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Bridging the Generation Gap in the Works of Gabrielle Roy

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THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of Camille G. Dean for the Master of Arts in French were presented October 11, 1995, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

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ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Camille G. Dean for the Master of Arts in French presented October 11, 1995.

Title: Bridging the Generation Gap in the Works of Gabrielle Roy

Gabrielle Roy's novels are filled with images of childhood and aging, of family, of rural and urban French-Canadian settings, and of Roy's experiences as a young, impressionable teacher. The generation gaps present themselves in many human relationships and thread themselves throughout Roy's works. For this thesis, the generation gaps will be studied in three important relationships.

Part One presents largely the relationships within the microcosm of the family. It explores the gap between mothers and daughters. La Rue Deschambault, La Route d'Altamont, and Bonheur d'Occasion are included. The relationship between the father and child in La Rue Deschambault, Bonheur d'Occasion, and Alexandre Chenevert will then be explored. Important elements of these relationships are: the circle of life, the inevitable resemblances between parent and child, and their reversal of roles as the parent ages.

Part Two focuses on bridging the gap between teacher and student in Gabrielle Roy's works. This relationship is studied extensively in both La Petite Poule d'Eau and Ces Enfants de Ma Vie. The teachers in Roy's works represent the link from the family to the outside world, as education empowers students to progress. Part Two also presents the elderly as teachers of the children in their lives. This special relationship is seen in La Route d'Altamont.

Part Three studies the relationship between life and nature. Roy's urban novels, Bonheur d'Occasion and Alexandre Chenevert, in which the author draws contrasts between rural and urban life, are explored. The gap between the urban dweller and nature is focused on in Alexandre Chenevert. The bond that links humankind and animals is studied in La Montagne Secrète. There is an important contrast between the inherent need for solitude and humankind's communion. The artist's place within the universe is shown to be unique. In this macro setting of humankind and the universe, all human relationships take their places within these interwoven, circular patterns.

BRIDGING THE GENERATION GAP IN THE WORKS OF GABRIELLE ROY

by
CAMILLE G. DEAN

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requirements for the degree of

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INTRODUCTION

Gabrielle Roy, a French speaker from rural Manitoba, developed from a young prairie student in Saint-Boniface to an enthusiastic, adventurous rural schoolteacher. She briefly studied acting abroad, and then returned to Canada where she was a journalist. Throughout her lifetime, she became a well-travelled, cultured and most of all, an accomplished Canadian novelist. Finally, she settled in Montréal, her home base during her travels through Québec. These life's transitions are undeniably represented in the novels of Gabrielle Roy, as are relationships with those around her during these important stages of her life's journey. Relationships between people are often portrayed with charm and love and at times, with shocking realism. Gabrielle Roy takes us from within the microcosms of the traditional French Canadian Catholic home and the one-room prairie schoolhouse to the poverty of urban quarter Saint-Henri during the depression. Often, people from different, sometimes conflicting generations, must bridge the gap between them to try to maintain harmony. On a more universal level, the relationship of humankind itself with its environment is confronted by conflict. Humans must struggle against outside forces to determine their role within the universe. For the purpose of this thesis, the different levels of important human relationships encountered by the

daughter, teacher and writer, Gabrielle Roy, will be divided into three sections: family, teacher/student, and humans and their universe. The thread drawn through this study will be the generation gap within these relationships. When discussing family relationships, the generation gap is an easily conceived notion, as is the gap between teacher and student. In the relationship between humankind and their environment and their universe, the idea of the generation gap will represent a new perspective which will help us draw commonalities between all human relationships.

Chapter One will treat the generation gap faced by family members in Roy's works. A feminine writer, Roy focused on the Canadian woman and her interaction with her family. The relationship between mother and daughter is almost always close, and the notion of re-birth through the daughter represents an idyllic hope for the aging mother to re-live memorable transitions of life. We will study the relationships between grandmother, mother and daughter; most importantly we will explore their ability to bridge the gap of years between them. La Route d'Altamont and La Rue Deschambault will be the main focus. It is clear that these works have autobiographical elements, as the families within resemble that of Gabrielle Roy's herself. For purposes of contrast, and as a direct result of Roy's experience in

journalistic observation, a harsher, more realistic mother/daughter relationship will be studied, that of Bonheur d'Occasion.

Gabrielle Roy was a daughter, a definite role in a human life. She was also a schoolteacher. She taught in an all-boys school in Saint-Boniface, and she also travelled to the Little WaterHen, which is the setting for her novel La Petite Poule d'Eau. In her experiences with children, she learned to serve as a bridge between the security of their families and the new world of the classroom. Clearly autobiographical snapshots, these episodes take Roy back to her years as a schoolteacher, but are mainly products of her love for children and her idyllic souvenirs of those early teaching experiences. When Roy began her teaching career, she herself was thrown into the transition between adolescence and adulthood. Suddenly she had to assume the authoritative role of teacher. **Chapter Two** will explore the relationships between the young school teacher and her students.

As a writer, at first a journalist, Gabrielle Roy observed, researched and wrote about social struggles as humankind attempts to determine its role in an ever-changing world. She lived in Saint-Boniface in Winnipeg, then in the French Canadian province of Québec. She was not *Québécoise*, and identified herself as a Canadian first. Later, she spent time in France, the birthplace of French writers, where she

reflected on the events of her rural Canadian existence. She observed the human creature in each setting; she compared the influence of their surroundings upon them, as well as the influence of changing one's surroundings. A chosen writer, Roy also explored the unique relationship of the artist to her environment. **Chapter Three** focuses on the relationship between the human and his environment, particularly his/her place within the universe. There is a generation gap as we leave our roots to venture into unknown territory. She translated for us the many relationships she encountered throughout her lifetime.¹

¹There is a comprehensive biography on Gabrielle Roy in the Dictionary of Literary Biography, volume 68.

CHAPTER ONE

Family Relationships

The works of Gabrielle Roy are characterized as stunning, realistic portraits of the Canadian family. Whether of urban or rural family backgrounds, the parents and their young children struggle to bridge the generation gap that exists between them while their adolescents in transition often battle to break away. This chapter will focus on the relationships between adults and children. At the forefront of Roy's novels is the bond between mother and daughter, which is not always strong enough to overcome negative outside influences. In Bonheur d'Occasion, Florentine Lacasse and her mother Rose-Anna cannot seem to overcome the obstacles, particularly the family's poverty, that stand in the way of mutual understanding. The novel Bonheur d'Occasion is described as "une étude fouillée de Florentine au seuil de l'amour et de la vie, et de Rose-Anna, femme mûre en charge d'une famille nombreuse".¹ Florentine's determination to break free from this often traditional cycle is eroded by the seemingly inescapable fate that she will repeat the life of her mother. As Gabrielle Pascal remarks "le sort des personnages féminins repose sur une sorte de prédestination."² In a more positive relationship within a much less impoverished family, Christine and her mother, Eveline, of La Route d'Altamont, can look upon this inevitable inheritance without as much panic and gloom. For Christine, her ambition is to ensure that she experience all

from life which her mother could not because of marital and family obligations. For Florentine, her family life is a prison from which she seeks any means to escape. The cycle of life is an integral notion of these novels; in both of them, the grandmother also plays a part, reinforcing the idea of child/parent emulation and re-birth for the elderly. In her own way, each child attempts to break away from certain elements of the circle, just as they serve to carry on values and traditions from their parents and grandparents. Although her works are dominated by female characters, and mother/daughter relationships are primary, let us not forget the fathers and their relationships with their children. In this section, the unstable father role of Azarius of Bonheur d'Occasion will also be explored. Generally, the fathers of Roy's works do not share the same nurturing bond with their children as do the mothers. Paula Gilbert Lewis asserts her perception of the father:

“It has often been mentioned that in Gabrielle Roy's works, the male characters, when they are even present, are either poorly developed or are themselves purposely portrayed as weak, vulnerable, impractical, tormented..., either lost children, or at best, not yet fully adults”.³

Alexandre Chenevert fits into several of these categories, which will become evident, as we discuss his relationship with his daughter, Irène. Chenevert's daughter is only briefly mentioned yet the picture painted of their awkward and strained interaction is clearly informative. Lastly, we will venture to La

Rue Deschambault where Christine describes to us the dynamics of her family, to which her somber, moody, often absent father is a stranger. In each of these families, the child expresses at least once, the raging desire to resist the possible inheritance of what they consider to be negative personality traits from their parent(s).

Mothers and Daughters

One might assume that through crisis, a family naturally comes together, and bridges the generation gap between parent and child to find a solution and encourage one another. This is not so within the Lacasse family. Florentine and her mother rarely share feelings or frustrations. Florentine Lacasse is the principal character of Bonheur d'Occasion. At nineteen, she is working in a local restaurant in a run-down quarter of Montréal and responsible for helping her family buy food and necessities. In fact, her wages are, for the most part, her family's only reliable sustenance. Florentine's mother, Rose-Anna, is also a central character in the novel. As a wife and mother, she becomes the head of the household and assumes responsibility for holding the family together. They are both preoccupied with their own priorities: Florentine concerns herself with what will become of her and her secret unborn child by the unattainable loner Jean Levesque; Rose-Anna wonders how much longer her younger children, malnourished

and underclothed, will survive if her habitually unemployed husband Azarius does not find work. Rose-Anna can speculate as to Florentine's distractions, but she dares not ask:

Florentine restait à la maison presque tous les soirs et, bien qu'elles n'eussent pas grand-chose à dire, absorbées de façon différente, il était consolant de sentir, même silencieuse, même refrognée, la présence de la jeune fille... 'Qu'est-ce qui peut la chagriner ainsi? Est-ce qu'elle aimerait quelqu'un?' (Bonheur, p. 166).

Florentine does not confide in her mother, and Rose-Anna does not pry. Since she works and earns money for the family, she is never questioned. Soon the problems that each encounter pull them away from the family to within themselves. The increasing poverty of the Lacasse family divides them as all communication breaks down among its members; the chasm between the generations becomes more impossible to bridge.

As Paula Gilbert Lewis has concluded, "contributing to the Royan female's difficult situation is the fact that she must usually face alone the problems arising in her life, without being able to depend on any outside source of strength."⁴ Florentine initially hides her illegitimate pregnancy from her mother. Then, when she finally attempts to divulge her secret to Rose-Anna, her mother shuns her, offering no warmth or understanding:

Une fois encore elle chercha les yeux de sa mère, avec des paupières battant lourdement, avec un tressaillement des lèvres et une angoisse de tout son corps: la première fois et la dernière fois sans doute qu'elle mettait dans son regard cet appel d'être traqué. Mais Rose-Anna avait détourné la tête. Le menton appuyé sur la poitrine, elle semblait être devenue une chose inerte, indifférente, à demi enfoncée dans le sommeil. (Bonheur, p.263).

In an article discussing the mother/daughter relationships in Roy's works, Lewis reinforces the unfulfilled need for communication, and the widening gap between Florentine and Rose-Anna:

...les deux femmes ont besoin de communiquer, surtout au moment de cette crise profonde. On note d'abord l'honnêteté et la vérité terrifiantes qui produisent ce désir de parler. Mais cela finit par créer une barrière de haine, mais aussi d'identification pure, entre les deux femmes. Chacune reste isolée de l'autre mais aussi liée à l'autre dans leur destin de femme."⁵

Florentine and her mother sense their shared fate, which results more in separation than bonding. When they are face to face, with the whole situation before them, "les deux femmes se regardaient comme deux ennemies" (Bonheur, p.263). Florentine lacks support and encouragement from her mother, so she shamefully flees from the Lacasse home. Monique Genuist explains Rose-Anna's apathetic reaction: "Rose-Anna touche un problème plus profond, celui du dialogue entre les êtres, et des êtres qui s'aiment...chaque membre de sa famille devra trouver sa solution personnelle à la vie."⁶

Genuist continues to argue that Rose-Anna is seemingly unemotional and even cold because she has been hardened from dealing with family burdens and responsibilities: "Accablée par ces soucis et la besogne quotidienne, il lui est difficile de donner à ses enfants le support moral et spirituel qu'ils lui demandent".⁷ Another explanation is that her own family

background was similarly without affection. Lewis concurs with this reasoning: “Puisqu’il n’y avait jamais de rapport chaleureux et ouvert entre Rose-Anna et sa mère, Mme Laplante, on peut bien comprendre que celle-là ne veuille pas suivre l’exemple de sa mère. Mais elle ne peut pas faire autrement.”⁸ In turn, Rose-Anna is undemonstrative toward her children. “...elle ne se livrait pas souvent aux épanchements. La tendresse s’abritait presque toujours chez elle sous des regards discrets et des mots d’un usage familial. Elle eût éprouvé de la gêne à l’exprimer autrement .” (Bonheur, p. 168). Rose-Anna has evidently inherited her mother’s emotional inhibitions, as she has inherited other gestures: “Sans effort, comme si l’habitude fût déjà ancienne, elle esquissait, sur le bras de sa chaise, le même geste futile que sa vieille mère.” (Bonheur, p. 202).

Rose-Anna knows that she is unexpressive, and feels guilty for pushing Florentine away but hopes to have better relationships with the little children. “Et Rose-Anna se sentit brusquement un sauvage besoin d’étendre ses bras autour d’eux, de les réunir tout dans la même étreinte et de les rassurer ” (Bonheur, p. 195). Hesse also finds that Rose-Anna regrets her inhibitions: “In contrast to Madame LaPlante, however, Rose-Anna feels impelled to express her affection more openly and blames herself for not having been able to strengthen the bonds with her daughter”.⁹ At her daughter’s wedding, Rose-Anna realizes how wide the gap is between them;

they are strangers. “Rose-Anna voyait le visage de sa fille dans une petite glace...La bouche était dure, le regard volontaire, presque insolent. Elle l’examinait avec stupeur. Cette Florentine...lui était une inconnue...”

(Bonheur, p. 345-6). We recognize the same distance between Rose-Anna and her mother.

Rose-Anna is embarrassed of the obvious rift between her and her daughter. When Emmanuel comes to the house to call for Florentine, Rose-Anna is ashamed that she does not know her daughter’s whereabouts. “Elle s’arrêta, confuse et troublée à l’idée qu’Emmanuel devait trouver étrange qu’elle ne sût pas exactement où était la jeune fille”. (Bonheur, p. 292). At least, for appearances, they should try to seem closer. Rose-Anna suddenly shows the same concern for the family image as do her proud daughter and husband.

When Azarius takes Rose-Anna to see her family after a seven-year absence, her joy in being reunited is quickly deflated by her taciturn, fatalist mother. Initially, the planning of the day trip fills Rose-Anna with only the happiest images of days past. “Elle ne cessait de voir surgir, se recomposer, s’animer, s’enchaîner les délices de son enfance” (Bonheur, p.173). When she is finally seated alone with her mother, the less idyllic images resurface. She soon begins to feel the shame associated with her family’s poverty. Madame LaPlante bluntly and candidly reminds her of the discarded advice

she gave her daughter as an adolescent: “ ‘Pauv’ Rose-Anna, j’ai ben pensé que t’avais eu de la misère, toi aussi. Je le savais ben, va...Tu vois à c’tte heure que la vie, ma fille, on arrange pas ça comme on veut. Dans le temps, tu pensais avoir ton mot à dire, toi...’ ” (Bonheur, p. 134). Rose-Anna soon remembers that her mother characteristically takes a distorted pleasure in hearing stories of hardship. Life has hardened her; she approaches troubles without much hope. When it comes to others, Madame LaPlante offers little warmth or encouragement, simply confirmation of negative prophecies come true.

In Madame LaPlante’s generation, a mother did not show her fifteen children her love through terms or gestures of endearment but demonstrated her maternal love only by fulfillment of their primordial needs:

Elle s’était levée la nuit pour les soigner;...leur avait enseigné les prières,...les avait vêtus...les avait appelé à table...mais jamais elle ne s’était penchée sur aucun d’eux avec une flamme claire et joyeuse au fond de ses durs yeux gris fer. Jamais elle ne les avait pris sur ses genoux, sauf lorsqu’ils étaient au maillot. Jamais elle ne les avait embrassés, sauf du bout des lèvres, après une longue absence; ou encore, au jour de l’An, et cela avec une sorte de gravité froide et en prononçant des souhaits usés et banals. (Bonheur, p.198).

As she leaves her family’s farm, Rose-Anna searches for a reason behind her mother’s guarded way. She empathizes with her mother’s inherent difficulty in expressing her nurturing side, certainly because she recognizes it in herself, and observes her mother’s donation of food as a sign of this maternal

caring: "Pauv' vieille, a veu nous aider à sa manière. Et ça la fâche de pas pouvoir plus." Then Rose-Anna deduces that which she lacks from her mother, and questions her own maternal role: "Tout notre vie, quand on a eu besoin d'elle, a nous a donné la nourriture, les vêtements et les bons conseils, c'est vrai...Mais est-ce c'est rien que ça qu'une mère doit donner à ses enfants?" (Bonheur, p.200). It becomes evident that Rose-Anna knows that she has become like her mother. In the same way, Florentine will emulate Rose-Anna in certain ways, despite a strong resistance. Rose-Anna, like her mother, is unable to offer any intimate support for her pregnant daughter. What will Florentine offer her child? The family cycle repeats itself.

Florentine is unfulfilled in her relationship with her mother, but does realize the enormous responsibility her mother assumes to try in vain to hold the family intact, and in these moments, Florentine softens towards her. There are times when "ce courage de Rose-Anna luisait subitement comme un phare devant elle." (Bonheur, p.258). When her mother appears at the restaurant, Florentine is moved to offer Rose-Anna a free hot meal and in her guilt over her love preoccupation, even gives Rose-Anna some extra money:

Alors, Florentine, voyant les traits de sa mère détendus, la voyant presque heureuse, éprouva un désir profond, déculpé, d'ajouter à la joie qu'elle lui avait donnée. Elle glissa la main dans son corsage, en sortit deux billet neufs...Et elle pensait: 'Je suis bonne pour maman. Ca me reviendrait, ça me serait compté. (Bonheur, p. 123-4).

Florentine feels remorse because she knows she will never suffer as does Rose-Anna. To her, "...c'est qu'elle apercevait la vie de sa mère comme un long voyage gris, terne, que jamais, elle, Florentine, n'accomplirait; et c'était comme si, aujourd'hui, elles eussent en quelque sorte à se faire des adieux." (Bonheur, p. 120). Florentine is determined to follow her own path, but accompanying her escape is regret for those she leaves behind. Florentine's perception of her resigned mother who has made sacrifices for the children causes her much guilt. Pascal describes the portrait of the mother as viewed by her young, adult daughter: "Ces femmes fictives sont représentées comme infiniment pitoyables aux yeux de la génération qui les suit. Leur sacrifice, qui culpabilise leur entourage marque tout particulièrement leurs filles."¹⁰

Added to her guilt, Florentine is driven by the desire to make a better life for herself, and "la haine de ce pauvre logis, comme un clos où venaient mourir toutes leur tentatives d'évasion, la tourmentait." (Bonheur, p. 169). Marriage to a respectable, ambitious man will be her way out. Supposedly, her life will not be a repetition of her mother's generation. There is, however, an underlying current that certain elements of this mother/daughter refrain are inevitable. As Pascal has noted: "Certains de ces personnages sont montrés comme essayant d'opposer à la fatalité de leur destin toutes les ressources de l'idéal, de la créativité et de l'imagination."¹¹ When she

discovers that Rose-Anna is expecting her ninth child, Florentine swears that she will never be like her mother, who is a product of catholic morality: “Moi, je ferai comme je voudrai. Moi, j’aurai pas de misère comme sa mère.” (Bonheur, p. 90). Hesse explains Florentine’s disgust with her mother’s pregnancy:

It is incomprehensible to Florentine that her mother should give life to yet another child whose future can only match the bleakness of their past. In response to Rose-Anna’s somewhat reluctant resignation to her fate that she equates with women’s lives, Florentine rebels within herself.”¹²

This forceful rejection of her mother’s way of life foreshadows Florentine’s actual ironic fate, becoming pregnant and also accepting a loveless marriage. Just as Rose-Anna fears she resembles her mother, Florentine grapples to break the cycle of her mother’s and grandmother’s generation. Yet Lewis explains the actual choice she believes Florentine has to control her destiny: “Although they cannot negate inherited qualities, children can, after having observed their parents, either imitate them or refuse to be like them.”¹³ One cannot completely concur with this statement, as Roy’s families illustrate that children do both. That is, they are often bound with resignation and suffrance, imitate their parents involuntarily, while constantly refusing these characteristics. Their refusal, however, is not always possible to maintain.

Although she is pregnant with an illegitimate child, Florentine will not passively allow this dilemma to trap her into a life of poverty. In this way, she differs from the more resigned Rose-Anna. Perhaps this explains the colossal gap between them. With Rose-Anna, “nous retrouverons une Florentine qui se serait mariée avec celui qu’elle aimait, mais vingt ans plus tard, avec plusieurs enfants, un mari sans travail, et dans la misère.”¹⁴ After a decent, yet impersonal childhood, Rose-Anna conceivably marries for love; ironically, she now lacks what was once more abundant. Her eldest daughter Florentine, whom she treats with at least the same reserve as her mother treated her, does not marry for love. The pattern appearing reflects that each generation encounters less and less sincere, communicated love. Florentine is hardened at an even earlier age than was her mother, but unlike her she independently assumes control of her situation: “Après la panique du début, Florentine reprend le dessus. Elle résoudra son problème en femme pratique, déterminée à ne plus souffrir de la pauvreté. Elle acceptera la proposition de mariage d’Emmanuel et ils se marieront un peu avant son départ pour la guerre en Europe.”¹⁵ Rose-Anna had hopes and dreams as a newlywed country girl; Florentine has none. Instead, she only hopes she may come close to feeling love for her new husband, who has provided her with an escape from a life of poverty. And although she may

have more money, she will inevitably be compromising her romantic ideal for a life of convenience.

In Roy's La Route d'Altamont, there is no love lacking between mother and daughter, and for the most part, their relationship is much more positive than that between Florentine and Rose-Anna. One explanation is their more advantaged economic situation; money troubles are not mentioned as part of their family's life. Naturally, there are certain elements of her mother's life that Christine would like to avoid, namely her unfulfilled desire for travel as a result of her obligation as a wife and mother: "Christine n'a aucune intention de revivre cette expérience de mère...rester prisonnière toute sa vie dans une petite rue."¹⁶ Christine has inherited her mother's inner need for adventure and for change. Like Florentine, Christine recognizes the sacrifices her mother makes for the family. Her mother, Eveline, wants her to have opportunities she did not, but the separation they face as Christine becomes an independent adult causes regret. The hope lies in the cyclical nature of human life.

When we first meet Christine she is a young, adventurous, curious girl of eight years. Since Christine knows her mother shares her instinct to roam free, Christine is grateful that she allows her to pursue her ambitions. There is, as with Florentine, a certain guilt involved as she perceives that Eveline is somewhat trapped in her adult role as wife and mother.

