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Oedipus and Eve: The Novels of Hugh MacLennan

Hugh MacLennan, in the words of George Woodcock, is "an unashamedly didactic writer."¹ Throughout his career MacLennan has placed great emphasis on delineating Canadian settings and creating characters whose destinies in some way mirror the fate of their country. There is a critical consensus that MacLennan's "portrayal of Canadian life and the Canadian land" is the strongest feature of his work.² This critical approach—essentially a combination of thematic analysis and moral judgment—may yield a misleading picture of MacLennan's achievement as a writer of fiction. Too often MacLennan's novels are discussed as if they were simply a group of lectures on the Canadian identity. The truth is that MacLennan is a major Canadian novelist in spite of, rather than because of, his didacticism.

The most memorable scenes and the most haunting images in MacLennan's fiction have little or nothing to do with the author's attempt to forge the uncreated conscience of his race. Consider the world MacLennan creates in his six novels. Beneath a surface of decorous style and rational exposition, the novels revolve around an inner core of angry violence and frustrated sexual desire. Destructive violence is frequently in the foreground of the action: the Halifax explosion; the murder of Mollie MacNeil and Louis Camire; the murder of Jerome Martell's mother. Always, the politically motivated violence of two World Wars looms as a threatening shadow in the background. Consider too the fates of MacLennan's characters: children are made unhappy and insecure by parents who are either tyrannically overbearing or irresponsibly permissive; young men are frequently mutilated; lovers often impose a painful continence and even separation on themselves; women often die in childbirth or are murdered by a husband or lover; even the most liberated of MacLennan's

nan's young heroines eventually forego their independence and submit to gifted but headstrong and self-centred young males. The novels' minor characters are often grotesques or caricatures—MacLennan specializes in good-hearted, grizzled older men, kindly but ineffective older married couples, and domineering female relatives. This is not a world of sweetness and light. As Warren Tallman has eloquently insisted, MacLennan inadvertently celebrates the irrational night-side of human experience.³

The turbulent emotion of MacLennan's novels can usually be traced to a family quarrel. In fact, MacLennan's true subject is the individual in his family setting rather than the individual in his broader social and political context. Behind an ostensible concern with politics, society, and religion, MacLennan's novels pursue a single-minded scrutiny of the love-hate relationships which can fester so intensely within the family circle. The novels are built around struggles between parents and children, between husbands and wives. Even MacLennan's frequent pairs of young lovers are lovers only secondarily. First, they are family members and often their family roles come into conflict with their romantic attachments. These recurrent tensions originating within the family create the regularities of plot and character which have so often been noticed in MacLennan's fiction.

The best-known attempt to identify a recurrent narrative pattern running through MacLennan's fiction is George Woodcock's influential essay "A Nation's Odyssey: The Novels of Hugh MacLennan."⁴ In this essay and in his later monograph on MacLennan, Woodcock argued that "the great unifying myth of MacLennan's novels was the *Odyssey* translated into terms of modern life."⁵ Woodcock's argument has been, if anything, too influential. A number of critics and reviewers have uncovered ingenious parallels to the *Odyssey* in virtually all of MacLennan's novels. But the validity and the usefulness of their conclusions are often debatable. Does it really make sense to assert, as Douglas Spettigue does, that in *Each Man's Son* Ulysses is split "into three, as it were—a physical, an emotional and an intellectual protagonist"?⁶ Presumably these protagonists are Archie MacNeil, Louis Camire, and Dr. Ainslie. But only Archie embarks on an Odyssean journey, and Dr. Ainslie thinks of himself throughout the novel as a son rather than as a father. Moreover, when Archie returns, Louis Camire is slain like one of Penelope's suitors. Of *Return of the Sphinx* Spettigue can only say that "the heroic quest is over"⁷—virtually an admission that the pattern of the *Odyssey* fails to

apply. Even Woodcock concedes that in *Return of the Sphinx* "We are confronted in fact by quite another universal myth."⁸

In a suggestive study of MacLennan to which too little attention has been paid, Alec Lucas adroitly points out the unsuitability of the *Odyssey* as an analogue for MacLennan's fiction:

Ulysses was an old man bringing hopes of restoring the old order in a disordered society. Neil Macrae and the other wayfarers are young men bringing hopes of setting up a new order in a disordered society; MacLennan stood with youth on the ramparts of the generation gap until *Return of the Sphinx*, when he left his position to cross over to the middle-aged.⁹

Lucas effectively argues that the most appropriate classical parallel for MacLennan's habitual plots and themes is the story of Oedipus. Lucas lists a number of motifs from the Oedipus myth which are also recurrent elements in MacLennan's fiction:

heroes with physical defects; the return of allegedly dead men; the separation from the father; the search for a father during which the son, by growing up, unconsciously destroys the father image and, like Oedipus, in trying simultaneously to find the reason for a resultant uncertainty, discovers himself.¹⁰

To this list of parallels might be added: a childhood presided over by kindly foster-parents and sexual attraction to a member of one's own family, or to a maternal female.

