

Ironized Man

A Jest of God and Life Before Man

I: Essay

I have always had more sympathy for Nick Kazlik, in Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God*, and Nate Schoenhof, in Margaret Atwood's *Life Before Man*, than is usually reserved for them. I view them as *eirons* that Laurence and Atwood use to show how the problem of women's misapprehension of men contributes to the dysfunctional relationships their novels portray. Though Laurence and Atwood may not have intended the irony I ascribe to the creation of Nick and Nate, Linda Hutcheon's assertion of intentionality in irony can help us view them in a way not usually seen but useful for deeper understanding of the novels: "The major players in the ironic game are indeed the interpreter and the ironist. The interpreter may—or may not—be the intended addressee of the ironist's utterance, but s/he (by definition) is the one who attributes irony and then interprets it: in other words, the one who decides whether the utterance is ironic (or not), and then what *particular* ironic meaning it might have" (11). As difficult as ascribing intent is for post-structuralists, I can assert that Laurence and Atwood intended Nick and Nate to be as deserving of our sympathy as are the women they are involved with, and that without that sympathy the novels are only partially understood.

Hutcheon's intentionalist irony takes me a certain way in reading male presence in *A Jest of God* and *Life Before Man*. To further structure my reading, I rely on the humanist and contingent irony defined by Richard Rorty. Both Laurence and Atwood write as Rorty's ironist as they portray the uncertainties that drive the characters of *A Jest of God* and *Life Before Man*.

Rorty defines an “ironist” as “someone who fulfills three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself” (73). Laurence and Atwood test vocabularies of power through interactions of Nick and Nate and the women with whom they are involved. The proximity to reality at the end of each novel remains as ambiguous as at the beginning, but Rorty says we are left with a better understanding of the proximity when we see, through such novels, “the ways in which particular sorts of people are cruel to other particular sorts of people” as a result of “the blindness of a certain kind of person to the pain of another kind of person. . . . how our attempts at autonomy, our private obsessions with the achievement of a certain sort of perfection, may make us oblivious to the pain and humiliation we are causing” (141).

What I am looking at here, then, is how *A Jest of God* and *Life Before Man* present blind cruelty in the attempt to achieve autonomy and how men need to rid themselves of their pain before they can be expected to respond to women’s demands that men stop being such a pain. As curative demonstrations, *A Jest of God* and *Life Before Man* are useful to compare for how Rorty’s “private obsessions” create the (mis)understanding of men. Laurence’s view of Nick is exterior only, through the obsessions of another, Rachel; Atwood’s view of Nate is interior, through his own obsessions. With opposed agency yet similar outcome, the novels create a dialectic within which misapprehension can occur—and can be resolved.

Laurence in limiting the view of Nick Kazlik to perception through Rachel creates the impression that he has used Rachel, but with closer examination of Rachel’s behaviour the impression is not entirely justified and is balanced by her personal difficulties, which Nick helps her overcome. Laurence ironizes their relationship to represent Rachel’s need to escape the tradition she clutches, and Nick becomes the *iron* in her realization of the need to let go. In *Life Before Man*, Nate becomes Atwood’s means to show the consequences of the ethical misprisions of Elizabeth and Lesje, requiring that he, like Nick, also be read ironically. The term “ethical” itself could be wondered at here: I understand it as the description not of the *desirable* but

rather *what is*, as does Wayne C. Booth (8). Ethics does, however, prescribe the desirable when irony enters; Hutcheon locates ethics as the “something else that characterizes irony”, beyond the unsaid: “irony involves the attribution of an evaluative, even judgmental attitude” (37). Innocence and guilt can be debated and attributed after the terms of debate are defined; the irony in *A Jest of God* and *Life Before Man* shows those qualities in the relationships to emphasize the importance of definition before judgment. In both novels, it is not that the men abuse the women but that their presentation in the development of problem behaviour in the women makes them appear abusive. At the same time, Laurence and Atwood do not grant them complete innocence either. It is the distinction between that guilt and innocence that interests me here, the ambiguity of presence and agency in Nick and Nate.

