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Promethean principles of community in three novels by Wright Morris

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PROMETHEAN PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNITY IN THREE NOVELS BY WRIGHT MORRIS

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

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Chapter I

Introduction

Long overdue, appreciation for Wright Morris's literary merit may be coming of age in America. Although many people persist in recognizing him chiefly as a photographer or as a regionalist, his latest novel, Plains Song, received widely published attention and recently won Morris his second National Book Award. His latest book, a memoir entitled Will's Boy, prompted the lead review in the book section of a recent Newsweek,[1] thus exposing his rich talent to a wide, popular audience. Admittedly, Wright Morris is also an accomplished, noted photographer, and he does write frequently about Nebraska. Morris's fiction, however, preceded and inspired his work in photography; and his novels include diverse settings ranging from California to Italy, abundant characters representing various regions and nationalities, and recurring themes addressing universal human dilemmas. To limit or to define Morris's artistry on the basis of his interest in either photography or Nebraska is to seriously underestimate his significance and worth as an American writer.

Rather, Morris's literary reputation should hinge on his remarkable range and diversity of talent. Over the years, Morris's extraordinarily prolific career has created a comprehensive artistic environment. Besides his numerous short stories and his twenty-three novels, including four photo-texts (his experimental genre which juxtaposes photography

as complementary to and evocative rather than illustrative of prose), Morris has published four volumes of criticism.[2] Though not widely read by the general public, his work attracts the respect and consideration of such distinguished critics as Granville Hicks, David Madden, and Wayne C. Booth; all regard Morris as a major American writer. One can approach Morris's work, then, from various vantage points. Although secondary critical comment on Morris's fiction is undeservedly sparse, nationally recognized scholars have evaluated his work. Having created an unusual opportunity for both readers and critics, Morris's clearly stated critical and artistic principles illuminate his fiction, while providing an obvious basis for the evaluation and interpretation of his work. Further, the sheer abundance of his works promotes the investigation of grounds for comparison and contrast.

Certain recurring themes and patterns do emerge from both his fiction and his essays. For instance, much of Wright Morris's fiction reflects the twentieth century literary obsession with isolation and alienation. Through his characters, Morris explores the human need for communion with others. While consciously or unconsciously longing for shared experience, kinship, and intimacy, the major characters of many of his novels fail to establish satisfying relationships. In addition, through both his fiction and his critical works, Morris establishes himself as a Platonist.[3] He insists on a reality, a coherence that lies behind the flood of immediate experience. He extolls the power of imagination, memory, and emotion, while suggesting technique and time as the essential rational controls.[4] Morris's critical works and his novels insinuate ideal forms not attainable in the here and now.[5] He

elevates the artist as one who reveals meaning behind appearances but who cannot permanently apprehend or capture ultimate reality, and he represents this artistic function through the narrative voices in his fiction. Finally, from both his essays and his fiction, Morris emerges as a social critic concerned with the quality of daily existence, concerned with the state of the human community, and concerned with the depth of human communication.

Wright Morris, a conscious synthesizer,[6] unites all of these disparate elements in three of his novels, The Works of Love, Ceremony in Lone Tree, and Plains Song. Although many of his novels address the problems intrinsic to human relationships, these three novels focus particularly on the major characters' conscious or unconscious attempts at social integration. In fact, the major characters' failures to realize mutually fulfilling connections with others provide the central, unifying control dominating the emotional, aesthetic, and thematic impacts of the novels. Despite the characters' failures, however, the novels do not evoke an overwhelming cynicism or pessimism. Rather, a compassion for humanity, emanating from the narrative voices, pervades the three novels and illuminates the pathos of the characters' lives. Morris is a subtle, observant writer who exhibits a particularly acute "eye and ear" for humanity and "its peculiarities";[7] he eschews sentimentality. Adhering to his principles that the artist must interpret experience, however, he creates narrators who invest the characters with an essential goodness and dignity which somehow override the futility of their empty lives. True to his Platonism, Morris suggests

through the compassionate voice of his narrators a potentially transcendent vision of humanity which compels compassion, recognition, and involvement. Through artistic technique, therefore, Morris suggests a means to community.

While his novels evoke an ennobling vision of collective humanity, they also reveal Morris's fascination with myth. Many of his characters, struggling for identity and meaning, adopt roles for themselves, based on tradition, archetype, or legend. Will Brady, the major character in The Works of Love, adopts the role of a department store Santa Claus in order to make contact with others. Gordon Boyd, one of the major characters in Ceremony in Lone Tree, adopts the role of "The Lone Eagle," epitomized by the legend surrounding the flight of Charles Lindbergh, in his attempt to affect others with his heroism. Plains Song's Cora bears the emotional void of her marriage by adopting the role of the pioneer woman, kept uncomplaining by her stoicism and endless labor. These and other characters adopt roles, sometimes unconsciously, handed to them as cultural birthrights, which represent the expectations and myths of the culture itself. Sometimes the characters consciously exchange one role for another, despairing of one and hoping in the next. The adoption of such roles precludes the personal risk of self-actualization: who to be, how to be, how to respond, and how to act. Occasionally, however, the major characters in The Works of Love, Ceremony in Lone Tree, and Plains Song break the pattern of their lives in a great heroic effort, only to return to their original existences, or, as in the case of Will Brady, to die.

Particularly in connection with the major characters' attempts to develop a sense of community, the Promethean archetype surfaces most frequently in these novels. Prometheus, the Greek god, hero to and savior of humanity, represents those characteristics which the novels' major characters lack to one degree or another; and the characters' deficiencies in these areas hinder their social integration. Briefly told, the legend holds that Prometheus saved humanity from Zeus, who wanted to destroy it and replace it with another race. For this, Prometheus was nailed and chained to a rock for an undetermined time and, thus, was exiled from the other gods. Each day an eagle, or vulture depending upon the myth's source, tore open Prometheus's chest and ate his liver. The liver regenerated overnight, and the whole process began anew. Prometheus knew from the beginning that he would be punished for saving humanity. Nevertheless, he defied the gods.[8] Prometheus represents, therefore, the archetypal hero whose personal convictions are the ultimate guides to behavior. In general, three archetypal character traits emerge from the Prometheus myth; they are imagination, pity, and audacity.

Imagination, the progenitor of the other two, is the most essential to the Promethean myth. Prometheus's name, Forethought, indicates his imaginative power, his ability to conjure images without direct sensual apprehension. Prometheus, unlike many of the other gods, exhibited the particular ability to call up images of things yet to happen. According to Aeschylus' portrayal of Prometheus in Prometheus Bound, Prometheus reveals this ability to the Chorus when he says, "All, all

I knew before, all that should be. Nothing, no pang of pain that I did not foresee."[9] Later in the play, he depicts the future of another character, Io, in clear images invoked by his imagination.[10] Finally, Prometheus foresees Zeus's loss of power and receives further punishment when he refuses to reveal details to Zeus's messenger, Hermes.[11] Prometheus's gift to humanity further reveals his connection with imagination. In order to save humanity, Prometheus gave the gift of life,

> . . . the instigator of all of man's discoveries. It enabled mortals to master nature and create civilization. It allowed them to use inventive skills and to bring art, science, mathematics, agriculture, and cognitive thinking into being.[12]

Prometheus's gift, then, provided humanity with a consciousness that produced culture. In fact, according to Denis Donoghue, the myth of Prometheus " . . . tells a story to account for the origin of human consciousness";[13] and consciousness, hinging on imagination, produces culture, shared collective experience. Before the "fire" of imagination, humanity had no memory, no invention, no creativity, no cognition, no community. Traditionally these are the qualities that separate human beings from the other animals. Prometheus had, therefore, displayed the imagination to create a new race, a conscious race, and a social race:

> For the creative individual, Prometheus' fashioning of the human race, stealing of fire, being punished for his crime and reintegrated with dignity into the society he had rejected may be

> considered as stages in the artistic process: the birth of the idea, the struggle to realize it in form, and its impact in the collective sphere.[14]

Promethean imagination becomes, therefore, the consummate process for both the ideal artist and the ideal community.

The second Promethean characteristic, often missing or lacking in the major characters of The Works of Love, Ceremony in Lone Tree, and Plains Song, is pity. Promethean pity, rather than being a condescending sympathy, is a grand compassion for the entire human race, emanating, after all, from the mind of a god. This compassion emerges from an understanding of the suffering intrinsic to the human condition.[15] Predicated on imagination--one must have the capacity to imagine, to conceptualize the human plight--this emotion also depends on detachment and distance. Prometheus, a god, held a position necessarily detached from the human race; yet he was able to imagine human suffering, to take pity on that suffering, and to act to relieve it. Similarly, the artist, though often motivated by personal emotion, achieves true art, rather than mere self-expression, by consciously imposing a rational detachment on the artistic work. If the artist remains caught up in the particulars of his own emotional environment, he cannot perceive or express universal implications. To achieve this detachment, the artist will often employ the disciplines essential to technique, interpretation, and structure. These help to establish the distance necessary between the artist and experience. Promethean pity has an ultimately reciprocal effect. By having provided human beings

with consciousness and by having served as a paradigm for unjust suffering, Prometheus evoked human pity. Humanity's "special mode of existence" became "to suffer with a sense of injustice,"[16] and pity spilled over into the human community. Human beings, haunted by the Promethean example and steeped in an awareness of their own suffering, felt compelled to help and be helped. They longed for a sense of communion among humans despite the accompanying risks: "Prometheus and those who identify with him must break away from the known and relatively secure personal fold into the forbidden, strange, and dangerous areas of the collective sphere."[17] Similarly, the artist, motivated by his awareness of the human condition, risks communication with an audience through the artistic creation. Promethean pity becomes a motivator for social integration and for art.

The third Promethean characteristic is audacity. Again, Morris's major characters in The Works of Love, Ceremony in Lone Tree, and Plains Song often lack this characteristic and, therefore, condemn themselves to alienation. Prometheus, on the other hand, represents the epitome of audacious behavior. Already compelled by his imagination to pity, Prometheus invoked his imagination once again. He imagined a deed which would save humanity, a deed forbidden by the gods; then with daring and courage mustered from his own internal, rather than external, reserves, he defied the gods and performed the deed despite them. Having accomplished the effort, he displayed further audacity by refusing to repent and by enduring his punishment with defiant stoicism. According to Aeschylus, Prometheus tells Zeus's

messenger Hermes:

> Go and persuade the sea wave not to break,
>
> You will persuade me no more easily.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> . . . Do you think to see me
>
> . . . stretch out my hands
>
> to him I hate, and pray him for release?
>
> A world apart am I from prayer to pity.[18]

Thus, Prometheus displayed the audacity to face "the risk of experience" and the audacity to invoke the "determination to maintain such a life by force of will."[19]

Prometheus's audacity becomes more than the facilitator for his gift of human consciousness, however; it becomes a positive paradigm for human behavior: "Above all, Prometheus made possible the imaginative enhancement of experience, the metaphorical distinction between what happens to us and what we make of the happening."[20] In order to make something of experience, to act on experience, one must display an audacity that challenges the power of circumstance. Audacity becomes the parent of action, the prime mover of the individual in revolt against destiny. When Prometheus committed his audacious act, however, he at once separated himself from one community and involved himself with another. Exiled from the gods, Prometheus had nonetheless forever involved himself with humanity. As a result of Prometheus's gift, human beings became capable of creative acts which distinguish them as individuals, thus providing a detachment and separation from community.

Like pity, this Promethean principle depends on individual direction and vision; but the audacious deed also affects its witnesses, thus affecting the collective life of the community. The model for this creative behavior is, of course, the artist. For the creation of community and the creation of art, then, imagination provides the vision of community, pity provides the motivation for social integration, and audacity provides the impetus for social action.

Wayne C. Booth echoes these three principles in his fine article, "The Two Worlds in the Fiction of Wright Morris." Booth maintains that Morris, indeed a Platonist, sees the material world as a place of change and that only the world of values offers permanence and, therefore, reality.[21] Booth interprets Morris's fiction as suggesting three modes of transcendence: imagination, love, and heroism. According to Booth, Morris's concept of imagination provides "the moment of truth,"[22] his concept of love provides "the moment of compassion,"[23] and his concept of heroism provides "the moment of real action."[24] Booth emphasizes that both characters and artist, according to Morris, apprehend and communicate meaning through these three means, which parallel very closely the Promethean principles of imagination, pity, and audacity.

Morris's own critical statements concur with Booth's analysis. In The Territory Ahead, Morris expresses his conviction that imagination processes experience, that only imagination can ferret meaning from behind a world of appearances. Despite modern humanity's love of material facts, only imagination can make sense of them:

> Wanting no nonsense, only facts, we make a curious discovery. Facts are like faces. There are millions of them. They are disturbingly alike. It is the imagination that looks behind the face, as well as looks out of it.[25]

In About Fiction, Morris discusses the importance of pity in fiction:

> Pity is at the heart of Dostoevsky's torment, and never long out of his imagination. It also interested James Joyce, and he was at pains to give this answer: "Pity is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the human sufferer." The statement is lucid and appeals to the intellect, but the emotions of pity itself are not aroused. We turn to fiction for the experience that arouses and enlarges our capacity for pity, whether or not we ever come to understand what pity is.[26]

Morris sees pity as a transcendent emotion which provides a unity of experience and an integration of human community. Further pity unites artist and participant in that the artist's compassionate vision excites compassion in the reader. Morris addresses the third Promethean principle in the novel, The Huge Season. Through the main character, a writer named Foley, Morris dramatically emphasizes the essential importance of audacity to both art and life. Foley, clearly representative of the artist, mulls over his writer's block and considers the following remedy:

> It finally led Foley to look into Darwin, into a book that he

> had owned but never read, and to spend nights brooding on a creative evolution of his own. Founded on what? Well, founded on audacity. The unpredictable behavior that lit up the darkness with something new.[27]

By comparing the enlightenment of Darwin's theory to the audacity of the creative act, Morris suggests once again that the role of the artist is to illuminate experience for the human community and that audacity is a means by which to fulfill that function.

Clearly, three principles intrinsic to Morris's artistic theory parallel three principles intrinsic to the Promethean myth, and Booth is correct in his analysis that these principles also emerge from Morris's fiction. In The Works of Love, Ceremony in Lone Tree, and Plains Song, Promethean principles emerge in direct relation to the characters' search for love. By love, Morris does not mean the limited romantic or sexual sense; rather, he means that emotion which compels humanity toward interrelatedness. By lover, he means that person who can feel and evoke communion with others, integrating self into community. Although Morris's major characters fail to integrate love, or satisfying human relationships, in their lives, the novels nevertheless establish norms for community behavior. These norms develop through the subtle interplay among narrator, reader, and characters.

Morris's narrative technique is the same in the three novels, and all three narrators demonstrate the principles of imagination, pity, and audacity. Morris's narrators are reliable, detached, and unintrusive. They dramatize rather than relate character revelation and

development. Relying once again on the classical tradition, Morris creates a relationship between narrator and reader which functions similarly to the chorus in a Greek tragedy. The Greek chorus, responding aloud to the events at hand and representing the society's norms, provides the audience with a reliable perspective with which it can identify. Similarly, the narrators in the three novels stop the action to ask rhetorical questions or to make salient comments. The narrators' interruptions are extremely brief and subtle, however, and the narrators refrain from fully answering their own questions or from fully explaining their comments. The reader must supply the missing answers, the missing explanations, the missing connections. "In any reading experience," according to Wayne C. Booth, "there is an implied dialogue among author, narrator, the other characters, and the reader."[28] Morris intensifies the dialogue between narrator and reader by distancing his characters from both. Occasionally, the narrator openly speculates about the characters and implicitly invites the reader to do the same. Further, Morris creates a narrator who lures the reader into a continuous, complicit effort to divine the meaning behind action and character. The narrator and the reader, therefore, engaged in a close relationship by Morris's technique, supply together the novels' norms.

Norms having to do with community are the most crucial to The Works of Love, Ceremony in Lone Tree, and Plains Song. While presenting the lives of characters who fail to relate meaningfully to others, the novels' narrators exhibit qualities which would have enabled the characters' success. First, the narrators relate the life stories of

very ordinary people, whose lives are relatively uneventful and insignificant; yet, the narrators present these stories imaginatively, interpreting and transforming the lives until they become somehow extraordinary. These lives capture the reader's interest which further transforms them. Imagination becomes a process of involvement and connection; it becomes, therefore, the first norm for successful social integration. Second, the narrators tell the stories of people whose good intentions balance their failings, whose weaknesses emerge only despite tremendous efforts, whose defeats recall the pathos of the human condition. The narrators reveal these lives to the reader through filters of compassion; and, as a result, the narrators awaken pity, Promethean pity, in the reader. This shared emotion becomes yet another basis for human connection, and pity becomes the second norm. Third, the narrators celebrate their characters' most daring acts, focusing in particular on those acts which are momentarily out of character. Regardless of either the atypical nature of the acts or of the consequences of the acts, these acts reveal to the reader what the characters wish themselves to be. If even for only a moment, the character can become his or her idealized self through a transforming act. In addition, the narrators dare tell the stories of ordinary, plodding people who seem totally inappropriate as the subjects of novels. The narrators emphasize the characters' inappropriate and insignificant lives by apologizing in the opening lines for telling such mundane stories; yet, the narrators audaciously persist in telling the stories regardless. Audacity, which compels the reader's

interest in both character and narrator, represents the final norm for human interaction.

Morris's narrators, then, like Prometheus, suggest three characteristics conducive to social integration. The narrators also represent a particular role in society. According to Booth in The Rhetoric of Fiction, "In so far as a novel does not refer directly to the author, there will be no distinction between him and the implied, undramatized narrator."[29] The narrators in Morris's three novels represent the implied author. By further implication, what the narrators achieve in the novels ultimately represents the achievements of the artist. Morris, therefore, suggests that the artist in society, possessing imagination, compassion, and audacity, is the prototype for the lover. The artist has the vision, the emotion, and the facility to express and evoke community feeling.

Morris accomplishes an amazing synthesis. In all three novels, the major characters fail to find love; they fail to integrate into community; they fail to establish mutually satisfying relationships. Their revealed deficiencies assert by negation, however, the principles necessary for their success. By contrast, the narrators of the three novels present an artistic vision which incorporates and applies those principles. Finally, and by further contrast, the novels allude to the Promethean archetype, which not only encompasses those principles but which also represents both artist and lover. In Wright Morris's The Works of Love, Ceremony in Lone Tree, and Plains Song, therefore, a paradigm for the ideal lover, based on the Promethean archetype,

emerges, paralleling closely Morris's artistic theory. In fact, three principles essential to Wright Morris's theory of art, imagination, pity, and audacity, emanate in the novels as the three principles essential to community. The ideal artist becomes the prototype for the ideal lover.

Notes

Introduction

[1] Jim Miller, "Plain Talk from the Plains," Newsweek, July 13, 1981, pp. 77-8.

[2] See Wright Morris's About Fiction, Reverent Reflections on the Nature of Fiction with Irrevent Observations on Writers, Readers, and Other Abuses (New York: Harper and Row, 1975); A Bill of Rites, A Bill of Wrongs, A Bill of Goods (New York: The New American Library, 1967); Earthly Delights, Unearthly Adornments: American Writers as Image Makers (New York: Harper and Row, 1978); and The Territory Ahead (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1958).

[3] Wayne C. Booth, "The Two Worlds in the Fiction of Wright Morris," Sewanee Review, 65 (Summer, 1957), 399.

[4] Morris, Earthly Delights, p. 12.

[5] Morris, About Fiction, pp. 30-1.

[6] Morris, Territory, p. 15.

[7] Leon Howard, Wright Morris (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1968), p. 5.

[8] Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound, in Three Greek Plays, ed. Edith Hamilton (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1937), pp. 95-143.

[9] Aeschylus, p. 100.

[10] Aeschylus, p. 129-30.

[11] Aeschylus, p. 140.

[12] Bettina L. Knapp, The Prometheus Syndrome (Troy, New York: The Whitston Publishing Co., 1979), p. 13.

[13] Denis Donoghue, Thieves of Fire (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 17.

[14] Knapp, p. 11.

[15] Knapp, p. 13.

[16] Ralph Manheim, Prometheus, Archetypal Image of Human Existence, Bollington Series LXV, I (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963), p. 88.

[17] Knapp, p. 11.

[18] Aeschylus, p. 140.

[19] Donoghue, p. 26.

[20] Donoghue, p. 26.

[21] Booth, "Two Worlds," p. 377.

[22] Booth, "Two Worlds," p. 380.

[23] Booth, "Two Worlds," p. 387.

[24] Booth, "Two Worlds," p. 377.

[25] Morris, Territory, p. 12.

[26] Morris, About Fiction, pp. 74-5.

[27] Wright Morris, The Huge Season (New York: Viking Press, 1954), p. 167.

[28] Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 155.

[29] Booth, Rhetoric, p. 151.

Chapter II

Imagination and the Vision of Community

Wright Morris suggests that a vivid imagination is essential to social integration. Through his critical works, Morris develops an artistic theory defining imagination as the necessary faculty through which human beings create meaning out of existence and through which an artist must filter raw experience in order to discern and express the universal and the permanent. In his novels The Works of Love, Ceremony in Lone Tree, and Plains Song, by revealing varying propensities and deficiencies in his characters' imaginations as they attempt to relate to others, Morris creates a cause and effect relationship between this function of imagination and the relative success or failure of social integration. Further emphasizing human relationships, Morris alludes throughout the novels to the Promethean archetype of involvement and imagination and constructs an implicit contrast between the Promethean archetype and his own characters. While his characters lack the imaginative vision necessary for social integration, the narrators present an imaginative interpretation of the characters' lives which sustains connections between themselves and the reader, between themselves and the characters, and between the characters and the reader. Morris, therefore, builds another implicit contrast, one between his characters and his narrators, concerning the ability to establish human connections. By allusion and by contrast, then, Morris implies a paradigm of imagina-

tive vision which must precede social integration. This paradigm emerges from the narrators' reflection of the Promethean archetype, symbolic of the artist, and represents the implied author; hence, the narrative vision symbolizes the artistic vision. The artist's creative imagination becomes an ideal perspective necessary for social integration, and the artist becomes the paradigm for the individual who successfully evokes and sustains human kinship.

Through critical essays, Morris establishes imagination as a product of emotion; as an agent of consciousness which interprets, transcends, and synthesizes experience; and as an evoker and creator of inspiration and communication. Imagination discerns reality behind appearances; permanence in temporality; meaning intrinsic to experience; and connections among ideas, people, and circumstances. Paradoxically, imagination provides both the basis for individual identity and creativity and also the basis for communion with others. Similarly, in the Promethean myth, an ancient attempt to elucidate the social nature of humanity, fire becomes the origin for civilization (in that fire enables invention, technology, and security) and the metaphor for the creative imagination. As early tribes gathered around the warmth and protection of the tribal fire, humanity gathers around the "fire" of the creative imagination. Perhaps, Morris suggests, the emotional need for social bonds excites the imagination, and the imagination envisions a more ideal, a more connected, society. Such a vision creates sparks, in the forms of art, communication, and culture, which inflame creators, witnesses, and participants, thus providing connections among them. Prometheus's gift of fire, the creative imagination, provides humanity with a faculty capable of envisioning, and then

inventing the means toward, mutual relationships.

Although his major characters fail to create satisfying relationships, Morris does not suggest that they lack imagination. On the contrary, all of the characters experience imaginative glimpses, however brief and elusive, of an ideal world; and these glimpses, occasioned by intense emotion--often painful loneliness--renew the characters' efforts to improve their relationships. But unable to sustain these transient images of a better world, the characters fall victims to cultural traps which foil their attempts to create such a world. Morris suggests that various life circumstances, including exterior circumstances and individual character, limit the full, natural expression of imagination. His characters often suppress emotion, the basic fuel for imagination, because cultural standards, based on the Christian and the pioneer (or Protestant work) ethics, stringently dictate the stoic acceptance of social roles. Attempting to establish themselves in a social context, the characters adopt, sometimes unconsciously, cultural stereotypes to substitute for imaginative creation of personal identities and for imaginative perception into others' identities. Despairing of the possibility for true communication, they often substitute clichés for authentic self-expression, thus limiting their abilities to sustain satisfying relationships. All of the characters allow fears to cripple the transcendent power of imagination. Rather than imaginatively processing experience in order to discover the ideal and the permanent, each character in his or her own way takes imaginative flight, a means of escape, from a bewildering, lonely world. In failing to sustain a vision of mutuality and in failing to imaginatively process experience toward more satisfying personal decisions and choices, Wright Morris's

major characters fail to perceive and to create connections between themselves and others. Only an imagination, relatively unfettered by stilted, culturally-prescribed responses, indeed free from cultural stereotypes, social clichés, and personal fears, can create a vision of, can sustain faith in, and can invent the means toward successful human relationships. Such an imagination, as represented by the narrative vision of the novels, becomes the predisposing, essential cause for mutuality.

Imagination, A Product of Emotion

According to Wright Morris in his Earthly Delights, Unearthly Adornments, emotions awaken the imagination. Specifically, people long to relive, to understand, to interpret, to assimilate past emotional experiences: "Precisely where memory is frail and emotion is strong, imagination takes fire."[1] In his recently published memoir, Will's Boy, Morris suggests the origin of such emotion. Specifically, Morris discusses in his preface "To the Reader" the dim, elusive childhood memories which provoked in him "the ache of a nameless longing."[2] This emotion stirred his imagination, and his imagination found expression in writing. Morris emphasizes that the roots of emotion and imagination lie in the basic human need for relationships with others:

> Six days after my birth my mother died. Having stated this bald fact, I ponder its meaning. In the wings of my mind I hear voices, I am attentive to the presence of invisible relations. I see the ghosts of people without faces . . . My life begins, and will have its ending, in this

abiding chronicle of real losses and imaginary gains.[3]

"Losses and gains" in human relationships excite emotions, and these emotions awaken the creative imagination.

At the beginning of Plains Song, Cora, one of the novel's major characters, seems devoid of emotions. Allowing circumstances and others to dictate her destiny, Cora stoically accepts her father's decision to move her West where she might find a husband: "It had been unthinkable, and Cora did not think, that she would go against her father's wishes."[4] Eventually, she meets Emerson who does indeed propose. Marriage arouses Cora's emotions. On the night Emerson and Cora consummate their marriage, Cora responds intensely:

> . . . What did she experience? It might be likened to an operation without anesthesia. Horror exceeded horror. The time required by her assailant to do what must be done left her in shock. In the dawn light she found that she had bitten through the flesh of her hand, exposing the bone (PS, p. 14).

Cora continues to endure "what must be done" for most of her life, but certain occasions arouse a ferocity of emotion that she simply cannot suppress despite her Christian devotion to duty. After this night in particular, Cora finds herself "feverish with emotions that both pleased and shamed her" (PS, p. 16), emotions evoked by her new status as a full-grown woman. As a result of her emotional turmoil, Cora's imagination awakens; and she becomes capable of new metaphorical interpretations "The drama of creation, as she now understood it, a coming together of unearthly forces, . . . not unlike the brute and

blind disorder of her unthinkable experience . . . " (PS, p. 22). Cora acquiesces to life, which she sees as subject to uncontrollable cosmic forces, and develops an attitude of melancholy acceptance. Religion remains an occasional outlet for Cora's emotional energy, but for the most part, Cora reins in her emotions.

