces and with a touch of disdain in his voice said, "He's stopped now on the edge of town, afraid to go any further. You don't need to worry. He'll be back for his blankets and bread and milk." (180)

Unlike Philip, however, who is not strong enough to follow through on his personal convictions, El Greco does reject society, with all its attendant physical comforts, in favour of the role he was created to play: that of the wolfhound. Of El Greco's choosing the latter, Mrs. Bentley writes:

We've lost El Greco. Driven by hunger the coyotes lately have been coming right to the outskirts of the town, and about eleven o'clock last night when they started howling again he answered with such a furious barking that I got frightened and opened the door for him. Philip ran after him, and stayed out so long trying to whistle him back that he froze his ears. There was no more howling from the coyotes, though, so we've concluded that they lured him well away from town, then turned and made an end of him. (196)

The tamed El Greco cannot return and survive within the wild. In similar fashion, the text suggests that Philip, tamed by years in the ministry and his marriage, would not survive were he to reject completely the "common-sense world" of which he has become a part. Philip's future thus results in death no matter which path he chooses to follow. Were he to leave the confines of his present society, El Greco's experience suggests he would be defeated by forces within the "illusory" world he is not strong enough to withstand. If he stays in the "common-sense world," he remains but a

shadow of what he could have been. As Mrs. Bentley remarks with regard to their taming of El Greco:

He was a wolfhound; we should have let him live like one...but Philip and I, of course, decided we knew better. We were attached to El Greco. We meant well.

It always turns out the same when you make up your mind that what's right for you must be right for someone else. I made up my mind about Philip once — and as a result see what he is today. He was so dark and bitter and lonely, struggling away toward such cold, impossible goals, and I was so sure that my little way of sympathy and devotion was the better way. Maybe there would be three of us today a lot happier if I'd had El Greco to teach me this lesson fourteen or fifteen years ago. (196)

Thus, with the “illusory” world an impossible one to attain, except for momentary glimpses, and the “common-sense” one being self-destructive, the ending of the novel by necessity must be bleak. This bleakness is further enhanced in that Mrs. Bentley, although she acknowledges her mistake with Philip in the above passage, is nonetheless in the process of making the same mistake again, and foreshadows what the end result will be: “It always turns out the same when you make up your mind that what's right for you must be right for someone else.” The saving of the one thousand dollars, the move to the city, and the purchase of the bookstore have all been her decisions; Philip has been but a grudging and passive participant. Mrs. Bentley has “made up [her] mind about Philip” once again, and thus the reader cannot anticipate anything other than that which resulted from the first time she did so.

Thus the patriarchal tradition on which the world of the “common-sense” has been founded surfaces victorious, ironically defended and maintained by a woman whose

assumption of a leadership role in her marriage would be frowned on by the very people whose values she is emulating. Nevertheless, Mr. and Mrs. Bentley and Philip junior become a "traditional" family unit on the surface and assume the appropriate roles therein. Economic and familial security have been chosen at the expense of legitimate artistic pursuits, the city having been chosen in favour of the town. The Bentleys themselves have moved even further from the wilderness and the wind, representing the "totality of possibilities which life offers" (Ricou 70), and closer to civilization and the patriarchal rules and regulations it represents.



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