

Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley*

and

Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*:

Two Cases of Canadian Canon Making

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ABSTRACT

This is an examination of the critical reception and canonical status of Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley* and Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*. While both novels have been regarded as important works of Canadian literature, *As For Me and My House* is currently regarded as a canonical novel and *The Mountain and the Valley* is not. This study examines the notion of the Canadian canon and its relation to Buckler's and Ross's novels to show how the specific case of Ross and Buckler illustrates the process of Canadian canon formation. Through a review of the critical work produced on each novel, an understanding of trends in Canadian critical practice and theory, and the application of canon theory, this thesis examines the reasons for the differences in the reception and status of the two works. This thesis argues that the interplay between critical trends, academic interests, and literary value ultimately determines the canonical status of a text.

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INTRODUCTION

This is a study of the critical reception and canonical status of two Canadian texts, Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley* (1952) and Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* (1941). The fluctuations in the status of each novel can be clearly seen by following the history of the critical reception of each. There are several remarkable similarities in both the personal and writing lives of Buckler and Ross and in the histories of the novels, yet Ross's novel has been far more widely read and discussed than Buckler's. Judging from the amount of recent criticism on each novel, *As For Me and My House* is currently regarded as a canonical novel and *The Mountain and the Valley* is not. The differences in the reception and status of the two novels raise questions about the nature and motivation of Canadian criticism of Canadian literature and Canadian canon formation. This study will examine the critical reception of *The Mountain and the Valley* and *As For Me and My House* to provide a case study of two instances of canon-making and address the larger issues surrounding the making, unmaking, and remaking of the Canadian canon. An examination of the critical reception of *As For Me and My House* and *The Mountain and the Valley* reveals that the canonization of a Canadian book is dependent upon many factors. Critical interests and trends in critical practice and theory strongly influence the status of a text. Despite early positive receptions of the novel, critical fashions following the late 1970s did not favour *The Mountain and the Valley* and, the novel is currently non-canonical. On the other hand, *As For Me and My House* has benefited from critical trends and, over time, has become established as a canonical text. Another important contributing factor is the literary value of a work, which may be recognized gradually. This case study will argue that the interplay between critical trends, academic interests, and literary value ultimately determines the canonical status of a text.

Buckler and Ross have interesting parallels in their personal and literary histories. Both men were born in 1908 and lived in rural Canada, Buckler in Dalhousie West, Nova Scotia, and Ross in Shellbrook, Saskatchewan (Chambers 1). Living in rural areas strongly influenced their writing and their work is representative of the regions in which they lived (1). Both men were extremely private bachelors who generally avoided literary circles and the publishing world (2).

There are also striking parallels in their careers, as each first wrote short stories and then moved on to novels. Both Buckler and Ross had difficulty establishing themselves as literary figures, as neither was able to live solely off his writing (1-2). Their work is also very similar, addressing shared themes such as the creation of art in a hostile environment, artistic failure, isolation, alienation, despair, and guilt. Another resemblance between the careers of the two is that each author's first novel was initially published in the United States, *As For Me and My House* in 1941 and *The Mountain and the Valley* in 1952, and enjoyed some critical success. Both novels went out of print and were later republished by McClelland and Stewart in the New Canadian Library (NCL) series and each was accompanied by an introductory critical essay. *As For Me and My House* was republished in 1957 and *The Mountain and the Valley* in 1961 and the NCL series editions of the books generated critical interest, and both texts received far more critical attention than previously.

While both novels were highly regarded when first published in Canada and for some time afterwards, the two have been treated quite differently since. Ross's novel has been far more extensively discussed by critics than Buckler's. In 1992, David Stouck estimated that sales of *As For Me and My House* were close to a quarter of a million copies (Lecker, *Making It Real* 174), showing that it has been widely read and studied. Ross's novel has been extensively studied without interruption for nearly fifty years and is widely regarded as a classic of Canadian literature. On the other hand, *The Mountain and the Valley* has not enjoyed such critical success. Buckler's work was well received in Canada after it was first published and R.E. Watters called it "the most distinguished and promising first novel ever published by any Canadian anywhere" ("Unknown Literature" 51). Praise of the novel continued into the early 1980s: Margaret Atwood called it "one of the finest novels to ever come out of the country" and poet Alden Nowlan claimed it was "one of the finest novels in the English-speaking world" (qtd. in Dvorak 16). However, interest in the novel died down in the 1980s and has just begun, tentatively, to revive. Considering the initial success of both *The Mountain and the Valley* and *As For Me and My House*, it is difficult to understand why one novel has been so successful while the other has been largely ignored.

A national canon consists of the classics of a nation's literature and these works are believed to be the best representations of the nation, its values, and its history. A canon consists of the best works produced over time, meaning that it is made up of the works of greatest literary

quality and that it shows the development of a nation's literature. A canon preserves and presents the best of what has been written and an outline of how the literature has developed. The Canadian canon is certainly not fixed list and there is disagreement regarding the shape of the canon, but there is a consensus among academics that a canon exists. Canon-making is largely in the hands of academics, as their critical and pedagogical activity is largely the means by which a novel is granted its status. This thesis studies the canonical positions of *As For Me and My House* and *The Mountain and the Valley* by focusing upon the critical work produced on each novel. This examination of the two novels depends on the past and current positions of each book in the Canadian canon. This study focuses upon critical work as a measure of canonicity, but there are various other factors which also influence canonicity. While academics contribute to the process of canonization through critical work, their work in the classroom is also important. The books which professors choose to teach demonstrates a particular view of the nation's literature. Classroom activity shows that certain texts are regarded as important for aesthetic, cultural, or pedagogical reasons, and the fact that they are taught maintains and may even elevate their status. Study of novels at universities at the undergraduate and graduate levels contributes to the canonical positions of texts.

Forces outside the academic world also contribute to the process of canon formation. One way that the significance of a work can be evaluated is through its influence on other creative writers in the nation. For example, Margaret Laurence admired both Ross and Buckler and was grateful for the contribution each man made to Canadian literature, showing that Buckler and Ross are a part of the Canadian literary tradition. Since a nation's literature needs to be printed in order for academics, students, and other readers to have access to it, publishers and editors are also deeply involved in the development of a canon. Editors and publishers contribute to a novel's reputation through the choices they make about which works to publish, as the choice to print a certain work indicates that the work is viewed as important in some way. Decisions to anthologize or re-issue certain works shows that particular pieces of fictions are believed to be more valuable than others, thereby elevating certain works. The publication of a novel is not determined solely by its literary value: the potential for financial success is also considered when publishers choose a book to release. Closely related to the evaluations carried out by publishers is the general public, which is involved with the status of a novel through purchasing and borrowing books. The public contributes to a novel's status through its decisions to read certain

books and ignore others, but these choices are partially influenced by publishers. There are many forces which influence canonicity, showing that the matter is extremely complex.

Theories of canon formation are therefore central to this study of Ross and Buckler, because they offer detailed explanations for how texts achieve their canonical status. Carole Gerson argues that canons are fluid and defined by those in power according to their personal agendas and a self-serving blend of national, aesthetic, and sexual politics (46). John Guillory categorizes canons as “cultural capital,” meaning that they “determine how works are preserved, reproduced, and disseminated over successive generations and centuries” (ix). He believes that the canon debate demonstrates “a crisis in the form of cultural capital we call ‘literature’” and argues that academic institutions control literature and therefore control the canon (viii). Terry Eagleton claims that both the canon and the national literature have to be recognized as a construct fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a certain time. He believes that no literary work or tradition is valuable in itself because he views value as a transitive term, meaning that it is defined by certain groups and is dependent upon the specific situations, criteria and purposes of those groups (401). W. J. Keith, on the other hand, argues that the canon should be established according to the intrinsic literary value of works rather than according to the values and agenda of critics (“Shooting Niagara?” 387). Harold Bloom also believes that the canon is a reflection of literary quality and disapproves of the unwillingness of literary critics to defend literature on the basis of its artistic merit (407). All of these critics have therefore contributed to the study of canonicity by attempting to define the factors that influence the formation of the canon.

A fair amount of critical work has been produced specifically on each author and his works. The most recent work on Buckler is Marta Dvorak’s *Ernest Buckler: Rediscovery and Reassessment* (2001), which examines Buckler’s influences, philosophy, and his artistic perception and imagination. She believes that although Buckler has been ignored because of changing sensibilities and aesthetic trends, his work can in fact be examined from a postmodernist stance. She claims that Buckler should be further studied and that he deserves canonical status. Robert Lecker’s *Making It Real: The Canonization of English-Canadian Literature* closely examines the history of Ross’s reception. He believes that interest in *As For Me and My House* (1995) was the result of its publication in the NCL and views the NCL as the driving force behind the creation of the Canadian canon. He challenges the view that the canon is

a product of purely aesthetic concerns and argues that the canon is a construct created by academics which has emerged as a response to pedagogical and cultural demands (174). Morton Ross also believes that critics have influenced the novel's status. He examines the history of the critical reception of *As For Me and My House* and concludes that it has been canonized because it has been misrepresented by critics. He argues that the critical inclination to ignore the novel's setting and the efforts to abstract the novel and characters from their historical setting are attempts to create universal themes in a novel that is clearly situated in a particular time and place (205). Ross argues that the novel needs to be examined as a regional text and its physical and historical setting must be considered (205). These critics have studied the issues surrounding the Canadian canon, and done so specifically by examining Buckler and Ross. Although the critics differ in their assessments of what ultimately determines the status of a text, the discussion of canonicity leads to an informed understanding of how texts achieve their positions.

This theoretical context will aid an evaluation of the development of the histories of the critical reception of the two novels. This thesis will examine both the similarities and differences in the treatment of *The Mountain and the Valley* and *As For Me and My House*, and will build upon and extend the work that has already been produced on the two novels and the Canadian canon. The status of both *The Mountain and the Valley* and *As For Me and My House* will be scrutinized in relation to theories of canon formation by carefully studying the critical work that has been produced on each novel, and by closely examining how critical trends and interests influence the canonical position of a text. I will focus on the fluctuations in the critical treatment of *The Mountain and the Valley* and *As For Me and My House*, beginning with a count of the amount of work done on each novel. I will also study major trends in Canadian literary criticism in order to determine how they have influenced the emerging status of *The Mountain and the Valley* and *As For Me and My House*. The nature of the work that has been produced on each will be studied to help explain why one text has received more attention than the other. I will assess the early and later reception of the works, specifically to determine the ways that articles, comments, and criticism constitute a case of canon making. I will, therefore, examine the developing criticism on Ross's and Buckler's major novels with respect to the theoretical framework of canon formation.

My first chapter focuses on Buckler and examines his literary history and critical reception. It is a study of the history of the reception of *The Mountain and the Valley* and a

review of the criticism produced on the novel. It examines how the major aspects of the novel, such as Ellen's rug, the novel's style and language, and the ending, are interpreted and how these interpretations change over time. Criticism of the novel is studied chronologically and thematically to show the dominance of certain methods at particular times and how this affects the reception of *The Mountain and the Valley*. This review of the novel's criticism will demonstrate how critical trends have affected the novel's literary status.

The second chapter focuses on the history and literary reception of *As For Me and My House* and examines the same influences that are studied in Buckler's case. Criticism of the novel is reviewed and summarized in order to demonstrate the variations in critical attention over fifty years. The chapter illustrates how interpretations of the major aspects of the novel, such as Mrs Bentley's character, Philip's character, and the ending, have altered over time. In doing this, I will attempt to discover the factors have led to the novel's success.

The third chapter compares the critical reception of the two novels and examines how the treatment of the novels demonstrates an instance of canon making, the inclusion or exclusion of a work. Questions raised by the variations in the reception of the novels will be addressed in this chapter. Why has one novel been so widely discussed while the other has not? What are the most influential factors in the determination of a text's status? Which critical influences are most powerful in determining a text's status? Will the present position of each novel remain as it is? I will also show how this particular comparative case illuminates some of the issues concerning Canadian canon theory in general.

The specific case of Ross and Buckler illustrates the process of Canadian canon formation. Academic interests have strongly influenced the status of the two books and each novel has been approached from numerous critical stances. The two have been labelled as works of literary value, showing that they are both worthy of consideration for inclusion in the canon. The interaction between academic interests, contemporary critical and literary trends, and literary value determines a novel's canonical position and studying these elements in the case of Ross and Buckler provides a glimpse into the process of Canadian canon formation. The differences in the careers of Buckler and Ross suggest the many factors that influence canonicity in Canada—nationalism, regionalism, literary critical trends, to name a few—and this thesis will provide a case study of Buckler and Ross in order to investigate how these factors intersect to construct texts as major and minor.

CHAPTER 1

Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley*

Ernest Buckler was a Nova Scotian who claimed he was a “farmer who writes, not a writer who farms” (“My First Novel” 22). A review of Buckler’s achievements shows this to be an understatement, as he was a skilled author who wrote plays, short stories, essays, reviews, newspaper columns, and several novels. Buckler’s first novel, *The Mountain and the Valley*, was published in 1952 by Henry Holt and Company in the United States and sold 7,000 copies. The novel received some critical attention in the United States and Canada after its publication. Despite positive reviews, interest in the novel decreased in the 1950s to the point that the novel went out of print. McClelland and Stewart eventually obtained the rights to the novel and issued a NCL edition in 1961, which revived interest in *The Mountain and the Valley* (Dvorak 30-31). The novel continued to receive praise into the early eighties, but by the late eighties *The Mountain and the Valley* was the focus of only a handful of critical works, showing that interest in the novel was declining. Nevertheless, a recent work focuses solely on Buckler, which suggests that critical interest in the novel may be growing. This chapter will examine the history of the novel’s reception, the various ways it has been approached, and the factors which have influenced its literary status.

The 1950s and 1960s

Early Reviews

When *The Mountain and the Valley* was published, it received positive reviews in the United States and Canada.¹ In the hundreds of American reviews, Buckler and his work are frequently exalted, naming him “the Thomas Hardy of Nova Scotia, a Willa Cather for dignity and homespun beauty, a Mary Webb and a Thomas Wolfe” (Cook 5). Reviewers also compare the Canadian author to D.H. Lawrence and Jane Austen (5). On November 7, 1952, soon after the release of *The Mountain and the Valley*, Sterling North of the *New York World-Telegram and Sun* congratulates “Ernest Buckler, a Nova Scotian farmer, who against tremendous odds,

¹ I have examined a selection of the reviews republished in Cook, Orange and Dvorak.

loneliness, poverty, and back-breaking labour, has come through with a fresh and exciting first novel, *The Mountain and the Valley*” (qtd. in Cook 4). Early Canadian reviews are positive as well, praising Buckler’s accomplishment and viewing the novel as a valuable addition to Canadian literature. Early reviews in both Canada and the United States are generally optimistic and predict that the novel will be the focus of future studies.

Reviews of *The Mountain and the Valley* frequently comment on the mimetic aspects of the novel, reflecting the dominance of critical realism in literary criticism of the 1950s (Bennett, “Criticism” 248). Several critics have commented on the prominence of mimetic criticism at this time. Claude Bissell believes this period in literature is controlled by a “contemplative realism,” which examines people in their social environment and illuminates rather than resolves their problems (248). Louis Dudek sees the chief critical act as relating text to reality and to the experiences of the external world (248). Desmond Pacey believes there are three modern traditions in Canada at this time: mythopoeic writing, urban realism, and rural or regional poetry (249). W.H. New writes that the fiction of the 1950s is committed to realism and to the mimetic representation of the ordinary. He says that fiction at this time celebrates individual lives and tries to demonstrate the psychological dilemmas behind characters’ choices (*History* 156).

Reviews immediately following the novel’s publication are mainly interested in the text’s mimetic aspects, from the realistic portrayal of life and language, to the autobiographical and psychological elements of the novel. Stuart Keate admires the reproduction of the local dialect (28). S. Morgan-Powell notes there are “painful passages of bitter realism” (Cook 33) and Bissell argues that David Canaan’s story is told with “fierce, unrelenting realism” (“Study” 37). One reviewer, Edmund Fuller, even finds that the novel mimics life too closely, stating that the author is too self-conscious about “bodily and biological details” (qtd. in Orange *Annotated* 48). Bissell and Morgan-Powell link the realistic elements of the novel with Buckler’s own life, claiming the novel is strongly autobiographical. Watters agrees, seeing Buckler as satisfying the function of the master artist-poet that David is unable to fulfill (“*Mountain*” 47). Other reviewers are particularly impressed by the psychological realism of the novel. Keate comments on Buckler’s perceptive psychology (28) and Bissell sees the text as a study of human relations as they work themselves out in a family (“Study” 36). F. H. Bullock calls the novel a “rare study of the effect of loneliness upon the human personality and the blessed response when the hunger for human companionship is satisfied” (qtd. in Orange 48). William Arthur Deacon comments that the

novel is an “interpretation of the ill-defined thoughts of the characters and the translation of their feelings,” which are so “tenuous” that even the characters themselves do not understand them (“Every Little” 30-31).

As Keate notes, Buckler’s use of language is closely linked with his true-to-life representation of the characters and their emotions, and his remarkable use of language is certainly noted by all who have read his work. Morgan-Powell says Buckler writes beautifully and has a passion for detail (33) and Deacon writes that the novel is “beautifully written – each word chiselled with loving care” (“Every Little” 29). Katherine Douglas praises Buckler’s prose for its concrete images, clarity, and ability to “evoke half-forgotten but instantly recognized sensations and impressions with startling originality and power” (48). Keate claims that Buckler’s language has a “haunting eloquence” and “aching sensuality” (28). Bissell states that the novel was written with intensity and painstaking care and notes that Buckler strives “to make each word a servant of his vision” (“Study” 37). Watters praises the “startling originality and richness of Buckler’s figurative language” (“*Mountain*” 48), and Sartwell states that Buckler has a “brilliant gift of drawing images” and recommends taking the novel in short bites “to savor its full flavour” (qtd. in Dvorak 33). Fran Blake believes the characters stand out “as though limned with an etcher’s tool” (qtd. in Dvorak 33). While these critics praise Buckler’s use of language, there is some disagreement in early reviews about the effectiveness of the prose. Others, sometimes the same critics, admonish the novel’s language. Keate criticizes the novel’s “overripe” language and faults its movement away from a traditional plot line, resulting in a story where “nothing much exciting happens” (28). Morgan-Powell notes that Buckler’s “passion for detail” results in a “realistic over-elaboration” (33). Douglas comments that Buckler “shapes his words with such startling originality and power that the reader may find himself half wishing that the writer would restrain himself” (40). These reviewers observe Buckler’s strong command of language, but find his prose dense and overly elaborate at times.

In the 1950s, there was a widespread concern over the quality of Canadian literature and many critics wondered if contemporary Canadian literature was superior to earlier works. This concern is evident in reviews of *The Mountain and the Valley*, where its status as a Canadian text is frequently highlighted and it is regarded as a text that will establish a foundation for other Canadian authors. Morgan-Powell says that Buckler provides a positive example for the development of Canadian literature and notes that he “has a skill in vivid imagery that must be

ranked as remarkable in Canadian fiction” (33). Bissell deems it “a fine Canadian novel, in many respects the best that has been written in this country” (“Study” 37). Watters praises the novel as a Canadian text: “There has never been a ‘first novel’ written in Canada as excellent as this one” (“Mountain” 41). He believes that Buckler’s command of language “is quite without rival in Canada and probably elsewhere” (48). These reviewers view the novel as being important to Canadian literature, as it establishes a new, very high standard of quality for the nation’s literature.

Another interesting aspect of the novel’s reception is the frequent comparison to the literature of other countries. This reflects the emergence of international or comparative criticism in the late 1950s. Comparative criticism examines how Canadian literature is distinct from, but also how it is similar to the literature of other countries, especially the United States and Britain (Bennett, “Criticism” 251). Thus, the claim that Canadian authors are equal to those outside of the nation emerges at this time. Douglas writes, “There can be no doubt that [Buckler] has made a valuable contribution to North American literature” (40). An anonymous review in the December 14, 1952 issue of the *Miami Herald* observes that the “interweaving of people and places, of men and women with their environment, is a technique that is often found in European writing, almost never in authors of this hemisphere” (qtd. in Dvorak 33). In these early reviews, Buckler’s work is recognized as important to Canadian literature because it elevates the status of the nation’s literature by making it comparable to the literature of other nations.

While Buckler’s first novel was reviewed positively in both the United States and Canada and viewed as a valuable contribution to Canadian literature, the work did not enjoy a wide readership in Canada for nearly a decade. The novel remained largely unknown in Canada, except to a few reviewers, for several years after its publication. Although many copies were distributed in the United States, only 250 copies were originally imported into Canada under the Clarke-Irwin imprint (G. Davies 36). Bissell comments that Buckler “has been enthusiastically received in the United States” but has not been given any reception “cordial or otherwise [. . .] in his own country” (“Study” 38). Watters, in a lecture in 1954, doubts that his audience has heard of Buckler, a view that was likely correct, as the novel was out of print in Canada by 1955 (“*Mountain*” 41). He believes the novel’s literary value is superior to the works of younger American and British novelists who are well known in Canada (“Unknown” 51). Despite

favourable reviews and comparison to several famous authors, Buckler and his novel were largely ignored by the general Canadian population and academic critics.

The 1960s

Critical opinion in the 1950s centres largely around the novel's realism, as critics focus on the psychological and autobiographical elements of the novel, while also showing an interest in Buckler's style, the novel's importance as a piece of Canadian literature, and its similarities to the literature of other nations. The focus of literary criticism changed slightly in the 1960s, but showed some continuity with the criticism of the 1950s. Before the 1960s, little work on Canadian fiction was done, but in the 1960s, the volume of criticism of Canadian literature increased, partially due to the recognition of Canadian literature as a field of academic study (Bennett, "Criticism" 249). Critics continued to locate English-Canadian literature in larger or alternate English-language traditions, and Canadian criticism assimilated modernist aesthetics and formalist analysis into its critical techniques and values (249, 252). One important area that emerged was thematic criticism, heavily influenced by Northrop Frye's work. Earlier criticism was also thematic, but the themes were changing. Frye argued that literature descended from the texts of myth and the Bible and this thematic criticism is based upon the idea that the content of literature is provided by archetypes of myths (249, 252). Due to the new focus of criticism, elements of nationalism, regionalism, and formalism began to appear in critical work on Buckler at this time.

With the development of new areas of critical interest, original approaches to literature appear. The success of *The Mountain and the Valley* increased in the 1960s due to its re-release in Canada. In 1961, McClelland and Stewart obtained the rights to the novel, which was out of print, and issued a new edition in the NCL. *The Mountain and the Valley* sold 28,000 copies and was in its fifth NCL printing by 1978. These numbers show that the novel's release as part of the NCL greatly affected its popularity and widened its readership, especially by students (Dvorak 30-31). One interesting aspect of the NCL edition of the novel is that it was released with an introductory essay by Claude Bissell. The introduction is a critical interpretation of the novel, showing that the text and its criticism are deliberately placed together for the novel's mainly academic audience of students and professors in a way that had not been done before in Canada, with Canadian writing. Bissell's commentary on the novel is representative of the criticism that preceded the NCL edition, as he remarks upon many of the aspects noted by earlier critics. He

comments on the mimetic aspect of the novel, calling it a “biographical” and “psychological” novel, noting “no other author probes so deeply” (“Introduction” ix). Echoing his earlier review of the novel, he thinks the novel “lies close to the common human experience” and is a “a study of human relations as they work themselves out in a family, separated by deep personal differences, and yet united by love and affection” (xi). He also comments on Buckler’s prose, positively and negatively. He says that Buckler is “constantly in search of the precise and inevitable word,” (x) but also observes that there are “times when one feels that the search for the word has become an end in itself; that the novelist has lost touch with the event, which must, after all, be the essential unit of the work of fiction” (xi). Bissell believes Buckler’s work is important to Canadian literature: “It has now firmly established itself as a Canadian classic, to be cherished and reread” (vii). He exalts Buckler as “the only Canadian novelist who writes in what might be described as the high metaphysical style” (x).² He compares Buckler to American authors such as Melville, Faulkner, Wolfe and Bellow.

