



Narrative Technique in Sinclair Ross's as for Me and My House

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ABSTRACT

There are some very good reasons why the novel has come to be so important to the Canadian tradition. If we approach the novel as a poem, through its imagery, or as a model for the Canadian identity, we are likely to find it a very important work indeed. The significance of Sinclair Ross's first novel, As For Me and My House (1941), to the study of Canadian literature in English has frequently been observed. As For Me and My House remains a profoundly puzzling book. The puzzlement that it provokes has sometimes been taken as a source of its power. And yet we do the novel and the study of Canadian literature itself a disservice if we call it a great work.

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The significance of Sinclair Ross's first novel, *As For Me and My House* (1941), to the study of Canadian literature in English has frequently been observed. Sandra Djwa, for instance, says, "I fully agree with those critics who suggest that *As For Me and My House* is in the mainstream of the English Canadian novel in nature, ethos and hero, Ross had captured all of these qualities which we attempt to invoke when we want to talk about Canadian writing." For John Moss, the novel is "a haunting orchestration of so many of the themes and image and behavioral patterns that are prevalent in our fiction as to seem uncannily prescient of the Canadian experience." Both Margaret Atwood and D. G. Jones, who approach the study of Canadian literature through patterns of themes and images, likewise find the novel central to many of their concerns. In fact, as Morton Ross has recently remarked, the novel's reputation has risen remarkably since 1957, when Roy Daniells wrote an Introduction to the New Canadian Library reprint. Daniells saw it as important, but flawed in its dependence on repetitive detail. Recent critics have praised it more highly; from Donald Stephens' cautious evaluation as "perhaps the best Canadian novel," we move to Wilfred Cude's daring appraisal as "a Canadian work so finely structured that it invites comparison with fiction in the first rank of English literature." As Morton Ross points out, this rise in reputation has been accompanied by a series of attacks on Mrs. Bentley, both as a character and as an unreliable narrator.

There are some very good reasons why the novel has come to be so important to the Canadian tradition. It is a study of the failed artistic imagination, and of an eroding puritanism; it is also, as D. G. Jones perceives, a good example of Frye's concept of the garrison mentality, in its exploration of the peculiarities of the Canadian experience of nature and its relation to civilization. It is, then, a powerfully mythical novel in which many of the characteristic themes and attitudes of Canadian literature are sharply focused. Also, the patterns of imagery through which much of the novel's meaning is conveyed are densely and carefully worked, as David Stouck has noted. If we approach the novel as a poem, through its imagery, or as a model for the Canadian identity, we are likely to find it a very important work indeed. And as a proto-feminist study of what happens to a woman who surrenders her identity to a man's creativity, it strikes a particularly responsive chord at the present time.

Yet *As For Me and My House* remains a profoundly puzzling book. The puzzlement that it provokes has sometimes been

taken as a source of its power; W. H. New, for example, suggests that the confusing effect of the end of the novel is the result of careful control by Ross, who desires throughout an effect of ambivalence. He acknowledges, however, that "in presenting and exploring a single point of view, *As For Me and My House* runs the danger of seeming shallow, of allowing no aesthetic distance from which we can respond to the narrator as well as participate in her verbal reactions to the world." The source of the ambiguity, then, is identified as the narrative technique. Stephens, who praises the novel highly, nevertheless acknowledges that Mrs. Bentley "does not reveal enough to the reader for him to deduce anything other than what she wishes him to deduce" (Stephens, p. 21). Related to the problem of Mrs. Bentley as narrator is the question of the realism of the novel; if we read the novel as a realistic, regional rendering of a particular time and place, the selection of details often contributes to a negative view of Mrs. Bentley's character. If we read it as a symbolic account - closer to *The Double Hook* than to *Fruits of the Earth* - Mrs. Bentley appears in a somewhat different light. Ross's mixing of these two modes causes further difficulties in assessing the novel's achievement. In a taped interview with Earle Toppings, Ross has explained the genesis of the novel in these words:

A novelist's intentions, however, are not necessarily borne out by the novel he produces, and one of the most noteworthy things about recent critical response to the book is the frequency with which Mrs. Bentley has been identified as its main character. In selecting Mrs. Bentley as his narrative consciousness, Ross has, intentionally or not, directed much of the reader's attention to her. The reader may find her sympathetic or repellent, or a mixture of the two. But the nature of the Bentley's marriage, in which Philip continually shuts his wife out, while she laments her inability to "possess" him, means that, while we see Mrs. Bentley from the inside, as it were, we see Philip only from the outside.