Ma pauvre mère! Avais-je jusqu'alors pensé qu'elle non plus n'avait jamais vu le grand lac Winnipeg, pas si éloigné pourtant de notre ville; mais, asservie à nos besoins, quand, comment qu'aurait-elle pu vivre un jour au moins selon les désirs toujours avides de son âme, ces vastes désirs tournés vers l'eau, les plaines, les lointains horizons en lesquels nous nous reconnaissons avec notre plus pur amour. Et même ne commençait-elle pas à s'apercevoir que pour elle il était déjà tard pour assouvir ces désirs, qui, non contentés, nous laissent pourtant comme imparfaits à nos yeux, dans leur traînée de regrets nostalgiques? Mais ainsi était-elle devenue extrêmement attentive à obtenir pour nous du moins ce qu'elle n'avait pas possédé de ce monde. (Altamont, p. 95)

Eveline may relive memorable events through the eyes of her young daughter. She understands Christine's longing to travel, and through the image of the circle of life, she decides, by putting herself in Christine's place, present and future, to permit her to go see Lake Winnipeg with M. Sainte-Hilaire. Christine contemplates how her mother reached her decision to permit her to go: "S'était-elle mise à la place de l'enfant dont le désir est presque un supplice? Ou m'avait-elle mis à la place de la mère âgée à qui n'apparaîtra peut-être jamais le lac?" (Altamont, p. 98). Knowing well her own regrets, Christine's mother selflessly strives to avoid their possible later appearance in her daughter's adulthood, when other obligations assume priority.

Since she is now settled in one place, Christine's mother argues that she prefers her established life and home. Christine longs to see new places; she envies her young friend who accompanies her father weekly on moving expeditions. When Christine asks her mother if they will ever move again,

Maman answers firmly “ ‘Ah! j’espère bien que non!...Par la grâce de Dieu et la longue patience de ton père, nous voilà solidement établis enfin. J’espère seulement que ce soit pour toujours.’ ” (Altamont, p. 157). Eveline seems to be attempting in vain to slyly discourage her daughter’s passions. Ironically, Eveline unadmittedly undergoes periods of a “migratory” instinct, when she is restless. Christine recognizes this nomadic characteristic in her mother when she is more mature. “Il y eut toujours deux époques de l’année où ma mère ne tenait absolument plus en place, son âme proche des saisons en entendant les appels les plus irrésistibles: quand c’est le temps de semer, et quand c’est le temps de récolter.” (Altamont, p. 211). Eveline’s soul is embedded within the circle of nature; she, like its creatures, cannot resist her seasonally shifting instincts. She must struggle to contain herself:

Elle traversait trois ou quatre jours d’agitation, d’instabilité, entreprenant à la fois le grand ménage, des travaux de couture, des courses en ville, que de choses encore! pour tromper sans doute son instinct migrateur - car si jamais l’un de nous en fut possédé, ce fut bien elle la première, avant de s’apercevoir qu’il nous prenait tous, ses enfants, à tour de rôle, pour nous arracher à elle. (Altamont, p.211-212).

As an adult, Christine better understands her mother, who has suppressed her wander-lust for a long time.

Eveline is not thrilled with what she promptly diagnoses as her daughter’s inherited departure sickness: “ ‘Toi aussi tu aurais cette maladie de famille, ce mal du départ. Quelle fatalité!’ ” (Altamont, p. 185). We come

to learn that this family trait spans generations; Christine's grandfather was afflicted. As the story goes "un jour grand-père avait aperçu en imagination - à cause des collines fermées peut-être? - une immense plaine ouverte; sur-le-champ il avait été prêt à partir; tel il était." (Altamont, p. 190). Inevitably following the example of her role models, Christine becomes the mirror of her mother and grandfather. When Christine later decides to travel to France following her studies, her mom blames this inherited trait which has for so long been a part of her family: " 'S'éloigner! Toute ma vie j'aurai entendu ce mot! Dans la bouche de tous mes enfants! Mais à la fin d'où vous vient donc cette passion?' " Christine responds with a undeniable answer: " 'Peut-être de toi' " (Altamont, p. 238). As Eveline has verbally passed on the tales of the family tradition, she has also instilled in her children the irrepressible desire for adventure.

When Christine steals away against her mother's wishes to spend a day with her friend and her father, the mover, she feels guilty. More importantly, however, she feels that her mother is directly responsible for causing within her "le désir qui me poussait si fort, et jusqu'à la révolte..." For Christine, there is no longer any element of joy involved: "C'était bien plutôt comme un ordre...Il me fallait partir" (Altamont, p. 165). When she returns late at night, the first words are spoken by Christine, who cries out at her mother in reproach " 'Ah, pourquoi aussi as-tu cent fois dit que du

siège du chariot, autrefois, dans la plaine, le monde paraissait neuf, beau et si pur?” (Altamont, p. 185). As Carol Harvey writes, “Tout en se parlant à coeur ouvert, elles découvrent leurs valeurs communes et leur héritage familial - et de nouveau “l’instinct migrateur” d’Eveline ne s’en dégage que plus ouvertement.”¹⁷

As Eveline grows older herself, the desires to bridge the generation gap and travel back into the memories of her childhood become strong. On a road trip to the country, Christine awakens her mother from a nap to show her the Manitoban hills that resemble those in Eveline’s childhood stories. Eveline is in a profound bewilderment, and Christine wonders “Se crut-elle transportée dans le paysage de son enfance, revenue à son point de départ, et ainsi toute sa longue vie serait à refaire?” The joy her mother feels at temporarily turning back in the cycle of life is unfathomable to Christine, who thinks it would be distressing to once again face one’s youth so long gone: “Et comment se fait-il que l’être humain ne connaisse pas en sa vieillesse de plus grand bonheur que de retrouver en soi son jeune visage? N’est-ce pas là plutôt une chose infiniment cruelle? D’où vient, d’où vient le bonheur d’une telle rencontre?” (Altamont, p. 206). In the circle of life, old age and childhood almost reach each other. Symbolically, yet frighteningly, they almost come together.

En quoi pouvait-il être bon, à soixante-dix ans, de donner la main à son enfance, sur une petite colline? Et si c’est cela la vie: retrouver son enfance, alors, à ce moment-là, lorsque la vieillesse l’a

rejointe un beau jour, la petite ronde doit être presque finie, la fête terminée. J'eus terriblement hâte tout à coup de voir maman revenir près de moi. (Altamont, p. 206-7).

When Christine one day reaches the same point in her life, she will understand. She at least recognizes that her mother is in her last phase of life, soon to have completed life's voyage.

It is here in La Route d'Altamont that the cyclical nature of life asserts itself. Hesse states that "mothers and daughters - frequently portrayed in the relationships of three generations - lend themselves *par excellence* to illustrate Gabrielle Roy's belief in the cyclical nature of life." ¹⁸ Mothers become more like grandmothers, and daughters often assume the role of the mother. This notion is prevalent in La Route d'Altamont. Christine cares for her mother, much in the same way Eveline cared for hers. This reversal of roles causes tension in the relationship, as the two women must adapt to the new situation. Christine momentarily forgets that her mother was once a young, dynamic woman like herself. "A dire vrai, je m'étonnais que, vieille et parfois lasse, maman abritât encore des désirs qui me paraissaient être ceux de la jeunesse. Je me disais: 'ou l'on est jeune, c'est le temps de s'élaner en avant pour connaître le monde; ou l'on est vieux, et c'est le temps de se reposer' "(Altamont, p. 200). Just as Eveline was once concerned about her mother, Christine frustrates hers in deciding for her how active she should be.

Christine even pronounces the same words to her mother, a constant reminder to Eveline of Mémère. “ ‘Reposez-vous. N’en avez-vous pas assez fait? C’est le temps de vous reposer.’ ” Insulted, Christine’s mother now replies: “ ‘Me reposer! Il en sera bien assez vite le temps, va!’ ” (Altamont, p. 200). Eveline is then thrust back into her past, to the time when she and her mother faced each other in this same dialogue. “ ‘Sais-tu que j’ai dit cette même chose cent fois à ma propre mère, quand il m’a semblé qu’elle devenait vieille: ‘Reposez-vous, lui ai-je dit, et c’est maintenant seulement que je sais à quel point j’ai dû l’agacer.’ ” (Altamont, p. 200). Eveline has become Mémère, and Christine has taken her place. Not long ago, ironically, Christine did not understand this exchange of family roles. As Hesse writes “Christine is...puzzled by an apparent, strange reversal of time and roles. When Maman is shocked by the grandmother’s frail state of health, she treats the old woman like a helpless child and even adopts a new and different tone of language.”¹⁹

Through re-living her own mother’s experiences, and now aging herself, Eveline better understands Mémère’s hostility. She says “puisque devenue elle, je la comprends.” (Altamont, p. 226). She is surprised at the intense sense of connection:

...c’est bien là l’une des expériences les plus surprenantes de la vie. A celle qui nous a donné le jour, on donne naissance à notre tour, quand, tôt ou tard, nous l’accueillons enfin dans notre moi. Dès lors, elle habite en nous autant que nous avons habité en elle avant de venir au monde. C’est extrêmement singulier. Chaque jour, à

présent, en vivant ma vie c'est comme si je lui donnais une voix pour s'exprimer. (Altamont, p. 130).

Eveline goes on to express the miracle of knowing now what her mother felt when she walked down the same road. Eveline is confident that one day Christine too will understand, in time; this day approaches too quickly. As we see our children grow old, we cannot deny our own aging; this is why Eveline cries out “ ‘Reste jeune et avec moi toujours, ma petite Christine, afin que je ne devienne pas trop vite tout à fait vieille et disputeuse.’ ” (Altamont, p. 229). Yet despite her pleas, Eveline concurs with this inevitable transition between mother and daughter: “Pour Eveline, il est question avant tout du cycle de la vie, de la continuité entre passé, présent et futur. Cette dernière idée met en relief une autre facette du lien mère-fille, à savoir le reflet entre grand-mère, Eveline, et Christine.”²⁰

At this later time in her life, Eveline also looks back at her adolescent vision of herself in relation to her family. During her own time of self-definition, Eveline remembers that she identified more with her father: “ ‘Toute jeune, je me reconnaissais parfaitement en mon père et lui en moi: nous étions des alliés. Maman disait de nous, avec un peu de rancune, peut-être: deux pareils au même. Je croyais tenir de lui uniquement, et je pense que je m'en réjouissais.’ ” (Altamont, p. 225). She explains to Christine how her perception soon changed, despite her resistance, as she began to deal with life's problems:

‘...avec les premières désillusions de la vie, j’ai commencé à détecter en moi quelques petits signes de la personnalité de ma mère. Mais je ne voulais pas lui ressembler, pauvre vieille pourtant admirable, et je luttais. C’est avec l’âge mûr que je l’ai rejointe, ou qu’elle-même m’a rejointe, comment expliquer cette étrange rencontre hors du temps’ (Altamont, p. 226).

At the time of middle age, Eveline felt the almost invasion of Mémère into her being. She felt helpless against its power: “ ‘...sous l’effet d’une invisible et attentive volonté sans bornes’ ” (Altamont, p. 226). Now, much older, she sees this transition complete: “ ‘Maintenant, peux-tu honnêtement dire que je ne ressemble pas étonnamment à ce portrait que nous avons de grandmère à l’âge que j’ai atteint?’ ” (Altamont, p. 226). Eveline is not insulted by Christine’s desires to make an even better life for herself, rather than immediately assume her mother’s life, for this step toward independence is one also towards progress. The mother figure in Gabrielle Roy’s works, she is described as “[wanting] for her child more than she had herself...the mother who realizes through another being her dreams of progress...”²¹

An important element of the healthy relationship between Christine and her mother is communication; it is key to Christine’s independence. Eveline shares the dreams she once gave up to marry and raise a family:

‘Jeune, sais-tu que j’ai ardemment désiré étudier, apprendre, voyager, me hausser du mieux possible... Mais je me suis mariée à dix-huit ans et mes enfants sont venus rapidement. Quelquefois encore je rêve à quelqu’un d’infiniment mieux que moi que j’aurais pu être... Une musicienne, par exemple, n’est-ce pas assez fou? (Altamont, p. 235).

Eveline assures Christine that she would not give up what she has to re-do her life in a different way, being that through her children, she will encounter many new experiences. Her positive influence and honesty, including sometimes critical advice, have benefited Christine. "Each individual and successive generation...succeed in achieving a degree of independence and self-realization within their limited sphere of influence. The belief in a gradual progression, rather than a break with the past, reflects the writer's faith in mankind and progress."²²

As Christine is overcome by her inherited travel instinct compounded with the natural transition toward independence, she approaches her mother with her intentions to travel to Europe. All thoughts of progress and self-realization are second to those of separation and regret. Eveline, despite herself, discourages her daughter from pursuing a career in writing and from travelling to Europe. Christine knows that she must make this break if she is ever to accomplish the goals she and her mother discussed together. In the words of Carol Harvey, "elle veut laisser derrière elle une sécurité trop facile où elle risque de s'enliser sans jamais développer ses talents d'écrivain."

Also driving Christine is the desire to show her mother how she has progressed and succeeded, which she cannot do if she assumes her mother's life completely. She remembers the rush to come back to her mother a well-

accomplished person: "...je me hâtais, je me pressais; des années passèrent; je me hâtais, je me pensais toujours au bord de ce que je voulais devenir à ses yeux avant de lui revenir." (Altamont, p. 255). The gift that Christine is preparing for her mother takes time to complete. She strives to make up for all the things her mother may have missed when she was making life's journey. Paula Gilbert Lewis describes this daughter's obligation:

...il n'est pas surprenant qu'en ayant sans cesse besoin de ce lien avec sa mère de qui elle s'est séparée, Christine désire se prouver aux yeux de celle-là et la récompenser de la difficulté de l'avoir mise au monde et de l'avoir élevée. Même le moindre manquement à cette responsabilité de fille la fera se sentir coupable.²³

Eveline's selfless ambition for her daughter allows Christine to succeed.

Harvey writes "Malgré les hésitations d'Eveline, l'interrelation entre mère et fille est essentiellement positive, puisqu'elle permet à Christine de s'acheminer vers l'indépendance."²⁴ It is only natural that Christine feel a certain amount of guilt in making a major decision for her own personal good, and in the process cause an inevitable sense of loss in her mother.

The guilt only seems to continue as Christine realizes that she does not have enough time to accomplish all she set out to do before her mother's rapid decline. As a result, Eveline's death has been described as a "maladie de chagrin avant le retour de Christine", because "à son tour, la mère avait tellement besoin de se refléter dans le regard de sa fille qu'elle ne pouvait jamais se rétablir de cette séparation et du vide qu'elle en ressentait."²⁵

While Christine works toward achievement of her goals, Eveline needs to confirm her re-birth by witnessing the happiness of her daughter. The end of La Route d'Altamont brings us back to Eveline's reflection on family members; they often come together too late. Eveline finds the departure of her daughter difficult at first, but is well aware of Christine's potential for happiness in pursuing her ambitions. Had Christine remained at home with her mother, she would one day look back at her life with this regret. Since the family relationships seem endlessly optimistic, we have confidence that Christine's future with her children will make up for time once lost. It is clear that Christine resembles Gabrielle Roy herself and that La Route d'Altamont has strong biographical elements. The character of Christine, Roy's fictional double who goes on to become a schoolteacher and writer, is closer in spirit to Gabrielle Roy than is Florentine. The novel La Rue Deschambault has been described as Gabrielle Roy's "autobiographie romancée, [qui] consiste en une juxtaposition des épisodes qui ont marqué - l'enfance puis l'adolescence de la petite Christine."²⁶

Fathers and Daughters

The relationships between the fathers and their daughters are not as positive as the mothers and daughters in Gabrielle Roy's works; they are often strained, unconvincing. Three fathers that come to mind are Azarius Lacasse of Bonheur d'Occasion, Edouard of La Rue Deschambault and Alexandre Chenevert of the same title. The studies of mother/daughter relationship far outnumber those written about the father. One in particular, by Th erio, entitled "Le portrait du p re dans Rue Deschambault de Gabrielle Roy" is one of very few articles written exclusively on this subject. Furthermore, few critics have discussed more than briefly the underdeveloped yet vivid portrait of Alexandre Chenevert as father to his daughter, Ir ne. The following paragraphs will study the generation gap between these fathers and their daughters, focusing once again on the inevitable inheritance of certain character traits. This section will begin with Christine's father in La Rue Deschambault, as he is most studied. As La Route d'Altamont treats largely Christine's relationship with her mother and grandmother, La Rue Deschambault projects clearer images of the relationship between Christine and her father.

From the beginning of the story, there exists a discreet bond between Christine and her father, although not necessarily a positive one, as Christine's father seemingly searches for someone to share his gloomy

perception of life. It must be said that Christine's vision of her father throughout her childhood and adolescence is due in part also to her own personality. Although he may not be the perfect father figure, we see Edouard through Christine's eyes; this is the only portrait we are given. His nickname for her provides the first evidence of his attempt to seize upon a likeness between them: "Mon père, parce que j'étais frêle de santé, ou que lui-même alors âgé et malade avait trop de pitié pour la vie, mon père peu après que je vins au monde me baptisa: Petite Misère." Christine does not want to be linked to her father in this way, and when she is able, determines within herself: " 'Ah non! je ne suis pas misère. Jamais je ne serai comme toi!' " (Deschambault, p. 37). Like her father, Christine does exhibit, as Grosskurth describes: "a precocious capacity for grief". On the other hand, she is like her mother in her "extraordinary eagerness for entertaining joy."²⁷

When she is young, as at the novel's opening, Christine does not understand her father's moods. She describes how he "traversait de longues périodes d'humeur sombre où il était sans patience et comme accablé de regrets; peut-être aussi de responsabilités trop lourdes." She continues to relate the careful treading around him when she and her mother find him in this depressed state: "un éclat de rire le rejoignant, l'atteignant en plein dans ses pensées moroses, provoquait chez lui un accès de détresse." (Deschambault, p. 37). Nobody knows what provokes his dark moods, except

of course young Agnès, the daughter Edouard chooses as his confidant. All the while, Christine is envious that her father discusses his federal government work in the colonies with her younger sister.

Edouard cannot hide his negative moods; he says things, during his stormy rages, that he should not, especially to the children. Moreover, Edouard perhaps does not sense Christine's acute intuition. She internalizes everything he says. His first line in the novel is disturbing: " 'Ah-Pourquoi ai-je eu des enfants, moi!' " (Deschambault, p. 38). During another period of anger, when Christine and her mother disobey him and take a ten-day trip to Québec, Edouard has difficulty controlling his emotions, considering he shares them with no one. Another example reinforces Papa's methods of dealing with anger: "Depuis dix jours, il marchait dans la maison, dans le couloir en bas, tout au long du couloir en haut. Les enfants n'osaient pas lui adresser la parole. Il paraît qu'alors tout se faisait chez nous dans le plus grand silence: les repas, la vaisselle, les reproches et tout" (Deschambault, p. 136). As the male head of a household, Christine's father does not allow himself to show his feelings or weaknesses. A strong, silent front is all that his children see. In the same way, the children do not approach him to discuss their feelings; for this they go to their mother.

In his article exclusive to Edouard, Thério argues that despite the fear of him his children exhibit, Edouard shares a bond with them: "Malgré la

crainte qui empêche les enfants de dialoguer facilement avec Edouard, on sent tout de même que le père est très attaché à ses enfants.”²⁸ Fathers in Roy’s works all seem to foster difficulty in communicating with their daughters and their relationships with their sons do not seem much better. In the case of Edouard, his relationship with his children is based on his authority and their fear of it. Thério’s article is written very much in favor of Edouard, perhaps from an empathetic understanding of his generation. For a young, modern reader, however, this type of relationship may not be the ideal, at a time when families are often portrayed as open and loving. Here is where our own generation gap influences our judgement.

It is easier said that Edouard’s relationship with Christine is often puzzling, as we do not understand the motivation behind his behavior. The rhubarb pie incident is a perfect example. To make up for their earlier disagreement, during which father very loudly questions his decision to have children, Papa bakes a rhubarb pie and at ten o’clock cuts Christine a huge piece. This is good and then bad. Granted, Christine loves rhubarb pie, therefore when Thério writes that father “cherche un moyen à se faire pardonner,”²⁹ Papa’s motivation seems genuine. We hope that this incident occurs only because Papa does not know his daughter well enough to anticipate Christine’s terrible reaction to the pie. No matter what he does, it seems as though Edouard cannot win in the relationships with his children.

His reaction at mother's later chastising proves he is remorseful: "Lui, avec un sourire triste, sans se disculper, pencha la tête, et, plus tard, quand il vint m'apporter un remède, il y avait sur son visage une telle douleur, que, parfois, je l'imagine immortelle" (Deschambault, p. 44).

Christine readily admits that her father's presence in the home is a dampening one, requiring the best behavior of everyone. The father at home, however, differs greatly from his professional persona. "Papa était un homme estimé, honorable; cependant, il n'y a pas à dire, la maison était beaucoup plus gaie quand mon père n'y était pas." (Deschambault, p. 102).

As Christine explains, her father becomes his tired, moody self when he comes home from his sometimes heroic pursuits at the colonies. Christine believes he shows more affection to the emigrant children because they see him in a different light than his own who have seen him at his weakest hour. To the young Ruthenians, however, he is invincible:

Aussitôt descendu de son break, papa se voyait entouré d'enfants; il leur tapotait la joue, leur tirait un peu l'oreille... chose assez curieuse, car avec ses enfants papa n'agissait jamais de la sorte... Mais peut-être ces enfants-là avaient-ils plus que nous confiance en papa; nous, nous voyions assez souvent le visage fatigué, déçu de papa; nous savions qu'il ne réussissait pas toujours; tandis que ces gens le croyaient doué d'un pouvoir presque surnaturel. (Deschambault, p. 144).

In any case, both her mother and father ironically lose a part of their identity when together. Of Christine, Grosskurth says: "the child senses the immeasurable gap between Papa and Maman; she cannot fail to see how

much gayer Maman is when Papa is away.”³⁰ Christine feels as though their two counterparts could get along very well: “Comme c’est navrant! Car, si papa s’était comporté parmi nous comme parmi les étrangers, et maman avec lui comme en son absence, est-ce qu’ils n’auraient pas été parfaitement heureux ensemble?” (Deschambault, p. 108). In another acute observation by a wiser Christine looking back upon her childhood, she illustrates mature understanding of the dynamics between her unaquainted parents.

All the while, Christine is witness to the differences between her parents. She is young, but she knows that her mother and father are opposite creatures: “...c’était inutile: papa ne comprenait pas maman...et maman peut-être ne comprenait pas bien que papa, menant une vie errante, avait besoin à la maison de trouver du stable, du solide...” (Deschambault, p. 107). Christine is certain that her father does not understand her mother, whereas says only that *perhaps* her mother did not understand her father. She seems to remain slightly more loyal toward her mother.