The ambiguity of Nick’s position is established when Rachel recalls that his eyes are “seemingly only friendly now, but I remember the mockery in them from years ago” (62). Nick’s seeming friendliness is Laurence’s signal that his mockery continues, and Rachel’s failure to see that grounds her misapprehension of him, especially on the problem of acquiescence to control. Ironically, if much of Rachel’s problem with control is situated in patriarchy, patriarchy’s example of control permits her self-control, as when the prophetic Murray Lees says that her father “had the kind of life he wanted most”: Rachel realizes that if her father “had wanted otherwise, it would have been otherwise” (124). The realization encourages her to begin living the life *she* wants, and despite feeling that “Women shouldn’t phone men” (131), she phones Nick and begins to break the rules that have controlled her life. The realization also situates Nick as enforcing Rachel’s continuing need to break those rules, set primarily by her mother, an ironic agent for patriarchy. Laurence, however, requires that Nick be seen as passive in Rachel’s struggle—otherwise, a novel of female independence becomes, ironically, contingent on male consent.

Nick’s reticence encourages Rachel to fantasize about him, and her fantasy establishes the basis for his unwitting control of her. Desperate to escape tradition, she denies the truth of her observation that he “doesn’t reveal much. He only appears to talk openly. Underneath, everything is guarded” (85). The denial in the fantasy makes Nick the unwitting deliverer of the hard truth to Rachel about her self-deception. When Rachel succumbs to “dramatizing” him in order to make their affair “seem mysterious

or significant, instead of what it is, which is embarrassing” (86), he becomes “one of the hawkish and long-ago riders of the Steppes” (86). The image of rapacity reveals the innocence and passivity of Rachel’s romantic naivety as it also puts Nick in a difficult predicament: if he really did behave as one of those riders, Rachel would be terrified. If Nick eventually appears to suit the image, he also leaves Rachel with more than he takes. Her benefit raises the historically recognized irony that difficult men are characterized as sometimes beneficial for women.¹ Laurence asks, as did Emily Brontë with Heathcliff, and as does Rorty in describing his ironist, what can be done to prevent that ironic agency.

In *Life Before Man*, the impression of Nate is established by his confusion over the trait that is considered primary and unique to Man: love. He realizes that, with Elizabeth, “He doesn’t know what ‘love’ means between them any more, though they always say it” (14). His realization defines the novel’s metaphor about love: absence of meaning leads to obsolescence, and the obsolete becomes extinct. If Nate loses the definition of what defines his species, he—and the species—is destined for extinction. The metaphor represents the ethical vacuum of the inability to take a position on an issue, as shown in Nate’s finding it hard “to blame anyone for anything” (31). The metaphor makes us re-examine the anti-teleological relativism that defines popular culture’s ambiguous ethical purpose and direction, an ambiguity found in the evolution of Nate’s impression of Martha: “What he liked about her at first was her vagueness, her lack of focus, an absence of edges that gave her a nebulous quality,” but when she becomes demanding, her pain makes it seem that “she’s been dropped on the sidewalk from a great height and frozen there, all splayed angles and splinters” (34). Martha exists only as matter for Nate—she has no soul. Liking her for being vague, unfocused, and nebulous, he also lacks position and a soul.

Yet Atwood presents positionality itself as a problem. Believing that his work as a lawyer compromised his integrity, Nate decided to take “an ethical stance. Grow. Change. Realize your potential” (41). He stood on shaky ground, though: the pop human-potential movement, with its emphasis on the self, is as misapprehending of ethics as was the law distant from the social justice Nate thought possible in it. His pursuit of the answer only leads him to blame Elizabeth for his dilemma: “It’s partly her fault. Half of her wants a sensitive, impoverished artist, the other half demands a forceful, aggressive lawyer. It was the lawyer she married, then found too conven-

tional. What is he supposed to do?" (41). Atwood here identifies the difficulty men have in meeting perceived demands that they be one or the other. A partial answer, as another question—what prevents being both?—only leads to the further question of what societal pressure made both impossible and caused Elizabeth's dilemma of insisting that he be just one or the other so that *she* could better define *herself* by either.

