

Common concerns in Marian Engel's children's stories and her adult fiction

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Although best known as a writer of adult fiction, and perhaps remembered more for her shocking novel *Bear* than for any of her other six novels, Marian Engel also published during her relatively short writing career two children's stories: *Adventure at Moon Bay Towers* (1974)¹ and *My name is not Odessa Yarker* (1977).² What is particularly interesting about these two children's works is that, genre notwithstanding, they are very much a part of the Engel oeuvre because they reflect in miniature recurring concerns and themes found in her more "adult" and, therefore, often more shockingly explicit novels. After examining these two stories in the light of her novels, what becomes clear is that Engel had certain thematic preoccupations throughout her writing life and these manifest themselves in the entire canon. The relationship between *Odessa Yarker* and her other works is extremely close; that between *Moon Bay Towers* and those same works less close, but, nevertheless, still evident.

Adventure at Moon Bay Towers is Marian Engel's apprentice piece in the genre of children's literature and this fact alone perhaps explains why the work is not particularly memorable. Two young siblings, Geraldine and Rufus, bored by city life despite lessons in "French, skating, music and dancing" quite improbably leave their apartment one evening, board a train and go in search of adventure. They soon find themselves working as caretakers in a large rural house inhabited by a crocodile called Susan. The adventures they experience involve not only Susan, but also a skunk, porcupine, beaver, and racoon. Initially they enjoy the presence of these relatively tame rural critters, but very quickly they discover that the animals bring them as much grief as delight. The story ends with the owner of the house returning to it in time to bail them out of their difficulties. He invites them to come back soon and they agree to do so, somewhat uncertainly. Presumably by the end of the story the children have learned that the adventure they initially sought is perhaps best lived in the imagination rather than in fact.

All sorts of things are wrong with this story. First of all the two children are never clearly individualized or distinguished one from the other. Secondly, they seem to exist in a sociocultural vacuum: we learn nothing of their urban background, see or hear nothing of either of their parents. Thirdly, the adventures they experience in the country are boring to the reader; the structure of the rural events is predictable: initially the animals are fun, but later they

are troublesome and cause the children problems. Fourthly, the story ends with too many unanswered questions: as the story closes, the children are rowing away from the island on which their adventures occurred. Presumably they are returning to their parents' apartment, but who really knows? Will their parents have been worried about their absence? Probably, but Engel abandons the story and the children, and leaves them as she introduced them without a familial context. The story doesn't so much end as stop. And finally, the story is not memorably written: the style lacks punch and reflects the prosaic qualities of the thin plot. In short, this work is just one more children's animal story, and, as such, is easily forgotten.

Although it is easy to dismiss this children's story as mediocre, it is not so easy to ignore certain similarities between it and Engel's adult novels. Two elements in particular require comment. The first is Engel's attitude towards urban life, especially Canadian urban life. In *Moon Bay Towers* the two children, Geraldine and Rufus, long for adventure outside of an urban context. They are city apartment dwellers and presumably their youthful spirits are stifled in this environment. The narrator makes clear that they are not lacking in middle-class urban activities — they take lessons in French, skating, music and dancing — but these well-structured activities are not true "adventures." The city's "high buildings" and "parks with beautiful fountains" do nothing for them; their many toys, "including a large doll's house and a miniature steam engine" do not equal adventure or compensate for its lack.

Boredom and/or anxiety within an urban setting is very much a part of four of Marian Engel's adult novels. In her first work, *No clouds of glory* (1968),³ Engel's female protagonist, Sarah Porlock, is a hopeless romantic caught in the cloying mediocrity of Toronto life and values. She comes to learn, not without pain, that it is extremely difficult to actualize one's romantic ideals in middle-class Toronto. Her present life, as a consequence, lacks adventure. Minn Burge in Engel's second novel, *The Honeyman festival* (1970),⁴ is also an entrapped woman caught in the dull round of Toronto middle-class life. The guests who invade her house on the evening of the Honeyman film festival are of one boring type, a type that would probably engage in French, music, skating and dancing lessons or would force their children to do so. In *Bear* (1977),⁵ before Lou escapes to the island where she experiences a psychic renewal in the presence of the bear, she is both physically and emotionally trapped in Toronto, working as a bibliographer in the basement of the Historical Institute. In *Lunatic Villas* (1981),⁶ the pain of Toronto life is again evident throughout the work, but is most dramatically expressed in the scene where the blood-stained snow outside of a high-rise apartment building attests to a recent successful suicide.