Because she has, in a sense, chosen a side, Christine does not feel comfortable when her mother asks her to write her father a card during their stay in Québec. Since before their departure, Christine has been internally adding up her father’s negative qualities. Suddenly, during a brief separation from her husband, Christine’s mother has nothing but praise for him. “Mais, depuis que nous étions en voyage et que maman découvrait tant

de qualités à papa, il me semblait ne plus très bien le connaître, et j'étais gênée de lui écrire...presque autant qu'à un étranger." (Deschambault, p. 124). Christine has been her mother's ally until now; she and her mother share the experience of living with difficult Edouard. Now, her mother no longer needs her support nor her empathy, since suddenly Christine's father is a remarkable man.

Perhaps in exploring this family my own generation gap provokes unfounded skepticism about their happiness. Is the modern reader equipped to judge the dynamics of the family of a different generation? One thing is certain, that is "like many children, she [Christine] is acutely aware of the contradictory elements in other people and the bewildering subtleties of relationships."³¹ She presents these subtleties to us, and our difficult task is to accept them without passing judgement, for we only have her perception. We cannot say that Maman and Papa were unhappy, because as Thério explains, we do not have evidence: "On ne nous avait rien dit jusqu'à maintenant qui pouvait laisser croire que les parents ne s'entendaient pas. Que le père soit triste, morose, qu'il se fâche de temps en temps, on le sait."³² All we know are the personalities of Christine's parents through her reminiscent portrait given from her adult perspective.

As a young woman, Christine senses the presence of a competitive element in her father against her mother, which sometimes pressures her to

choose between them. Thério states that Eveline steals the spotlight from her husband through her more easygoing nature. “Il est vrai que par son exubérance, Eveline, la mère, a l’air de voler la vedette à son mari, qui, lui, préfère rester un peu en retrait, semble n’être pas très liant.”³³ Late at night, when his wife is sound asleep before her early rise, Papa tries to convince his children to defy their own daytime instincts, inherited from their mother, and stay up with him. “He prefers nighttime, and therefore, is somewhat jealous of the fact that his children, enamored of daylight, are more similar to Maman.”³⁴ Christine herself cannot decide what to do: remain and be there when her father comes to life and opens up, or go to bed and be well rested to spend tomorrow with her mother. Finally, it is her biological instincts that win, and a sleepy-eyed Christine hears her father say “ ‘Poor child! You’re asleep on your feet!...Oh, well, go; get your rest.’ Yet in the same breath he accused me with a sort of bitterness: ‘You’re all like her, deep down. Even you. She has you all to herself...that Maman of yours’ ” (Deschambault, p. 149).

Later in her life, Christine realizes that which she has inherited not only from her mother, but from her father as well. She knows that her father loved his family, but his pre-disposition for suffering, of which she herself showed symptoms during her more dramatic moments, caused him much grief. When he grows older, her father opens up more, “il s’ouvre à ses

filles de ses projets”³⁵. Time has eroded his barrier; once again, as Gabrielle Roy has illustrated in many family relationships, it is late. Christine assumes partial responsibility for their lack of communication through the years: “Ah! si j’avais su davantage veiller la nuit, j’aurais bien mieux connu mon père! Mais je m’échappais alors que mon attention un peu plus patient l’eût délivré du silence” (Deschambault, p. 271).

Christine does not dislike her father. When she is younger, as early in the novel, she fears him and his disapproval. She sides more with her mother, with whom she spends more time. Her mother, with no one to confide in, reveals her feelings and unfulfilled dreams, which bias Christine slightly against her father. As her acute comprehension of the family dynamics increases, Christine begins to assign meaning to her father’s behavior and personality. No two people are alike; her parents are the perfect proof of this cliché. As for her later perception of her father: she pities Papa’s suffering; she recognizes his love and she later names the impatience of her youth equally responsible for his silence.

Let us return to the more troubled home environment of the Lacasse family, where we will examine the generation gap between Florentine and her father, Azarius. The family’s poverty, compounded with Azarius’s guilt in accepting Florentine’s earnings to support them, does not ease their strained relationship. There are too many obstacles blocking a healthy

communication between Azarius and his daughter. He has, at first glance, little influence over Florentine, besides invoking in her a raging determination to be nothing like him. Inevitably, however, characteristics of Azarius present themselves in Florentine as we better acquaint ourselves with their relationship.

Azarius is not portrayed as the ideal role model for his children; Florentine, who at times appears his opposite, does not look up to him. It is unlikely that this distance can be attributed solely to her rebellious adolescent years. There are few admirable qualities in Azarius Lacasse that Florentine would welcome as part of her inheritance. A good man at heart, he is a dreamer, while Florentine shows a survivalist side. Azarius never renounces his big dreams, even though he has never succeeded and his family is hungry: "Comment se faisait-il qu'il n'avait pas encore réussi? Sans doute parce qu'il n'avait pas eu de chance, mais un jour, il en aurait, et sa grande entreprise, une de ses grandes entreprises, le vengerait de tout le dédain, de toute la honte qu'il sentait peser sur lui" (Bonheur, p. 163).

Florentine supports the family knowing that her father cannot be left responsible for earning a living. Azarius's pride is his biggest obstacle, and his denial severs all communication between himself and his family, who must struggle for him to find a solution. His wife, the strong-willed Rose-Anna, decides to arrange work for her husband herself, having lost all trust

that he would do it himself. Grosskurth finds that “at home, Azarius’s tone is conciliatory and apologetic.”³⁶ Azarius never keeps a job very long, while his eldest daughter Florentine, perseveres at the café where she is an overworked waitress.

Somewhat of a hypocrite, Azarius notices the money that Florentine spends on fashion and explains that he allows this to continue because he is a liberal-minded father when actually, he is happier that his attractive, better-dressed daughter is a positive reflection on him:

...il ne manquait jamais de remarquer les colifichets, les petits chapeaux pimpants, les beaux bas de soie qu’elle s’achetait; et bien que ce fût sur ses payes de serveuse, et après en avoir donné la plus grande partie pour les besoins de la maison, il s’était toujours senti libéral à son égard quand elle arrivait avec ses emplettes personnelles. Il se croyait bon père parce qu’elle réussissait à se vêtir avec éclat. Elle, du moins, n’étalait pas leur indigence. (Bonheur, p. 177).

When they plan a trip to see his wife’s relatives, Azarius insists that Florentine join them, so he can show her off: “Florentine, ce serait leur fierté qu’ils iraient monter là-bas” (Bonheur, p. 177). Because of her contributions to the family, Azarius must really leave Florentine to do as she wishes, since he himself contributes almost nothing and is respected little. She buys what she pleases with the money she has left, and she is allowed to remain at home to enjoy a day of privacy while her family travels to their grandparents. She permits herself to remain entirely absorbed in her

infatuation with Jean Levèsque as she feels she has done her share for the family.

The importance Azarius places on appearances and his pride are characteristics that he has undeniably passed on to Florentine. Although at While Florentine dresses up to attract a man who will lift her from her poverty-stricken world, Azarius is thrilled that his acquaintances see her and identify her with him. Her driving force behind her primping is the desire to escape from her family. Azarius is much less directed than his daughter, or at least, the avenues he chooses for himself are out of his reach. Azarius puts all of his energy into the impossible dream. Inevitably, the same can be said for Florentine, attempting to win the heart of Jean. She persists with a man who does not love her, like her father who chooses an occupation that does not fit him. Azarius is too proud to settle as a cab-driver; Florentine hesitates to commit to Emmanuel, who is her second-choice man. Possessing her father's pride, Florentine resists settling for Emmanuel.

Preoccupied with their own desires, they share the equally selfish wish to escape the confines of the family's poverty, and start fresh. We witnessed earlier Florentine's perception of her home as a cage, from which she felt she could never escape. Azarius, her father, in a similarly adolescent rebellion, dreams of being freed from all responsibilities:

Il souhaita l'évasion avec une telle mélancolie que sa gorge nouée refusa de laisser passer le flot de sa salive. Il souhaita n'avoir plus de femme, plus d'enfants, plus de toit. Il souhaita n'être qu'un cheminéau trempé, couché dans la paille sous les étoiles et les paupières humides de rosée. Il souhaita l'aube qui le surprendrait un homme libre, sans soucis, sans amour. (Bonheur, p. 198.)

Despite his weak and proud personality, Azarius does love his family. He is trapped in an self-absorbed, adolescent frame of mind, like Florentine, and cannot live up to his adult role in life.

When he does try to reach out to Florentine, during his selfish attempt to convince her to go on the trip to Grandmother's, she pushes him away. In fact, Azarius would rather not face the possible reasons for her insistence on staying home: "...il avait toujours peur d'aller jusqu'au fond des questions, et n'insista guère plus. Florentine se dégagèa brusquement." (Bonheur, p. 178). She rebels against all affection outside her infatuation with Jean. She wraps herself up in daydreams about Jean and their escape. This causes a certain amount of guilt as she knows that she is truly more concerned about herself than the others around her. Grosskurth asserts that "Florentine is a mixture of her mother and father...Vain and coquettish, like her father she protects herself from reality by daydreams of unattainable wealth and self-pampering."³⁷

Since Florentine has little respect for Azarius, or trust in him, Florentine would never approach her father with her illegitimate pregnancy. Her mother is not an option as Rose-Anna has assumed responsibility as head of the household since Azarius has proven himself unreliable. Florentine quickly dismisses her father as a possibility: “Son père? Quelle aide, quel appui leur avait-il jamais donnés?” (Bonheur, p. 253). At the novel’s end, with her marriage of convenience approaching, Florentine realizes that everyone, including herself and her father, has gone his own way, leaving no trace of family behind: “De récents indices de la désunion familiale continuaient à l’enserrer de toutes parts.” (Bonheur, p. 254). The head of the family *Lacasse*, who suitably gave it his name, can do nothing to keep it from “casser”, or breaking apart. When Florentine receives her check from the army, she thinks of how it will help her mother, who has been the supporting thread of the family, albeit a weak one, financially.

In Bonheur d’Occasion, Florentine’s relationship with her excessively proud father includes her financial support of the family, a solution to his unemployment. In exchange Florentine is assured independence. Knowing full well that Azarius is only a dreamer who throws himself into risky ventures doomed for failure, Florentine does not depend on him for help with her problems. More like her father, Florentine also throws herself into daydreams of an impossible venture with Jean Levèsque. She does end up

on a more secure path in life, but to accomplish this, she is forced to forget her pride and settle for marriage to Emmanuel. Florentine's preoccupation with appearances has also evidently come from her father, and leads her to the choices she makes. As for her father, Azarius, he also finally chooses an alternate escape route for himself. He, like his adolescent son, joins the army and chooses freedom from home. Each family member, particularly Florentine and Azarius, chooses for himself or herself; unfortunately this is detrimental to the already broken family.

The last father/daughter relationship to be discussed briefly is that between Alexandre Chenevert and his daughter, Irène. Focused on briefly, few critics have approached the character of Alexandre Chenevert as a father figure. Indeed, his rapport with his daughter is as strained as those witnessed thus far. From the few pages written describing the dynamics between Alexandre and Irène, we recognize immediately similar characteristics found in father/daughter relationships throughout Roy's works. In particular, the powerful influence of genetic and family inheritance between Alexandre and Irène is crucial to understanding their interaction. In this portrait, it is Alexandre who seems most aware and concerned that his daughter may inherit his characteristics.

First of all, we are told that Irène has inherited certain physiological weaknesses from her father. One well acquainted with Alexandre knows

that his physiological problems are always psychosomatic, in his case, attributed to his worrying and obsessing. Alexandre's only daughter has inherited his sickly stomach, definitely brought on by excessive worry. During their visit, she assures him that there has been no cause for worry in her life: "elle paraissait interdire qu'il la crût malheureuse. 'Ne t'inquiète pas pour moi, papa. J'ai bonne santé maintenant que j'ai plus le temps de penser à moi" (Chenevert, p. 141-2). How does Alexandre know she may be worrying? It is because Irène takes after her father in this way; she also is a victim of his incapacity for joy, which plagues Alexandre and other Royan characters:

Alexandre s'aperçut mieux que jamais de cette ressemblance et il en eut l'âme déchirée de pitié. Autrefois, cette ressemblance ne se voyait pas nettement. Heureuse, Irène y eût peut-être en partie échappé; mais, à présent qu'elle avait souffert quelque fatigue, les premières désillusions, il n'était déjà plus possible de ne pas s'apercevoir qu'elle serait tout le portrait de son père. (Chenevert, p. 139).

Until this point of our study, it has been the child of Roy's works who most often expresses the desire to resist becoming like his/her parents. Here a father is distressed that his daughter has somehow ended up more like him. The gloomy fate of Irène's future stretches ahead much like her father's.

Alexandre attempts to dissociate himself from his daughter's fate; he blames it instead upon the characteristically strong will she displayed as a teenager: "Il jugea qu'elle ne pouvait pas être heureuse, et sa pitié devint

une amertume débordante...Mais elle-même était malheureuse pour n'avoir pas écouté son père" (Chenevert, p. 140). In fact, Alexandre's earlier prophecies about Irène's disapproved marriage come true. The precognition of Roy's parents is usually a result of their similar experiences. An adolescent cannot easily imagine his parents as young people; they are frozen in middle age and therefore cannot empathize. It is only when children themselves become adults and parents that they understand this cyclical pattern of life. The most dreaded words of confirmation of parental prophecy come to Alexandre:

‘Ah non! Elle savait mieux que lui: elle aimait; elle serait heureuse.’ Il s'était fâché; il avait tempêté; il avait même essayé la douceur, voyant si bien ce qui arriverait - il l'avait lu comme dans un livre écrit déjà dans l'avenir- ‘Ce garçon est paresseux; il ne te fera jamais vivre. Ecoute mon expérience; tu sera obligée de travailler toute ta vie.’”(Chenevert, p. 140).

As a parent, Alexandre does not wish for fulfillment of his fateful prophecy, but it is inevitable. Compared to Florentine, Irène could be called fortunate to have a father motivated to offer advice in an attempt to save her from the same unhappiness plaguing him.

Now bitter, “ce qui était impardonnable chez Irène, c'était d'être maintenant malheureuse, faute de l'avoir écouté” (Chenevert, p. 140). The new obstacle between Alexandre and Irène is her refusal, as an adolescent, to heed her father. Now she has developed her own ideas about parenting issues, for example, that reflect her more modern generation, and her

perception of her childhood with her parents. Here again the generation gap widens between them. As they discuss the disciplining of her son, Irène lets slip her opinion of the influence her childhood had upon her:

On s'apercevait maintenant, dit-elle, que la sévère éducation d'autrefois, où tout était défendu, était responsable de bien de névroses, de complexes qui marquaient la vie entière. Et elle ne voulait pas faire de son enfant un être craintif...comme elle même...Le mot lui ayant échappé, elle rougit... (Chenevert, p. 139).

This passage is strongly reminiscent of Edouard, and again, it is important as a reader to recognize the generation gap in our approach to the novel.

Irène searches for the origin of her personality, and she speaks from experience of the various emotional problems accompanying a repressive childhood. The Chenevert family does not address Irène's accidental revelation into her feelings about her childhood. Instead, they avoid the subject and go on.

As a grown woman, Irène does not even attempt to speak with her strict, traditional father about her intentions to divorce her husband; instead she approaches her mother. Inside, Alexandre does regret being disconnected from their bond: "Mais pourquoi se cacher de lui? Pourquoi le craindre, lui qui n'avait jamais été qu'un si inoffensif personnage? Le sentiment d'une offense intolérable l'atteignit lorsque Irène chuchota "Toi, maman, justement, tu devrais comprendre.' " (Chenevert, p. 146). His self-perception obviously conflicts with Irène's picture of him; this is why he fails

to understand her distance. The father in Roy's works must always compete with the powerful bond between mother and daughter. As they whisper as quietly as possible, so as not to disturb him, Alexandre feels more like an outsider: "Cette solitude exprimée en ce moment lui étreignit le coeur plus douloureusement qu'aucun reproche." (Chenevert, p. 148). His wife and daughter will always fear him, and tiptoe around him.

Alexandre finds it difficult to be demonstrative, but he indirectly shows love and concern for his daughter, particularly since she reminds him so much of himself. His often unsolicited advice is an attempt to change her similarly unhappy fate, but he must compete with the more open relationship between mother and daughter. As a result, he often feels the painful distance separating him from the women in his life. The gap between the generations runs parallel; father and daughter are never at the same level and the children often have difficulty remembering that their parents have passed through the same stages of life that they are presently experiencing. This is why understanding between the generations often presents itself too late, and the often negative prophecies of the parents who see their children reliving their lives come true. Gabrielle Roy is a writer who is able to show the reader that much

empathy is needed from children and from parents in order to better understand each other.

CHAPTER TWO

Teacher/Student Relationships

In Chapter One we explored the relationships between family members who struggled to bridge the generation gap between them. As children leave the security of the family to attend school, they come under a new important adult influence in their lives - their teacher. This chapter will treat the relationship between the teacher and his/her students through which they both learn important lessons of school subjects and of life itself. A teacher of a diverse group, Mademoiselle of Ces enfants de ma vie learns important lessons from her students that greatly impact her perception of education and family. Her own family background is quite unlike that of most of her students. As a teacher, Mademoiselle is introduced to several situations in which she must strain to find a way to bridge the generation gap between herself and her students, mainly through her sensitivity to their parents - their unique socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds - but also through her passion for teaching and love of challenge. Also passionate for education is mother Luzina Tousignant of La Petite Poule d'Eau. When the Tousignant children are blessed with the gift of education on their northern Manitoban island, they are able to progress and join the world from which they and their parents have been isolated for a long time. Luzina is thrilled to give her children a chance to live a different, less traditional existence than her own. This departure is received with mixed feelings as the

education that enriched life at Little Water Hen now necessarily serves to separate the family. In the works of Gabrielle Roy the elderly assume the role of teacher to the children in their lives. Most children are encircled by family members and others who protect them and present to them important lessons of life. The patience that typically accompanies old age is essential in the relationships between the children and their elderly “professors”. The last section of Chapter two will discuss the relationship between Christine of La Route d’Altamont, and two elderly people who introduce her to many of life’s lessons.

Children of My Heart

Ces enfants de ma vie is Gabrielle Roy’s last novel, et “son meilleur ouvrage”, writes Mryna Delson-Karan.³⁸ It is composed of six episodes, each the souvenir of a young school teacher, and of the students she inspires in her first years. Although critics tend to focus on the last story, which they describe as a love story between the young teacher and her adolescent student, Médéric, this first section of Chapter Two will concentrate on the relationships between Mademoiselle and all of her students. In the following paragraphs, we will witness Mademoiselle’s endeavor to endow her students with a desire to learn, even those who will likely never continue their education. In the process, she learns a great deal about different family

values against which she must often compete. The following questions gain importance: How strong are the family influences? Can these students break the cycle and decide their lives for themselves or are they predestined? The last story in which Mademoiselle develops a tender relationship with a student caught between childhood and adulthood will illustrate again the gap as she helps guide him through this difficult transition. These themes of Ces enfants de ma vie place these characters in transition within the large circle of the human life so important to Roy's works.

Clemente states that "the focus of each of the six stories lies in the interactions of child/teacher and child/parents." Mademoiselle's relationships with her students are not independent of their parents. She learns that, to be an effective teacher, she must understand her students' backgrounds. Clemente asserts that Ces enfants de ma vie is filled with "Roy's reflections on a child's development - a development fostered more by socioeconomic than hereditary factors."³⁹ This study does not entirely concur with Clemente's argument, as the novel illustrates that the students are products of both their social environment and of certain qualities unavoidably inherited from their parents. Linda Clemente further asserts her point of view: "In each story, the boy is young enough, unformed enough, that environmental factors such as indigence, immigrant status, ignorance...have

yet to triumph irrevocably”⁴⁰ We will focus on Mademoiselle’s admirable ability to bridge the generation gap, at least, within the classroom.

The collection begins with *la rentrée*, or the first day of school; our teacher is also brand new. As a young rural Canadian school teacher, Mademoiselle must prepare herself for a culturally diverse, multi-level classroom setting. She is young, fresh, and full of enthusiasm for her profession. This delightful first scene introduces the new teacher, who arrives into a special situation:

J’avais la classe des tout-petits. C’était leur premier pas dans un monde inconnu. A la peur qu’ils en avaient tous plus ou moins, s’ajoutait, chez quelques-uns de mes petits immigrants, le désarroi, en y arrivant, de s’entendre parler dans une langue qui leur était étrangère (Enfants, p. 7).

For the parents and children, the day is already difficult, because it signifies a great step in the life of the child, the first step away from the security and the familiarity of their parents. In a comical scene, Benito’s Italian father is reluctant to leave his crying boy, who clutches onto his pantleg, with this group of strangers. The teacher must be firm, and she says “quand il faut couper la branche, rien ne donne d’attendre” (Enfants, p. 8). Even the father knows she is right, despite the strong, instinctual bond pulling at his heart.

Mademoiselle comes to know her students very quickly, which helps ease their tension and worry in the classroom. For example, Little Clair, who comes from a poor family, cannot compete with the other students who

lavish Christmas gifts upon their schoolteacher. When the students present their gifts on the last day of school before the holidays, Clair stays back, unable to participate: “De sa place il ne perdait rien de ces bruyantes démonstrations, sans tenter le moindrement d’y prendre part, sinon des yeux qui s’attachaient à moi pleins de chagrin, pour ensuite s’abaisser quelquefois comme dans la honte” (Enfants, p. 25). Mademoiselle is sensitive to Clair’s situation; her natural teacher’s sense advises her exactly how to handle it. She asks him “ ‘Veux-tu’, lui dis-je, ‘me faire le plus beau cadeau du monde?’ ” and convincingly assures him “ ‘ce serait de voir ce petit garçon me faire un sourire heureux.’ ” Instead of giving his teacher an expensive box of chocolates, or a bouquet of flowers, “l’enfant me regarda du fond de son chagrin et, pendant que tombaient ses larmes, sur ses lèvres fleurit un tendre, un adorable sourire” (Enfants, p. 33). Mademoiselle brings Clair into the group of students giving presents, despite his significantly poorer family background. She has the gift of helping students overcome their restrictions; she bridges the gap between their world and that of the more well-off.

The young teacher would do the same for all unfortunate students; this is her personal fulfillment. When she learns about the Demetriooff family of Russian immigrants from the other teachers, who have a ready-made caricature for each upcoming school-age child, she is simultaneously fascinated and terrified by the upcoming challenge. As the teachers compare

their Demetriooff children, we learn what it means to be “un Demetriooff”.