Definition through a man is Rachel's problem as well. Her passivity is evident in her response to Nick's voice, a sense-related concern similar to the sensualist ethic Atwood critiques. Rachel likes the simple *sound* of Nick's voice and wants "just to sit here beside him, in this security and hear his voice, whatever it happens to be saying" (105). Paradoxically, Rachel's state of security is her greater danger: listening only to the sound and ignoring the sense, she is most open to deception. If Laurence here cautions women to be wary of the seductive deception of a man's voice, it also appears that a man is responsible for a woman's seduction when the real problem is her inattentiveness. Desiring security, she seeks protection with a man. In making him protector, though, she assigns him responsibility to determine the bounds of protection. The determination can be a sacrifice of liberty and even amount to repression. Rachel is unaware of that and will suffer for it, but Nick is also victimized in being made the mistaken repressive agent.

Nate lives with a dilemma similar to that which Rachel imposes on Nick. His mother looks down on him from her pedestal, having engendered insecurity because of the contradiction between her forbidding him to fight in self-defence when a boy and her willingness to "kill" over bigotry (83). Respecting her yet confused by her hypocrisy, he can only respond in fantasy with the hostility toward women that the dilemma generates in him: bathing while Elizabeth glares at him, he imagines diving for a raw sponge and "combat with a giant squid" whose tentacles enwrap him, and he has "Nothing to think about but getting free," which he does by "Plunging the knife right in between its eyes" (105). Yet, though hostile, he follows his mother's injunction and does not plunge the knife where he really wants to, and he still desires her presence in his lovers, as when Martha perceives Elizabeth's continued influence on Nate and berates him for it: "When are you going to get your own bellybutton back, Nate?" she scolds, sneering with a metaphor that recalls Elizabeth's marrying him as easily as putting on a shoe: "I bet she even ties your goddamned shoelaces for you" (233).

With Nate in this dilemma, Atwood can use him as a foil to qualify the

status of the women around him. Neutral—maybe “neutred” is better—as he is and as his mother believes he should be, Lesje finds him attractive yet ambiguous in his “making a gift of himself, handing himself over to her, mutely” (116). Yet her attraction to being able to “do something” (116) with him, just as he implicitly let Elizabeth form him, is frustrated by his continued value for his marriage. The frustration challenges Lesje’s own ambiguous ethics, which are pop-oriented like Nate’s and founded on the view of her women’s group that spouses are not “property” but “living, growing organisms” (127). “Organism” is particularly apt in describing the absence of any consideration of the soul. Without that consideration, ethics are impossible. Atwood problematizes the solipsistic sensualism that Lesje begins to perceive, the hypocrisy of the pseudo-ethic that justifies what it also condemns: “What it boiled down to was that man-stealing was out but personal growth was commendable” (127).

The beginning of Nate’s affair with Lesje also begins what appears to be the development of his new ethic. Its basis is his change from passive to active involvement, which Elizabeth identifies, and it parallels Rachel’s assumption then rejection of Nick as her protector. Nate once “wanted to be protected. He wanted a woman to be a door he could go through and shut behind him,” but now, “he wants to protect” (162). While Elizabeth’s understanding of Nate’s involvement with Lesje may not indicate how Nate is, and regardless of the identification as protector, Elizabeth finds herself, like Rachel toward Nick, in a compromised and threatened condition. The trick of the irony here is to recognize that Elizabeth and Rachel have put, or allowed themselves to be put, in that condition and that Nate and Nick appear blameworthy if not responsible when they were unwitting participants in the development of Elizabeth’s and Rachel’s reaction of fear. But as does Laurence in exposing Nick’s injury over his father’s absent love, Atwood questions this ambiguous role of protector by undercutting its supposed strength with an image of Nate’s weakness. Having realized that he can and will leave Elizabeth, he nonetheless feels acute helplessness over the impending separation from his children. His bewilderment leads to the fundamental questions he has to answer, just as his physical position suggests his need to return to grace, to recover his soul: “Yet he kneels; tears come to his eyes. He should have held on, he should have held on more tightly. He picks up one of Nancy’s blue rabbit slippers, stroking the fur. It’s his own eventual death he cradles. His lost, his kidnapped children, gone