Cora's sister-in-law, however, penetrates Cora's defenses. Belle, who has married Emerson's brother Orion, arrives from the Ozarks untutored in the pioneer woman's stoic, repressed lifestyle. Cora's jealousy of Belle's earthy, natural impulses induces her imagination to create a startling image; Cora imagines that Belle might nurse Madge, Cora's baby, for the sheer pleasure of it, passing a wildness of spirit to the baby through her milk. Cora, "feeling shame for this lack in herself" (PS, p. 46), recognizes, fears, and yet admires that "Belle would do whatever came naturally" (PS, p. 47). Despite Cora's tight control over her feelings, her emotions will again and again awaken at the unexpected and the unpredictable. Because Cora refuses to feel the full impact of these emotions, she avoids the full awakening of her imagination. Perhaps her life of hardship and duty, the societal role demanded of pioneer farm wives, forces her to deny her basic longings; and, unfortunately, the suppression of some emotions eventually culminates in the suppression of her entire emotional life. The tenuous hope implicit in an imaginative vision of a world where human feelings and relationships are openly expressed and appreciated is perhaps too painful for Cora; she withdraws from such a vision.

Will Brady, the major character in The Works of Love, like Cora, displays little emotion in the beginning of the novel. Brady, too,

grows up in an environment where emotions are never discussed. Eventually, however, his sparse environment, Indian Bow, Nebraska, awakens in him a longing for more: ". . . in Willy Brady's opinion it was . . . not enough."[5] But the emotion fails to motivate Brady to move until events force him to face his loneliness. First, the only eligible girl in town decides to marry someone else. Second, his mother dies leaving him without further family ties. At her funeral, Emil Barton, the town stationmaster, gives him a third reason. He reminds Brady of the desolation of Mrs. Brady's life and suggests that Brady avoid a similar fate by seeking new opportunities in eastern Nebraska. Stirred by fear of loneliness, Brady's imagination awakens. He imagines the possibility of a better place and leaves for the more densely populated eastern Nebraska.

Midway through the novel, in the chapter entitled "In the Moonlight,"[6] Brady is more keenly conscious of his emotions. By this time middle-aged, Brady has been left by his first wife, remarried an Omaha cigar counter girl named Gertrude Long, and inherited custody of a prostitute's son. Although Brady is not the biological father of the boy--he had had no sexual contact with the prostitute though he had been kind to her--he generously takes responsibility for his "son." Nevertheless, having adopted the role of the American business man, rational and materialistic, he feels alienated from the boy and isolated in his marriage. In desperation and loneliness, Brady searches through his son's books in order to discover something about him. The intensity of his emotions, combined with the effect of one of these books, Journey to the Moon, incites Brady's imagination. For the first time, Brady tries to envision a commonality between himself and his neighbors.

Standing on the porch, Brady is reflective:

> . . . A warm summer night, the windows, and the doors of most of the houses were open, and the air that he breathed went in and out of all of them. In and out of lungs, and the lives, of the people who were asleep. They inhaled it deeply, snoring perhaps; then they blew it on its way again, and he seemed to feel himself sucked into the rooms, blown out again. Without carrying things too far, he felt himself made part of the lives of these people, even part of the dreams that they were having, lying there (WOL, pp. 134-5).

Although Brady does not like "carrying things too far"--he won't actually involve himself personally--he uses his imagination to discover the source of his emotional pain, a compelling need for kinship. Although Brady develops a greater and greater sense of compassion for general humanity, he remains personally isolated throughout the novel.

McKee and Boyd, the major characters in Ceremony in Lone Tree, represent a more highly developed emotional life than that represented by either Cora of Plains Song or Brady of The Works of Love. Both McKee and Boyd have much more intense and authentic moments of introspection and insight, and, therefore, experience their emotions more fully. But both men, subject to crippling fears, eventually suppress their feelings and hide them from others. Boyd and McKee possess a symbiotic emotional relationship, based on their shared memories of growing up together in a small town in Nebraska, a time when expectations had yet to be dashed. As children, Boyd and McKee had built a relationship on mutual need.

Boyd, "bolder than McKee,"[7] had done those things which McKee lacked the courage to do. By having been Boyd's best audience, McKee had associated himself with the daring of a rebel and thus had experienced life vicariously. At the same time, Boyd had received the attention and the appreciation he so badly needed. In those days, both had believed anything was possible, and Boyd had dared try it, including his repeated attempts to "walk on water" (CILT, p. 13). The central action of Ceremony in Lone Tree occurs over a few days during a family reunion held to celebrate the ninetieth birthday of Tom Scanlon, McKee's father-in-law. Details of their childhood emerge, however, in order to explain Boyd's and McKee's bonds as "hero and witness,"[8] respectively. Each misses the other, sometimes unconsciously, because their former relationship had provided a sense of potential and anticipation which they lack in the present. Often, in order to assuage the pain of loneliness, both withdraw into an imaginative reconstruction of the past.

The fact that Boyd had once loved Lois, McKee's wife, further complicates their relationship. McKee had begun dating Lois, but it was Boyd who dared first kiss her. Boyd's memory of her, filtered through his nostalgic vision of a better time, substitutes for relationships in the present. Lois becomes "the only real friggin woman" of his life (CILT, p. 37). McKee's memory of Boyd kissing Lois arouses two emotions in him, pride and jealousy. While concerned that Lois might regret her choice of husband, McKee enjoys the idea of having won a woman coveted by Boyd. McKee creates an image of Lois, based on what he considers to be Boyd's image of her. Because of both men's larger-

than-life images of Lois as "the perfect woman," they both become incapable of relating to real women, including Lois herself.

Besides their respective failures to build relationships with women, both men feel that they have failed in other ways. During the course of the novel, Boyd laments his failures as a writer and as a human being, and McKee understands that "watching Boyd, after all, was what he'd been doing all his life" (CILT, p. 56). Activated by disappointment, loneliness, and loss, the imaginations of the two men stir; but because both fear intimacy and prefer memories of the past to the risks in the present, they use their imaginations as the means of escape from, rather than the process toward, social integration. Instead of creating an imaginative vision of a present world in which social integration becomes possible, Boyd and McKee imaginatively entrench themselves in the past.

Although Sharon Rose, the other major character in Plains Song, at first suppresses her emotions like the other characters; by the end of the novel, she breaks through the barriers imposed by her childhood and her society. The novel ends with Sharon Rose truly discovering and feeling her emotions and with her risking further emotional experiences by reaching out to another human being. Sharon Rose's early childhood involved two widely disparate emotional models. As the biological child of Belle, Sharon may have inherited some of her mother's propensity for impulse and sensuality; certainly Belle modelled and nurtured these qualities before her death. After Belle died, however, Cora becomes the foremost model with strict adherence to duty and suppression of emotion. Sharon and Madge, Cora's daughter, develop a symbiotic

relationship, similar to that between Boyd and McKee, based on Sharon's daring and Madge's passivity. The threat of losing Madge to a man arouses the intensest of emotions in Sharon Rose because Madge represents the only close relationship Sharon knows. Unlike Madge, in Sharon Rose's attempt to meet changing emotional needs, she cannot easily substitute a societally-dictated role for the loss of a close childhood relationship. But Sharon Rose's grief over Madge's decision to marry awakens her imagination and compels her to create new possibilities for her own life, possibilities which do not reflect the mainstream of social roles. In order to break away from her past, Sharon Rose begins to envision a better world, one far different from the one she has known during her childhood.

Each major character, then, comes imaginatively to life as a result of emotional experiences evoked by relationships. Similarly, the narrators of the three novels begin their stories with emotionally-charged, though subtle, language in order to awaken the reader's imagination. The narrator of The Works of Love imbues the very first descriptive passages of the novel with emotion, suggesting, at the same time, the process and the circumstances which provoke creativity:

> . . . In the dry places, men begin to dream. Where the rivers run sand, there is something in man that begins to flow . . . The stranger might find, as if preserved in amber, something of the green life that was once lived there, and the ghosts of men who have gone on to a better place. The withered towns are empty, but not uninhabited. Faces sometimes peer out from the

> broken windows, or whisper from the sagging balconies, as if this place--now that it is dead--had come to life. As if empty it is forever occupied . . . (WOL, p. 3).

In the face of emptiness, of sterility, of death, human beings experience a sense of their essential loneliness, an emotion that causes the imagination "to flow," perhaps in order to alleviate pain. The use of "the stranger" in the passage suggests a lonely visitor, perhaps the narrator or the reader, to a world which impels the imagination. In this "dry place," the world of the novel, both narrator and reader come imaginatively to life, much as the emptiness of material reality, according to a Platonist, might stimulate the imagination of those who observe it.

Similarly, the narrator of Ceremony in Lone Tree emphasizes the relationship between emotion and imagination. In the first line, this third person, undramatized narrator involves the reader in a conversation by using a direct imperative (a highly unusual convention for such a narrator), "Come to the window" (CILT, p. 3). Like the narrator of The Works of Love, the narrator of Ceremony in Lone Tree introduces the idea of a "stranger" (CILT, p. 4), while speculating as to what such a stranger might see if he or she were to look out this same window. The scene outside the window represents a view Tom Scanlon sees as he sits and stares:

> . . . the stranger might find the view familiar. A man accustomed to the ruins of war might even feel at home. In the blowouts on the rise are flint arrowheads, and pieces of farm

> machinery, half buried in sand, resemble nothing so much as artillery equipment, abandoned when the dust began to blow. The tidal shift of the sand reveals one ruin in order to conceal another . . . The emptiness of the plain generates illusions that require little moisture, and grow better, like tall stories, where the mind is dry (CILT, pp. 4-5).

By using images of ancient war relics, by equating the soil to the sands of time, the narrator evokes more than a mental image of the setting. Creating a tone of acquiescence--to time, change, and death--the narrator arouses emotions of desolation, loss, and grief. Although ostensibly speaking of the old man's view, the narrator purposely leaves him in another room. Together, without the liaison of characters, narrator and reader gaze out the window. Then goaded by emotion, the imaginations of both stir, awaken, and begin the process of image-making, of building "tall stories." Like former "strangers," who now share a common emotional and imaginative bond, they enter the world of the novel.

The narrator of Plains Song also establishes an emotional tone from the outset but begins the novel with a direct reference to the characters: "It is a curse in this family that the women bear only daughters, if anything at all" (PS, p. 1). Ostensibly callous, the narrator seems to dismiss the major characters, to base their worth on their reproductive function. But the novel is "For Female Voices," and this first statement is thoroughly ironic. By using such a statement, the narrator echoes the collective voice of the society with which the

characters must cope. A few lines later, the narrator of Plains Song, like the other narrators, addresses the reader directly, in this case, by asking a rhetorical question, "Is the past a story we are persuaded to believe, in the teeth of the life we endure in the present?" (PS, p.1). With this question, the narrator establishes a tone of compassion which permeates the entire novel. A tender description of Cora follows which emphasizes her age and frailty and which warns the reader not to misinterpret her stoicism; it is "not that she is cold, unloving, or insensible. She is implacable" (PS, p. 2). Cora simply lacks the flexibility, the elasticity necessary to accommodate change. Engaging the reader further in an imaginary conversation, the narrator asks, "Would it have been better if she had stayed with her father, a gentle man with a cracked, pleading voice?" (PS, p. 2). The narrator, however, leaves the answer to the reader and begins the story of Cora's life, filtered through her memories: ". . . But she no longer sees things too clearly. The glass of memory ripples, or is smoked and darkened like isinglass" (PS, p. 3). The narrator warns the reader, then, not to rely on the validity of the facts and engages the reader in a complicit imaginative process, fueled by emotional responses to Cora and lapses of memory which demand reconstruction. Rather than creating expectations of verisimilitude, of biographical analysis, the narrator invites the reader to join in an imaginative interpretation of Cora's life. Imaginative worlds, after all, are the worlds in which confrontation with the ideal and the permanent are possible and where evaluations of lives are made.

In all three novels, the narrators introduce major characters

whose emotions arouse the characters' imaginations. The narrators establish setting with emotionally connotative language and images. Just as the characters' emotions awaken their imaginations, the emotional content of the novels' first pages engage the readers' imaginations. Following the theoretical principles discussed in his critical works, as when Morris discusses the relationships of emotion and imagination in his Earthly Delights, Unearthly Adornments, Morris utilizes narrative technique to establish imagination as a product of emotion.

Imagination, An Agent of Consciousness

Once the imagination awakens, Morris believes it has an essential role to play in human life. Through imagination, people can develop a state of full consciousness which will enable them to transcend, interpret, and synthesize experience.[9] For Morris, the extent of consciousness in human beings indicates the extent to which they are capable of apprehending true reality, the permanent and the ideal:

> . . . Life, raw life, the kind we lead every day, whether it leads us into the past or the future, has the curious property of not seeming real enough. We have a need, however illusive, for a life that is more real than life. It lies in the imagination . . . it seems to be the nature of man to transform--himself, if possible, and then the world around him--and the technique of this transformation is what we call art. When man fails to transform, he loses consciousness, he stops living.[10]

This passage reflects Morris's Platonist belief that ultimate reality lies in the ideal and not in the material. Only the truly conscious are capable of envisioning ideal and permanent relationships with others.

On the basis of such a vision, these people become capable of creating, evoking, communicating, and inspiring kinship with others. Using their imaginations to interpret human behavior, such people discern commonality and establish connections:

> But without the synthesizing function of the imagination, isolation results: . . . The isolated monuments, the isolated efforts, that characterize the American imagination, symbolize the isolation in which Americans live. Connections are missing. The whole does not add up to something more than the sum of the parts. No synthesizing act of the imagination has as yet transformed us into a nation.[11]

For Morris, art depends on human bonds, and the participants, like the artist, should employ their imaginations toward ever-higher levels of consciousness:

> If the modern novel is threatened with a crisis that will not result in better novels, it may lie with the reader who has lost the will, and the power, to read. Who fears--and rightly--that the good book seeks to make him fully conscious, the great book to expand such consciousness as he has.[12]

With the exception of one character, the major characters of The Works of Love, Ceremony in Lone Tree, and Plains Song never experience full consciousness.

A person reaches in Morris's view a state of full consciousness by carefully examining socially-defined stereotypes and clichés and by refusing to interpret experience solely through them. One must also recognize, acknowledge, and transcend one's own crippling fears. Having transcended fear, one must then strive to live in the present, resisting both seductive nostalgia for the past and groundless hope in the future. Finally, one must perceive the universal qualities of human existence which bind all of humanity in common experiences. Through these processes, all of which take place in the imagination, human beings become capable of envisioning and establishing relationships. The one character Sharon Rose (Plains Song), who does achieve full consciousness, does so on the last page of the novel. Because Sharon Rose's change comes so late in the novel, the reader witnesses her character traits, which initially preclude satisfying relationships, and her gradual process toward social integration, and the reader can only imagine the quality of her subsequent life. In contrast to the characters, all three of the novels' narrators reflect a state of full consciousness and thus suggest a prototype for the susceptible reader, and Morris's theory of full consciousness again recalls the myth of Prometheus,[13] a recurring reminder that imagination is the proper interpreter of experience.[14] Through the imagination, people create meaning of existence; in fact, "the act of coherence is the imaginative act."[15] And satisfying human relationships require a vision of coherence, an imaginative vision.

Unable to interpret their experiences and thoughts as elements of individual identities, Morris's major characters adopt the stereotyped

roles that they perceive as external reality. Further, they become incapable of seeing the identities of others, assigning others stereotyped roles as well. Clichés begin to direct behavior and to provide content for communication, but they fail to dispel the characters' fears. As a result, the characters become incapable of transcendence and take, instead, imaginative flight from the world. Having chosen escape rather than transcendence, the characters fail to synthesize their experiences with the experiences of others; they feel frighteningly alone. Further retreating, this time from intolerable loneliness, they lapse into various degrees of consciousness, thus entrenching isolation.

Plains Song depicts the life of such an isolate. The major character, Cora, rarely emerges from a state of semi-consciousness. Occasionally Cora's "numbed, flickering awareness" (PS, p. 76) awakens but only during rare moments of intense emotion. Interestingly, Cora seems most content when she is least conscious, almost as if the steady, predictable rhythms of life lull her. She loves, for instance, the farm's windmill precisely because of its steady presence, ". . . the sight of it in the morning was like a church steeple." Carrying the religious imagery further, the narrator explains that Cora accepts that which she cannot control; the windmill's unpredictable shifting in the wind ". . . moved and awed her," because it, like she, followed ". . . orders from on high" (PS, p. 21). Cora submits to life partly because she suppresses both questions and challenges. The narrator associates Cora's semi-conscious condition with the "drone of insects" (PS, pp. 70, 173, 211), as if this drone might suggest the ringing in the ear which

often precedes loss of consciousness. With the "drone of insects" heavy in her ears during her so-called "good years," Cora finds great contentment because events occur during "appointed times" and people and things stay in their "appointed places" (PS, p. 69). Feeling safe and secure but never joyful, Cora succumbs to ". . . a sorrowful pleasure which is ". . . more satisfying to her nature . . . " (PS, p. 70).

Because Cora expects exterior circumstance to dictate her existence, she makes few conscious choices during her life. She accepts unquestioningly the cliché of the pioneer woman's role and develops the industry and the stoicism necessary to fulfill that role. Never questioning the value of her labor, Cora works endlessly because, for the pioneer woman, "only work that could not be finished gave purpose to life" (PS, p. 124). Cora lacks the imagination to interpret or evaluate other lifestyles; she cannot envision alternatives for, or possibilities of, an improved existence. Filling her life with work, she exhibits a remarkable stoicism even in the face of the unknown. During her honeymoon Cora had experienced sex for the first time, and she bit through her hand rather than cry out with the pain and the horror that she had felt. Even during childbirth, "Cora made no sound" (PS, p. 25). Rarely revealing any emotion, Cora endures her many disappointments, her life's harshness and scarcity, her loneliness, and her husband's eventual death.

Although the suffering of others intrudes occasionally into her consciousness (Cora recognizes Belle's loneliness which results from Orion's neglect and Cora sympathizes with the fact that Fayrene, Sharon Rose's sister, receives little attention), Cora never expresses regret

or offers comfort to anyone because, "If there was affection in Cora's nature, it was not something she shared with people" (PS, p. 88). Cora becomes more and more the role she adopted early in her life--a pioneer woman, hard-working and stoic. Incapable of interpretation, introspection, and evaluation, Cora remains isolated despite fleeting moments of sympathy toward others.

Further entrenching Cora's isolation, three basic fears inhibit her ability to transcend her immediate environment: fear of intimacy, fear of emotions, fear of changes. To justify her fear of intimacy, Cora explains that she will not be "beholden" (PS, p. 88) during a conversation with her children. Actually obligations terrify Cora because she is afraid to confront human needs. When Cora travels to the World's Fair with her daughter Madge, and Madge's family, Cora attempts to block Madge's attempt to confide in her mother. Despite Madge's need for consolation, Cora ". . . hoped to minimize what she heard by saying nothing herself, keeping her eyes averted" (PS, p. 141). Cora fears that listening to her daughter's distress might allow emotions long suppressed to surface. Earlier in the novel, Cora displays this fear of emotion when, as a young mother, she takes Belle and Madge to see a production of Uncle Tom's Cabin. During the performance, Cora becomes unexpectedly upset and with "great relief" sees that little Eva escapes. After this experience, Cora decides that she ". . . had little desire to see more than she had already seen, or feel more than she had already felt" (PS, p. 61). This becomes the motto of her subsequent existence. But perhaps the most overwhelming of Cora's fears is her fear of change. All her life she appreciates and clings to predictability. When Emerson

and Cora first settle the farm, they both become upset with Orion's frequently spontaneous behavior. After their first shared harvest, Orion spends money in what Cora and Emerson view to be a self-indulgent manner, by buying a saddle horse and a new rifle, and then he leaves abruptly for the Ozarks. His behavior "dismayed" poor Cora and caused her to wonder ". . . was he a hillbilly or a farmer?" (PS, p. 39). Cora worries terribly when Sharon Rose insists on a university education and on questioning the value of the marriage institution. Further revealing her resistence to change, Cora cannot use the restrooms, or tolerate the noise, or enjoy the sights during her visit to the Chicago World's Fair. This bombardment of changes, in fact, numbs poor Cora into a daze (PS, p. 140-3). Eventually Emerson dies, and Cora never tolerates or accepts this ultimate change in her life. After Emerson's death, Cora's ears fill with "the drone of thronging bees" (PS, p. 173), metaphorically signalling Cora's further withdrawal from the world. One day, one of Cora's grandchildren finds her ". . . crouched on a milk stool in the cobhouse, unable to get up" (PS, p. 174). She is holding a cob in her hand the way Emerson had done when he shelled popcorn, but Cora, now that she has lost her teeth, performs this task not because she will use the popcorn but because doing Emerson's chores makes her feel closer to him. The only thing they had ever really shared was their mutual respect for work. Fearful of intimacy, Cora has no other outlet for her grief; thus, Cora denies herself the consolation possible in human relationships. People frighten Cora because they need intimacy, because they are emotional, because they change. Instead of imaginatively transcending these fears in order to experience

the value of human relationships, Cora capitulates to fear and remains an isolate throughout her life. Entrapped in a stark, emotionless world, she fails to envision a better one.

Similarly, Will Brady (The Works of Love) lives an isolated existence throughout his life. Despite Brady's moments of heightened awareness, he, like Cora, cannot sustain full consciousness. At the beginning of the novel, Opal Mason, a prostitute who becomes his first lover, describes him as a man "who didn't seem to know anything" (WOL, p. 22), and her words could serve as Brady's epitaph at the end of the novel. Born in an isolated, desolate town of a taciturn father and a lonely mother, Brady's experiences are so limited that he begins young adulthood as an innocent. Attempting to create a social identity, Brady adopts one clichéd role after another and mouths clichéd statements in his limited conversations. Brady somehow never realizes that these clichés deaden his existence, including his effect on other people, in much the same way that clichés deaden language.

Clichés, for instance, thwart his attempts at family life. When Brady accidentally inherits a "son," he goes "about the business of being a father to the boy" by bouncing him ". . . on his knee in a horsey manner . . .," and by permitting him to "play with the elastic arm bands on his sleeves" (WOL, p. 37). Brady, though well-intentioned, avoids thinking too deeply about "the business of being a father" by allowing occasional, stereotypical bounces on the knee to be substitutions for real fatherhood. In this way, he unconsciously avoids delving too deeply into his own or into his child's psyche. Toward the end of the novel, having unconsciously despaired of family life, Brady leaves

his son altogether and moves to Chicago. There he longs for social involvement and consequently adopts yet another cliché; he becomes a department store Santa Claus, a man "out of this world" (WOL, p. 252). Santa Claus represents an archetypal image of human altruism; but because Santa Claus always gives and never receives, he cannot represent mutuality. Santa Claus is "out of this world" because he exists in the collective imagination of the culture and not in the day to day world of human interaction. By taking on Santa Claus's exterior, Brady emulates Santa's benevolence toward others, but he also loses his own identity. In fact, Brady internalizes the cliché, and in pantomiming Santa Claus's role, instead of involving himself with humanity, he becomes more detached. Will Brady as Santa Claus, rather than Will Brady as himself, makes contact with others.

Because Brady cannot create any identity for himself, including proper behavior as a father, he longs for his son while in Chicago but fails to invent a way for them to live together there. Perhaps Brady enjoys the distance between himself and his son because Brady can create an identity for a son while he lives far away without the flesh and blood reality intruding on the image. Occasionally his acquaintances ask about his son. By emphasizing another cliché, Brady dismisses suggestions that he send for the boy:

> "The city's no place for a boy," Will Brady says, and gets to his feet as if that would end it. As if he didn't want to hear what the place for a boy was (WOL, p. 227).

Thus, Brady relies on another traditional American myth; the country produces "the good life" and the city only produces corruption. In

accepting this cliché, perhaps an easy escape from unnerving responsibility, Brady avoids the possibility that "the place for the boy" might be with his father, and he also avoids the consequences of evaluating circumstances, motives, and choices. Because "an endless flow of clichés gives a sheen of vitality to what is either stillborn or second-hand,"[16] Brady confuses his automatic, culturally-defined responses for conscious living.

Brady often relies on such clichés because his fears impede his ability to transcend experience. As in Cora's case, Brady fears responsibility and emotion which culminates in a generalized fear of intimacy. After Brady marries his first wife, he discovers her absolute terror of sex when she wraps herself tightly in a sheet on their wedding night. Recognizing her fear, Brady capitulates to it, preferring to endure celibacy rather than force a confrontation. Brady continually avoids such confrontations because he fears the emotions which might surface as a result, and this avoidance builds a pattern of sparse communication which endures throughout the marriage. Because his marriage is empty of pleasure or companionship, Brady eventually substitutes business life for family life:

> Was he all right? Once a week his wife, Ethel, asked him that. She spoke to him through the bedroom door, the lamp shadow at her feet. Yes, he was all right--just a little preoccupied. That was it, he was just a little preoccupied (WOL, p. 70).

Rather than consciously facing the emptiness of his marriage, Brady chooses to dim his awareness by being "preoccupied" with business

matters; thus he capitulates to a poor marriage. Because he has adopted the clichéd role of a family man, Brady does not consider divorce; eventually Ethel puts them both out of their misery by leaving him.

Brady's fear of responsibility in relationships again emerges when he marries his second wife, Gertrude Long. Up until his wedding day, Brady avoids considering the seriousness of his decision to marry--the possible problems inherent in the new adjustments and his own weaknesses in relating to others. When a Western Union by stumbles onto the ceremony, Brady becomes momentarily aware of the sober consequences of marriage:

> . . . the boy took off his uniform cap, held it at his side, and ran his dirty fingers through his messy hair. His eyes were wide, his lips were parted, and though there were other people in the room, what you call witnesses, it was only the boy who saw something. It was the boy that reminded Will Brady of what was happening to him. That taking a wife, as he had put it, was a serious affair (WOL, p. 103).

Lulled into a condition of partial consciousness by the clichés surrounding marriage, Brady and the other adults in the room fail to comprehend the significance, the implications of this particular wedding ceremony. Only dimly aware of possible consequences, Brady fears conscious reflection of the ideals and the values of marriage. A transcendent preception of an ideal marital relationship often functions as a guide for married people, but Brady's fears that he cannot measure up thwart such an imaginative, transcendent vision. Shortly after his wedding day,

Brady lapses back to his old patterns, dim awareness and sparse communication.

After moving his new wife and son to a small town in western Nebraska, Brady faces a terrible business failure and this dim awareness allows him to endure his family's indifference. An epidemic kills most of the chickens necessary to his chicken and egg business; afterward, Brady realizes that his wife and son have barely noticed the disaster. Because Brady fears human emotions, he cannot face his own needs, even comfort and support from family. Passively accepting the marked insensitivity of others, "It seemed hard to believe, but somehow it didn't trouble him" (WOL, p. 125), he learns to expect and to deliver very little regarding relationships.

