

TIME AS THE FIFTH ELEMENT IN MARGARET LAURENCE'S MANAWAKA CYCLE

Brigita Pavšič

Abstract

Margaret Laurence's Manawaka cycle has several unifying features, one of them is the four elements theory. This pattern may not be deliberate, however, it is very well developed through all four novels: *The Stone Angel* represents earth, *A Jest of God* air, *The Fire-Dwellers* fire, and *The Diviners* represents water. Additionally, *The Diviners* reconciles all four elements. The main metaphor of water running both ways in this novel also offers a new interpretation of the occurrence of the water element in the other three novels as a metaphor for the progress of time and maturing.

INTRODUCTION

Twenty years after her death, on January 5, 1987, Margaret Laurence is still one of the greatest Canadian writers. She was born and laid to rest in the small town of Neepawa in Manitoba. The town itself served as a model for Manawaka, the fictional setting for her Manawaka cycle of four novels and a short story collection: *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God*, *The Fire-Dwellers*, *The Diviners*, and *A Bird in the House*. If we exempt the short story collection, the cycle is not unified solely by the main characters' hometown. In the Manawaka cycle "we encounter a pattern which may not be deliberate, but which nevertheless seems clean and definite" (Woodcock 55); the pattern being that of the four elements: water, air, earth, and fire. From *The Stone Angel* to *The Diviners* the cycle progresses from arid drought to water in various forms and, finally, the four elements, and through them the appurtenant humours of the protagonists – the melancholic, the phlegmatic, the choleric, and the sanguine, are reconciled in the last novel.

The four elements theory originates in ancient Greece where the list was created by Empedocles. Hippocrates then used the elements to describe the four body types and humours. The concept was widely known and used in the Middle Ages and has also been used in the works of such writers as William Shakespeare. Although the theory may be scientifically primitive, in terms of myth the links between the four humours and the four elements appear in poetry and fiction from antiquity to the present (Woodcock 56).

The Manawaka cycle of novels starts with the earth element in *The Stone Angel*, continues with the air element in *A Jest of God*, and fire in *The Fire-Dwellers*, and finishes with *The Diviners* in which all four elements clash, and the protagonist Morag

Gunn reaches an understanding of the past, present, and future through the fourth element, water.

THE FOUR ELEMENTS IN THE MANAWAKA CYCLE

“In *The Stone Angel* earth, in the form of land and property, but also as wasteland and wilderness, is the foremost element” (Blewett 185). Hagar Shipley, the ninety year old protagonist, is choleric as is becoming for the earth element. She is like one of the first settlers on a new land, a pioneer in the wasteland and wilderness. Trying to survive, she is just as ruthless and coarse as the land she attempts to tame: “The night my son died I was transformed to stone and never wept at all (Laurence 1985: 243)”. Hagar herself acknowledges that “[p]ride was [her] wilderness” (*ibid.* 292). None of the four protagonists show their character more clearly than Hagar Shipley, “her rages are one of the most vividly memorable things about her” (New v). She is a choleric through and through, she fights with her father and contrary to his will marries Bram; when her anger overcomes her again she leaves Bram; and she drives her beloved son John away, indirectly causing his death. Ultimately she runs away from home when her other son suggests she should go to an old people’s home. Even in the end, when she becomes reconciled with her life and her son Marvin, she still acts in character when she is offered a glass of water.

“Here. Here you are. Can you?”

“Of course. What do you think I am? What do you take me for? Here, give it to me. Oh, for mercy’s sake let me hold it myself!”

I only defeat myself for not accepting her. I know this – I know it very well. But I can’t help it – it’s my nature. I’ll drink from this glass, or spill it, just as I choose. I’ll not countenance anyone else’s holding it for me. And yet – if she were in my place, I’d think her daft, and push her hands away, certain I could hold it for her better. (Laurence 1985: 308)

Precisely for the meaningful and symbolic value of this final event the element of water is not negligible even in the ‘earth’ novel. After years of drought and depression when the prairies struggled to survive as did their inhabitants, Hagar is offered a drink of water on her death bed. Her need for water has not softened her and she still refuses help from the nurse and grabs the glass on her own. Nevertheless, at the end of her life, she is finally freed from her wilderness by accepting a drink of water, the symbol of change and rebirth.