While Bissell’s introduction looks back to earlier readings of *The Mountain and the Valley*, it also points ahead, showing the emergence of a new thematic focus of critical attention. Bissell is interested in the prominence of the theme of time in the novel, calling it “The great unifying force” of the novel and “a mysterious, and powerful entity” (x). As a result of this interest in time, Bissell views Ellen as playing an important role: she is a “a still point in the jumble of events, a sort of eternal present, who ranges back and forth in memory, so that the past and present become to her, and then to the reader, almost indistinguishable”(x). Closely linked to Ellen is the rug, which, with its “multiple strands and its associations with past events and people, becomes a symbol of the power of human relations to withstand the complex gnawing of time” (x). This interest in and concentration upon time and continuity is not present in previous interpretations, and is in congruence with Frye’s mythic criticism as it focuses on the fundamental archetypes of experience.

Another focus of interest that Bissell develops is the theme of isolation. He believes that as the novel progresses, David “retreats more and more into a self-contained world of his own making” (xii). Because of David’s withdrawal, “The study of human community threatens to become a study of human isolation” (xii). Bissell also examines the portrait of the artist as a

² Metaphysical writing is “characterized by wit, syntactic complexity, and the use of elaborate and intricate schemes of imagery to express abstract ideas and emotional states” (OED).

young man. Bissell's introduction is important to the development of interest in Buckler's novel because it reviews the elements of the novel that have previously been examined and also presents new approaches to the novel. The placement of criticism as an introduction to the text, the review of previous criticism, and the development of new approaches, all operate to present a new view of the novel. The NCL paperback edition of *The Mountain and the Valley* therefore provides a new format for a new audience.

The importance of Bissell's work is clear, as critics in the 1960s continued to explore and expand on the issues he raises. Building upon Bissell's thematic reading of the text, Warren Tallman, for example, examines the novel thematically. He views David as the example of the sensitive Canadian soul who attempts to overcome isolation in an illiterate family and community (Pell 17). In 1967, Spettigue also adopts a thematic approach and analyzes the structure of *The Mountain and the Valley*, focusing upon the use of symbols: mountain and valley, letter and train, the fall and the scar, the rug and the mountain (151-53). Another theme that is developed at this time is the challenges faced by the artist. The problem of a sensitive individual in a place dominated by physical work and the land is examined, and critics centre their studies on the challenge of creating art in a hostile environment.

Interpretation of Major Elements

Many of the reviews focus on Buckler's language: all the reviewers and critics admit that Buckler has an impressive command of language, but differ in their judgements of the prose's effectiveness. Keate, writing in 1952, argues that Buckler's use of language actually prevents the novel from enjoying greater success: "Had his excesses of imagery, his infatuation with the language, been curbed by a somewhat sterner editorial pencil, it is altogether possible that this good book might have been a great one" (29). Another interesting area of interpretation is the various readings of Ellen. Reviews from the 1950s and 1960s interpret Ellen as a link between past and present.. Bissell sees Ellen as a stationary point in time: she is able to move back and forth in memory so that past and present become impossible to differentiate ("Introduction" x). Keate views the rug as linking past and present (28). Watters sees Ellen and her rug as playing an important role in the novel. She is a symbol of "the eternal present whose function is always the interweaving of our yesterdays with our todays" resulting in "the comic and tragic moments from the past [being] brought together in new interrelationships" ("*Mountain*" 43). The novel's conclusion is also the focus of much critical attention. Deacon is unable to decide if David's

illumination on the mountain indicates the healing of his soul, if his brain had “parted company with mundane reality,” or if he had died. He concludes that since Ellen has finished the rug at the same moment, David has probably died and concludes, “if so, we are glad that he died happy” (“Every Little” 31).

The 1970s

Critical Interpretations

Thematic criticism, which began in the 1960s, becomes prevalent in the 1970s. The emerging thematic criticism was heavily influenced by Frye’s idea that literature has controlling archetypes of myth, and critics used this criticism to reveal the controlling myths or “conceptual frameworks” that exist in the narratives (Bennett, “Criticism” 252). The thematic critics have several goals: to participate in nationalistic polemic (to promote social action, to change the perception of Canadian literature and experience); to continue to formulate theories about national identity and what constitutes Canadian writing; and to show that literature is regionally or locally defined (254). The work of the thematic critics raises several issues, which become the most important focus of criticism in the late 1960s and 1970s. Much of the criticism that emerges after thematic criticism, such as formalism, is an attempt to address the shortcomings of thematic criticism.

A major change in the reception of Buckler’s work occurs in the 1970s. At this time, there is a general burst of critical activity in Canadian literature and as a result, Buckler becomes the object of increased critical attention. One new area of attention consists of works focusing solely on Buckler, such as the introductory overview and the monograph. These studies closely examine Buckler and his works, and emerge as a response to the growing critical industry supporting Canadian literature classes (Pell 17). Several introductory overviews and several full-length studies of Buckler were published in the 1970s. The first monograph that focuses on Buckler was Gregory Cook’s *Ernest Buckler*, published in 1972. This volume consists mainly of reviews and letters, typical of the attention Buckler had received up to this point. Following Cook’s book was Robert Chambers’ *Sinclair Ross and Ernest Buckler*, published in 1975. Chambers’ study deals with the themes and techniques of Buckler’s fiction, and his reading is typical of the previous two decades of criticism (Pell 18). Alan Young published *Ernest Buckler* in 1976 and his text is an analysis of Buckler’s development as a writer. The emergence of full-

length studies on Buckler demonstrates that there is considerable growth of critical interest in the author.

The other major type of attention Buckler receives is from thematic critics, including D. G. Jones, Margaret Atwood, and John Moss. Atwood's *Survival* is the "most influential work of Canadian criticism in the 1970s" and is dominated by an evaluative, nationalistic argument (Bennett, "Criticism" 249). Its underlying conceptual model echoes Frye's garrison thesis. Frye proposed that Canadian culture is shaped by a "garrison mentality" that arose from the "settlers' tendency to shut out the wilderness while attempting to maintain the ways of the Old World" (249). Atwood believes that Canadians are alienated from the environment and are obsessed with an image of themselves as victims (252). Moss presents a similar image, portraying the Canadian as the exiled individual (252). Jones tries to go beyond the idea that Canadians live in a state of exile by suggesting that this isolation is not permanent and that Canada can eventually create a community which is at one with its environment (252). These critics seek to discover a central vision that is a common mode of perception in Canadian writers and, by extension, the Canadian people (252).

As thematic critics examine *The Mountain and the Valley*, the theme of isolation is developed, building upon the garrison mentality thesis. Several critics focus on David's isolation and examine its implications. In 1970, Jones writes that David's isolation is a reflection of the "disintegration of the old rural ways of life and the final failure of the cultural community of the previous generations" (23). David tries to escape his isolation through writing, which is an attempt to understand his experience and give it meaning. Myth is central to Jones's reading and he argues that when David reaches the top of the mountain, he realizes that "the single core of meaning would be nothing less than a complete cultural identity, a central myth or fundamental conception of the world" (25). According to Jones, David believes this central myth "will restore him to the community of his fellow men [. . .] [and] will allow them to find their real community with each other, with the land, and with the dead as well" (25). Jones argues that David's struggle with isolation can be resolved by a return to myth, meaning that the novel supports Frye's argument that the creative imagination creates the myth by which humans live and find identity (Orange *Annotated* 34). Eileen Sarkar also addresses the theme of isolation by examining the existential dilemma of the novel, as David withdraws from his community into his own world. Sarkar describes David's life "as a series of ever narrowing circles which describe

the ever narrowing circumference of David's relations with the external world" (354). As David ages, he continues to isolate himself, moving further into "the self-contained world of words that [he] has built for himself" (360). At the end of the novel, David's last illusion dissolves and he realizes that he will always remain a stranger to everyone. As a result, "All that remains for him is to catalogue the relationships he has missed: with the men of his community; with the wife he would never have; with his child who would never be born [. . .] And finally all that remains is to die" (361). Sarkar argues that David has removed himself so completely from his community that he can never be a part of it.

In line with their thematic exegesis, critics begin to examine the relationship between the environment and the individual, leading to a study of the failed artist. Some critics argue that David's environment is primarily responsible for his failure. This criticism focuses on the conflict between the artist and the environment and sees artistic failure as a part of a general pattern in Canadian literature. Atwood views David as an author who should redeem his people but, as a victim of Canadian cultural sterility, is doomed to fail. Atwood argues that David's gift could allow him to "perform the function of the artist, 'articulate' the community so it could become visible to itself" (186). David has the potential to commit an "integrating, synthesizing act" that would unify "place, people, language and time" (187). David has the ability to fulfill the role of the artist, but cannot because his environment stifles his creativity. Despite David's potential, he is unable to succeed, because "A great writer, an artist of any kind is not imaginable in Entremont" (187). D.J. Dooley accepts Atwood's colonial/environmental explanation for David's collapse. He believes David's failure lies in his "inability to dissociate himself from the standards of the community" and his refusal "to place enough value on the written word that he is willing to risk embarrassment for it" ("Style" 682, 680). David is so strongly affected by his surroundings that he cannot move beyond the judgement of his community, and his inability to ignore judgement leads directly to his failure. John Moss believes David exemplifies "the special problems of the creative person born into an inarticulate world" and dies in an attempt to overcome with words "the isolation that is imposed upon him by external events" (*Patterns* 233). Atwood, Dooley, and Moss, therefore, see a direct correlation between David's environment, both physical and social, and his artistic failure.

Other critics are unwilling to place responsibility for David's failure on external factors and instead hold David responsible for his own failure. Douglas Barbour argues that failure is not

the inevitable outcome of life in a small town in Canada, but rather the result of a self-centred approach to life (65-66). He views David's failure as a result of personal and ethical shortcomings: "If David is an artist-manqué, it is not because he lacks innate qualities of vision, but because of some moral flaw in his character" (71). Barbour claims that David "fails to achieve his potential for the most human of reasons – wilful self-love" (75). Barbour therefore links David's lack of success to deficiencies in his character rather than his environment. L. M. Deorksen argues that the tragedy of the novel is that David has remained a child: "he has failed to develop a separate identity, a self; he has refused to pass through the psychological process that forms the traditional pattern of the *Bildungsroman*" (47).³ Throughout David's life, he is unable to commit the "emotionally agonizing" acts that are "essential for developing an independent, mature identity" (Deorkson 47). Deorksen argues that David will never be a writer because he remains emotionally a child. She believes his ultimate failure lies in his inability to evolve into the writer that he has the potential to become.

Regionalism also emerges as an area of interest as a direct result of thematic criticism. Elizabeth Waterson categorizes *The Mountain and the Valley* as a regional novel and argues that it is also a novel about regionalism, since it explores how an artist risks becoming trapped by his ties to his community (Orange 34). Several critics establish a link between the regional aspects and universal elements of the novel. Clara Thomas classifies Buckler as a "regional writer in the most effective and in the deepest sense of the word" (*Our Nature* 126). The novel builds on the strength of its regional foundation to "tell stories and explore conditions which involve all men and women at all times" (126). Although the novel is set in a specific place, its themes and story are relevant to people everywhere. She believes that the words Buckler chooses are extremely important to its universal scope, as they "add a dimension of the timeless and the universal to the lives and surroundings of ordinary people" (127). Chambers agrees that the regional aspects of the novel are the basis for its universal appeal, as the people of the Annapolis valley take the reader "into the heartland [. . .] of life" and reveal aspects of "the human condition" (102).

Buckler's work is also examined from a formalist stance, studying the novel's style, imagery, and structure. Thomas writes that it is the novel's language "that gives the book its memorable distinction" (*Our Nature* 127). Deorksen comments that no one can "deny the artistry

³ *Bildungsroman* is the story of the development of a person from childhood into adulthood, "through a troubled quest for identity" (Baldick, 24).

of imagery and symbolism, the integrity of structure, or the power of lyrical expression” of the novel (56). Other critics analyze the correlation between Buckler’s style and the themes and content of the novel. Gerald Noonan believes that the “frequently overwrought verbiage” creates “structural and interpretive disharmony” (68). He thinks that the “Self-conscious and wordy” style indicates David’s obsession with words, his introspective egoism and his self-deluded isolation, meaning that the novel’s prose is intended to reflect David’s character (69). Dooley also sees the prose as central to the novel because it illuminates the protagonist’s mind. The style then serves as an “illustration of and ironic commentary on, the egocentric and alienated centre of consciousness” (“Style” 674). Dooley believes that the “recondite vocabulary and love of alliteration [. . .] belong to the imagined character, who lives very much in his own mental world and has not had his mode of thought and composition normalized by contact with people who can correct his excesses” (672). He argues that the sometimes excessive, esoteric language is a reflection of David’s mind. Dooley also believes there are two separate styles in the novel, “one for David’s thoughts and one for the thoughts of others,” but that the distinction is not clearly maintained (674). Laurence Ricou believes that an examination of Buckler’s style emphasizes the “ways in which David remains a child” (685). These critics argue that style in the novel is a conscious technique of characterization. Critics in the 1970s are intrigued by Buckler’s language but, unlike previous critics, they comment on more than the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of style. Formalist criticism of the novel examines the interaction between style and content and attempts to illustrate how style contributes to an understanding of the novel.

One topic that recurs in the criticism of the 1970s is time. Perhaps as a response to earlier critics who commented on the relationship between Ellen, her rug, and time, several critics analyze the role of time in the novel. Building upon Bissell’s observations, J. M Kertzer believes that *The Mountain and the Valley* is a study of “time as the forum of human growth and emotion and thought” (“The Past” 75). As a result, David realizes that his life is temporal and that his view of himself and others depends on his relation to his own past, present and future (74). Time is tangible in the novel as a “felt constituent of experience, or the very condition of experiencing” (75). He identifies two modes of time: the chronological time of the valley and the timeless transcendence of the mountain, which surmounts and encompasses linear time (75). In order for David to survive, he must learn to combine the two orders of time. In the end, this is something that David cannot do, so he dies unfulfilled (83). Moss believes that Buckler’s focus

upon time is an integral aspect of his style. He claims that Buckler “explores time as a medium of existence and not merely its measure” (*Patterns* 90). Buckler plays with the concept of time in the novel, emphasizing certain moments while still positioning them within “the surge and flow of things,” therefore stressing several different points of view simultaneously (90). David shares Buckler’s view of time and he comes to believe that “a writer could subject time to his will and create the antidote to its ravages” (90). According to Moss, David’s epiphany regarding time occurs immediately before his death. Bruce F. McDonald also examines the importance of time in the novel: “Time seems ultimately to lead to a complete negation of all human hopes in destruction, separation, and death” (qtd. in *Orange* 38). McDonald believes there are two alternatives to this negation: Ellen’s resignation to her condition and David’s vision of the possibility of transcending time. McDonald argues that David’s vision is actualized by Buckler’s writing of the novel (qtd. in *Orange* 38). These studies of time, therefore, build upon criticism from the 1950s and present a more optimistic reading than will follow in criticism of the 1980s, enhancing the status of the novel.

As is clear from the development of the interpretation of time in the novel, criticism in the 1970s reviews previous criticism and attempts to address its shortcomings. This increase in attention to the novel indicates that the work is regarded as an important piece of Canadian fiction. One crucial new development in Buckler criticism is Young’s suggestion that “there is a strong vein of irony involved in the portrait of David” (“Genesis” 95). The suggestion that the novel is ironic opposes earlier interpretations which view David positively and as a young man robbed of his chance for success. At the same time as Young writes on the novel, other critics use textual analysis rather than citing authorial intention to argue the ironic characterization of David. Dooley writes that the novel “abounds in ironies” (“Style” 682). He states that the greatest irony is that David “develops a sophisticated and subtle style [. . .] and puts this style to no use in communication. He does not speak to anyone in it, he does not write prose in it (not even letters) for anyone to read” (682). Ricou argues that “Buckler’s novel is an ironic comment on naïveté” (695). Chambers also notes the irony of the novel: “David’s every act of assertion, however motivated, ironically [leads] to failure, guilt, and isolation” (77). J. A. Wainwright extends the ironic reading by exploring the “essentially solipsistic and destructive nature of David’s talents” as an impediment to human relationships (79). Wainwright points to two instances where David destroys what he has written: “David’s fiction, crafted to breach the

silence between him and Chris, is absolutely powerless before the fact of Chris's absence"; so too Anna's accident and Toby's return intrude upon his creative isolation and "any connection between art and life is immediately cut off" (81, 85-86). Wainwright sees irony in the fact that David's talents at first appear to be creative and helpful to others, when in fact they are destructive and disconnected from real life. Critical re-evaluations of David in the 1970s lead to ironic readings of his character, especially his artistic abilities, which increase the novel's status.

Interpretation of Major Elements

The major elements of the novel are interpreted in new ways in the 1970s. There is a great deal of interest in Buckler's language and style as a reflection of content and meaning. At this time, Ellen is seen as an active character. She is interpreted as an element of irony because she is able to give life to the Canaan family as an artist, filling the role David never could (Barbour 74). Deorksen writes that "the rug-hooking grandmother, a combination of sibyl and Fate, engages in an activity that bodies forth the idea that we live in a world of infinite consequences, that the 'now' is a creation growing out of shreds of the 'ago'" (46). Chambers views the rug as a kind of family history and a device for demonstrating the connections between the generations (66). The rug allows Buckler to introduce the members of the family and to foreshadow major events. The grey piece from Joseph's shirt and the flowered piece from Martha's apron foreshadow Joseph's death, and the piece of white tablecloth stained with blood prefigures David's death (67). Young writes that Buckler intended the rug "to show how the apparently blind and capricious turns of [the characters'] fortune are the inevitable outcome of circumstance and inheritance" ("Genesis" 94). Kertzner states that the rug is a "family tapestry" that shapes the past into a pattern ("Past" 74).

Another focus of interest is the novel's ending, and opinions regarding David's death vary. Some critics view the ending pessimistically, such as Young, who claims that David's death does not give him insight into the mysteries of life but is actually his final self-deception ("Genesis" 95). Most critics, however, regard David's death as triumphant and believe that he comes to a joyful understanding and acceptance of the world. Chambers states that there is a sense of beginning rather than loss (3). Thomas claims that "David's quest has finished triumphantly, in his conviction over the power of the word" ("New England" 85). Deorksen argues that David dies in exchange for his insight into the mystery and final unifying truth of human existence (56). Jones believes that David and "his vision lie like the faithful shepherd on

the top of the mountain under the falling snow” (25). Atwood writes “the mountain accords him his vision only at the moment before his death” (186). These critics emphasize David’s death as a final resolution of all the questions he has examined throughout his life and view the conclusion optimistically.

The mid-1980s to the present

Critical Interpretations

In the 1980s there is a great deal of critical writing on Canadian literature, but interest in *The Mountain and the Valley* slowly begins to decrease in the late 1980s and does not increase in later decades. Debate over the existence of a distinct national literature and identity continues, showing that earlier critical concerns affect later studies. Canon formation and revision also become important to critics and a strong critical interest in Canadian writing is established abroad (Bennett, “Criticism” 258). Canadian criticism in the 1980s and 1990s is characterized by a focus on newer methodologies, several of which are applied to *The Mountain and the Valley*. The placement of Canadian writing in the context of works by authors of other nationalities continues (262). Queer theory emerges as an area of criticism. Language becomes a primary area of interest, and structuralism and deconstruction become important modes of inquiry. Criticism of *The Mountain and the Valley* in this period is clearly affected by previous critical trends and also evolves in new directions, as it is read from regional, structuralist, and queer theory stances.

In this period, Buckler criticism is not prominent, but full-length studies of his work continue to be produced and a few monographs on Buckler and his works appear at this time. Orange wrote two works on Buckler: an annotated bibliography in 1981 and a study, *Ernest Buckler and His Works*, in 1990. Orange’s annotated bibliography calls for renewed attention to Buckler’s lesser-known works, his short stories and later novels. He is interested in maintaining critical study of Buckler and believes that Buckler’s “metaphysical style” and the “strain of the metaphysical” in his writing should be further studied, echoing Bissell’s earlier comments (15). Bissell wrote a memoir of Buckler in 1989, which contains some critical assessment of Buckler’s work. In 1995, Barbara Pell wrote *A Portrait of the Artist: Ernest Buckler’s The Mountain and the Valley*, which reviews the critical reception of *The Mountain and the Valley* and provides a reading of the novel. The most recent work on Buckler is Marta Dvorak’s *Ernest Buckler: Rediscovery and Reassessment*, published in 2001. Dvorak examines Buckler’s influences,

artistic perception and imagination, and philosophy in relation to all of his published texts. She re-evaluates all of Buckler's work, remarking upon the criticism that has been produced on Buckler, and suggests possible approaches to his work for the future. The monographs on Buckler demonstrate that although he is not the focus of major critical attention, he is still of interest to critics. Except for Pell's text, all of the works on Buckler discuss all of his texts rather than only *The Mountain and the Valley*, indicating that critics believe his entire body of work deserves to be studied. These critics argue that Buckler deserves canonical status and suggest that the examination of all he has written is one way this can be achieved.

Although there are new developments in criticism, much of the work on Buckler in this period does not present new readings, but rather reviews and reflects on previous interpretations. W. J. Keith focuses upon the regional nature of the novel and notes Buckler's struggle to universalize "intensely regional subject matter" (*Canadian Literature* 147). He believes that Buckler clearly draws upon his own experiences for much of his material and that David is a thinly disguised Buckler. He argues that the novel is so strongly autobiographical that "when David begins to write, his style is indistinguishable from the narrative that contains it" (148). Keith feels that Buckler is unable to separate himself from his protagonist. He sees the novel as emerging from a base in realism and notes that Buckler has a highly metaphorical approach to language (147). He also examines the irony of David's role: he desires to tell the story of his people on a level that is far too advanced for them to comprehend. Gwendolyn Davies, like Keith, also builds on previous criticism. She believes that the novel is concerned with a loss of rural and childhood innocence, with the ascendance of urban and adult values, the destructiveness of time and death, and the alienation of the artist (35-36). She notes that the novel's irony lies in David's belief that he will be the greatest writer in the world. She believes that the novel transcends regionalism (33). She comments on the novel's style, claiming that it "borders on obscurantism as well as exuberance, but its complexity and abstractionism convincingly convey David's introspection, loneliness, and aesthetic frustration" (35). Like critics before her, Davies has an ambivalent view of the novel's style. She also comments on the passage of time, noting the importance of the novel's opening and closing at a still point in time. She argues that Ellen has stopped time because she is living in a kind of childhood (35). Keith and Davies do not advance new readings of the novel, but rather supplement previous criticism by building upon earlier views of irony, region, Buckler's style, and the passage of time.

Lawrence Mathews also looks back upon previous critical work, but he is far more critical of the novel than either Davies or Keith. He takes special note of criticism that emphasizes the novel's irony and comments that "the Ironization of David [. . .] says something either about the quality of the criticism or the quality of the novel itself" ("Hacking" 194). Mathews believes that "the book is *badly written*" and that criticism has failed to prove otherwise: "One looks, in vain, for a thoughtful, comprehensive essay in which a critic demonstrates that *The Mountain and the Valley* should, according to reasonably sophisticated aesthetic premises, be considered to possess the qualities that make it worthy of inclusion in a canon" (189, 191). Mathews specifically addresses the book's canonicity, arguing that critics have been unable to prove that *The Mountain and the Valley* possesses the aesthetic value that make it worthy of canonicity and suggests that since this is the case, the novel does not deserve to be a part of the Canadian canon. Mathews' attack on the literary value of *The Mountain and the Valley* and the weaknesses of its criticism is the first instance of a direct challenge to the novel's literary status.