from him, kept hostage. Who has done this? How has he allowed it to happen?" (166). The introduction of death to the image of desire for redemption is foreboding, despite Nate's realization of the questions he needs to ask about his state. Yet Nate's eventual realizations about himself, his developing ability to assert himself, especially against his mother, together with the provocative ending which may either destroy or redeem him, show the possibility for redemption, *if* the right questions are asked.

Traumatic separation from others, as the means of final discovery for Nick and Nate, is the means also for Laurence and Atwood to represent the severest consequence of misapprehension. Not having anticipated his own trauma over separation from Elizabeth, Nate is shocked to discover that "He can't connect any act he can think of with any consequence he can imagine," and that as a result he feels "Segmented" and "Dismembered" (244), a worse state than he was in while with Elizabeth. He suspects that the truth about himself is that he is a "patchwork, a tin man, his heart stuffed with sawdust" (246). The character he becomes by the allusion to the tinman and the lion in *The Wizard of Oz* is one in need of courage and a heart. With those needs, his desire to view Elizabeth as "morally neutral" (245) becomes the stand of the cowardly and the witless. Just as Laurence problematizes Rachel's traditionalism, Atwood through Elizabeth indicts moral neutrality with the evaluative irony that Hutcheon describes. Nate's reaction to Elizabeth asserts the need for the position that will raise the novel's characters from their moral stupor.

The same need for elevation in Nick is suggested when the possibility of pregnancy makes Rachel fantasize about how he would ask her to marry him. She constructs and rejects scenarios, then realizes the futility of her fantasies and is finally able to act on her knowledge of her self-deception. When she asks Nick to stay in Manawaka despite his desire to leave, she has "no pride" left, yet, paradoxically, she is also "calm . . . almost free"; she asks herself, "Have I finished with facades? Whatever happens, let it happen. I won't deny it" (142). The epiphany of her visit with Hector makes her see herself and her affair with Nick in a new way. But Nick, also the unwitting agent of revelation yet in a relationship of lover rather than father, is not seen as an emissary but as a deceiver who has been discovered. Nick has done nothing more than Rachel permits, yet Rachel in discovering her facades implicitly accuses him of responsibility for it. Just as Elizabeth's self-righteous contempt of Nate permits her a moral relativism, Rachel's self-deception continues but now with a hostility toward a scapegoat who permits her a false virtue. Laurence's focus

on Rachel's delusion makes it less evident that Nick has become a victim than that Rachel has been wronged, but Rachel has wronged herself as much, if not more.

Rejecting facades, Rachel is capable of a new assertiveness with Nick and is strengthened as she recognizes her weakness. The ambiguity of her new status is evident when she inwardly quotes John Donne to silence Nick: "*For God's sake hold your tongue and let me love*. But it's the man who is supposed to say that" (145). The assumption of male responsibility seems to repeat Rachel's passivity earlier in the phone call to Nick, but here Laurence ironically shows Rachel's change. In quoting Donne, Rachel feels that convention hampers the expression of her love. Her usurpation of the male role is a means to mock the convention to discredit it and then act without reference to it. Yet, at the same time, the statement is a plea for the ability, which Rachel is painfully aware she lacks, to talk enough that Nick would quote Donne to her. The tension between the two possibilities shows Rachel's uncertainty with her new vision of the world without her formerly reassuring facades. The impression it leaves of men, though, is that they are domineering and must be mocked into realizing their imperiousness—Nick gets his mockery turned back on him. Rachel looks the better for it, but only because Nick looks worse.