Air is Rachel Cameron’s element in *A Jest of God*. This is, similar to *The Fire-Dwellers*, indicated by the epigraph and several metaphors in the novel. Chapter one starts with a children’s song:

“The wind blows low, the wind blows high
The snow comes falling from the sky,
Rachel Cameron says she’ll die
For the want of the golden city.” (Laurence 1986a: 1)

In that same chapter Rachel mentions twice more how cold the wind is. There are other such instances throughout the novel: “the air glutinous and sugary with the heat and the smell of grass and weeds that still clings around us” (Laurence 1986a: 93); “the telephone wires hum like the harps of the wind” (*ibid.* 100); “the wind, whipping dustily, circles in a cold chain around my feet” (*ibid.* 162); “the air is very cool, too cool to rain now, and the wind has gone away” (*ibid.* 167).

The imagery of air and wind is mostly cold and unpleasant, something to shield oneself against, as the air and wind represent freedom, release, relief – concepts that are unimaginable and unfathomable for the boxed-in Rachel. However, there are a few instances where Rachel comprehends the meaning of the wind in a considerably more positive manner, starting with the moment when she loses her virginity with Nick Kazlick and she thinks about how Nick does not know, “how I’ve wanted to lose that reputation, to divest myself of it as though it were an oxen yoke, to burn it to ashes and scatter them *to the wind*” (*ibid.* 92, my emphasis). The wind in this instance signifies how she starts to feel who she really is and how she shows the first indications of her attempting to let go. It might seem a minor change in attitude, but all Rachel’s steps are small, as is evident at the end of the novel when she finally succeeds and escapes her inner prison, the Manawaka within. She decides to leave the town with her elderly mother. The way she perceives the journey and her future is telling: “[t]he bus flies along, smooth and confident as a great owl through the darkness” (*ibid.* 201); “I will be light and straight as any feather. The wind will bear me, and I will drift and settle, and drift and settle. Anything may happen, where I’m going” (*ibid.*).

The element of air is also linked to the ‘Jest of God’ in the title of the novel through the ecstatic utterances at the religious meetings to which Calla, Rachel’s friend, invites her. The speaking in tongues at these meetings fills Rachel with shame and fear. “How can anyone bear to make a public spectacle of themselves? How can anyone display so openly?” (Laurence 1986a: 35) Or in other words, how can people give way to instincts and their nearly animalistic desires and admit to being who they really are – clowns, fools, jests of God. Through her sorrowful realization that instead of Nick’s child she has a benign growth in her uterus, she finally learns to express her emotions, to mourn for the children she has never had like her Biblical namesake. Rachel realizes her children will always be temporary, “[b]ut so are everyone’s” (*ibid.* 201).

Her sister, Stacey MacAindra, the protagonist of *The Fire-Dwellers*, seems to be her opposite in everything: she is married and has four children and is anything but phlegmatic. But what looks like a happy family life from Rachel’s point of view, is a dangerous, untamed jungle for Stacey. She is nearly hysterical with fear of something happening to her children and of losing the last thread of sanity and normalcy in her life; fear that is closely associated with fire. She tells Luke, her short-term lover, she is terrified of her children becoming “damaged or like burned so they couldn’t recover” (Laurence 1986c: 194). “Fire symbolizes Stacey’s hellfire existence in which everything burns with tormenting fires: her lust, her alcoholism, visions of destruction and death, the city itself” (Blewett 188). Indeed, she describes the streets of the city as “now inhabited only by the eternal flames of the neon forest fires” (Laurence 1986c: 167).

The novel starts with two epigraphs on the theme of fire. The first is from the poem "Losers" by Carl Sandburg:

If I pass the burial spot of Nero
I shall say to the wind, "Well, well" –
I who have fiddled in a world on fire,
I who have done so many stunts not worth doing.

The second is the nursery rhyme which functions as some sort of a refrain throughout the novel, constantly underlining Stacey's anxiety:

Ladybird, ladybird,
Fly away home;
Your house is on fire,
Your children are gone.