Although Brady's suppression of human feelings creates his semi-conscious condition, he does have moments of heightened awareness. One such moment occurs when, after reading Journey to the Moon, Brady stands on his porch in the moonlight. Almost as if for the first time fully aware of his own isolation, Brady momentarily transcends his immediate circumstances. He begins to contemplate a universal human dilemma, "By some foolish agreement, made long ago, men and women went into their houses and slept, or tried to sleep, right when there was the most to see" (WOL, p. 134). By sleeping during the moonlit time, a time symbolic of the imagination, people avoid full consciousness. But Brady, standing alone in the moonlight allows the awakening of his imagination; and he realizes that most people miss "the most to see," the permanent reality behind finite appearances, because their imaginations are dormant. Thus, human beings slip into a sleep-like condition,

a condition lacking full consciousness. Brady's heightened, transcendent awareness is short-lived, however; soon afterward, Gertrude leaves Brady for the second time, and he tries to comprehend his loss and to generate new alternatives. But Brady deals poorly with personal problems; he had been much more successful with his business problems:

> During the day he had eggs in his hands, things that he could pick up, that is, and put down, and tell what they were, good or bad, holding them to the candler. But during the night there was nothing he could grasp like that with his hands. (WOL, p. 167).

Brady is neither shallow nor indifferent; he is even capable of realizing that he is missing something of abstract value in his life. Having suppressed his emotions and thus crippled his imagination, however, Brady allows such abstractions to elude his grasp.

Toward the end of the novel, Brady unconsciously employs his imagination to escape rather than to transcend the world. He moves to Chicago and takes a job sorting waybills in a tower overlooking the freight yards. Driven by an earlier vision (WOL, pp. 205-7), Brady has decided by this time to become a lover of all humanity. Brady imaginatively transforms the tower into a castle with a moat and himself into "the last man in the world" (WOL, p. 239). From this detached, unthreatened, impersonal position, Brady surrenders former clichés and fears; he feels close to the human race. As he gazes out of the tower window at the people below him, his imagination flows, "It seemed to Will Brady that he knew these people, that he had lived in

these rooms behind the windows, and that he could walk about in the dark as if the house were not strange to him" (WOL, p. 240). Though his imagination conjures a vision of commonality, Brady cannot sustain the vision without involvement. Full consciousness depends on self-understanding in the context of present human relationships. Like the artist, conscious human beings must develop both individual and social identities and create a balance between detachment and involvement. Brady uses his imagination to create illusions which facilitate detachment only, while producing the illusion of involvement.

By the end of the novel, Brady lapses into a semi-conscious stupor. Pathetically persisting in his attempt to become a great lover, he falls asleep under a sun lamp in an attempt to emulate Santa Claus's ruddy complexion. In doing so, Brady blinds himself, but this sacrifice is an unconscious one--he was, after all, asleep (WOL, p. 263). Similarly, when he walks down the fire escape of Montgomery Ward's, overwhelmed by his affection for humanity, Brady is only semi-conscious of his immediate environment. He leaves behind Manny Plinski, a neighbor boy completely devoted to him. Unconscious of and uncomforted by Manny's feelings for him, Brady walks blindly into the canal, ". . . he went down, groping a little, as he had no proper eyes for seeing or for knowing that there was no landing over the canal" (WOL, p. 269). The word "knowing" refers to Brady's lack of consciousness, and the blind eyes, therefore, become impaired perception. Brady's lack of perception and consciousness, combined with his sincere quest for social relationships, rendered futile by his crippling fear of involvement, kill him in the end.

Like Will Brady, Gordon Boyd and Walter McKee (Ceremony in Lone Tree) never reach full imaginative consciousness. Although Boyd and McKee are fundamentally different personalities, they both fail to develop full consciousness, and to establish relationships, for similar reasons. Because both characters rely on clichés, rather than imagination, to interpret life, they blind themselves to the truth about themselves and others. Because they succumb to irrational fears, Boyd and McKee fail to transcend the difficulties of the transitory world in order to perceive more lasting values, particularly those inherent in human relationships. Because they are incapable of imaginative synthesis, Boyd and McKee cannot perceive or create connections between themselves and others. As a result of these failures and despite erratic attempts at communication and involvement, both men remain isolated and estranged throughout the novel.

At the beginning of Ceremony in Lone Tree, Boyd seems devoid of clichés and fears, and he seems full of insights into the human condition. Bit by bit, however, Boyd's facade crumbles and the pathos of his life emerges. Initially Boyd displays an ability to puncture clichés, creating fresh interpretations of them; thus, he plays the traditional role of the artist. To prove his personal worth and creative ability, for instance, Boyd attempts to "walk on water" (CILT, p. 13). The act itself is so blatantly archetypal, transcendent, and supernatural that one might naturally assume Boyd's intentions were satirical. But Boyd reveals his seriousness by writing a novel entitled The Walk on the Water (CILT, p. 21) which imbues the clichéd expression with new meaning. For Boyd, the inability to walk on water becomes the inability to

transcend other of his personal limitations, and he predisposes himself for failure by setting impossible goals.

Despite Boyd's ability to see beyond the cliché to the truth of a matter, somehow he cannot incorporate this perception into constructive living. In a later description of himself, Boyd invokes another cliché, "In the middle of life, Morgenstern Boyd had everything to live for . . . ," but he punctures the cliché by adding, ". . . everything worth living for having eluded him" (CILT, p. 145). Finishing his thought, Boyd twists yet another cliché; he describes himself as "that rare thing, a completely self-unmade man" (CILT, p. 145). The human imagination is the faculty responsible for cerating a vision of the ideal; and Boyd's failure to set worthy goals, to discern permanent values, and to behave accordingly represents a failure of the imagination. Furthermore, although Boyd punctures some clichés (he does have a creative, perceptive mind at times); he tenaciously clings to others. He believes, for instance, that Lois is "the only woman in the world for me," and by holding onto this familiar cliché, he avoids serious relationships with women in the present. Similarly, Boyd adopts the clichéd image of the alienated, exiled artist; he perfers it to the "middle class, conformist, family man" cliché. But Lois intuits the real reason for Boyd's self-exile; she describes him as ". . . living by himself so he could believe the stories about himself" (CILT, p. 235). Unwittingly, Boyd uses his imagination to entrench certain clichés rather than to interpret the reality behind appearances. Thus he avoids certain truths about himself, particularly those concerning his ability to define, and to live within, a social context.

Besides lacking the ability to interpret experience, Boyd also lacks the ability to transcend experience. Rather than recognizing the permanent values inherent in relationships and rather than consciously striving to create them, Boyd avoids relationships because of "Kithophobia," which he describes as "fear of one's own kind" (CILT, p. 228). Boyd also admits that he fears rejection when Daughter, the young woman he brings to the reunion with him, asks him why he never asked Lois to marry him. Boyd answers, "Might have hurt my feelings if she'd turned me down" (CILT, p. 228). Boyd's fear of relationships culminates in his inability to protest McKee's plans to marry Lois, "Boyd had mailed a letter enclosing a blank piece of paper . . . " to Lois. Rendered "Speechless . . . For the first time in his life" (CILT, p. 228), Boyd avoids facing the continual conflict between his needs and fears.

Boyd's attachment to clichéd interpretations and his inability to transcend fear of intimacy culminate in a generalized fear of the present. The present holds the terror of relating to others, of facing oneself. During Boyd's stop over in Las Vegas while he is enroute to Lone Tree, he stays in a motel where the manager offers to wake him so that he might witness the test explosion of an atomic bomb (CILT, p. 30). To "wake before bomb" becomes for Boyd a metaphor for becoming fully conscious of the present because the atomic bomb represents the central, most terrifying image of the modern world:

> . . . WAKE BEFORE BOMB? How did one do it? Was it even advisable? The past, whether one liked it or not, was all that one actually

> possessed. The present was that moment of exchange--when all might be lost. Why risk it? . . . To wake before the bomb was to risk losing all to gain what might be so little--a brief moment in the present, that one moment later joined the past (CILT, p. 32).

The present, however, remains the only possible context for mutual human relationships. Boyd's only relationships with McKee and Lois exist in occasionally resurrected memories. Rather than transcending the world, perhaps by working toward the permanent and the ideal in human relationships, Boyd escapes the world of other people by locking himself up in a world of semi-awareness, a world inhabited by clichés and memories. At the end of the novel, despite a number of startling events, Boyd refuses to emerge from his isolation. As Boyd leaves Lone Tree, riding in a covered wagon with Jennings, McKee, Daughter, and the corpse of Tom Scanlon, McKee turns to discover why he cannot elicit a response from Boyd; he finds Boyd "asleep" (CILT, p. 304). Despite the fact that he feels intermittent affection for others, Boyd unconsciously forfeits mutual relationships because he cannot consciously face the terror and the risks of the present.

Interestingly, Boyd is the character who first reveals a similar state of semi-awareness in McKee. Boyd asks, "McKee, one question. You awake or asleep?" Though not literally asleep, McKee does not answer, and the narrator emphasizes his silence by reporting, "McKee said nothing" (CILT, p. 182). Like Boyd, McKee owes his semi-conscious condition to the clichés which dominate his thoughts. Instead of

responding to experience creatively and uniquely, McKee interprets life through preconceived conceptions of what life should be, conceptions based on the various clichés of American life. When faced with uncomfortable situations, McKee automatically says or thinks the expected, whether or not the expected is actually appropriate. For instance, when McKee and Boyd reunite in Mexico after many years of separation, McKee becomes overwhelmed with nostalgia. He misinterprets these feelings as affection for Boyd and blurts out, "You know you're closer to me than a brother, Gordon" (CILT, p. 26). These are the words, according to McKee, that one should say to a childhood friend outside of one's family. Understandably this preposterous remark renders Boyd speechless; time and distance, along with a lack of communication, have precluded any real closeness between the two men. Although McKee's intention is sincere, the cliché he chooses to express his affection is completely inappropriate. Similarly, McKee mentions in Boyd's invitation to the Lone Tree reunion "the pride he took in his wife's family" (CILT, p. 151-2). He had "naturally mentioned" this pride though secretly he felt ashamed of the family's myriad neuroses; the cliché of family pride simply seemed expected of him even though it actually obscured the truth. McKee persists in believing he possessed "God's loveliest creature" (CILT, p. 32), yet another cliché, despite the fact that he and Lois are emotionally estranged. Thus, one cliché after another shields McKee from the truth.

McKee especially avoids two basic truths about human existence: pain and death. Lois reveals McKee's obsession with death when she remembers McKee's daily reading of the obituary columns (CILT, p. 241).

As he clips out obituary articles concerning men his age, McKee tries to interpret and thus transcend this fear, but he muses, instead, over insurance policies, perhaps the only modern artifact that promises to take the risk out of living:[17]

> . . . People took it for granted like the weather because of something called insurance. If you had it, that is, the accident made sense. It didn't explain what had happened, but it paid you for what had happened . . . McKee would like to know if there was anything in this world, except insurance policies, that claimed to make any sense out of life (CILT, p. 246-7).

McKee's fears compel him to try "to make sense out of life," but ironically the fears themselves preclude the possibility. The meaning of life lies in the ideal and the permanent reality behind the appearances of the world; but McKee lacks the imaginative perception to discern them; and his overwhelming fears urge him to escape awareness of the world. McKee escapes conscious living in the present, where death and pain exist, to live in a world of clichés and memories. In this latter world, he avoids confrontations with his fears, but he forfeits his imaginative consciousness. He also, therefore, avoids relationships because they exist in the present; thus, he forfeits the consolation and significance that such relationships might offer him. Terrorized by the thought of a killer on the loose, McKee and Lois discuss, perhaps for consolation, what they might do if confronted with the killer. But they give each other little comfort, and McKee recognizes something about himself during their exchange:

> "If I'm going to be shot, I want to know who it is," she said. McKee didn't . . . No, he would prefer being shot in the dark. What the devil good would it do, knowing, and being dead (CILT, p. 48).

The "dark" symbolizes McKee's preference for semi-consciousness. Because the present terrifies him, McKee retreats from it, shutting out the enlightment possible in the interchange between imagination and experience. And, of course, in shutting out the present, McKee isolates himself from the people who inhabit it.

As a result of his isolation, McKee misses the real connections in life, the ones that define his place in a world of other human beings. When confronted by a group of "hoodlums in a souped-up Ford," McKee feels that he has discovered evil:

> . . . but the grinning faces of those young hoodlums scared him worse than he dared to admit. McKee had recognized the nameless face of evil--he recognized it, that is, as stronger than the nameless face of good. What troubled him was not what he saw, but the nameless appetite behind it, the lust for evil . . . He felt himself beaten at the start (CILT, p. 50)

McKee no more understands evil than he does goodness. Both are "nameless faces" because McKee evades "appetite," "lust"--all emotions. If McKee were able to transcend experience, in this case to quiet his unreasoning fear, he might begin to understand that the evil lies not in the boys but in his lack of courage. Fear is the evil. It limits, paralyzes, and confines humanity to a transitory world subject to the seeming

cruelties of the fates. McKee never learns from his experiences, and he continues to take refuge in clichés. Speaking the last words of the novel, "It's going to be a hot one" (CILT, p. 304), McKee delivers his empty, anticlimactic comment to an ironic audience, Tom Scanlon's corpse and a sleeping couple (Boyd and Daughter). McKee's cliché and his unconscious audience metaphorically represent both the quality and the effect of McKee's existence.

Sharon Rose (Plains Song), unlike any of the other major characters in these novels, manages to free herself of clichés, quiet her deepest fears, and perceive universal human connections. She, therefore, achieves a level of consciousness unknown to the other characters. Sharon Rose reaches this condition of consciousness, however, very late in the novel, leaving the reader to speculate as to the quality of her subsequent life. At the beginning of Plains Song, Sharon Rose displays a similar attitude and temperament to Boyd's; she is both a rebel and an artist. Unable to accept the clichés of the pioneer woman's life, Sharon Rose becomes increasingly repelled by Cora's sparse lifestyle and its accompanying ugliness. Ultimately she rejects this early childhood model and accepts another cliché--the idea that the rigors of farm life bury emotions under endless toil and sacrifice beauty to the struggles for survival. In her attempt to escape such an existence, Sharon Rose leaves her home to attend the university and to devote her life to music.

Eventually, Sharon Rose applies this cliché to domestic life in general, and she reveals her distaste for marriage during a visit back to the farm. Refusing to believe that two people might freely choose marriage, Sharon becomes enraged when she sees Madge, both her adopted

sister and her closest friend, "spooning" in a buggy. Unable to control her anger, Sharon Rose screams at the couple, "Is he looking for a wife or a housemaid?" (PS, p. 75). Dismissing her sister's happiness, unable or unwilling to consider Madge's feelings, Sharon Rose allows clichés to dim her perceptions, perhaps because she needs so badly to escape the domestic life Cora represents. Influenced by her interpretation of married people as:

> . . . intolerable, all of them, their otherwise decent lives more like that of livestock than aspiring human beings. It both shamed and elated her to have such unthinkable thoughts . . . (PS, p. 85-6),

Sharon Rose cannot tolerate the idea of Madge marrying. Unlike Cora, Sharon allows thoughts of the "unthinkable" and feels elation at the accompanying liberation. Cora, sensing Sharon Rose's rejection, reacts uncharacteristically emotionally to Sharon's challenge to the young "spooning" couple. Cora becomes infuriated because she fears that Sharon Rose might dissuade Ned, Madge's fiance, from marrying Madge and because Cora recognizes the challenge to her own lifestyle. In her fury, Cora grabs Sharon Rose, shoves her into her bedroom, and strikes the young girl's palm with the back of a hairbrush. Each woman is simultaneously attracted and repelled by the other's life choices. This incident and the accompanying strong emotions become a touchstone for changes in their perceptions throughout the rest of their lives.

Before she reaches this understanding, however, Sharon Rose continues to be obsessed with her fear of domestic life. She long regrets her failure to rescue Madge from marriage. Later, she concentrates on

Blanche, Madge's daughter, in an attempt to groom her for a single, artistic life. By this time teaching music in Chicago, Sharon Rose believes that she sees some special talent in Blanche and coaxes her to Chicago to attend a private girls' school. After a short time, Sharon Rose thinks that she perceives a remarkable transformation in her adolescent niece. The child seems more confident. Comparing this so-called "assurance" (PS, p. 150) to her own assurance when she left the farm, Sharon Rose deludes herself and misinterprets the child's character and behavior completely. Seeing Blanche's retiring personality as "serene detachment" (PS, p. 152), a quality for which Sharon Rose herself longs, Sharon Rose begins to hope her niece might be gifted, perhaps artistically. Sharon Rose hopes further that she can become instrumental in nurturing Blanche's gift. Sharon Rose is sincere and well-intentioned; she is unconsciously in need of establishing a relationship; but, like Will Brady, she projects her own needs into relationships, confusing them with the needs of others.

Eventually, Sharon faces that the real Blanche is far different from her imagined Blanche. The confrontation comes one day in a Chicago park. Told to wait for Sharon Rose at a particular spot by a lake, Blanche becomes fascinated with some exotic birds. A man in the park notices her and lures her to his side by capturing one of the birds for her to see up close. When Sharon Rose finally finds Blanche, she sees the man and her niece together.

> . . . The young man's arm tightened about her waist as he inclined his head to touch her hair. Not lost on Sharon was his

> silly, conspiratorial smile. The sound that escaped her, an intake of breath, led the young man to glance up. Sharon stared at his beardless, oafish face, then he was gone into the barn's shadows (PS, p. 159).

Sharon, previously blinded by her fear that Blanche might be ordinary and domestic, heretofore had been incapable of seeing her niece clearly. Hopeful that Blanche was an artist-in-need-of-exile, Sharon Rose had perceived her in that light. But after the incident in the park, Sharon Rose recognizes that what she had seen as "serene detachment" has actually been passivity. Slowly more of the truth dawns on Sharon Rose as she remembers that Blanche's spelling has always been poor and that she has reversed the letter "s" (PS, p. 151). Sharon Rose also remembers that despite her niece's exposure to classical music, Blanche prefers easy pop tunes; Blanche, in fact, responds minimally to all outside stimuli. Eventually Sharon Rose faces the inevitable; her protogée, far from gifted, is probably learning disabled and perhaps mildly retarded. She returns Blanche to her parents, Madge and Ned, because she simply cannot accept a niece with such limitations.

Sharon Rose allows other fears to blind her perceptions; thus, she fails to discern the abiding truths which lie beyond the surfaces of her experiences. Though Sharon had stringently rejected Cora's lifestyle, she adopts and displays many of Cora's attitudes. She shares, for instance, Cora's unreasoning fear of intimacy, a general disinclination to be "beholden." Intimacy arouses emotions with which Sharon Rose cannot cope. Lillian, the girlfriend who brings Sharon Rose to Chicago,

analyzes Sharon Rose's unconscious fear, "Your fear of being beholden . . . is really just a fear of your own emotions" (PS, p. 187). As a result, Sharon's "most habitual and salient characteristic . . ." becomes her " . . . impulse to withdraw, to disengage . . ." (PS, p. 187). Sharon, an artist like Boyd, also fears the forces of nature, particularly because they remind her of the farm life she has rejected and of the passivity of Cora who acquiesced to such forces. Consequently, Sharon Rose feels more comfortable with art than with her own body and her own sensuality. When contemplating natural forces, Sharon conjures images of Cora's bleak lifestyle, one which lacked beauty according to Sharon Rose. But art gives Sharon Rose a beauty which she can appreciate, understand, and control. Very similar to her adopted mother, Sharon fears the unpredictable and the uncontrollable. Because she can control her music in a way that nature refuses to be controlled and because she cannot acquiesce to natural forces as Cora did, Sharon suppresses natural drives and urges, including sexual ones, from her consciousness. Incapable of transcending her fear of emotion and her fear of nature, Sharon Rose avoids intimate contact with other people; she, therefore, avoids sexual or emotional responses.

Late in the novel, however, Sharon Rose begins to quell her fears and to develop a capacity for transcendence. Returning home for Cora's funeral, Sharon Rose begins to face her past. Caroline, another of Madge's daughters, picks Sharon up from the airport. During their visit together, Caroline, another rebel, accuses Sharon Rose's generation of having never faced certain aspects about life. At this accusation, Sharon Rose asks herself:

> . . . What had she failed to look at? At the back of her eyes, where she couldn't avoid it, where, indeed, she had to confront it, she saw the iron frame of the bed, the sagging mattress evenly divided into two compartments, as if invisible bodies lay there, beneath the bed the gleaming, lidless night pot, and above it the dangling cord to the shadeless bulb . . . (PS, p. 198).

Thus, Sharon Rose's sexual fears rise to consciousness. For the first time, she consciously associates those fears with her attitude toward Cora and Emerson, both now dead, who are the "invisible bodies" lying on the "sagging mattress." Though Emerson and Cora had a non-existent sex life, Sharon Rose could not have known that; and she may have concluded that their sexual relationship caused their alienation. And this marriage was, of course, the first one she ever knew. Generalizing from this experience, Sharon had associated all married life with the emptiness of Cora and Emerson's life; further, she had associated all of nature, including bodily functions ("the lidless night pot") and biological drives with farm life. In an attempt to escape her own domestic, rural past, Sharon Rose had suppressed her own natural needs, even her thoughts about nature. She had viewed nature in threatening opposition to art, and art had represented the only aspect of her life which provided her with lasting pleasure.

Realizing these fears, Sharon Rose invites a confrontation with her own feelings. In recalling a phone call from Madge, she recognizes an aspect of life that she had feared worse than natural forces. When

Madge had called Sharon Rose to inform her of Cora's death, Madge mentioned, in an attempt to console Sharon, that Cora had died in her sleep. In thinking back over Madge's words, however, Sharon feels anger rather than comfort. She realizes that Cora's lack of awareness in life, though it may have eased Cora's death, was precisely the quality that limited her abilities as a parent. At this moment, Sharon Rose, unlike McKee, decides that she would prefer her own death with ". . . her mind and soul wide awake" (PS, p. 197). Because of Cora's death, Sharon feels finally released from Cora's influence and, therefore, sufficiently secure to face her own life; perhaps in Sharon's mind death had rendered Cora less formidable. Whatever the specific reason, during these moments in the car with Caroline, Sharon Rose confronts many formerly-hidden truths about herself, including the fact that in her attempt to resist Cora's model, she herself had created a repressive, stark existence not so very different from Cora's life. In facing these unpleasant truths, Sharon begins to raise the level of her consciousness, to create an awareness with "her mind and soul awake."

Having reached this higher level of awareness, Sharon Rose becomes for the first time capable of imaginative synthesis. She is the only character in the three novels capable of this process. Enroute from the airport to Madge's house, Caroline asks Sharon Rose to escort Sharon's grand niece and nephew through Elephant Hall, a natural history museum, in Lincoln, while Caroline runs an errand. As a result of Sharon Rose's new level of awareness, the relics of the past have an extraordinary effect upon her. Viewing one extinct animal after another,

and thinking of the dead Cora, Sharon Rose wonders at the obliterating effects of time. Her imagination considers the new feminism, as represented by Caroline. Might it one day render all of male humanity extinct (PS, pp. 194-5)? But this thought is only an idle, though perhaps wishful, speculation, resulting from her initial confusion at heightened impressions and perhaps from her recent confrontation with her own repressed sexuality. These colliding impressions of past and present finally culminate, however, into a new synthesis; for the first time, Sharon Rose consciously and directly compares her life to Cora's. Having left the museum, and as she journeys in Caroline's car to Madge's home, Sharon gazes out the car window at the site of Cora and Emerson's farm, now almost completely overgrown by the plains. Perhaps remembering the extinct animals in the museum and considering once again the effects of time, Sharon Rose considers her feelings regarding Cora's death:

> . . . Did she feel any loss? Was it the emptiness that evoked the presence of Cora? Not her image, not her person, but the great alarming silence of her nature, the void behind her luminous eyes. It had frightened Sharon. Had she sensed a similar hollow in her own being (PS, p. 200)?

For the first time, Sharon Rose understands the similarity between what revolted her about Cora's lifestyle and what Sharon herself fearfully adopted--suppression of emotion. This new understanding recalls the incident of the hairbrush when Sharon had hurled a challenge that not only enraged Cora but threatened "the deep silence of her soul" (PS,

p. 201). Sharon begins to understand Cora's fear and anger that day and resolves to raise and answer similar questions regarding her own life. She suddenly becomes aware that "all those unanswered questions were now asked . . ." (PS, p. 201) of herself. Sharon resolves to evaluate and to make choices in the context of deeper self-awareness and broader alternatives--tasks of which Cora was incapable.

The remainder of the novel involves Sharon Rose's attempts to consider these new alternatives and to begin making choices. To the end of the novel, Sharon is true to her decision to be conscious of her feelings. As a result, after a number of emotional experiences with family and friends, Sharon has a vision which symbolizes her attempt to reinterpret experiences. Newly appreciative of ". . . the forces that brought . . . loose ends together, making them one" (PS, p. 222), Sharon Rose's mind invokes a long forgotten memory of Cora bathing as Sharon, yet a child, secretly watches through a floor ventilator. Having completely suppressed this guilt-provoking memory, Sharon Rose resurrects and reinterprets it. Capable of making new connections, Sharon Rose reprocesses this memory through her imagination and sees that she has always desperately wanted Cora's love. Shut out by Cora, however, she had been forced to steal intimacy from a detached, secret vantage point. Eventually Sharon Rose comes to understand that her initial attraction for a new friend, Alexandra Selkirk,[18] basically arises from Alexandra's resemblance to Cora. Through imaginative interpretation, transcendence, and synthesis, Sharon Rose begins to see, for the first time, her long-buried need for other people. At the very end of the novel, Alexandra asks Sharon if she would like to go for a walk to watch a sunrise. When Alexandra turns to receive an answer, Sharon

fears that her own face might expose her new thoughts. She feels embarrassed, however, for only "a moment" at these thoughts which betrayed" . . . her customary independence" (PS, p. 229). Then, Sharon Rose rises to leave with Alexandra saying, "I'm coming . . . I've not seen a sunrise since I was a child" (PS, p. 229). With these words, the last of the novel, Sharon Rose resolves to experience a new consciousness, a "sunrise," one shared with another human being, one arising from a new imaginative vision of the world.

The Narrative Vision: Paradigm of Imaginative Consciousness

The consciousness that Sharon Rose finally achieves comes so late in Plains Song that little evidence exists to suggest the effects on her. But the narrators of all three novels possess this consciousness throughout. They present an imaginative vision which interprets, transcends, and synthesizes the characters' experience, thus imbuing those lives with meaning. Through the narrators' imaginative vision, actually an imaginative processing of experience and character, the narrators interpret the characters' lives without relying on clichés or stereotypes. Despite the fact the characters often depend on clichés, the narrators create separate, unique, and memorable personalities of the characters rather than stereotypes. Then from these unique personalities, the narrators indicate universal aspects of human existence, thereby revealing insights into the human condition. Finally, the narrative voices engage the readers' emotions and imaginations, creating a bond between characters and readers which motivates the reader to discover, to recognize, and to identify with these universal human problems and experiences. By establishing such connections, the

narrators model an imaginative processing of experience which is essential to social integration: one must seek to understand human character and motivation; one must look beyond immediate experience to apprehend universal implications for the human condition; and one must have the perception to recognize one's own relation to the experiences and actions of others. By presenting the stories of ordinary people, the narrators emphasize the universal challenge to conquer cultural cliches and stereotypes, to quell unreasoning fears, and to establish connections with other people. By presenting these characters' lives through an imaginatively conscious vision, the narrators model caring, perceptive, and involved social attitudes. The susceptible reader feels the characters' struggles; perceives the characters' motivations, strengths, and weaknesses; and identifies with the characters' lives. The discovery of the characters' inner lives facilities, therefore, the reader's self-discovery. Thus, the narrators present a paradigm for the constructive mutuality possible in human relationships.