Unlike other studies at this time, Barbara Pell's examination of the novel both responds to earlier criticism and suggests new approaches to the text. She replies to earlier readings of the novel, particularly by detailing the shortcomings of thematic criticism. Pell notes that the thematic critics seek to portray the protagonist as a victim of the "garrison mentality," "crippled" by Canadian cultural repression, heroically attempting to realize his or her artistic identity but inevitably doomed to isolation and defeat (17). She believes that the major flaw of thematic criticism is that their interest in "generalities obscure[s] the particularities of style" (17). She argues that thematic criticism fails to answer to what extent David's artistic vision is self-delusion and whether he is a victim of society or his own feelings. After reviewing previous criticism, Pell presents her own interpretation of the novel. She suggests a more balanced reading of the text: "this is a subtle, complex novel in which the protagonist [. . .] engages the reader's admiration and sympathy from the beginning. At the same time, Buckler has achieved an ironic objectivity toward his semi-autobiographical artist that [. . .] reveals David's self-delusion and leads the reader to an increasingly critical judgement of his failures" (20). She believes that the major themes of the novel, such as the inability to communicate, the psychological alienation of the individual, and the artist's attempt to give voice and meaning to culture, are characteristic of all modern literature (24). Since the novel deals with many modern themes, she claims it has a

modernist stance. She also argues that the complex patterns of irony and sophisticated point of view parody, and therefore subvert, the self-reflexive or metafictional genre of *Kunsterroman*.⁴ Pell's interpretation of the novel therefore builds upon previous work and suggests new approaches to the novel, presenting the credible study Mathews is looking for.

In his afterword to the 1989 NCL edition of the novel, Robert Gibbs examines the language and narrative design of the novel. Like many critics before him, Gibbs admires Buckler's language, commenting that the novel is a "prose poem, musical in its large design and in its parts" (297). He also presents a new view of the novel's design. He sees the Prologue as the "way in to" *The Mountain and the Valley*, and believes that Ellen's rug is the "single large metaphor" of the novel, as the weaving of Ellen's rug parallels the story of David's life (297, 298). The "large enclosing design" of the rug creates a paradox in the novel: "Formal containment within the surrounding frame perhaps mirrors a view of life as appearing free when it is experienced moment by moment but, seen as a whole, evidently circumscribed" (298). This paradox continues to the final sentences of the novel, which may show "natural life going on, patterned but not confined," leaving "this well-closed book, in a way, unclosed" (302). Gibbs also suggests that the novel's design is linked to the time the novel was written, which was soon after World War II. He argues that "Buckler's very use of strict formal design [. . .] invites the reader to appreciate the tensions of a whole historical moment as well as of one individual's life" (299). The design of the novel is intriguing, as it builds a paradox and reflects the tensions of a particular time in history.

Like Pell, several other critics develop new readings of the text by addressing what they perceive as shortcomings in previous criticism. David Williams finds fault with the approaches of the thematic critics, arguing that the connection between art and life has been cut off "by a critical method which is more content to trace patterns of isolation than to explain the life of such imagery in the novel" (*Confessional Fictions* 148). He argues that this approach is reductive, as it leads the thematic critic to ultimately find "a community threatened on every side by silence, by isolation, and by death" (148). In an attempt to discover more than a threatened community, Williams examines the artist's romantic egoism and the irony of Buckler's style. He presents the not entirely new argument that David is extremely self-centred, remembering that David is

⁴ *Kunsterroman* is a story which describes the protagonist's development as an artist (Baldick 118).

crippled by “a child’s habit of language,” as “every subject refers ultimately to David; the world is entirely enclosed in him, to the point of solipsism” (165). Having established David’s habit of self-reference, Williams questions David’s artistic identity: “Does the artist exist to speak for his community? Or does the community serve to gratify the heroic fantasy of the artist?” (170). He argues that David, a romantic egoist, believes that the whole world exists to see his face and uses other people as masks for himself. Williams’s judgement of David is harsh: “The artist who can see only his own face in the mirror is more than physically disfigured; he is the moral cannibal of a community for which he still pretends to speak” (170). Williams believes that David seeks only to see himself in his art, demonstrating his self-centredness. He sees irony in David’s pretence of speaking for the community when he actually only represents himself. Although Williams’ arguments are anticipated by earlier critics, his study is important because it completely details David’s selfish nature. Like Mathews, Williams challenges the status of the text and suggests, through his attack on David, that the novel may not be worthy of further study.

Several critics build upon earlier observations about the connection between meaning and style by studying the novel’s language. Dvorak is primarily interested in Buckler’s style, which she believes is grounded in “phenomenological and ontological concerns” and is also concerned with “primacy of language” (6). She presents a structuralist reading that examines the construction of meaning through language and assumes that “Meaning is dependent upon differential relations among elements within a system,” such as binary oppositions (Rice 46). According to structuralism, language is “the basic modelling system of our culture” and, as a result, “reality is not reflected by language but produced by it” and “meaning is not natural but a way of interpreting the world” through the language at one’s disposal (Cameron qtd. in Godard 31). Dvorak’s assessment of language in the novel depends heavily upon the view that language is the means by which the world is interpreted and ordered. Dvorak examines “the relationship between language and the universal [. . .] and the way in which [Buckler] reorders the world” through words (8-9). From Dvorak’s perspective, Buckler uses language to structure the world so that there is meaning and presence within it. She believes that Buckler’s writing shows that “all major human experiences – love, loss, time, death, and even thought – are [. . .] made real, and exist only through language” (9). Buckler’s writing demonstrates that language is the base of society because it is only through words that experience can be translated into meaningfulness. Buckler’s and David’s uses of language demonstrate the search for meaning and reality. David

depends upon words to express reality and understand his world and because of this, he is often frustrated by the “inadequacy of the linguistic medium,” as the “perfect word is never the one formed in the scribbler; it is always the virtual one, the next one, for next time” (110). By the end of the novel, David “experiences the fusion of word and the world,” meaning that he finally masters language (109). From Dvorak’s perspective, human experience exists only through language and this is demonstrated by both the character David and the novelist Buckler.

Stephen Ross also examines the novel’s language, but presents a poststructuralist reading of the text. Post-structuralism emphasises the instability of meaning, the indeterminacy of language, and the failure of language to establish truth and represent the real world (Baldick 175-76). Ross’s interpretation of the novel contradicts Dvorak’s position by arguing that language is ultimately incapable of truly conveying meaning. He believes that the novel has an “anti-modern stance in its self-reflexive exploration of the problems of realistic representation in a world that increasingly reveals such representations to be inadequate and inauthentic” (59). The novel portrays a tension between the desire to accurately portray the world through language and the impossibility of doing so. This tension, between “exact description and ascertainable meaning,” is portrayed as “an anti-modernist opposition between Ellen [. . .] and David,” where Ellen represents the premodern world and David represents the modern world (73, 59). Through its focus upon David, the novel explores the tension between the necessity “of communicating experience and the impossibility of true realistic representation” (73). David struggles to find the perfect words to express his thoughts and feelings, but can never achieve this. David tries to enclose reality in language, but the novel shows that “such containment is impossible and that truly authentic representation conveys the authenticity of this predicament” (73). David does not realize that reality cannot be accurately conveyed through words, and does not recognize that the only true notion of life is one that acknowledges that life cannot truly be represented through language. Buckler presents his novel as a “conditional resolution” to “David’s dilemma,” meaning that his novel attempts to reproduce life precisely, while also being aware of the impossibility of recreating the world through language (73). Ross’s examination of the difficulties of representation through language offers a new understanding of both David’s and Buckler’s views and uses of language.

Other critics also study the language of *The Mountain and the Valley*. Margery Fee and Janice Kulyk Keefer both apply deconstruction to the novel, which is a method that emerged out

of and is closely related to post-structuralism. Deconstruction challenges the assumption that “language provides grounds that are adequate to establish the boundaries, the coherence or unity, and the determinate meanings of a text” (Abrams 225). A deconstructive reading of a text, then, “sets out to show that conflicting forces within the text itself inevitably dissipate the seeming definiteness of its structure and meanings into an indefinite array of multiplex, incompatible, and undecidable possibilities” (225). Deconstruction argues that all Western uses of language, except deconstruction itself, rely upon the logos or presence behind every word, rather than depending upon a signifier (226). Fee’s reading of the novel displays several aspects of deconstruction. She notes that Buckler’s style is problematic, as it reveals an “ideological tension endemic to Western thought,” which is the belief that an actual presence lurks behind every word (79). She believes that the novel moves into a multitude of meanings, since “Buckler shows David tormented by the proliferation of alternate voices every time he writes” (77). The endless possibilities that David sees in his writing show that *The Mountain and the Valley* similarly has infinite possibilities. David’s text and Buckler’s are closely connected: “Buckler’s suspicion that the invocation of presence, the attempt at transparently perfect writing, is impossible, means that the only model that he could write about his ‘people’ is one that shows a writer failing to write such a novel” (79). Fee’s deconstructive reading of *The Mountain and the Valley* thus shows the indefiniteness of Buckler’s novel through its close connection to David’s unwritten novel. Kulyk Keefer examines the discrepancy between David’s language and the language of the people of Entremont. David, and by extension Buckler, yearn to know “how something is, for oneself and for everyone else” (226). This means that David tries to understand the experiences of his family, using “extravagantly literary language” and as a result, “the feelings stop being theirs and become David’s” (227). This is because “the ordinary people of Entremont [communicate] best through touch or even through silence; accordingly, not verbal but visual and tactile mediums would best express their lives” (227). David’s belief that he is able to know everything through language is disproved by the very language that he uses. Fee and Kulyk Keefer’s deconstructive readings of the text ultimately show that the boundaries of the novel, between Buckler and David and between David and his family, are not maintained through language and that there are endless significations in the novel.

Another study of language is undertaken by John C. Van Rys, who uses dialogic analysis to examine the text. Dialogic criticism argues that a literary work is a site for “the dialogic

interaction of multiple voices, or modes of discourse” (Abrams 231). As Fee and Kulyk Keefer demonstrate, several different modes of discourse are evident in the novel, shown through the contrasting language of David and the people of Entremont. David’s mode of discourse is primarily monologic and internal, while the people of the valley have a dialogic or polyphonic mode of discourse. Rys carefully studies the dialogue in the novel and traces David’s withdrawal from the “polyphonic world of the valley” as he seeks “transcendence through a meta-language divorced from the dialogue of life” (69). David’s language is inarticulate because rather than “constructing actual dialogues with actual people, David withdraws into internal dialogue, monologue, and eventually silence” (69). By the end of the novel, David has isolated his discourse from reality so completely that he “seeks to master a nonexistent meta-language that will soak up all voices in a monologic vision” (73). Rys’s study of dialogue demonstrates David’s inability to articulate his thoughts and his tremendous isolation.

One new area of recent inquiry into the novel is the application of queer theory. Queer theory challenges the heterosexual bias, which assumes all authors and literary characters are heterosexual, and examines literature to expose instances of homosexuality (Barry 148-49). Terry Goldie and Peter Dickinson each use queer theory to examine *The Mountain and the Valley*. Goldie views David’s alienation as a symptom of homosexuality and believes that David has many “attributes of the stereotypical young homosexual” (86, 91). He sees “an epistemological space which lurks in the corners of David’s character for which homosexuality could be an explanation” (91). He acknowledges that there is no definite point at which David can be said to be gay, but views homosexuality as a viable option for David’s isolation and unhappiness. Dickinson also briefly considers the possibility that David may be gay. He notes that Buckler “suggests that a possible source of David’s emotional disequilibrium is a conflict with his own sexuality,” and argues that the specific point of conflict is his relationship with Toby (21). Dickinson believes David has repressed his homosexual desires, contributing to his melancholy. In certain passages, Buckler is sensitive to “the emotional investments and social emplotments of male-male desire” therefore opening up the text to another “discursive space of identification and critical interrogation for readers who prefer to interpret his text from outside the strict bounds of regional or generic classification” (22). Dickinson suggests that examining the elements of homosexuality in the novel allows a viable alternate reading of the novel. Queer

readings of *The Mountain and the Valley* offer new insights into the novel and enable new interpretations through the suggestion that David may be gay.

Interpretation of Major Elements

Buckler's use of language and his style are the focus of most recent critical discussions. His style and language are regarded as excessive, indicative of confusion, and modern. Recent criticism places Ellen as the pre-modern storyteller who identifies each garment with the story of its genesis and the narrative that follows (Stephen Ross 60). She is the "rug-weaving Fate presiding over the narrative" (71). Williams views the rug as the sharing of memories, as it serves to bind the generations of family and community together (*Confessional* 173). Rys writes that "As Ellen hooks the two inner circles of her rug with the red of David's cape from the play and the white lace, we are reminded of the power and failure of David's voice and the whiteness of death" (9). Gibbs argues that the rug parallels David's life and is a way of understanding the entire novel. The ending of the novel is examined and it is viewed more negatively than it was before. Critics focus on the irony of the ending and begin to see the connection between David's and Buckler's own artistic process. A.T. Seaman writes that David is Buckler's portrait of his worst fears about himself and David's death allows Buckler to exorcise his own tragic flaw (173). Ross believes that David's death is "the death of the artist in chrysalis that becomes Buckler" and claims that Buckler is therefore able to achieve all that David found impossible (75).

CHAPTER 2

Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*

As For Me and My House was published by an American publisher, Reynal and Hitchcock, in 1941 and was released on February 14. In the same year, McClelland and Stewart imported some copies into Canada and distributed them in April. The novel attracted very little attention in the United States and there were hardly any sales (Woodcock 10). Canadian reviews were positive, but only a few hundred copies of the novel were sold, and the book soon dropped from sight. Scarcely any attention was paid to the book until 1957, when *As For Me and My House* was republished as one of the first titles in McClelland and Stewart's NCL series. This renewed attention confirms the importance of the series in the creation of the Canadian canon. The novel was accompanied by a critical introductory essay by Roy Daniells, which opened the debate about ambiguity and authorial intention that continues today. The NCL edition of the novel led to an increase in critical interest, and the novel has been frequently examined since and has been important to both authors and critics. Several authors have called the novel a "seminal work in the development of Canadian fiction" and "Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, and Robert Kroetsch have all referred to *As For Me and My House* as an originary text" (Stouck, *Sinclair Ross* 6). *As For Me and My House* has "provided the occasion for this country's critics to write and test the limits of new literary theory, international as well as Canadian" (6). As David Stouck notes, it has proved able to support critical questions about ambiguity and authorial intention and has been approached from a variety of critical stances, including realism, modernism, structuralism, semiotics, and gender studies (6). This chapter will examine the history of the novel's reception and the various ways it has been approached.

The 1940s

Critical Interpretations

The early reception of *As For Me and My House* was largely affected by critical trends of the day. At the end of the 1920s, literary criticism shifted its concept of "realism [. . .] from an earlier 'idealized realism' to a new social realism, [which was] a depiction of everyday life that

pointed to the problems of society, if not to its solutions” (Bennett, “Criticism” 244). Critics became interested in the realities and challenges of daily life. Philip Frederick Grove, in 1929, describes the essence of Canadian social realism by calling for a literature that adopts universal concerns and focuses on regional actualities (Bennett 244). This desire to concentrate upon the authentic facts of Canadian life continues into the 1930s, as writers and literary critics “seek a new vision of Canada by looking at small details ([. . .] the everyday life of farm and factory, the particulars of individual texts) in order to discover the larger patterns of Canadian culture that had been ignored by their predecessors” (244). In 1936, W.E. Collin searches for patterns in Canadian poetry and locates several central Canadian images: landscapes, dream, the garrison in the wilderness and the Eden myth, epic heroism of real men, stoic Puritanism, exile, martyrdom, faith, and redemption (245). Collin introduced “an important concept in Canadian criticism: the mythic renewal” (245). Criticism up to the 1940s, therefore, focused upon regional elements, realism, and patterns indicative of a particularly Canadian identity. All of these critical interests are evident in early reviews of *As For Me and My House*.

1941 Reviews

As For Me and My House was first published in the United States, and American reviews were essentially character and plot summaries, containing brief critical assessment only in conclusion. Overall, reviewers agree that the novel is well-written. Rose Feld, for the *New York Herald Tribune* writes that “the book shows a real ability to depict a mood and to catch character” (qtd. in Stouck, *Sinclair Ross* 11). A review in the *Dayton Daily News* Feb 16 1941 calls the book “an interesting study” that is “appealing” and “easy to read” (qtd. in Stouck, *Sinclair Ross* 11). Marianne Hauser, writing for the *New York Times Review of Books*, notes that Ross “writes with remarkable honesty, and often with strength” (13). American reviews are not overly critical, but they give no reason to purchase the book (Stouck, *Sinclair Ross* 13).

While American reviewers believe that Ross is a skilled author, they also criticize the novel’s realism for its unbalanced depiction of its subject. Reviewers label the novel a gloomy work, are puzzled that the novel is so dreary and cheerless, and do not recommend it enthusiastically to their readers (Stouck, *Sinclair Ross* 13). Clifton Fadiman, writes that there “are some good things here, but the book is very gloomy” (qtd. in Stouck, *Sinclair Ross* 13). A review in the *Dayton Daily News* Feb comments that it is not a “happy or cheerful” story (qtd. in Stouck, *Sinclair Ross* 11). Hauser notes that Ross has “an almost uncanny feeling for the drab

and depressing” and believes that the Bentleys’ lives are “nothing but defeat” (13). Woodcock suggests that many people read it simply for its plot, as just another Depression novel, “telling of drought, dust storms, hard times, small-town prejudice, and hypocritical religion” (10-11).

Woodcock suggests that readers wanted to put this world behind them and, as a result, were not interested in the novel. While reviewers in the United States emphasize Ross’s skill as a writer, they are generally unimpressed by the novel and do not regard it highly.

As For Me and My House received very little attention in Canada after it was first published. A few Canadian reviews are similar to the American reviews, focusing upon the dark elements of the novel. A review from the *Vancouver Sun*, April 12 1941, notes that the novel is “depressing” and presents a “very gloomy picture of the prairies,” and a review from *Daily Province*, April 19 1941, claims that the little prairie towns are depicted in a “remarkably unfair” manner (qtd. in Stouck, *Sinclair Ross* 12). However, most Canadian reviews are far more positive than those from the United States. The majority of Canadian reviews hail the novel “as an important piece of fiction” (Stouck, *Sinclair Ross* 5). Among the reviews, there is a “strong sense that Canada had produced a serious and talented artist in fiction” (5-6). Critics view the book as the “kind of artistic novel Canada had been waiting for” and praise Ross as a writer of great promise (11).

Canadian reviewers praise Ross’s command of language and ability to write simply and effectively. Stewart C. Easton admires Ross’s style, clear perception, and compassionate sensitivity and believes Ross has written a “mature, difficult novel” (14). G. B., a reviewer for the *Winnipeg Free Press*, notes that the story of the Bentleys is told with “quiet sympathy and reserved strength,” showing that Ross is “a mature and thoughtful artist (15, 16). Robertson Davies states that the book is written with “remarkable skill and completeness” (17). He admires Ross’s ability to write in a way that allows the reader to draw his or her own inferences rather than being told everything (17). Roy Daniells believes the novel has a “redeeming simplicity” and that the single point of view allows “concentration and a powerful, relentless drive along a single line” (Review 23). Deacon believes that “a genuine talent is disclosed” in the novel (“Story” 18).

Several reviewers comment on Ross’s ability to portray the prairies accurately. Daniells claims Ross “can be relied upon to recreate the familiar things of our way of life and to etch his chosen details sharply enough to emphasize its precise and characteristic shape” (Review 22). He

believes that Ross's depiction of Horizon is faithful to the reality of prairie life (24). Deacon also comments on the realism of Ross's writing: the "background of dust storms, elevators, treeless, forlorn stretches and mean main streets has a pitiful photographic accuracy" ("Story" 19). He believes that Ross is "interpreting contemporary Canadian life earnestly and skilfully" (19). G.B. writes that the novel is "infused with the prairie atmosphere" and draws attention to Ross's sensitive rendering of prairie moods (16).

Reviewers also frequently note the psychological realism of the novel. E. K. Brown states that the text outlines a "taut psychological conflict" (124). Deacon views the novel as a study of the mind, stating that it charts "the psychological state of a childless woman in her mid-thirties" ("Story" 18). Deacon writes that Ross has a "tender, intuitive perception of the human heart" (19). Because Ross can accurately represent the mind and emotions, he is able to create realistic characters. Davies believes that Ross's keen awareness of the "sensitivities of the human mind" enables him to create characters and relationships that are complex and "entirely credible" (17). The Bentleys' relationship is "complex and perverse" and completely believable (17). Deacon argues that the characters are so powerfully drawn that certain scenes from the novel will remain with its readers for a long time (18). Daniells asserts that any questions the reader may have about the characters and their future are a tribute "to the essential life-likeness" of the characters rather than a flaw (Review 23). The characters of *As For Me and My House* are regarded by these reviewers as full and realistic. They maintain that Ross is able to draw both the environment and characters in an entirely believable manner.

Many Canadian reviewers from the 1940s emphasize Ross's status as a Canadian author and believe that he will make valuable contributions to the nation's literature. Roy St. George Stubbs views Ross as a national asset and fears that Ross may be tempted to go to the United States (Stouck, *Sinclair Ross* 12). Deacon believes that Ross "is distinctly the sort of young novelist who should be encouraged" ("Story" 19). The novel is regarded as a new development in Canadian literature, as Brown writes that it "owes nothing to any other work of Canadian fiction" (124). Davies also believes that the novel is extremely important, stating that it is "a remarkable addition to our small stock of Canadian books of first-rate importance" (17). Daniells believes that Ross's work will elevate the status of Canadian fiction, claiming that the novel "raises our hopes that our own milieu may now receive a more adequate recognition" (Review 24). There is a general feeling that the text is "a promising first novel" (Deacon "Story" 18) and

that Ross “gives promise of others still better to come” (Davies 18). Reviewers therefore regard Ross as a Canadian novelist who has written a good first text and has the potential to become even greater.

All this praise does not mean that reviewers avoid criticism. Brown argues that the novel is “Strangely and powerfully uncontemporary,” showing that Brown does not believe the novel can speak to a contemporary audience (124). Deacon believes that the repetitions “deaden the reader’s sensitivities to the tragedy, and even take away from the human reality of the central pair” (“Story 18). This feeling, that the novel is not regional and unrealistic in its characterization, contradicts other reviews which emphasize the faithful depiction of prairie life. Deacon also believes that the repetitions affect the novel negatively, claiming “the dreary monotony of the once-hopeful West almost kills any chance of popularity” (18). Several critics believe that the novel is bland and dreary. Daniells finds that the diary form causes a loss of “liveliness and lifelike quality” found in dialogue (Review 23). G. B. writes that the novel is not a “happy story” and finds that the characterization is weak (15-16). Brown also has problems with character portrayal, viewing Paul as “caricatured, simplified [. . .] [and] melodramatically unreal.” (124). Reviewers criticize what they see as monotony and dullness, and these criticisms show that not all reviews were positive.

To sum up, reviews following *As For Me and My House*’s publication emphasize the environmental and psychological realism of the novel. There is interest in Ross’s use of language, the regional aspects of the text, and the novel’s importance as a work of Canadian literature. Reviews from the United States are not hostile, but they do not praise the novel. Although there are many critical remarks, Canadian reviews are quite positive, embracing Ross as a promising young author. These evaluations and interpretations of the novel are closely connected to prevailing critical trends, and especially to the emerging interest in social realism.

Interpretation of Major Elements

The character of Mrs. Bentley receives the most critical attention, and she is generally viewed positively. G.B. believes Mrs. Bentley is so exceptional that she “lives as an ideal, rather than as a reality” (16). This shows that not all reviewers were adherents of critical realism. Other critics admire her, but also find her to be a realistic character. Deacon views Mrs. Bentley as a strong, convincing character whose radiant love and steadfast courage are compellingly true (“Story” 19). Daniells also believes Mrs. Bentley is a realistic character and that readers will

immediately recognize her lifelikeness (Review 21). Hauser views Mrs. Bentley as the centre of the novel, noting that “it is really she who gives the story life and suspense” (13). The only disparaging assessment of Mrs. Bentley is from Easton, who declares that she is solely responsible for Philip’s unhappiness and hypocrisy. However, Mrs. Bentley is generally regarded as a strong, admirable character.