The fire suggests imminent danger, catastrophe, ubiquitous *angst* which is at times so severe it makes Stacey lose her sense of reality. Laurence did not achieve this effect merely through the numerous fire references in the novel, but also with the novel's fragmented form. The short passages, either indented, written in capital letters or in Italics, or introduced by dashes, allude to the multitude and simultaneity of events, emotions, and sensations that envelop Stacey every minute of her everyday life. She seems unable to deal with everything at the same time, so much so that she occasionally seems overwhelmed, lost, and defeated in her attempt to be a good mother and wife. She, for example, recollects St. Paul's words: "Better to marry than burn, (...), but he didn't say what to do if you married *and* burned" (*ibid.* 211). How serious her desperation was is suggested at the end of the novel when Mac, her husband, admits he feared she might commit suicide with her father's old revolver. However, that was not Stacey's intent at all, and as she comes to realize she does not need *fire-arms* to protect herself, she throws the gun into a lake.

The "Ladybird, ladybird" rhyme is repeated once again at the end of the novel, but the intensesness and the threat of its symbolic meaning are somewhat dampened by Stacey's subsequent thoughts: "Will the fires go on, inside and out? Until the moment when they go out for me, the end of the world" (*ibid.* 307). Stacey has come to terms with the fires inside and with herself as a middle-aged housewife. She realizes she is "made of asbestos" (*ibid.* 242).

However, in *The Fire-Dwellers* the element of water is not negligible, either. Stacey remembers her vacations as a child by a lake; her son Duncan almost drowns; after a quarrel with her husband she goes to the seaside to calm herself and meets her future lover there, etc. This way the novel actually paves the way for the last novel in the sequence, *The Diviners*.

THE ELEMENTS RECONCILED

The Diviners is the summation, the culmination, and ultimately the reconciliation of the four elements and the four humours. But first and foremost, as the title

suggests, it is the 'water' novel. Morag Gunn lives next to a river which is a way for her neighbours to visit her, and it also offers fish which Royland catches and brings to Morag. The river is also the central metaphor of the novel – it runs both ways – the way our life does.

The river flowed both ways. The current moved from north to south, but the wind usually came from the south, rippling the bronze-green water in the opposite direction. This apparently impossible contradiction, made apparent and possible, still fascinated Morag, even after the years of river-watching. (Laurence 1986b: 3)

The novel also closes with that same image. Morag realizes she can “[l]ook ahead into the past, and back into the future, until the silence” (*ibid.* 453), just as the river flows both ways, and then she wonders

[h]ow far anyone could see into the river? Not far. Near shore, in the shallows, the water was clear, and there were the clean and broken clamshells of creatures now dead, and the wavering of the underwater weedforests, and the flicker of small live fishes, and the undulating lines of gold as the sand ripples received the sun. Only slightly further out, the water deepened and kept its life from sight. (*ibid.*)

This is closely correlated to the theme of the past and the present and the relationship between the two. Where the water is clear, one can see the immediate past and the near future, but as the river deepens one can only perceive “broken clamshells of creatures now dead”, of creatures of the past; and the underwater forest conceals what awaits us in the future.

All Laurence's heroines struggle to come to terms with their past, with that nuisance of a town they were all born in – Manawaka. The town represents as much the past as it does the present and the future since it exists not only on Laurence's fictional map of Canada, but also on the maps of the inner lives of Hagar Shipley, Rachel Cameron, Stacey MacAindra, and Morag Gunn. Morag visits Scotland to find her origins, the land of her ancestors, only to realize her roots stem from the hometown of the undistinguished Christie and Prin Logan, Manawaka, the town she has despised her whole life and tried to run away from. Just as she reaches the balance between the past and the present by understanding that, the cyclic structure of the novel, and of the life it imitates, repeats when Morag's daughter, Pique, sets off on that same journey to rediscover and reinvent herself.

The same growing and maturing is evident in *The Stone Angel* where Hagar, through the act of drinking a sip of water at the end of the novel, acknowledges her progression from the unforgiving wilderness to the acceptance of change, of coming to terms with the past. Although *A Jest of God* contains the fewest images of water, it suggests change and the attainment of a certain amount of gratification through Rachel's imagining of how “[she] will walk by [herself] on the shore of the sea and look at the freegulls flying” (Laurence 1986a: 202). Laurence in this way suggests that Rachel has done the least digging through her past, unlike the rest of her characters in the Manawaka cycle. There are no extensive flashbacks as in *The Stone Angel* or

*The Diviners*¹. Instead, the relationship of the past to the present and the future seems to be of minor importance. Rachel mainly struggles with the present and mentioning her 'air element' in the same sentence as the sea, with water here being the symbol of change, suggests that the change in Rachel's life is also minor – "I will be different. I will remain the same" (Laurence 1986a: 201) – especially in comparison to that of Hagar Shipley or Morag Gunn, as can be expected of a character whose humour is phlegmatic. Rachel lives in a world of her own, emphasized on the formal level of the novel by the use of the first person narrator, and in its contents by Rachel's frequent fantasies that have little to do with her dull, everyday life of a primary school teacher and carer of her demanding, widowed mother.