The repeated occurrence in MacLennan's fiction of Oedipal motifs suggests that the novels are expressions of conflicts whose origins can be traced to the "oedipal" stage of personality development. The term "oedipus complex" is psychoanalytic shorthand for the fondness of the child for the parent of the opposite sex and jealousy towards the parent of the same sex. At a certain stage of physical and emotional growth, these feelings are necessarily present in every child. Ordinarily, the intense emotional ties to the parents underlying the oedipus complex are later transferred to persons outside the family, as the child matures and frees himself or herself from excessive dependence on the parents. But oedipal conflicts may continue into adult life when this process of maturation is incomplete. Such appears to be the case with many of MacLennan's fictional characters. Specifically, the central characters in MacLennan's novels appear to act out dream-like oedipal fantasies, in which the character's forbidden wishes are given expression under the guise of realistically portrayed action.

The myth of Oedipus is strongly male-centred: in Freudian thought it serves primarily as a model for discussing masculine psychology. In his fiction MacLennan also devotes a considerable amount of attention to women. Therefore, in order to complete a mythic paradigm for MacLennan's novels, we must also invoke a female-centred myth, the story of the expulsion of the parents of mankind from the Garden of Eden. The myths of Oedipus and Eve encapsulate very neatly the concepts of man and woman which have been transmitted down the centuries by Western tradition, in both its classical and Christian aspects. They also summarize, just as neatly, most of the concerns which are central to MacLennan's fiction.

Man and woman, enacting the roles of Oedipus and Eve—these are the warring polar opposites which energize MacLennan's novels. In fact, these two myths are based on tensions within similar family triangles consisting of father, son, and a woman. In both myths, the role of the woman is ambiguous, combining sexual attractiveness with maternal nurturing. Jocasta is clearly both mother and lover to Oedipus; and Eve combines the roles of mother and lover when she offers Adam forbidden nourishment: "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat." (Gen 2:12) In both myths, woman precipitates a conflict between father and son which results in the isolation of the younger generation.

Sexuality is therefore an integral part of both myths. However, the implications of dawning sexual knowledge are worked out more fully in the classical myth. The Oedipus story leads up to the revelation of a sexual relationship between mother and son. It is not simply violation of the incest taboo which shocks Oedipus, but also a sudden recognition of sexuality in the mother. With this knowledge comes an unavoidable awareness that the father's relationship to the mother was also sexual. That is, a significant aspect of the Oedipus story is the disclosure of parental sexuality. This discovery comes upon Oedipus with all the impact of an actual Freudian primal scene. Since MacLennan's novels abound in oedipal conflicts, it is not surprising that they contain a number of primal scenes, presented both literally and in symbolic form.

The stories of Oedipus and Eve, like MacLennan's fiction, present mankind as fundamentally homeless, a wanderer in a hostile universe. The myths explain this condition as resulting from a tragic fall from innocence into guilty knowledge. Moreover, both stories present the fall away from a desirable condition as a separation from parental figures. In the Oedipus myth, a son is cast out into the

world, after the deaths of both father and mother. In the Biblical narrative, a stern father figure exiles children of both sexes. Thus, both stories deal, as MacLennan's fiction so often does, with the destruction of a family unit.

The two myths have similar continuations, in that after the children are cut off from parental supervision they must learn to view their independence as an opportunity to attain maturity. For too long, albeit unknowingly, Oedipus has clung to a sheltered position beside his mother; he must recognize that true maturity does not consist of taking the father's place, but of making his own place in the world. Adam and Eve must recognize that they have not been deserted by the parental figure, but urged along the road to true maturity. The challenge presented by the myths—a challenge to emerge from the shadow of the parents and live one's own life—is also the challenge which faces the younger generation in MacLennan's novels.

All of MacLennan's novels exhibit oedipal motifs, but in three novels the use of oedipal patterns is particularly clear-cut. Not by accident, these novels are also the three most formally satisfying of MacLennan's books: *Barometer Rising*, *Each Man's Son*, and *The Watch that Ends the Night*. The ensuing discussion will touch on all six of MacLennan's novels, but these three works will receive the most extensive treatment. When conventional oedipal conflicts are uppermost in MacLennan's fiction, the result is a plot which acts out the archetypal oedipal hostility to the father and attraction to the mother. A clear instance of this pattern is contained in *Barometer Rising*. If oedipal conflicts have another outcome—if loyalty to the father wins out over attraction to the mother—the result is a plot which acts out hostility to the mother and admiration for the father. The clearest example of this outcome occurs in *Each Man's Son*. Sometimes oedipal conflicts may become so intense that they grow intolerable. Then the child may seek to escape from his uncomfortable plight by rejecting both parents in favour of imaginary substitute parents. The foster parents are carefully assigned personality traits which prevent them from arousing oedipal anxieties in the child. Such a scenario appears to be acted out in the account of Jerome Martell's childhood in *The Watch that Ends the Night*. Moreover, the triangle of George Stewart, Jerome, and Catherine has strong oedipal overtones. As a result of combining several psychological motifs, *The Watch that Ends the Night* is MacLennan's most complex exploration of the emotional tangles which beset the human species.