Reviewers examine Mrs. Bentley’s relationship with Philip, finding that, on the whole, she is dominated by him, and yet is also able to save him. Hauser believes that Mrs. Bentley is submissive and endures both Philip and the town (13). Mrs. Bentley is deeply affected by Philip’s moods: she “moves about the house like a frightened cat, watching for his footsteps, waiting for a smile, pushed back by his bitterness and reticent loneliness” (13). G. B. believes that Mrs. Bentley’s “understanding of Philip’s situation, [and] her devotion to him in the face of continual negligence is admirable” (16). Deacon opines that Mrs. Bentley’s extreme sympathy towards Philip and her exceptional understanding of his moods save the novel from the “gross and the bitter” (“Story” 18). Daniells sees Mrs. Bentley’s “patience, sympathy, and determination” as saving Philip and putting him on the right road (Review 21). Hauser believes that Mrs. Bentley is extremely patient and “her strong, simple persistence” saves Philip at the end (14). Generally, these early reviewers see Mrs. Bentley as subservient to Philip and admire her for her ability to understand, support, and ultimately save him.

Examinations of Philip focus on his hypocrisy and artistic failure, blaming Philip’s lack of religious belief for his hypocrisy. Davies notes that because Philip “has no real vocation” for the ministry, he “detests his work” and becomes a hypocrite (17). Hauser believes Philip hates “his clerical profession and [is] caught in it nevertheless,” causing him to live “in the seclusion of his failure” (13). Several reviewers believe that Philip’s failed artistic ambitions and his sensitive nature contribute to his unhappiness. Deacon claims that because Philip became a preacher rather than an artist, he feels he is a hypocrite (“Story” 19). G. B. believes that Philip is “forced by circumstance into the ministry” and is “a sensitive man, who has become warped in a struggle to maintain his integrity in face of circumstances and environment completely unsympathetic to his nature” (15). Daniells believes that Philip is a “genius frustrated by having to live in a series of small towns” (Review 21). Hauser views Philip as the prototype of the frustrated artist, who is talented, sensitive, “yet too weak to fight for his art” (13). Reviewers are therefore fairly sympathetic towards Philip as a frustrated artist, but criticize his hypocrisy.

Reviews also frequently comment on Philip's cold and distant behaviour towards Mrs. Bentley. Some reviewers lay the blame entirely on Philip. G.B. notes that Philip "does not make an amiable husband" (16), and Deacon believes that it is impossible for Mrs. Bentley to regain Philip's love because he is "estranged by consciousness of his own failure" (19). Easton has a different opinion, arguing that although Mrs. Bentley loves Philip, "He does not love her in return, and cannot" (14). Easton believes that Philip is unable to love Mrs. Bentley because "she has made him what he is, a hypocrite in a profession that sincerity alone can redeem from emptiness," touching on a point that continues to be a focus of interest and will continue to be controversial (14). Easton believes Mrs. Bentley is essentially responsible for Philip's unhappiness, making it impossible for him to love her.

Another aspect of the novel that receives critical attention is the ending. Most reviewers believe Ross fails to provide a satisfactory conclusion to the Bentleys' story. Several reviewers are frustrated by the absence of a scene that resolves the novel's issues. Brown questions Ross's refusal to provide the scene "which would have given a release to the emotions pent up throughout the book" (124). Easton believes that the ending is contrived (14). On the other hand, a few reviewers regard the ending as positive, and convincingly so. Deacon writes that "By rare feminine wisdom and self-control, Mrs. Bentley takes destiny into her hands and wins freedom against odds" ("Story" 19). Hauser sees hope for the future in the novel's conclusion: "a bright last scene [. . .] interpreting if not justifying all previous desperation" (13).

The 1950s to late 1960s

Critical Interpretations

Very little work was done on *As For Me and My House* in the ten to fifteen years after the novel's initial publication, validating Deacon's claim that the "the dreary monotony" of the novel could kill any chance of popularity ("Story" 19). This was also, and, mainly due to the fact that, until the late 1960s, very little work was done on Canadian fiction at all. Edward McCourt produced the first critical assessment of the novel in 1949. Desmond Pacey, in 1952, is the only other critic from the early 1950s to mention Ross's work. Both McCourt and Pacey believe that the novel is of high quality and praise Ross.

Edward McCourt briefly discusses *As For Me and My House* in his work *The Canadian West in Fiction*. McCourt views the novel as primarily a regional work and admires Ross's

ability to recreate the prairie atmosphere. He writes that Ross has “the power to suggest the atmosphere of a prairie region which the reader [. . .] finds wholly convincing” (96). He believes Ross has “suggested with unusual sensitivity the peculiar atmosphere of the prairie region” (55). McCourt admires Ross’s ability to write succinctly, as “A sentence or two illuminates the life of an entire community” (96). He regards Ross as a highly skilled author, stating that “the descriptive passages are sometimes beyond praise” (96). He considers Ross an extremely important Canadian author and asserts that “Ross’s one novel and his few short stories comprise the most important body of fiction written about the Canadian West” (95). McCourt regards Ross as an asset to Canada and claims Ross has not received the recognition he deserves: “in Sinclair Ross we may, through indifference and neglect, have permitted a fine artist to perish” (99).

Although McCourt generally praises *As For Me and My House*, he finds fault with the novel’s characterization. He states that the “characters [are] neither convincing nor lovable” and believes this explains the novel’s lack of success (95). He considers Philip to be “a curiously wooden character” who has “one characteristic action, that of stalking, white-lipped and silent, into his study and shutting the door against the world” and “that after awhile he becomes a kind of automaton going with mechanical precision through a limited series of movements” (95-96). McCourt writes that nearly all of the main characters are like Philip “in that they are almost wholly static; we know as much of them in the first paragraph as we do in the last” (96). McCourt therefore regards the characters as one-dimensional and underdeveloped, and he believes poor characterization has hindered the novel’s success.

Desmond Pacey makes a brief, positive reference to Ross in his 1952 study, *Creative Writing in Canada*. He believes the novel is “certainly one of the best to come out of Canada (174). He admires the novel’s environmental and psychological realism: “It is an accurate, if skeptical, account of life in a Saskatchewan small town and it is also a searching psychological study of a minister and his overly possessive wife” (174). He also praises Ross’s style, calling it “fresh and clear” and notes that the tone is “at once drily astringent and warmly sympathetic” (174). He believes that *As For Me and My House* “gives promise of future greatness” for Ross. Pacey describes Ross as a skilled author who has created a realistic, well-crafted text that is among the nation’s best works of fiction. Ross is a prairie realist concerned with the impact that the landscape and climate have upon his characters’ lives.

NCL Release

McClelland and Stewart issued a paperback edition of *As For Me and My House* in 1957 and this edition was accompanied by a critical essay by Roy Daniells. Daniells touches on a number of issues which are closely examined in the following decades: Ross's skill, the novel's regional character, the relationship between symbolism and realism, the novel's importance to Canadian literature, character credibility, and the success of the book's form. Many of these issues had already been touched on in early reviews, but Daniells' examination was the catalyst for the critical responses that follow in the 1970s. His most-contested view is his reading of Mrs. Bentley: Stouck writes that "probably no other judgement in Canadian literary criticism has been so vigorously contested [. . .] or defended" (*Sinclair Ross* 35). The NCL release and Daniells' accompanying essay gave the novel a new life.

Daniells praises Ross's skill in creating a realistic portrayal of prairie life. He writes that "simplicity is the keynote of Ross's artistic achievement," a judgement that rings most ironically considering the later controversies about ambiguity and authorial intention (Introduction 38). He admires Ross's minimalist style: "To create a complete world in a few strokes and to etch these on the reader's mind is under Canadian conditions no small artistic achievement" (39). He argues believes Ross's skill allows him to represent the Canadian prairie in a realistic way. He writes that the details of the novel "are precisely congruous to the actuality from which he drew his materials" and "there is no doubt that these pages present the prairies of the drought and the depression, the long succession of the years between the wars" (40). Daniells views *Horizon* as a "composite" of small towns Ross lived in and endured (36-37). The novel represents the prairie environment in a realistic way, but he argues that there are "ups and downs of credibility and convincingness" in characterization: he finds Judith's constant crying more believable than her seduction of Philip (39). Daniells views Ross as a talented author who portrays the prairie realistically, but is less capable of strong characterization.

Daniells' most contentious claims are his assessments of Philip and Mrs. Bentley. He views the Bentleys as the focus of the novel and believes that the other characters are "agents to reveal to us the character of the Bentleys" and these characters "serve as a convenient and appropriate chorus" (37). He finds Philip unsympathetic and unconvincing, calling him "limited and stiff" (37). He is a "palpable hypocrite, the demonstrable failure, the righteous fornicator against whom the clamours of his own self-righteousness obscurely rage" (38). Despite these

flaws, Daniells argues that Philip is exactly right for the story because he is “beautifully complementary to his wife’s character” (38). Daniells finds Mrs. Bentley a truthful, compelling character: “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” (37). Mrs. Bentley starkly contrasts Philip as she is “the more candid, selfless, and receptive soul” (38). She clearly understands herself and her situation. She is fully aware of Philip’s flaws and does her best to console him: “She is Eve comforting Adam after a fall in which she has played no contributory part” (38). Daniells views Mrs. Bentley as morally superior to Philip. Daniells compares Mrs. Bentley to other women, writing that she is “both individual and type” because she represents all the women who were “strained beyond reason, reduced to the skeleton of a human sensibility, yet never failed to respond with courage, intelligence, sympathy, and hopefulness to the worst of situations” (40). She is also superior to the average woman, since she is “more responsive, more articulate than the type” (40).

Daniells views *As For Me and My House* as an important addition to Canadian literature because it is typically Canadian in its characterization. He says that “Canadian writing inevitably displays the middle-class desire for self-knowledge as a key to self-development,” and believes that *As For Me and My House* responds to this traditional need (37). Canada is in search of itself, which includes an examination “of our historic and cultural past for indications of the national character” (40). Daniells argues that the novel fulfills these requirements for Canadian writing and that the novel also demonstrates growth in a new direction: “Ross evokes a special gratitude from all of us who believe in the future of Canadian literature” (40).

To sum up, then, Daniells focuses on many of the same matters as earlier critics and also advances new interpretations. He examines the symbolism of the blowing down of the false fronts, making a connection between the novel’s psychological realism and its realism of setting (37). He expands upon this point by showing that the environment is a reflection of the Bentleys’ emotions, as the “inner and outer worlds of the Bentleys correspond perfectly” (37). Daniells also comments on the novel’s form, stating that “There is an inescapable monotony” caused by viewing everything through Mrs. Bentley’s eyes (38). Of all his observations about the novel, his most generative comment about *As For Me and My House* is his statement that Mrs. Bentley is “pure gold” and “wholly credible” (37). His praise of Mrs. Bentley’s character and Ross’s depiction of her caused many critics to focus their attention on this text, either to support or

contradict Daniells' view. Most would praise Ross's depiction, but read it much more ironically than Daniells did.

After the NCL release of *As For Me and My House*, critical interest in the novel grew very slowly but steadily. The novel received more attention as a result of its reissue than it did when it was first published, in response to the cultural assessment that took place in the 1950s and 1960s and the resulting focus upon Canadian literature. One of the first critics to assess the novel after its NCL release was Claude Bissell, who had also contributed much to early discussions of *The Mountain and the Valley*. He gives a brief assessment of the novel in his 1958 article "The Novel," published in *The Arts in Canada: A Stock-taking at Mid-Century*. He notes the mimetic aspects of the text, calling it a study of "a small prairie town, with its dullness and cruel prejudices" (94). He believes that the "central human situation" is of "the clergyman-hero condemned to a self-destructing hypocrisy by his own weakness and the tricks of circumstance" (94). He views Mrs. Bentley as detached from the story, calling her a "sensitive onlooker," implying that Philip is the main subject (94). He writes that the novel is "one of the most vivid recreations of our society in our literature" (94). Bissell views the text as a valuable work of literature which realistically portrays a man's internal struggle.

Two years later, Tallman provides a thematic reading of *As For Me and My House* in his influential essay "'Wolf in the Snow. Part One: Four Windows onto Landscapes.'" Tallman examines the relationship between Philip's isolation and artistic frustration and the garrison or colonial culture he is trapped in. Like Bissell, but unlike Daniells, Tallman views Philip, not Mrs. Bentley as the central focus. Tallman argues that Philip is driven to art by his desire to escape the isolation of Horizon and other small towns like it. However, he cannot escape isolation and is therefore unable to find a way of life that will release his creativity. As a result, Philip is actually a "non-artist – one unable to discover a subject which will release him from his oppressive incapacity to create" (64). He is "an artist who cannot create because he cannot possess himself and who cannot possess himself because there is no self to create" (64). Because of the centrality of Philip's isolation and artistic frustration, the novel "represents [. . .] the pervasive undermining of all vital energies which occurs when the would-be artist's creativity is thwarted" (64). Tallman argues that Philip's isolation, frustration, and inability to create are conditions "symptomatic of a culture that does not connect to its landscape or its gods" (Stouck, *Sinclair*

Ross 35). Therefore Tallman reads the novel as a study of the effects of the garrison mentality upon the artist, a view which will be both confirmed and challenged in later decades.

Criticism on *As For Me and My House* is absent for several years and it is not until 1965 that critics re-examine the novel. Several critics take note of the novel and more positive views of the novel emerge, elevating the novel's literary status. Hugo McPherson writes that *As For Me and My House* "remains one of the most finished works that Canada has produced" (706). Donald Stephens states that *As For Me and My House* is "perhaps the best Canadian novel" (175). Northrop Frye calls *As For Me and My House* one "of the most powerful of Canadian novels" because it objectively portrays the conflict between the individual and the community (839).

Like many readers, Stephens and McPherson praise Ross's writing and ability to recreate the prairie atmosphere. McPherson writes that the style enhances the story: the "rigidly limited point of view and the rhythmic use of repetition [. . .] supports the meaning and much of the novel admirably" (706). This takes issue with earlier criticism of the novel's repetitive dullness. Stephens states that the novel has "very good writing" and praises the style: "There is an exact vividness, pure diction choice, observation that is accurate, and a rhythm that is controlled" (176). He believes that Ross has created such a powerful story that only "the most shallow reader" will be unaffected by his depiction "of the desolate life in a prairie town" (176). He also praises the realism of the novel, stating that the story is "horribly true" (175). Stephens declares that Ross's "simplicity of style and intricacy of mood create a prairie so immense it virtually stuns the mind" (176).

Aside from style and characterization, McPherson is also interested in "the absorbing problem of the imagination, of the artist" in Canadian fiction (704). He builds upon Tallman's examination of artistic failure and sees the central theme of *As For Me and My House* as the imagination and its failure in Canada (705). McPherson makes note of the extremely harsh physical and social conditions of Horizon and argues that "in this barren setting, music, painting, literature, and thought all wither or freeze" (706). Like many later critics, he reads the novel thematically, expanding on Tallman's thesis to examine the character of the frustrated artist more closely.

In line with an increasing interest in Ross's symbolism, Susan Jackel examines the portrayal and implications of the house as a symbol. She argues that the house is central in

Western Canadian fiction and that it “frequently symbolizes the dominant power within the household” (165, 167). She writes that Ross uses the “confining and depressing aspects of the Bentleys’ house [. . .] to emphasize the repression of their lives [. . .] but these details are used realistically rather than with primarily symbolic intent” (170). She argues that the Bentleys’ house “is a semi-ironic reference to the internal tensions which exist behind the false front Mrs. Bentley so painstakingly erects” (170). Jackel is one of the first to see irony in Ross’s novel.

Interpretation of Major Elements

Critics up to the late 1960s largely view Mrs. Bentley with compassion and seem to “accept Mrs. Bentley’s account as authentic and totally reliable” (Woodcock 62). As noted, Daniells is extremely sympathetic towards her and believes she is “pure gold and wholly credible” (Introduction 37). Most other critics also admire Mrs. Bentley’s character and find her narrative wholly convincing. Tallman praises Mrs. Bentley, stating that she has a “remarkably responsive consciousness of the despair in which her husband is caught” and finds that she absolutely lacks pretentiousness (62). He views her as a positive force for life and rebellion in the novel (62). Bissell calls her a “sensitive onlooker” (“The Novel” 94). McPherson does not comment on the Bentleys individually. His absence of evaluation indicates that he either views Mrs. Bentley as simply an extension of her husband or that he finds it unnecessary to comment upon her character, implying that he accepts her narrative. Jackel believes that since Philip has failed to assert himself as the controlling power of the house, Mrs. Bentley must fill that role, making her the stronger character (171). These critics view Mrs. Bentley with sympathy, in stark contrast to later critics who will take a more ironic view of her character.

Stephens foretells later developments when he criticizes Mrs. Bentley by drawing attention to her shortcomings and ambiguities. He points out several shortcomings in Mrs. Bentley and exposes her attempts to control the reader’s perception. Stephens sees an “inert and chilly stillness” to her life (178). He acknowledges that Mrs. Bentley has strength, but argues that this power “comes from the knowledge of the falseness and the sham of a life that she and her husband lead [. . .] [and] with this strength comes a certain smugness” (178). Pointing the way for later, ironic readings, Stephens finds she is pleased by the knowledge that Philip is “a hopeless failure, a compromise” (178). He states that Mrs. Bentley is “a trifle too satisfied with her dominant position in the family” (179). Stephens believes that Mrs. Bentley labours to hide her weaknesses from the reader and, as a result, the reader can not take her at her literal word and

must “probe beyond what she says superficially and make conjectures as to her real meaning” (178). Mrs. Bentley is a cautious, controlling narrator: “She does not reveal enough to the reader for him to deduce anything other than what she wishes him to deduce. She plays her cards too close to her vest” (179). She believes that she is powerful, as “She almost envisions herself as a goddess, all-seeing” but she is also “fearful to tell or show the reader lest he recognize yet another flaw in either herself or her husband” (179). Stephens is the first in this period to voice a concern about the reliability of Mrs. Bentley’s narrative and the ambiguity of her character and therefore of the novel.

In this period, views of Philip are similar to those of earlier reviews, as critics view Philip as a hypocrite and as a man who has failed in everything he has tried to achieve. McCourt criticizes Philip for entering the ministry when he has “neither inclination nor ability for priestly duties” (97). Daniells finds Philip unsympathetic, stating that he is a hypocrite who fails to convince the reader that he is a frustrated artist, and that his primary purpose is to contrast with Mrs. Bentley (Introduction 37). Stephens criticizes both the character and the depiction of Philip, calling him contrived, shallow, drab, mechanical, fragmentary, moody, and frustrated (180). Stephens questions whether Philip is a frustrated artist, or merely a weak, spineless hypocrite unable to face what life gives him, and comments that if Philip truly were frustrated, he would have been able to find some relief and compensation in his work (180). Jackel sees weakness in Philip’s character because he is not the head of the house (171). More positive assessments of Philip focus on his artistic experience and frustrations. Tallman labels Philip’s artistic desires a “maddeningly inarticulate impulse to create” and, instead, believes the novel is a “study of the frustrated artist” (63). Tallman and McPherson are interested in Philip in order to advance their arguments about the failure of creative energy and the imagination in Canada and Canadian life in general.

There is less attention paid to the ending of the novel than in reviews from the 1940s. McPherson writes that the Bentleys’ twelve year ordeal “ends in a spring time of qualified hope” and that “the journey from emptiness and pain to a somewhat more humane society is beginning, but there is no suggestion that the goal is at hand” (706). McCourt believes that the resolution of the Bentleys’ drama is artificial, noting that Judith’s death and the miraculous emergence of money to purchase a bookstore seem completely unrealistic (97). McPherson has a more positive

view of the conclusion than McCourt, but neither critic believes that the Bentleys will succeed in the future.

The 1970s

Critical Interpretations

In the 1970s and early 1980s, the general study of Canadian literature explodes, resulting in an increase in criticism of *As For Me and My House*, and Ross's novel is the focus of many studies. The novel is approached from a variety of critical stances: thematic, Marxist, formalist, structuralist, and feminist. The issue of authorial intention is brought to light at this time, as critics speculate upon Ross's own intentions for the characters and novel. Critics also examine and respond to earlier opinions about the novel. Mrs. Bentley's reliability as a narrator is seriously questioned and much of the criticism at this time is a direct reply to Daniells' claims about the text, either in opposition or support of his assertions. Critics who use a formalist approach are able to move away from questions of authorial intention, enabling a close examination of the Bentleys and their relationship. As a result of the elevated status of the novel and the variety of approaches to it, there is concern regarding the validity of certain critical approaches and questions are raised regarding what the text can truly support.

One of the most important assessments of *As For Me and My House* is W.H. New's 1969 article "Sinclair Ross's Ambivalent World." New examines Ross's intentions for the text and the tackles the issue of the novel's ambiguity. He focuses upon the character of Mrs. Bentley, noting that there are two obvious ways to interpret her: as a manipulative woman who is destroying her husband, or as a humble woman who finally embraces the opportunity to escape the hypocrisy of her life (49). He believes both views are entirely reasonable and supported by the text. He then suggests a third possibility: that "ambivalence itself is desired" (45). New shows that meaning is often unclear in the novel and argues that Ross wants his readers to see both sides of Mrs. Bentley, and to avoid both approval and condemnation (53). He believes that Ross communicates the novel's ironies and ambiguities by blurring his images (such as dust and rain) to show that "absolutes do not exist" (52). Ross also demonstrates that "Mrs. Bentley's polarization of Horizon (this world, arid, sterile, bad) and the Bookstore (dream, water, fruitful, good) is invalid and gradually breaks down" (53). New argues that Ross wants his readers to understand that absolutes do not exist and to be cognizant of the ambivalence and tensions

caused by irony. New's reading of the novel emphasizes Ross's authorial intentions and suggests that the novel's ambivalence shows that Mrs. Bentley has acknowledged the reality of her situation.

The most challenging criticism in this period is that which attacks Mrs. Bentley's reliability as a narrator. Critics find several reasons to doubt the accuracy of Mrs. Bentley's narrative. Lorraine McMullen writes that the reader must view Mrs. Bentley's interpretations with some suspicion because she does not attempt to step back and "view the situation or herself dispassionately" and she selects details to include and omit (59). McMullen argues that Mrs. Bentley's "assessment of others and of what is happening is frequently incorrect" (87). Moss concurs with McMullen's view, stating Mrs. Bentley's "delusion [. . .] compounded by an autistic narrowness of vision, makes her observations unreliable" (*Patterns* 154). Cude believes Mrs. Bentley is evasive and even untruthful (36). Cude writes there can be "little doubt that Ross gives us an invitation to go beyond Mrs. Bentley," meaning that Ross does not want the reader to accept Mrs. Bentley's narrative and that the reader must search to construct the true story (32).

Mrs. Bentley's character is also attacked, as critics refute Daniells' claim that she is "pure gold" (Introduction 37). Much of the criticism she receives is related to her relationship with and behaviour towards Philip. McMullen summarizes Mrs. Bentley's flaws: "Her love for her husband is too possessive, her determination too manipulative, her attitude to the town too hypocritical" (87). Cude believes Mrs. Bentley is hypocritical, manipulative, and cruel and that the "'pure gold' of Mrs. Bentley is actually an alloy incorporating baser metals" (36). Moss uses a variety of adjectives to describe Mrs. Bentley: "fallible, contradictory, [. . .] mean, [. . .] self-indulgent, [. . .] [and] self-dramatizing" (*Patterns* 154). Mrs. Bentley "remains unaware that her bitchiness more than her conscious duplicity has been largely responsible for their individual isolation from each other [. . .] and from the world around them" and is to blame for the continuation of Philip's unhappiness (153, 155). Sandra Djwa argues that Mrs. Bentley does not fully understand Philip, that she has a "false image of his real nature" and is wrong to try to control him (199). Djwa emphasizes the ambivalence of the novel and finds fault with Mrs. Bentley, stating she is stubborn, self-interested and proud (199, 202).