Anna asks “ ‘...de quoi a-t-il l’air, ton Demetriooff ? ’ ” to which her colleague replies “ ‘D’un Demetriooff, que veux-tu que je dise! Huit ans seulement et déjà Demetriooff jusqu’au bout des ongles...’ ” (*Enfants*, p. 65). They continue to describe the notorious Demetriooff children:

‘On ne dirait pas qu’ils sont bouchés’, dit Léonie, ‘Mais d’abord ils nous arrivent ne parlant que le russe...une sorte de russe...Ensuite le père les garde à travailler pendant des semaines quand ça fait son affaire, puis subitement les renvoie un beau jour à l’école à coups de pied de derrière. Non, ils ne sont pas bouchés, mais entêtés comme des mules et mettant leur résistance, on dirait, à prouver au père qu’ils ne sont pas faits pour l’école’ (*Enfants*, p.65).

When the last Demetriooff of the group arrives at school, it is evident that he must compete against the stereotype placed on him by these teachers.

Mademoiselle, however, will be all the more determined to reach this child, as she absorbs herself in the challenge.

Now aware of what little Demetriooff faces at home, following her exotic adventure to the Demetriooff tannery in *Petite Russie*, Mademoiselle is prepared to give him the best educational experience possible. She hopes he will be the exception to the “Demetriooff rule.” He becomes one of her special causes, as she believes that education empowers children to surpass what is expected of them from their generation. Immediately, he shows suprisingly neater handwriting than his older siblings. She recalls his child-like letters: “Elles étaient parfaites, d’égale hauteur, d’égales proportions, avec un petit

envol qui leur donnait l'air de rouler en effet vers le bout du monde par-delà le tableau noir. Je n'en revenais pas" (Enfants, p. 80). Mademoiselle's reaction of astonishment emphasizes her internalization of the negative stereotypes initially restricting the Demetriooff children. Here was the exception, and Mademoiselle is thrilled after having assumed the worst.

Mademoiselle promptly notices Demetriooff's almost ceremonious writing process. She strives to understand the driving force behind his dogged spirit, and finally attributes it to the subconscious desire to break the cycle of his father's generation and become something different from his brothers:

Peu à peu me venait à l'esprit l'idée qu'il n'était pas commandé seulement de lui-même dans son acharnement à écrire. Mais peut-être par une faim lointaine. Une mystérieuse et longue attente. Il me venait la singulière impression que ce pauvre petit enfant était poussée à écrire par des générations loin en arrière qui le pressaient impitoyablement (Enfants, p. 83).

An educated person herself, it is not surprising that Mademoiselle insists that education is beneficial for everybody. She believes that the hidden inspiration for little Demetriooff is to learn to read and write to escape his harsh surroundings. She hesitates, however, to explore the option that perhaps Demetriooff will succumb to family pressures and decide to follow his father's occupation. A family raising children to continue the tannery business is not likely to encourage them to pursue what to them seems an unnecessary education. The recurring Royan image of the circle threatens

the child to in some way assume the life of his parents. Mademoiselle aspires to break this pattern with those she perceives as her less fortunate students. Likely, little Demetriooff will forget his writing skills as he becomes more useful around the tannery. His father will come to depend on his help. Mademoiselle will have to accept that some of her students will be compelled to cast aside her gift of education, for, perhaps “a way of life dedicated to preserving a tradition of ignorance and brutishness.”⁴¹

Another example of a student upon whom Mademoiselle takes great pity is André Pasquier, a generous, hardworking young boy who sacrifices his own education to fulfill similar family obligations. André carries large responsibilities on his small shoulders. Mademoiselle’s memories of him are positive, although she also remembers his often tired, preoccupied face:

...Et même tracassé par des soucis de la maison sans doute qui le suivaient à l’école et que son esprit ne parvenait pas à écarter. Et puis il était déjà tout fatigué dès son arrivée en classe. Comment aurait-il pu y fournir l’effort que j’espérais de lui! Je me doutais bien qu’aussi il travaillait trop chez lui (Enfants, 96).

The teacher’s experience with the laboring Demetriooff children has provided her with the sensibility for children with responsibilities outside of school. She immediately guesses the reason for André’s fatigue, and she is right. “ ‘Je suis l’aîné’, he explains, ‘C’est mon rôle de seconder le père’ ” (Enfants, p. 96). She also discovers that he walks two and one half miles to school each day, and she shamedly remembers having once chastised him for

tardiness. The usual classroom misbehaviors are trivialized as Mademoiselle realizes that André has the worries of an adult. She sets out to make school a more enjoyable place, much more enjoyable than the stressful work of home:

Il me sembla qu'à partir de ce jour, s'il arrivait encore en retard, encore accablé, parfois même encore triste, peu à peu, au cours de la journée, sur des préoccupations trop graves pour son âge, son âme d'enfant, légère et tendre, prenait le pas, remontait en surface, s'étonnait de jouir d'un moment d'insouciance comme il est normal à dix ans" (Enfants, p. 96-7).

Mademoiselle allows André to become a child again when he is in her class; school becomes "a way out"⁴² or a temporary escape from other pressures. We may assume from familiarity that Mademoiselle is actually the same young teacher, as Christine of Roy's novels, who is the author's fictional double. We perceive that she had a comparatively fulfilling childhood. In fact, it was her parents, especially her mother, who encouraged her to pursue an education. For this reason, she does not immediately recognize the different family values and priorities she encounters as other than wholly repressive.

Mademoiselle wishes for André to get his education, and thus she cannot understand how a parent could in any way discourage a child from achieving this. She still must realize that the economic position of some families does not allow for them to prioritize in the same way. She asks him "Tes parents tiennent à ce que tu t'instruises?" A loyal defender of his

family, he answers, ‘Ah oui! Mon père dit souvent qu’il ne veut pas que je sois comme lui, sans instruction, sans métier, sans rien du tout’ ” (Enfants, p. 98). Mademoiselle must be delicate with André, and avoid permitting false hopes, not because of a lack of intelligence, but because of his background. His family may always need him, and he too may feel the obligation to stay. He does not wish for her to discuss his indefinite future: “André me jeta un regard hésitant où il y avait comme un reproche d’homme: ‘Il ne faudrait tout de même pas exagérer’...mais aussi un éclair de la folle croyance en l’impossible chez tout enfant” (Enfants, p. 98). Mademoiselle embarrasses even herself by her apparent naïveté; André’s insight into his situation is based on his acceptance of his future obligations.

Each child we have met thus far seems to be part of a patriarchal family in which the father is authoritarian and even brutish. With her portrait of the fathers, Roy enlargens the family circle.⁴³ The father Demetriooff has been described as fostering “physical brutality and ignorance.”⁴⁴ André’s father may not be an overpowering brute, but he may not be able to surrender the help his son gives him on the farm. Again, the possibility of emulating the lifestyle of their parent’s generation, by carrying on their traditions, causes our concern for these young boys, as we foresee them falling into the circle and becoming mirror-images of their fathers.

At one extreme, Linda Clemente finds that most damaging outside influences can be attributed to the fathers: "...these negative environmental influences have their roots in the father, whose hegemony lies with that of the wife/mother and of the school."⁴⁵ On the other hand, she has faith in the children, and insists with hope that "given that these qualities are neither genetic or hereditary, the coarse, illiterate, immigrant father need not necessarily propagate his own kind"⁴⁶. Clemente is suggesting that the sons in Ces enfants de ma vie do have a chance to break the cycle and choose for themselves the kind of person they will become. In most cases throughout Roy's works, however, the inheritance of certain parental traits, which incidentally are not always negative, is inevitable. If they assume their father's lifestyle, and if continually exposed, as their fathers, to the same difficult circumstances, they will likely react the same way. This we have already seen through many relationships between the child and his parents, particularly in more troubled homes such as the Lacasse's or the Chenevert's.

The brief mention of fathers leads to the last story, in which a young boy of a notorious reputation assumes his tough attitude as a barrier against the pain caused by the difficult transition he is making into adulthood. Mademoiselle, not far past adolescence herself, becomes determined to battle the negative outside influences upon first warning of this infamous

character. When Mademoiselle assumes her new post in an isolated prairie village, she is warned well in advance about a student, as with the Demetriooffs of the previous short story, who will surely cause her problems - Médéric. His arrival, therefore, is awaited with apprehension, and even fear, as we learn about his reputation: "Il n'y eut personne pour ne pas me prédire que ce serait entre nous la guerre...mais bien plus complexe qu'ils ne me l'avaient prédite, une guerre mystérieuse où nous nous sommes affrontés pour ainsi dire sans armes, également démunis tous deux." (Enfants, p. 131). The intrigue well established, Médéric arrives and lives up to his reputation. Immediately, in a rather comical, wild-western entrance, the reader has confirmation of Médéric's persona:

Enfin, le garçon, son large chapeau à présent ramené sur le front, parvint au seuil. Il s'y campa, jambes écartées, les mains au fond des poches de son pantalon à franges, une ceinture cloutée sur les hanches, en bottes à talons et dessins mexicains. Là il nous toisa d'un regard où il y avait du dédain, de la commisération pour les prisonniers que nous étions et peut-être, tout au fond derrière de la fanfaronnade, la connaissance d'une déjà longue solitude. Puis, à couples foulées, en sifflotant sans plus de gêne que s'il eût été dans la rue, il s'avança dans l'allée du centre (Enfants, p. 133).

Considering that Médéric is fourteen years old, and that our Mademoiselle is only eighteen, we foresee the power struggle that is about to take place in the prairie school. Médéric is physically bigger than Mademoiselle, yet his strength seems to lie in his attitude and tough experience: "Il me dépassait d'une tête et sans doute davantage dans bien

des choses de la vie” (Enfants, p. 134). At first, Mademoiselle is not sure how she will handle the situation, although she knows she must be firm in her teacher’s authority. She must make clear the distance between her position and his as a student, a child: “Ne sachant comment m’y prendre avec un garçon de cet âge, n’osant rien, ne disant rien, mais par contenance gardant un air lointain et inaccessible, je finis par l’énerver prodigieusement” (Enfants, p. 114). Mademoiselle’s trick is to frustrate him into defeat by refusing to appear bothered by Médéric’s antics, nor by his constant ploys to get her attention.

In fact, Mademoiselle is bothered by Médéric; the tension between them resembles unmistakably that between two adolescents wishing to disguise their mutual attraction. “En fait, j’attendais que mon coeur se calmât. A la longue, j’osai lever les yeux vers lui, et il me parut qu’il était aussi en peine que moi. L’idée de lui parler de maîtresse à élève à travers tout cet espace me sembla ridicule” (Enfants, p. 135). At this moment, the crisis develops. Médéric is obviously already affecting her composure.

Throughout the story, the electricity between the two is undeniable, and Mademoiselle oscillates between her rigid, professional persona, and her vulnerable, infatuated self. Gabrielle Poulin, whose article focuses on the love intrigue between the two, concludes that the novel: “raconte l’attente, la rencontre, les éblouissements, les craintes, les reculs de deux êtres jeunes,

intacts, déjà irrémédiablement séparés par la distance infinie d'une sombre épée."⁴⁷ They play the mind games that accompany the typical adolescent pursuit, which is complicated even more by their generation gap.

Mademoiselle has irreversibly entered the adult world as a teacher, while Médéric is still in school, on the threshold of manhood.

To maintain her professional front, Mademoiselle turns her feelings for Médéric into the desire to motivate him to learn. She focuses all of her energies into this endeavor, even though she admits that her class functions much better in his absence. She cannot seem to explain, or perhaps does not want to put into words, this driving force within her, when it seems clear that Médéric, only a disruption, has no ambition to learn:

Ma classe marchait si bien avant qu'il n'arrive, pourquoi, me demandai-je, avait-il fallu que j'hérite ce phénomène. J'essayai deux ou trois fois de n'en faire aucun cas, de l'abandonner, puisque c'était ce qu'il voulait, à son ignorance, à son oiseveté, mais ce fut bientôt plus fort que moi, je fus reprise par la frénésie de le faire avancer coûte que coûte. Telle alors était ma fièvre, impérieuse comme l'amour, en fait c'était de l'amour, ce passionné besoin que j'eus toute ma vie, que j'ai encore, de lutter pour obtenir le meilleur en chacun (Enfants, p. 139).

This characteristic, the desire to bring out the best in each person, compounded with her admiration for him is what compels her. She is inconsolable when her efforts to instill in him a desire for learning do not succeed.

Mademoiselle has only to look back the short distance to her own adolescence to understand the young man's priorities, which are freedom and

independence, identical to her own during that time. They render him restless and unsociable. Not long ago, she herself had the same powerful feelings of isolation and rebellion: “Passant d’un sentiment à l’autre, je fus sur le point de lui reprocher de prendre à son âge tant de goût à la solitude, mais me rappelai que moi-même je venais tout juste de quitter le temps où j’avais vécu pour ainsi dire le dos tourné aux gens” (Enfants, p. 150). She sees, in contrast, what her life has become since she has assumed her place in the adult world: “Si jeune, je me voyais enfermée pour la vie dans ma tâche d’institutrice. Je n’en voyais même plus le côté exaltant, seulement sa routine implacable” (Enfants, p. 148). “La jeune institutrice n’a qu’un pas à faire pour retourner sur le seuil de l’adolescence où se trouve Médéric,”⁴⁸ explains Poulin with great insight.

Mademoiselle empathizes with the transition Médéric is facing. That adolescence is a difficult time is a well-known fact, but here Mademoiselle equates it to a physical pain, a break in one’s self, as we leave our childhood self completely behind:

Il me rappela ce que j’avais ressenti, il n’y avait pas si longtemps, quand je m’étais trouvée coupée de mon séjour naturel, au bord de la vie adulte. J’aurais tout donné pour le rassurer: ‘Allons, Médéric, ce n’est qu’un pas à franchir. On s’y fait...tu verras...’ Mais j’en doutai justement et que de cette cassure de l’être, de la separation d’avec l’enfance, ne restât pas un mal dont on ne guérissait peut-être jamais tout à fait (Enfants, p. 180).

It is the death of a child. Mourning follows, regardless of whether or not our childhood was a happy one. So many Royan characters experience these difficult transitions between the various phases of their lives. The character of Médéric is a vivid portrait of the bridge between adolescence, even childhood, and adulthood.

Through her experience with Médéric, Mademoiselle begins rethinking her place in life. She mourns her days of freedom past, as the end of childhood is truly a regretful event in the Royan universe. She compares it to the changing of the seasons, with winter approaching her. “Les dernières journées radieuses d’automne s’achevaient et me reprochaient de laisser passer sans profit ce qui a peut-être le prix en ce monde” (*Enfants*, p. 148). One would ask if Mademoiselle is thinking sorrowfully of herself or of Médéric. His transition in fact reminds her of her own since left behind.

The young teacher has been described as in exile; she is a foreigner in this prairie school. Poulin explains this idea: “Une étrangère? Oui. C’est-à-dire, une exilée. Elle a été chassée du pays de l’enfance et a cherché refuge sur cette île, sorte de ‘no man’s land’ que le tumulte environnant menace constamment d’engloutir.”⁴⁹ Mademoiselle throws herself into her work to distract herself. She gets to know her students and their families; she tries to bring education to those most resistant to it. She has had to mature

quickly to adapt to her new surroundings, to live alone and to assume adult responsibilities.

One would expect to find Médéric relieved and happy at the opportunity to leave his rough, domineering father. Mademoiselle is convinced that this escape is through education. “ ‘C’est ta seule vraie échappe ’ ” (*Enfants*, p. 179). Assuming that Mademoiselle represents the voice of young Gabrielle Roy, Genuist interprets Roy’s confidence in empowerment through education:

La pensée de Gabrielle Roy est nuancée. Elle croit sans doute aux immenses bienfaits de l’éducation, mais elle ne veut pas nous cacher que le chemin du savoir est aride, et qu’il n’apporte pas la solution de tout le problème humain. Celui qui a lu tous les livres et appris toutes les sciences n’a pas d’emblée trouvé la clé du bonheur⁵⁰

Médéric’s father sees the value of education in his own way, as Clemente has noticed: “...the father conceives of education and/or pretty schoolmarms as a means to his son’s future success, the teacher offers the school to Médéric as his only practical means of escape from his father’s determinism.”⁵¹

Mademoiselle cannot bridge the generation gap between Médéric’s father’s negatively opportunistic view of education and her own, and unfortunately, the determinism of the Eymard family decides the fate of Médéric. The fact that he is still in pain over his impossible love for his teacher also contributes to Médéric’s sense of failure. He quits school; is it the beginning of the end?

The collection of stories Ces Enfants de ma Vie focuses on the important transitions within the circle of life, between the phases of childhood/adolescence and adulthood. The younger students of the first stories enter the unknown world of school, leaving the protective enclosure of home for the first time. As a teacher, Mademoiselle is sensitive to what these children face. Since she learns more about their family lives, she is able to bridge the gap between their inherited values and priorities and her own, although she tends to believe that education can only benefit these children, offering a way out. Mademoiselle identifies with Mederic's painful voyage into adulthood, having recently been there herself. Again, she feels that by instilling the desire to learn in this young man, he will surpass his father's expectations of him and his own and pattern a better life for himself. Unfortunately, products of a determinism resembling that of Emile Zola, these child characters cannot break away that easily from the cycle of their family traditions and values. Mademoiselle learns these lessons during her years as a school teacher on the Canadian prairie.

The Little WaterHen Teachers

There is a group of children who are able to take full advantage of their education and make a life for themselves very different from that of their parents - the Tousignant children who live on the Water Hen island in La Petite Poule d'Eau. Their mother, Luzina, also sees education as progress, as a way out. Since the family lives in the most northern region of Manitoba, education serves as a bridge to the outside world of which her children will become a part. Luzina finds joy and fulfillment in her children's smiles.⁵² Part of a happy family, the children's desire to leave the home is not as urgent as may be the youngest Demetriooff's, for example. Unfortunately, once the children are ready to venture out into the world full of enthusiasm and knowledge, Luzina realizes that she will be left alone, and she later blames education for taking her children from her.

Although she lives on an island far from the nearest civilization, and despite her own lack of education, Luzina Tousignant believes firmly in the immense benefits of education, and will do her best to fulfill every government requirement to bring a schoolteacher to WaterHen. When the government insists upon an enrollment of at least six pupils, Luzina is thrilled that she can comply:

Elle vit aussi à quel point elle avait été bien inspirée de ne pas s'arrêter une seule année une seule année de mettre au monde de futurs écoliers. Aurait-elle eu besoin d'encouragement que ce dernier

règlement de l'instruction touchant le nombre des élèves n'aurait pas eu pour effet de ralentir Luzina. (Poule d'Eau, p. 41).

Luzina makes it her mission to bring education to the little island; from her generation she inherited the belief in education but her obligations kept her from further pursuit. Now that the world around them is growing, Luzina wants to bring it to her children, and give them what she never had:

“Luzina était déjà prête à tout renverser pour recevoir sa maîtresse d'école...”

(Poule d'Eau, p. 41).

The equation - education equals progress - is clear to Luzina. Her visions are deepened and broadened, as will be those of her children. “Elle vit le progrès venir à eux...Et maintenant, une maîtresse d'école était en route vers l'île de la Petite Poule d'Eau. Ah! il n'y avait pas de doute possible: la civilisation, le progrès, soufflaient de ce côté-ci comme le vent du dégel” (Poule d'Eau, p. 59). The long winter of isolation is over, and she sees the arrival of the schoolteacher as a “thawing spring breeze”, giving life and nourishing what has been covered for so long. Luzina will feel more in touch with the world outside through the enlarging experiences of her children.

When the first teacher finally arrives on the island, she is not the old maid that Luzina may have expected, reminiscing about her own school teachers, and it is obvious that this brand-new teacher is equally surprised at her first assignment in the wilderness. In a comical scene, Luzina

watches the teacher cross the river in her fancy clothes: “Un petit chapeau de paille, un vrai chapeau de ville qu’elle portait très incliné sur l’œil droit piquait sa plume rouge partout entre les roseaux qui menaçaient de la lui arracher” (Poule d’Eau, p. 62). Evidently this young teacher is not prepared to be portaging through Northern Manitoba, but rather “On aurait dit qu’elle venait prendre un poste à deux pas de la gare, en plein village, sous le nez d’au moins douze familles qui guettaient son arrivée” (Poule d’Eau, p.62). Young Mademoiselle Côté never dreamed of a teaching position so far from the nearest village.

One can imagine the aspirations of a young educated teacher; who goes to school and receives an education to open up opportunities. Being then placed on a practically inaccessible island in the most northern part of Manitoba is an opportunity few young graduates would wish for. As for Mademoiselle Côté, “Depuis deux semaines seulement, elle détenait son brevet tout neuf d’enseignement” and to further complicate things, she did not seem the outdoor type. Surely she would have liked to work in a village where she could be around other people. “Depuis bien des heures, la pauvre enfant n’avait plus la moindre idée du lieu où elle se trouvait” (Poule d’Eau, p.64). There is anxiety created as we wonder how she will handle her initial disappointment, but we are relieved to find that it will not affect her

relationship with her pupils, and she will immediately throw herself into her work at the island school.

At first, it seems as though Luzina is getting the most out of Mademoiselle's lessons. Of French descent, Mademoiselle Côté has already fallen under the good graces of Luzina, who clings to the tradition of her generation. Her French perspective on history thrills Luzina. She listens to the old stories Mlle Côté tells the children and she is once again thrown into her childhood memories: "C'était beau! Plus beau encore que dans les livres à l'entendre raconter par la maîtresse avec tout ce talent, cette jeunesse fervente qu'elle y mettait. Luzina avait envie de rire, de pleurer ." (Poule d'Eau, p. 69). Through her children's educational experience, Luzina becomes a student once again. She is freed from her household responsibilities and brought back in time, where she rediscovers her heritage. Luzina is proud to remember that she is smart, even though her duties as a wife and mother have taken over her life.

The novelty of the new young schoolmistress has just as much influence over the children, and Luzina later watches rather sadly as she sees how much her children revere their teacher. She knows that as a mother, she can never share the same bond with her children.

Ils riaient avec délice. Mademoiselle savait les faire rire comme jamais Luzina ne les avait entendus rire. Elle savait apparemment tout obtenir d'eux. Ainsi elle frappa les mains l'une dans l'autre, et aussitôt ils s'alignèrent et redevinrent fort sérieux, appliqués à marcher comme Mademoiselle. (Poule d'Eau, p.73).

The influence of someone closer to their generation, a bright young teacher is very powerful. Mlle Côté is very much in tune with the children. “Elle savait toutes les choses aussi que les enfants désirent apprendre, les noms de tout ce qui les entoure et dont la connaissance donne la possession...” (Poule d’Eau, p.76). As a mother, Luzina has many responsibilities and not enough time to participate in educational activities.

In fact, the children are rather embarrassed of their own mother, afraid that somehow she may jinx Mademoiselle’s image of them. “Ce qui les impatientait surtout, c’était la crainte de voir révélé à Mademoiselle leur jour quotidien par une fâcheuse remarque de leur mère. De plus, ils avaient peur de voir échapper Mademoiselle.” (Poule d’Eau, p.74). This fear marks another step away from their mother; they seek validation through others that influence them. Luzina recognizes her children’s wish that she not interfere in their beloved relationship with their teacher. She observes that they treat their teacher better: “Mais où donc, par exemple, avaient-ils appris tant de délicatesse amoureuse qu’ils n’avaient encore jamais marquée à leur propre mère!” (Poule d’Eau, p.76). Luzina, as would any mother, finds these steps away from her difficult.