Now it is true, as Wayne Booth warns in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, that the process of getting "inside" a fictional character normally invites a certain amount of sympathy for that character even if he or she is not otherwise very admirable. This is what appears to have happened in *As For Me and My House*. There is, ultimately, no way of knowing what to make of Mrs. Bentley, and therefore no way of knowing what to make of her narrative.

Although it is unfair to criticize a writer for what he has excluded

ed from his story, or not attempted, some of the things that are missing from Mrs. Bentley's account - things that we might reasonably expect to find there - are worthy of note in an effort to evaluate her narration. Although we assume that the novel is set in Saskatchewan, Ross, like his contemporaries Morley Callaghan and Irene Baird, carefully avoids locating his work in an identifiable Canadian context; perhaps this is why, as Dick Harrison notes, the novel ignores Saskatchewan's vigorous public life - the co-ops, the CCF, the Wheat Pool - altogether. Horizon's isolation, which is insisted on throughout the book, is almost total, but it is also highly artificial, more like that of a ship at sea before Marconi than that of a town on the prairies. This is one point at which the novel departs from regional accuracy and moves toward symbolism.

Slovenly housewifery is also apparent elsewhere, but its symbolic implications are not always so clear. Mrs. Bentley describes several of her meals for us, and they always seem hastily assembled. Apart from "serenely making curtains over for the double windows in the living room" (p. 3), she is not seen to sew. We notice that Judith makes herself a dress (p. 108); Mrs. Bentley, though lamenting her dowdy clothes, does not. Her housework is minimal. In spite of their economic deprivation, it never occurs to her to look for Saskatoon or chokecherries during her railway walks, or to deplore their absence from the drought-stricken land. She spends most of her time, it appears, writing her diary (if that is indeed what she is doing), walking the tracks, and feeling "sorry for Philip, sorrier for myself" (p. 76). Small wonder she gained a reputation in Crow Coulee as "a shiftless housewife" (p. 39). And although she complains about the cultural thinness of Horizon, it does not occur to her that she might do something to alleviate it by offering music lessons to the children of the district. Wilfred Cude has characterized her as mean-spirited and manipulative (Cude, pp. 3-18); it is tempting to add that she is also domestically and socially irresponsible.

The same difficulty is illustrated perhaps more clearly in a passage where Mrs. Bentley, still smarting from the way Philip has excluded her from the afternoon with Steve, plays the piano for Paul and Steve, and excludes Philip: "Afterwards Paul asked me to play, and because it had been such a humiliating afternoon I played brilliantly, vindictively, determined to let Philip see how easily if I wanted to I could take the boy away from him" (p. 47). One may sympathize here with Mrs. Bentley's sense of humiliation, but not, presumably, with her vindictiveness. Yet the meaning of the passage is obscure. We can prove anything we like from such a passage; we do not really know whether it makes her admirable or reprehensible. The difficulty is apparently the result of the narrative technique.

This does not mean that *As For Me and My House* is a bad novel. It has very real and substantial virtues - among them some fine landscape description, complex symbolic patterns, and a realization of a particular kind of Canadian experience. In his use of phrases such as "Main Street" and "the middle west" (an otherwise meaningless term in a Canadian context), Ross seems to be inviting comparison with Sinclair Lewis's novels of the American Mid-west. In any such comparison, Ross is surely the better writer. And yet we do the novel, and the study of Canadian literature itself a disservice if we call it a great work. 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 make sense only as symbols. Finally, the death of Judith is an unsatisfactory plot device. Until critics are prepared to face these difficulties, there will be no adequate evaluation of the place of Ross's novel in the development of fiction in Canada.

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