Mockery of his state finally makes Nate act as he needs to, as when he returns to the morally suspect world of his law practice, a world in which even his hero René Lévesque has succumbed to "compromise and hedging, like the rest of the country" (274). Yet Nate's disappointment turns into a tautological defence of compromise: "It's a world of unfreedom after all. Only a fool could have believed in anything else, and Lévesque is no fool. (Like Nate: not any more)" (274). Such a defence, if adhered to, justifies the mockery that Rachel feels necessary to jolt a Nick into awareness of his behaviour, and Atwood forwards the same idea when Nate confronts the moral fervor of his mother and her imposition on him of her vision of an ideal son. He scoffs at her enthusiasm for what she believes is his idealistic return to law: "'Mother, . . . anyone who thinks they can really help people, especially doing what I'm doing, is a horse's ass'" (286). But his triumphant assertion is erased by his mother's revelation that not only has he always been afraid of being a horse's ass, but also that she contemplated suicide after his father's death. Appalled that she shares with him a despair of life, he realizes that his mother is not the idol he had in turn set her up as, that

he can no longer depend on her. This is the point of total alienation for him. Like so many others in literature whose illusions have been shattered—Updike's *Rabbit*, Hesse's *Harry Haller*, Dostoevsky's *Raskolnikov*—he attempts to flee to the absence of the knowledge of mortality: running and leaping and soaring, “he aims again for it, that non-existent spot where he longs to be. Mid-air” (288).

Such flight is also evident in the last time that Rachel and Nick are together, a moment of inversion in his involvement with her growth to autonomy. As Nate does from Elizabeth and Martha, Nick withdraws in what appears to be an escape from Rachel, and the reason for his flight makes him seem even more an ironic emissary for her. In the scene, they have made love for what will be the last time. Rachel affectionately says that if she were ever to have a child, she would like it to be his. She feels immediately his withdrawal from her, and he replies “I’m not God. I can’t solve anything” (148). Apparently he believes she thinks he can put her life in order. Rachel has meant a compliment, and whether he desires to evade it or fails to perceive it, he is implicitly discredited as not only egocentric but also spiritually dead when he directs Rachel’s attention to the cemetery. Puzzled, Rachel asks, “Nick, why don’t you ever say what you mean?” (149). This anxiety-laden gap in signification is, at the same time, Rachel’s first challenge of another, the first example of her new independence of mind, whose strength makes Nick try to defend what he knows he cannot: “Don’t make a major production of it, eh? . . . I’ve said more than enough, about everything” (149). It is uncertain whether it is Nick or Rachel who understands the other better. Rachel has had difficulty speaking and interpreting herself and the words of others, but Nick evades her because he knows that his position is indefensible, just as Nate evades Elizabeth and Martha.

Existence for Nate after his annihilation and flight, however, is not quite that of the automaton he wants to become. He still works for political justice and “longs for a message” even while suspecting that the message is a “joke” (306). He will, at the end of the day, “lose himself among the apathetic, the fatalistic, the uncommitted, the cynical; among whom he would like to feel at home” (306). But his suspicion is unconfirmed; he does not feel at home. The sense that Atwood gives that the human spirit endures after the last illusion has been shattered—the illusion that makes Nate “sway at the lip of the abyss” (287)—makes Lesje’s pregnancy at the end, despite Nate’s desire not to have a child, not a push into the abyss but a step back from it.

That is one choice for the ending. The other is that his suspicion will be fulfilled and that he will feel at home with the alienated. Though we last see him running, which is the metaphor of control for him in the novel even while it suggests his desire to escape, a small but significant detail shows the fragility of his new state: when he stops, he will smoke a cigarette, “Perhaps he’ll throw half of it away” (313-14). Immediately after, he will meet Lesje, who will tell him she is pregnant. Will he continue running, or will he rejoice? Atwood leaves the choice to us, as something of an ethical test for ourselves. Given his love for children, yet his despair of the world, either is possible. If we choose flight, we succumb to despair. If it is joy, we revel in the new life.