The narrator of The Works of Love facilitates the reader's interpretive perceptions into Will Brady through exposures of character flaws. After describing Brady's move to Murdock to start a chicken and egg business, the narrator explains why Brady considers World War I an advantage for people like himself:

> In the old country this Kaiser fellow had done a lot of damage and killed a lot of people, but in the new country he seemed to be doing a lot of good. Will Brady could see it on the faces of the men who came into town. The war boom was about the finest thing that had happened to them. Some of the

> women might feel a little different, but it was hard to complain about a new buggy, a roof for the barn, and a machine that would separate the milk from the cream . . . And having tasted the finer things in life, like Will Brady, she would go on wanting them (WOL, p. 69).

Hence, the narrator offers a type of double vision. On the one hand, the narrator presents Brady's case seemingly objectively and with a realistic internal logic. On the other hand, however, by juxtaposing war--its death and destruction--with "the finer things in life," the narrator utterly refutes this position and thus exposes Brady's shallowness. Obviously the material "finer things in life" often seduce people and blind them to the destruction sometimes necessary to obtain such things. The narrator then reveals the universal aspect of Brady's flaw; other people "would go on wanting them" because they lacked the imaginative vision to ascertain what were really "the finer things in life."

Later in the novel, the narrator exposes another flaw, Brady's fear of involvement. Brady, according to the narrator, "belonged" in hotel lobbies, which had, "no connection whatsoever with the busy life that went by in the street" (WOL, p. 171). Toward the end of the novel, the narrator elaborates further on Brady's detachment by supplying some reasons for it:

> . . . the old man in the Santa Claus suit seemed to like his work. He would have paid Montgomery Ward & Co. in order to carry on with it. Out on the street an old man cannot hold hands with children, bounce them on his knee, or tell them

lies that he will not be responsible for (WOL, p. 264).

Hence, the narrator captures Brady's terror of relationships, his fear that he will fail to live up to others' expectations and to his own. The narrator avoids molding Brady into the facile stereotype of the business man, uncaring, preoccupied, and neglectful. Instead, he creates a believably unique character, whose overwhelming sensitivity and accompanying fears create exterior behavior which only seems indifferent and callous. Below the appearance, the narrator reveals the real pathos of Will Brady's life.

Besides interpreting Brady's character, the narrator also indicates, both implicity and explicitly, Brady's relationship to universal aspects of the human condition. For instance, in describing Opal Mason's attitude toward her clients, interestingly referred to as "lovers," the narrator imagines what motivates Brady and others to seek out such companionship:

> . . . the lovers did not come, merely to sleep with her. No they came . . . for something else . . . In her opinion, all of these strong silent men were scared to death. Of what? Perhaps they were scared of themselves (WOL, p. 21).

Fears, unavoidable in human life, both compel human beings to one another and preclude their ability to relate. The "strong, silent men" represent an appearance which belies the reality; they are afraid as all human beings are afraid. But the narrator tacitly suggests that recognition and acceptance of fear, communication of fearful feelings, and solace in human company culminate in an improved existence. Unfor-

tunately most people, according to the narrator, lack the consciousness to deal with fear. Unaware of internal conflicts, these people walk through life like "sleepwalkers," following a "new Pied Piper," who ". . . beckoned, whispered to them, that the time had come" (WOL, pp. 241-2), the time to leave this world. Thus, the semi-conscious escape rather than transcend the world. Following the Piper, long a symbol for one who leads the innocent out of a corrupt world, they avoid confrontation with themselves or with others and, thus, never lose their innocence. But the narrator offers an alternative to escape in his description of hotel lobbies. These lobbies represent the transitional stage human beings must undergo to reach full consciousness and eventual transcendence:

> The same things go along with lobbies that go along with dreams, great and small love affairs, and other arrangements that never seem quite real. The lobby draws a chalk line around this world, so to speak . . . It prepares you for a short flight from one world to a better one. From the real world, where nothing much ever happens, to the unreal world where anything might happen--and sometimes does (WOL, pp. 172-3).

In describing the Platonic levels of reality--the transitory reality of the material world versus the permanent reality of The World of Ideas--the narrator suggests that people come to a crossroads in their lives which demands a choice. The truly conscious choose transcendence of material reality and base subsequent choices on ideal values. They do not escape the world, but they are no longer fooled by appearances.

They choose "love affairs" and "dreams" and other significant possibilities inherent to a world interpreted by imagination. Through Brady's character, the narrator synthesizes the plight of a particular human being with the plight of the universal human condition. In presenting Brady's life and in revealing the relationship of that life to the reader, the narrator reveals commonality among human beings.

Similarly, the narrator of Ceremony in Lone Tree displays a level of consciousness which models imaginative interpretation, transcendence, and synthesis of experience, all essential to creating satisfying human relationships. By transforming clichés, the narrator interprets character. By describing Boyd's delight in comparing himself to Charles Lindbergh, the narrator exposes one of Boyd's primary weaknesses. Having stumbled across an old newspaper headlining the story of Lindbergh's flight, Boyd feels vaguely disturbed; and the narrator interprets the reasons for Boyd's discomfort:

> . . . Lindbergh was over the Atlantic. There was a snapshot of him in his helmet, the Lone Eagle gaze fixed on Paris where in four or five hours it was said he would be.
>
> Had he made it? Why was it Boyd did not smile? Why did it seem, there in the moonlit lobby, almost as good a question as ever? Lindbergh had to be somewhere. Over the Atlantic was where he belonged (CILT, p. 229).

Like the narrator of The Works of Love, the narrator of Ceremony in Lone Tree uses the setting of a lobby and of the moonlight to suggest both transition and imagination. Boyd's imagination temporarily awake, he confronts an opportunity for real introspection resulting from his

accidental find. The narrator indicates, however, that Boyd cannot rise to the opportunity. Clearly, Lindbergh's isolation, a means-to-an-end, was not meant to be a permanent state. Boyd, however, dismisses this obvious fact. When he looks at the snapshot, Boyd simply cannot understand the real reason for his disturbed feelings. Having chosen a life-style, based on "the lone eagle" cliché of the past, Boyd avoids interaction with the present and with other human beings. Instead of heeding his discomfort and therefore recognizing his many unfortunate choices, Boyd adopts the romanticized notion of his "lone eagle" heroes. In doing so, Boyd condemns himself to a life without the necessary landmarks, a relationship to the present and some relationships with other human beings; consequently, Boyd never really knows where or who he is.

Further transforming clichés and delving into Boyd's psyche, the narrator discusses Boyd's relationship to Lone Tree, the town, thus suggesting Boyd's relationship to the past:

> . . . There in Lone Tree the future still hung in balance, the moonlit plain was like the stormy Atlantic, something to be crossed, a stage in a journey, with the gold fields the great good place at the end. Lone Tree, like the Spirit of St. Louis, was up there in the wild blue yonder, the cuckoo-land between the end of your dreams and wherever you are from (CILT, p. 229-30).

Stringing cliché after cliché, the narrator transforms them, creating new meaning out of tired images. The passage operates on two levels. On the one hand, Lone Tree is part of "something to be crossed"; and, as it represents Boyd's past, it represents something Boyd needs to

leave behind. While caught in the past, Boyd does indeed live like the "Lone Eagle," suspended in a transitional world where no living, breathing person can join him. On the other hand, the narrator processes this image further, and Lone Tree becomes a metaphor for the present. Life is a "stage in a journey" from "wherever you are from" to the "end of your dreams"--death. Human life, like Lone Tree, hangs suspended between the known past and unknown future, and the challenge lies in the conscious effort to make the suspended present known. By using the creative imagination to discern permanent reality behind transitory appearances of the past and of the present, to transcend the flood of experience by concentrating on that permanent reality, and to synthesize knowledge of the past with the underlying truth of the present, human beings can create a tolerable, conscious life in the here and now--a life where human relationships are both possible and comforting.

None of the characters in Ceremony in Lone Tree lives such a life, however, because as Granville Hicks suggests, the narrator tells the stories of ". . . no one who knows how to live in the present."[19] Despite the characters, the narrator creates the model for a life capable of living in the present through a narrative vision which is imaginatively conscious of experience. While the characters are trapped in images of the past and isolated by these images, the narrator perceives a world where, "everywhere the tongue is dry, but the mind is wet" (CILT, p. 7). An active, living imagination can emerge in the most adverse of circumstances, the narrator suggests. One does not have to use that imagination as Tom Scanlon does to escape the present, but the narrator does acknowledge the human fears which preclude both living or

transcending the present:

> . . . The phoenix, that strange bird of ashes, rose each day from the embers where the past died and the future was at stake. To wake before Bomb was tricky business. What if it scared you to sleep (CILT, p. 32)?

The present, the narrator emphasizes, is elusive like the mythological phoenix. Even if human beings do succeed in grasping present experience by becoming fully conscious of it, perhaps they will find the present so intolerable that semi-consciousness, or even death, might seem preferable. Through an imaginative vision, the narrator interprets the lives of the characters, transcends their particular circumstances to reveal universal human problems and, therefore, synthesizes the experiences of characters and readers.

The narrator of Plains Song, like the previous two narrators, depicts the experience of the characters through a conscious, imaginative vision. In explaining the direction that Sharon Rose's life takes, the narrator avoids dependence on the cliché of the tough-minded rebel and portrays Sharon Rose instead as a vulnerable human being subject to the whims of circumstances and the demands of universal human needs. As Sharon Rose returns from a visit to her childhood home:

> . . . Loneliness overwhelmed her. The lights of villages flashing at the window, even the glow of lamps in solitary farmhouses, made a mockery of her independence. What was it in her nature that led her to choose a life alone? If the man across the aisle, graying at the temples, . . . had spoken to Sharon, if he had

> suggested she join him for dinner in the diner, if he had sensed, as he surely would, the contradictory needs in her nature and had been free to administer to them, the Sharon Rose who boarded the train in Columbus might not have been the one who got off it in Chicago (PS, pp. 104-5).

In this passage, the narrator emphasizes Sharon Rose's conflicts. The narrator also demonstrates that Sharon Rose's decisions, conscious or unconscious, are subject to chance, thus foreshadowing her pivotal meeting of Alexandria Selkirk on a plane later in the novel. Finally, the narrator suggests that Sharon could resist some of the control chance wields over her destiny if she would consciously make choices rather than allowing "a spell of napping" to make such choices for her; it was during such a spell that the man on the train got off (PS, p. 105).

In a later passage involving a train, the narrator captures another aspect of the human condition. A young man, who rides with Sharon Rose on one of her earlier trips back to Nebraska, reminds her of her own feelings when she first left home:

> . . . happy in his freedom, in his expectations that whatever life held for him in the future, it would henceforth be his own life . . . it would not be the trauma of birth or burial, or mindless attachments to persons and places, to kinships, longings, . . . all of which would recede into the past, into the darkness--wouldn't it (PS, p. 137)?

By interpreting the boy's hopes and by asking the unexpected rhetorical question at the end of the passage, the narrator not only creates an

analogy between Sharon's and the boy's experiences, the narrator suggests a universal human experience. Human beings, though hopeful in their youths, never escape "the trauma of birth or burial," or the "attachments" and "longings" for their pasts. By definition, the experiences of the past always relate to the experiences of the present because the truths of human experience are permanent and enduring. The boy can never fully escape his past; neither can Sharon Rose; neither can any human being. But human beings can imaginatively interpret their memories in order to discover fundamental truths about the present; they can transcend their memories by overcoming fears associated with them; and they can synthesize the truths of the past in order to illuminate the present. In these ways, human beings can accept their past "longings" for "kinship" and incorporate them by living fully in the present.

The narrator again transcends particular circumstances in order to emphasize abiding human truths in a later description of Madge. Madge, having been brought up in an extremely repressive household, feels shocked at her enjoyment of sex. Because it occurs in the dark, however, Madge learns to tolerate both her sexual responses and her sexual behavior. Then one day Ned, her husband, shocks her out of her complacence. He makes a comment which forces Madge to realize that he thinks about their love life, even during the day:

> . . . What might he be thinking? Did he think about all the things that she did? The way they slept together was acceptable to Madge because it took place in the dark, and required no discussion, but her very consciousness quivered to think what he thought about it in the light of the day (PS, p. 113).

The narrator, therefore, like the narrators of The Works of Love and Ceremony in Lone Tree, emphasizes the difficulty of consciously facing the truth about existence, the truth about the present, the truth about oneself.

Further exploring this theme, Plains Song's reliable narrator, representing closely the implied author, interprets a pivotal incident between Sharon Rose and Caroline. Through this incident the narrator explores the idea that most people evade honest intropection and depicts a climactic moment in Sharon Rose's imaginative development. Caroline, who prides herself on her hard-bitten honesty, also fears and thus avoids facing certain of her emotions. During Sharon Rose's final visit to Nebraska, she has a meal with the extended family at Madge's home. While the family is sitting at the dining room table, Blanche, Caroline's sister, comes into the room with her beloved parakeet and captures everyone's attention by showing off her bird's antics. Caroline despises her sister Blanche, probably because the slow-witted Blanche chooses a dependent life at home with her parents and Caroline ruthlessly insists on every woman's need for rigorous independence. Although Caroline perceives Sharon Rose's inability to face herself and openly challenges Sharon Rose to confront whatever is hidden, Caroline cannot face the jealousy she herself feels toward Blanche, probably because Blanche has such a special place in her parents' affections. While the family members watch Blanche and her bird appreciatively, Caroline suddenly responds by "sharply clapping her hands." The sudden noise, of course, frightens the bird, and Sharon Rose notices that Caroline cannot face her own cruelty:

> . . . Sharon glances--no more, just a quick passing glance--to see that Caroline sat with her eyes lowered, as if in thought. She had been fearless in revealing what had been concealed, in resolutely confronting what had been hidden, but the most appalling facts were those that burned like gems in the open (PS, p. 213).

Caroline, the rebel and the feminist, clearly avoids full consciousness. She resists confronting certain of her own thoughts and impulses. While searching the world and other people for hidden meanings, Caroline has missed coming to terms with the obvious. Because the narrator chooses a familiar domestic scene, this aspect of Caroline's character takes on a universal quality. Her fears represent all the crippling human fears which impede knowledge and improvement of self. Those people who succumb to such fears, unconsciously fearing discovery, avoid relationships. In this way, they decree their own isolation.

Imagination, then, is essential to full consciousness, and full consciousness is essential for social integration. Awakened by emotion, the imagination produces a consciousness capable of discerning the permanent and the ideal, transcending an appalling flood of experience, and synthesizing particular human experiences with the universal human condition. Through the narrative vision evoked by The Works of Love, Ceremony in Lone Tree, and Plains Song, Wright Morris creates a paradigm for an imaginative consciousness which discerns the universal social needs intrinsic to the human condition, which transcends particular flaws and circumstances concerning the characters, and which suggests the reader's kinship to the characters' lives. The narrators, therefore, provide an imaginative vision of the world which suggests the possibility for successful, mutual human relationships.

Notes

Chapter II

[1] Wright Morris, Earthly Delights, Unearthly Adornments: American Writers as Image Makers (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 3.

[2] Wright Morris, Will's Boy (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), p. 2.

[3] Morris, Boy, p. 4.

[4] Wright Morris, Plains Song, For Females Voices (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), p. 3.

[5] Wright Morris, The Works of Love (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952; rpt. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1972), p. 9.

[6] The Works of Love contains six chapters, representing six stages of development in human life. The first two chapters depict life entrenched in transitory, material reality. The first chapter, "In the Wilderness" portrays Brady's initiation into a world of false values, both sexual and material. The second chapter, "In the Clearing," traces Brady's many disappointments in relationships and in business and his resulting loss of innocence. Brady's discovery of his own imagination and of a world of abstract ideals occurs in the third chapter, "In the Moonlight." The next chapter, "In the Lobby," represents a transitional stage in Brady's life. Poised between an imaginative and an empirical interpretation of the world, Brady remains "In the Lobby." At this stage, Brady has no commitments to women, and he searches for a way to

begin a new life for both himself and his son. The return of his second wife, however, ends this particular life stage. The fifth chapter, "In the Cloudland," an obvious allusion to heaven, follows. During this chapter, Brady loses his second wife for good and experiences an extraordinary vision. Brady's loneliness and his misinterpretation of the vision lead him to the experiences of the last chapter, "The Wasteland," in which he confronts hell on earth. Thus, Brady moves through two phases of sensual perception, discovers his imagination, enters a transitional period, experiences an other-worldliness similar to traditional conceptions of heaven, and finally enters a world of delusion without purpose, or meaning, or love. There in the last world, Brady dies.

[7] Wright Morris, Ceremony in Lone Tree (New York: Antheneum, 1960); Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1973, p. 9.

[8] See David Madden's Wright Morris (New York: Twayne, 1964) for a discussion concerning the relationship of hero and witness, a recurring theme, according to Madden, in Morris's work.

[9] Wright Morris, Wright Morris, A Reader, 1st ed. introd. Granville Hicks (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 64.

[10] Wright Morris, The Territory Ahead (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1958), pp. 228-9.

[11] Morris, Territory, p. 28.

[12] Wright Morris, "Death of the Reader," Nation, 198 (1964), 53.

[13] First Prometheus, despite Zeus's awesome power and the capitulation of the other gods to that power, interpreted the injustice inherent

in Zeus's actions and intentions. Second, outraged by this injustice, Prometheus transcended his own fears and imaginatively created an alternative solution. Third, through the gift of fire, Prometheus provided humanity with imagination, thereby creating in mortals capacities for interpretation and transcendence similar to his own. Thus, Prometheus synthesized analysis, effort, and outcome into his own imaginative conception of the good. By imbuing humanity with imaginative power, Prometheus instilled the capacity for empathy in humans, thus creating the possibility for mutuality.

[14] Morris, Delights, p. 31.

[15] Wright Morris, "What Was Missing in the Fireworks," rev. of The Vanishing Hero: Studies in Novelists of the Twenties, by Sean O'Faolain, New York Times Book Review, 1 Sept. 1957, p. 3.

[16] Morris, Territory, p. 12.

[17] I am indebted to my thesis director, Dr. John McKenna, for this insight into the relationship between insurance and risk.

[18] Wright Morris seems to have chosen some of his characters' names in Plains Song because of their meanings. Although careful etymologies of these names are not really the subject of this paper, certain of the names reinforce central concepts discussed. For instance, Cora, which comes from the Latin root meaning "heart," also derives from a Greek name meaning "maiden daughter" (George R. Steward, American Given Names. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979, p. 87). The Cora in Plains Song is a daughter of the plains and of pioneer life who is probably much more suited to maidenhood, and Cora's conflicts with herself and with the other characters is at the "heart" of the novel. Sharon Rose's name

seems to be based on the biblical allusion to the rose of Sharon. Sharon is a biblical place alternately described as a desolate, barren plain and a thick, forbidding forest. Regardless, the rose of Sharon seems to refer to a lovely flower indigenous to a forbidding, hostile environment--a flower that "will grow most anywhere even if it had to grow among other vegetation" (Merril C. Tenney, ed. and Steven Barabas, asst. ed. The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible in 5 Volumes, vol. 5, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975, p. 172.). Sharon Rose is the character who seems to bloom to full consciousness and to the capacity for love despite her stoic, repressive background. Blanche's name, meaning white, is an obvious allusion to her perpetual innocence. Caroline's name comes from Charles, meaning "man," perhaps an interesting reference to her feminism (Stewart, Names, p. 77). Emerson, compelled to work obsessively and continuously, takes his name from Emery, a word meaning industrious (Elsdon Smith, Dictionary of American Family Names. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956). Finally, Alexandra Selkirk's name seems to be a feminization of the name of the prototype for Robinson Crusoe, Alexander Selkirk. If so, Alexandra becomes a symbol for isolation. Like Crusoe, Alexandra develops inner resources to sustain her; on the last page of Plains Song, she says, "Do I look a sight? Who is there to see me but God?" Correlations develop between Sharon Rose's images of Alexandra and her memories of Cora, thus reinforcing the symbol of isolation and independence. Such a character provides the true test for Sharon Rose's new consciousness. Totally self-sufficient, Alexandra does not need other people to sustain her, but Sharon Rose reaches out to her despite the fact. Because Alexandra

reminds Sharon so much of Cora, Sharon's overture represents a real triumph over the painful rejections of the past.

[19]Granville Hicks, "Review of Ceremony in Lone Tree," by Wright Morris, Saturday Review, 43 (1960), 11.

Chapter III

Pity: The Grand Compassion

The imaginative mind is conscious both of the present and of other human beings. As a result, the imaginative human being grapples at times with the appalling facts of the human condition. Trapped on a planet spinning in an eternal void and subjected to powers beyond human control or rational understanding, human beings struggle to find meaning where none is apparent. Perhaps due to his own imaginative power, Wright Morris, according to Leon Howard, "discovered early that life, from any rational point of view, was absurd but took the discovery as a matter of fact rather than as a revelation of philosophical truth."[1] Rather than emphasizing despair and absurdity, Morris's works reject hopelessness through the implicit, transcendent promise of the human imagination. Indeed Howard maintains that Morris resists the tendency to "intellectual despair" through his more powerful "faith as a novelist" in "imaginative richness and vitality,"[2] and Morris himself maintains that imagination invents meaning in spite of reason's failure to discover it. Morris further suggests that, ironically, the ones who confront the grim realities of existence are also the ones who invent the means for coping with existence. The vision of a better world, emanating from the imagination, produces hope. From the capacity to imagine the lives of others springs the human capacity for pity. Through both hope and pity, human beings find the redemption possible in transcendence.

In his works Morris represents pity in a number of different guises. Recognizing this, Wayne C. Booth discusses what Morris means by love (one of three transcendent means--heroism and imagination are the others --of surviving in a meaningless universe). According to Booth, Morris often employs the word love to indicate "the moment of compassion,"[3] and he sometimes uses the term love interchangeably with pity.[4] Precisely because humanity is lost in an incomprehensible universe, imaginative human beings feel compassion for themselves and for others. This compassion, born of the encounter of imagination with material reality, produces a longing for unity and a means for connection, for "The value of love as compassion . . . as the charity that alone makes us capable of imagining ourselves in other people's lives, has been implicitly important from the first."[5] Pity provides the motivation and the vehicle for understanding others. Because pity promotes the understanding of human frailties, it provides the impetus and the means to forgiveness. Social involvement in an imperfect world of imperfect human beings demands both understanding and forgiveness. Pity becomes, therefore, a basic motivator and a basic vehicle for social integration.

By defining the human capacity for pity in this way, Morris once again recalls the myth of Prometheus. Recognizing and pitying humanity's plight, Prometheus gave hope as well as fire to humanity, "Blind hopes I caused to dwell in them,"[6] so that human beings could muster the courage to endure. But Prometheus, who "put himself in their place," had to face "the inevitable consequences"[7] of helping human beings; that is, Prometheus experienced the most negative aspects of human existence, including pain, suffering, injustice, vulnerability, and impotence. Encouraged by Prometheus's gift of hope, human beings

became capable of accepting and understanding Prometheus's suffering, of recognizing their own suffering in him. Empathy and compassion became tolerable because hope, the great gift of Prometheus, implies change and relief:

> . . . Thus Prometheus gave them a sense of illusion that relieved them from feelings of perpetual discouragement coming from the realization of the absurdity of their condition. With fire and hope Prometheus instilled in men the active principles that would motivate and enlighten them and activate their ambitions--giving purpose to their struggle.[8]

Human beings, having become capable of hope and pity, recognized their individual power, and resisted social indifference:

> . . . The individual battling for ego-consciousness and the creative person concretizing his vision must approach their inner flame with great circumspection. Goals must be evaluated not only in regard to their immediate effects, but also in regard to their long-term impact on the individual and the collective.[9]

Imagination in an irrational universe and hope in a hopeless world culminate in a capacity for pity, the grand compassion, which compels social awareness and which motivates social integration.

In Wright Morris's novels, The Works of Love, Ceremony in Lone Tree, and Plains Song, the major characters feel varying degrees of pity for others particularly, for themselves individually, and for the human race collectively. The degree to which each character is capable of compassion accounts for the degree to which that character strives

for involvement. While each character observes, at least to some extent, the suffering of others, the characters markedly differ as to their abilities to recognize and express the resulting emotions. While some characters seem capable of compassion for self, others seem unconscious of their own suffering. Only one character, Sharon Rose (Plains Song), in the three novels develops full compassion, a compassion which synthesizes pity for others individually, pity for self alone, and pity for humanity collectively. This character, therefore, develops true pity, a grand compassion for the human condition which illuminates her understanding, allows her forgiveness, and motivates her kinship with others.

Although only one of the major characters becomes capable of ultimate compassion, all of the narrators present the characters' lives through such a compassionate vision. The narrators observe and recount the characters' suffering; then they explicitly link that suffering to universal human suffering. Thus, while the narrators awaken the reader's sympathy for the characters, the narrators also expand the reader's capacity for pity by heightening awareness of the human condition. As reliable narrators, representing both the norms of the novels and an artistic view of the world, they lure the reader into a complicit creative process, motivated by pity for the characters and for humankind in general. The reader's compassion motivates involvement with the characters, with the narrators, and with the artistic work. Thus, the narrators' compassionate vision suggests a motivation for involvement with others, a motivation for social integration. The artistic vision becomes a paradigm for a unifying vision of humanity.

Such a vision results from a delicate balance between involvement with the world and detachment from the world. Artists possess the

capacity to imagine the lives of others. In order to tolerate such empathy, artists also possess hope, at least in the power of artistic expression. Perhaps artistic hope lies in the faith that imagination and art provide relief from the suffering of existence. At any rate, in order to develop imaginative creativity, artists must involve themselves with immediate experience, including other people. In order to understand the universal implications of experience, artists must detach themselves occasionally for reflection and introspection. Similarly, all human beings who filter experience through a compassionate vision strike a balance between involvement and detachment. They involve themselves with others' lives, feeling compassion for suffering; and they also occasionally detach themselves in order to confront their own pain and to feel compassion for themselves. Finally, such people synthesize compassion for self with compassion for others into a grand compassion which encompasses all of humanity.