Luzina’s reaction of feeling left out is quite expected. She must share the position of role model with the young schoolmistress, if not renounce it to her altogether. The school day is over and the children still are tagging

behind the teacher, rather than coming home to their mother. She complains out of exasperation about her children, trying to pry them away from Mlle Côté. “ ‘Des petits haïssibles!’ complained Luzina. ‘Si vous commencez à les écouter, ils ne vous laisseront jamais tranquille. Des petits haïssibles!’ ” (Poule d’Eau, p.75) Her authority is also humbled and turned over to Mlle Côté, as we see when Luzina tries to keep at least the littlest child with her, while the others run after their teacher: “La petite fille se retourna. Ses yeux étaient sombres. Au milieu du sentier, trépigant de la colère d’être retardée, elle se rebiffa: ‘La maîtresse a dit que je pouvais apprendre les choses, moi aussi!’ ” (Poule d’Eau, p.76). Luzina has finally lost every last child to the company of Mademoiselle Côté.

For Joséphine, her exposure to education, especially her encounter with Mademoiselle Côté, has inspired her to become a teacher:

Il y avait quatre ans qu’une grande ambition avait soulevé Joséphine: marcher sur des talons hauts, d’une démarche légère et pleine de grâce comme Mademoiselle; se coiffer avec des bouclettes sur le front comme Mademoiselle; et, ce qui était beaucoup plus difficile, devenir savante comme Mademoiselle (Poule d’Eau, p.114).

When no more teachers come to the island, it is Joséphine who takes over: “Elle menait, en rang, quatre ou cinq petits Tousignants dans un coin de la cuisine ou dehors sous un bouleau, et elle annonçait d’une mine sérieuse qui rappelait singulièrement Mademoiselle Côté: ‘L’école va commencer’ ” (Poule

d'Eau, p. 108). Mademoiselle Côté has instilled in Luzina's children, especially Joséphine, a passion for learning and an enduring ambition.

The Tousignant children are fortunate to have had three different teachers, each offering something memorable. Although Luzina does not immediately like the third, Armand Dubreuil - finding his carefree, liberal attitude detrimental to the learning process - she recognizes at his departure his contribution to the children's motivation. Luzina is disappointed when he leaves, and admits:

Il n'avait pas été toujours à son devoir, du moins dans les premiers temps. Il avait prêché de mauvaises choses: la nature, la fantaisie, la liberté. Pourtant il avait peut-être été leur meilleur maître...Il avait dit qu'il n'était pas très important d'apprendre, et c'était lui pourtant qui leur en avait le plus donné le goût. (Poule d'Eau, p. 104).

Luzina finds the positive aspects of everybody; she admires the bond between her children and each schoolteacher. She appreciates the positive contributions and is grateful for their encouragement, deliberate or not, toward further educational pursuits.

Luzina even finds a beneficial contribution by dry, British, Miss O'Rourke, who is the second teacher to come to the island. At first, the children cry and refuse to go to school to listen to her day-long patriotic speeches. She is harsh and severe with them, yet Luzina is convinced that "L'instruction ne pouvait être que joie. Une si grande richesse, une si profonde expérience pouvaient bien coûter quelques pleurs." An opportunist,

she focuses on the English as the bonus: “Quoique incapable de l’apprécier, Luzina ne le tenait pas moins pour une qualité: ‘Elle parle bien l’anglais, en tout cas’ ” (Poule d’Eau, p. 85). Ironically, despite the children’s complaints, Luzina’s son Edmond will later excel in the English language.

When Luzina brings the first teacher to the island, surely she does not envision the departure of her children. The completion of her cycle as a mother weighs upon her, and she looks upon her approaching solitude with regret:

Presque tous les ans elle partait, et elle faisait vite afin de revenir avec un enfant de plus contre le désert à peupler. Maintenant, elle restait et c’étaient les enfants qui partaient. Luzina voyait en quelque sorte la vie. Et elle n’en croyait pas son bon coeur: la vie qu’elle avait tant aidée, déjà, petit à petit l’abandonnait. (Poule d’Eau, p.124).

Luzina finds it difficult to recognize the great gift she has given her children. Although raised in the isolated north, they have every opportunity to fulfill their aspirations. As a result, Luzina grudgingly names Mlle Côté responsible for taking her children away.

The value Luzina places on education has not changed, yet one by one her children will leave her. Gabrielle Roy paints moving scenes between Luzina and her children that illustrate the tension the mother faces. Joséphine is the eldest and the first to go. Luzina reacts weakly by trying to

discourage her dreams of becoming a schoolteacher. Gabrielle Roy calls this her “very sly defence strategy”:⁵³

‘Pour faire une maîtresse d’école’, dit Luzina , ‘il faudrait que tu ailles au couvent des années, puis des années. Tu serais enfermée, au loin. Faudrait que tu fasses au goût des soeurs tout le temps. Et d’abord, faudrait que tu partes toute seule avec le vieux Nick Sluzick, que tu prennes les gros chars. Une petite puce comme toi, tu penses que ça aurait du bon sens! (Poule d’Eau, p.118).

Luzina has forgotten, or perhaps neglected to mention the pleasure in the independence of her yearly trips away from the island, and the independence she feels. Luzina passed on her sense of adventure to her children, and “Ne s’en apercevant point, Luzina venait d’ouvrir à la petite Joséphine l’exact chemin des grands projets qu’elle entendait poursuivre. C’était en effet ainsi que Joséphine procéderait” (Poule d’Eau, p.118). Joséphine, like her mother, loves a challenge and her mother has described exactly the road she will follow.

When her children are settled at their destinations, Luzina is proud of them. She keeps track of their achievements; she is thrilled by their eloquent letters. Her children begin to express their gratitude toward their mother for her role in their success. During her first year of teaching, Joséphine sends a heart-wrenching letter in which she writes:

Chère maman, quand je suis entrée ce matin dans ma classe et que j’ai vu se tourner vers moi le visage des enfants, j’ai bien pensé à toi. Dire que ce bonheur, je le dois en grande partie, ma chère maman, à ton esprit de sacrifice, à ton dévouement... (Poule d’Eau, p. 136).

Luzina is deeply touched by her daughter's letter, and proud: "Joséphine s'exprimait aussi bien que dans les livres" (Poule d'Eau, p. 137).

There is one Tousignant child who will not be leaving the little Water Hen; this is little Claire-Armelle. "Le Bon Dieux lui avait donné celle-ci pour être le baton de sa vieillesse." (Poule d'Eau, p. 138). Although it is unlikely that there will be any more school teachers on the island, Luzina's last child will also learn. To pass the time, Luzina teaches little Claire-Armelle the alphabet until finally she can reply to letters sent by her accomplished brothers and sisters. The childish handwriting the older children discover on the envelopes sent from the island brings them back to their days on the Little Water Hen, and "Et les enfants instruits de Luzina avaient un instant le coeur serré, comme si leur enfance là-bas, dans l'île de la Petite Poule d'Eau, leur eût reproché leur élévation" (Poule d'Eau, p. 139). Of course, there is always a twinge of regret when one contemplates family left behind. Paula Gilbert Lewis touches upon this reminiscence: "they feel as though [their past] is scolding them for having grown up, for having become educated, and therefore, for having bettered themselves to such an extent that they had to depart."⁵⁴ Surely Luzina's children are thinking about the sacrifices she made so that they may lead challenging and exciting lives.

The Tousignant children are blessed to have parents who gave them the opportunity to develop their talents. Luzina has raised and educated her children, so they may be part of the more populated regions of the province. Her daughters will not be pressured to emulate the way of life of her generation, staying home and bearing a child each spring. Her sons will not have to depend on the harsh land and climate for their earnings. By bringing schoolteachers to the island, Luzina has enlarged their world. Unfortunately, as a mother sharing a close bond with her children, Luzina has opposed feelings about their departure. She feels that ironically, education both empowered her children, and then stole them from her. This is Luzina's sacrifice. Each teacher on the island influences the Tousignant children. Mademoiselle Côté has inspired Joséphine to pursue a teaching career. Armand Dubreuil, whom Luzina does not like at first, motivates the children with his natural, liberal approach to education. Miss O'Rourke somehow brings English into the life of Luzina's son Edmond. Luzina bridges the generation gap in this delightful novel by Gabrielle Roy, and she does it because of her own passion for education and progress.

The Elderly and Children

In the works of Gabrielle Roy the school instructors are not the only teachers. The relationships between the elderly and children are similar to

those between teacher and student, as the child's world is enlarged by valuable lessons. This study will first present the relationship between Christine and her grandmother which are explored in the first chapter of the novel "Ma grand-mère toute puissante", "My Almighty Grandmother". Next the relationship between Christine and M. Sainte-Hilaire will be explored. Though he is not her true grandfather, there are mysterious and moving bonds that exist between them. He teaches her, with infinite patience, all about which she is passionate; he knows almost by instinct what will interest her. There are times, however, when the gap between these two generations opens very wide and becomes difficult to bridge. Suddenly the relationships Christine shares with her Grandmother and with M. Sainte-Hilaire bring confusion and distress. In La Route d'Altamont, Christine learns valuable practical lessons, but she also learns those more abstract and universal: the lessons of life; of the existence of man; of the relationships between all beings. There are vibrant images of the circle of life; it links all living things together. We enter the cycle of life in which each being has a constantly changing role.

When Christine goes to visit her grandmother, she hardly expects to have a good time. In fact, she is sure of the contrary, "qu'elle va s'ennuyer ici, c'est certain, c'est écrit dans le ciel" (Altamont, p. 10). Her typically childish reaction invites the reader to share the experience; anticipating

the end result of this summer shared between grandmother and granddaughter. Grandmother answers her “Tu vas voir, tu ne t’ennuieras pas tant que cela. Quand je le veux, quand je me mets en frais, j’ai cent manières de distraire un enfant” (Altamont, p. 11). It is at this moment that Mémère assumes the role of teacher and that Christine becomes the willing participant and enthusiastic student. Christine learns much from her grandmother that she could never have learned without patience and many hours spent together.

While fabricating a home-made doll, “une catin”, for Christine, grandmother presents her version of her life’s past events. While she marvels that her grandmother is so talented, Christine learns her family heritage. Of the rags she is sent to fetch, Christine says to herself “C’était plaisant de pouvoir rattaché tant de souvenirs (à ces retailles)” (Altamont, p. 18). At first, grandmother explains to her how life was so much less convenient when she was raising her family. “ ‘Moi, jeune, je devais me passer d’acheter dans les magasins. J’ai appris, j’ai appris’ dit-elle, regardant au loin dans sa vie...” (Altamont, p. 18). The repetition of the words *j’ai appris, j’ai appris* invites us to venture further and further back in the past through her memory. As grandmother succeeds in not missing a single detail of her *catin*, Christine is in awe: “Je devenais humble, très humble devant la majesté de son cerveau, l’ingéniosité de ses mains, cette

espèce de solitude hautaine et indéchiffrable de ce qui est occupé à créer”

(Altamont, p. 22). When the project is completed, she cries to her

grandmother “Tu es Dieu le Père. Toi aussi, tu sais faire tout de rien”

(Altamont, p. 28). Christine learns that her grandmother has the creative mind to produce something as beautiful as her doll. She notices immediately her grandmother’s insistence on the value of hand-made things.

After beginning this subject, Grandmother continues her campaign for the value of things made at home, and Christine understands that she holds to the ideals of her generation, as she speaks of it all the time. Grandma complains constantly of the poor quality of store-bought products: “Les magasins vendent surtout de la camelote, mal cousue, mal finie” (Altamont, p. 24). Below the surface, what bothers her more deeply than store objects are the modern young people: “les jeunes d’aujourd’hui ne connaissent pas le bonheur et la fierté de se tirer d’affaire avec ce qu’on peut avoir sous la main. Ils jettent tout” (Altamont, p. 21). Paula Gilbert Lewis believes that grandmother “is jealous of these younger individuals...she is ashamed before them of her old age and her old ways...she defensively treats youth with cynical scorn.”⁵⁵ Perhaps Paula Gilbert Lewis is rather severe in her judgement. Mémère often criticizes young people, but the elderly’s difficulty in adapting to new traditions and her self-perception as obsolete, cause her bitterness.

The elderly in the works of Gabrielle Roy often try to remain useful and to avoid becoming a burden to their families. Mémère is far from being a burden while Christine stays with her. After the doll's completion, Christine believes that her grandmother can do anything. The desire to remain an active member of society, according to Paula Gilbert Lewis, is important for the elderly in La Route d'Altamont, because "when they succeed in this desire, as does Mémère, they are deeply flattered by the attention and respect given to them by the young, and a mutual admiration and communication can then begin between the two generations."⁵⁶ It is in this way that Christine and her grandmother begin to connect and understand each other. She now has the patience to get to know her better.

If the young people save so much time by buying ready-made products at the store, why do they not have the time to go and visit their grandmother from time to time? Paula Gilbert Lewis clarifies that this question explains grandmother's sarcasm, which "stems from a reaction against the treatment of older people by the young."⁵⁷ Being an observant child, Christine learns what accompanies old age - solitude. Grandmother certainly knows that given the choice, her adolescent grandchildren would rather go and have their own fun than to come to her house, thus she protects herself by a wall of criticism: "Ah, cette jeunesse d'aujourd'hui!" (Altamont, p. 13). But at a more vulnerable moment, she sighs to herself, saying:

On est puni par où on a désiré, toujours. J'ai sans doute trop souhaité mes aises, un bon ordre établi et de n'avoir plus constamment des enfants dans mes jupes avec leurs jérémiades. Oui, j'ai souhaité une minute à moi. A présent, j'ai à moi un siècle (Altamont, p. 14).

Accidentally overhearing Grandmother's private thoughts, Christine learns the dark side of grandmother's life. Her bitter reaction is a result of her recent loneliness.

It is here that the chasm between the generations opens very wide. Christine does not always understand her Grandmother's obsession with outdated values. Grandmother describes in detail her life of the past in which she toiled very hard. She wants everyone to appreciate her frustration that she is not trusted to decide herself how much work she is still capable of doing. Paula Gilbert Lewis remarks that "Mémère, like most elderly people, simply needs to prove to herself and to others that she is still a useful, capable human being."⁵⁸

Christine becomes witness to rapid changes in her grandmother, or at least, she is more aware because Maman finally persuades her to live with them and she sees her daily. When Maman shows Christine a photograph of Mémère as a young woman, Christine is struck by confusion: "Je suppose que je devais croire que grand-mère avait toujours été vieille (Altamont, p.37). Christine barely recognizes her anymore, and she cannot get over the changes. Persuaded that she should now rest, it seems as though

Grandmother ages more quickly. Christine is distraught to find her in this state:

...oh j'avais tant à faire que je ne m'aperçus guère de ce que devenait grand-mère de jour en jour... je voyais, tassée dans le fond de la cuisine, une vieille personne dont les yeux suivaient toutes nos allées et nos venues avec une expression étrange. L'idée persistait en moi que ce n'était pas ma vraie grand-mère que maman avait ramenée ce soir du neige. Elle avait dû se tromper, ramener quelqu'un d'autre. Car ma vraie grand-mère n'aurait jamais pu rester inactive. Elle avait toujours dit que cela la tuerait de rester à ne rien faire (Altamont, p.46).

Christine remembers the doll her grandmother made and her pride in her talents. Now she understands how life transforms people. After many years of taking pride in everything accomplished, Grandmother feels useless, a burden to her family. Finally she expresses this feeling directly: "Plus bonne à rien...à la charge...voudrais m'en aller...", showing a readiness for heaven.

In "Ma grand-mère toute puissante", Christine has the opportunity to know her grandmother while she is still active and relatively lively, and to realize that her Grandmother, once young like herself, was uprooted from Québec to live in Manitoba. As Paula Gilbert has noticed "With their nostalgia and respect for, as well as their knowledge of the past, old people serve as guardians of that past and of tradition."⁵⁹ She has a clearer idea of the importance to Grandmother of hard work to make everything one needs from what is at home. At the end of the story when Christine shows her

grandmother the family photos, she begins to understand the passage of time and the generations.

According to Paula Gilbert Lewis, after her grandmother's death, Christine searches to fill a void. This she does by befriending M. Saint-Hilaire, her "bon vieillard". A patient man, he becomes Christine's summer teacher; from the very beginning she is perfectly comfortable asking him all sorts of questions. Sharing her imagination and sense of adventure, M. Sainte-Hilaire knows exactly what Christine will love. At eighty-four years old, he sees the world again through the eyes of his young friend. Christine learns many lessons of geography, and history, and she expands her vocabulary. In passing so many hours with M. Sainte-Hilaire, however, Christine comes back to the more abstract lessons, those more difficult to learn. She learns once again about old age, and about the cycle of human life.

After getting to know her Grandmother, and developing a close friendship, Christine gets along just as well with M. Sainte-Hilaire. In fact, he becomes her best friend and her teacher. A young, intuitive creature, Christine contemplates her easily-formed bonds with the elderly

Etait-ce donc cela, cette espèce de prescience que j'avais de leur disparition proche qui me les rendait si chers? Mais alors, eux, les vieillards, pourquoi auraient-ils été pareillement attirés vers moi? Ne serait-ce pas qu'il est naturel aux petites mains à peine formées aux vieilles mains amenuisées, de se joindre?...Mais là encore, qui expliquera ce phénomène tout aussi plein lui-même de mystère que celui de la vie, que celui de la mort dans un cercueil (Altamont, p.68).

M. Sainte-Hilaire also notices this special bond. The two enjoy playing “voyageur” in an imaginary world. Emphasizing the special relationship between them, he often points out to Christine their commonalities. When Christine tells him, “ ‘On est matinal’ ”, he explains to her “ ‘Oui, matinal. Il le faut, quand on est vieux, quand on est jeune. Ce sont les gens entre deux âges qui restent le plus longtemps au lit. Nous autres, les très jeunes, les très vieux, on n’en a pas le temps, hein’ ” (Altamont, p. 64). These two friends with much in common will make a voyage of friendship and learning.

Christine is surprised that the old man, almost by instinct, knows that “je n’étais pas souvent seulement moi” (Altamont, p. 65). He is as enthusiastic as she is about games, although as we will see, his role is more passive. While playing this imaginative game in which Christine becomes the explorer La Vérendrye, she learns geography and history: “ ‘...je dois aller découvrir toutes les terres à l’Ouest jusqu’aux Montagnes Rocheuses’, dis je. ‘Si je ne suis pas tuée en route, avant ce soir j’aurai pris possession de l’Ouest pour le Roi de France’ ” (Altamont, p. 65). This ostensibly innocent game more profoundly represents the voyage of life at whose beginning we find Christine. M. Sainte-Hilaire must stay under the shade of the tree and wait, because “ ‘pour ma part, j’ai passé l’âge des grandes voyages épuisants. Je n’irai plus guère en personne contempler les paysages et les spectacles de

ce monde. Mais, si vous venez me les décrire, ce sera comme si je les avais vus' ” (Altamont, p. 66). M. Sainte-Hilaire wishes to have the experience of the game and of life's adventures through generous young people, like Christine, who is thrilled to share it with him. For Christine, this time spent with M. Sainte-Hilaire provokes a desire to understand and measure the distance of life's route.

She enjoys discussing geography with the old man, so she describes to her friend the countryside where her uncle lives with his family. Because M. Sainte-Hilaire seems very formal, always dressed in a suit, Christine wants to express herself very correctly as she does in her compositions at school:

‘La campagne de mes oncles’, commençai-je sur un grand souffle, comme si j’allais parvenir loin, dire beaucoup de choses, et m’aperçus, hélas, à ce moment, que je ne savais pas encore témoigner en faveur ce que j’aimais...Mais je poursuivis quand même: ‘c’est une campagne plus haute que par ici. Dans *l’attitude*, essayai-je d’expliquer’ (Altamont, p. 82).

Her teacher, the old man, corrects her and supplies the word likely read in a textbook but long forgotten, *l’altitude*. The very word seems to extend the young girl's horizons.

The world becomes, in the same way, much larger when Christine learns about Lake Winnipeg and its extent. It is typical for Christine to compare her steady flow questions about age, to something concrete such as the lake. First, she struggles to understand the significance of her grandmother's life. This process includes infinite questions and

comparisons. Christine seeks to define for herself the significance of the short human life when compared to that of the earth, for example its lakes and oceans. She must imagine the size of the lake in relation to the earth. M. Sainte-Hilaire tells her “ ‘C’est bougrement grand...on ne voit pas d’un bord à l’autre; c’est trop vaste.’ ” Christine stops on the word vast. “ ‘Vaste, repris-je en écho, rêveuse...’ ” (Altamont, p. 66). Christine sees the expanse of the world before her. Do these childhood experiences with M. Sainte-Hilaire explain Christine’s later desire to travel to France after her studies? As she learns the rather exotic background of her old friend, he becomes more intriguing to her.

M. Sainte-Hilaire, like any teacher, is captured by Christine’s enthusiasm for learning; he gives Christine the time to enjoy each wonderful concept: “le vieillard qui aimait me voir apprendre de ses mots me laissa le temps qu’il fallait pour bien m’entrer celui-là dans la tête avant de poursuivre”. Then he continues: “ ‘A un certain degré d’ampleur et de vastitude, l’oeil humain ne se distingue plus de différence’ ” (Altamont, p. 140), but Christine wants to see the other side of the lake: to establish the distance; to solidify. The old man is concerned that Christine is always wishing for more, rather than finding satisfaction in what she sees before her. M. Sainte-Hilaire insists upon this idea: “Le coeur est ainsi fait que, plus qu’il en a, et plus il lui en faut” (Altmont, p. 142). According to him, the

impatience of youth pushes Christine toward trying to obtain too much at once.