Ambiguity determines the final view of Nick also. After Rachel learns that Nick is not married, she first concludes that his own “demons and webs” made him “draw away, knowing that what I wanted from him was too much,” but then she objects, “Was that it? Or was he merely becoming bored?” (189). Nick had been fighting the demon of his dead brother and his father’s attachment to that brother to the detriment of himself. Rachel’s conclusion implies isolation on two counts: over personal problems that arise, and the boredom that ensues. In both cases, the reference is to Nick: the problems that she perceives in him take precedence, and he is derided for not realizing that departure does not end boredom. Rachel can now dismiss him: “I don’t know whether he meant to lie to me or not. As for what was happening with him and to him this summer, I couldn’t say what it really was, nor whether it had anything to do with me or not” (190). The accumulation of negatives in the statement nullifies the modicum of sympathy in it. Laurence shows Rachel as hardened, with the resolve to finally leave Manawaka, even over the protests of her mother, less a happy choice than an enforced decision.

The ambiguity of its conclusion complicates *A Jest of God*. Rachel was headed for disaster in her life, which was suggested by her bizarre speaking in tongues and her undesired friendship with Calla. She seems to have come to her new strength as a consequence of her summer with Nick, to whom she was drawn from Calla, the absurd spiritualism, the clutch of her mother, and the static memory of her father. Nick, though, in Rachel’s view, developed into something other than what he led her to believe he was—or, more accurately, what she wanted him to be. Just as Atwood problematizes the last view of Nate, Laurence symbolizes Nick’s final effect on Rachel with her suspected pregnancy being a tumour. The autonomy Rachel achieves is

made ironic through the cancer metaphor for her hardened emotional state, but without a consideration of Nick's difficulty with Rachel, it is unclear whether or not her conviction of his deceit is justified.

The ironized view of Nick in *A Jest of God* and Nate in *Life Before Man* reveals the sensitivity of Laurence and Atwood to a representation of male presence founded on uncertainty and binarism, not just in relation to women but within men themselves. Both writers reject the simplistic ascription of blame for the complex irony that better represents the nuances of their characters' relationships. The representation is more than a valorization of the shaky relativism that Atwood critiques in her novel; it is the extension of her victim status to acknowledge the possibility that the perceived victimizer—as Laurence shows through the effect of Nick's father and brother on him—is himself a victim. Adherents to contemporary men's movements that are concerned, even obsessed, with their claimed victimization under feminization would do well to understand their perceived plight through the irony that Laurence and Atwood employ. The solace of the recognition of their victimhood would at the same time encourage them to see the legitimacy of women's anger against them.

II: Differences

Irony and identity criticism on *A Jest of God* and *Life Before Man* can be addressed partly through the issue of language. Diana Brydon says that Rachel's speaking in tongues is a "release of speech" and freedom from the restriction on speaking within patriarchy (189), though Brydon does not praise Nick for his role in freeing Rachel where she should: Calla is Laurence's representation of the isolation that awaits Rachel if she denies the need to speak not *within* patriarchy, but *to* it. Rachel speaks only to herself if her language is premised on speaking in tongues, and Laurence refuses that solipsism as she shows the need Rachel and Nick have for each other if they are to move beyond restriction. Diana M.A. Relke defines Calla as does Brydon, calling Calla's "gift of tongues . . . a metaphor for communication—not merely verbal communication, but emotional, sexual and spiritual communication as well" (35); again, though, as Calla can be understood by no one when speaking in tongues, she communicates with no one but herself, which is not the end Laurence wants for Rachel.