Dooley responds to critiques of Mrs. Bentley and defends her as a narrator and character by focusing upon the more positive interpretations of her character. He argues that Mrs. Bentley is an admirable character, stating she has all that Philip does not have: "altruism, [. . .]

generosity, [and] the willingness to make sacrifices for the other person” (*Moral Vision* 44). He shows that critics who point out shortcomings in Mrs. Bentley also highlight positive aspects of her personality. Stephens, who first questioned Mrs. Bentley’s reliability, claims Mrs. Bentley is both smug and strong, fully capable of fighting her battles and winning. Echoing New, Dooley argues that the ambivalence of the novel is Ross’s goal and suggests that Mrs. Bentley has passed beyond polarities of good and bad and faced up to actuality (38). Djwa believes that Mrs. Bentley finally admits her self-interest and begins to examine her motives (199). She concludes that Mrs. Bentley is “no more or less culpable than she might be expected to be under her circumstances” (201). Dooley demonstrates that although Mrs. Bentley is not perfect, she is a reliable narrator and a strong character. He argues that Mrs. Bentley’s general credibility as a witness must be accepted or there is no novel, and thus concludes that her interpretations of conversations, events, people, settings, drawings and human character are trustworthy (*Moral Vision* 40, 41). He agrees with New that the reader may make inferences about events and Mrs. Bentley’s motives that she does not, but argues that she is not as self-deceived as Moss, for example, contends (40). Mrs. Bentley’s flaws are not in her character but her decisions: to surrender her independence, to alter herself for Philip and to place all her faith in her husband and marriage (41, 42). Dooley’s position is not identical to Daniells’, but he responds to critics who attack Mrs. Bentley, defending her character and reliability as narrator.

Chambers also presents a sympathetic reading of Mrs. Bentley, both of her character and of Ross’s depiction. He believes she is “one of the most remarkable” women in all fiction and that Ross celebrates her “incredible strength of character, [and] her quietly creative determination to save her husband and her marriage” (37). He views her as a “woman who does not rationalize away her insecurities and fears” and is always able to ‘see it plain’” (38). Mrs. Bentley has many regrets, such as a failed musical career, a childless marriage, and Philip’s paralysis and hypocrisy, but despite the disappointments of her life, she is ultimately optimistic: “the faint beat of the future is always there” (37, 38). It is because of this “rhythm of returning hope” that she is drawn back to Philip after his affair (38). Chambers notes that the final sentence of the novel “provides hostile critics with evidence of her continued desire to dominate Philip” (35). On the other hand, he interprets the ending as showing that Philip has emerged from his isolation and found “a newness of being” and that Mrs. Bentley “alone has brought that rebirth”

(36). Chambers concludes that Mrs. Bentley is a powerful character, dismissing criticisms of her unreliability.

As the result of the negative re-examination of Mrs. Bentley, more positive views of Philip emerge. Cude writes that Philip is more admirable than Mrs. Bentley admits (41). Cude praises Philip, calling him “dynamic, a man of initiative, imagination and action” and “a very handsome man” (41). Cude believes Philip has several qualities of a good minister: he agonizes over the spiritual needs of his parishioners, he is “motivated by a genuine Christian compassion for the helpless,” and he is disgusted by hypocrisy (42). Although Philip wants to be an artist, he has “discovered some aspect of the ministry that keeps him there, even to the extent that he forgets about his passion for art” (45). Cude labours to defend Philip’s character and choices by emphasizing Philip’s positive characteristics, which no one else had done to this point.

As a result of Philip’s rehabilitation in some camps, a number of critics argue that he, not Mrs. Bentley, is the intended protagonist of the novel, as Tallman and Bissell suggested earlier. Dubanski believes that Philip’s pictures operate as a response to Mrs. Bentley’s diary, creating an “anti-journal which balances Mrs. Bentley’s version” (89). Dubanski sees Philip as undergoing a profound change, as he is able to find challenging subjects in Partridge Hill and Judith (90). Philip is truly an artist; Mrs. Bentley is not. Philip moves deeper into both the landscape and himself, “giving shape and meaning to both” (92). Philip undergoes a drastic change, while Mrs. Bentley does not, showing that he is the true focal point of the novel. David Stouck also argues that Philip is central to the novel and is intended to be the protagonist (“Lamp” 95). Stouck believes that the plot and imagery of the novel derive from Philip’s frustrated attempts to deal with his likeness to his father (99).

Readings of Philip as the protagonist lead to interpretations of him as a type of Canadian hero. Djwa argues Philip is a Canadian hero, concerned with maintaining his integrity within a chosen community. He “is the one who stays and endures” unless he can discover an “honourable way” to leave which is “sanctioned by the community” (205). Ronald Sutherland finds that Philip is a typical Canadian protagonist because he chooses to “blame himself and to suffer quietly and insistently rather than to strike at the cause of his miseries” (53). Philip, as a Canadian protagonist, criticizes himself for disagreeing with the constraints of society, internalizing this tension and then engaging in “painful and destructive soul-searching in an attempt to discover his own deficiencies” (4). Djwa and Sutherland expand upon Stouck’s and

Dubanski's idea that Philip is the protagonist. Following the scathing attacks on Mrs. Bentley, interpretations of Philip as the intended protagonist emerge.

Aside from responses to earlier criticism, critical inquiry into *As For Me and My House* increasingly takes the form of thematic criticism. Several critics study the novel to develop ideas about the Canadian identity by building concepts of national character, the formation of Canada, and Canadian writing. One specific element of identity is the relationship between the artist and the cultural environment. Critics find that the environment stifles the imagination, leading to isolation. Atwood argues that the culture of Canada cripples creativity, as shown through the character of Philip, who is a "warped artist [. . .] unable to act or even love" (185). She argues that Philip's surroundings cause his failure because Horizon and the cultural environment it represents "is not the sort of place in which great painters are offered roots or are even imaginable" (185). Because of his environment, Philip cannot succeed as an artist. Thus, two options remain: "stay in the culture and be crippled as an artist; or escape into nothing" (185). Several other thematic critics study the Bentleys' relationship with their community and find that both Philip's and Mrs. Bentley's artistic abilities are stifled by their surroundings. Jones writes that the Bentleys' "creative energies are more and more paralysed" by their environment, yet their artistic impulses "make more and more urgent demands upon them" (39). Because the Bentleys' creativities are suppressed, they become isolated from each other and from their community. Thus, Philip and Mrs. Bentley "are divided within and against themselves" (38). Moss believes that "the patterns of [Mrs. Bentley's] isolation incorporate every aspect of her experience" (*Patterns* 156). Canadian culture prevents the expression and eventually the existence of creativity, causing Mrs. Bentley and Philip to become severely isolated from others and themselves.

Thematic critics also study the relationship between the individual and the physical environment, arguing that the characters are negatively affected by their physical surroundings. This idea is based in the concept of the "garrison culture," meaning that when one has "failed to establish physical or spiritual harmony with the environment," hostility is the only alternative to complete emptiness and unmeaning" (Harrison 40). The Bentleys' response to the prairie reflects the garrison mentality, as they turn inward and stiffen their "meagre cultural defences against the natural environment" (40). Ross's imagery also suggests that the prairie is hostile to the imagination (40). Moss sees the Bentleys as resisting the physical environment, noting that

acceptance of the facts of weather and the environment is distorted “into an intolerably strained resignation and misdirected attempts at control” (*Patterns* 164). This strain and attempt to control drives “the Bentleys farther and farther into the isolation of hypocrisy, of compromise, deeper into themselves and their destructive union” (164). Mrs. Bentley’s attempts to control her environment and inability to accept the reality of her surroundings leads directly to her and Philip’s isolation and unhappiness.

However, Dick Harrison argues against the prevailing thematic view of the physical environment. He notes that prairie realists have traditionally represented man as “spiritually alien to the plains, isolated in an unnamed country” because he has not “transformed the prairie [. . .] with the power of his heart or his imagination” (131). He comments that the “fate of the imagination” is an accurate indicator of “how well man is thriving in his natural and cultural environment” (131). He counters the argument that the environment causes the imagination to fail: “the prairie challenges the imagination rather than stifles it” (152). Philip’s failure is caused by stifling social forces and his reluctance to fully embrace the great challenge presented by the prairie (152). Harrison insists that “the plight of the imagination” is not to be blamed on the environment, but rather “on a long cultural tradition of inadequate response to” the environment (153). Harrison therefore responds to the argument that the prairie has subdued the imagination by arguing that Canadian characters have not laboured enough to properly respond to the physical environment.

Other critics sense a far more positive relationship between the Bentleys and their environment, one in which humans and the environment are closely linked. Jones sees a parallel between the land and the inner lives of the Bentleys, writing that the “land which embodies the authentic life of the Reverend and Mrs. Bentley [. . .] reveals unconsciously their own suppressed vitality” (38-39). The inner lives of the Bentleys are “associated with the world of the open prairie which lies outside and appears opposed to the world of the town” (39). Ricou also believes that the Bentleys are integrally linked to the prairie. He states that “The prairie is both externally real and absorbed as a part of the mentality of the characters” (*Vertical Man* 94). He argues that humans and the environment are completely intertwined and as a result, “adjectives chosen to describe the natural environment could as well apply to characters, and vice-versa” (87). The integration of humans and environment is ironic because “the characters of the novel are influenced by the environment, and yet themselves contribute to its oppressiveness” (87).

Ricou argues that “Landscape and climate become an integral part of *As For Me and My House* in a way which is new to the prairie novel” (86). Jones believes that the physical environment shows the true desires of the Bentleys, and Ricou views nature and the Bentleys as totally intertwined with one another, presenting the most balanced views to date of the relationship between the Bentleys and the prairie.

In addition to thematic readings of the text, a number of other critical theories and approaches are applied to the novel. Robin Endres provides a Marxist reading of *As For Me and My House*, arguing that the Bentleys’ personal and marital problems are caused by their socio-economic situation. Endres is sympathetic to Mrs. Bentley and believes that Philip treats her unfairly, stating that Mrs. Bentley “is punished for being an economical and emotional burden, and punished for not providing another burden – a child” (124). Endres believes that the core of the novel is the “larger structure of work and its meaning, the real inner form of the novel” (125). The “nodal point” of the Bentleys’ despair is their “inability to use their respective work skills” (125). Because of the Depression, Philip is oppressed economically and like Philip, Mrs. Bentley is oppressed by poverty, but is also frustrated “by societal and marital chauvinism” (125). Endres believes that the novel demonstrates the frustration of “the need for self-fulfillment through labour” (126).

Robert Kroetsch, on the other hand, provides a structuralist reading of the novel. Structuralism “is the belief that things cannot be understood in isolation – they have to be seen in the context of the larger structures they are part of” (Barry 39). The structuralist seeks out parallels, echoes and balances (72). Kroetsch analyzes the binaries of the novel and shows how they operate and are challenged in Ross’s novel. He suggests the novel is organized by a system of masculine and feminine binaries which are epitomized in the opposition of horse/house. Each gender is defined in opposition to what the other is supposed to be: masculinity is silent, solitary, and oriented towards external space, while femininity is spoken, domestic, and confined. These sets of oppositions trap characters, mainly men, and are challenged, primarily by women. The characters wish to break these binaries, as men are tempted by male friendship and women by dreams of androgyny (Kroetsch “The Fear” 119). The destruction of these binaries would require the man to make a “radical change” and redefine himself, meaning that he, not the woman, would be forced to sacrifice his name (120). Because of his adherence to the horse/house binary, the man refuses to change, maintaining the isolation of men and women (119).

The advent of feminist criticism in the 1970s meant that *As For Me and My House* receives readings from this perspective. The status of *As For Me and My House* as a Canadian classic is verified by its inclusion in *Women in Canadian Literature: a Resource Guide for the Teaching of Canadian Literature*, published in 1977. Elizabeth Gaskin writes that “Ross carefully details the role of dutiful wife” and shows the tension that is constantly present in the Bentley marriage (49). Gaskin notes that Mrs. Bentley is clearly the “stronger character,” as she speaks of using tools with more competence than Philip, but comments “such an intrusion into male territory would not be forgiven” (49). Gaskin also shows that the Bentleys’ expectations of each other are largely determined by gender, as the wife yields to the desires of her husband and the husband labours to maintain his freedom (50). Gaskin also comments that both Bentleys are artists and questions why Philip’s art is considered to be more important than Mrs. Bentley’s (50). Gaskin challenges the societal roles presented in the novel, providing an early feminist reading of the novel.

The decade of the 1970s, therefore, represents a period of increased attention to both Ross and *As For Me and My House*. However, some readers feel that the growing interest in the novel have some negative effects. Morton Ross examines the history of the reception of *As For Me and My House* and claims that the conditions that have led to the canonization of the work have also led to its misrepresentation. He takes issue with critics who argue that Mrs. Bentley is an unreliable narrator and then conclude that the novel has no definiteness, leaving the reader responsible for creating meaning in the text (195). Critics must identify the means by which Ross guides and shapes his readers’ perceptions and understanding (195). He believes that recent critical trends have led to the “progressive enlargement of the reader’s responsibility for contributing meaning” thereby diminishing the novelist’s role (205). Ross argues that an increased concern with complex critical theory has led critics to “convert” a flawed but uncomplicated novel into a case of paradox and ambiguity and to “deregalize” its western Canadianness in order to expound on “universal themes” (205). He believes that the tendency to remove Ross from a regional setting and abstracting the novel and characters from their historical setting is an attempt to create universals in a text composed of particulars. Ross calls for a halt to the critical drive to remove the novel from its regional setting and suggests that the work should be examined as a text of a specific time and place.

Interpretation of Major Elements

Mrs. Bentley is treated much differently in the 1970s than previously, as earlier claims about her character are challenged. In this period, assessments of Mrs. Bentley are largely negative and her character, motives, and reliability are attacked, as critics work to question Daniells' claim that she is "pure gold and wholly credible" (Introduction 37). The ambiguities of her character are examined, and critics find many flaws in her personality and narrative. Her relationship with Philip is closely examined and she is heavily criticized for her treatment of him. Yet she is also defended by several critics who seek to show that although she may be flawed, she is a believable, admirable character. Critics' views of Mrs. Bentley are therefore increasingly polarized, and critical interest in her character focuses on attacking or defending her character.

The view of Philip's role alters considerably in the 1970s, as he is seen far more positively and sympathetically than previously. One specific element of his character that continues to receive attention is his role as an artist. Some critics believe Philip's surroundings hamper his creativity. Atwood argues that Canadian society and culture prevents his fulfillment as an artist. Cude argues Philip is crippled as "an artist, as a minister, and as a man" by remaining in the church when he truly wants to be an artist (44). He believes Philip must leave the ministry and go into "some line of work that will allow him to develop his artistic talents" (44). Others argue that Philip's failure is caused by his own flaws. Dooley views Philip's paintings as private and solipsistic, showing Philip's aversion to communication (*Moral Vision* 39). Jones states that while Philip "has the talent to paint, he does not have the heart" and calls him "a true artist and a false minister" (39). Philip's role in the novel is re-examined and the view that he is the protagonist of the novel is further developed. Philip's relationships with characters other than Mrs. Bentley are examined, including his father, Steve, and Judith. Philip receives far more attention than he did in earlier criticism, and his character and actions are often regarded quite positively.

The ending of the novel continues to be a focal point of critical interest, and it is interpreted in various ways. Dubanski takes a pessimistic view of the Bentleys' future: "The most that can be said is that there is a new, limited honesty between husband and wife concerning the paternity of Judith's baby, nothing more" (89). He believes Philip is doomed because Mrs. Bentley will smother him and transform him into a static artist (94). Most critics are not much more optimistic about the Bentleys' future. Atwood writes that "there is hope that

his marriage will improve (though not much hope)” (85). Moss believes their future is a mixture of renewal and repetition (*Patterns* 164). Jones equates the beginning of the child’s life and the beginning of a new phase in their marriage (42). Chambers is fairly hopeful about the future, feeling that Philip “has finally emerged from his terrible isolation and found a newness of being” as a result of Mrs. Bentley’s efforts, yet we are left wondering if they will endure (36). Djwa is the most optimistic about the ending for the novel, stating there is a “new possibility characterized by a new honesty, and a child” (196). Views of the ending vary greatly and depend largely on assessment of Mrs. Bentley’s character.

The 1980s

Critical Interpretations

A great deal of critical work is done on *As For Me and My House* in the 1980s. Interest in questions examined in the 1970s, such as the dependability of the narrator and the role of the environment, continues. A variety of critical approaches are taken to the novel, including feminism, psychoanalysis, comparative studies, structuralism, and deconstruction. Questions regarding Philip’s infidelity are raised, leading to further reconsiderations of his character. Paul’s role in the novel is also re-evaluated, and he is regarded as playing a greater role than previously thought. Criticism responds to earlier views by applying different critical methods and developing in new directions.

The dependability of the narrator continues to interest critics. Paul Denham concludes that flaws in the narrative technique lead to an unsuccessful fusion of historical realism and symbolism. He argues that there are several reasons to mistrust Mrs. Bentley’s narrative, such as obvious omissions from her journal. He believes the details of everyday life are conspicuously absent and that the novel does not depict the realities of prairie life during the Depression (120). One example of the move away from reality is the Bentleys’ isolation, which is almost absolute, but highly artificial, showing that the novel “departs from regional accuracy and moves towards symbolism” (120). Denham also comments on Mrs. Bentley’s reliability as a narrator. Readers are aware of her “blundering obtuseness in the present” and “belated recognition of the obvious,” both of which suggest her limited perceptions,” yet there is “no way of telling whether lucidity or obtuseness is the keynote of her character” (122). He believes “the selection of Mrs. Bentley, an unreliable narrator whose unreliability we cannot verify, creates unresolved problems of

perspective in the novel. These problems are compounded by uncertainty as to which details are realistic and which only make sense as symbols” (124). After examining the novel’s historical inaccuracies and Mrs. Bentley’s possible unreliability, Denham concludes that Ross’s method of representation is symbolic rather than realistic. Denham argues that critics must face these difficulties in order to adequately evaluate the position of Ross’s novel in the development of Canadian fiction.

T.J. Matheson examines the critical reception of *As For Me and My House*, concluding that questions about the novel can be solved by understanding the cause of the Bentleys’ hypocrisy. He believes that both Bentleys are obsessed with and dominated by “a compulsion to conform” and have failed to embrace “self-reliance as a method of directing their lives and determining their behaviour” (163). Philip’s behaviour is controlled by “a fear of incurring community wrath” and the option of a more self-reliant lifestyle never occurs to him (166). The consequences of sacrificing self-reliance are evident in Mrs. Bentley, as her conformity to the expectations of the town has devastated her art and her self-confidence (171). The Bentleys’ lack of self-reliance has an obvious impact on their lives, and understanding the centrality of self-reliance is the key to understanding the novel (175). Questions about ambiguity, reliability of the narrator, and the moral integrity of the characters are all answered by acknowledging self-reliance “as an underlying principle behind the creation of the novel” (175). Matheson considers these issues resolved, meaning that “the question of the novel’s worth may then be addressed, for readers can now be assured they are dealing with a carefully conceived and intellectually unified work of art” (176). This is a direct reply to Denham’s contention that textual difficulties need to be addressed before the novel can be assessed. According to Matheson, understanding the centrality of the theme of self-reliance in *As For Me and My House* fully explains the problems identified with the text and puts critics in a position to evaluate the aesthetic worth of the novel, which he believes is considerable.

Anne Hicks enters the debate on the reliability of the narrator, arguing that the question cannot be resolved until critics more fully consider the problems of gender. She provides a feminist reading of the text, defending Mrs. Bentley and examining the intricacies of gender relations in the novel. She believes that Mrs. Bentley is not a “vampire,” but a victim of conventional romantic ideas about men and artists (63). She responds to earlier critics, stating that the mixture of “truth and illusion in the narrative [. . .] makes the character of Mrs. Bentley

authentic without making her story unreliable” (64). Hicks views the ambiguity of Mrs. Bentley’s character as a sign of her lifelikeness. The complexity of Mrs. Bentley “tests the reader’s ability to come to grips with a complex personality and situation without resorting to pat, uncritical assumptions” (61). She responds to the claim that Mrs. Bentley mothers Philip by suggesting that Mrs. Bentley actually relates to Philip as a girl would to her father (66). Hicks’ feminist reading thus replies to criticisms of Mrs. Bentley’s character and of her dependability as narrator.

In his afterword to the 1989 NCL edition of the novel, Kroetsch discusses Mrs. Bentley’s role as an artist figure and presents a positive interpretation of her character. He regards Mrs. Bentley as a skilled artist, arguing that she “writes the beginning of contemporary Canadian fiction” (217). Mrs. Bentley’s views are important to Canadian culture: “In the enigmas of her confessions and concealments, of her telling and not telling, of her presence and absence, Mrs. Bentley speaks some of the illusive truths not only of our culture and psyche but of contemporary art itself” (217). Mrs. Bentley is aware of certain truths about Canadian culture and art, and as a result, “Her stance as a writer prophesies a way in which one might proceed to become or be an artist in the second half of the twentieth century” (217). Mrs. Bentley does not identify herself as the artist, choosing to give that role to Philip, but she possesses artistic talent and the novel itself is “a commentary on, notes towards, a novel that she would write if she were a novelist” (220). Kroetsch discusses Mrs. Bentley’s ambiguity and the paradoxes of the novel, concluding that she is “quite possibly the most compelling and disquieting character in Canadian fiction” (221).

Beverly Mitchell applies the insights of psychoanalysis to interpret the novel and argues that Mrs. Bentley’s unreliability as a narrator stems from her psychological depression (206). Psychoanalytic criticism such as Mitchell’s applies some of the techniques of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of literature (Barry 97). Mrs. Bentley’s depression cripples her and “distorts her perceptions of people and events,” thus causing the novel’s ironies and ambiguities (Mitchell 206). Because of her depression, she projects her negative feelings onto the things around her, leading to her resentment of Philip, the church, God, her home, and Horizon (211-13). Mrs. Bentley’s guilt and unhappiness cause her to live “in a state of morbid expectancy,” and this feeling of impending doom leads her to assume that Philip has an affair with Judith and is the father of her child (214-16). As Ken Mitchell first suggests (30), Philip’s infidelity is

unsubstantiated, and it is more likely that Paul is Judith's lover. Since the deluded Mrs. Bentley believes Philip is guilty, she is released from her guilt and is able to focus her "feelings of resentment, anger, and hatred" upon Philip (216). Mrs. Bentley no longer feels badly about herself, but all of her negative emotions are directed toward Philip, a prospect Mitchell finds "frightening" (216). Reading Mrs. Bentley as a victim of depression shows that her perceptions and judgements are deeply affected by her illness, explaining the ironies and ambiguities of the novel.

Interest in Ross's depiction of the prairie environment also continues. More specifically, Ricou's idea that the Bentleys are closely linked with the land is taken up and developed by several critics. John O'Connor examines the analogy of the prairie and sea in Western Canadian fiction, and Mrs. Bentley's view of the prairie as a form of sea. Mrs. Bentley encounters the "prairie-sea" on her long walks and this interaction enables her to more fully understand her domestic problems (167). To Mrs. Bentley, the analogy of the "prairie-sea [. . .]" outlines the degree to which the individual's encounter with the western Canadian world is both a physical and a psychological challenge" (168). In the end, she is able to withstand the assault of the "sea" and finds safety on the "island" of the city (167). Takao Hagiwara believes that the Bentleys are completely alienated from other people, from nature, and from God, and that their alienation is "symbolically expressed in the severe natural conditions of the prairie" (22). The wildness of nature is also evident within the characters, expressed in their artistic inclinations (22). The Bentleys struggle with nature, internally and externally, and by the end of the novel, the "wild force of nature is sublimated into a positive force," allowing the Bentleys to achieve their "spiritual metamorphosis" (23). The Bentleys are able to withstand the challenges presented by nature and overcome them, as they finally leave Horizon for civilization (32). Robert Thacker notes that there are "continual parallels between the external landscape and the Bentleys' internal one" (*The Great Prairie* 202-03). He finds that the landscape is inextricably linked to the person, as shown in Philip's art. Philip is able to paint various subjects and in a different manner when he is away from the prairie, but when he is living on it "the land forces itself into his consciousness and dictates his subject matter" (206). The Bentleys are seen to be entwined with the land, even though it may affect them negatively. Ultimately, the characters must escape nature for their survival and the city is the place of refuge.