With the exception of Sharon Rose (Plains Song), the characters in The Works of Love, Ceremony in Lone Tree, and Plains Song lack to varying extents the tempering and illuminating effects of pity. Some lack pity for others in their lives; some lack of pity for themselves; some lack pity for humanity in general. Cora (Plains Song), more than any other of the characters, lacks compassion in all three ways. Although Cora observes the suffering of others, particularly Belle's suffering, Cora fears the emotions that these observations arouse. Even though Belle is perhaps the only human being for whom Cora feels real affection, Cora resists the impulse to develop a close relationship. After Belle's death and immediately after Emerson dies, Cora, now alone and feeble, conjures Belle's presence in her imagination to alleviate her feelings

of loneliness although she had rejected an intimate friendship while Belle was alive.[10] Perhaps she longs for Belle more than anyone else because she had once pitied her more than anyone else. For the most part, because of Cora's extremely limited capacity for affection and sympathy, she remains detached from others; she simply cannot tolerate the emotions resulting from involvement.

The incident in the novel which best represents Cora's unsympathetic approach to others occurs in a climactic conflict with Belle's daughter, Sharon Rose, on the day Sharon Rose realizes that she will lose her sister Madge to marriage. Unable to recognize the fear, the anxiety, and the grief which motivate Sharon to shout at Madge, "Is he looking for a wife or a housemaid?," Cora hears only Sharon's "resentment" and "bitterness" (PS, p. 75). Rather than responding to Sharon Rose's emotional needs and perhaps recognizing her own, Cora instead grabs Sharon and strikes her with a hairbrush. This uncharacteristic violence grows out of Cora's anger that Sharon Rose dares to risk sabotaging Madge's engagement and out of Cora's outrage that Sharon Rose dares to question traditional patterns of existence. Cora had never raised such questions; such questions raise the spectre of alternatives which she could not entertain. Preferring passive acquiescence to unsettling possibilities, Cora desperately silences Sharon Rose as Cora had once silenced Belle. Cora refuses to listen to her adopted daughter's cry of pain. Later in the novel, this memory encroaches on Cora's consciousness as she watches Emerson alternatively beat and carress an old farm horse. Feeling sympathy for the horse, who suffered at the hands of men both affection and brutality (Cora could never forget her pain and shock during her first sexual encounter), Cora realizes that

she had never consciously hoped for a less painful life;

> Cora had not felt then [during the incident with Sharon Rose], nor did she feel now, that she might have led a different life--only that this life might have been led differently. Things she had once put from her mind now returned for her to ponder (PS, p. 164).

Cora's pity for the old horse awakens the memory of a time when she had refused to pity her adopted daughter. Clearly, Cora could not have pitied Sharon Rose then because she could not confront the questions that Sharon Rose raised. To think about such questions would be tantamount to thinking of lost opportunities, and Cora feels duty bound to suppress such thoughts. Because Cora lacks hope in a future of possibilities, she sees all suffering as unrelenting, constant, and inexorable pain for herself. Cora prefers not to hope and not to feel; Cora is incapable of true pity.

Gordon Boyd (Ceremony in Lone Tree) resists compassionate feelings for others in much the same way that Cora does. In Boyd's case, this resistance results in part because of his lack of faith and hope in himself. Feeling like a failure--a writer without talent[11]--Boyd has little hope in his own future. Because of his poor self-image, Boyd believes he cannot possibly be good enough for others either. He believes further that other's lives are as hopeless as his own. Thus, he avoids any real involvement because of his shame and despair. McKee sums up Boyd's compulsion to drive others away when he says to Boyd, "There's people here who don't know you as well as I do and how

you have to make a fool of yourself since you've made such a mess of your life" (CILT, p. 254). And Boyd himself exemplifies his inability to express compassion for others in an incident with Daughter, his companion. Little by little during their trip to Lone Tree from Las Vegas, Daughter has revealed her heartbreak over a broken love affair with a man named Irwin. In addition, she has displayed some of her loneliness and bitterness. As the two of them approach Lone Tree, Daughter realizes that Boyd has been assessing his decision to bring her along and has begun perhaps to regret that decision, and she says, "You don't want me. You think I don't know?" Eventually Boyd responds by saying, "Daughter, you should know me better. I'm just scared." And Daughter retorts, "You're scared of what they'll think of me. I know." Even though Boyd recognizes Daughter's feelings of insecurity and rejection, he neither feels nor expresses compassion. In fact after Boyd asks Daughter, "Are you scared worse than I am?," the narrator explains Boyd's incapacity for pity, "He thought she was [scared worse than Boyd] . . . That is, he hoped she was" (CILT, p. 142). Because Boyd has lost hope that his own pain will ever end, he hopes instead that others share in that pain. Always painfully aware of his own shortcomings, Boyd takes comfort too in recognizing the frailties of others. The comparison makes Boyd feel better about himself.

Boyd reveals final proof of his inability to feel compassion toward the end of the novel when he relates the plot of a story he had written, a story whose major character clearly represents himself (Boyd often refers to himself as Morgenstern Boyd, and he names the major character of the story Morgenstern). Morgenstern and Hyman Kopfman, another major character of the story, were struck in the head by a falling scaffold,

according to Boyd. Having been rushed to the hospital, they share adjacent beds in the same ward. Doctors give Kopfman, because of his youth, a fifty-fifty chance of surviving, and they give Morgenstern no chance at all. Despite medical predictions, Kopfman, who has always emanated a degree of hopelessness, worsens while Morgenstern, who lived life only "half alive" (CILT, p. 257), improves. Boyd, in telling the story, indicates to Daughter that Kopfman's hopelessness makes Morgenstern believe by contrast that his life offers some hope. People, according to Boyd, instead of feeling real sympathy for others, delight in others' suffering because it makes them feel better about their own lives. Thus Boyd unwittingly explains why he has not been capable of feeling pity for Daughter's pain; he actually takes comfort in it. At the end of Boyd's story, Kopfman dies and Morgenstern, who had been improving, suffers a relapse. Eventually Morgenstern dies. He simply no longer had anything to live for now that Kopfman's death removed the implicit promise of a life more hopeless than Morgenstern's own. Boyd's complete pessimism, reflected in this story, prevents him from feeling pity for others; he rather guiltily finds solace in others' pain.

McKee, on the other hand, though he too feels frightened, is capable of sympathy, but he simply cannot express the feelings. Throughout the novel, McKee views Boyd with sympathy, understanding, and forgiveness. Occasionally, McKee will blurt out affection or concern for Boyd but usually in the safe distancing guise of a cliché. Those real insights into Boyd's character which motivate McKee's continuing sympathy, McKee usually keeps to himself. An incident which particularly depicts McKee's ability to feel but not to express sympathy occurs after

Boyd's arrival at Lone Tree. In a discussion concerning a young murderer, McKee asks, "Gordon, . . . know what that boy said when they asked him why he did it?" (CILT, p. 158). During the pause that occurs after his question, McKee reconsiders the advisability of discussing this topic with Boyd. The boy, the murderer, had in fact said that he committed the murders "to be somebody," and McKee knew that that was what Boyd had been trying to accomplish all of his life. Incapable of making Boyd feel worse about himself, McKee finally says, "Know what he said, Gordon? Said he was tired of being pushed around. Can you beat that?" (CILT, p.]59). Rather than expressing the sympathy McKee feels for Boyd's sense of failure, McKee evades the issue by lying. Similarly, McKee feels sympathy for Maxine, Lois's matronly sister, especially because of her marriage to the perpetual child Bud, but McKee cannot express his feelings to her. Frequently McKee silently wonders at the misery of Maxine's life (CILT, p. 150-1, 205), and sometimes he shows her physical affection (CILT, p. 291) with a gentle hug or pat. But when McKee hurts Maxine's feelings, he is incapable of expressing regret or sympathy despite the fact that he feels both strongly (CILT, p. 164).

McKee is much like Cora and Boyd in this inability to express sympathy, but he is unlike them in that he has hope. McKee hopes "for the best when the worst [is] happening" (CILT, p. 149), not out of an imaginative vision which compels confrontation with the ideal and the transcendent, but because his ungrounded hopes offer temporary escape from terrible fears. McKee's idea of a better world is one without confrontation, or fear, or pain. As a result, when he feels pity for others, he attempts to help them by deceiving them, by helping them to deceive themselves, by anesthetizing them, by facilitating their escape

from reality. McKee's hope is for a world of artificial comfort, a world of no conflict--a dead world. Early in the novel, McKee recalls an incident when he had tried mercifully to kill an injured bird. The bird, clinging desperately to its life, had resisted his efforts so strongly that McKee had dropped the bird in horror (CILT, p. 53). McKee had been intimidated at the bird's passionate, intense struggle to live. McKee felt no such passion for life, and the people in McKee's life, perhaps sensing his anesthetized existence, similarly resisted (like the bird) the deadening effect of McKee's "help" and influence on their lives. As a result, they pull away from McKee, and McKee never experiences true involvement.

Although Will Brady (The Works of Love), like McKee, cannot express emotions to others, he feels even more sympathy for the people involved in his life. Indeed Brady seems to possess a natural inclination for sympathy. Very early in the novel, after moving to Calloway, Brady confronts the suffering of a young, pregnant prostitute. She impresses Brady with her spunk though she rejects his offer of marriage. Out of sympathy for her penniless, desperate condition, Brady gives her an engagement ring anyway.[12] Later, Brady displays extraordinary understanding and sympathy for Ethel Basset, his first wife. During their honeymoon, when Ethel wraps herself up with bedclothes to avoid sex, Brady reflects on this strange behavior, and he thinks of Ethel's now dead first husband:

> . . . he felt a certain wonder, what you might call pity, for this man once her husband, now dead, and for this woman, his wife, who was still scared to death. He felt it, that is, for both of them (WOL, p. 55).

Because Brady never expresses this sympathy--actually he fears the emotions that he might awaken in his wife--he evades involvement with Ethel.

Brady develops greater and greater feelings of sympathy for others as the novel progresses. When he meets a cigar counter prostitute later in the novel, he feels sympathy for her and eventually marries her. Out of sympathy for this second wife, he forces himself to lie awake as she aimlessly talks:

> . . . He couldn't really do much for her, somehow, but one thing he could do was wake up in the morning, roll on his back, and lie there listening to her. Sometimes he wondered if this might be another form of loving, one that women needed, just as men seemed to need the more obvious kind (WOL, p. 91).

But Brady avoids the sustained intimacy that such sympathy might motivate by never expressing emotion in words; he expresses sympathy for others in small acts or "works" of love which must be intuited by the recipient. Little by Little, as Brady gets older and more divested of personal relationships, the pity he feels for others takes on increasingly abstract forms. During his final days in Chicago, Brady meets Manny Plinski, a seventeen year old, retarded, mute boy who feels a strong attachment for Brady. Manny Plinski expresses his affection for Brady by giving him turtles.[13] Brady appreciates the gifts but, "For a man so fond of turtles it was strange how they nearly scared him to death" (WOL, p. 218). Brady's fear of emotional intimacy simply overwhelms his sympathy for particular people. Further, Brady rejects the silent works of love offered by Manny even though they parallel Brady's own mute

attempts at love. Although Brady accompanies Manny to the zoo and offers Manny a job assisting him in a department store, Brady never really accepts the affection that Manny offers him; somehow Brady never seems consciously to recognize the pitiable state of Manny's existence, of Manny's total devotion to him. Manny finally resorts to taking Brady's brown tweed coat--he prefers the real Will Brady to the one who wears the Santa Claus suit--out on the landing of Montgomery Ward's while Brady plays Santa Claus. There on the landing, Manny can fill the pockets of Brady's coat with turtles, thus expressing his love, and Manny does not have to face Brady's misunderstanding and resistance (WOL, p. 264). In the end, Manny whimpers at the sight of Brady's damaged, weeping eyes (WOL, p. 266) because Manny, unlike Brady, is truly capable of pity for someone else in specific, intimate terms. Brady, unfortunately, ignores Manny's distress, thus unwittingly blinding himself further--this time in a spiritual sense. Brady simply cannot accept pity from, or feel pity for, those who are too close to him. Brady, who is so capable of compassion in the abstract, evades real involvement.

With few, incidental exceptions, then, the major characters of the three novels (except Sharon Rose) evade the feeling and the expression of pity for others. Similarly the major characters also evade feeling sympathy for themselves. Cora, in particular, unconsciously edits thoughts that might lead to self pity. Because Cora unconsciously depends on unending, back-breaking work to provide her life with meaning, she cannot afford to pity herself; she must keep working. And because Cara unconsciously accepts uncontrollable, cosmic forces as the dictates of human life, she never places faith in individual control

over destiny. She, therefore, cannot hope to control her own future and passively accepts her lot in life. Cora neither complains nor asks for consolation. Cora, "who felt no pity for herself" (PS, p. 76), simply accepts the pain of living, detached not only from others but from herself.

Similarly, Brady refuses to feel compassion for himself. Left by both wives, despite what he thought were his real efforts at marriage, Brady never consciously feels sympathy for himself. Leaving his son behind, Brady moves to Chicago. Even though Brady decides before going to Chicago that his real mission in life is to be a great lover, he builds no close relationships there. He depends instead on superficial acquaintances to help him pass the time. Brady seems unaware of the inadequacy of these relationships, of the loneliness that drives him, and he certainly never expresses compassion for himself. Even as Brady's eyes matter closed because he has burned them under a sun lamp in an attempt to approximate Santa's red cheeks, he does not express his pain, or ask for sympathy, or feel compassion for himself. He leaves his station and walks out on the landing for some fresh air, hoping that the cool air might soothe his eyes. Rather than asking for help or going for medical attention, Brady feels drawn to the street level so that he might mingle with humanity. He walks blindly down the landing stairs and into the canal. Brady's last act is symbolic of his entire life. Never expecting much for himself, never understanding himself, Brady's unconscious loneliness compels him to try some new way of involving himself with humanity. But Brady never consciously grasps what motivates him. Lacking the capacity for honest introspection, Brady dies a man devoid of compassion for himself while trying to love all of humanity.

McKee, though more capable of sympathy for others than Boyd, seems like Brady incapable of conscious sympathy for himself. In the middle of family gatherings, McKee can maintain the detachment necessary for introspection, and he does have rather insightful perceptions about himself from time to time. During these detached moments, McKee retires to special places, such as the garage or the upstairs bathroom to his home. When retreat to such a special place is impossible--for instance, when he is in his father-in-law's home in Lone Tree--McKee withdraws mentally even in the midst of family activities. McKee feels especially long-suffering, perhaps understandably, during such times because he must endure a trying array of in-laws, especially his irascible father-in-law, Tom Scanlon, and his perpetually childish brother-in-law, Bud Momeyer. To keep "peace in the family" (CILT, p. 55), an important goal to McKee, McKee not only has to bear the presence of the relatives, but he must also help them from time to time, usually at Lois's insistence. Often when he tries to help, McKee is rejected. Since conflicts of any type disturb McKee greatly he suppresses his own anger, complaints, and dissatisfactions. As a result, he feels impotent in his relationships with others because he lacks the courage to express the emotions that others awaken in him. This impotence, more than any other feeling, disquiets McKee; he simply cannot fully suppress it. Boyd senses McKee's weaknesses, and during the reunion dinner at Lone Tree, Boyd challenges McKee's acquiescent nature, his empty marriage, his flagging courage, and his self-deceit. Boyd, in fact, challenges McKee on the very issues of impotence and consciousness; "You can't be happier McKee. You awake or asleep?" (CILT, p. 183). These challenges hurt McKee, and he is surprisingly, uncharacteristically aware of the

pain:

> McKee wagged his head as if it hurt him. "Gordon," he said, maybe it's as much my fault as it is yours. Like you say. You'd never walked on that water or squirted pop at that bull if me or Mrs. McKee hadn't been there to watch you. Guess we got into the habit, the way kids will, of you showing off and me bein' there to watch you, and habits you acquire as kids tend to stick, don't you think?" (CILT, p. 183).

McKee expresses here the kind of sympathy which enables him to forgive Boyd, and McKee also reveals in this passage his inability to feel the same kind of compassion for himself. While McKee understands Boyd's weaknesses and the influences of others on Boyd's life, he does not have the same understanding concerning himself. He takes the blame for Boyd's life but does not try to evaluate his own culpability through a similar filter of compassion. Completely selfless in a rather peculiar way, McKee cannot consciously recognize his own weaknesses, compare those weaknesses to the weaknesses of others, or consider the weaknesses of human beings in general. If he were able to put his character flaws in perspective, he might be able to forgive himself, but McKee, terribly ashamed, becomes obsessed instead with accidents and death. Pity for himself is beyond McKee's range of feelings; when McKee withdraws, he does so to nurture the fears of catastrophes which he feels certain he deserves. In this way, McKee pays penance for his weaknesses and evades the onerous burden of change.

Boyd, on the other hand, often has moments of sympathy for himself; and, unlike most of the other characters, Boyd expresses that sympathy.

He recognizes and expresses, for instance, the Kithophobia," or "fear of one's own kind" (CILT, p. 228), which haunts him and precludes his relationships with others. When Boyd had decided that he had made a fool of himself in Mexico in front of McKee and Lois, he purposely eats "several cups of shaved ice doused with sirup . . . that he knew with reasonable assurance would make him sick" (CILT, p. 25). Having gone off to "sulk," Boyd's illness gives him added reason to pity himself. After Boyd leaves Mexico to visit Lone Tree, he meets Daughter. As he listens to Daughter's painful confessions, Boyd recalls his own feelings of estrangement and becomes immersed in them instead of sympathesizing with her bitter loneliness. Boyd feels that he has failed as a writer; he feels that he has failed as a lover--he lost Lois; and he feels that he has failed as a human being. Such a self-image inevitably arouses occasional and painful self-pity, but most of the time he suppresses all emotion rather than feel anything. A pessimist, Boyd has no hope his life will change; thus, since he, like Cora, has no faith that his life will ever be different, he simply cannot afford to confront his weaknesses. Without such a confrontation, Boyd fails to make the first step to forgiving himself through compassion. Boyd cannot tolerate sympathy from others either. Faced with Maxine's pity for him, Boyd thinks of it as an "illness" on her face (CILT, p. 254) probably because her pity confirms for him his own pitiable, hopeless life. Rejecting others' sympathy, including McKee, Daughter, and Maxine, Boyd cannot believe that he is worth their compassion. Although occasionally Boyd wallows in a private self-pity, he lacks the hope and the perspective to feel real compassion, which involves understanding and forgiveness, for himself. Even when he seems to ask Daughter for sympathy through his

descriptions of "Kithophobia," Boyd distances Daughter's response with cynical jokes and remarks. Finally, because Boyd's feelings of failure are so intense, he retreats to an interior world of partial awareness. He seems to suppress feelings altogether and thus withdraws not only from others but from himself. As Boyd, himself, admits, "Perhaps the one talent he had was the talent for sleep" (CILT, p.228).

Despite these major characters' failures to build a Promethean vision of compassion, The Works of Love, Ceremony in Lone Tree, and Plains Song implicitly suggest that a propensity for such compassion is essential for those human beings who establish relationships. In order to want to be with others, people must see others as worthy. Since all human beings possess weaknesses and faults, the people who want kinship must understand and forgive human frailties to perceive the worth of others. Such human beings must also understand and forgive personal weaknesses and faults in order to believe in self worth; otherwise, fear of certain rejection would impede social integration. Finally, people must sustain sympathy for others and sympathy for self by understanding and forgiving the frailties of human nature in general. Shunning despair, those who desire kinship must gather hope in the redemption possible in compassion while also mustering faith in compassion's transcendent power; these human beings must believe in the strength and dignity inherent in mutual helpfulness and interchange.

Besides these efforts, socially integrated people must alternate between social involvement and social detachment. They must depend on social involvement in order to experience first-hand the dynamics of social interaction and the particulars of human character. But from these experiences, they must detach themselves from time to time

for reflection and introspection. From experiencing conscious solitude and company, the socially-integrated build a synthesis--a conception of the general human race. Thus, when confronted with particular character flaws which might arouse anger, outrage, or despair, such people can temper these emotions by filtering their views of a particular individual through a compassionate vision of the entire human race. Similarly, when experience seems to indicate the depravity of the entire human race, each person can recall with sympathy the heroic struggle of another particular human being in a specific human situation and, in doing so, reawaken sympathy for all of humanity. The grand compassion, or true pity, then, by providing a means toward understanding and forgiveness and by maintaining one's faith in the basic worth of humanity, motivates human beings toward social involvement.

Because Cora, McKee, and Boyd fail at varying levels to feel sustained compassion for others or for self, they cannot possibly partake of a grand compassion for all of humanity. Brady (The Works of Love) also fails to feel true pity, but he is a special case. Incapable of feeling sustained sympathy for himself or for those who truly love him, like his son or like Manny Plinski, Brady is capable of generalizing but not particularizing his compassion for others. Although Brady never attains to a compassionate vision such as Sharon Rose's, he does observe and respond to others from a detached position; unfortunately, he steadfastly, though unconsciously, refuses to involve himself too closely. Exemplifying his unconscious need for distance, Brady slips from time to time and calls his son "Kid" (WOL, p. 228), a rather abstract name, almost as if he cannot quite face the real relationship that might exist between them. The name "Kid" seems to hurt the boy,

and Brady seems to sense this hurt and to be sorry for it. But he never quite changes his approach. By leaving him behind when he goes to Chicago, Brady keeps the boy at an emotional as well as a physical distance. In this way, he can imaginatively create a relationship between them without the uncomfortable intrusion of reality.[14] Similarly from a detached position, Brady sympathizes with both of his wives' problems, Ethel's fear of sex and Gertrude's failure to love, but he chooses to feel sympathy in a generalized way and then withdraws from real involvement with their lives. Brady sometimes watches his neighbors' behavior, again from a distance, and he views their problems and their struggles with sympathy. His concern, however, fails to inspire him to communicate, or to interact, or to help. Because Brady lacks the imaginative power to transcend his own unconscious fears of intimacy and emotion, his sympathy cannot motivate him toward involvement with others. Instead, he suppresses his fears. Unaware then of what blocks his contacts with others, he unconsciously longs for kinship, and his longing takes form in a dramatic personal vision.

The vision, occurring after Brady's second wife leaves him for the second time, grows in part out of Brady's increased understanding of the power of imaginative transformation. Shortly before Brady has the actual vision, he comes into contact with some old men in a park. One of these old men, in an attempt to escape the pain of living, transforms himself into a teapot, perhaps so that he might "empty" himself of the feelings which pained him. Further, by becoming an inanimate object, "Teapot" no longer faces his aging, his poverty, his boredom, and perhaps his despair. Clearly sympathizing with the old man, Brady "felt right at home with" him (WOL, p. 228). Perhaps to maintain his with-

drawn position with regard to other human beings, Brady unconsciously adopts "Teapot's" model of behavior; Brady imaginatively transforms his world in order to escape real involvement. After his contact with "Teapot," Brady's second wife leaves. Subsequent to hearing the news that she has left, Brady stands on a curb watching another old man feeding pigeons in the dark. Brady's pitiable state, juxtaposed with the pitiable image of the old man, produces a metaphorical image in Brady's mind:

> . . . On the old man's face was the look that Will Brady had seen, many years before, on one of the calendars at the foot of his mother's bed. A religious man, it was said, who fed himself to the birds. So it was not a new notion. No, it was a notion of the oldest kind. Very likely this old fool let himself think that in just such a manner he might fly himself, grow wings like an angel, and escape from the city and the world (WOL, p. 205).

The image of the old man symbolizes for Brady the image of a religious man with a religious purpose, and Brady heretofore has found no sustaining purpose for his life. As well as being reminiscent of St. Francis of Assisi,[15] this religious man, who fed himself to the birds much as Prometheus (Forethought) knew he would be feeding himself to the eagle (or vulture) by helping humankind, recalls the myth of Prometheus. Unfortunately, Will Brady interprets the meaning of this image through an imagination crippled by fear. He misunderstand the real religious purpose and seeks escape rather than transcendence. Brady does not feel a pity which compels him to kinship; on the contrary, he allows his emotional flights of sympathy to help him escape close, intimate

contact.

Brady cannot, however, completely suppress the longing for relationships, and this longing takes form in an imaginary voice which addresses him while he watches the old man feed the pigeons, "Old man [Brady], . . . so you think you are a lover?" Brady does not answer, but the voice continues, reflecting Brady's thoughts as they drift to images of a better world:

> "Speaking of heaven," the voice went on, though of course, they had not been speaking of heaven. "I suppose you know there are no lovers in heaven. I suppose you know that?"

Brady becomes incredulous. He then thinks it over and, revealing his most basic desire, Brady asks, "Then why go to heaven?" Brady cannot, in other words, resolve the idea of a better world "heaven," with the thought that such a world might lack love. Finally, after the voice explains that "small lovers like it" in heaven, Brady asks the voice where the "great lovers" go. To this question the voice responds:

> . . . "There's no need for great lovers in heaven. Pity is the great lover, and the great lovers are all on earth" (WOL, p. 228).

In this passage, Brady's inner voice explicitly equates pity with love. Love becomes the compassion that motivates connection between human beings. Inspired by this message and by the image of himself as a great lover, Brady decides to transform himself into such a lover. Hampered by clichéd images of love, such as that offered by Santa Claus or by his conception of "religious" men, Brady lives a life detached from specific relationships so that he might encompass all of humanity in his love. He moves to Chicago leaving his son behind; he stows away

alone in a tower by day; he resists the love offerings of Manny Plinski; he hides behind a Santa Claus suit; he, in short, evades intimate contacts with others. From his detached position, Brady does not allow himself to feel emotions that surface in personal relationships, he evades meaningful involvement. For this reason, his lack of direct involvement, Brady never attains to the Promethean grand compassion of which Sharon Rose eventually becomes capable. Brady is like the artist who has grand abstract or theoretical principles which he simply cannot translate into a particular work of art. Such an artist fails at art, and Will Brady, sadly, fails at love.

Sharon Rose (Plains Song) is the only major character in the three novels who learns to filter personal experiences and insights through a compassionate vision. But she develops this compassionate vision quite late in the novel. For most of the novel, in fact, Sharon Rose's attitudes toward her family, with the exception of Madge, seem contemptuous, judgmental, and fearful. When Sharon Rose returns to Nebraska for Cora's funeral, however, she seems to undergo a transformation; and, unlike Brady, Sharon Rose's transformation enables her to transcend the pain of living rather than to escape it. Finally released from the fear of Cora's influence, Sharon Rose opens up to new thoughts new interpretations, and new experiences. During this process, Sharon Rose re-evaluates her relatives' lives, her own life, and human life in general.