Frank Davey, discussing *Life Before Man*, claims that the characters' "insights into themselves are . . . restricted to conventional language" (85);

that restriction indicates the need for an ironized reading to determine the value of the binarism that Davey identifies in the novel: “*Life Before Man* thus makes exceedingly clear the fact that Atwood’s male versus female dichotomy of order versus disorder, solid versus liquid, stasis versus process, segmentation versus wholeness, is a metaphor, rather than a literal distinction between men and women. It is a feminist vision of nature rather than of politics” (90). Yet to restrict the metaphor to nature is to deny the identity politics of feminism. The ironist position permits the necessary metaphors of both politics and nature: each becomes a metaphor of the other as the characters grope toward understanding through the limitations of their language. Like Davey, Cathy N. Davidson and Arnold E. Davidson argue by trope as they describe a limitation like the one Davey sees: “dead dinosaurs . . . are Atwood’s ambivalent icon of the life before man and her multivalent symbol for the life of man” (221). Davey’s metaphor and the Davidsons’ symbol go further with the addition of the embracing trope of irony, which extends their arguments to the ethical vacuum that equates both the male and female characters of the novel.

Nick of *A Jest of God* has received extensive consideration, both positive and negative. The negative treatment centres on the perception of him as a worthless seducer. Elizabeth Waterston asserts that “Like the other male figure who dominated Rachel’s life, Niall (‘nihil’) Cameron, Nick offers nothing” (88), but she unfortunately lets slide the potential for the ironic reading that shows what Nick offers after she earlier states that “Nick is Rachel’s double” (83). Kenneth James Hughes is even more severe: “Nick coldly uses Rachel . . . for his own selfish gratification, and in the process he misleads her about his marital status” (110); Nick is a “failure as an individual,” having Buberian “I-it relationships of power” rather than “I-thou relationships” of intimacy (119), which repeats Davey’s observation on the novel’s nature-politics division. The negative impression has led to Harriet Blodgett’s disputable claim that Nick “pretends to be married” (11); Blodgett, as does Hughes, reads too much into the ambiguity-laden photograph that Nick shows Rachel, showing more their own desire that the photograph be Nick’s son—it could also be Nick as boy, playing on his lost boyhood (see Stovel 38), even his rival brother; the point is, the photograph has no certainty: it is Laurence’s signatory gap in the novel to play on the gap between Rachel and Nick—what *is*, she asks, the true identity of these people?

The discussions about Nick reveal Laurence’s success in conveying the

irony of his role, even if the perception of that irony is seldom announced. Yet both Waterston and Hughes see some value in Nick. Waterston sees him as something of an example to women who, “emphasizing their equality with men in everything but opportunity, came to say, like Nick, ‘People used to group us [Nick and his brother] together . . . I wanted to be completely on my own’” (89); Hughes admits to the presence, if limited, of a didactic role: Nick, “not without some distress, gives [Rachel] a sexual education” (118). Clara Thomas is closer to the ironic reading that objects to Nick as solely a “casual seducer,” arguing that is it Rachel’s mediated vision of him that prompts the description (90), and Patricia Morley disputes Hughes’ impression that Nick uses Rachel as a “commodity” and that Rachel’s tumour represents a colonial past that *A Jest of God* argues against (97), though Morley does not consider the irony the tumor symbolizes. C.M. McLay also discusses how Rachel’s view of Nick, “uncorrected by an omniscient narrator,” though “closer to reality,” does distort him (188), a distortion corrected with the ironic reading. Nora Stovel has directly noted the irony, if briefly, with the facts about Nick emerging to “form an ironic counterpoint to Rachel’s misinterpretations” (37).