Morag, on the other hand, comes to understand that just as the river constantly changes, so does our past. "A popular misconception is that we can't change the past – everyone is constantly changing their own past, recalling it, revising it" (Laurence 1986b: 60). The same way Christie Logan tells the story of the Battle of Bourlon Wood just like it is described in a book, yet differently. It is the present point of view or situation of every man and woman that defines their past and vice versa, as Morag realizes.

However, as Woodcock suggests, another balance is needed for a healthy world.

Though destiny lays a bias on each of us by giving us special natures, and we spend our lives trying to achieve the equilibrium. Hagar is only aware of the need for equilibrium at the very end, but Stacey and Rachel progress in their own ways of understanding, and Morag, because of her calling and largely despite herself, comes nearest to an understanding of the pattern. (Woodcock 61)

This is why *The Diviners*, from the four-element point of view, is somewhat different from the first three novels. It is not engaged in presenting predominantly one element, instead, its goal is to reconcile all four. Water is the most important, of course, and the principal metaphor is Morag's old friend Royland, a diviner. She relates his occupation to her own – he divines water wells, she divines words. "Old Man River. The Shaman. Diviner" (Laurence 1986b: 286). But even he is not entirely a 'water' character as he is 'king of the land' (fr. roi - king), he masters the ground and searches for water sources below the surface.

Morag reaches the desired equilibrium through her relationships with three men. Brooke Skelton, her husband, is air. He is afraid of bringing a child to earth – he refuses to have children with Morag – and even in literature he is concerned only with the superficial (airy) elements, but he is afraid to tackle the real (earthly) passions of men and women. He has a "terrible need. His terrible need for someone who could bring him light, lightness, release, relief" (*ibid.* 257).

Dan McRaith, Morag's lover in London, is a man of earth. He is tied to the sea-shore in Cromarty, to a mediocre wife who bore his children. Even the contours and colours on his paintings are the reflections of the earth, of the rocks, and the soil: "The colours black-green, a hundred different greys and browns, but the sun's colours, too,

¹ The flashbacks in *The Diviners* are done through the use of Memorybank Movies and Snapshots, a special technique used by Laurence to emphasize that Morag as a writer is deliberately remembering and analyzing her past.

in brief revelations” (*ibid.* 377). Or, for instance, he keeps talismans that remind him of his land: “a bowl full of oddly shaped and oddly coloured pieces of rock, from Crombruach. Perhaps they are necessary to remind McRaith of those shapes and textures” (*ibid.* 375). Dan also takes Morag to Crombruach to make her understand his “need of the place, the geographical *place*, the sea and the shore” (*ibid.* 382).

Jules Tonnerre is connected to the element of fire not only through his name (fr. tonnerre - thunder) and his sanguine character; he is also linked to fire through his sister Piquette and her children’s death by fire witnessed by Morag as a reporter for the Manawaka newspaper. This relation then continues with the name Pique which is given to his daughter by Morag. Jules is a Métis, or Bois-Brûlés as they are called in French, meaning ‘burnt wood’. Furthermore, Morag as water and Jules as fire can never be together as theirs is a love-hate relationship.

All three of Morag’s relationships eventually end, the only constant in her life remains Royland, Old Man River, who represents water, just like her. So not only does Morag’s life come full circle, the Manawaka cycle, too, is unified in *The Diviners*. After searching through the past and coping with the present, all four protagonists come to some sort of understanding and consolation in their lives.

CONCLUSION

Each novel of the Manawaka cycle represents one of the four elements. Although this pattern may not be deliberate, it is well defined particularly in *The Stone Angel* and *The Diviners*. The metaphors in *A Jest of God* and *The Fire-Dwellers* may have less symbolic force and lack a deeper level of significance, but when understood as parts of the whole cycle they gain a greater importance and relevance. The element of water is particularly in *The Stone Angel* and *The Diviners* connected with time, firstly as a symbol of the maturing and progression of the main characters, and secondly as a symbol of the intertwined past, present, and future. In this context time functions as the fifth element in the Manawaka cycle.

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