Before Cora's death, Sharon Rose had remained aloof from other human beings. She had consistently resisted close entanglements with others because, as she herself says, "I wanted my independence" (PS, p. 196). After her plane ride with Alexandra Selkirk from Boston to Nebraska, Sharon Rose begins to change subtly. Alexandra, who reminds

Sharon Rose very much of Cora (PS, p. 190), invites Sharon Rose to come to the Grand Island motel where Alexandra is staying so that they might return to Boston together. Uncharacteristically, Sharon Rose accepts. Perhaps unconsciously Sharon Rose wishes to resolve her inner conflicts regarding Cora through a relationship with Alexandra. At any rate, after a visit to a natural history museum which forces her to confront a cosmic sense of time, Sharon Rose begins consciously to think of Cora in a new way. As a young woman, Sharon Rose had feared Cora's strength of will, particularly because Sharon Rose had viewed Cora's lifestyle with repugnance. Fearing that she might be molded in Cora's image or that she might adopt unwittingly Cora's lifestyle, Sharon Rose had rejected Cora personally. Now no longer afraid, Sharon Rose remembers Cora's stoic struggle through life with new understanding and forgiveness. Riding in the car with Caroline, her niece who criticizes Cora, Sharon Rose blurts out, "Poor Cora" (PS, p. 201) to defend her. Furthermore, Sharon Rose seems at last capable of admitting to her deep ties to Cora. When offered a portion of pickle relish from Cora's last batch, Sharon Rose symbolizes this recognition by thinking of Cora's relish as a kind of communion, "The words 'blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh' came to her lips as if spoken" (PS, p. 210). For the first time, Sharon Rose understands that she is inextricably bound to Cora. Because of their shared pasts, Sharon Rose shares a permanent, emotional, and spiritual bond with Cora which manifests itself in Sharon Rose's material life. At the burial service, this new acceptance culminates into a moment of real compassion for Cora. As Sharon mulls over the meaning of the words "Abide with Me," the name of a hymn played at the funeral, she recognizes how little in life actually abides on the earth, how very little

actually endures. Her thoughts turn to Cora's long, earthly struggle and to what remains of her efforts. Almost as if capable of total empathy, Sharon Rose imagines the "speechless humiliation" (PS, p. 214) that Cora would feel if she could know that her endless hours of toil had meant so little of enduring value. During these reflective moments, Sharon Rose exhibits for the first time her capacity for real compassion, probably realizing Cora's only legacy was Cora's enduring influences on Sharon Rose. Sharon Rose realizes a compassion, then, that deepens her understanding and enables her powers of forgiveness.

Despite Sharon Rose's new capacities for emotional involvement, she retains her former capacity for detachment and introspection. Like McKee, Sharon Rose can withdraw into her own thoughts in the midst of clamorous activity, and this kind of detachment is essential for self understanding. By the end of the novel, having learned to transcend her fear of Cora as well as her fear of other emotions, Sharon Rose learns to look more objectively at past emotional experiences. While Sharon Rose is in Nebraska for Cora's funeral, the memory of the incident when Cora struck her with a hairbrush returns to Sharon's conscious mind. The memory comes to life during a family meal in Madge's home, Caroline responds jealously to some extra attention her sister Blanche receives from the family. Caroline behaves cruelly to her sister, and Sharon Rose recognizes that Caroline is unable to recognize her own capacities for jealousy and cruelty. While recognizing this fact about Caroline, Sharon Rose recalls her own self-delusions, particularly those of her youth. Remembering her own self delusion sparks the memory of her conflict with Cora. Although Sharon Rose had believed formerly that she hurled her angry challenge at Madge (and indirectly at

Cora) because of rebellious courage, she now recognizes that the anger had arisen partly from fear, a fear that was still with her:

> . . . On the palm of her hand Sharon felt again the stinging slap of Cora's brush. No matter how fearlessly youthful eyes started, or youthful voices cried out what should not be mentioned, the tongue would prove to be silent, the eyes lidded, in matters that were secret to the heart. In that way--how else?--it was possible to guess at what they were (PS, p. 213).

In the process of realizing that she had failed to confront certain facts about herself, Sharon Rose also realizes that the source of fear lies in fear of oneself. She recognizes that young people find it easier to discover the faults of their elders than to confront their own, and she now sees Cora's behavior with newly sympathetic eyes. Just as she learns to forgive Cora, she also begins to forgive herself. In seeing that she, like all human beings, has faults and by forgiving these faults, Sharon Rose develops her capacity for compassion.

Shortly after Cora's funeral, Sharon Rose displays further compassion for herself. One of Sharon's relatives drives her to Grand Island so that she might rejoin Alexandra at the motel. During the ride Sharon Rose stares out at "the darkening plain,"[16] but she particularly searches for "lights in the farmhouse windows:"

> . . . A sweet sadness, a longing touched with dread, filled her with a tender pleasurable self-pity. Whatever life held in the future for her, it would prove to reside in this rimless past, approaching and then fading like the gong of a crossing bell. In Blanche's mutness, in her elusive presence, Sharon felt their

> mutual kinship with the child buried in the grave without a marker, nameless as the flowers pressed between the pages of Cora's Bible (PS, pp. 216-7).

This passage clearly indicates Sharon Rose's new ability to see others and herself with compassion. She longs for kinship, and she seems no longer ashamed of it. She reflects on the concepts of loss and change, and she grieves over time. Finally, she confronts the vulnerable, finite nature of human life and sees these qualities as the bonds which unite all of humanity. Sharon Rose learns, therefore, to confront her fears and weaknesses, to understand them, to forgive them because they represent the plight that all human beings share. She learns to view her own life and her own character with true compassion.

With this newly compassionate vision, Sharon Rose begins to display the artist's capacities for both involvement and detachment. Like the artist, Sharon Rose needs both involvement and detachment in order to develop the Promethean grand compassion which synthesizes specific sympathies into a compassion for the entire human race. During the ride into Grand Island, Sharon Rose becomes conscious of her abilities to be at once detached and involved:

> . . . In the cab of the pickup, the blacktop flowing soundlessly beneath them, Sharon was at once incredulous and believing, at one with the world and fearlessly detached. Did the young orbiting in space feel a similar bafflement and elevation? (PS, p. 217).

Like the artist, Sharon Rose feels both wonder and inspiration. Her detachment enables self understanding and her involvement enables the

understanding of humanity in general. Like the "young orbiting in space," she has grown into a new perspective of human life. And after Sharon Rose arrives at the hotel, her many new thoughts seem to converge and take form in a voice, similar to the voice that Will Brady hears, which represents her new consciousness. Aware of an intense longing, Sharon Rose searches for its source:

> . . . Longing for what: Signs are visible. A child is sometimes seen wearing a blindfold, groping about as if for companions. A voice says, "It's not your longing, but part of the world's longing." A profound recognition sweetens her soul (PS, p. 221).

In this moment, Sharon Rose understands that the longing she has always felt is a longing for "companions," a longing for kinship. She understands further that this longing is universal. In this moment, because Sharon Rose sees that a yearning for kinship is not a weakness but a truth of human existence, she feels true pity for herself and for all of humanity; Sharon Rose becomes capable of the grand compassion.

The narrators of The Works of Love, Ceremony in Lone Tree, and Plains Song filter the stories of the characters' lives through such a Promethean vision of grand compassion. They relate the incidents and thoughts of the characters' lives with compassion; they imply connections between the characters and the rest of the human race; thus, they suggest compassion for the universal human condition. The narrator of The Works of Love displays this compassionate vision throughout the novel. In a passage toward the end of the novel, the narrator describes Brady's detached view of humanity from the train yard tower where he works all day. The narrator reveals Brady's sincere but futile desire

to integrate his life with the lives below him:

> . . . The old man in the tower, the waybills in his hand, was there with them. He had his meals with them in the back, wandered with all of them to the front, listened to the talk, and then saw by his watch what time it was. With them all he made his way through the house to bed. He sat there on the edge, looking at his feet or the hole in the rug (WOL, p. 240).

This passage indicates Brady's concerted effort to enter others' lives at least mentally; but, of course, no communication takes place. Interestingly, the narrator has Brady watching activities that also involve no communication, thus linking Brady's dilemma with a common dilemma of humanity. Just as Brady imaginatively and sympathetically follows these strangers through their day, the narrator imaginatively follows Brady through the days of his life. Both maintain a curious balance between detachment and involvement, but the narrator dares to focus on a specific character while Brady deals with faceless strangers.

Later the narrator describes two groups of humanity in general. The first group has "faith" and includes Will Brady. People in this group manage to escape the pain of the world by following the "Piper" of imagination through baptismal waters to a more tolerable reality, ". . . whether true or false, whether in the mind's eye or far out on the water, they had followed the Piper, followed him into the water, and disappeared" (WOL, p. 242). These people "disappear" because they no longer exist as individual identities living and reacting in the present and remaining visible to others; they isolate themselves. The other group, those who did not have "faith," cannot imagine for

themselves a better world than that of material reality, so they pathetically attempt to escape the pain of living by holding onto material possessions:

> . . . there were others, even thousands of them, who wanted to leave, but they wanted to take the world along. They had brought along with them every-thing they would leave behind: Magazines and newspapers, chewing gum and tobacco, radios and phonographs, small tins of aspirin, laxative chocolate, and rubber exercisers to strengthen the grip. Decks of playing cards, and devices to promote birth control. They had brought these things along, but the water would not put up with them. As they entered, it washed them back upon the sand. There it all lay, body and booty, like the wreckage of the world they had been departing . . . How live in this world? They simply hadn't figured it out. Nor how to leave it and go to live in another one (WOL, pp. 242-3).

With this image, the narrator, as representative of the implied author, creates the pathos of the lives of those who depend on material reality to provide purpose, security, and happiness. Unable to escape the material world, or to transcend it, they languish like "wreckage," futilely depending on "everything they would leave behind" when they die, depending on those things, therefore, without ultimate meaning. The narrator, by cataloguing this list of common objects, catalogues at the same time attempts people often make to live purposefully and happily. People try to live for pleasure (chewing gum, tobacco, playing cards, birth control devices); people try to avoid pain (aspirin, laxatives); they try to control circumstances or destiny (again birth

control devices and the very fact they try to escape the world). In these few pages, the narrator synthesizes the pathos of Will Brady's life with the universal yearnings of the human spirit. As Will Brady fails to find ultimate meaning so do many other human beings. The narrator captures a desperate, often tragic, dilemma of human life: How do human beings maintain the courage to live in a wasteland, the world, without succumbing to the appearances of the material and thereby rejecting ultimate reality? The narrator exhibits compassion for Will Brady's plight and for humanity's plight, and in conveying this compassion, the narrator awakens the reader's imagination and motivates the reader's involvement with the characters and with the work of art.

The narrator of Ceremony in Lone Tree tells the story of Boyd and McKee with similar compassion. By the end of the novel, the narrator has clearly established Boyd and McKee as incapable of lasting relationships. But both men emerge as people who cannot help themselves, as victims of a world which asks too much and which gives very little. Only the extraordinary transcend the world; only the extraordinary can sustain kinship. These men simply are not extraordinary and, therefore, represent most human beings. At the very end of the novel, Tom Scanlon, McKee's father-in-law, dies, and the gathering of family and friends must join together to pass the information of his death, to minister to the old man's body, and clumsily to comfort each other. During a scene in which the men remove Scanlon's body, the narrator portrays these characters very sympathetically:

> "Like me to give you a hand?" Jennings said to McKee, and made clear what he meant by moving over to the sofa. He slipped his hands under the top end of the sheet. When McKee took the

legs, and they didn't bend, he almost dropped him.

"Like to hold that screen, Boyd?" he said, and Boyd hustled over quick enough to do it, McKee's left arm rubbing on his paunch as he squeezed past. Made him think as he felt for the steps, trying not to think of what he was doing, of how it took something crazy, good or bad, to pull a room full of people together. He took it slow, the way he used to do it with a case of eggs . . . McKee had to wait till Bud could help him. He took McKee's end, then said, "which way you think he'd like to ride?"

All McKee could think of was how people would surprise you, even people like Bud (CILT, p. 297-8).

The juxtaposition of these four men's efforts, of their fears and weaknesses, of life and death, elicit the pathos of human life. Death is an undeniably permanent, transcendent value which awakens these men's compassion. Jennings, a journalist, visiting from out of state, offers to help this family he barely knows. McKee, who is desperately trying to be both brave and efficient, reveals his vulnerability when he recoils from the reality of death, symbolized in Scanlon's stiff legs. The usually remote Boyd responds quickly when McKee asks for his help, and the narrator emphasizes Boyd's aging by mentioning Boyd's "paunch"--perhaps to emphasize Boyd's vulnerability and mortality despite his tough exterior. McKee consciously realizes, according to the narrator, that the "roomful of people" has been united by the presence of "something crazy," something incomprehensible, unpredictable, and uncontrollable like most of the conditions of human life, including death. But, he does not realize that some things only seem "crazy" to these who

attempt to apprehend truth and premanence through the reason only. Nevertheless faced with "something crazy," people become aware of a sense of kinship, a sense of shared circumstance. The narrator then describes how McKee carries Scanlon tenderly, carefully as if he would break like a "case of eggs." Despite the fact that Old Scanlon constantly irritated McKee, McKee displays tenderness toward his father-in-law because the old man's death unites them explicitly in a common destiny. Finally, the narrator explains that even the childish Bud helps carry out the body and expresses concern and respect for the old man's wishes by speculating as to which way the dead Scanlon might like to ride in the wagon. Through the image of the four men carrying out Tom Scanlon's body, the narrator presents a sympathetic portrait of each one of them and of human nature in general. The reader, like McKee, also becomes aware of "how people would surprise you." Despite their differences, their defenses, their fears, these four men become capable of tenderness, concern, and helpfulness in the face of their common destiny, death. Instinctively recognizing that they all share in the same fate, they seek each other's company for consolation. Thus, the narrator sympathetically portrays the human spirit's need for kinship and perhaps awakens the reader's identification and involvement.

Throughout Plains Song, the narrator approaches the characters and and their lives with the same compassionate understanding that the narrators of The Works of Love and Ceremony in Lone Tree express. Sharon Rose accidentally comes upon a man and a woman in crisis while she is staying in the Grand Island motel. The woman is withdrawing from an addiction to Valium and is in obviously desperate pain. The man attempts to comfort her. Fortified by her recent confrontation

with her fears, Sharon Rose offers to help these strangers. But the young man only responds, ". . . what can we do to be saved?" This answer startles Sharon Rose because, as the narrator explicitly tells the reader, it brings back to life "something believed dead" in Sharon (PS, pp. 222-3). Without the anesthesia of drugs, of emotional suppression, of self-delusion, life is painful. One often suffers "the withdrawals" (PS, p. 223), symbolic of futile attempts to escape the pain of living. The way "to be saved" is to find a way to live in compassionate kinship with other human beings. A few moments later, in a conversation with Alexandra, Sharon Rose attempts to tell Alexandra what she has just witnessed, "In the hall just now . . . I was asked what we should do to be saved." Strangely, after Sharon Rose shares this information, the narrators describes, ". . . a smile of recognition to Sharon's lips" (PS, p. 227). Alexandra asks, "Was it a man or a woman?" And to this Sharon, now capable of understanding the universal suffering of the world answers, "Both, I think." The narrator then emphasizes the pain Sharon Rose consciously feels as a result of her new capacity for compassion, ". . . feelings with which she did not pretend to cope rose in her life like a fever . . . ." In describing these feelings, the narrator emphasizes Sharon Rose's new capacity for acceptance (perhaps even unconsciously modelled for her by Cora's acquiescence) which replaces her former escape through suppression. "Through the film on her eyes the objects in the room appeared to melt," and Sharon Rose's new compassion, though painful, begins to put things in proper perspective. The transitory "objects in the room began to melt" because Sharon Rose intuitively recognizes the permanence beyond the material. Thus, the narrator of Plains Song emphasizes the suffering of Sharon Rose's life and

the suffering of all human life with a compassion that renders that suffering dignity. The narrator suggests that those who face suffering willingly and consciously are those who recognize permanent values; they are the fortunate ones who might find the means to "be saved" through understanding and forgiveness--through compassion.

All three narrators, therefore, portray human existence in the same compassionate light. Human suffering is inevitable. The only hope for humanity. Through compassion which goads the interpretive and transcendent powers of the imagination, human beings can better come to terms with permanence and reality. Since such compassion motivates human beings to search for kinship, Morris suggests that qualities of permanent and ultimate value lie in human relationships. By presenting the lives of the characters through a compassionate vision, the narrators awaken the reader's imagination and compassion. Thus, the reader becomes motivated toward involvement with character and novel. In this way, the narrators suggest the motivation for human kinship and the redemption possible in art.

Notes

Chapter III

[1] Leon Howard, Wright Morris, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1968), p. 5.

[2] Howard, Morris. p. 38.

[3] Wayne C. Booth, "The Two Worlds in the Fiction of Wright Morris," Sewanee Review, 65 (Summer, 1957), 387.

[4] Booth, "Two Worlds," 393.

[5] Booth, "Two Worlds," 388.

[6] Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound, in Three Greek Plays, ed. Edith Hamilton (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1937), p. 106.

[7] Denis Donoghue, Thieves of Fire (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 88.

[8] Bettina L. Knapp, The Prometheus Syndrome (Troy, New York: The Whitston Publishing Co., 1979), p. 19.

[9] Knapp, Syndrome, p. 19.

[10] Wright Morris, Plains Song, For Female Voices (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), p. 173).

[11] Wright Morris, Ceremony in Lone Tree (New York: Atheneum, 1960; rpt. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1973), p. 228.

[12] Wright Morris, The Works of Love (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952; rpt. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1972), pp. 28-31.

[13] Manny Plinski, a mute, sits for hours watching his pet turtles swim in a bathtub, and he gives Brady ones that he particularly likes. These gifts represent love offerings,"works of love" (WOL, pp. 217-8).

[14] I am indebted to a member of my thesis committee, Dr. Judith Boss, for this insight.

[15] St. Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscan Monks, taught devotion to simplicity, poverty, and humility. These qualities represent an aesceticism which rejects the worth of worldly, material treasures, and Brady, at this point, is about to leave the business world to seek for values of a more spiritual nature. St. Francis of Assisi also devoted great attention and love to animals, including birds.

[16] Morris's "darkening plain" recalls Matthew Arnold's description of the world as a "darkling plain" (line 35) in his "Dover Beach." The similarities between the thoughts of Morris and those of Arnold are striking in other ways. Arnold underscores in his poem the false appearances of the world, "So various, so beautiful, so new . . . " (line 32), and he appeals to the worth of relationships as comfort in a world which "Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light. Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain . . . " (lines 33-4). Arnold's narrator says to an unidentified lover, "Ah, love, let us be true/To one another!" (lines 29-30), so that they might find sustenance in love despite the false appearances and ugly realities of the world. Similarly, Morris's Sharon Rose seeks to establish relationships with other human beings in order to provide her life with meaning.

Chapter IV

Audacity and the Transforming Act

Wright Morris suggests in his fiction that a few, rare human beings are capable of facing experience without depending on clichés that mask true interpretations or without succumbing to fears that compel withdrawal and escape. Such a capacity arises from imagination free to create insights and values out of experience, and eventually such an imagination illuminates experience by building a conception of the permanent and the universal in the human condition. Out of the heightened awareness produced by the imagination, the truly imaginative develop Promethean pity for others individually, for self alone, and for the human race collectively. This compassion awakens a longing for involvement, borne of a sense of pathos and kinship concerning human existence. These people have learned to understand and forgive through compassion. As a consequence, they long for involvement with others. Because the truly imaginative understand the suffering, the vulnerability, the absurdity of human life, they yearn to help, and to be helped by, others who share the same bewildering circumstances. The desire to help others does not creat kinship, however; compassion as motivation for involvement is simply not enough. According to Morris's conception of the true artist, one last Promethean principle is necessary to true art. According to the myth of Prometheus, this same principle is necessary for true community.

True involvement depends on action. Those who desire kinship must

establish it through a transforming act which unites both actor and witness. Because such action involves risk and conviction, only those who possess audacity can serve as catalysts for involvement. Human beings who wish to establish relationships must act on, instead of merely reacting to, experience. Bold, fearless, and shameless (if only momentarily), those who possess audacity confront the truth about those around them, the truth about the self, and the truth about the human condition. Stripped of cliches, they act, revealing the essential character of their own identities. Further, they direct their actions toward what they perceive to be the true identities of others. The audacious act, then, compels an encounter between actor and witness, revealing not mere appearance but the essential nature of the participants. The audacious act transforms the participants into a community involved in a common, intense experience.

The Promethean myth celebrates this conception of audacity. By stealing fire from the gods to give to humanity, Prometheus displayed audacity when he had defied Zeus. Prometheus's defiant action transformed him from a part of the Olympian hierarchy to the eternal rebel. Furthermore his action transformed human beings into creatures who possessed fire, symbolic of the creative imagination, and who were then capable of imagination, compassion, and creativity. But Prometheus received punishment for his action, and when Zeus bound him to the rocks, "Passivity did not mark his features, nor did depression set in."[1] Prometheus audaciously refused to repent. Before stealing the fire, Prometheus had confronted circumstances, motivations, and consequences. Fortified by this understanding, he remained true to his conviction. After he had performed the deed, Prometheus's " . . . exile

aroused his anger and triggered his feelings of violence and bitterness, thus increasing his frustration."[2] Prometheus, an audacious hero, particularly hated the frustation of inaction. Fettered by Zeus's literal and figurative bonds, Prometheus refused to capitulate--he disdained to ask for mercy. Rather, he proudly endured his suffering. According to the Promethean myth, then, the hero is one who, certain of personal convictions, acts on them with great daring even though the consequences might be painful and who refuses to surrender, retract, or regret them. In acting with strong conviction, the Promethean hero exhibits a truth about self which transforms the witnesses as all truths seems to transform the beholders. Thus, the Promethean hero effects transformation through a self-actualizing action that forever changes both actor and witness.

Wright Morris describes a similar conception of heroes in a conversation with David Madden, ". . . the hero, to effect transformation, must be audacious . . . ."[3] But audacity does not manifest itself in independent, isolated acts according to Morris. He explains that the hero must realize, "What one man can do will henceforth be a challenge of what he can do with or through others."[4] Audacity is more than courage. In some ways like courage, audacity demands of the actor a willingness to endure risks, particularly the condemnation of others. But, audacity also demands originality. This originality, emanating from self knowledge, reveals truth of the hero's inner self. Furthermore, the audacious hero self discloses in order to affect others. Compassion motivates the audacious to confront truth of self and others, to communicate that truth, and to establish kinship. In order to sustain that kinship, the hero must repeat such audacious action to keep

all participants in contact with permanence and universality. For these reasons, heroic acts, truly audacious acts, compel attention and create or sustain involvement.

Interestingly Morris also attributes audacity to the successful artist. In his critical work, The Territory Ahead, Morris accuses most modern Americans of relying on sensory experience, unprocessed by the imagination, as a touchstone for reality. He believes that many Americans depend on social customs and biological drives to control their daily existence; unfortunately, according to Morris, Americans ". . . believe in doing only what comes naturally."[5] Because many people seem incapable of discovering connections, values, and insights on which to base their decisions and behavior, the artist must serve as prophet because, ". . . without the sublime audacity of his creative imagination the world will degenerate into a museum of happenings in which the past is unknown and the future nonexistent."[6] Speaking as an artist himself, Morris explains that his own art involves risk because the process of creation paradoxically also involves destruction:

> . . . I seek to make my own what I have inherited as clichés. To make new we must reconstruct, as well as resurrect. The destructive element in this reconstruction is to remove from the object the encrusted cliché.[7]

Creativity, by its very nature, threatens the status quo, and challenging the clichés of the status quo demands risk-taking of the challenger. All creative acts, therefore, spring from the audacity of the creative actor.

Artists are not, however, the only human beings capable of creati-

vity. Those human beings who interpret life through the creative imagination are also capable of thinking, communicating, and behaving creatively. Each of these processes demands audacity, the daring to risk the consequences of independence and originality. Morris says his novels reflect the importance of audacity in every day life: "The theme of audacity, as I would describe it, in one or several disguises, and many variations, emerges from all of the books."[8] But according to Morris, no matter how powerful the theme, the novel's impact depends in part on responsive, creative readers: "The creative act itself is self-sufficient, having served the artist's purpose, but it lives on only in those minds with the audacity to transform it."[9] Thus, the creative process depends on the audacity of both the creative actor and the creative witness; audacity enables actor, action, and witness.

In Wright Morris's The Works of Love, Ceremony in Lone Tree, and Plains Song, the major characters owe their varying abilities to establish relationships partially to their varying capacities for audacity. While some characters come closer than others, all of these major characters, except for Sharon Rose (Plains Song), ultimately fail to demonstrate the audacity necessary for social integration. Through the characters' attempts at relationships, the novels suggest that, in order to establish and sustain human relationships, people must have the audacity to confront experience without clichés or fear. Those who wish involvement with others must have the courage to look beyond appearances and into reality. They must search for true identities of human beings, including themselves. They must search to discover the true nature of the human condition. Those capable of such courage translate audacity into action which exposes something true about actor and witness. This

exposure, transcending cliché and fear, transforms both actor and witness and provides connection between them. For those people who long for kinship, audacity enables an act revelatory of that longing. Thus, the audacious act enables a response from others. The audacious action of the truly imaginative, motivated by compassion, compels involvement through concrete action.

Cora, more than any of the other major characters, lacks audacity. Afraid to question or challenge, Cora acquiesces to exterior forces because she sees these forces as uncontrollable and inevitable. Cora depends on the habitual rhythms of daily chores to provide her life with meaning and resists anything that might upset that rhythm. And audacious acts, by their very nature, overwhelm the common, the habitual, the daily. Cora is too afraid, therefore, to face herself, those around her, or life itself. Once in awhile, she breaks the monotonous pattern of her life, such as the time when she takes Sharon Rose and Madge to see the play Uncle Tom's Cabin,[10] or the time when she accompanies her family to the Chicago World's Fair (PS, pp. 138-40). In both these instances, however, Cora regrets the experience. The flood of new information, new ideas, new experiences saddens and distresses her. Cora's only unpredictable, extraordinary action takes place as a response to Sharon Rose's challenge ("Is he looking for a wife or a housemaid?," PS, p. 75) when Cora strikes Sharon with a hairbrush. But this action does not represent audacity. Rather than searching beyond the cliché of Sharon's question to discern its real meaning--that is, that Sharon was desperately hurt to lose her sister--Cora takes the question at face value. Rather than confronting her own deeply buried disappointments, Cora silences Sharon Rose. Fearful of confronting her own or Sharon

Rose's emotions, Cora behaves defensively. Defensive action, no matter how dramatic or compelling, is not audacious in the Promethean sense because it seeks to avoid rather than to take risks. By avoiding risks, defensive action clouds rather than reveals truth. As a result, the act fails to transform the relationship between actor and witness; in veiling the truth, the act fails to create a kinship based on deeper understanding. In the case of Cora and Sharon Rose, this incident increases the estrangement between them. Cora's lack of audacity ensures her alienation.

McKee (Ceremony in Lone Tree) similarly lacks audacity, particularly because he seems incapable of taking any form of risk. McKee lives his life variously attempting to avoid confrontation with the things that frighten him, particularly emotions. These fears so cripple McKee's existence that he cannot truly communicate with other people or learn to know himself. And he certainly cannot muster the courage or the conviction to act audaciously. Throughout the novel, McKee reveals his fear of others' emotions in that he avoids confrontation at all costs. Although he understands that, "When Boyd knew he was slipping, first thing he [Boyd] did was trip the other fellow up . . .,"[11] McKee avoids confronting Boyd with this insight despite the fact that Boyd torments and taunts McKee. Even though McKee recognizes his father-in-law's arbitrary and cantankerous behavior, he avoids confronting either Lois or Old Scanlon on the subject. Choosing to express his frustation in a few, oblique wise cracks (CILT, p. 55), McKee misses opportunities to improve relationships.