Nick’s role as Rachel’s teacher is regularly alluded to. Margaret Ossachoff believes “Nick sets her straight” about the colonialist mentality (232), though here again the irony of Rachel as willing participant in this colonialization, through her self-doubt, is missed. Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos concludes that Rachel and her sister Stacey make “internal changes through connections with dynamic animus figures that the women internalize although the men themselves are ephemeral” (50); Waterston also notes the dynamism, claiming that “Nick is Rachel’s double” (83). Clara Thomas believes that Nick “understands Rachel better than she understands him” and that Rachel is unaware of “the depth of his meaning” when he says “‘I’m not God, I can’t solve anything’” (85). Totally opposed to the casual seducer role for Nick is C.M. McLay’s assertion that Rachel’s demand for a child “ultimately destroys her relationship with Nick”; the child, Nick realizes, is for “her own fulfillment” (180), which is the ironic response to the view of Nick as colonizer—he now becomes the colonized and exploited.

As with Nick, criticism of Nate varies. Barbara Hill Rigney sympathizes with but implicitly dismisses him: if he is victimized as a “Segmented man,” he creates his victimhood, as when his “sexual fantasies about Lesje, as about all women, are firmly grounded in arrested adolescence” (87, 86). Just

the same, Elizabeth's viciousness and Lesje's pop-psych romance are as retrograde and in need of ironic reading to reveal Atwood's concern for the problem of being kept adolescent rather than choosing to be. Cathy N. and Arnold E. Davidson also see Nate as living "mostly in his fantasies" (213), with the result that "Nate remains the same Nate" at the end (220); their view is limited, not taking into account Nate's overall ethical change, which the use of René Lévesque suggests and which Atwood posits with the ethical test at the novel's close as Nate runs toward Lesje and the knowledge of new life that could either condemn or redeem both him and us. The Davidsons in comparing the men in *Life Before Man* employ a binarism that hints at the irony they nonetheless do not discover: "Nate is Chris' emotional and physical opposite" (211); to the extent that Chris' brutality is developed, Elizabeth's attraction to it affirms her adolescent arrest, and Nate's difference from it reveals him to be, ironically, far beyond that plead-shout-and-punish romance.

The ending of *Life Before Man* has been difficult for critics, ranging from Kolodny's belief that Lesje "makes a commitment to the future by throwing away her contraceptive pills" (96) to Barbara Hill Rigney's disagreement with the tendency to view Lesje's pregnancy as life-affirming (99); Gayle Greene disagrees with the usual "hopeless" view: "I see the characters as changing and countering the processes of repetition" (81), which is the closest any previous reading has come to recognizing the irony at work in the novel.

Frank Davey's argument that, because the characters' "insights into themselves are . . . restricted to conventional language," *Life Before Man* "has no climactic moment" (85), could have defined an alternative language through irony. The definition would have permitted identification of any number of passages as the climactic moment—Nate's realization of the loss of his children, or his mother's revelation about suicide, for example.

While not opposed to these criticisms, others do not consider Nate exclusively as a man of limited worth or appeal. Sherrill E. Grace believes that Atwood created "a sympathetic picture of Nate" (136), and Atwood herself, suggesting the irony fundamental to the novel, said that "Peter [in *The Edible Woman*] is not terribly likable; Nate, in *Life Before Man*, is very likable" ("Interview" 179). The ambiguous readings of both Nate and Nick beg for some further understanding of their value to the novels. The ironic reading both accounts for the ambiguity and establishes their value.

NOTE

- 1 Work on the historical presentation of this irony in women's fiction includes Lydia Burton and David Morley, "A Sense of Grievance: Attitudes Toward Men in Contemporary Fiction," *The Canadian Forum* LV.654 (Sept 1975): 57-60; Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977); Carolyn Zonailo, "Male Stereotypes in *The Diviners* and *The Edible Woman*," *Room of One's Own: A Feminist Journal of Literature and Criticism* 3.1 (1977): 70-72; Janet Todd, ed., *Men by Women (Women & Literature* Vol.2, new series, New York: Holmes and Meier, 1981); Jane Miller, *Women Writing About Men* (New York: Pantheon, 1986); Helen M. Buss, "Margaret Laurence's Dark Lovers," *Atlantis: A Women's Studies Journal* 11.2 (1986): 97-107.

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