At first glance, the structure of *Barometer Rising* might seem closer to a fairy tale or romance than to the tragic Oedipus myth. If we untangle the chronology of Neil Macrae's life story, we obtain the following sequence of events: the death of a boy's natural parents is followed by the boy's grudging adoption into the home of an unfriendly uncle; as the boy grows up he develops a strong attachment to his female cousin, the uncle's daughter; when the boy reaches manhood the uncle prohibits any affection between the boy and the girl; the young couple violate the uncle's prohibition in the most direct manner possible—they make love; the girl conceives a child, whose birth she conceals from her father; nonetheless, the uncle's hostility towards the boy continues; at the first opportunity the uncle assigns his nephew an impossible task, and plans to punish him when he fails; at this point chance events intervene, apparently causing the death of the nephew and leaving the uncle in possession of his daughter; in reality, however, the nephew survives with the aid of a "magical" helper (the doctor who saves Neil's sanity); the nephew eventually returns and, with the aid of a wise older adviser (Angus Murray), confronts the wicked uncle; the uncle thereupon dies amid sordid circumstances; to complete the happy outcome, the young couple are reunited and their child is restored to them. Viewed in this way, *Barometer Rising* seems to have a fairy tale plot: a young man wrests possession of a beautiful girl away from her overly protective father. Even in this fairy tale, however, there are dark emotions at work. Colonel Wain mistreats Neil, and eventually wishes to see him dishonoured and even killed. For his part, Neil has good reason to wish Colonel Wain dead and the Colonel does indeed conveniently turn up among the casualties of the Halifax explosion.

The preceding analysis by no means exhausts the emotional conflicts present in *Barometer Rising*, whose apparent fairy tale plot actually conceals a version of the Oedipus myth. Like Oedipus, Neil Macrae is a wanderer, wounded both physically and mentally. Neil returns home to confront Colonel Wain, in whose home he was raised. Therefore, Neil's story involves a displaced father-son conflict, in which the fearful traits of the father have been transferred to the foster father. The plot of *Barometer Rising* splits Neil's father into two figures. The biological father is portrayed as admirable, but he dies offstage, so that Neil is raised in the house of a repellent stepfather, onto whom all the hostility felt towards the real father can be projected. MacLennan's plot therefore disguises a father-son conflict as a conventional struggle between hero and villain. Oedipus is literally rejected by his own father; Neil's father simply dies of

unspecified causes. Oedipus literally kills his own father; and shortly after Neil's return to Halifax, the man who stood in the place of a father to him is killed. Neil is not the literal agent of Colonel Wain's death; but the coincidence of the explosion, the death of the Colonel, and Neil's return to self-confidence is too neat to be passed off as mere chance. MacLennan is dreaming on Neil's behalf; the plot says more about Neil than MacLennan consciously knew.

Colonel Wain's death allows Neil to be reunited with Penny Wain. Penny is certainly not Neil's mother, nor is she of the mother's generation. But Penny is Neil's cousin, and she and Neil have been raised as brother and sister. As in the story of Oedipus, the romance is kept within the family. The displacement of love-object from mother to sister alters the romance to a conventional alliance between hero and heroine, so that Neil can be permitted to keep Penny. The incest motif is complicated by Dr. Angus Murray's fondness for Penny. Murray is of the Colonel's generation, not Neil's. At one point, the Colonel even suggests that he will condone Murray's romance with Penny if Murray cooperates in eliminating Neil. Therefore, the incipient love affair between Angus Murray and Penny Wain has strong overtones of a father-daughter relationship, and the rivalry between Angus Murray and Neil Macrae is potentially a father-son romantic conflict. Perhaps the oedipal tensions underlying the romance between Angus Murray and Penny Wain help to explain why MacLennan cannot allow the romance to continue, though it brings together the two most attractive characters in the novel. Instead, the long-lost Neil Macrae is rather arbitrarily reinstated as Penny's lover, despite an egotism that makes him a dubious candidate for success as a husband and father.

In arranging the conclusion of *Barometer Rising*, MacLennan has actually performed a quite astonishing feat: he has transformed the Oedipus story from a tragedy into a romance. But he has performed this legerdemain only by truncating the myth, by repressing the tragic dénouement. Perhaps part of the unsatisfactory tone of the conclusion of the novel comes about because the action never forces the characters to face up to the immature basis of their attraction to one another. Neil and Penny never grow up, as far as the reader knows. If there is a catharsis of oedipal tensions in the novel, it takes place symbolically, in the form of the explosion which devastates so great a part of the city and also returns Neil to his own identity and to active participation in life.

The explosion deserves careful attention. It is usual to praise MacLennan's documentary realism in recreating this piece of Nova Scotia local history. However, in the novel's symbolic economy the ex-

plosion has additional meanings. At a literal level, the explosion reinforces one of the book's dominant themes: the subordination of human affairs to random shifts in the external world. At the level of literary symbolism, the explosion is an image for the sudden accession of self-knowledge which violently catapults both Neil Macrae and Canada out of their somnolent states into full wakefulness. At the level of psychological symbolism, the explosion's violence is an image of the potentially overwhelming power of sexual desire to overcome human reason and induce destructively uncontrolled behaviour.