Besides being incapable of honest confrontive behavior with others, McKee cannot face his own inner life. McKee wants a life of safety and

and security above all else. If he looks too closely and too honestly into his own character, he is terrified of forfeiting his complacency. Consequently, McKee never attains peace of mind. In his desperate attempt to suppress all uncomfortable emotions, McKee prolongs his own agony; certain fears in particular will not subside. Again, McKee learns to deal with fears obliquely rather than directly. Rather than coming to direct terms with his fear of death, for instance, McKee dwells on the idea of insurance instead. Insurance fascinates McKee for two reasons. In the first place, he is dimly aware of his own cowardice, and he believes, consequently, that he deserves the worst of all fates. Because insurance companies are in the business precisely to protect people from the accidents of fate, McKee hopes, in the second place, to take the risk out of living, to insure himself against the odds of the fates (CILT, pp. 245-7).[12] Rather than confronting other people, himself, and circumstances with audacity, McKee becomes obsessed instead with mundane matters which unconsciously symbolize his real fears. Toward the end of the novel, McKee hears an unexpected gun shot from the upstairs room of Scanlon's home. Hearing this shot and remembering the young murderer still on the loose, McKee starts at the dreaded sound:

> . . . Time and again McKee had asked himself what he would do when he faced a killer, and time and again he had feared the worst. But he needn't have. He found himself doing just what Mrs. McKee expected, which was just what he had been doing all his life. He was up without a thought for himself, crossing the moonlit lobby to where he tripped on the lobby scales and sprawled on his face (CILT, p. 277).

Because McKee was able to spring up "without a thought for himself," this passage clearly reveals McKee's inability to risk introspection. Also incapable of facing exterior risks, McKee naturally trips. Unconsciously avoiding confrontation, McKee is ineffective and bungling in his life. Mrs. McKee "expected," and she was right, that McKee would be impotent and useless in such a crisis because he simply lacks the courage to face life. Without the necessary audacity, McKee's actions reflect his lack of control over his own destiny. Incapable of consciously controlling his own behavior, McKee has no chance of affecting others or of establishing relationships with them.

Brady, more impulsive than McKee, lacks the ability nonetheless courageously to confront others or himself. Although Brady is the one major character, besides Sharon Rose, who seems to realize that his life would be better if he could establish and sustain relationships, his attempts to incorporate love into his life are ineffective. Brady lacks the ability to understand circumstance, others, and himself because he uses clichés to interpret existence. He also seems incapable of confronting his own motives and fears. He chooses instead to suppress them. For example, Brady decides to please his second wife and his son (thereby ensuring their continuing relationship with him) by building a "city" house in Murdock, a small town where he decides to start a new business. But he has not thought the project through before he initiates it. He chooses his own house plan and has the house constructed without consulting either wife or son. Then Brady moves the family to Murdock. When he gets there, the size of the house disconcerts him, making him fear that his family and others might feel he has over done it and made a "fool" of himself.[13] Although capable of unpredictable, even grand

gestures, Brady often diffuses his own pleasure because he lacks the audacity to confront his own and others' needs before acting.

After Brady's second wife leaves him, he impulsively decides to catch a train and to ride it wherever it will take him (WOL, pp. 213-4). Lacking true audacity, Brady makes this decision from a desire to escape rather than to face his circumstances. Brady escapes from a personal relationship and from his own grief. He does not return to his son in order to say good-bye and to tell the boy of his plans; nor does Brady decide to surrender the relationship with the boy. Perhaps unconsciously, Brady prefers to fantasize a father and son relationship from a distance because he cannot find a way to create one with the boy near him. Brady also evades his own desperation, his own feelings of abandonment and his fears of loneliness. Failing to build self knowledge through honest introspection, Brady longs to create an identity as a lover and thus adopts stereotyped roles as a lover. After glimpsing a scene from a movie about a pagan lover in the "land of true love" (WOL, p. 230), Brady begins a process toward the total loss of identity. More and more, Brady's concept of himself becomes unclear:

> Sometimes, standing there in the street, Will Brady felt that perhaps he had died, but the man in charge of him, the man this side of heaven, had not closed his eyes. So he stood there, a dead man in most ways, but with his eyes looking out (WOL, p. 230-1).

Beginning to lose his identity, Brady is like "a dead man" except for the eyes that continue to look outward for clues as to how to live. Brady cannot gather the courage and the audacity to look within his

own imagination and psyche for such clues. By the end of the novel, even the eyes searching outward became blind because Brady's continuing lack of audacity to face his own interior life culminates in the total loss of a conscious identity.

At the end of the novel, compelled unconsciously by unrecognized needs, Brady, the "dead man," walks down the landing into the canal. Though his decision to get closer to the people on the street level is impulsive, genuine, and unpredictable, it does not reflect audacity. True audacity springs from conscious interpretation of experience and conscious introspection of self. Brady is by this time blind--spiritually blind as well as physically--and is capable, therefore, of neither. Indeed, Brady leaves behind two symbols of his lack of audacity. In the pockets of his old, tweed coat, held by Manny Plinski as Brady drowns in the canal, are turtles and a postcard. The turtles are the unrecognized tokens of Manny's love for Brady. The unmailed postcard is the unexpressed love that Brady feels for his son. True audacity would have required, at the very least, two specific actions from Brady. First, he would have recognized Manny's overtures of love for what they were. Instead of trying to love the human race collectively, Brady needed the audacity to recognize and return love in the particular, specific sense. Second, Brady would have ceased to fantasize and would have begun to create a real relationship between himself and his son. This he might have begun by mailing the postcard. Overcoming his fear of intimacy (by mailing the postcard and by accepting the turtles as gifts of love) would have been a true expression of audacity, thus eliciting a response from others. Always reacting rather than acting, Brady cannot take control of his own life. Boyd (CILT), unlike any of

the other major characters except for Sharon Rose, appears to display audacity. From the very beginning of the novel, Boyd appears fearlessly creative despite the opinions of others. As a youth, he attempts repeatedly to walk on water, always with witnesses (CILT, p. 13). Seemingly unconcerned about eliciting negative responses from others, he enjoys shocking them with his behavior. Boyd seems, in fact, almost obsessed with winning the attention of others but on his own terms. During his stay in Acapulco, right before traveling to Lone Tree, Boyd sends Lois and McKee a bizarre photograph:

> . . . In one of these pictures a vulture on a post at his back seemed to peer over his shoulder, the bird looking evil indeed, but not Boyd. Knowing how it would shock them, he sent one of these snapshots to the McKees (CILT, pp. 27-8).

Besides shocking the McKees with the photograph, Boyd shocks the entire gathering at Lone Tree with an honest appraisal of their collective lives:

> ". . . The people of Nebraska, being conservative by nature, living close to the soil and the round of the seasons, are not swept by the tides of shifting opinion and still refer to Negroes as coons. A predictable percentage of the women go mad, books are sold in most of the drugstores, and Mr. Charles Munger, celebrated gunman, is a native son. A restrained optimism characterizes the outlook and the inlook of a pioneer people who welcome the visitor with a "Howdy, stranger' and a friendly smile. Until a man proves himself bad he is considered good. Dust, as seen in Life magazine, continues to blow, and the state emblem, a stiffly

> pleated upper lip, symbolizes the spirit of its people resolutely carried forward into the new age" (CILT, pp. 178-9).

On the surface, Boyd seems compelled to ruthlessly expose the truth despite the effects on others; this characteristic suggests the capacity for audacity. And a few moments later, Boyd displays this characteristic again as he presses McKee to discuss feelings:

> "It's okay to show a bit of leg, a bit of bosom and a bit of bottom, but the man who shows the fly of his feelings has to leave the state. Is something showing, McKee?" (CILT, p. 180).

Again, Boyd shocks those around him by mentioning the unmentionable.

But Boyd's seeming audacity is only a matter of appearances. In reality, Boyd risks as little as McKee. Further, Boyd represents the fate of the artist who cannot risk confronting and thus exposing himself--at least to some extent. Such an artist always fails because the work itself is not honest.[14] Although Boyd frequently scandalizes others around him, when confronted with a matter concerning his own feelings, he becomes strangely reluctant to act and reticent to speak. As a young man in love with Lois, Boyd had heard that McKee planned to marry her. Boyd consequently sent Lois a letter, but the letter was blank (CILT, p. 228). Boyd's blank letter indicates his inability to express emotion--even to avoid the pain of loss. This inability to express emotion also indicates his essential lack of audacity. Boyd, afraid to confront and reveal his need for others, simply cannot bring himself to express that need and to risk possible rejection. Toward the end of the novel, especially after McKee confronts Boyd with his letter to Lois, Boyd becomes quieter, less wise-cracking. He does

manage one last self-deprecating remark, however; "Morgenstern Boyd, pop-squirter, water-walker and friggin bore. First and last of the completely self-unmade men" (CILT, p. 302). In this sentence, Boyd sums up the ineffectiveness of his seemingly audacious acts. Because Boyd avoids the real risk of confronting and exposing the truth about himself, his actions (including his art) are meaningless and finally boring. Rather than self-actualizing through actions, Boyd self destructs. At the end of the novel, he slips off to sleep, symbolizing his low level of awareness, and he remains incapable of action or involvement with others.

Throughout most of Plains Song, Sharon Rose, like Boyd, displays a reckless bravado which is ultimately ineffective; her actions simply fail to change her own life or the lives of others. As a child, again like Boyd, Sharon Rose captivates the interest of a faithful admirer, Madge, who serves as witness to all Sharon does. Because Sharon Rose dares to try new activities, to think new thoughts, to express new ideas, Madge, who lacks such daring, lives her life vicariously through her sister. As a result of the character of their relationship, when Sharon Rose and Madge grow into young women, Sharon Rose becomes hurt and angry at Madge's betrothal. Showing little interest in marriage herself, Sharon Rose remains perplexed that Madge considers it, particularly because marriage effectively will end their relationship. Without a witness, an audience that is, creative acts become less meaningful, and Sharon Rose senses this. As a result, threatened with the idea that Madge might marry, Sharon Rose becomes capable of her most daring act as a youth. She screams at Madge and her fiance, "Is he looking for a wife or a housemaid?" (PS, p. 75). On the surface, this challenge seems

audacious, particularly because it takes place in Cora's repressed and controlled household.

But Sharon Rose's words lack the qualities of Promethean audacity. In the first place, Sharon had not confronted her own feelings regarding Madge; that is, Sharon had not faced her sense of loss, a truth about herself. Further, Sharon Rose refuses to come to terms with her feelings regarding Cora. Because of Cora's stoic, undemonstrative demeanor, Sharon Rose in turn rejects Cora. In order to accomplish and sustain this rejection, Sharon Rose develops an increasingly intolerant attitude toward the whole of Cora's lifestyle, including married, rural, and pioneer life. Sharon Rose's words, therefore, not only challenge Madge and her fiance; they also challenge Cora, but not directly and therefore audaciously. Finally, Sharon Rose's words ought to challenge her to face certain painful emotions, but they do not. She simply is not ready at this point in her development to confront the secrets she keeps from herself, particularly her intense loneliness. Hence, Sharon Rose's challenge to the young couple and to Cora fails to effect a transformation. Unaware of her own feelings, Sharon Rose finds no relief for her own pain; thus her witnesses hear no truths from her which will transform them. Because she aims her angry words completely at Madge and not at least in part toward Cora, the confrontation between Sharon Rose and Cora which takes place seconds later involves hidden issues. Finally, Sharon Rose shouts angrily at Madge when she really means to express grief, and her sister never understands her real feelings. In short, her daring words fail to represent Promethean audacity because Sharon speaks from suppressed rather than recognized feelings. Hence, her words change neither actor nor witnesses.

By the end of Plains Song, however, Sharon Rose does develop Promethean audacity. Having confronted a number of truths about herself, including ties to Cora, fears of commitment, and feelings of loneliness, Sharon Rose begins to act with audacity. A real act of daring (though it is not representative of Promethean audacity because it only changes Sharon and not others) occurs when Sharon returns to the Grand Island inn to meet Alexandra Selkirk. This action forces Sharon Rose to confront herself in such a way that she prepares for the true audacity she will display a few pages later. As she makes her way through the lobby to find Alexandra's room, Sharon Rose hears blaring rock music coming from a party room. She peeks in at the rock singer and becomes:

> . . . spellbound. Her flesh crawled, an expression she had always found ridiculous. His crouching, cringing manner, the subtle movement of his fingers, conveyed as words could not the corruption of his nature. She stared, her eyes wide, her lips parted, powerless to move or to resist his suggestions. At the crotch of his legs, thrusting upward and outward, the black shaft of the microphone, nudged by his knee, wagged like a tailpiece. Was she hypnotized? She knew that she was watching a simulated orgasm. His body jerked convulsively (PS, p. 219).

While watching this singer, Sharon Rose confronts a side of life (sensuality and sexuality) which she had always before suppressed. In her attempt to reject Cora, Sharon Rose had rejected marriage as a threat to her independence; and consequently, she also had rejected her own sexuality. Interestingly, having confronted this dark fear, Sharon Rose returns to her room and falls into a deep, dream-inducing sleep. During

her nap, Sharon's long-suppressed need for others surfaces in her dreams:

> The life congenial to Sharon, however melancholy, is the world of phantoms, more alluring than dreams, that impinges on her dreaming. The pervasive tone is a sweet sadness, a pleasurable longing, suffused with drug-like strains of music. Longing for what? Signs are visible. A child is sometimes seen wearing a blindfold, groping about as if for companions (PS, p. 221).

The daring Sharon Rose had shown in watching the rock star brings to the surface her most basic needs and desires--those concerning companionship.

Alexandra Selkirk, Sharon's traveling companion, awakens Sharon Rose from her nap, and perhaps Alexandra also awakens her from her former stupor of suppressed feelings. Moments later, Sharon makes her way down corridors toward Alexandra's room. On the way, she encounters a troubled young couple. The young woman is trembling in the corner sobbing as the young man pats her. Uncharacteristically, without keeping her usual distance, Sharon Rose approaches them and asks, "Can I help?" (PS, p. 223). Even as Sharon, who has always lived a life sheltered from vices, discovers that the young woman is an addict suffering withdrawal, Sharon daringly persists, "What can I do?" (PS. p. 223). Sharon Rose's sincere efforts to help, her sincere attempts at involvement, her sincere willingness to face terrible circumstances, motivated by pity, awaken an audacious response from one of her witnesses. The young man asks, "Ma'am, . . . what can we do to be saved?" (PS, p. 223). With these words the young man recognizes the misery of his own life, of his friend's life, and perhaps of human life collectively. And the young man's audacity, in turn, indirectly awakens a long-

suppressed memory in Sharon Rose which, once remembered, is the key to her final transformation.

Moments later, Sharon Rose continues down the corridor. "Without searching" (PS, p. 223)--Sharon Rose has begun to follow her own natural impulses--she comes to Alexandra's room. The sight of Alexandra combined with the impact of the experience moments before, evokes the memory of Cora:

> . . . A memory Sharon had obliterated flooded her mind. Through the floor ventilator in the upstairs hall she had once spied on Cora bathing herself in a washtub. Her lean body had been folded to fit the space, her arms and shoulders were lathered with soap. One hand, holding a jelly glass, scooped water from the space between her knees to pour it over her head. Sharon was all eyes. Never before had she seen a grown-up person without clothes. Was she a crawling baby, or a growing child who had left her bed to witness this ceremony? It was a single image out of time, but rooted in place, stored unseen and unacknowledged till the moment the door opened on Alexandra (PS, p. 223-4).

Thus Sharon Rose begins her final transformation in the novel. Awakened to the present by the young man's audacity and by Alexandra's evocative presence, Sharon confronts her past through a memory of Cora. In doing so, Sharon Rose becomes for the first time simultaneously fully aware of her past and fully conscious of the present.

Once in Alexandra's room, Sharon assertively calls the desk to stop "the rhythmic thumping" (PS, p. 224) of the neighbors above them. Obviously, these noises suggest sexual intercourse, but Sharon, newly

daring, refuses to ignore or deny what she hears. Next, she watches Alexandra eat. Now capable of making creative transformations, Sharon Rose imagines that ". . . each bite . . . was transformed into energy" (PS, p. 277). Clearly admiring and feeling attracted to Alexandra, Sharon Rose does something which she could not have done before; she tells Alexandra about her experience in the hall with the young couple. Sharon's intimacy evokes an angry outburst toward men collectively from Alexandra, but Sharon Rose does not adopt or share Alexandra's vision. On the contrary, Sharon Rose's heightened vision includes all humanity of both sexes ("Both, I think," PS, p. 227).

Finally, Alexandra rises and begins to speak of sunrises, symbolic of new beginnings:

> ". . . I'm going for a walk. I want to see the sunrise. Do you know the sun is perpetually rising? Every moment somewhere. Isn't that awesome? . . . You want to join me?" (PS, p. 228).

With this question, Alexandra puts Sharon's new capacity for audacity to the final test. Many thoughts must converge in Sharon Rose's mind in order to answer. Alexandra represents the thorough-going independence displayed by Cora. Alexandra is not the passive disciple that Madge and others of Sharon's friends have been. To reach out to such rigorous independence would be like reaching out to Cora; thus Sharon Rose would risk rejection. Nevertheless overcoming her fears of rejection, intimacy, and commitment, Sharon Rose rises from the bed and answers, "I'm coming, . . . I've not seen a sunrise since I was a child? (PS, p. 229).[15] With these words, Sharon embarks on a new beginning (the "sunrise") with and through a new relationship. Sharon reaches out to a new experience

with another human being by admitting that she had not tried new beginnings or experiences since she was a child. Now more than a literal traveling companion, in the geographical sense, Alexandra becomes Sharon Rose's traveling companion as she explores relationships. Ready to face her past (the "sunrises" of her childhood) as it relates to the present (the "sunrise" she plans to view with Alexandra), Sharon Rose embarks on a life, her transformation from isolate to companion begun. Only Sharon Rose, then, of the three novels' major characters, displays Promethean audacity.

The narrators of The Works of Love, Ceremony in Lone Tree, and Plains Song, as they represent the implied author and therefore the artist, display a paradigm for similar audacity throughout the novels even though the characters falter. The narrators create an artistic environment which invites questions, oblique statements, ambiguous connotations, and wry humor.[16] Rather than explaining all, the narrators build a literary collage which demands participation of the reader; the reader must make some connections. Morris, a Platonist, insists on a universal, permanent reality behind appearances. He sees the artist as one possessing the imagination to discern the universal and the permanent and as one possessing the audacity to reveal these insights. Morris sees the artist, then, as possessing Promethean audacity. That is, the artist must discern reality behind appearances and must display the courage to communicate this perception. Like Prometheus, the artist must have witnesses. By revealing reality before witnesses, the artist, again like Prometheus, effects a transformation of the participants into a community involved with the work of art, the artist's audacious action.

Wright Morris's narrators reflect the Promethean audacity necessary

in the artist. They establish a Promethean hero and witness relationship between themselves and the reader. David Madden refers to another hero-witness relationship which exists between some of Wright Morris's characters, such as Boyd and McKee. According to Madden, contact with the hero enables the self-transformation of the witness. Similarly, the narrators of the three novels enable the reader's transformation as Prometheus enabled the transformation of his witnesses. By presenting a particular vision, a particular view of reality, the narrators provide the reader with the opportunity to recognize and identify new perceptions, to incorporate them, and to apply them. Morris's narrators, reliably presenting the norms of the novel and thus of the implied author, represent the audacious vision of the artist, a vision revelatory of the universal human condition. In this respect, all artists manifest true Promethean audacity through their works of art, according to Morris. Audacious action becomes the creation of the novels themselves, a transformation of impressions and perceptions (of experience) into art. Thus, the readers have the opportunity to "witness" audacity translated into art (the novels) and to become capable of transforming themselves.

The narrator of The Works of Love displays audacity from the very outset of the novel. After setting the scene of Brady's birth place, Indian Bow, Nebraska, the narrator introduces Will Brady, the major character. The narrator states a few vital statistics about Brady and then digresses:

> . . . In time he grew to be a man who neither smoked, drank, gambled, nor swore. A man who headed no cause, fought in no wars, and passed his life unaware of the great public issues--

> it might be asked: why trouble with such a man at all? (WOL. p. 4).

With these words, the narrator both introduces and dismisses the major character of the novel by presenting Will Brady at the very outset as ordinary, even dull. Then, after exposing the major character this way, the narrator audaciously and directly asks the central question of the novel, which is in fact the central question of any work of art: why does this work exist? If, in fact, the subject of the novel is a commonplace, ordinary human being, what recommends the novel? Such a question, implicit to all art, directly asked by the narrator, encourages consciousness of purpose in the reader during the reading process. The narrator daringly attempts to shake the reader into a heightened awareness, as Prometheus produced consciousness in human beings by giving them imagination. The narrator admits the purpose of the novel will not lie in the character's life and challenges the reader through a direct question to find that purpose.

Displaying remarkable audacity, the narrator proceeds to tell the story of this ordinary man despite the admission that Brady's life holds no intrinsic excitement or interest. And Will Brady's life, taken as a series of events, is indeed ordinary. Brady moves from western Nebraska to eastern Nebraska as a young man. He meets a number of women, inherits a son, loses two wives, succeeds and then fails at business. In the last days of his life, Will Brady attempts to infuse his existence with spiritual meaning, but he fails and eventually dies by accidental drowning. This ordinary man becomes extraordinary and his story engrossing, however, because the narrator insists universality into Brady's experiences, thus forcing conscious readers to recognize themselves.

The excitement of the novel lies in the revelation of the infinite in the finite and in the possibility for self-discovery in the reader. A passage describing the ways in which Brady spends his last desperate days before hiring out as a department store Santa Claus reveals the narrator's audacity in making such connections:

> But all of this took time--the sitting and the waiting, the patting of other people's dogs in strange lobbies, and the reading of papers left on the bench along the walk. The morning traffic would flow toward the city from the north, white sails would appear on the lake, and in the park life would begin all over again. Candy and peanuts were sold, men would roll the sleeves on white arms, put away for the winter, and women would sit fanning the flies away from the baskets of food. Games would be played, young men would run and fall, others would stand in a row behind chicken-wire fences, and others would run toward Will Brady himself, waving him away. Crying that he should look up, or down, asking if he had eyes in his head. So he would make his way north, careful to avoid the deceptive clearing, where the unseen might be falling, or the games of young men who would suddenly turn and chase him away. The papers he found there he carried under his arm. It gave him the feeling that along with other people there was something in the park for him to do . . . (WOL, p. 246).

Ostensibly describing a typical day in Brady's life, the narrator captures a microcosm of human life through both grandiose and mundane images. On the one hand describing the mundane "patting of other people's dogs," the narrator also alludes to the ever-renewal of life,

"in the park life would begin all over again." The narrator refers to work, "the morning traffic would flow toward the city," and to play, "white sails would appear on the lake." The narrator presents traditional roles with the men rolling up their sleeves and the women protecting the food. Successes and failures emerge from the passage as "the young men would run and fall," as well as the rhythm of the seasons, "men would roll the sleeves on white arms." The narrator refers emphatically to the divisions that often separate the old and the young; "the games of young men who would suddenly turn and chase him away." And all of this, the narrator suggests, amounts to the limited time human beings have--"all of this took time."

To the conscious reader, then, the narrator symbolizes the ways in which human beings attempt to fill the time of their existences, in work, in play, in changing, in growing old. In the last few lines, the narrator relates Will Brady's days in the park to the struggle of all human beings. As he "makes his way north" in the park "careful to avoid the deceptive clearing," Brady had also made his way north to Chicago to avoid "the clearing" of his past.[17] Similarly, when circumstances appear uncomplicated and secure to human beings, the appearances may belie the reality. Sometimes human beings, like Will Brady, cannot avoid "the unseen," symbolic of suppressed feelings in the unconscious and of the forces of the fates. Making one's way north connotes the harshness of winter, and all human beings make their way through existence to the winter of their lives. Finally, audaciously, the narrator makes one final connection in the passage. Brady longs for something "to do," something which will significantly occupy the hours of his life. He assumes further that "other people" have that something. But

the narrator indicates that Brady is mistaken. Although "there is something in the park [the microcosm of life]" for people to do, few people actually discover meaningful purpose. Most people, like Brady, only ape the actions of others. Audaciously suggesting that most people's lives, equally as ordinary as Brady's, may not be worth the trouble ("why trouble with such a man at all?"), the narrator also suggests that "there is something" significant for people to do with their lives if they can only discover it. By having the audacity to tell a superficially dull story about an ordinary man, the narrator transforms the life of the major character into a universal symbol which offers the reader (through interpretation and identification) the opportunity for self-transformation. Like Prometheus, the narrator reveals truth and effects transformation, creating involvement between characters and reader based on shared universal experiences.

The narrator of Ceremony in Lone Tree also displays audacity. While telling the stories of ordinary people such as McKee and Boyd, the narrator continually prepares the reader for something extraordinary. Yet nothing extraordinary ever does happen. Using a backdrop of implicit and threatening danger in the form of two young murderers,[18] the narrator focuses on the lives of two ordinary, middle class people. In the opening chapter of the novel, "the Scene," the narrator describes Boyd's attempts to walk on water and McKee's comparison of Boyd to the murderers and to Christ:

> . . . Anybody could run over people or shoot them, but so far as McKee knew there was only one other man in history who had tried to walk on water--and He had got away with it (CILT, p. 21).

Such an introduction prepares the reader for an extraordinary character capable of extraordinary actions. But the narrator audaciously promises the remarkable and delivers the mundane, perhaps because truths of human existence lie more often in the mundane than the remarkable. Boyd expresses a number of amazing thoughts, but he is careful to avoid personal risks. Boyd reveals sharp wit and intelligence, but he allows these qualities to be overwhelmed by his fears. Boyd, despite his bombast, is really quite ordinary. Further, the narrator mentions repeatedly McKee's and Lois's fear of the murderers, their grandson's fascination with guns and violence, Lone Tree's desolation and darkness, thus creating an atmosphere of dread and anticipation; yet, the murderers never appear. Teasing the reader with the dark shadows, the empty plains, the implied violence, the sudden noises, the narrator refuses to deliver the excitement. The climax of the novel occurs, rather anticlimatically, with the accidental and harmless firing of a pistol and with the predictable death of Old Tom Scanlon, not a particularly likeable character. In these moments, the "bomb" (constantly alluded to) goes off, and the past (Tom Scanlon) dies in the present. Hence, the narrator suggests that the climax of all life lies in the human ability to recognize and accept the truth of the past while consciously living in the present.