One new critical approach to Ross's novel is that of comparative criticism. Several comparative studies of *As For Me and My House* are undertaken, which aim to illuminate new aspects of the text. Philip Stratford compares Ross's novel with *Poussiere sur la ville* by Andre Langevin and finds that Ross's text "shows many typical English-Canadian characteristics" (40). There are many differences in narrative technique, showing that Langevin's writing is more dramatic and theatrical than Ross's (42). Hagiwara compares spiritual growth and the relationship between man and nature in *As For Me and My House* and *A Dark Night's Passing* by Naoya Shiga. Hagiwara believes that the Bentleys have an antagonistic relationship with nature and that this struggle finally enables them to grow spiritually and gain maturity (32). Thacker compares Ross's depiction of the prairie landscape with Steinbeck's in *The Grapes of Wrath*, noting that for Steinbeck "the dustbowl is a point of departure for a tale of epic heroism while, for Ross, it is human experience to be dramatized and [. . .] detailed" ("Grapes" 196). Ross's is the more artful of the two novels, since Steinbeck's novel lacks the details "needed to evoke place, the texture of place" as *As For Me and My House* does to an "excruciating degree" (197). Owen Wee compares Ross' novel to Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* and examines the use of prairie landscape. Mrs. Bentley's perception of the prairie is highly subjective and she makes the prairie a projection of herself (27-28). Unlike the protagonist of *Main Street*, Mrs. Bentley sees the open prairie as sinister and finds refuge in the town, which she actually identifies with (27). All these comparisons reveal different aspects of *As For Me and My House*, showing that the novel has the strength to withstand a variety of interpretations. The comparisons to French-Canadian, Japanese and American literature reveal new dimensions in the novel and new ways of understanding it.

Frances Kaye suggests another comparative approach by arguing that Ross deliberately parallels Frederic Chopin and George Sand with Philip and Mrs. Bentley. Ross refers to Chopin several times and by means of hints at the story of Chopin's relationship with George Sand, his mistress, illuminates the story of the Bentleys. Kaye wishes to reverse negative views of Mrs. Bentley and emphasize her role as an artist and a guardian of Philip's artistry. There are several parallels between Sand and Chopin and the Bentleys: the patterns of each couples' daily life is similar, each couple has an ambiguous sexual relationship, both women become "mother and androgynous comrade" to their partners and neither woman recognizes the unconscious homosexuality of her partner (102-03, 104). Apart from the intimate details of their relationships,

there are also similarities between the two couples in terms of art. Mrs. Bentley's writing is similar to Sand's (107). Mrs. Bentley also assists Philip's art, as she gives up the myth of Philip as a romantic artist and gives him the stability he needs to create, just as Sand did for Chopin (106). Philip and Chopin are similar in their formalist view of the natural world (108). Despite the numerous similarities between Sand and Chopin and the Bentleys, there is one great difference that determines the success or failure of their art: an audience. Sand and Chopin have an audience, but the Bentleys do not, causing Philip's loss of faith in his art and the Bentleys' artistic isolation (110).

Another new approach to Ross is Ken Mitchell's attempt to introduce him to the general public. Mitchell reviews all of Ross's work, reprinting some short stories and providing analyses of his major works. Mitchell views the Bentleys with sympathy, stating they are "cursed with human frailty, and ultimately blessed with human strength" (28). The Bentleys are quite similar to one another and can be viewed as representing "two halves of a single identity, mirror-images reflecting back into each other" (28-29). Mitchell comments on Mrs. Bentley's dependability as a narrator, calling her unreliable in an interesting and realistic way. Mitchell questions Mrs. Bentley's assumption that Philip had an affair with Judith and is the father of her child. He suggests Philip may be innocent of adultery and that Mrs. Bentley's belief in his infidelity is a reflection of her problems with perception (30). Mitchell shows Ross as an author who could appeal to a wide audience. He also analyzes *As For Me and My House* and makes important critical claims, such as being the first to suggest that Philip is not guilty of adultery.

Williams responds to Mitchell's assertion and also claims that Philip is innocent. Mrs. Bentley is determined to make her husband a hypocrite so he will be her "partner in conspiracy," holding the outside world in secret contempt (163). When this fails, she tries to make him an adulterer ("The 'Scarlet' Rompers" 162). Paul is actually the father of Judith's child, but Mrs. Bentley is unable to accept this because she is obsessed with possessing Philip through his illegitimate child (161). When Philip will not join her, she turns against him and, as a result, her insistence on his failure as an artist and minister cannot be trusted (163). Philip is actually a compassionate minister and an artist filled with pity, but Mrs. Bentley cannot admit this because she is "absorbed in her own reflection" (163-64). William's sympathetic view of Philip and attack on Mrs. Bentley continues the trends of character analysis from the 1970s.

Building upon increased attention to Paul's role in the novel, Barbara Mitchell argues that Paul is "the answer to the riddle of this novel" (47). She believes that "Paul may be the most enlightened and balanced of all Ross's characters" (48). Paul has a double identity as "scholar/teacher and 'fool'/poet" and in these two roles, he helps improve Philip's and Mrs. Bentley's individual lives and marriage (48). Paul's habit of dissecting words is more than a quirky habit: Paul delivers his words "seriously and with moral intent" to guide the Bentleys through particular problems (57). His involvement with the Bentleys improves their lives in several ways. With his help, Mrs. Bentley "moves from a conventional, pragmatic perspective to a more open, unordered vision," finally imagining "an unlimited horizon" (50). Paul introduces the Bentleys "to the elements that cause major transformation in their lives," and he inspires in them a "new attitude of both intellectual and emotional responsiveness" (50). Paul is a model for the Bentleys and he helps them work towards a "successful partnership" by establishing the grounds for their acceptance of each other (54). Because of Paul's help, Philip is ready to embrace Mrs. Bentley and his relationship with her and "throw down his false front as a minister," and Mrs. Bentley realizes the importance of family love (60, 61). The greatest lesson Mrs. Bentley learns from Paul is balance in her life, "an affirmation of life as it really is, without need of explanation or defence, without anger or reproachment" (62). This allows her to reconcile conflicting aspects of her life, such as dream and reality, silence and activity (63). Mitchell argues that Paul is a well-developed, intelligent character who should be acknowledged for helping the Bentleys discover their true selves and repair their broken relationship.

Another new approach to the novel is to re-evaluate its form. Evelyn Hinz and John Teunissen argue that *As For Me and My House* is actually a dramatic monologue: it is characterized by concealment, shows a narrator who wants to be caught, and is mid-way between interior monologue and written articulation (148). Mrs. Bentley is an extremely manipulative and tricky narrator who tries to control the reader's interpretation of her story. Mrs. Bentley feels guilty for concealing her secrets, the first of which is "the deception which led to her marriage" (149). Mrs. Bentley constructed a false image of herself in order to attract Philip (150). Having lured him by presenting a false image of herself, Mrs. Bentley then exploited his sense of moral responsibility by tricking him into marrying her because she was pregnant (152). The truly devious nature of Mrs. Bentley is further exposed by the fact that Mrs. Bentley was actually carrying Percy Glenn's child when she became engaged to Philip (156). The authors contend that

Mrs. Bentley feels guilty because of these burdens, and in order for her to alleviate her guilt she tries to place herself in the position of the “wronged party” (153). In order to make herself feel better, she falsely accuses Philip of mistreating her and of having an affair (153). Hinz and Teunissen believe that Mrs. Bentley’s claim that Philip had an affair with Judith is without substance and that the father of Judith’s child is actually Mr. Finley (158). Hinz and Teunissen believe that many of the mysteries of the novel can be solved by viewing it as a dramatic monologue. They also respond to earlier criticism, commenting that the shortcomings Denham sees in the novel are not evidence of inadequacies on Ross’s part, but rather a result of Denham’s failure to view the text as a dramatic monologue. They also believe that their approach satisfies Morton Ross’s request for critics to articulate the techniques and structures Ross uses to guide his readers.

The novel’s language and structure also receive a great deal of critical attention in this period. Lorraine York examines the language of the novel, arguing it is “a self-conscious exploration of language, a brilliantly constructed study of the relationship between verbal and non-verbal means of communication” (167). One example of the interplay between non-verbal and verbal communication is the contrast between silences and voices (167-68). The central concern of Ross’s novel is the “clash between verbal and non-verbal methods of self-expression” (168). This conflict is apparent in the Bentleys’ marriage, which is divided between the non-verbal and verbal through their contrasting interest in books and music and their conversation patterns (168). Although it may seem that Philip is non-verbal and Mrs. Bentley is verbal, “the degree to which Ross’s characters are verbal or non-verbal” shifts, revealing “that the human being is capable both of candour and concealment” (170). These two modes of expression form the basic polarities of the novel, along with despair and hope, and life and death (174). These opposing forces are combined in the baby, who is a “palpable symbol of the fusion of the verbal and non-verbal” (174). The tension between verbal and non-verbal expression and power is embodied in the child.

Moss also examines the novel’s language, approaching the novel from a structuralist stance, arguing that a binary exists in Mrs. Bentley’s mind. The novel does not represent two realities but a “a single world perceived from the same perspective [. . .] in two distinctly different ways” (“Mrs. Bentley’s Bicameral” 140). The novel articulates the interaction between the two sides of Mrs. Bentley’s mind, and an understanding of Mrs. Bentley’s “bicameral mind”

offers a model for interpreting the novel's "textual anomalies" (140). One side of Mrs. Bentley's mind is "dominated by words and meaning, by linearity, logic and progression" and is associated with the masculine and phenomenology (140), a method which describes the concrete, lived world as it is experienced "independently of prior suppositions" (Abrams 255). The other side of Mrs. Bentley's mind is "dominated by form and pattern, by intuition and discontinuous connections" and is associated with the feminine and structuralism (Moss 140). These two parts of Mrs. Bentley's mind "exist, side by side, as parallel functions of the mind, sometimes competing, sometimes complementary" (140). Mrs. Bentley aligns herself with the structuralist cosmology and views Philip in a phenomenological context, but the text shows that each character can function within both frameworks (144). The novel is a working out of the two sides of Mrs. Bentley's mind, which explains the ambiguities of the work. In order to understand and explore the novel, the reader should be aware of these binaries and approach the text as "a labyrinth" (138). Keeping this in mind, the most appropriate approach to the novel is "to move inwards, away from meaning, towards the centre, towards an appreciation of the enigmatic and anomalous form" (141).

Kertzer approaches the novel from a deconstructionist stance. Kertzer calls the novel a provincial classic, meaning that it represents two opposing types of power. He defines the classic model as "profoundly political" and as a "model of imperial authority," marked by aggression, assertion of power, and authoritativeness ("Provincial Classic" 114, 119, 116). The classic model represents several types of imperial power, including political, cultural, religious and sexual, and these forces operate within the novel (119). Yet opposing kinds of power are also at work in the novel, such as "rebelliousness, impropriety, adultery, heresy, paganism and chaos," representing the provincial and challenging "the classic formula" (119). The novel, as a piece of provincial fiction, "implies that the imperial fiction [. . .] has been recentered and may even be decentered" (119). Ross's novel presents a provincial challenge to the classic model by disputing the classical approach to understanding freedom or truth in a text (121). Kertzer believes that the imperial, classical model "uses spatial metaphors to imagine truth and reality as places to be reached through intellectual and moral discipline" (121). In contrast to this, the provincial approach subverts the spatial model by turning it on itself and examining "the recursive figures of the vicious circle, labyrinth, abyss and mirror," which are all suggested in the novel (123). The deconstruction of the novel and exposure of these images presents a way to read the text and, like

Moss, Kertzer views the labyrinth as the key to understanding the novel. He believes “the labyrinth is an image of endless entrapment and confusion” meaning that there is “no outside to a text” and that it simultaneously “draws us inside only to reveal that a text is always open” (124). The provincial challenge to the classic model shows that truth or freedom “can come only from accepting and exploring the conditions of textuality [. . .] by opening it up from within” (124-5). Kertzer deconstructs the novel to show that it is best understood by accepting and embracing the pluralities of reading, from outside and within the text.

Interpretation of Major Elements

In this period, interpretations of Mrs. Bentley’s character vary greatly. Many critics view her negatively, maintaining claims from the 1970s that she is manipulative and jealous. Beverly Mitchell calls Mrs. Bentley “a hypocrite, a liar, insensitive [. . .] deliberately cruel” and “one of the most thoroughly unpleasant women in Canadian literature” (207). Williams sees Mrs. Bentley as spiteful, jealous and self-centred. Hinz and Teunissen view Mrs. Bentley as devious and deceitful. Other views of Mrs. Bentley are far more sympathetic: Barbara Mitchell writes that Mrs. Bentley is also “lonely, insecure, and unhappy” (207) and Kaye emphasizes Mrs. Bentley’s role as an artist and guardian of Philip’s work. Kroetsch regards Mrs. Bentley as a gifted artist who is aware of certain truths about contemporary Canadian culture and art.

Philip’s character continues to receive a great deal of attention. Several critics judge Philip harshly. Matheson views him as a “withdrawn, passive man, rarely capable of initiating action” (165). Hicks strongly criticizes Philip, calling him a “weak, bitter man” and a “cold destructive parasite who feeds on the romantic illusions of the women around him to boost his sagging ego” (67). More positive interpretations of Philip’s character develop as some critics claim that Philip is innocent of adultery. Williams believes that Philip is a compassionate minister and a sensitive artist, clearing him of charges of hypocrisy. Hinz and Teunissen believe he has a strong, moral character and does his best to deal with Mrs. Bentley.

The ending of the novel is read in several different ways. Hagiwara is extremely optimistic about the ending of the novel and believes that every single aspect of the Bentleys’ lives will continue to improve (29). Ken Mitchell has a positive view of the ending, claiming “Ross’s unambiguous projection for the Bentleys is one of hope and love somewhere beyond Horizon” (50). Most critics are not as confident about the Bentleys’ future, but they believe there is a chance for happiness. Hicks sees the conclusion as showing some hope for the Bentleys and

suggesting that “Mrs. Bentley is learning to [. . .] deal more honestly with her situation” (65). Matheson believes that Mrs. Bentley’s decision to buy a bookstore is a move “in the direction of self-reliance,” but since neither of the Bentleys have truly changed inside, there is little hope that they will move “into genuinely self-reliant spheres of activity” (174). Other critics are completely pessimistic about the ending. Denham asks if the “baby [is] a means to Philip’s final entrapment by his possessive wife, the city merely a larger garrison, the second-hand bookstore a symbol of a second-hand life?” (124). Beverly Mitchell argues that Mrs. Bentley’s depression, delusion, and anger towards Philip point to an extremely unhappy future (216). The novel’s conclusion is thus interpreted in as many ways as the novel itself.

The 1990s to the present

Critical Interpretations

From the 1990s to the present, the novel is explored from a variety of contemporary critical stances: semiotics and linguistics, feminism, and queer theory. Within these interpretations of the text, concerns with earlier approaches are evident. Another common element of criticism is consideration of future interpretations. Critics advance theories or expose certain elements of the text and invite others to join in the critical debate. The greatest amount of interest centres around the presence of homosexuality in the novel and its implications for criticism.

Four major works have been produced on Ross in the last fifteen years. George Woodcock published a reader’s guide in 1990, reviewing the history and critical reception of Ross’s works. *Sinclair Ross’s As For Me and My House: Five Decades of Criticism*, edited by David Stouck, was published in 1991, fifty years after the novel’s initial publication. The book contains early reviews and critical essays from 1957 to 1991, confirming the novel’s status as a classic. The Sinclair Ross Symposium, held in Ottawa, in April 1990, reconfirmed the classic status of *As For Me and My House* and continued to explore its subtleties (Stouck 8). *From the Heart of the Heartland: The Fiction of Sinclair Ross*, edited by John Moss, was published in 1992 and is a collection of essays discussing Ross’s novels and stories. These studies serve to advance the exploration of Ross’s fiction, reviewing critical interpretations and presenting avenues for further explication. In 1997, the year after Ross’s death, Keith Fraser published *As*

For Me and My Body, a biography of Ross revealing him as a homosexual. This text is obviously different from the other three, as it explores both Ross's personal life and his writing.

Several critics examine the language of the novel. Frank Davey approaches the novel from a semiotic point of view, arguing that the various interpretations of *As For Me and My House* show how "the interaction between the signs a text deploys and the discursive context in which they are read" creates literary power (*Power* 127). Earlier critics read the same signs as contemporary critics, but because the meaning of the signs has changed as cultural discourse and readers have changed, the contemporary readings of the novel are much different (127). Previous focus on realism obscures "the novel's existence as a complex of textual signs that participate in the readerly construction of meaning" and overlooks the fact that "Mrs. Bentley herself is a textual construction [. . .] and that this construction is part of the semiotic field the novel presents for reader interpretation" (128, 129). Davey is interested in the text and the kind of "constructions, signs, and power affiliations it offers, whether these be through its construction of Mrs. Bentley, through gaps, intrusions or contradictions it allows in her narration" (128). He examines several of the text's elements ("its peculiar array of proper names, its lack of information about Mrs. Bentley's childhood, its silence on economic issues") and notes although they can be explained in terms of her personality ("she is Eurocentric, self-effacing, humanistic in cultural perspective") they do not remove her from the "overall textual/social operations of the book" (128-29).

Janet Giltrow also examines the language and style of Ross's text. She uses syntactic and discourse analysis to describe some features of the text. Discourse analysis focuses upon the use of language "in a running discourse, continued over a sequence of sentences" and the interaction between writer and reader in a specific context (Abrams 232-33). Syntactic analysis examines the "way that sequences of words are ordered into phrases, clauses, and sentences" (104). Using these two approaches, Giltrow studies four passages in the text and makes some brief observations about them. A few patterns emerge in this analysis, but Giltrow does not analyze them, claiming that her observations are isolated (203). She comments on the text but does not develop an argument about Ross's style and use of language, leaving the issues open for critics to make future observations.

Another sort of critical inquiry that continues into the 1990s is feminist criticism. Anne Compton presents a feminist reading of the novel, arguing for the rehabilitation of Mrs. Bentley.

Since Mrs. Bentley has been viewed as a limited narrator, Philip has been the focus of greater attention causing “Most investigations of the narrator [to] ultimately become accounts of Philip” (62-63). Mrs. Bentley has predominantly been read as a “passive/manipulative” character in the studies which view Philip as central (67). Compton believes Mrs. Bentley is the protagonist of the novel and that her journal is a record of her personal growth. Although her diary “may be an inadequate report of place and people [. . .] it is a propulsive self-report, producing the self which it reports upon” (64). Mrs. Bentley is surrounded by indifference in the environment and in Philip, and she asserts her existence in her diary (69). Mrs. Bentley records her struggle with her fear of meaninglessness in her journal: “Writing it out, she confronts it. Confronting it, she survives” (74). Her diary is both a record and a means of survival. She is manipulative and controlling until she realizes “that the only mastery that matters is that exercised over her own fears” (74). In her review of the past and description of the present, Mrs. Bentley realizes that possessiveness and manipulation are useless, and her journal documents and causes this change (73). In his description of Mrs. Bentley, Ross explores “the basic human need to be seen, to matter, to live and in living to count” (73). The reader is invited to identify with “a female experience and perspective presented as the human one” (75). Mrs. Bentley is a complex character whose consciousness is fully revealed through journal, and it becomes clear that she “transcends the passive/manipulative reading” (74).

Helen Buss also approaches the text from a feminist perspective, “seeking a Mrs. Bentley who accords with female experience” (39). Buss reflects upon critical inquiries in the 1970s, which examine Mrs. Bentley through her role as Philip’s wife, causing her to become “a pole of negativity” (39). The prevailing assumption is that her “primary function in Ross’s fiction is as wife in a patriarchal structure,” and she fails to fill the wifely requirements of “support, service, and submission of self” (39). Buss finds that assessments of Mrs. Bentley as narrator and artist are also negative. Buss proposes “a fuller view of female artistic production in the context of Mrs. Bentley’s historical situation” (40). Mrs. Bentley, as a piano player and author, is an artist who explores her husband, her community, and her role as a minister’s wife and recreates her world through her text (41). This exploration is “intertwined with her painful, anxious, resentful love-hungry and art-hungry negotiation of the implications of such a world” (41). Although Mrs. Bentley is a successful artist, she faces challenges from her patriarchal environment (54). Patriarchy views female creativity that is not directed towards reproduction as threatening and

demonic, and works to suppress it (53). As a result, Mrs. Bentley's creativity is stifled by the "narrow range [. . .] of patriarchy" (54). Buss works to purge negative readings of Mrs. Bentley from criticism, to argue her status as an artist figure, and show her as a victim of patriarchy.

Misao Dean argues that the feminine ideal presented in Ross's work is based upon Freudian models of femininity, and ultimately opposes feminism. Dean states that Ross purposefully constructed Mrs. Bentley according to the Freudian concept of femininity, which developed from the "pervasive cultural stereotypes" Freud used to interpret the psychology of women (105, 101). The text encourages readers to use "specifically Freudian stereotypes of femininity to attribute Mrs. Bentley's unreliability as narrator to the instability of femininity itself" (101). Mrs. Bentley's inability to determine truth is caused by her female psychology, since the Freudian feminine self is incapable of establishing truth. These stereotypes are widespread, as they are present in the novel and in contemporary criticism. Dean contends that "The universality and truth of the psychological model of the feminine self has formed the basic assumption of criticism of the novel," as Mrs. Bentley's narrative has been analyzed for "its concealments, fantasies, and self-justifications" and motives (104). Even feminist critics have not identified her "as a linguistic construct," but as a person whose "material and historical situation has determined (or excused) her supposed defects of character" (105). The fact that criticism has focused so intensely upon the person and characteristics of Mrs. Bentley shows that the Freudian stereotype of femininity dominates contemporary criticism as well (105). *As For Me and My House* "undermines the validity of feminine authority" by using modern analytical psychology, and creates in Mrs. Bentley a "backlash against feminism" (106). Freudian stereotypes of femininity controlled Ross's creation of Mrs. Bentley and dictate current critical inquiry, resulting in a misogynistic novel and misogynistic criticism.

Freudian psychology also appears, but is not subject to critique, in D. M. R. Bentley's examination of the novel. Bentley uses psychoanalytical theory to diagnose Mrs. Bentley as a "victim of increased acute paranoia" (866). Using Freud's lecture on "The Theory of the Libido: Narcissism," Bentley argues that Mrs. Bentley is a victim of paranoia, with delusions "of grandeur, of persecution, of jealousy, [and] of being loved" (865). Mrs. Bentley displays each of these paranoid delusions, showing that Ross intentionally constructed Mrs. Bentley with Freud's work in mind. Mrs. Bentley's paranoia compromises her dependability as a narrator, explaining

the novel's ambiguity. Bentley analyzes Mrs. Bentley and finds that her diagnosis as a victim of paranoia is key to understanding the text.

A new area of inquiry emerges in studies of Ross and *As For Me and My House* in the late 1990s as queer theory is applied to the text. Those who use queer theory in their criticism have several goals. They seek to identify and discuss homosexual episodes in mainstream literature and highlight "homosexual aspects of mainstream literature which have previously been glossed over" (Barry 148-49). This type of inquiry existed before queer theory, but it is a deliberate aim of those employing queer theory. They work to expand the definition of homosexual to include "a moment of crossing a boundary, or blurring a set of categories" (148). The expanded definition of homosexual can mean a blurring of boundaries or resistance to established norms (149). Those who use queer theory to examine literature also work to expose the heterosexual bias of literary criticism, which either ignores or degrades the homosexual aspects of canonical literature (149). Queer theory works against the assumption that all authors and literary characters are heterosexual and exposes instances of homosexuality, as sexuality or resistant behaviour, in literature (149).

In 1997 Fraser published a memoir of Ross which exposes him as a gay man. Fraser's text is a personal account of his interaction with Ross, focusing on the later years of Ross's life. Fraser examines Ross's sexuality and discusses *As For Me and My House* in relation to Ross's personal life. Ross acknowledged the presence of homosexuality in *As For Me and My House*, though he thought it was unintentional (41). Fraser suggests that Ross's "divided self is [. . .] present in a homoerotic way," creating a flaw through the pretence "such a self isn't present" (44). He believes that by not fully "admitting Philip's homosexuality in the novel," Ross's characterization of Philip "contains an artistic flaw," resulting in a "stilted outcome" (54). Fraser focuses on Steve's role and he claims there is "a kind of ideal homoerotic love" evident in Philip's relationship with the boy (59).