The last assertion may need some explanation. Among the victims of the explosion are Colonel Wain and his mistress, Evelyn, who, incidentally, is about the same age as the Colonel's daughter. Is it simply coincidence that Neil Macrae should be the one to find the two bodies, in circumstances which clearly indicate the sexual nature of their relationship? First Neil sees "a girl's body, entirely naked and exposed." Then:

As he was trying to find a foothold to climb back, a plank broke loose and the man's face was revealed. Neil stood staring as the beam of the torch fell on the frozen, familiar features of Geoffrey Wain. His fingers slipped from the switch and he was in darkness, his knees shaking and the tired blood throbbing through his temples.¹¹

Consider what, in symbolic terms, this scene implies. Neil has discovered his step-father's sexuality at the same time as he discovers the Colonel's death. The death seems to come as a punishment for the sexuality of the father figure. Moreover, the Colonel's sexuality has an unpleasant aspect, namely the latent sadism of his relationship to Evelyn:

Whenever he made love to her he seemed to be studying the effect he produced, and she knew that the basis of his desire lay in the fact that her perfectly formed body was as diminutive as a miniature, and that it was easy to hurt, and that he could goad it into the convulsions of a pleasure she could rarely control.¹²

A child is also "as diminutive as a miniature" and "easy to hurt". The portrayal of Colonel Wain shows that the novel's attitude to sexuality is highly ambivalent. The explosion clears the way for the reunion of Neil and Penny, but the explosion also functions as an extended primal scene, a magnified image of the child's fearful misunderstanding of the nature of parental sexuality.

Oedipal motifs also appear in MacLennan's next two novels, which both contain a displaced oedipal romance similar to the brother-sister

attraction between Neil Macrae and Penny Wain. In *Two Solitudes* the eventual lovers Paul Tallard and Heather Methuen play together as children during Heather's visit to her grandfather's farm. In *The Precipice* Bruce Fraser, who has known Lucy Cameron from childhood—in fact, she is the proverbial girl next door—is presented as the man in Grenville who could have perceived the femininity dormant in Lucy and forestalled her troubled marriage to Stephen Lassiter. There is also a primal scene in *Two Solitudes*. Marius Tallard's extreme antagonism to his father can be traced in large part to his knowledge that Athanase made love to Kathleen on the night of the death of Marius' mother. Thus, a latent father-son rivalry for the youthful Kathleen helps to precipitate the tragic movement of the first half of the novel.

In *Two Solitudes* and *The Precipice* the conflict between parents and children grows increasingly explicit. Paul Tallard concludes *Two Solitudes* by defying both Heather's mother, the neurotically possessive Janet Methuen, and Huntly McQueen, who at Janet's request tries to assume the role of fatherly protector towards Heather. From the start *The Precipice* is dominated by parent-child conflicts, for the behaviour of the main characters is traced to formative influences exerted by their fathers. John Knox Cameron imposed his dour Calvinism on his daughters, and Abel Lassiter inculcated into his son the secularized puritanism brought to perfection by Benjamin Franklin. Thus MacLennan's novel, which starts as an almost allegorical confrontation of "Canadian" and "American" values, becomes a study of the persistence of parental influences. Another of MacLennan's favorite themes, the effect of the puritan or Calvinist heritage, also achieves prominence in *The Precipice*. In fact, parental and religious influences can hardly be distinguished. The Calvinist universe is dominated by a punitive, authoritarian God, just as the Cameron and Lassiter families are dominated by strict patriarchal fathers. The family situation which MacLennan investigates results from an elevation of the patriarchal father into a divinity. In the end, the intended political allegory becomes, by way of an analysis of the "puritan" ethos, yet another study of MacLennan's recurrent subject, the patriarchal family and its attendant conflicts.

In MacLennan's fourth novel, *Each Man's Son*, the uneasiness towards women, present as a secondary theme in all MacLennan's fiction, becomes the dominant concern. Just as MacLennan's males are beset by oedipal conflicts, MacLennan's women display characteristics associated with the role of Eve in the story of the expulsion from the Garden. The Biblical story applies with special

vehemence to women, who are assigned the greater share of blame for the Fall, and bear the more severe punishment: "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception: in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." (Gen 2:16) The story of Eve has traditionally served to rationalize the subordinate role of women in Western culture. Women are conceived of as weaker, less capable of rational thought, and therefore more easily tempted. Above all, women's procreative function makes her suspect. With the story of the Fall, woman becomes the temptress, the inciter to a carnal desire which is sinful except within narrowly defined boundaries and is never to be enjoyed for its own sake. The uneasy attitude towards women displayed in *Each Man's Son* appears to arise from this anti-female aspect of the Christian tradition and to be an integral part of the Calvinism which plays so large a part in the novel.

Specifically, *Each Man's Son* explores the uneasy relationship between Dr. Ainslie and his wife, focusing especially on the unreasonable guilt induced in the doctor by the sexual attraction he feels for his wife: "There was Margaret—he felt before her, guilty in his soul. Why again? Merely because, when he had married her, he had been so swayed by sexual desire?"¹³ The novel also hints at an oedipal attraction between Dr. Ainslie and Mollie MacNeil: "Then it was not Mollie's eyes he was looking into; they were the eyes of his own mother. Mollie and his mother became confused and he was confused with Alan."¹⁴ But eventually Dr. Ainslie fights down all awareness of his sexual desires. As a result, the book acts out a double denial of oedipal desires: first, a denial of oedipal attraction to the mother and second, a denial of any rivalry with the father.