Finally together on the shore of the lake, Christine watches the waves on the lake surface rise and fall. She tries so hard to see the far side, or the end of the lake: “ ‘Là-bas, là-bas, demandai-je, est-ce la fin ou le commencement?’ ” His answer is somewhat philosophical: “ ‘La fin, le commencement? Tu en poses de ces questions! La fin, le commencement...Et si c’était la même chose au fond...si c’était la même chose...Peut-être que tout arrive à former un grand cercle, la fin et le recommencement se rejoignant’ ” (Altamont, p. 121). The image of the lake’s circle represents that of life. Paula Gilbert Lewis has studied the image of the circle in the works of Gabrielle Roy, and finds that:

...time, humanity, and the universe function in a circular or cyclical manner as a spiral, pendulum or whirlwind. The presence of what one can call the great circle of life, death and re-birth has already been suggested in relation to a return to youth through children, heredity, the ability or at least the desire of Royan adults for *recommencement*, and the effective links among generations in their mutual rapports of communication and understanding.⁶⁰

Christine herself notices, in contemplating the relationships between the elderly and children that she was not sure of the exact distance between them, but “sans doute n’avais-je pas encore clairement compris que tous nous finirons ainsi, que ce sera là notre dernière image de nos êtres les plus aimés, mais je pressentais plus près d’elle que j’en étais moi-même les vieux

visages ridés" (Altamont, p. 67). Christine can place herself and her old friend in their positions on the circle of life. She can sense the great distance between them, yet that on the same circle, they almost join. "It is noteworthy, that Christine, who so effectively represents youth in the Royan literary universe, is the one who best understands the nature of this circular phenomenon."⁶¹

Like the waves of the lake that turn themselves over again and again toward the shore, grandparents are re-born through their children. Gabrielle Roy effectively uses this metaphor that illustrates the parallels between human existence and the earth, our universal mother from whom we all come. In Roy's works, the elderly have the opportunity to become children again through the important events and periods of their children's and grandchildren's lives. When Christine sees the lake for the first time, the old man surely is thinking also of his first view of the lake. Instead of looking at it with her, he looks at her, at her reaction: "Il ne pouvait pas parler lui non plus tellement il était content. Mais ses yeux guettaient plus le grand champ bleu étalé au loin. Ils me guettaient, moi plutôt, comme si c'était moi le grand lac que nous venions voir" (Altamont, p. 110). The old man wants so much to see childish delight in her eyes; this is what pleases him. He is a tired old man; he can no longer jump for joy when he sees the lake.

Poor M. Sainte-Hilaire has grandchildren who do not have time for him, therefore he seeks to relive his childhood through Christine's friendship. When they are at the lake, they are approached by a stranger who remarks: "Est-ce que ce n'est pas charmant de voir ensemble et s'entendant si bien un grand-père et petite fille?" (Altamont, p. 126). At this innocent observation, Christine explains the reaction she shares with M. Sainte-Hilaire as they look at one another, thinking the same thoughts: "Nous deux avons alors échangé un regard pétillant de ce que nous savions: que nous n'étions pas vraiment grand-père et petite fille et que pourtant nous l'étions plus que si c'était vrai" (Altamont, p. 126). Their relationship represents the ideal relationship between grandparent and grandchild. Often family relationships are taken for granted, as by M. Sainte-Hilaire's grandchildren. The gap between the generations widens when he thinks of them; "ils n'étaient pas méchants ni sans-cœur, mais qu'ils avaient dans le corps la maladie du siècle: le goût de la vitesse, des autos, des motocyclettes et aussi de dépenser l'argent au plus vite...et que lui, à présent, se sentait trop vieux pour pouvoir encore s'adapter à la frénésie d'aujourd'hui" (Altamont, p. 126). As did Grandmother, M. Sainte-Hilaire has difficulty relating to the new generation, whose mode of life is too fast, too extravagant. Christine is not yet part of this group; she thus replaces the

void in his life, because “qu’une seule personne venant à nous manquer, la terre peut nous paraître un désert” (Altamont, p. 127).

It is not always easy, however, for Christine to be at the same level as M. Sainte-Hilaire, and often enough they feel the distance between their ages. When M. Sainte-Hilaire must take a nap after lunch, Christine realizes once again that her friend is an old man:

Tout à coup il m’apparut infiniment plus vieux que je m’en étais jusqu’alors aperçue, sans doute à cause de la vivacité de ses yeux bleus quand ils étaient éveillés; mais à présent, ne montrant plus qu’un peu de blanc laiteux sous les paupières à moitié closes, ils m’effrayèrent. Je n’arrivais plus à le reconnaître. (Altamont, p.128).

Evidently, this image reminds Christine of her grandmother, who grew old so rapidly before her eyes. Paula Gilbert Lewis interprets Christine’s perception of death: “The eight-year-old child initially views death as a mere disappearance or absence of someone. When she first sees M. Saint-Hilaire asleep, however, she begins to fear what she does not understand.”⁶²

Christine is never more conscious of this distance of years between them than at the moment when she sees it written in the sand. Her perception of what age one must be to be old is shattered. When she says to him, as if in confidence “ ‘Ma grand-mère était vieille, vieille, quand elle est morte...Elle avait quatre-vingt ans.’ ” He suggests his own age in his reply “ ‘Ce n’est pas encore si vieux que cela!’ ” (Altamont, p. 137). Christine does

not want to hear that her old friend is older than her grandmother was when she died. He thus whispers his age in her ear, and she writes it on the sand.

Dieu sait pourquoi j'ai eu l'idée de disposer ces chiffres, son âge et le mien, comme dans un problème d'arithmétique, et je fis la soustraction. Je fus atterrée devant ce qui me restait et me parut nous séparer par quelque étendue de temps plus mystérieuse encore que les étendues d'eau et de terre. (Altamont p. 138).

After they subtract her age from his, Christine is surprised by the number left: " 'Soixante-seize ans, c'est beaucoup' " (Altamont, p. 138). She is faced once again with disturbing facts of life. The emotional highs and lows Christine feels on the beach are like the waves of the lake.

In the most moving scene of this part "Le vieillard et l'enfant", Christine is full of tears and of questions about old age and death. Finally after an accumulation of questions, she bursts: " 'Quand on est vieux, vieux, est-ce qu'il faut mourir?' " (Altamont, p. 135). Christine wants to understand and M. Sainte-Hilaire has the patience to answer her: " 'Mais vieux, c'est naturel...On a fait sa vie. On a comme le goût d'aller voir maintenant de l'autre côté.' " (Altamont, p. 135). He knows his time is soon, but M. Sainte-Hilaire admits that " 'Je voudrais encore un petit peu de temps, je suppose qu'on voudrait toujours encore un petit peu de temps.' " (Altamont, p. 136).

The lessons that the old man teaches to Christine are much deeper than those she might learn at school. By examining more concrete things like lakes, coulees and mountains, Christine's world enlargens. The voyages

through these monuments of nature are a parallel of those we make throughout our lifetime. The elderly, who no longer travel, may relive these experiences through their children and children's children. For M. Sainte-Hilaire, who has no constant role in his own grandchildren's life, Christine replaces the void. For her, who after having discovered a special relationship with her grandmother loses her suddenly, M. Sainte-Hilaire assumes the place of a patient teacher, and also of a friend. Life's events that seem overwhelming are rapidly reduced when put in perspective in relation to the vastness of the earth, and in turn the universe. A citation from Paula Gilbert Lewis who has written many thematic studies on Gabrielle Roy's works summarizes the notions of generations and the circularity of life:

These works remain optimistic, precisely because of the circular nature of humanity and of the world. One must not forget that, since the works remain open at their end, there is always hope, always a new dawn, always a possibility of *recommencement*. Memories as well, will present the closing of the circle, since, as shall be later analyzed, they create a form of eternity or immortality. Rather than being depicted as a circle, therefore, this universe is more accurately seen as cyclical, as a series of concentric or superimposed circles, all within one infinite circle encompassing humanity, nature and time. This ultimate circle will never close.⁶³

CHAPTER THREE

Human Relationships with the Environment, the Universe

Through a close look thus far at several of Gabrielle Roy's novels, filled with anecdotes of the lives of her characters, we have explored the relationships between family members. Families must often find a way to bridge the generation gaps between them to communicate with and understand one another, despite many outside influences and forces. Children naturally resist their parents, from a fear of inheriting the negative aspects of their generation. We have also studied the role of the teacher who serves as the bridge when the chasm between her students and their parents affects their educational experience. At the same time, the teacher must struggle to accept firmly the essential gap separating herself from her students not so much younger than herself. We have seen how the teacher and education bridge the distance between the security of home and the outside world. The third chapter will take a step outside the microcosms of the family and of the classroom, and look at the individual's relationship with his/her environment and his universe. Within the Royan world, there is a gap similar as that between generations as humans attempt to understand their significance, through analyzing their relationship with their fellows, with their environment, and with nature. Again, there is an element of determinism as Roy's characters often possess qualities and instincts that explain their actions and attitudes, and which lead them into a

certain life pattern. To focus on man's relationship with the environment and its influence, I have chosen Alexandre Chenevert and Bonheur d'Occasion, Roy's urban novels of realism. The urban character of these two novels is a direct product of the environment in which they have lived.

These city creatures are, as a result of their urban "programming", out of touch with nature. Each character of Bonheur d'Occasion is affected by their upbringing in the poverty-stricken, war-time quartier of Saint-Henri. The somber, depressed description of Saint-Henri renders it a destructive force, a metaphorized prison from which all its inhabitants wish to escape. The war and the people of the Montréal "quartier" have created an environment in which those who live there can no longer survive. The world has progressed, and left the people of Saint-Henri behind, their values and skills no longer of any use to them. Pierre Cordorai of La Montagne Secrète will serve to illustrate Roy's portrayal of a man's relationship with his universe and with nature. As an artist, he has been "chosen" to fulfill the difficult task as a translator of nature, of his world, for his fellow human. Alexandre and Pierre are alike in their similar quest towards an unachievable goal; the two characters share a heavy responsibility given to them by an unknown force, that both separates them from humankind, and yet at the same time intensifies their bond to their fellow human beings. As a somehow superior individual programmed for his dismal existence in the city, who seems

predestined for suffering and the only person truly concerned about humankind as a whole, Alexandre carries the world on his shoulders and feels totally alone, apart from even his family. As an artist, Pierre Cordorai experiences the same distance between himself and all of humanity. His calling requires solitude. His inner force driving him to create is accompanied by the self-inflicted responsibility to his fellow man to decipher life's puzzles and transmit his message through his painting. Nature plays an important role in Roy's novels. For Alexandre, it becomes the ultimate yet temporary bridge between himself and his fellow human. When he escapes the oppressive city to seek solitude in nature, he finds love and a more positive outlook on humanity. Pierre's artistic endeavors require him to act as a translator of nature; his problem lies in his adjustment to the often cruel laws of the wild, and also to man's treatment of God's creatures. His relationship as an artist with his audience is similar to that of the pursuer and the pursued in nature. Following the thread of bridging the generation gap, which has never been applied to the urban novel Alexandre Chenevert, nor to La Montagne Secrète, we will study Alexandre Chenevert and Pierre Cordorai and their journey to understanding their place in the universe, in relation to their rapport with their fellow human beings and nature.

Roy's Urban Novels

Roy's first urban novel Bonheur d'Occasion best illustrates the impact of the environment on its inhabitants. We have already seen how the story illustrates the strained relationships between family members stricken by poverty. This section will focus on the interaction between the characters and the economically depressed, war-time quarter of Saint-Henri in Montréal. The dark, somber, noisy neighborhood is filled with factories manufacturing war products, and trains roaring through day and night. It is contrasted with the English neighborhood Westmount, a brightly-lit, flowering suburb. McPherson describes the significance of Roy's depiction of Saint-Henri: "In Gabrielle Roy's imaginative landscape, that is, big-city living, with its soot and noise, its mechanical routine and impersonality suggest simultaneously both the pains of adulthood and the dislocations of this happy century."⁶⁴ Lewis clarifies the dislocations of the characters of Bonheur d'Occasion: "Never becoming fully adapted to the rapid progress and to the frenetic, costly lifestyle surrounding them, they stagnate, remaining neither rural or urban."⁶⁵ In Roy's portrayal of war-time Montréal, humans have created an environment in which most people can barely survive. This gap provides for, as Grace calls it "an unrelenting realism and urban setting"⁶⁶, reminiscent of Alexandre Chenevert. Shek describes Bonheur d'Occasion as "the urban realistic novel centered on

working class characters.”⁶⁷ In the following paragraphs we will study the relationship and the gap between humans and their surroundings to answer the questions: how powerful is the influence of the place where one makes his life? can one overcome these influences, or do they become a permanent part of our being?

St-Henri’s streets are always dark and deserted, right from the first chapter. Important details establish an enclosing, inescapable doom. “Le passant disparaît, la porte claque, et il n’y a plus dans la rue déserte, entre le feu pâle des lampes familiales d’un côté et les sombres murailles qui bordent le canal de l’autre, qu’une grande puissance nocturne.” (Bonheur, p. 32-3). Grace concurs with this dismal picture: “Saint-Henri is a slum, a low-lying area of stone, cellars, and tenements hemmed in by factories and a walled canal, and crisscrossed by wires and railway tracks.”⁶⁸ But why the insistence upon the dark and dreary aspects of the quarter? Shek explains:

The physical features of Saint-Henri are often treated in Bonheur d’Occasion in symbolic fashion, in order to emphasize the claustrophobia of a special kind which its inhabitants have to confront. Everywhere they turn, they are surrounded by factory walls, or deafened and sullied by the trains, that is, by cold, inanimate, inhuman objects. ⁶⁹

Evidently, the characters from Saint-Henri are far removed from nature, in the midst of an industrialized world in which they are ill-prepared to participate.

The people of Saint-Henri never have a moment of silence in their world; there is constant mechanical movement. Even in the middle of the night, can be heard: “l’assaut des locomotives hurlantes, [les] volées de bourdons, [les] timbres éraillés des trams et la circulation incessante” (Bonheur, p. 37). The entire quarter is a huge machine, and the people in it are merely a part, dehumanized in the process, or left out completely to find another way to survive, as with the case of the Lacasse family.

For different characters, their reaction to their surroundings reveal their inner ambitions and desires to break the cycle, or their resignation as victims of their society. For Jean Levesque, seeing the elevators and smokestacks tower around him in the dark streets is his motivation to better himself and leave Saint-Henri as soon as possible. “A sa droite, s’élevaient les massives rangées du silo à céréales. Il les regarda avec une amitié qui datait de loin, avec un nouvel intérêt et avec insistance, comme s’il lui fallait obtenir des murs impérieux, des tours de ciment, orgueilleuse oeuvre de l’homme, une dernière confirmation de sa destinée.” (Bonheur, p. 217). For Jean, the buildings around him represent the war’s impact on his environment, which for him has been profitable. He has succeeded in his occupation at the foundry and will further himself with the experience gained during his temporary stay at Saint-Henri.

Like Jean, Florentine wishes to leave Saint-Henri, but it is not as she walks through the streets of her own neighborhood that she feels driven to escape, but while looking up at the hill of Westmount, which represents everything she longs for. When she meets Jean, he becomes for her the key to this unknown dreamworld:

Il sembla à Florentine que, si elle se penchait vers ce jeune homme, elle respirerait l'odeur même de la grande ville girsante, bien vêtue, bien nourrie, satisfaite et allant à des divertissements qui se paient cher. Et soudain, elle évoqua la rue Sainte-Catherine, les vitrines des grands magasins, la foule élégante du samedi soir, les étalages des fleuristes, les restaurants avec leurs portes à tambours...l'entrée lumineuse des théâtres...tout ce qu'elle désirait, admirait, enviait, flotta devant ses yeux. (Bonheur, p. 21).

It is not surprising that the bright sparkling lights of la rue Sainte-Catherine attract Florentine's attention; she is a dreamer, a romantic. The beautiful flowers of Westmount would quickly wither and die in Saint-Henri's grey, polluted streets. Yet if Westmount were not so near Saint-Henri, if she had nothing with which to compare her own surroundings, would Florentine be so tormented to leave her own neighborhood? Would her family's poverty be so obvious?

Florentine's life in Saint-Henri has given her a romantic image of what she would like her life to be; it has given Jean more practical, self-centered ambitions. Florentine envies the couples walking down la rue Sainte-Catherine. "La ville était pour le couple" (Bonheur, p. 22). For Jean,

the couples just add to the already dismal, suffocating atmosphere of Saint-Henri:

Il y aurait dans les ruelles sombres, au fond des impasses obscures, dans la grande tache mouvante des arbres, des silhouettes réunies. Deux par deux, elles iraient dans la pénétrante odeur de la mélasse chaude du tabac, dans les effluves des fruiteries, dans la vibration des trains, elles iraient couvertes de suie, ombres tenaces et pitoyables; et certaines nuits de printemps, parce que le vent souffle mollement et qu'il y a dans l'air une folie d'espoir, elles recommenceraient ces gestes qui assurent à l'humanité sa perpétuité de douleurs. (Bonheur, p. 215).

Jean's perception of his surroundings is much different from Florentine's. He is taken by the smug satisfaction of knowing he will get away from Saint-Henri on his own, whereas Florentine is depending upon him, in vain, to be her way out. He does not want to take anything associated with his environment with him when he leaves, least of all Florentine.

Although they do not live there, all characters of Bonheur d'Occasion are affected by the richer suburb on the mountain called Westmount, because the two contrasting neighborhoods face each other, stare at one another. Grace describes it as though she has been there herself: "If one looks up the mountain, slightly to the northwest of Saint-Henri, one can easily see the prosperous urban domain of the wealthy, Montréal English in Westmount."⁷⁰ It symbolically looks down upon Saint-Henri. "Ici, le luxe et la pauvreté se regardent inlassablement, depuis qu'il y a Westmount, depuis

qu'en bas, à ses pieds, il y a Saint-Henri" (Bonheur, p. 38). It represents all that the youth of Saint-Henri long for, or envy, or aspire to.

In the subplot of Emmanuel's gang: Pitou, Alphonse and Boisvert, these bitter and accusing boys represent the real attitude of their generation, and consistently describe themselves as products of their environment. They too have looked up at Westmount, and have walked down la rue Sainte-Catherine looking enviously in the shop windows as does Florentine. Their attitude could be summarized as "tourmentée, blageuse, indolente" (Bonheur, p. 53). A description of their background easily provides an explanation:

Boisvert, intelligent et rusé, mais si affamé qu'il était déjà plus occupé à voler des pommes, des glands, dans les poches de ses camarades qu'à étudier; le petit gars Alphonse déjà silencieux et amer. Et Pitou donc, qui déchirait ses culottes et n'osait plus rentrer chez lui de peur de se faire battre. Pitout qui manquait la classe pendant trois semaines parce que sa mère n'avait point de fil pour le raccommoder. (Bonheur, p. 53).

From an early age, these young men have been restricted by their economic background, and they are trapped in Saint-Henri. Ironically, their financial situation keeps them there more than their attitude of resignation.

The reigning view in Pitou's group is that very few people in Saint-Henri get the breaks to move out and on to better things and those who do put themselves before everyone else, because society "doesn't give a damn about us."⁷¹ Emmanuel has joined the army and will earn a decent living;

his friends cannot hide their bitterness at their own perceived fate, particularly Boisvert who says: 'Toi,' dit-il, 't'as eu de la chance. Si tu veux faire le héros, c'est ton affaire. Chacun sa business. Mais, nous autres, qu'est-ce qu'on a eu de la société? Regarde-moi, Regarde Alphonse. Qu'est-ce qu'a nous a donné, la société? Rien...(Bonheur, p. 58). Je m'en vas vous dire une chose, moi...La société s'occupe pas de nous autres, pendant quinze ans, pendant vingt ans. A [elle] nous dit: 'Arrangez-vous, débrouillez-vous' (Bonheur, p. 57-8). Despite their rough exterior, these boys seem to place a certain expectations upon their society, only to be ultimately disappointed by it when they are not provided for.

Boisvert and his friends expect to be handed certain elementary things, such as a good job and financial opportunity, so they may buy all the wonderful things from the shops of Westmount but cafe owner Emma remembers a different youthful attitude; she is, however, from another generation. She tells the boys: " 'Dans mon temps...on parlait pas de rien se faire donner. On parlait de donner.' " (Bonheur, p. 59). When the boys look towards la rue Sainte-Catherine, they see the injustice of the inequality of wealth. They become frustrated and resigned that it is society's irreparable fault that they can not escape. Alphonse describes the bitter envy as he walks down la rue Sainte-Catherine:

Avez-vous déjà marché, vous autres, su la rue Sainte-Catherine, pas une cenne dans vot' poche, et regardé tout ce qu'y a dans les vitrines? Oui, hein! Ben moi aussi, ça m'est arrivé. Et j'ai vu du beau,

mes amis, comme pas beaucoup de monde a vu de beau...des Packard, des Buick, j'en ai vu des autos faites pour le speed et pour le fun. Pis, après ça, j'ai vu leurs catins de cire, avec des belles robes de bal ...des meubles...Pis des magasins de sport, des cannes de golf...(Bonheur, p. 60).

Alphonse wishes that he and his friends could have fun with these luxuries and he blames society for this material temptation. He says that society has given him only one thing: "a donné des tentations" (Bonheur, p. 59).

Critics have applauded the realism of Gabrielle Roy's Bonheur d'Occasion; a great part of her success is the portrayal of the Saint-Henri quarter, which is given a powerful force of influence over its inhabitants. "We are caught in this phantasmagoric world of railroad crossings and soot and factory whistles, and made to scrutinize its every detail and to admit the truth of the picture."⁷² The resignation of characters like Pitou, Alphonse and Boisevert and the ambition of others, such as Jean and Florentine, are a direct reaction to the somber, dehumanized, enclosed surroundings of Saint-Henri. These people are products of their environment, regardless of their fight to erase its impact. The hill of Westmount serves as a direct contrast to Saint-Henri. Lewis demonstrates the influence on the people who live at its foot: "its inhabitants are faced daily with the sight of Westmount and are painfully tempted by the rue Sainte-Catherine."⁷³ The youth of Saint-Henri who are unemployed and unskilled have been disappointed by a society they believed would assure better opportunities, that would take care of them.

“Ashamed and yet often resigned to their fate, the inhabitants of Saint-Henri, and especially the young, bitterly condemn society for allowing such conditions to exist.”⁷⁴ Although there exists a deep social, political commentary in Bonheur d’Occasion, the vivid portrait of the relationship between an environment and the people who live there has shown the powerful influence of one’s surroundings and economic background. As Grace has found, Gabrielle Roy addresses “larger questions of the nature and value of human relationships and the possibilities for human happiness” For the characters of Bonheur d’Occasion, the possibility of happiness is equated with Westmount, not Saint-Henri.

Roy’s second urban novel, Alexandre Chenevert powerfully illustrates the profound influence of one’s environment. Alexandre is an urban creature; he lives the hurried, stressful life we equate with the city existence. The character of Alexandre and his story have been briefly summarized as follows: “...a non-entity who breaks down under the pressures of city life, escapes briefly to the “earthly paradise” of Lac Vert, and returns home to die.”⁷⁵ This is indeed the skeleton of Alexandre Chenevert. Monique Genuist summarizes the story while providing a better indication of Alexandre’s role in society and, out of the microcosm of Montréal, in the universe: “Le livre entier est consacré à l’analyse psychologique détaillé et profonde d’un homme quiconque, si insignifiant

que c'était presque un gageure pour Gabrielle Roy d'avoir réussi à intéresser son lecteur."⁷⁶ Genuist does not focus on the effectiveness of Roy's portrayal of the insignificant Montréal bank teller. This study, however, interests itself in the non-entity aspect of Alexandre's character; it is the basis for the irony of Alexandre's suffering and of his distorted self-perception as a Christ figure, crucial to the novel's significance. He may torture himself by his obsession with the world's problems and the rapid decline of humankind, yet this same quality seemingly places him above his fellow man, to such a degree that his superiority complex provokes his intolerance and repulsion towards others.