Timothy Cramer exposes the heterosexual bias of extant criticism of the novel and argues that "acknowledging [Ross's] homosexual orientation adds new and profound dimensions" to interpretations of his work (51). He doubts Ross's claim that the homosexual content in *As For Me and My House* was unintentional and argues that the tension and ambiguity of the novel are caused by "Ross's desire to create homosexual meaning" (51-52). Cramer views Philip as a homosexual man who denies his inclinations and Philip's "desire for an intense male-male

relationship” is shown through his relationship with his father and Steve (49, 53, 55). Philip’s homosexuality interferes with his relationship with his wife, who loves him passionately and labours to maintain their relationship (52). Cramer views the real tragedy of the novel as Mrs. Bentley’s dependency upon Philip and her belief that she is responsible for Philip’s lack of interest in her (56). Because of her love for Philip, Mrs. Bentley tries to make herself valuable to him, which some critics misinterpret as manipulation and possessiveness (57). Change will only occur in the Bentleys’ lives when Philip “figures out what he wants, what exactly is behind *all* of his false-fronts” (59). Once he tears down the false-front masking his desires, whether they are homosexual or bisexual desires, Philip will be able to give himself and his wife “well-deserved peace” (59-60). Cramer criticizes readings of the text which ignore the homosexual elements of the novel and believes that Ross’s sexual orientation affects the artistry of the novel through the creation of tension and ambiguity.

Valerie Raoul also recognizes a homosexual subtext in the novel and questions earlier interpretations of the novel that assume the characters are heterosexual. Fraser’s text is central to her argument and she believes his memoir of Ross “has put into question all preceding studies, by speaking openly and directly for the first time about Ross’s homosexuality and its bearing on his most famous novel” (13). She too doubts Ross’s claim that he did not recognize the homosexual undertones of his novel and believes that Philip was intentionally created as a homosexual character (16). Philip’s identification with a younger self, Steve, and the absence of his father “corresponds to the conventional Freudian pattern for male homosexuality” (19-20). Mrs. Bentley is aware that her marriage is a masquerade and to compensate, she tries to create a “semblance of the only acceptable trio – an oedipal family composed of mother, father, and son” (16). However, Mrs. Bentley is not a heterosexual character either, and she is attracted to Judith, Mrs. Bird, and Laura (22). Mrs. Bentley is somewhat uncomfortable with her attraction to other women and works to conform to the standards of society. At the end, Mrs. Bentley has created the appearance of normalcy in their relationship, as the adoption of Judith’s baby enables the Bentleys “to establish a semblance of the patriarchal oedipal triangle,” which seems to be what both of them want (24, 26). Raoul’s reading is interesting because it is the first to suggest that Mrs. Bentley is not a straight character, but it will not be the last.

Andrew Lesk responds to the critical work of Fraser, Raoul and Cramer, arguing that although each critic favours a supportive reading of homosexuality, Ross’s homosexuality and

the homosexuality of the novel are represented either as a pathological or sexual misgiving (66). Lesk is emphatically critical of the works of these three critics. The approach of each critic belies “an invariable engagement with normative heterosexual understanding and related compliance” (66). Lesk criticizes Fraser’s biography of Ross, concluding that “Fraser’s psychoanalytic” reading renders “Ross’s homosexuality as pathology” (69). Raoul’s “favouring of triangulation [. . .] reveals an investment in paradigms of the straight mind that betray again and again their stake in understanding homosexuality only in so far as it may secure the foundations of heterosexual discourse” (78). While Cramer endorses an approach to the novel shaped by queer theory, he “uses homosexuality as generative or *possibility* but never in *actuality*” (79). Cramer’s refusal to specifically locate homosexuality in the text relegates homosexuality to a fiction, creating an atmosphere for denials of “historically-located homosexuality” (79). All three critics are solely interested in the “*manifestations* of a problematic homosexuality – that *safe* and distant homosexual *fiction* – and not in any *thorough* biographical account that may more fully disclose the subjective nature of Ross’s (homo)sexual feelings” (79). Lesk closely analyzes the approach of each and finds that Ross’s novel “is not bent; it remains as straight as ever” (83). Despite attempts to supply favourable readings of the novel, Lesk finds that the three critics simply reassert the dominance of heterosexual discourse in Canadian literary criticism.

Terry Goldie examines constructions of gender in *As For Me and My House*, suggesting that in the novel “societal norms of gender are a product of compulsory heterosexuality” (45). The tension between society’s expectations and personal desire is shown by Mrs. Bentley’s obsession with gender, as she labours to construct herself as a woman and Philip as a man (44). Philip and Mrs. Bentley are uncomfortable with the heterosexual roles they play as minister and minister’s wife, leading to confusion and anxiety in their relationship with each other and other characters (55). Both Philip and Mrs. Bentley blur the boundaries of heterosexuality through their interactions with members of the same sex. Philip is clearly uninterested in heterosexuality (46). There is erotic tension between Mrs. Bentley and Judith, and Mrs. Bentley’s “constant assertions of compulsory heterosexuality hide a fine dose of lesbian eroticism” (48). Baby Philip may then represent “Mrs. Bentley achieving reproduction outside of heterosexuality, adopting her dead love’s child” (48). There is no “overt homosexuality” in the novel, but there is a strong sense that something is being hidden and if the characters could express their true selves, the

problems of the novel would be solved (53). Goldie's reading emphasizes the demands of society and suggests that both Bentleys have homosexual tendencies.

Interpretation of Major Elements

Mrs. Bentley's character is discussed in new and interesting ways, suggesting that she is no longer a "pole of negativity" (Buss 39). Davey views Mrs. Bentley as a textual construction, avoiding comments upon her character. Feminist readings call for her rehabilitation and a recognition of her artistic talent. Compton argues that Mrs. Bentley should be admired for her personal growth and development. Dean makes a strong case for Mrs. Bentley as a victim of patriarchy, both in the novel and in the criticism. New readings of Philip affect those of Mrs. Bentley, as she is no longer viewed as manipulative but as simply desiring affection from her husband. Fraser praises Mrs. Bentley, calling her "smart, determined, self-reliant" and questions why she stays with Philip (55). Views of Mrs. Bentley as a lesbian also emerge.

Interpretations of Philip vary and diverge greatly from earlier criticism. Criticism that focuses upon the homosexual aspects of the text views Philip as a homosexual man and regards the problems in his marriage and his life as symptoms of the conflict created by Philip's concealment of his true sexual orientation. Fraser's text greatly influences all subsequent readings of Philip, as criticism that follows engages with the concept of a homosexual subtext. One interesting reading of the text by Peter Dickinson argues it is possible to "interpret the text [. . .] as homosexual fantasy" (19). He comments on the withholding of Mrs. Bentley's first name, viewing it as a clue to the possibility that Philip and Mrs. Bentley may "be one and the same person" (20). The text is then a working out of two different selves (a male author and a male protagonist) in one person, explaining the narrative confusion (21). Even criticism which does not focus upon Philip mentions his sexual orientation. Bentley notes that Philip has homosexual tendencies which are shown through hints about past relationship with young men and his relationship with Steve (868). Critics generally agree that Philip is hiding his true self and that he will not find happiness until he reveals himself as a homosexual man.

Interpretations of the novel's ending focus on the Bentleys' ability or inability to reveal their true natures. Philip's failure to destroy the false fronts of his life prevents the possibility of happiness for him and Mrs. Bentley. Goldie views the conclusion as unhappy because the Bentleys have failed to reveal their true selves, and it is not likely that they will. Raoul's reading of the text implies that since both Bentleys wish to hide their homosexuality, they want their

future to be one of concealment. Compton's reading of the text views the ending positively, as Mrs. Bentley has discovered herself through her journal and sets herself and Philip free through her words.

CHAPTER 3

Two Cases of Canadian Canon Making

The critical history of *The Mountain and the Valley* and *As For Me and My House* shows several important points of convergence and departure in the reception of the novels. Both texts received positive early reviews, were discussed briefly, and then dropped out of sight. The two books were out of print and then reissued as part of the NCL, giving each new life. Interest in the novels grew after this reissue and both novels received roughly the same amount of critical attention until the 1970s. Both were included in the list of the ten most important novels at the 1978 Calgary Conference on the Canadian novel: *As For Me and My House* was the third novel on the list and *The Mountain and the Valley* was the fourth (Mathews 151). The two were frequently compared, appearing together in studies by Chambers, Goldie, Gaskin, Tallman, Frye and Dickinson. Chambers' study, *Sinclair Ross & Ernest Buckler*, is devoted exclusively to the works of the two authors. Both novels have been the subject of several full-length studies. Each book is included in ECW Press's Canadian Fiction Studies series, which studies a major Canadian novel by examining the author's life, the book's importance and the history of its critical reception, as well as providing a reading of the text and a selected bibliography. Both are included in *The Annotated Bibliography of Canada's Major Authors* series from ECW Press and these bibliographies have been reprinted in individual books as part of the Canadian Author Studies series. The similarities in assessment of *The Mountain and the Valley* and *As For Me and My House* are remarkable and all the elements of a successful text appear to be in place for both novels.

Despite the parallels between the two novels, they do not currently enjoy the same status, since *As For Me and My House* is clearly regarded as a canonical work and *The Mountain and the Valley* is not. Lecker argues that "There is probably no work of Canadian fiction that has received more canonical validation than Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*" (*Making It Real* 173). Stouck writes that "no single work of fiction in the country has so continuously engaged the attention and interest of writers and critics as this novel" (*Sinclair Ross* ix). Moss calls *As For Me and My House* "the quintessential Canadian novel" (*From the Heart* 1). The

novel has influenced other creative works, such as Lorna Crozier's *A Saving Grace: The Collected Poems of Mrs. Bentley*, which is a further measure of *As For Me and My House*'s canonicity. The novel's critical acclaim is also reflected by its use in the classroom. A study conducted in November 2001 by *Quill & Quire* showed that *As For Me and My House* was taught in approximately one third of undergraduate courses in Canadian literature (Smith 17). The status of *The Mountain and the Valley* is in sharp contrast to that of *As For Me and My House*, as it was not taught in any classes (17). Kulyk Keefer comments on the current position of *The Mountain and the Valley*, noting that "in most discussions of the post-war or modern novel in Canada, it tends to be slighted or totally ignored" (x). The two novels have numerous similarities, yet one is regarded as a canonical work and frequently studied and the other is nearly invisible. Why has one text been so much more successful than the other? Both texts were initially regarded as important works and major works of Canadian fiction by reviewers and critics. What is the reason for the difference in their reputations? What are the factors and influences that shape the status of a novel?

A specific study of the differences between the current status of *The Mountain and the Valley* and *As For Me and My House* requires an understanding of the theories regarding canon formation. There is a great deal of debate regarding the Canadian literary canon, raising questions about its existence, its exact shape, and the factors that determine its form. Most critics agree that there is a Canadian canon and that it is extremely fluid. Theories regarding its formation, however, vary greatly. Questions of literary value, cultural concerns, and institutional agenda all come into play. This larger debate over the Canadian canon sheds light on the particular cases of Ross and Buckler.

One aspect of the canon debate is the literary value of a work. Harold Bloom believes that the sole determiner of a text's status is its aesthetic value. Literary works have inherent aesthetic worth, which is recognized and cherished by the reader. Based upon this concept, Bloom's definition of the canon is the "relation of an individual reader and writer to what has been preserved out of what has been written" (406). This preservation through personal choice will equate the canon with "the literary Art of Memory" (406). Bloom believes that most current criticism shows a "flight from the aesthetic" and he hopes that this will be rectified (407). W. J. Keith holds a similar view, arguing that "canons presuppose quality" ("Shooting Niagara?" 390). For Keith, literary value and canonicity are nearly synonymous and the existence of a canon is

therefore completely dependent upon aesthetic quality. As a result, any Canadian canon “will be determined in large measures by the artistic skills of the writers represented” (390). Keith feels that “Evaluations in terms of language and style [. . .] are inescapable” and thus form the basis for the inclusion of a work in the canon (390). He acknowledges that literary value is, to a certain extent, an intangible concept and that “literary judgements can never be established in terms that will satisfy a strictly scientific mind” (395). Despite the ultimately indefinable nature of value, Keith believes that it is entirely possible to evaluate literature with the proper knowledge: the assessment of literary value requires a “comprehensive knowledge of established classics [. . .] [a] sense of literary quality [. . .] [and an] awareness of the variety of acceptable critical approaches and procedures” (395). Bloom and Keith believe, then, that literary works have inherent value and that literary worth determines canonicity.

This view, however, is not currently shared by all academics. The problems with judging a text’s worth based upon its literary value are raised by John Guillory and Terry Eagleton. Guillory believes that “evaluative judgements are the necessary but not sufficient conditions for the process of canon formation” (*Cultural Capital* vii). Guillory acknowledges that literary value exists and influences a work’s status, but also recognizes that it is not absolute and is not the only determining factor of a text’s status. Eagleton takes a stronger stance against the importance of value, arguing that “value-judgements are notoriously variable” and that assessments based upon language and style are inconsistent (401). Bloom and Keith claim that a fixed canon will evolve as the works of value are preserved over time. Eagleton disagrees because he does not believe that value is static: “‘Value’ is a transitive term: it means whatever is valued by certain people in specific situations, according to particular criteria and in the light of given purposes” (401). According to Eagleton, the definition of value will change drastically over time, making it impossible to say that only works of value are preserved. Eagleton’s and Guillory’s comments apply to Buckler’s and Ross’s novels. While the question of value certainly enters the debate on canonicity, it has not absolutely determined the status of these works. Both *As For Me and My House* and *The Mountain and the Valley* are works with literary value, as Ross and Buckler were praised for their language and style by reviewers and critics. The value-judgements of *As For Me and My House* and *The Mountain and the Valley* have been essentially the same, both being regarded as works of quality, showing that other factors are at work in the determination of their canonicity.

Eagleton expands upon the idea that the values of certain people determine a text's position. He writes that "The 'literary canon', the unquestioned 'great tradition of the 'national literature', has to be recognized as a *construct*, fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a certain time. There is no such thing as a literary work or tradition which is valuable *in itself*, regardless of what anyone might have said or come to say about it" (401). Literary texts are objects upon which value is conferred according to the needs of certain people. Literature has worth only because it is deemed valuable for particular purposes, not because it contains value on its own, and the canon is a structure which reflects the specific needs of a group at a certain times. Gerson agrees with Eagleton. She believes that canons mirror the interests of particular people, in response to new imperatives:

National literary canons are deceptively fluid entities. Apparently fixed at each moment in history, they nevertheless assume different shapes in response to new fashions and shifts in social value. The contours of a canon are governed not by the inherent qualities of certain texts, but by the values attributed to them by those in power according to their current agendas and the particular configuration of national, aesthetic, and sexual politics that best serves their interests. (46)

Gerson does not deny the possibility of intrinsic value, but argues that it does not determine canonicity. This leads to the suggestion that there are intrinsically valuable works which are not read, such as *The Mountain and the Valley*. Instead of status being determined by value, values are ascribed to texts by people in positions of power and the values found in a text are determined by the agendas and politics of the controlling group. John Metcalf agrees that the canon in Canada is determined according to the values of those in power, but he does not regard this as inevitable or desirable. He argues that the debates regarding Canadian literature have nothing "much to do with literature" because "the real subject is the politics of Canadian sovereignty" (9). Since national politics dominate discussions of Canadian writing, "Theories about Canadian literature tend to reflect the larger social attitudes and nearly all visions of our literature are nationalistic, chauvinistic, smug, and amazingly *white*" (13). As Gerson suggests, the values of those in power determine the criteria by which literary traditions are created. According to these critics, then, the canon is a product of the interests of certain people in order to obtain certain goals.

Which groups of people promote certain texts? What exactly are their intentions? Lecker argues that the Canadian canon is a construct developed largely by academics interested in “affirming narratives that promote those forms of interpretive power sanctioned by the institution itself” (174). The canon is thus “an institutional construct” verified by its creators because “To verify this structure [is] to verify the institution itself” (28). Somewhat cynically, Lecker sees canonicity as an academic exercise completed in order to validate the existence and operation of the academic institution. Other critics agree that there is a close connection between canon-formation and the academic institution. Gerson writes that “academic and editorial institutions [...] shape the canon,” showing that she believes the people interested in promoting particular texts are academics and editors (47). Guillory argues that the canon “must be confronted as the cultural capital of educational institutions” (“Canonical and Non-Canonical” 495). He believes that academic institutions regulate and control literature and therefore command the shape of the canon. Metcalf also believes that academic institutions control canonicity, but his view differs from those of Gerson, Lecker and Guillory. These three critics accept the academic control of canon formation and appear willing to work within the parameters of an academically-defined canon. Metcalf agrees that “our writing has become captive to the academy,” but argues that this has led to the promotion of texts which lack aesthetic value (43). Metcalf thinks that value should prevail but does not in Canada, whereas Gerson argues that literary value never prevails and seems to think this is acceptable. Regardless of critical views of value, it is clear that academic interests strongly influence the shape of the canon.

Two critics, Dean and Metcalf, comment specifically on the relationship between academic interests and the current status of both *As For Me and My House* and *The Mountain and the Valley*. Dean agrees that canons are constructed according to the values of those in power. She finds that *As For Me and My House* “undermines the validity of feminine authority by contrasting domestic ideology with modern analytic psychology, creating in Mrs. Bentley the backlash against feminism which characterized the early modern period” (106). Contradicting the views of other feminist critics of *As For Me and My House*, Dean argues that the novel is anti-feminist and that it has been promoted because it reflects the misogynist attitudes of some academics: “Perhaps this is the reason why it is the only novel unanimously agreed upon by Canadian scholars as a true classic of the modern period” (106). Metcalf examines Ross and Buckler as examples of authors whose texts do not deserve to be included in the canon, claiming

that their canonization “has been purely academic” (43). He believes that “Literary nationalism has boosted and bloated the reputation of such figures as [. . .] Sinclair Ross [and] Ernest Buckler” (31). He notes that “The academic CanLit establishment has stamped [*The Mountain and the Valley* and *As For Me and My House*] as ‘Classics.’ They are, of course, nothing of the sort. [Buckler’s and Ross’s] books are, in the main, dull and flawed. They were old-fashioned when they were written and are now antiquated” (31). The two books, then, have little literary value and have been promoted only because of academic politics. Metcalf also argues that since Buckler and Ross are “essentially one-book men,” their novels do not deserve to be included in the canon because they have not been able to produce other works of quality. He also finds the history of critical response to *As For Me and My House* and *The Mountain and the Valley* disturbing, as it suggests “that the critics have decided on canonization whatever literary difficulties and purple defects they are forced to ignore or stumble over” (43). He believes that the canonization of the two books demonstrates that academics define canonicity in a way that excuses the shortcomings of the text. He points to the fact that the 1978 American reissue of *As For Me and My House* was through a university press and that sales in Canada and the United States have been almost exclusively to the university and college market as proof of academic control of the canon, and also as evidence of the novel’s lack of aesthetic value (46). In Metcalf’s view, academics have created a literary tradition, and Canadian canonical texts are texts without literary value. Both Metcalf and Dean believe that academic interests control the shape of the canon and argue that this leads to the promotion of unworthy texts, specifically *The Mountain and the Valley* and *As For Me and My House*.

How then does the history of the critical reception of *The Mountain and the Valley* and *As For Me and My House* demonstrate the deliberate actions of academic institutions? How did one novel come to be regarded as canonical and the other non-canonical? The reception of the two novels must be understood in the larger context of Canadian culture and the creation of a Canadian literary canon. Academics became interested in the form of the Canadian canon as a result of increased attention to Canadian culture. The formation of the Canadian canon relates to Canada’s recognition of the need for cultural transformation following World War II and during the Cold War. Canada emerged as a middle power after the second World War and began to develop as an independent rather than colonial nation (Whitaker 5). Issues of national identity, self-representation, anti-Americanism, and anti-colonialism became prevalent parts of cultural

discourse as Canadians realized that if the nation did not want to be defined as part of the British Empire or the United States, it needed a strong national culture. The solution to the question of the Canadian character was the Massey Report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Sciences, published in 1951. The Massey Commission was grounded in the notion that “culture was what bound Canadians together and distinguished them from other nationalities” (Litt 4). It issued a warning about the dangers of dependence upon American culture and proposed a strategy for state-sponsored Canadian cultural development, which included “endowing federal cultural institutions with the resources they needed to play leading roles in national cultural life” and to protect Canadian culture from American mass culture (Litt 3). Although the Massey Report did not create a national literature (cultural distinctiveness having begun long before it), it was the catalyst for the formation of the Canadian canon.

The development and promotion of the Canadian nation was therefore a primary concern after World War II and during the Cold War. Homi K. Bhabha writes that the “nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west” because “traditions of political thought and literary language” link the concept of the nation with narrative, causing nationalist discourses “to produce the idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of national progress” (1). Canada was re-creating its identity as a nation in the 1950s and, as a result, required a narrative of national advancement. The development of a nation is assisted through the creation of culture and Canada began to cultivate its culture to demonstrate its developing nationhood (Frye 828). Davey writes that in the 1950s and 1960s, “The Canadian canon became the site of several new nationalistic projects: to give international legitimacy to Canadian culture through the writing of scholarly histories and companions; [and] to popularize things Canadian by re-publishing Canadian texts for secondary and post-secondary school study” (*Power* 45-46). As Metcalf suggests, this cultural emphasis led to the emergence of Canadian literature as a distinct field of study. The first course in Canadian literature was taught by Carlyle King at the University of Saskatchewan in the 1946-7 academic year (Findlay 426). Under King’s supervision, an MA thesis on Canadian literature was written in 1950 by Ella Keller, showing that the university study of Canadian literature led directly to graduate work. The study of Canadian literature grew gradually in the 1950s and 1960s, as is reflected in the criticism of *The Mountain and the Valley* and *As For Me and My House*. The impetus for the study of Canadian literature emerged from the cultural

development of the 1950s and 1960s and once it was established as an area of study, efforts were made to maintain scholarly inquiry into the nation's literature.

The NCL itself was and is one way of promoting the study of Canadian literature. Lecker argues that the history of the canon can be examined by looking at the NCL, because it "truly has achieved a high point of canonical status: it is a powerful collection of culturally relevant texts that has been accepted, institutionalized, utilized, studied, praised, and never once interrogated" (*Making It Real* 156). Lecker challenges the real value of the NCL, but also demonstrates that the establishment of the NCL closely corresponds with the inception of the canon in its recent form. Metcalf agrees that what is thought of as "'the Canadian tradition' is largely the McClelland and Stewart New Canadian Library series" (35). The NCL was launched in 1957 in an attempt to promote the readership and study of Canadian literature. According to Lecker, Malcolm Ross, general editor of the NCL, chose texts that were "firmly rooted in mimetic assumptions about the relationship between people and place," emphasized "cultural self-recognition," and excluded titles that "challenged cultural norms" (*Making It Real* 158). The series was "eminently conservative in its formation" with an "emphasis on works that were not contemporary," reinforcing the idea that contemporary texts were not as culturally relevant as those from the past (158). While nationalism was seen as valuable prior to the establishment of the NCL, the series linked the "the exploitation of nationalism" to the "deliberate founding of an institutional canon" (160). Lecker argues that the NCL created the Canadian canon and emphasized cultural self-recognition, conservatism, nationalism, and mimesis. He believes that the Canadian canon has scarcely changed since the beginning of the NCL, meaning that the values governing the inception of the NCL control the current canon. However, given that some NCL texts, specifically *The Mountain and the Valley*, are no longer canonical, Lecker's assertion that NCL texts are canonical texts is not true in all cases. This also shows that the values which governed the creation of the NCL are not the values which control the canon today. The values which controlled the formation of the NCL may have influenced the form of the early canon, but this is no longer the case, as some canonical texts do not adhere to the values which shaped the NCL. While the factors influencing the creation of the NCL are important, they are not the factors which define the current canon.