Dr. Ainslie feels guilty because his self-absorbed pursuit of his own career has led him to postpone having the children his wife Margaret desired. Unexpectedly, an operation—performed by Dr. Ainslie himself—rendered Margaret unable to have children. Although Margaret is firmly reassured that the operation was necessary in order to save her life by old Dr. Dougald MacKenzie, she is actually quite right to question her husband's motives. Symbolically Ainslie has deliberately denied Margaret the fulfillment she so much desires; he has in effect made destructive love to her with his scalpel. Dr. Ainslie's uneasiness is intensified by his fear of his own sexual feelings. Sex threatens a loss of self-control, a destruction of the hard-won image of self-sufficiency he has created for himself, in an attempt at once to defy and please his stern and intimidating father. Dr. Ainslie as a child absorbed his father's derogatory attitude to women.

Speaking to Dougald MacKenzie of his mother, Dr. Ainslie says: "My father was always afraid I'd be like her. He warned me often enough, heaven knows. I'm afraid she was a weak character."¹⁵ For Dr. Ainslie now to admit his need for a woman would make him seem weak to himself. Dr. Ainslie resents his sexual need for Margaret, and even more fundamentally he resents what that sexual need symbolizes: his own unacknowledged need to love and be loved, his need for other people—in short, the "feminine" aspects of his own nature.

Dr. Ainslie's emotions cannot stay repressed forever. When they appear, they take the form of a sudden fondness for the son of the absent Archie MacNeil. Dr. Ainslie's longing for young Alan reaches a crisis when he performs an appendectomy on the boy. Despite his skill as a surgeon, the operation induces great mental stress in the doctor:

When he was in the hall the strange feeling of being about to perform his first operation settled upon him again. He looked at his hands and saw they were trembling. He stood still and breathed deeply several times, leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Slowly he brought his nerves under control, but when he looked at his hands they were still tighter than they ought to be.¹⁶

After the operation he flees, first to the sea-side and then to the home of Dougald MacKenzie, a kindly and admired father figure. Ainslie's extreme reaction to such a simple operation can be accounted for only by considering his emotional situation. He had once inflicted sterility on his wife by performing an operation; now by saving Alan through another operation he is symbolically undoing his previous action. Alan's operation is, for Dr. Ainslie, a birth scene.

We were told that after his confrontation with Mollie Dr. Ainslie accepts the apparent fact that Alan will be leaving with his mother. Yet events suggest a quite different emotional state in Dr. Ainslie. Mollie is murdered, Archie dies, and Dr. Ainslie then inherits the orphan boy. The plot of the novel acts out with brutal explicitness Dr. Ainslie's desire to take Alan away from Mollie. Mollie and Louis Camire, both of whom opposed the doctor, are now dead. The perpetrator of this carnage, Archie MacNeil, is the barely disguised alter ego of the doctor. Both Archie and Dr. Ainslie have rebelled against their constricting, impoverished backgrounds. Both have refused to submit to imprisoning social forces and have sought alternate ways of life. Archie channels into his fighting the violent rebellion against authority which Dr. Ainslie's strict self-control only barely holds in check.

The return of Archie as the incarnation of Dr. Ainslie's murderous

impulses is actually foreshadowed in a scene to which Warren Tallman draws attention. When Ainslie flees to the dock after he has operated on Alan, he trips over a drunken miner, the notorious brawler Red Willie MacIsaac. Red Willie is one of those exiled Highlanders who, as Tallman says, when "doomed to wear their vitality away in the dreary Cape Breton mines, rebel like the profound children they are by recourse to the only political action of which they are capable, their endless evening brawls." These same violent impulses are present in Dr. Ainslie, whose veneer of self-control is used "to hold these impulses in check." Of the moment when Dr. Ainslie trips over Red Willie, who then rises over the fallen doctor like a summoned genie, Tallman writes:

When the rhythms of Ainslie's mind and body become separated and he trips and becomes mingled with Red Willie there is reason to believe that "this living thing . . . beside him" is simply the self behind the mask, the vital, violent being held in check by the civilized surface.¹⁷

As Tallman astutely points out, Red Willie is at this moment drunkenly mourning Archie's defeat in a boxing match, and in his first words to Dr. Ainslie he speaks as though with Archie's voice: "There wass dirty tricks in the States last Friday night, and by Cheesus, I am going to kick them back up your ass."¹⁸

As *Each Man's Son* ends, Dr. Ainslie has achieved a unique masculine fantasy: he has acquired a son without implicating himself sexually with his wife. To state the doctor's fantasy in undisguised form, he has cast himself as God the Father and reenacted the creation of Adam. This fantasy is not present in Dr. Ainslie's own consciousness, but it is conveyed by the events of the novel. Thus, *Each Man's Son* ends ambiguously. The explicit message and the implicit meaning of the action seem to be at odds. Dr. Ainslie is told by Dougald MacKenzie: "You would do well to honour your father less and your mother more. She was a very loving woman."¹⁹ Ostensibly, Dr. Ainslie learns this lesson. However, the plot of the novel acts out a violent antagonism towards women, which is consistent with the Biblical impulse to take revenge on Eve. Nor is Dr. Ainslie's supposed love for Alan at the end of the novel entirely convincing. The doctor seems to adopt Alan in order to create an extension of his own personality, not to further Alan's welfare in a purely altruistic manner. The sterile Margaret, the murdered Mollie, and Dr. Ainslie's own self-starved mother mutely contradict the notion that Dr. Ainslie has attained emotional maturity.