Alexandre is quickly losing faith in humanity, which he believes is unconcerned, self-serving and generally ignorant. He feels a large gap between himself and his customers, who are average people. Their denseness is what he deals with at his job serving the public, and each repetitive day he grows more embarrassed to belong to the human race: "Appartenir à la race humaine redevenait affligeant." (Chenevert, p. 47). At his monotonous, mechanical job as a bank teller behind a glass cage, he faces the ignorant species all day long; he is frustrated and impatient with those who are unsure of the procedures, or who need him to point out what to him seems obvious. He cannot resist a condescending sarcasm, and snaps even at a young girl: "Vous ne pouvez pas lire les recommandations?...Vous ne

pouvez pas vous conformer aux règlements comme tout le monde?” This outburst is not the first of the day, and Alexandre’s next comment “C’était à croire que les gens ne savaient pas lire” (Chenevert, p. 52) reminds us of his easy rejection of his own kind. Compounded with his perceived superiority, after years of staring at lines of ignorant customers, Alexandre’s image of people influences his relations with them: “C’était lui dès lors qui les regardait tous un peu comme des objets.” (Chenevert, p. 53). He has no patience for them, yet he pities them: “Les pauvres hommes! Sortiraient-ils enfin de leur files?” (Chenevert, p. 58). He speaks of people without ever identifying himself with them: “ ‘Pauvres hommes,’ de moins en moins Alexandre les comprenait: des êtres bizarres en qui il ne se reconnaissait plus du tout, du tout!” (Chenevert, p. 295). The more he educates himself about the perils of humankind, the more Alexandre feels a widening chasm between himself and the “common” man, whose concerns are more selfish.

Grosskurth explains Gabrielle Roy’s success in creating the patronizing, nitpicking bank teller, Alexandre. “He is repelled by the ugliness of the human spectacle which files up to his cage all day long. His occupation, too, of pushing money in and out of the aperture in his cage, is symbolic of the utter impersonality of his world.”⁷⁷ At his job, Alexandre has no opportunity to interact with people except for the brief, repetitive transactions that he does almost robotically, expecting the same from his

customers. "In her description of Alexandre's daily life, Gabrielle Roy stresses how its impersonality cuts man off from all contact with the nourishment so vital to his well-being."⁷⁸ This lack of nourishment manifests itself physically, emphasizing the elementary importance of maintaining meaningful relationships with one's fellow human, which are crucial to our survival and existence. Unfortunately, Alexandre's relationships outside his employment are not much more fulfilling. Brotherson also describes the effectiveness of Roy's choice of occupation for her main character: "The novelist has clearly chosen to describe the functions of a bank-teller as indicative of unstimulating, depersonalized existence in modern industrialized society."⁷⁹ Le Grand describes the cage as "symbole de la distance entre lui et les autres."⁸⁰

During most of his spare time, Alexandre is excessively occupied with current events, particularly the tragedies occurring around the globe. Nature provides him with a new perspective on his actual importance. He has sacrificed fulfillment of his primordial needs - he is an insomniac and has lost his appetite. Like Christ he is consumed with the world's problems. This connection has already been drawn by critics, therefore let us focus instead on the impact on Alexandre's perception of his place in the universe. Grosskurth clarifies Alexandre's disproportionate view of his importance, and describes him as follows:

...a little man who convinces the reader that, like the proverbial sparrow, he is of immense importance in the eyes of God. Chenevert is a compulsive scapegoat, one who takes upon himself the sufferings of mankind. In a sense, then, he transcends his insignificance to become a universal archetypal figure.⁸¹

During his week at Lac Vert, he becomes receptive to nature's lessons which parallel his questions. "Les arbres s'inclinaient, ils disaient à Alexandre qu'ils vivaient, un temps, mouraient, étaient remplacés, et que tout était bien ainsi. La beauté de ce matin frais, qui annonçait déjà un peu l'automne, en disait autant" (Chenevert, p. 121). Alexandre is faced with the notion of the cycle of life in which man follows the same relatively insignificant pattern as the majestic tree. He places himself within the vast universe, and compares his significance to "l'un des joncs verts et souples, et, cependant, déjà l'automne commençait à les flétrir" (Chenevert, p. 121). Alexandre is able to temporarily put his worries into perspective as he experiences the vastness of nature for the first time. Alexandre's relationship with nature will later be discussed in more detail.

Alexandre is alone in his preoccupation, bordering on compulsion, with the sensationalist media's constant focus on tragic events. Somehow this elitist obsession renders him more important; he is annoyed that his wife and closest friend do not allow the world's affairs to disturb them in any way, or to provoke in them any deep, philosophical thought. "His impatience with his wife Eugénie and his friend Godias arises from his sense of irritated

superiority over their self-sufficient indifference to the fate of the rest of the world.”⁸² More likely, he feels abandoned by them to his life of suffering. In any case, he calls his best friend Godias a self-centered lout because his own needs take priority. Godias represents the average, everyday working man. “Il lui faisait le grief d’être heureux dans un monde tragique” (Chenevert, p. 68). Godias is of light-hearted nature, and, knowing Alexandre so well, he likely anticipates his friend’s reaction to his comment on the fate of the world:

Cette légèreté acheva d’offenser Alexandre. Comme s’il avait parlé pour lui-même! Un danger des plus graves, que dire, l’extinction même de l’espace menaçait l’humanité, et ce gros, ce satisfait de tout, s’en désintéressait puisque alors il aurait quitté ce monde. (Chenevert, p. 66).

Ironically, as we have seen, the same Alexandre who scorns his fellow human is suddenly absorbed in the possibly tragic end of humankind and scorns anyone who puts his own needs first. His supposed selflessness is what separates Alexandre from his fellow human.

Godias indirectly addresses this irony; he knows that Alexandre is in some ways not any different from the typical human. Even Alexandre eventually realizes that, fundamentally, he is of the same inherent self-servitude: “...il fut bouleversé de se reconnaître plus égoïste qu’il ne l’avait cru. Au fond, c’était vrai: il aimait encore mieux sa sécurité personnelle que l’avancement commun.” (Chenevert, p. 354). Alexandre does not

immediately admit to possessing characteristics that link him to his fellow man. While Alexandre is still on his mission to preserve the species, Godias advises him to quit trying to be different, as in the process he makes others feel terrible. Godias wishes his friend could relax and be like the rest of their world:

Godias lui reprochait de vouloir à tout prix affliger, ennuyer les autres; ou, plus exactement, de se singulariser... 'Au fond, pourquoi est-ce que t'essaies pas de vivre comme les autres! manger comme tout le monde...boire un peu de scotch, te lâcher une bonne fois...Vivre! T'amuser un peu!' (Chenevert, p. 68).

Alexandre's reaction to the philosophy of Godias and others stems from, according to Brotherson, Roy's message that "happiness is not a function of blindly accepted principles for living."⁸³ This is more definitely the view of her fictional character, Alexandre. Godias is soon easily frustrated by Alexandre's incessant negativity, and is not willing to participate. Monique Genuist blames Alexandre's desire to be different on his excessive arrogance, and dares us to examine the degree of this universal characteristic in ourselves: "Le plus arrogant d'entre nous, s'il ose s'analyser avec sincérité, se trouvera sans doute quelque parenté avec le pauvre Alexandre."⁸⁴

And although Alexandre generally treats people who file up to his window all day long as objects, he is concerned about their perception of him. He later regrets his often aggressive hostility towards them, and wishes he had been more like the admired Ghandi he hears so much about in the news:

“Comment n’avait-il pas compris auparavant que son rôle dans la vie était, comme le lui avait montré Ghandi, dans la douceur?” (Chenevert, p. 288). In the hospital, Alexandre is happy to hear Godias tell him that he is genuinely respected by his fellow workers at the bank who miss him during his absence: “ ‘Je t’assure qu’on te regrette...ta clientele te redemande...les gens s’informent...Presque tous...” (Chenevert, p. 259). Although he may not know it, Alexandre does belong. He belongs to the bank staff and, on a more universal level, to humankind.

Medically speaking, Alexandre’s condition creates a risk, as no person should suffer as long as he does, without ever finding the essential distraction of happiness. Alexandre has not been programmed for joy, and he will not allow himself to shirk his life’s responsibility to humankind for his own pleasure. His doctor, sensing the severity of the situation, advises him to seek solitude in nature, and therefore, on the doctor’s orders, “la permission d’être heureux avait été accordée...elle lui avait été recommandée par une voix autorisée et, à tout prendre, comme un médicament.” (Chenevert, p. 179). Humankind’s innate need to be happy has been ignored too long in Alexandre, but to avoid a guilt in abandoning his preoccupation with society, he will only take the vacation as an order from his doctor. He cannot, like his peers, welcome the needed selfish escape.

This desire for freedom and happiness seemingly presents itself in Alexandre long before the doctor's intervention; the episode of the calculation error appears to be a subconscious move toward this freedom away from the burdened urban life. When his day-end additions reveal a hundred dollar deficit, Alexandre's reaction is evidence of this suppressed, universal hidden need.

And suddenly he, who never laughed, began jiggling his shoulders in a movement of extreme hilarity. Abrupt relief relaxed the muscles of the face. Enchanted, Alexandre saw this moment as thought it were the moment of his emancipation...He had certainly imagined all sorts of ways to free himself, but none so radical, so clean-cut, and - in a word - so thoroughgoing. (Chenevert, p. 58-9).

Something within Alexandre drives him to make this error, a revolt of his unfulfilled need: "Alexandre's most intense desire is to be free from the deformities of life in a modern city, deformities fully realized by him as he approaches the end of his conflict."⁸⁵ It is at this moment that Alexandre's thirst for freedom and happiness can no longer be ignored. As Brotherson finds: "Alexandre has already grasped that man's greatest wish is to live long and be happy!"⁸⁶ Alexandre's nature as a human being does not harmonize with his monotonous, unnatural existence as a bank teller, and inevitably "so distraught is Alexandre, so desirous of release from these deformities, that he regards his miscalculation of one hundred dollars at the bank as a welcome break in his stifling routine, as that point at which his freedom will begin."⁸⁷

Earlier we attributed Alexandre's isolation to his arrogance; it is equally an important reflection of urban existence, which is not naturally conducive to a communion of humankind, and in which people lose touch with their relationship with nature. Just as Evelyne in La Rue Deschambault took a ten-day trip away from her husband to, as she described it, become a better wife, Alexandre needs to find solitude in nature to distance himself from his peers and become a better human. It seems to work at first. "Once alone he has an unfulfilled need to love and work for the good of his fellow man."⁸⁸ The oscillation between nature and the city has been the focus of many studies, for example that of Paul Socken, who concludes the following:

Since Royan characters, and in particular her urban characters, are fundamentally alone, alienated in an incomprehensible modern world and since they have become strangers to themselves and to nature, they have a deep need to adapt themselves to the natural world, to rediscover their surroundings so as to understand better both themselves and others.⁸⁹

As much creatures of God's earth as the animals, humans who are out of touch with nature are denying themselves an element of their existence. They must periodically renew their inner strength through, as Alexandre does to "get back to nature". In a cyclical pattern, "la vie des hommes semblait être de sortir de leur campagne afin de faire assez d'argent dans la ville pour pouvoir venir refaire leur santé à la campagne." (Chenevert, p. 263).

During his stay in the isolated wilderness cabin at Lac Vert, nature bridges the gap between Alexandre and his fellow humans; he seems, for a time, almost a different person. "The episode of the Lac Vert treats another form of happiness which is not viable for the absurd man of Gabrielle Roy."⁹⁰ "Il eut faim, et il mangea...Il ressentit une fatigue naturelle, bienfaisante, et il se reposa sous les branches d'un pin." (Chenevert, p. 219-220). Away from the blaring tragedy of the radio and newspaper, Alexandre "gradually...is lulled into a state of relaxation where he discovers the satisfaction of the fulfillment of his simplest needs"⁹¹ of which he has been deprived for a frightfully long time. He discovers an appreciation for his fellows: "il ne faisait pas de doute qu'en ce moment il aimait tous ces compagnons de la terre." (Chenevert, p. 220). He recognizes his link to other men, as he draws water in a cup and produces light by striking matches, which signified "la fraternité", or man's brotherhood. Socken believes that, "for Gabrielle Roy, there exists in the universe a basic harmony and unity to which humanity belongs. An ideal, therefore, is to be found in a mutual reconciliation between the world of the people and, predominantly, the natural world."⁹²

The realization of his bond to the human race provokes "a voluntary resumption of his relationship with others, leads him to the Le Gardeurs (the owners of his rented cabin)...and eventually away from the solitary life they lead, back to Montreal where the interdependence of humanity is

manifest.”⁹³ As his reactions are characteristically excessive, “Alexandre’s link to the rest of humanity is such, however, that he cannot be satisfied with any selfish search for happiness. He has discovered his dependence on other men.”⁹⁴ Alexandre zealously agonizes over his newfound debt to humankind. Unfortunately, a creature of the city for over thirty years, Alexandre easily falls back into his old ways; now he must worry about his debt to the thousands and thousands of men, even to those no longer living. The stressful, determined pattern of worry in him proves to be center of his existence. “Il parassait souffrir comme avant”, his wife notices and tells him: “ ‘Ca n’a pas l’air que ça t’a fait tant de bien, tes vacances.’ ” (Chenevert, p. 276). “Encroaching urbanization spreads its cancerous tentacles into the countryside”⁹⁵ and also into Alexandre.

While Alexandre is in the city, he longs to get in touch with nature; while he is in the woods, he rediscovers his inner city being. This division is reminiscent of the proverb “the grass is always greener...” At Lac Vert, while he marvels at the matches and the cup, creation of humankind, the message is that to be happy in solitude, you had to be a product of an ancient civilization. Humans have created an environment for themselves that is not conducive to the same kind of happiness. Although there are many positive aspects in a life close to nature, Alexandre cannot be happy there because he does not belong to this “generation”. Suddenly everything once

so negative and oppressive about the city is what Alexandre longs for. “La nostalgie des vies entassées là, des vies solidaires, le surprit, plus fort qu’aucun ennui qu’il eût éprouvé dans son existence: comme un ennui d’éternité” (Chenevert, p. 259). The newspapers now “bear tidings”⁹⁶ and not disaster. That is, until Alexandre returns to the city.

Can it be that some human beings are programmed to a life of suffering, or are they merely products of their environment? It appears that Gabrielle Roy has applied both theories to her character, Alexandre Chenevert. Dr. Hudon concurs with the notion of Alexandre’s predetermined inclination towards excessive sensitivity about things he cannot control: “Vous êtes trop délicat pour ce monde...Vous êtes fait pour souffrir. Ce n’est pas sage...” (Chenevert, p. 177). When Alexandre plans his vacation, he is “inquiet de cet aspect nouveau de son caractère.” (Chenevert, p. 190). Alexandre is the product of a long, unnatural city life. He is always hurried and overburdened. “Le docteur Hudon voyait parfaitement le nonsens, la fatalité, la gratuité de la misère humaine de son époque.” (Chenevert, p. 102). Alexandre’s generation is one of “...du monde pâle, maigre, du monde à moitié vivant, c’est ça la ville, au fond.” (Chenevert, p. 230). Alexandre belongs to this urban group:

Alexandre is not, however, a rural individual but a true urban dweller...he needs the city to communicate with others, and needs to return to what he sees as now as anonymity, as the comforting solitude of urban life, that is, the knowledge that thousands of others are similarly alone in Montréal.⁹⁷

As Grosskurth has concluded, back in his old pattern, “Alexandre’s happiness is extinguished.” About his time in nature, she continues: “The forces against him are too powerful to enable him to preserve his fragile gift.”⁹⁸ Alexandre, therefore, is the overburdened, modern city mouse going to the country. Now he is willing to assume his unhappy, but habitual life: “plus encore qu’être heureux, plus encore que la grandeur, il désira se trouver dans sa cage.” (Chenevert, p. 316).

The message reflected by Alexandre- his urban programming, his scapegoat attitude, and inability to be happy- seems to be that humankind has created a world for itself, an urban existence, that does not allow for its natural fulfillment. Alexandre is the perfect example of a misfit in both generations - too sensitive for city pressures, yet so out of touch with nature that he does not fit in there either. This is nature’s reproach.

Throughout the entire novel, our character Alexandre oscillates between the values of the urban existence and of rural life. For part of his stay at Lac Vert, Alexandre seems to become a confident advocate of nature. His city self shows through when he attempts to share his thoughts with a tribute to his fellow man that sounds more like an advertising endorsement: “Le silence répare les nerfs...Nos tracas disparaissent d’eux-mêmes face à notre mère, la nature...Allez au fond des bois si vous voulez vous guérir” (Chenevert, p. 52). As it took him a few days to put his urban character aside

to connect with nature, he soon returns to his life in the city, but never completely overcomes the bit of nature in him that presents itself during his vacation.

Yet Alexandre's rural/urban transition are not so clean; he carries away a part of nature within his being, so that when he arrives in Montréal from his vacation, he seems a disoriented tourist. In the middle of the crowd, in his own city he feels like a foreigner: "Ce qui lui arrivait était pire que la solitude: comme un atroce malentendu...Il éprouva la terrible ingratitude de la ville de son endroit." (Chenevert, p. 268). He is yelled at and treated like an imbecile as he attempts to do what should come naturally to our city-dweller: cross a busy street. He tells a white lie: " 'Au lac Vert,' dit il, 'on ne connaît pas les règlements de trafic.' " (Chenevert, p. 269). In fact, Alexandre seems to have been more influenced by his natural self than he believes, proven by his awkwardness in the city that has been his home for more than thirty years. His hesitant conclusion, which returns us to nature's reproach, is the following: "Toutes les habitudes de sa vie étaient donc mauvaises anormales. Il vacilla devant une si extraordinaire révélation." (Chenevert, p. 272). Although Alexandre is used to life in the city, or programmed for an urban existence, this does not mean that it is natural for humankind. This is the message of Alexandre Chenevert.

In fact, Alexandre regrets ever having gone on vacation, as he is faced now with his inability to fit in with nature or the city. His problem lies in the fact that he cannot find an equilibrium. Had he never gone to Lac Vert, he would have continued his monotonous existence never knowing the alternative possibility - life in nature. He overhears two people discussing a possible vacation, and warns them: "Attention...surtout ne partez pas...jamais, jamais de vacances..." (Chenevert, p. 274). Alexandre is unable to draw positive elements from his city world and from his newfound world in nature, perhaps as a result of the permanent effects of his lifetime urban environment. Instead, he oscillates between the positive and the negative of nature when he's away, and when he returns to the city he does the same, never able to find harmony from elements of both experiences, which many people are able to do.

Alexandre Chenevert is an oversensitive man of the city whose apparent calling is to, like a Christ figure, take on responsibility for the disasters afflicting the human race. He is isolated by his obsessions and has no tolerance for the average, self-sufficient, easygoing individual. A philosophizing deep thinker, Alexandre does not fit in with the people around him. His vacation to nature, to escape the problems of the city serves only to illustrate that Alexandre does not fit any better, as his thirty years of city life have him longing for the impersonal solitude of urban existence. Once back in the city, Alexandre no longer seems to fit in there either.

Once back in the city, Alexandre no longer seems to fit in there either. Rather than carry with him important elements from each environment and find an equilibrium, Alexandre unhappily reassumes the stressful, worried life of Montréal until finally his frail body can no longer carry the burden.

Humans and the Universe

Pierre Cordorai of La Montagne Secrète similarly is alone in his journey through life, isolated by his inner calling to be an artist. Grosskurth explains what she considers a non-coincidental likeness: “Clearly Gabrielle Roy set out to write The Hidden Mountain as a companion piece to the cashier...concerned with the solitude such as life entails and with the necessity for man to cooperate in mutual aid.”⁹⁹ She has linked the theme of humankind to both works: “Gabrielle Roy has a particular interest in the artist, but she is also concerned with the brotherhood of all men. In The Hidden Mountain, she presents a vision of the unity of all life - of the bonds that link man and animals in nature.” The following paragraphs will examine the bonds humankind share with each other and with animals, and the place of humans in the macrocosm of the universe, including the influence of their environment.

If Alexandre’s inner drive is to contemplate the sufferings of the earth, Pierre’s is to travel and recreate nature in his drawings. The main character

of the La Montagne Secrète is moved within him to draw, but is not immediately aware of what being an artist, belonging to society, entails. At our introduction to Pierre, we recognize at first his desire for travel, which is not a new characteristic to Roy's beings. He does not understand this hunger: "...il avait le sentiment d'une incommensurable distance en lui-même à franchir...Guère plus d'un jour ne passait maintenant sans qu'il entendît cette plainte de son âme: Hâte-toi, Pierre; le temps est court, le but lointain." (Montagne, p. 21). Monique Genuist agrees that his instinct for travel is unique: "Pierre est attiré dans ces régions sauvages par une passion mystérieuse."¹⁰⁰ He recognizes how this force makes him different from many men: "Quel homme était-il donc pour avoir cette faim des endroits perdus!" (Montagne, p. 37). Pierre is drawn toward Nina, who possesses the same desire for travel. "Elle ne pouvait pas s'en empêcher." He empathizes because he knows the pain involved: "lui-même il était atteint du quelque chose du genre" (Montagne, p. 39).

As an artist, Pierre's relationship with his environment, with the wilderness of northern Canada, is mysterious and singular, and often interferes in his relationships with others, who do not understand the former. He hears the summons "d'une beauté qui n'existait pas encore, mais qui, s'il en atteignait la révélation, le comblerait d'un bonheur sans pareil" (Montagne, p. 28). He tortures himself to succeed in capturing the simplest

yet most important elements in his artwork, such as the colors and imagery of water; when he fails he is inconsolable. His cabin and hunting mate Steve can not empathize with the inner turmoil of his artist friend: “Steve considérait sans comprendre ce chagrin inutile de Pierre. Se fait-on du chagrin pour pareille vétille?...Sans tort envers personne, pourquoi se torturer? Il grommela que tout cela était enfantillage: l'eau valait la peine en vérité de se mettre pour elle en tel état.” (Montagne, p. 78). Not “chosen” to be an artist, Steve does not understand that for Pierre, an inability to present nature’s truth to people is a wrong against them. The difference between them widens the gap in their relationship, and soon Steve can no longer be around Pierre’s frequent depression. Pierre himself does not yet know the full power of his inner duty to translate nature for his audience.

Pierre’s artistic endeavors require him to serve as a manipulator of nature, to often add something, in other words, present it according to his perception and interpretation. He learns to exaggerate certain features to bring them to our attention. He must translate the emotion of the trees and snow around him:

...sans doute les arbres alentour ne donnaient-ils pas assez l'impression du vrai. Pour atteindre ce terrible vrai, il commençait à s'en apercevoir, il y a lieu quelquefois de forcer un peu le trait, de souligner. Que les choses se mettent à en dire un peu plus dans l'image que sur nature, là était sans doute le souhait absorbant de son être (Montagne, p. 47).