Following the creation of the NCL, interest in Canadian literature continued to grow and by the 1970s the study of Canadian literature was prominent in Canada. Although classes in

Canadian literature had been taught for nearly two decades, the number of university classes in this field increased sharply. The 1972 publication of Atwood's *Survival*, which was used as an aid to teachers of Canadian literature, shows that the subject was beginning to be widely accepted as a teaching area in Canadian universities. Graduate work in Canadian literature in general, and on Buckler and Ross in particular, became more prevalent. From 1966 to 1979, six MA theses were written on *The Mountain and the Valley* and six were written on *As For Me and My House*. One PhD dissertation was written on *The Mountain and the Valley* in 1966 and another was written in 1970; one dissertation was produced on *As For Me and My House* in 1966. The two novels received roughly equal attention in graduate work, suggesting that their status within Canadian universities was also fairly equal. Thematic criticism was prominent in the 1970s and both texts were able to support thematic readings, showing their alignment with contemporary critical trends. Both texts were the focus of several articles and full-length studies. It was at this time that the two novels were validated as canonical by their inclusion in the list of the ten most important novels in Canadian literature at the Calgary Conference on the Canadian novel in 1978 (Mathews 151). At this time, the status of the novels among Canadian academics was roughly equal.

The prominence of *The Mountain and the Valley* and *As For Me and My House* in the 1970s shows that there is a strong correlation between critical trends, critical interests, and the status of a novel. In an interview with *Quill & Quire* in November of 2001, Terry Goldie comments on the connection between current critical concerns and the popularity of a text. He refers specifically to Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*, noting that it "is a very fine novel" which contains many elements that adhere to "almost any teaching model, and fits exactly our present concerns of race, sexuality, feminism, regionalism, etc., and thus it appears on courses everywhere" (Smith 17). Goldie also suggests that the novel would not be "ubiquitous if it were just as good but didn't fit those imperatives" (17). Goldie's comments are interesting because although he emphasizes the importance of contemporary concerns, he also makes a value judgement of the novel, calling it "fine" and "good." His remarks show that a novel's alignment with present critical models heavily influences its position within the academic institution. If academics largely control the canon, then texts which adhere to academic interests are more likely to be included in the canon. Could this be an explanation for the different treatments of *The Mountain and the Valley* and *As For Me and My House*?

Both *The Mountain and the Valley* and *As For Me and My House* were popular in the 1970s among Canadian critics and both were read thematically. The link between critical interests and a text's status becomes even more apparent when one considers the effects of changing literary trends. In the late 1970s, thematic criticism was replaced with other critical models and the position of *The Mountain and the Valley* fell, while the status of *As For Me and My House* continued to rise. Thematic criticism came under attack for being "anti-evaluative" and ignoring the particulars of the text, such as language, form, style, and structure (Davey *Paraphrase* 1). It was viewed as reductive, "reducing a novel to its declared themes and plot outline [. . .] [and] the Canadian culture ultimately to catch-words such as Atwood's 'victimization' and 'survival'" (3). As the popularity of broad thematic studies waned, new critical methods were employed, such as feminism, regionalism, and queer theory, which closely studied specific themes. Examinations of language and style also became prominent, leading to formalist and structuralist interpretations. This shift in critical focus greatly affected the status of both novels. Although these theories were initially applied to *The Mountain and the Valley*, very little attention was paid to the novel and it came to be regarded as a minor work of Canadian fiction. In contrast to this, *As For Me and My House* benefited greatly from the application of different critical methods. This shift is also reflected in the graduate work produced on each of the novels.¹ From 1981 to the present, eight MA theses and four PhD dissertations have been written on *The Mountain and the Valley*. In this same period, three MA theses and ten PhD dissertations have been written on *As For Me and My House*. A greater number of MA theses have been written on *The Mountain and the Valley* than on *As For Me and My House*, but Ross's novel has been the focus of more PhD dissertations, showing that critical interest has shifted heavily towards *As For Me and My House*. The change in critical focus has strongly affected the status of both *The Mountain and the Valley* and *As For Me and My House*.

Another factor that has greatly influenced the reception of the two works is critical interpretations of gender roles. Early reviews of *As For Me and My House* concentrated on Mrs. Bentley's role as a minister's wife and later readings challenging the reliability of the narrator also raised questions about gender roles. The predominantly negative readings of Mrs. Bentley's

¹ Another way that graduate student activity contributes to the process of canon formation is through PhD field exam lists, as inclusion in these lists is an indication of a work's canonical status. These lists are not examined in this thesis, but should be acknowledged as a canon-making force.

character are countered by feminist readings, which aimed to re-evaluate and rehabilitate Mrs. Bentley. Gerson argues that interest in gender influences canonicity, and Ross's decision to focus on a woman narrator has meant that his work was of interest to feminist critics in the 1980s and 1990s, thus ensuring that *As For Me and My House* continued to receive attention. On the other hand, Buckler, who concentrated on a male protagonist, was not the subject of the feminist interest which was so strong in this period. Buckler's portrait of a sensitive, disempowered, rural man following a non-traditional path could be examined through the lens of masculine studies, but since this has not been a major area of interest until recently, this element of the novel has been largely ignored. The prominence of feminist criticism has clearly affected the status of both novels.

Regionalism has also become a prominent focus of critical interest, resulting in renewed attention to *As For Me and My House*. Bennett asserts that the reception of Prairie writing in recent years is "one of reassessment in which characteristics that had been seen as 'flaws' were discovered to be strengths" ("Conflicted Vision" 148). The transformation of flaws into strengths indicates a radical change in both value-judgements and values. Bennett explains how this occurred:

the history of the reception of *As For Me and My House* indicates not only that critics from outside the West had difficulty accepting the 'artfulness' of this book until the last two decades, but that its acceptance into the Central-Canadian-defined canon came only after the book was interpreted – with a shift in emphasis onto the unreliability of the narrator – in a way that aligned its techniques with those of modernist literary criticism. What had bothered earlier critics – repetition, the claustrophobic perspective, and the relative lack of drama and dramatization – became virtues, and new values were discovered in the text: irony, psychological intensity, and a vision blurred by ambiguity. (148)

Bennett argues that the dominance of modernist criticism in Canada made Prairie writing more acceptable to Canadian critics (148). The interest in modernist elements led away from an examination of the regional elements of the novel and this change in critical models ensured that *As For Me and My House* continued to be of interest to academics. Bennett's comment that "new values were discovered in the text" implies that the detection of these values was a deliberate critical act rather than the result of textual re-examination (148). Similarly, Morton Ross observes that recent evaluations of the novel have discovered universals in the text in an effort to

deregionalize the novel. Bennett's and Ross's comments suggest that the re-evaluation of Ross's text has been carried out with certain goals in mind, regardless of the strengths of the text itself.

Nevertheless, the critical concern with regionalism leads to an elevation of Prairie writing, but not Atlantic-Canadian writing. Several critics argue that Atlantic-Canadian writing was omitted from re-evaluations of regionalism because of an academic bias against or a lack of interest in this region. Keefer argues that "As a distinctive and vital literary region, the Maritimes has been virtually neglected by critics and scholars of Canadian literature" (x). The literature of Atlantic Canada has been generally under-discussed and therefore has been excluded from discussions of regionalism. Davey supports this view, commenting that it is difficult for Atlantic writers to make their way into the canon: "The place of Atlantic-Canadian writers has steadily diminished since their predominance in the early 19th century to their virtual exclusion in many contemporary expressions of 'the canon'" (*Power* 46). Perhaps because of a lack of profile in Canadian culture as a whole, Atlantic-Canadian writing does not often fall within the scope of academic interest outside the Maritimes, preventing works of this region from entering the canon. This exclusion of Atlantic-Canadian writing is evident in the particular case of *The Mountain and the Valley*. Both *As For Me and My House* and *The Mountain and the Valley* are regional novels, but because academics tend to be more concerned with Prairie writing than Atlantic-Canadian writing, only *As For Me and My House* has been widely re-examined as a regional work.

Much of recent criticism of *As For Me and My House* has focused extensively upon Ross's homosexuality and the homosexual aspects of the novel. There are several lengthy queer readings of *As For Me and My House*, which are largely based upon Fraser's memoir of Ross, a work that has been extremely influential in subsequent readings of the novel. Speculations about Ross's personal life have led to new readings of the characters Philip and Mrs. Bentley, suggesting that Philip is a gay man and Mrs. Bentley is a lesbian. Queer readings of the novel are so prominent that even assessments of the novel which do not deal with sexuality refer to the homosexual elements. In contrast, only two critics, Dickinson and Goldie, have suggested that homosexuality may exist in *The Mountain and the Valley* and these readings have been brief and underdeveloped. This shows that the novel is able to support a queer reading, but for some reason, this approach has hardly been employed and thus has not changed critical views of the novel. Considering the effect of Fraser's autobiography of Ross on subsequent criticism, it likely

that critics are reluctant to make strong statements about homosexuality in *The Mountain and the Valley* because Buckler has not been identified as a homosexual. If an autobiography of Buckler revealed that he was gay, readings of his novel would certainly change and interest in the work would increase. The differences in the application of queer theory to the two novels also shows that critics work harder to ensure prominent novels comply with their critical interests.

Feminism, regionalism and queer theory have all been applied to *As For Me and My House*, generating numerous critical works, opinions, and responses. These same theories have been applied to *The Mountain and the Valley*, but only briefly, and thus have created almost no critical interest. The application of these theories to the novel suggests that it is capable of supporting a wide range of readings. However, many other popular critical methods, such as psychoanalysis, have been applied to Ross's novel but not to Buckler's. Is this a reflection upon the novel or the criticism?

Although the two novels are similar in several ways, they are also dissimilar and the differences between the texts themselves are a factor in their reception. *As For Me and My House*, unlike *The Mountain and the Valley*, is a puzzling, challenging novel which is also very accessible. The point of view is eccentric and ambiguous, suggesting many difficulties. Problem novels, such as Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, receive a great deal of critical attention because critics engage with the complexities of the text. Ross, perhaps unintentionally, created an extremely problematic novel, which is capable of supporting a number of critical approaches and, as a result, *As For Me and My House* has enjoyed a measure of critical success that *The Mountain and the Valley* has not. On the other hand, the wide range of critical approaches to the novel suggests that critics are interested in ensuring that certain works adhere to their critical positions. A review of the criticism on *As For Me and My House* shows that some critical interpretations of the novel are pushed as far as they can feasibly go, and perhaps at times beyond, as criticism of the text becomes metacriticism. In contrast to this, readings of *The Mountain and the Valley* do not stretch beyond the limits of the text, and even seem to stop short sometimes, such as in the lack of attention to its regionalism. The two novels have been subject to literary fashion, and *The Mountain and the Valley* has suffered while *As For Me and My House* has benefited. Critical trends are extremely influential in the criticism of Canadian literature, justifying the cynical views of Lecker and Gerson. The case of *The Mountain and the*

Valley and *As For Me and My House* shows, then, that the extent to which critics labour to advance a particular theory in their discussions of each work affects the status of the text.

A closer examination of the academic moulding of texts to suit specific purposes shows that, in many ways, *As For Me and My House* has been adapted to fulfill the programs of the critics. Metcalf believes that the reputation of *As For Me and My House* was “created and fostered by academics to serve dubious academic and nationalist ends,” showing that the text has been reconstructed by critics to adapt it to their needs (43). As noted earlier, Morton Ross argues that an increased concern with complex critical theory has led critics to transform a fairly simple novel into a work full of paradox and ambiguity and also to deregionalize it order to depict universal themes (205). The critical drive to study complicated themes in literature has caused *As For Me and My House* to be redefined as an intricate text that speaks of universals rather than regional elements. Bennett suggests that the re-evaluation and championing of *As For Me and My House* was forced to a degree and that critics found certain values in the text by seeking them out, not simply by observing them (148). Gerson argues that the canon is formed according to “the values attributed” to texts rather than the inherent qualities of a work, suggesting that the values found in a text may not actually exist within the text (46). These comments on *As For Me and My House* lead to the conclusion that some Canadian academics can and do make certain texts say what they want. These observations suggest that these texts can be moulded to say particular things. The academic study of literature involves, among other things, the restructuring of a text to make it adhere to and therefore represent contemporary critical stances, thereby fulfilling academic agendas.

Following this line, then, in the specific case of Buckler and Ross, alignment with current critical interests and the ability to be moulded to contemporary critical views are the most important characteristics of a Canadian canonical text. A canonical text is therefore a malleable text, and Ross’s text is simply more flexible than Buckler’s. The futures of both novels are then dependent upon critical trends. Taken to its logical conclusion, criticism of Canadian literature is largely a fantasy of critics, as there is essentially no text to study and only critical theory to advance. However, a canon cannot be based purely on academic interests, because those interests are themselves dependent upon the culture as a whole. Heather Murray notes that “all criticisms are as historically situated as are the works themselves, that they are never neutral, and that they always work from particular positions and for certain people” (80). Murray agrees with Gerson

that certain people promote texts for particular reasons, but she also points out that criticism itself is “historically situated” (80). Every new critical method and approach is therefore shaped by its historical context. As times change, so does the emphasis of criticism. This is clearly demonstrated in the critical reception of *The Mountain and the Valley* and *As For Me and My House*, as certain types of critical methods become less popular as time progresses and new approaches are developed. Considering this fact, then, canons formed according to the contemporary interests of academics are also “historically situated” (80). Canons formed by contemporary academic interests must change even as the critical methods themselves change. The flux of academic interests means that a canon based solely upon current interests is, to a degree, ephemeral. But the fact that certain texts, such as Frederick Philip Grove’s *Settlers of the Marsh*, have endured changing sensibilities and political trends demonstrates that the canon has some continuity and variety. A limited number of texts cannot support different values over a significant length of time. The argument that only the values and interests of academics shape the canon is belied by the fact that certain texts have remained prominent, showing that while academic interests have a great deal of influence, they are not the only determining factor in canon formation.

One issue that reappears in discussions of Canadian literature is the concept of literary value. Even those who believe that academic interests significantly control the canon do not deny that intrinsic quality exists in a text. Both Gerson and Goldie refer to the literary worth of a text, showing that they believe value is an important aspect of a text. Literary value, as discussed by Keith and Bloom, exists and is present in Canadian literature. Both *The Mountain and the Valley* and *As For Me and My House* have been regarded by many as works with literary worth, showing that value is an integral part of discussions of Canadian literature. Bennett and Metcalf also believe that a text’s intrinsic value is important and argue that a Canadian tradition will eventually emerge, shaped by literary value. Bennett claims that a well-defined, if not fixed, Canadian canon will materialize over time:

National canons give us both the literary vision that influences the shape of newly articulated work and the narrative of aesthetic values that expresses how a culture locates its writing within its larger history. While we may not be able to produce a stable canon that will supply Canadian readers and writers with a single tradition, we may still seek to shape one that will show us the aesthetic history of our literature and, in so doing, will

show us the standards that have emerged from our conflicted literary values. (“Conflicted Vision” 149)

Bennett believes that a Canadian canon will develop because writers will produce works of aesthetic value. Metcalf holds a similar view, writing that “a sense of ‘Canadian-ness’ will inevitably emerge from our literature whether we desire it or not” (104). Metcalf believes that over time, the canon will have distinct characteristics of its own, regardless of critical activity at a particular moment, and that critics do not have to create a canon.

Bennett and Metcalf suggest that the recognition of literary worth is a slow process which cannot be rushed, meaning that canon development requires time. Keith’s requirements for the recognition of value (a knowledge of classics, an understanding of literary quality and a familiarity with acceptable critical methods) certainly need care and meticulousness, suggesting a slow process. Keith’s comments are interesting because although he emphasizes value, he also acknowledges the importance of critical examinations of texts. Several others agree that time is an essential factor in developing a literary tradition. Frye views the test of time “as crucial to the designation of classics” (Stouck, *Sinclair Ross* 85). Stephen Leacock argues that the canonizing process “demands at least a century and the verdict of the people” (qtd. in Stouck, *Sinclair Ross* 84-85). He believes that time and value judgements are closely connected and equally important. These comments show that the assessment of a text’s value occurs gradually and that the passage of time reveals canonical texts.

According to Metcalf, a literary tradition develops at its own pace and will grow and change as it does so. As the criticism of *The Mountain and the Valley* and *As For Me and My House* demonstrates, the tradition of Canadian literature has not always been given time to develop and is still relatively young. Metcalf believes that “A literature has its own natural rate of growth and change” (99), but early reviews of both books heralded them as classics, long before they could actually be established as such, and debates about their position in the canon have existed since their publication. Metcalf argues that academic eagerness has led to the analysis of literature that is too new: “Academics are beavering away, cataloguing this literature, annotating it, analysing it, deconstructing it, and most of the matter of their labours *is all of twenty-five years old!*” (100-01). Metcalf believes that “Such academic busy-work is distorting our literary culture by slowing or preventing the natural shaking down and settling of reputations over years” (101). Metcalf argues that the overly zealous critical examination of new literature

warps the process of canon formation. Stouck argues that the current age “craves affirmation of classics as though such affirmation is a sign of maturity” (85). Critical interest in Canadian literature is a sign of the desire to establish which texts are classic and which are not. Critics are unwilling to wait for a tradition to emerge and thus they actively seek to define and construct one. The immediate canonization of texts demonstrates anxiety about the value of Canadian literature and the shape of the canon.

Although academic activity interferes with and distorts the process of canon formation, the importance of the role of critics cannot be denied. Metcalf downplays the intervention of critics, suggesting that they are not needed for the development of the canon and only hinder the development of a national literature. However, the canon is a construct which cannot grow naturally, and therefore requires critical assessment. Works of value may withstand the passage of time, but they need to be discussed in some way in order to gain and maintain their status. Critical activity, even if it is guided by a certain agenda, is a response to the text, showing critical recognition of something worthy of discussion existing within the work. As a result, and contrary to Metcalf’s claims, the role of critics cannot be completely dismissed from the process of canon formation.

Academic interests, literary value, and the natural process of canon formation are therefore closely interdependent. All of these factors intertwine to influence the status of a text. This is apparent in critical discussions of canonicity, as critics who emphasize the importance of a particular element also acknowledge the existence of other aspects. Gerson and Goldie admit to the concept of literary value, and Keith acknowledges that critical assessments are important. The different aspects of canon formation cannot be separated from each other and continuously affect each other. Academic interests lead to the examination of certain texts for particular reasons. However, critical study of a certain text will not be maintained over a period of time unless the text has literary value. The value of a text cannot be immediately determined and the passage of time is required to definitively ascertain a text’s position in the canon. The unease created by waiting for the value of a text to be determined over time causes critics to examine texts in an attempt to define their status. Despite this linear account, the factors involved in canon formation are not neatly separated and canon formation is not a simple linear process. Various factors are linked together in a complex relationship, creating a canon as intricate as the process

of formation itself. Metcalf's description of a literary tradition is a fitting description of the product of this process of canon formation:

A tradition is alive, various, densely populated, intricate. It is interconnected. It is like a river which accommodates within its general flow differing currents and eddies and whirlpools and backwaters. A tradition teaches and trains. It is like a family which is constantly expanding yet managing somehow to contain and sustain contradictory personalities and disparate aims and ambitions. (40-41)

The canon is an organic structure. It has a form, but is always changing. It has a general goal, yet contains contrasting intentions. The canon is tangible, but it is not fixed. In the future, it will be very much the same and very different.

How then do the specific cases of Ross and Buckler exemplify the process of canon formation? The critical reception of *The Mountain and the Valley* and *As For Me and My House* illustrates specific aspects of the development of the canon. Contemporary academic interests have affected the status of both books, as they have been approached from various critical stances. Since the time of their publication, both texts have been labelled as works with literary value. The two books have been widely available in Canada for nearly fifty years, a significant amount of time. Despite this length of time, the urgency to define a national literature has persisted, leading to a flurry of critical activity. Both novels have been subjected to the factors involved with canon formation and are still undergoing this process. Although the two novels show a remarkable number of similarities, Ross's text is currently viewed as a canonical novel and on the evidence of recent critical activity, Buckler's is no longer. Academics have recently been more interested in *As For Me and My House* than *The Mountain and the Valley*, creating a greater number of critical works on Ross's novel. This could mean that *As For Me and My House* has greater literary value and is therefore able to support a wider variety of approaches. The differences in the styles of the two books is also a factor in the amount of critical attention each has received. *As For Me and My House* is a problematic novel which is open to a wide range of inquiry because of its ambiguities and difficulties. *The Mountain and the Valley* is a much different novel and critics have simply not been as interested in *The Mountain and the Valley*, perhaps because of its themes or dense language. In an examination of the critical reception of each novel, there is not a single obvious reason for the difference in the status of the two. As the process of canon formation continues, a more precise answer will emerge. An

examination of the current status of the two texts is therefore a snapshot of a particular point in the development of Canadian literature and the status of either text may change or remain the same. Academic interests, critical trends, literary value, and the passage of time will continue to intertwine and will ultimately define the status of both *As For Me and My House* and *The Mountain and the Valley*.

CONCLUSION

Looking Forward

While this study has not intended to pinpoint the exact position of the two novels in the Canadian canon, it has highlighted the issues surrounding the status of both books. Bloom writes “All that we can do now is maintain some continuity with the aesthetic and not yield to the lie that what we oppose is adventure and new interpretations” and this pertains to further studies of Ross and Buckler, and Canadian literature in general (407). Critics must continue to involve literary value in the evaluation of literature and also acknowledge that new interpretations are essential to criticism. The various aspects of canon formation need to be recognized and examined as they operate individually, as well as part of a whole process. Considering this, what further lines of inquiry are open for future studies of *As For Me and My House* and *The Mountain and the Valley*? Will the novels continue to be as popular, and unpopular as they have been at different times?

The Mountain and the Valley has been approached from various critical stances and there are several ways that the novel could be explored in greater depth in future studies. Dvorak believes that Buckler deals extensively with many matters of interest in a postmodern world, such as language, time, memory, knowledge, truth, and perception, and she argues that postmodern interest in the novel could be further developed (232). The novel’s language has been examined extensively through structuralism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction, and perhaps critics could shift their attention to focus on the moments in the novel when the Canaan family refuses to use language, which alters the lives of the family members forever. Martha hurts Joseph by withholding words, and after his fall, David wounds Chris by choosing not to speak. David has the power to transform his community and his life through the use of language, but he never does. The novel is obsessed with the use of language, but the times that language is not used are also significant. Another possible approach to the novel is to examine it in ways that have only been briefly attempted. *The Mountain and the Valley* has not been the focus of major attention as a regional work, and this may be a possible avenue of inquiry. Queer readings of the text have been brief, so this may be another area that could be further expanded. There is also

potential for the novel to be examined through emerging critical methods, such as masculinity studies. Buckler's portrayal of a perceptive, disempowered, rural man following an unconventional path could be examined through this lens. *The Mountain and the Valley* could, and should, be approached in many ways in future studies.

As For Me and My House has been studied from a number of critical stances and has supported a diverse array of interpretations. The text has supported so many approaches that in some instances, such as with queer theory, criticism has turned into metacriticism. Critics focus more on what others have said about the text than the text itself. This may signal a decrease in interest in the work itself, implying that critical inquiry about *As For Me and My House* will gradually dwindle. If popular critical methods are not applied as frequently to the novel as they have been in the past, critics will re-evaluate the novel in terms of its literary value. Emphasis may shift back to the details of setting and history, as Morton Ross suggested. Another possibility is that criticism responding to other criticism will continue to grow. Dean critiques both the novel and its criticism for what she views as a backlash against feminism. Perhaps other feminist critics will respond to this, either in support of or to question her claims. Giltrow's linguistic analysis of the novel purposefully drew no conclusions, as an invitation to other critics to respond to her examination. *As For Me and My House* may not continue to be the focus of many future studies because it has been analyzed so thoroughly, leaving little room for new approaches. Critics are now more interested in criticism of the novel than the text itself, and it seems that this is the line of inquiry that will continue.

It is difficult to determine exactly how the two novels will be studied in the future and what the status of each book will be. The various elements of canon formation, academic interests, literary value, and the passage of time, have affected the position of each novel and will continue to work together to establish the on-going canonical status of each. At the present, it seems possible that critical interest in *As For Me and My House* will slowly decline and that attention to *The Mountain and the Valley* will gradually increase. Whether this will happen or not remains to be seen.

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