Each Man's Son presents the consequences of a childhood

dominated by a demanding father who looks down upon women. MacLennan's next novel contains a parallel study of the effects of growing up under the control of an unloving, man-hating mother. The inset narrative at the centre of *The Watch that Ends the Night* recounts the childhood of Jerome Martell in a New Brunswick lumber camp. Jerome's mother "hated men as a group and despised them, too. 'They're no good,' she used to say to me I don't know how many times. 'All they want is one thing. That and drink is all they want. And they're all the same.'" ²⁰ Nevertheless, it happened that "Cyclically, this man-hating female required a man, and when she wanted one she took him." ²¹ The sex life of Jerome's mother rings a further variation on MacLennan's favorite oedipal triangle. Jerome habitually sleeps with his mother, except for the occasional nights when she invites a strange man into her bed:

"I'd wake up with her carrying me out of the bedroom in her arms. She used to put me down on a palliasse she kept beside the stove in the kitchen and she left me there under a blanket with the dog. Sometimes when it was over and the man went away she'd take me back to bed with her, and when that happened I'd lie awake all night." ²²

The "Engineer," his mother's guest on the fateful night of the murder, shows a sullen exterior to the world. But inside this withdrawn, unfriendly man was a longing for human companionship:

The Engineer he had feared so much began talking in a low, earnest stream of conversation, talking about himself, and how lonely he was and how wretched was his life, and how different everything would be if she would go away with him. Jerome could only partly hear his words, and hardly any of them could he remember, but he knew that of all the lonely men in the camp this was the loneliest of all, and he yearned for some gentleness to come into his mother's voice in place of the withholding silence or the sneer he was afraid would come if the Engineer continued to talk like this. He wanted the Engineer to break through his mother's refusal to some kindness inside, some safe kindness inside. ²³

In other words, at this moment the Engineer's feelings are very much a projection of Jerome's own loneliness and longing for affection from his mother. Thus, when Jerome's mother mocks the Engineer, Jerome attacks her in spirit just as surely as the Engineer attacks her physically:

The man began to curse the woman in a stream of obscenity using every word Jerome had ever heard the men apply to the women they called

whores. There was a short struggle, the pant of his mother's breath, then a loud smack as she hit him across the face and Jerome thought: Please, please don't let her do that again!

Jerome's flight from the Engineer and his escape down the river are therefore as much flight from himself—flight from his own sense of guilt—as flight from an actual physical danger. The episode has acted out in terrifyingly literal form a child's worst imaginings about the nature of the sexual act. As a result of this dramatic initiation into knowledge of sexuality, Jerome has prematurely but irrevocably embarked on the river of life.

The couple who adopt Jerome are the very antithesis of either Dr. Ainslie's father or Jerome's mother:

He was a thin little man with the kindest, funniest face Jerome had ever seen, with crowsfeet smiling out from the corners of his blue eyes and a gray goat's tuft on a pointed chin. His suit was of pale gray serge, his waistcoat a shiny black bib and his collar white, round and without a tie. On his head was a soft black hat and his long hands were thin, graceful and astonishingly white and clean. Beside him was a woman as short as himself, but plump, with wide apple cheeks, a smiling mouth, hair flecked with gray and a straw hat square on the top of her head.²⁴

Reverend Martell and his wife are the kind of non-threatening, kindly, protective parents an insecure boy would wish for, if he had the chance to make his own choice. In fact, in terms of the novel's imaginative dynamics, Jerome does choose these parents for himself. At the time he requires parental care, the Martells appear—not providentially, but called forth by Jerome's need.

Jerome's childhood is only part of MacLennan's novel. Another story with strong oedipal overtones provides the larger action of *The Watch that Ends the Night*. This is the triangular relationship of George Stewart, Jerome Martell, and Catherine Carey. George has always looked upon Catherine as though she were older and more experienced than himself, although they are virtually the same age. At one point he tells us: "in a motherly way she professed to feel responsibility for my future."²⁵ George also remarks: "I had come to think of Jerome as a protector, almost as a substitute for the father I never had except in the biological sense."²⁶

George's own parents were weak almost to the point of non-existence. The strongest adult figure in his early life was his Aunt Agnes. George grew up in a house where "my parents turn into a pair of frightened children at the arrival of an aunt."²⁷ George's aunt

bullied his parents and inculcated into George a sense of his own inadequacy:

"George," said Aunt Agnes after a time, "I suppose you are aware that the time has come for you to think seriously about your future?"

"I have been thinking about it."

"Indeed? What do you intend to be?"

"I don't know yet, Aunt Agnes."

"What do you think you could be successful at?"

"Well I guess there'll be quite a few things."