Toward the end of the novel, the narrator places the above incident in further context and suggests that true audacity lies not in performing the extraordinary but in facing every day existence. Maxine, Lois's sister, displays real courage at one point in the novel. She also reflects the audacity of the novel's narrator. By the end, Maxine has become more and more tired of the gathering's collective witticisms and

pot shots at each other's expense. The victim of a couple of unkind remarks herself, Maxine seems to sense that people cover their true identities with words rather than actually using words to express themselves. Tired of seeing those around her attempt to strip others' psyches naked while protecting their own, Maxine reaches her limit. She does so while watching McKee hesitantly confront Boyd with the letter Boyd had written Lois forty years before. Boyd, very uncomfortable, hides his true feelings with a typically cavalier witticism, "My dear, two cents for your thoughts," as he hands Etoile, Maxine's daughter, a two-cent stamp off the old letter. To this, Maxine screams at her daughter and then at the others, "I don't want to know your thoughts . . . or anybody else's" (CILT, p. 296). Maxine then grabs the letter and throws it in the fire. A few moments later, as the amazed gathering watches, Maxine holds a stove lid threateningly over her daughter's head. Throughout the novel before this incident, Maxine, always attentive and cowed by others' needs and emotions, had thrown her apron over her face to hide her own feelings; but in this moment of real anger and daring, Maxine refuses to hide:

> . . . The girl [Etoile] ducked, and Maxine gathered up her apron as if she was going to weep--but she didn't. No, she mopped her face with it, then she let it fall like she was unveiling a monument, and McKee would swear to God that was how she looked. Like the one to long-suffering motherhood in Hastings Park (CILT, p. 296).

Finally, Maxine releases the last of her emotion, "I'm sick and tired of hearing you people talk . . Will you please shut up?" (CILT, p. 297). With these words, Maxine reveals the depth of her disgust and despair

regarding her relatives. Maxine's courage in revealing this heretofore secret part of herself transforms the wisecracking group around her: "from face to face, from Eileen to Jennings,. . . they all looked shamefaced and sheepish, like McKee felt" (CILT, p. 297). Thus, the narrator suggests that Maxine, more than any other character during the celebration at Lone Tree, accomplishes through her courage a transformation.

But Maxine's fears limit her courage. She succeeds in expressing her emotions but refuses to hear the emotions of others. Anger rather than compassion motivates Maxine's emotional release, and for this reason Maxine's words do not reflect true audacity because, though she expresses a genuine insight into herself, she fears hearing such insights from others. True, confronted with the depth of Maxine's rage, the others in the gathering reveal their guilt; yet they cannot progress beyond this shame to perceive what compels them to torture each other in the first place. But the narrator audaciously reveals these inner secrets to the reader and suggests their universality. Through a compassionate vision, the narrator suggests Boyd's sense of failure, McKee's fear of risk, Lois's fear of passion, Maxine's feelings of despair; and, through these character revelations, the narrator invites the reader to encounter truths of the universal human psyche and of the universal human condition. Like Prometheus, the narrator of Ceremony in Lone Tree audaciously creates involvement through the revelation of universal truths concerning the human psyche.

Earlier in the novel, the narrator explicitly explores the theme of shared experience. Jennings, the journalist, who comes to Nebraska to interview the family of one of the young murderers, decides to interview

Tom Scanlon as well. Standing on a caboose's platform and riding toward Lone Tree, Jennings reminisces about his own youth in Nebraska, and the narrator makes some connections:

> . . . What led a boy, born and raised in a soddy, to roll down the plain like a pebble to where men were paid to be Santa Claus? And another, a few years later, to leave at home his well-thumbed Bible; and another to take up his gun like Billy the Kid? In some way left to Jennings to discover, these lives seemed to be related, not merely to each other but to the man on the platform of the caboose. Local boys. Local boys who made--or unmade--good (CILT, p. 137).

In this passage, the narrator displays the audacity to synthesize the ordinary with the extraordinary. All of these human beings, despite their differences, are subject to the same mysteries, the same invisible influences. Just as the answers to the questions raised by the narrator are left to Jennings to discover, they are also left to the reader. Hence, the narrator audaciously suggests that all life, no matter how seemingly routine or ordinary, involves unfathomable and remarkable mystery. All lives confront the essential, monumental questions of good and evil; all human beings can "make" or "unmake" good. The narrator suggests that such questions confront the most ordinary of people, consciously or unconsciously, every day that they live. Thus, the narrator, rejecting the bizarre, chooses the lives of common people for his subjects and reveals the extraordinary in the ordinary. In doing so, the narrator suggests to the reader an opportunity for self-discovery, for discovering the extraordinary within the human psyche if the reader

possesses the audacity to do so. Again like Prometheus, the narrator creates involvement through creative, audacious works. In revealing truth, the narrator involves the reader with the lives of the characters and, like Prometheus, facilitates self knowledge.

The narrator of Plains Song, like the narrators of the other two novels, displays audacity through explicit, direct questions to the reader. Breaking the rhythm and the verisimilitude of the novel, this reliable narrator speaks directly to the reader and asks questions central to the novel's theme. On the first page, the narrator poses the questions, "Is the past a story we are persuaded to believe, in the teeth of the life we endure in the present?" (PS, p. 1). The use of first personal plural suggests not only a question significant to the lives of the characters, but the narrator also includes implicitly all participants in the work of art: characters, narrator, and reader. Thus, the narrator indicates an audacious consciousness of the novel as an art form, as a means of communication. Both as art and as communication, the novel reaches out toward some directly recognized, outside force, exterior to the art and yet audaciously addressed--the audience. And, of course, Plains Song deals directly with the influence of the past on the present, particularly if one attempts to repress, or to fictionalize the past. Since Plains Song deals, for the most part, with the American past, the narrator also raises an essential question concerning the nature of fiction's impact on the audience. Do, in fact, readers of fiction "believe" what they read because the events of their own lives seem so intolerable? Once again, the narrator audaciously questions the reader in an attempt to awaken the reader's full consciousness.

Later in the novel, the narrator devotes a number of pages to

Sharon Rose's discoveries regarding her relationship to her music, another art form. In these pages, the narrator explores art as a vehicle for confronting oneself. Now grown and attending music school in Chicago, Sharon Rose learns music from a Miss Baden-Hall who believes that, "The technique would come. First and foremost the artist must feel" (PS, p. 84). Shortly after relating this information, the narrator once again asks a direct question, "could it have been Miss Baden-Hall's purpose to disturb Sharon's remarkable composure?" (PS, p. 84). In asking this question, the narrator intimates that the teacher may be trying to shake her student's complacency, forcing her student to confront her inner life and resources. Since the artist must feel, contact with inner life is essential to the artistic process. The narrator, representing the implied author and thus the artist, then, audaciously breaks the rhythm of the novel, again risking its verisimilitude, and asks a direct question of the reader. The narrator dares the reader to take an active part in the novel as an artistic process. Because the success of the novel as a work of art depends, in part, on the self-discovery of the reader, the complacency of the reader must also be shaken. Contact with the self emerges from the audacity of the creative imagination, of actor and witness, of artist and audience, as that imagination attempts to confront reality in others, in self, and in collective humanity. Like the previous two narrators, the narrator of Plains Song chooses ordinary people as subjects, thus suggesting that the real drama of life takes place in ordinary lives, perhaps in the ordinary lives of potential readers. The audacity of the narrator, then, compels susceptible readers to make connections between the novels and their own lives. Just as the artist creates through audacity

involvement between artist, artistic work, and audience, all human beings create personal involvement through the audacious perception of connections between experience and self.

The Works of Love, Ceremony in Lone Tree, and Plains Song present audacity as the facilitator of action which creates community. Despite the fact that most of the major characters fail to display audacity, Sharon Rose becomes capable, by the end of Plains Song, of true, Promethean audacity, and she is the only character who seems capable of a mutual relationship with another human being. Furthermore, the three narrators, as they represent the implied author and thus the artist, suggest a paradigm for action which compels involvement. The narrators explicitly demonstrate a characteristic of the artist which is also a necessary characteristic of socially integrated human beings. The three novels, then, present audacity as the final Promethean principle necessary for social integration. Such audacity compels connection between the essential, rather than the apparent, natures of those involved. Human audacity, springing from a daring willingness to expose the self and to challenge the essential (sometimes hidden) inner lives of others, produces community.

Notes

Chapter IV

[1] Bettina L. Knapp, The Promethean Syndrome (Troy, New York: The Whitston Publishing Co., 1979), p. 25.

[2] Knapp, Syndrome, p. 25.

[3] David Madden, Wright Morris (New York: Twayne, 1964), p. 35.

[4] Wright Morris, A Bill of Rites, A Bill of Wrongs, A Bill of Goods (New York: The New American Library, 1967), p. 88.

[5] Wright Morris, The Territory Ahead (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1958), p. 8.

[6] Leon Howard, Wright Morris (Minneapolis: University of Minn. Press, 1968), p. 43.

[7] Morris, Territory, pp. xiv-xv.

[8] Wright Morris, "Letter to a Young Critic," Massachusetts Review, 6 (Autumn-Winter, 1964-65), p. 93.

[9] Morris, Territory, p. xv.

[10] Wright Morris, Plains Song, For Female Voices (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), p. 61.

[11] Wright Morris, Ceremony in Lone Tree (New York: Atheneum, 1960; rpt. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1973), p. 247.

[12] I am indebted to my thesis director, Dr. John McKeena, for this insight.

[13] Wright Morris, The Works of Love (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952; rpt. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1972), pp. 107-8.

[14] Madden, Morris, p. 41.

[15] Morris again reveals his Platonic influences. Plato used the sun as a symbol for truth in his famous cave metaphor. Thus, Sharon Rose promises to face the truths of life more directly by viewing the sunrise.

[16] For an interesting discussion of this effect of Morris's style, see Granville Hick's introduction to Wright Morris, A Reader (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

[17] The early days of Will Brady's adult life take place in the chapter of The Works of Love entitled "The Clearing."

[18] One of these young killers, Charlier Munger, is obviously patterned from the real life historical figure Charles Starkweather, the famous mass murderer of the 1950's from Lincoln, Nebraska.

Chapter V

Conclusion

Mutuality is central to the myth of Prometheus, to Wright Morris's conception of the artistic process, and to the success of human relationships. The Promethean myth represents an ancient attempt to account for the human capacity for cultural bonds, for artistic expression and appreciation, for shared perception and empathy. Thus, the Promethean myth explores elements of mutuality. According to Morris, truly successful art depends not only on the quality of the artistic work but also on the quality of the audience. For Morris, art must elicit a response from an audience, and this audience should possess the capacity to transform an experience with a work of art into an experience of personal significance. Thus, art changes the audience, and the audience transforms art--art evokes mutuality. Finally, human relationships hinge on mutuality. True involvement depends on both action and response. Those who are successfully socially integrated communicate with others, listen to others, and respond to others. Community produces mutuality. Morris suggests further, again echoing the Promethean myth, that Platonic values of permanence and universality often lie in the interchange between people. Morris presents in his novels a human environment which is on the surface a kaliedoscope of false appearances which in themselves mean nothing, but Morris implicitly suggests that human relationships provide a central core of meaning to human life.

Out of human relationships emerge values of permanence and universality, such as honesty, love, benevolence, charity, compassion, tolerance and justice. Through the discovery and development of these qualities, Morris suggests potential purpose for otherwise potentially empty human lives.

With the exception of Sharon Rose (Plains Song), the major characters of The Works of Love, Ceremony in Lone Tree, and Plains Song fail to create meaningful and mutual relationships. Although the ending of Plains Song suggests that Sharon Rose, finally possessing a fully conscious mind, a compassionate vision, and the necessary audacity, will be capable of relationships, the other major characters in the three novels remain isolated. Through the characters' various attempts at relationships (and, in the case of Plains Song, through Sharon Rose's success), the three novels implicitly present three general deficiencies in the characters which impede their development toward social integration. In addition, through the narrative process, the narrators display three positive qualities, contrasting to the characters' deficiencies, which promote reader involvement. These qualities closely parallel the three principles which emerge from the myth of Prometheus, itself concerned with the human capacity for community, and the Promethean principles symbolically represent three qualities of the true artist. These principles are imagination, pity, and audacity.

Although each of these principles becomes crucial to the process of social integration, each is indeed part of a process, and, therefore, not effective in isolation. First, emotion must awaken imagination. Imagination then creates a vision of community; pity motivates the desire for community; and audacity serves as a catalyst for community.

All of the principles are interdependent: imagination depends on emotion for its awakening and then, in turn, awakens compassion; only those who have the capacity to envision the lives of others, who have, thus, imagination, become capable of Promethean pity; and only those motivated by Promethean pity and possessed of an imaginative vision, have the audacity to act toward the creation of community. Furthermore, these principles depend on witnesses. Viewing an audacious act, the witness responds emotionally. Such emotion compels the witness to action--audacious action which is not only daring and bold but which also becomes revelatory of human truths. If such an audacious action takes place in view of further witnesses, the process continues; and a community develops based on a shared imaginative vision, a mutual compassion, and various actions which compel, establish, and sustain involvement. Hence, these Promethean principles, essential to social integration, possess a cyclical rather than a linear relationship.

The narrators of the three novels, as they represent the implied author, display the principles of imagination, pity, and audacity in recounting the stories of the characters' lives. The narrators display imagination in those passages which imply meaning and significance beyond the characters' lives, through passages which transcend particular characters and suggest universality, and through passages which synthesize characters individually with humanity collectively. During this process, the narrators filter the lives of the characters from a perspective of tenderness and compassion. The narrators emphasize the trials, the pain, and the vulnerability of the characters in the context of threatening, oppressive conditions of human existence. The compassionate vision of the narrators implicitly encompasses, therefore, all

who share in the human condition. Finally, with creative audacity, the narrators expose truths concerning the secret, inner lives of the characters and then daringly suggest that these truths apply to the lives of others. Through this process the narrators promote the involvement of the susceptible reader. Hence, Morris suggests through his narrators the ideal qualities of the artist: imagination, pity, and audacity.

The reader with a healthy imagination responds to the narrators and discerns the narrators implications about human life. This reader begins to interpret, to transcend, and to synthesize the characters' experiences in order to discern the universal and the permanent. While imagining the characters' lives, the susceptible reader then develops compassion for the struggles of the characters, eventually transcending the particular characters' lives to synthesize a new understanding, forgiveness, and compassion for the collective human condition. Motivated by an increased capacity for compassion, this reader feels drawn toward action and develops the audacity to transform the experience of the novel. Ideally, then, the susceptible reader relates the novel to personal existence and internalizes meaning intrinsic to the novel to expand personal consciousness, thus integrating exterior artistic experience with the experience of inner life. Finally, the ideal reader feels compelled to share insight, thus completing one cycle and beginning another. The artist, therefore, compels an involvement which the individual yearning for kinship emulates.

Despite the fact that The Works of Love, Ceremony in Lone Tree, and Plains Song present lives of alienation and estrangement, they implicitly suggest a process toward involvement. The first step of the process involves the awakening of imagination through emotion: when

e imagination comes fully to life, it must interpret appearances to scern reality; it must transcend fears to resist escape or withdrawal; d it must synthesize the particular with the general. If the imagina- on is healthy enough to accomplish these tasks, then the individual comes fully conscious.

Cora (Plains Song) lacks the interpretive powers to see beyond ltural stereotypes and clichés, however, and thus allows appearances mislead her. She further lacks the transcendent power of the agination to rise above fears of emotion and change. McKee (Ceremony Lone Tree) lacks these capacities almost to the same degree that Cora es. McKee, too, cannot see beyond clichés; he, too, cannot transcend ars--in his case, fears of emotion and death. Although Brady (The rks of Love) displays more imagination than either Cora or McKee, he es imagination to escape and withdraw rather than for transcendence d to internalize cultural stereotypes rather than for creation of an dividual identity. Boyd (Ceremony in Lone Tree), the most imaginative the characters other than Sharon Rose, rejects certain clichés only adopt other ones and uses imagination to escape into a world of emories rather than living actively in the present. The only truly aginative character, Sharon Rose finally confronts her own external d internal existence after nearly a lifetime of emotional suppression d denial. With imagination she finally becomes capable of developing nest insights. She refuses to interpret life through clichés. She arns to transcend her fears and to face life honestly and courageously. e becomes capable of synthesizing the particulars of her own life with e particulars of others' lives and of developing an understanding,

therefore, of collective humanity. In her ability to interpret, transcend, and synthesize, Sharon Rose emulates the creative imagination of the artist.

Similarly, the narrators interpret the characters' lives without depending on clichés, transcend the pathos of the characters' plight in order to suggest the redemption possible in kinship, and synthesize the particulars of the characters' lives into a general conception regarding the human condition. By presenting insights into both characters and collective humanity, the narrators suggest a means by which to discern reality behind appearances. One must imaginatively interpret existence to discern meaning, and one must imaginatively transcend existence to discern the permanent. Because the narrators often suggest rather than explain meanings and connections, the susceptible reader, one who has the means and the desire to enter the narrator's vision, seizes opportunities throughout the novels to enter the fictive process. Morris's narrators sometimes ask direct, rhetorical questions of the reader and alternately use and puncture clichés. They often imply rather than make connections and deliberately employ ambiguous or highly connotative words and expressions. This technique requires close attention on the part of the reader, and Morris believes that good readers must actively participate:

> If the modern novel is threatened with a crisis that will not result in better novels, it may lie with the reader who has lost the will, and the power to read. Who respects, but rejects, the novelist's authority. Who fears--and rightly--that the good book seeks to make him fully conscious, the great book to expand

> such consciousness as he has. Obviously, none of this jibes with the reader's need to remain unconscious, with his knowledge that the last information he wants is his own plight.[1]

Consciousness demands knowledge of pain and adversity, and consciousness, produced by imagination, is the quality necessary from the reader who wishes involvement in the artistic process. The narrators of The Works of Love, Ceremony in Lone Tree, and Plains Song exhibit a conscious vision of the world as they tell stories of characters who (except for Sharon Rose at the end of Plains Song) are only partially conscious. In doing so, the narrators display the qualities and model the process necessary to full consciousness, but the reader must interpret, transcend, and synthesize through the imagination to develop a fully conscious experience with the novel. If the reader can develop this consciousness, the process toward mutuality between narrator, characters, and reader begins. Thus, the narrators display the first Promethean quality of the artist, imagination, and suggest imagination as a facilitator for involvement.

After imagination produces consciousness, human beings become capable of pity for others individually, for self alone, for humanity collectively. The major characters of the three novels (again with the exception of Sharon Rose), however, fail to develop this capacity. Only partially conscious, Cora fears change rather than placing hope in it. Seeing her existence as a constant, bitter struggle which she somehow must survive, Cora stoically suppresses compassion for herself or for others. For Cora, compassion is both painful and futile. Boyd's pessimism similarly precludes pity for himself or others. Boyd lacks

aith in himself and therefore cannot believe his life will be better. lence, Boyd takes comfort in rather than pitying the suffering of thers. McKee, unlike Cora and Boyd, has hope, but he hopes to escape eelings rather than to confront them. Again in McKee's case, compas- ion becomes intolerable and ultimately impossible. Brady comes the losest of the major characters to developing true compassion (other han Sharon Rose), but he feels emotions only in abstract, distant ways. eelings for particular people impose an intimacy which Brady cannot olerate; feelings for self impose a self-knowledge which Brady uncon- ciously avoids. Sharon Rose is the only major character who attains o the Promethean grand compassion. Fully conscious by the end of the ovel, Sharon Rose begins to understand the pathos of the lives around er. With this understanding, Sharon Rose begins to forgive the mis- akes of others individually. Through this perspective, Sharon Rose hen begins to understand and forgive herself. Finally, Sharon Rose egins to develop a compassionate vision through which to view all of umanity. She begins to understand and to forgive universal flaws and eaknesses in human nature. Sharon Rose adopts, therefore, Morris's onception of the artist's compassionate vision.

The narrators of the three novels display similar capacities for nderstanding and forgiveness and invite the same capacities to develop n the reader. Although some of the major characters in the novels ossess unattractive and, in some cases, destructive character flaws, he narrators tell the stories of the characters' lives with compassion. ora, stoic and undemonstrative, creates in Sharon Rose a terror of ejection. McKee, frightened and passive, fails to confront and improve

the relationships around him despite his occasionally clear insights. While searching for ideal love, Brady unconsciously abandons his son and ignores Manny Plinski's attempts to love him. Sharon Rose, throughout most of her life, reins in her feelings and judges others harshly. All of the characters emerge from their respective novels, however, as sympathetic human beings, struggling against formidable odds, rather than as contemptible human beings deliberately choosing the path of least resistance. The narrators tell the stories of their characters through a compassionate vision which presents human beings in their ultimate context--that is, the characters emerge as human beings with finite abilities attempting to cope with an infinite universe and as people who attempt to survive, without deliberately hurting others, despite pain, disappointment, and confusion. The narrators suggest the second Promethean quality of the artist, compassion, and indicate compassion's role in creating involvement.

Because the narrators are reliable, they represent the norms of the novels; and, therefore, the reader who identifies with those norms adopts the same compassionate vision. With this vision, this susceptible reader understands and forgives the characters, perhaps identifies some personal qualities in the characters, and certainly recognizes universal human qualities in the characters. Viewing the characters with pity, then, enlarges the reader's capacities to understand and forgive personal failings and to understand and forgive universal human frailties. With these new capacities, the ideal reader becomes motivated to create further connections with the art work by transforming it into something of personal significance. This transformation requires audacity.

In their attempts to create relationships, the major characters in the three novels reveal their relative incapacities for audacity. Cora represses feelings and labors her hours away; but because of her irrational fear of change, she disdains to do the unpredictable or the daring. Similarly, McKee lacks the courage to confront himself or others and thus passively accepts what life delivers him. Brady desperately tries to infuse meaning into existence, but he fails to conquer his fear of intimacy. Hence, he fails to understand that meaning must evolve from self-knowledge. Boyd, initially daring and bold, lacks Promethean audacity because he hides secret fears about his own character from himself and others. He lives in dreams of the past in which he creates an identity without the flaws that haunt him in the present. For most of Plains Song, Sharon Rose too lacks audacity because she cannot conquer the fears which impede self-knowledge. Toward the end of the novel, after Cora dies, Sharon Rose's character undergoes a dramatic change which culminates in audacious acts. In reaching out to others through her audacity, Sharon Rose completes a transformation of self. She becomes capable of mutuality.

The narrators of The Works of Love, Ceremony in Lone Tree, and Plains Song also exhibit audacity. In each of these novels, the narrator tells the story of middle class, plodding people whose lives lack intrinsic excitement, glamour, and fascination. Nevertheless, each narrator creates out of the major characters' lives stories of wonder and interest; each narrator presents the stories, ". . . of ordinary people who somehow become extraordinary . . . ."[2] The narrators accomplish this transformation by revealing the universal human truths

intrinsic to the characters' lives, by interrupting the course of the novels to ask direct, rhetorical questions or to tell jokes, thus audaciously insisting on the reader's active, conscious participation. Granville Hicks describes this narrative technique:

> . . . Like most speech, it calls for response. Although it flows so unpretentiously, it constantly challenges the reader to take his part in the activity of a creative imagination. That is one reason why Morris so often interrupts himself with a paradox, an apparent non sequitur, or a wisecrack . . . .[3]

Because the narrators openly address the reader and then demand through technique the reader's participation, they transform the susceptible reader into active participant rather than passive spectator, and they transform the artistic process into community effort involving the reader. The narrators suggest the third Promethean quality of the artist, audacity, and display audacity's relationship to involvement.

The susceptible reader becomes involved in this complicit fictive process, developing concern and caring for the characters. Emotions goad imagination. With imagination awakened, the susceptible reader becomes capable of interpreting events of the characters' lives, of transcending the particularities in order to discern generalities, and of synthesizing the characters' lives with personal experiences, thus increasing general understanding of the human condition. This process expands the consciousness of the reader; and out of this awareness, especially because it emerges from the compassionate vision of the narrators, the reader expands his capacity for pity. The reader, sharing the narrator's compassion for character, in turn applies this

vision to personal as well as collective human existence. This compassion, then, motivates the reader toward the final stage of the process. Involvement and identification with the characters lead the susceptible reader to increased self-knowledge; such a reader becomes more capable of change. Hence, the reader with audacity undergoes self-transformation. Morris reflects his belief in transformation through art in his narrative technique and discusses the belief openly in The Territory Ahead:

> . . . it seems to be the nature of man to transform--himself, if possible, and then the world around him--and the technique of this transformation is what we call art. When man fails to transform, he loses consciousness, he stops living.[4]

Thus without audacity, without transformation through action, human beings lose the consciousness produced from imagination because audacity enables the completion of imaginative vision. Hence, audacity realizes the completion and the continuation of the cycle. Audacity establishes mutuality.

While through an imaginative vision Prometheus developed compassion for the human race and then audaciously acted to save humanity, human beings survived with increased responsibility. Denis Donoghue in discussing this responsibility asks, "What kind of obligation is incurred by a man who accepts a stolen gift?"[5] This is the essential question of the Promethean myth. According to Aeschylus, humanity faces, as the result of Prometheus's action, the challenge to view the suffering intrinsic to life with the full consciousness produced by the creative imagination. Prometheus's last words in Aeschylus's

play, "Behold me I am wronged,"[6] issue an awesome challenge and a continuing obligation of human life. Human beings, bound together by shared conditions and shared capacities, must have the courage to confront experience, to witness pain and suffering, and to act to relieve it. By witnessing Promethean suffering, the beholder's imagination awakens, the beholder becomes fully conscious, the beholder feels compassion, and the beholder effects transformations of self and others through audacious action. Echoing Shakespeare Morris states that similarly a writer, an artist, must be "a lunatic [possessing audacity], a lover [possessing compassion], and a poet [possessing imagination],"[7] and Morris creates narrators who exhibit those qualities. These narrators, representing the artist, possess imaginative vision, feel compelled through compassion to share it, and then audaciously create an artistic work which embodies that vision. Thus, the artist creates an audience who witnesses his art, whose consciousness is raised by it, whose capacity for compassion increases, and who transforms self through the artistic work. Such witnesses possess a new understanding and feel compelled to share it. Like the beholders of Prometheus's suffering, these witnesses have a responsibility. They must develop the audacity to communicate or to act before witnesses. Hence, these Promethean principles, as represented in the artistic process, present a paradigm for creating and sustaining kinship and involvement which, according to Morris, provide human beings with ideal, permanent values in the Platonic sense. The Works of Love, Ceremony in Lone Tree, and Plains Song, through major characters and narrators, present a paradigm for establishing and sustaining human community based on Promethean principles

of the artistic process: imaginative vision, motivating compassion, and audacious action. The artist becomes the prototype for one who possesses and exhibits the qualities necessary for mutuality, perhaps the only redemption for human suffering.

Notes

Chapter V

[1] Wright Morris, "Death of the Reader," Nation, 198 (Jan. 13, 1964), 53.

[2] Leon Howard, Wright Morris (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1968), p. 5.

[3] Granville Hicks, "Introduction," inc. Wright Morris: A Reader by Wright Morris (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. xxxi.

[4] Wright Morris, The Territory Ahead (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1958), p. 229.

[5] Denis Donoghue, Thieves of Fire (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 17-8.

[6] Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound, in Three Greek Plays, ed. Edith Hamilton (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1937), p. 143.

[7] Wright Morris, "The Lunatic, the Lover, and the Poet," Kenyon Review, 27 (Autumn, 1965), 737.

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