By adding his own touch to the portrait of nature, Pierre brings it to life. As time passes, he solves the mystery of his purpose. “ainsi le travail du vrai peintre n’est pas de reproduire mais de lire, traduire, et écrire l’âme de l’arbre.”¹⁰¹ It seems, however, that most of his works capture the solitary, isolate aspects of his region. He spends much time reflecting upon his goal: “Sa vie était-elle d’autre but que d’arracher un murmure en passant au vide effarant, à l’effrayante solitude qu’il traversait?” (Montagne, p. 25).

Grosskurth describes another tension facing Pierre: “the central problem of the artist is adjustment to a world not made as he would have created it.”¹⁰² He does not condone the ways his fellow humans often manipulate nature with cruelty and he seems to relate to animals who are controlled by them. This sensitivity separates him from his friends and puts him closer with the wild creatures. “Par la ruse et par la force: ainsi régnait l’homme” (Montagne, p. 51). Steve explains his method of achieving the most from his pack of sled dogs; he allows them to go hungry throughout the day: “Si tu veux avoir de bons chiens de trait, il ne faut pas leur donner tout à fait à leur faim, mais les tenir en haleine, un peu comme les chiens de course que l’on voit foncer à toute allure vers la proie de carton qui s’éloigne d’eux...tout le temps s’éloigne” (Montagne, p. 51). Pierre finds the dogs more intuitive than simple wild beasts; he senses their own feeling of injustice as they are powerless to the higher species. “Les chiens restaient écrasés sur

leur arrière-train, tout blancs de neige, le poil hérissé, comme se demandant qui ils étaient, d'où ils venaient, pourquoi ils étaient des chiens" (Montagne, p. 52). Pierre attributes a much higher capacity in the dogs for self-reflection than does Steve, who, as most men would, says that Pierre forgets the essential, and that he: "servait un maître qui n'était pas le seul cruel besoin de vivre" (Montagne, p. 52).

There are several occasions when Pierre finds himself empathizing with the role of the animals in relation to man and when his views are often contrary to those of his fellow human. Although he spends the winter trapping, he does not seem to have the ability to see the animals as objects, or as Steve does, to see them as a sacrifice for human's survival. Pierre always draws links between the animal's life and his own. When he and Steve find the live ensnared mink who has gnawed through his own leg to release himself, Pierre recognizes that the animals, too, have the desperate instinct for survival and that like us in the circle of life, witness the same end. "Il allait, et le mystère de la vie et de la mort lui paraissait allier ici plus que jamais les hommes et les bêtes" (Montagne, p. 44-5). Humans and the animals share the mystery of life and death.

Pierre recognizes, however, that humans kill animals to feed themselves; they put their needs first. It has always been this way. A part of the human race, Pierre does not deny that he too participates in this chain

of nature, but he, unlike the others, contemplates the significance and is sensitive to the plight of the animals. While checking the snares, Pierre is divided by his superior human self who instinctually needs to kill animals for food, and his empathetic self, who contemplates the unjust place of the animals in the universe:

...un homme qui souhaitait de riches captures peut être mis à l'abri du besoin, pour pouvoir donner tout son temps et toute son énergie à illustrer de dessins la création étrange; mais aussi un homme qui souhaitait presque la vie sauve à ces petites créatures; tout au moins qu'elle aient le maximum de chance contre ceux qui les traquaient" (Montagne, p. 44).

The scene that most illustrates Pierre's close link with the animals is that of the caribou chase; in fact, there are repeated images of Pierre's identification with this animal. Pierre risks his safety in the frigid climate to stay with his mountain, the vision he has been searching for. With his food supplies down, he is desperate for food. Chasing the caribou, he feels as though he is in pursuit of a man, ready to slaughter him: "...il avançait, le coeur battant d'une étrange émotion, comme si ce fût un homme qu'il eût ainsi suivi pour l'abattre. Mais de surcroît, une créature qui ne lui avait fait aucun tort" (Montagne, p. 117). Running side by side with the animal, their eyes meet and they thus communicate:

Il fut à égale hauteur du caribou. L'homme et la bête coururent ensemble, côte à côte, l'oeil dans l'oeil. 'Ecoute, frère,' dit Pierre, 'je n'en peux plus...J'ai faim. Laisse-toi mourir.' Mais l'oeil du caribou regardait le bras levé de Pierre, la hachette qui étincelait, et plein d'un triste reproche, cet oeil semblait dire: 'Je suis vieux, je n'en peux plus, pourquoi t'acharnes-tu contre moi?' (Montagne, p. 119).

Pierre cannot justify, deep within himself, the brutal killing of animals, even for the purpose of his own survival. He cannot even bring himself to eat the caribou. For him, “the caribou represents the sacrificial nature of all life, the animal and the hunter-artist.”¹⁰³ He identifies with the caribou as he, like the animal, is pursued by his chosen way of life, consumed by his pursuit. When he later tells the story, “C’était très curieux; on eût dit que Pierre tout ce temps n’eût parlé que d’un seul et même être, poursuivi et poursuivant” (Montagne, p. 200). Pierre parallels his life with that of the animal. He now must surrender himself to fulfilling his obligations to people, to present to them with the gift of his experiences in nature.

A fellow artist in Paris and friend, Stanislas, is stunned to set eyes upon Pierre’s final portrait, which is of himself. Pierre has sunk into a grave depression, and reveals his soul in his work, after many years of searching for the explanations of life’s mysteries. “Son attrait était dans cette sorte de fascination qu’il exerçait, au rebours de la clarté, vers les torturantes énigmes de l’être” (Montagne, p. 213). A description of the painting itself reveals Pierre’s bond with the wild caribou:

...sur le sommet de la tête se devinaient de curieuses protubérances, une suggestion de bois de cerf peut-être, que prolongeait comme un mouvement de feuillage ou d’ombres. Cependant, la pupille, quoique dilatée, était bien celle d’un homme, d’une lucidité, d’une tristesse intolérables. Stanislas songea aux douces vaches du tendre Chagall, à leurs yeux qu’illumine de la bonté humaine. Ceci était bien autre chose. Qu’avait donc voulu suggérer

Pierre? Quelle alliance étroite de l'âme avec les forces primitives? (Montagne, p. 213).

Stanislas can interpret the possible meaning of his friend's work. He knows the demands of the primitive calling, the torture his friend has endured in attempting to fulfill his role.

This often mysterious and isolating obligation that Pierre faces leads him to better understand his role beside his fellow humans on the earth they share. No man can live completely alone forever, as illustrated by the first character of the novel, Gédéon, whose loneliness makes him insane. He is left by his family who move to the more civilized parts. "Tant il fut tourmenté par le désir de voir des hommes, le pauvre vieux faillit bien s'élançer vers sa barque" (Montagne, p. 12). Gédéon is so desperate for company that when Pierre arrives at his cabin, he chatters on to him incessantly. Unfortunately, Pierre is driven to move onward in solitude, to pursue his unknown goal. Later, he comes to recognize the importance of human bonding.

During his two seasons spent with friend and trapper Steve, Pierre comes to know how their time spent together has influenced him, which he reveals in his artwork: "En un grand nombre de ces croquis devait reparaître ce détail des raquettes, l'une à l'autre paire appuyée" (Montagne, p. 47). They work and live as a team for a long time. When Steve leaves behind an ill and weak Pierre in their cabin to embark on an excursion and is two days

late; Pierre is worried. The experience has shown Pierre the need for companionship as he wishes for the safe return of Steve: “Ah! que revienne seulement Sigurdson, et il ne se plaindra plus de rien; il connaît à présent que la seule privation tout à fait intolérable, c’est celle d’un compagnon” (Montagne, p. 63). After the first season passed, their contractual agreement for the sale of furs settled, Pierre and Steve plan to go their separate ways. Coincidentally, they meet up on the streets of Fort Renunciation a few days later, and realize that “leur association n’avait pas vécu. Elle promettait encore” (Montagne, p. 70). Their friendship has not run its course. The two still need each other, and so they set forth upon another adventure together.

Upon his death, Pierre leaves all his art work to his friends, the people who helped him and cared about him. As an artist, Pierre always felt the pressure of fulfilling their expectations. He believes he has disappointed them, since he did not reach the mysterious, ultimate goal: “ ‘De tous les biens que nous recevons,’ dit-il, ‘aucun ne nous fait plus de mal malgré tout que les amis avec leur confiance en nous, leur espoir...leur attente.’ ” (Montagne, p. 217). In this way, Pierre cannot enjoy his relationships with others. Actually, it is that Pierre has mostly disappointed himself, only able to capture the desolation of northern Canada. He now wishes to repay them each for their contribution and so he gives away all his pieces.

There is a distinct message about the expectations an artist faces by his people and many critics have put forth that Gabrielle Roy compares Pierre's art to her writing. When the man of the wilderness first learns of the label "artist" placed upon him, he discovers what people expect of persons like himself, including his friend Steve, who brings back art supplies so that he may enjoy Pierre's work in color. "Ah, c'était cela en effet qu'il fallait mettre sur du papier: le soleil revenu, les arbres reprenant la vie, la fin du maudit hiver! Alors Pierre découvrit que ce que les hommes attendent de gens de sa sorte, c'est par eux d'être réjouis et soulevés d'espérance" (Montagne, p. 57-8). Steve wants to have pictures of nature just as much as Pierre feels driven to make them: "Il avait le désir de sauver, peut-être autant que Pierre, les ensorcelantes images du printemps qu'il avait pensé devenir en son regard" (Montagne, p. 61). Pierre becomes known by the natives in the area as "l'Homme-au-crayon-magique" (Montagne, p. 94); they admire his great task, "to paint the untamed world of God"¹⁰⁴. They need him to interpret their vast wilderness through his medium.

As he learns more the meaning of his life's work, Pierre must move away from people and battle the forces of the harsh climate himself. Nothing can come between himself and nature; in this way he finds the truth without interference. He will remain isolated until he can bring this truth back to the people. As Genuist explains "l'artiste mène une lutte solitaire pour

déchiffrer le monde et transmettre son message aux hommes.”¹⁰⁵ Genuist continues to clarify the artist’s unique and difficult role in his world: “Dans la société, l’artiste est à part. Pour être fidèle à l’appel de l’absolu, il doit se détacher de la terre, de ses passions, de ses plaisirs, et vivre en ascète comme le saint. L’âme libérée, l’artiste créera ses plus grands chefs d’oeuvre.”¹⁰⁶ At times, Pierre feels as though he is close to achieving his unknown goal, but he isolates himself until he has succeeded. Like the young Christine who leaves her mother to fulfill her desire for travel and become an accomplished individual, Pierre must leave society and return with the gift of his experience. When in Paris, Pierre avoids contact with his painting master, as he wishes to better himself: “Pierre prenait alors la mine d’un enfant qui se sent ingrat et coupable. C’était cependant pour mieux mériter de son maître qu’il restait isolé, tout entier livré à la poursuite de son idée. Ou bien, se disait-il, il parviendrait à créer un tableau qui réjouirait les yeux sévères et tant de fois déçus du maître, ou bien il préférerait être oublié” (Montagne, p. 204). The more people he befriends, the more pressure Pierre finds upon himself to fulfill their expectations. “Sa vocation se fait de plus en plus exigeante,”¹⁰⁷ asserts Genuist.

As soon as Pierre enters the art world in which he sees a price tag affixed to his work, he is puzzled at accepting money for what to him is not a job, but an instinct: “il ne vivait plus que pour peindre, peindre, peindre”

(Montagne, p. 149). Most of all, he feels indebted to people, and he is about to lose his freedom he has enjoyed in his primitive life: “Du coup, c’en était presque trop. Saura-t-il se rendre digne jamais de cette confiance? Envers tout un pays?” (Montagne, p. 120). At this point, Pierre enters a different league, as he is advised to go to France and study the masters of his craft. Now, the pressures of the successes of his forefathers are added and Pierre quickly loses confidence. “De tous les supplices qu’il avait subis et subirait encore, celui-là serait le plus dur” (Montagne, p. 178).

Another difficulty facing Pierre is adapting himself to life in Paris, when all his life he has lived in the most isolated regions of Canada. Ironically, Pierre’s world shrinks rapidly as he takes a plane overseas, to the smaller, more crowded city of Paris. Also diminished is his place in the universe: “une fourmi humaine avançant, tout son avoir sur soi.” at which point he asks himself “A quoi servait donc sur terre la présence de pareille fourmi?” (Montagne, p. 139). Compared to the world-renowned artists of France, Pierre will indeed feel minute. About the city itself, he anticipates, from prior knowledge, the crowded streets, and a new genre of solitude, incomparable to that of the wilderness: “Cette taïga canadienne, cette Sibérie sans fin de notre pays, qu’était-ce en vérité, auprès de cette autre solitude envers laquelle il allait, la si mystérieuse solitude des rues emplies de monde, de pas et de lumières!” (Montagne, p. 140).

In Paris there are scores of painters, like himself, many with much training; the competition overwhelms Pierre, and reminds him of his insignificance. His first reaction is escape: "Prends le premier bateau de retour. Pauvre Sauvage, retourne là d'où tu viens, là ou seulement tu peux être quelqu'un, quelque chose" (Montagne, p. 158). He finds later, that living in Paris becomes easier if he thinks of the city as a wilderness to travel, keeping close to the Seine River. His new friend Stanislas is excited about their commonalities, each an artist searching for his place, and his analogies help bring the Yukon to the shores of the Seine:

'Qu'est-ce que je suis?' me demandais-je. 'Un petit peintre de rien du tout. Comment faire du neuf? Nous devons être trois ou quatre mille peintres dans Paris à chercher à nous distinguer les uns des autres; tout comme vos petits arbres du Mackenzie à pousser hors de la forêt anonyme' (Montagne, p. 167).

Sharing so many bonds, the two are able to bridge the gap between their backgrounds: "Dans La Montagne Secrète, Pierre et son ami Stanislas ont, à certains moments privilégiés, l'impression d'être partout à la fois."¹⁰⁸ More often, however, our savage Pierre isolates himself as he is used to.

Pierre's journey as an artist and human is quite complicated; the achievement of his ultimate, mysterious goal uncertain. Albert Le Grand summarizes the importance of Pierre's life:

La vie de Pierre comporte trois grandes charnières: il voyage, il peint et il pense. Le voyage n'exprime pas un simple déplacement dans le temps et l'espace objectifs, il décrit le mouvement même d'une recherche qui lie pensée et existence en une expérience fondamentale que le peintre tente sans cesse de traduire. Cette recherche est avant

tout interrogation de l'existence: qu'est-ce que l'univers? qu'est-ce que la vie? qu'est-ce que l'homme?¹⁰⁹

Through the course of La Montagne Secrète, Pierre spends much time during his travels searching for truth in nature and a way to express it to his fellow humans. He disappoints himself, and as he believes others, because he is not able to answer these questions and provide the answers in his medium. What Genuist suggests, is that these contemplations have no solutions, and thus "Pierre n'a pas atteint l'absolu qu'il cherchait parce que la perfection n'appartient pas à ce monde. Ce grand rêve fou de l'homme de saisir enfin l'insaisissable ne sera sans doute jamais comblé."¹¹⁰

There is more than one message in La Montagne Secrète, and its author likely had many intended purposes. The notion hierarchy of human beings and animals in nature is evident; as an artist, Pierre is sensitive to both sides. His personal reflections and close bond with the animals in nature often set him apart from his fellow man. The role of the artist is also an important message. Bessette discusses Roy's purpose: "l'auteur a voulu y montrer que l'élan créateur est chez l'artiste irrépressible; que, pour s'accomplir, pour devenir lui-même, l'écrivain ou le peintre sera conduit à immoler même les êtres qui lui sont les plus chers."¹¹¹ According to the novel's message itself, an artist does not choose to be so, "art" chooses him. In this way, his obligation to society is unique, but it is also extremely demanding. For Pierre, his journey represents a lesson in being an artist. It

also is a lesson in life, in the human existence, or as Le Grand states: “une double voie poursuivie méthodiquement sur le plan de l’art et mystérieusement sur celui de l’existence.”¹¹² Through his artwork, Pierre tortures himself to bring the answers to questions of a human’s existence to society. It is seemingly an impossible absolute. “Les mots, les couleurs, les sons, les formes ne sauront-ils jamais traduire la perfection entrevue? Ne réussira-t-il donc jamais à donner aux hommes cette oeuvre enfin complète, enfin parfaite, après laquelle il n’y aurait plus rien à dire?”¹¹³ The answer is clearly no.

Just as Roy focused on her family relationships in La Route d’Altamont and La Rue Deschambault, and on her teacher/student relationships in La Petite Poule d’Eau and Ces Enfants de Ma Vie, Gabrielle Roy explored the relationship between humans and their environment in Alexandre Chenevert, Bonheur d’Occasion and La Montagne Secrète. The first two novels illustrate the impact of an industrialized, insensitive, unnatural setting on people, who have an inherent need to find an equilibrium between the frenetic world they have created for themselves and mother nature. Alexandre Chenevert does not find this necessary balance, as his urbanized existence dominates. The characters of Saint-Henri in Bonheur d’Occasion are similarly resigned to their suffering. In Alexandre Chenevert, like in La Montagne Secrète, the notion of solitude versus

communion with humankind is presented; Pierre discovers the importance of both in his role as a human being and as an artist. As a creator, an interpreter of the world herself, Gabrielle Roy empathizes with her characters who feel their an obligation to their fellow humans, which isolates them.

CONCLUSION

If Gabrielle Roy was in any way “programmed”, as were her characters Pierre Cordorai, and Alexandre Chenevert, it was to write. The notion that an author writes best about what she knows is emphasized in the works of Gabrielle Roy. It is improbable that an author can leave her own personality, her own experiences or her own feelings out of her writing. In her collection of novels, Roy has taken us on a journey through her childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age. She has shown us the world through the eyes of a schoolteacher, and her students. Through her writing, Roy has given us the gift of her perception of human relationships with others and with their surroundings.

In summary, in Chapter One, the difficulty in bridging the generation gap between family members is illustrated through families facing different social situations. The family faced with the most challenging socioeconomic situation is also the one whose members have the most problems communicating with each other. It is also the daughter of the poorer family, Florentine Lacasse, who struggles most to avoid emulating the lifestyle of her mother, Rose-Anna. Gabrielle Roy’s own family background is closer to that of her fictional double, Christine, in La Rue Deschambault and La Route d’Altamont. Christine and her mother contemplate the notions of re-

birth in future family generations, and of hope for a happy, spiritually rich life, while Florentine and her mother barely speak at all, each wrapped up in her own financial dilemma. Florentine is the creation of the journalist Gabrielle Roy, who observed life in Montréal during the economic depression. Similar differences present themselves in the relationships between fathers and daughters. Through her portrait of the Canadian family, Roy demonstrates that the inheritance of qualities from mother and father is inevitable, but that ultimately it is the child who assumes responsibility for his/her own happiness.

Secondly, in Chapter Two, Roy shares with us her experience as a schoolteacher, particularly her role in bridging the generation gap between the traditions of the student's family, and her own hopes of the child's bright future through a good education. Again, Roy's family background has provided her with the empowerment to become as she wishes, and the young teacher Christine of Gabrielle Roy's novels believes that education may also benefit every child. Luzina Tousignant's wish for her children is to gain knowledge and skills through education, yet she is not prepared for the quick transition of her adolescent, learned children into independence. Consequently, when her children leave home, Luzina experiences the negative side of

empowering her children with education; she is left behind. The elderly of Roy's La Route d'Altamont broaden the horizons of young children in the same way. They serve as a bridge to the adult world as they bring patience and pay special attention to their relationships with these children. Each relationship presented demonstrates valuable lessons Roy has learned through her roles as a young grandchild, student and schoolteacher.

The inner responsibility of a writer is to present to her audience her interpretation of the universe. Gabrielle Roy's journalistic efforts led to vivid representations of an urban existence, while her rural upbringing proved responsible for her tendency towards a simpler way of life. She has shown that individuals in the urban extreme, like Alexandre Chenevert and the characters of Saint-Henri, lack the spiritual nourishment of nature and the communion with humankind. They are isolated by their dismal urban life and resigned to the impersonal, mechanical surroundings. In turn, those unequipped for city life must struggle to adapt themselves to their new environment. Pierre is never truly happy in the populated city of Paris as he has lived all his life in the remote forests of northern Canada. What is most important, and most challenging, as illustrated by Gabrielle Roy, is to take what is best from both worlds. In the circle of life theme so

important to Roy's works, an integral part is the transitions people face through life's journey. One must be able to find strength in the solitude of nature and in a meaningful relationship with humankind. As shown in Chapter Three, Roy captures this important notion in her characters.

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- ⁸⁰LeGrand, Albert. "Gabrielle Roy ou l'être partagé," Etudes Françaises 1 (1965): 43.
- ⁸¹Grosskurth 27.
- ⁸²Grosskurth 28.
- ⁸³Brotherson 93.
- ⁸⁴Genuist 48.
- ⁸⁵Murphy, John J. "Alexandre Chenevert: Gabrielle Roy's Crucified Canadian," Queen's Quarterly 2 (1965): 337.
- ⁸⁶Brotherson 95.
- ⁸⁷Murphy 337.
- ⁸⁸Brotherson 95.
- ⁸⁹Socket, Paul in Lewis, p. 165.
- ⁹⁰Brotherson 94.
- ⁹¹Grosskurth 33.
- ⁹²Socket in Lewis 165.
- ⁹³Murphy 345.
- ⁹⁴Murphy 345.
- ⁹⁵Grosskurth 34.

- ⁹⁶Roy, Gabrielle. The Cashier, trans. Harry Binsse, ed. Malcolm Ross (1955, 1963; Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970): 148.
- ⁹⁷Lewis Vision 171.
- ⁹⁸Grosskurth 34.
- ⁹⁹Grosskurth 44.
- ¹⁰⁰Genuist 51.
- ¹⁰¹Amniproz, Alexandre L. "L'Homme-Arbre de 'La Montagne Secrète,'" Canadian Literature 88 (1981): 167.
- ¹⁰²Grosskurth 48.
- ¹⁰³Lewis 189.
- ¹⁰⁴Roy, Gabrielle. The Hidden Mountain, trans. Henry Binsse, ed. Malcolm Ross (1961, 1962, 1974; McClelland and Stewart, 1974): 75.
- ¹⁰⁵Genuist 87.
- ¹⁰⁶Genuist 86.
- ¹⁰⁷Genuist 51.
- ¹⁰⁸LeGrand 62.
- ¹⁰⁹LeGrand 63.
- ¹¹⁰Genuist 53.
- ¹¹¹Bessette, Gérard. "La Route d'Altamont clef de la Montagne Secrète de Gabrielle Roy," Livres et auteurs canadiens (1966): 19-24.
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