"There will *not* be quite a few things, George. You would be useless in business. Business does not attract you, does it?"

"No."

"Well? I can't see you as a lawyer. You lack the kind of intelligence and drive for the law, and you would quickly be bored by it. There is only one profession where I can imagine you even earning a living, and that's schoolmastering. In the *right* kind of school, of course."²⁸

George is vulnerable to this kind of intimidation because his father has not provided a strong masculine role model; indeed, George's father had remained a thorough child in thought and deed. No wonder George accepts Jerome as a substitute father and Catherine as a substitute mother. Those places in George's life have never been properly occupied.

George's eventual marriage to Catherine is the fulfillment of an oedipal dream. Yet in a sense George has guarded himself from the responsibility of having too close a sexual connection with a mother figure by choosing a wife with Catherine's disability. Moreover, George's attitude to Catherine is strangely exalted. He occasionally affirms the existence of his sexual desires, but we are not quite sure we believe him. George is not Jerome, to say "yes" to life at whatever risk to Catherine's weakened heart. Actually, George diagnoses his own case quite well:

All of us are children at heart. What gives the child the desire to grow and acquit himself well is his hope of winning his parents' love. Without this hope, why struggle? Why care?

But the child becomes middle-aged, and who then can fulfill the father's role? Reason can't do it for long. Ability and success are makeshifts. A man may install his wife and children in the role of his god, as the sanctions for his existence and his reason for being. A woman, more naturally integrated into the scheme of nature than modern men seem to be, may find no difficulty at all. But a man, apparently, needs a god. So in the Thirties we tried to make gods out of political systems, and worship and serve them.

But the trouble is that none of these substitutes abides. The time

comes when the wife dies, and then what is there? The time comes when children go away. The time comes when the state is seen for what it is—an organization of job-holders.

Then, though we may deny it, comes the Great Fear.²⁹

George's solution to the problem he describes has been to install Catherine as his god; but he casts her not as wife but as a divine mother. Catherine is not Eve, to be punished for her sexuality; she is the Virgin Mary, to be venerated for her purity.

The characters in *The Watch that Ends the Night* are trying to go beyond the impasse reached by Dr. Ainslie in *Each Man's Son*. Dr. Ainslie's life is blighted by his acceptance of his father's attitudes. In contrast, Jerome's life can be understood as an attempt to prove his mother wrong about the male sex. Catherine tells George "that Jerome's abnormal fear of displeasing a woman came from his mother."³⁰ George accepts a mother figure, whereas Dr. Ainslie rejected his own mother. There is a possible parallel between the self-punishing way Catherine clings to life through her illnesses and the self-sacrifice which Dr. Ainslie's mother underwent in order to keep her son healthy. But Catherine's suffering does not go unnoticed. Moreover, Jerome tells George that Catherine's suffering is, in part at least, meant to help him: "She must live a little longer in order for you to find out who you are."³¹ Dr. Ainslie internalized a demanding father; George is trying to internalize a giving mother. Surely George's way holds more promise of happiness. In the final transformation which Jerome undergoes, we see that George may have found a way of coming to terms with the strong father figure of Jerome Martell:

His whole face seemed transparent. And in his eyes was an expression new and uncanny. They seemed to have seen everything, known everything, suffered everything. But what came out of them into me was light, not darkness. A cool, sweet light came out of them into me then. It entered me, and the murderous feeling went out, and I was not afraid any more.³²

Jerome has allayed the "Great Fear" in George—fear of death, fear of the dark, fear of one's own insignificance. The father figure is no longer perceived as a stern and punitive Calvinist God, but as a feminized and forgiving Christ-like figure.

The Watch that Ends the Night seems to bring MacLennan's recurrent conflicts to a resting place. Yet oedipal patterns again dominate MacLennan's last novel, *Return of the Sphinx*. Several children in the

book have witnessed their parents' deaths, just as Oedipus saw first the death of father and later of his mother. Alan Ainslie saw his father murder his mother and her lover; Bulstrode saw his parents killed in an avalanche; and Marielle saw the ship in which her father was a gunnery officer blown apart. The novel is pervaded by parent-child conflicts, especially by the antagonism of Daniel Ainslie towards his father. The sexual aspect of the Oedipus myth is also echoed in the novel. Constance, Alan's wife, was seduced by her father's favorite relative at the age of fourteen; Chantal Ainslie sleeps with Gabriel Fleury, a man eighteen years her senior and of her father's generation. In addition, Daniel's hostility to his father takes on a clearly sexual note when, in a neat reversal of the usual structure of a primal scene, Daniel is discovered by Alan in the paternal bedroom where he has taken the maternal Marielle in order to sleep with her.

Yet *Return of the Sphinx* may introduce a new element into MacLennan's treatment of oedipal conflicts. Consider the scene in which Alan Ainslie discovers his son Daniel together with Marielle in Ainslie's own bedroom:

Something snapped in Ainslie and he leaped at Daniel with his fists clenched and raised. Daniel, hands at his sides, eyes horrified, awaited him motionless. Ainslie's fist moved and in his brain was a flash of light and a silent voice shouting, "Not you too—no, not you—for God's sake not you too!" and his fist stopped in mid-air as the muscles refused to drive it. His hands loosened and fell to his sides like weights. His shoulders sagged and he turned to go back to his study.

"Get out," he said quietly, "both of you."³³

The incipient violence of this scene links it to the crucial scenes of violence in MacLennan's two preceding novels: Archie's murder of Mollie and Louis Camire, and the murder of Jerome's mother by the Engineer. Moreover, all three scenes have an explicit sexual dimension. In fact, there are three versions of the Freudian primal scene. *Return of the Sphinx* inverts the usual pattern, for a father discovers his son in a compromising position with a maternal female. Nonetheless, the initial impact on Alan Ainslie is as great as the impact of an orthodox primal scene. Yet Ainslie checks himself in time; he does not reenact his father's violent response to a parallel situation. Moreover, Ainslie subsequently sanctions Chantal's marriage to Gabriel Fleury. In effect, he is admitting that oedipal wishes are inevitable and should be no source of guilt.

George Stewart and Alan Ainslie both claim to have resolved for

themselves one of the most insistent problems treated in MacLennan's fiction: the need to feel there is a meaningful pattern behind the random appearance of events. Artistically, *The Watch that Ends the Night* presents this resolution more convincingly, for in that novel theme and technique are more successfully blended than in any other book by MacLennan. But perhaps the story of Alan Ainslie does carry the quest for self-assurance one step beyond the stopping place reached by George Stewart. Alan Ainslie remains malleable into middle age and remains ready to confront new and potentially disturbing experiences. He remains engaged with the world around him, the world of political events and other people, rather than taking refuge in the quietism which consoles George Stewart.

Taken in their entirety, MacLennan's novels depict a slow and difficult growth to maturity. The first three novels adopt the younger generation's point of view and present a youthful rebellion against parental figures. *Barometer Rising*, *Two Solitudes*, and *The Precipice* all end with the representatives of the younger generation poised on the edge of a new and independent life. In MacLennan's last three novels, children are followed into the middle years of their lives. As a result, the emphasis is no longer on rebellion but on adjustment to one's own family responsibilities. *Each Man's Son* shows a son grown into middle age, who realizes the futility of his life-long inner quarrel with the ghost of his father. Although readers may question Dr. Ainslie's eventual success, there is no doubt the doctor does try to move closer to his wife and to accept his new role as father to Alan. MacLennan's last two novels focus on characters who value their role as father very highly, yet who as the novels conclude willingly launch daughters into marriage. For Sally Martell and Chantal Ainslie, families are not imprisoning but supportive.

Accompanying the change in the portrayal of oedipal conflicts is a change in MacLennan's handling of his recurrent primal scenes. He moves from the indirect symbolism of the Halifax explosion to the literal violence of both Archie's attack on Mollie and Louis Camire and the Engineer's murder of Jerome's mother. But in *Return of the Sphinx* MacLennan is able to present a primal scene which does not develop into violence. Over the course of his career, then, MacLennan has become increasingly able to acknowledge openly the nature of the tensions which shape the plots of his novels. Finally, he has been able to present in Alan Ainslie a character who confronts the temptation to oedipally motivated violence and rejects it. *The Watch that Ends the Night* may be a better novel than *Return of the Sphinx*. But Alan

Ainslie is probably a more mature individual than that perpetual child, George Stewart.

NOTES

1. George Woodcock, *Hugh MacLennan* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1969), p. 2.
2. Woodcock, *Hugh MacLennan*, p. 118.
3. Warren Tallman. "Wolf in the Snow," Part One, *Canadian Literature* 5 (Summer, 1960), 7-20.
4. "A Nation's Odyssey: The Novels of Hugh MacLennan", *Canadian Literature* 10 (Autumn, 1961), 7-18.
5. Woodcock, *Hugh MacLennan*, p. 52.
6. Douglas Spettigue, "Beauty and the Beast," in Paul Goetsch, ed., *Hugh MacLennan* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1973), p. 158.
7. Spettigue, in Goetsch, p. 159.
8. Woodcock, *Hugh MacLennan*, p. 115.
9. Alec Lucas, *Hugh MacLennan* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), p. 47.
10. Lucas, pp. 47-48.
11. *Barometer Rising* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969), p. 202.
12. *Barometer Rising*, p. 68.
13. *Each Man's Son* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1972), p. 64.
14. *Each Man's Son*, p. 194.
15. *Each Man's Son*, p. 192.
16. *Each Man's Son*, p. 184.
17. Tallman, "Wolf in the Snow," pp. 19-20.
18. *Each Man's Son*, p. 189.
19. *Each Man's Son*, p. 194.
20. *The Watch that Ends the Night* (Toronto: New American Library of Canada, 1968), p. 163.
21. *Watch*, p. 164.
22. *Watch*, p. 164.
23. *Watch*, p. 167.
24. *Watch*, p. 168.
25. *Watch*, pp. 188-89.
26. *Watch*, p. 140.
27. *Watch*, p. 67.
28. *Watch*, pp. 69-70.
29. *Watch*, pp. 319-20.
30. *Watch*, p. 163.
31. *Watch*, p. 341.
32. *Watch*, p. 338.
33. *Return of the Sphinx* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 291-92.