Without pausing to comment in any detail on the obvious similarity between the rural settings in *Moon Bay Towers* and *Bear* and the importance of animals in each work, particularly Susan the house crocodile in *Towers* and the house

bear in *Bear*, one might see the final authorial statement in the children's story and the novels as the second main similarity between them. All of Engel's novels seem to end where they began in a circular return to and acceptance of what was once either literally or metaphorically abandoned. Without exception, what one notices in the novels is the protagonist's final acceptance of her lot and a casting off of romantic visions, ideals, daydreams, or thoughts of escape from the present unseemliness of life. Often the urban world and all the middle-class values symbolized by it which are rejected throughout the novel are finally recognized as part of the human lot. What is important is not where one lives, but how; not the physical locale but the vigorous psychic life. So, for example, Sarah Porlock comes finally to accept the difficulties of living a life of quality in Toronto; her resolve is to resist the temptation to escape to Paris (the romantic locale of earlier happier events) and to tough it out in Toronto. For her, as for Minn Burge in *The Honeyman festival*, living in the difficult present rather than dreaming of the past is painful but necessary for psychic survival. In *Bear*, Lou, after escaping Toronto and experiencing a renewed sense of self and importance in the country in the company of the bear, returns to Toronto to live a new life in an old context. In *Lunatic Villas*, Harriet wins our admiration in part because, for all her trials, she is prepared to remain in her lunatic villa townhouse which is part of a larger lunatic villa called Toronto. It would, of course, be absurd to try and push *Moon Bay Towers* in the heavily philosophical direction in which the novels travel, but the fact that the two children return to their city apartment at the end of the story and recognize that their adventure was not only delightful but dangerous and threatening to their well-being (as Engel's grown-up protagonists finally recognize the dangers of their actual or psychological journeys) does suggest an acceptance of a state of being that was earlier rejected, a coming to terms with the not-so-pleasant here and now rather than an escape from it.

Marian Engel's second children's story, *My name is not Odessa Yarker*, is very much closer to Engelian themes and visions found in the adult novels. Furthermore, in itself, it is a work far superior to *Moon Bay Towers*. Once again, this story involves the exploits of Geraldine and Rufus, but here they are given a family name, Shingle, and, more importantly, a real family made up of a lawyer father and a cello-playing mother. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the girl, Geraldine, is to be the central character and the centre of attention; in fact, she becomes a young version of the typical Engelian female protagonist. In this story, unlike *Towers*, Geraldine and Rufus are different characters with different voices and concerns: Geraldine is a beleaguered but gutsy Engel female and Rufus is a boyish version of her grown-up male figures who, consciously or not, along with middle-class society in general, help to create the psychic crisis which the female must resolve.

The simple plot of *Odessa Yarker* revolves around the effects on Geraldine of a trick played by her brother. One boring Sunday afternoon, Rufus, in.

Geraldine's presence, contemplates changing his name. The following day at school, he makes an announcement over the public address system to the effect that he is changing his name from Rufus to José, and that, henceforth, his sister Geraldine is to be called Odessa Yarker. The effects of this announcement on Geraldine are profound: immediately, everyone, including her best friend Molly, and even her grandmother, begins to refer to her by her new name; the story involves the psychic dislocation she experiences as a result of this profound assault on her identity. Engel stresses how the loss of a name and the identity associated with it can be seen as a kind of death. Contemplating her fate, Geraldine muses in the following terms:

She wondered if she should steal Rufus's cap gun and shoot it every time they called her Odessa; if it would pay to kick and bite and scream; if she should go home and take to her bed in a physical decline like a girl in a hundred-year-old storybook. She thought of getting whiter and paler and more distinguished looking, all waxen like a little doll, of withering and dying. They'd be crying at the funeral, she thought.

What this small story presents is the conflict that is central to all of Marian Engel's novels, namely the crisis that arises in her female protagonists who strive either to maintain or locate their identities in a hostile or uncaring world. Like Geraldine, who, after her name change to Odessa Yarker, finds herself totally without allies in her attempt to reassert the importance of her true name, Marian Engel's heroines are very much alone in their struggles to survive and assert their own personalities. Often forced to fight against middle-class values and mindless social conventions, they are also, without exception, either unmarried, divorced, or raising their children virtually on their own. The structure of all of the novels involves these women coming to terms with both who they are and the depressing context in which they must survive. On one level, the plot-line of *My name is not Odessa Yarker* is clearly absurd and could only "make sense" to a child. In real life people do not have new names imposed on them nor do their friends refuse to call them by their real names. On another level, however, the Odessa Yarker plot is a literal translation of the major psychological trauma that occurs in Engel's adult novels. Odessa Yarker's literal loss of name is reflected in the psychological losses of female identity found in all the adult works. Odessa Yarker's story, therefore, is the central idea — the mythos — from which Marian Engel has created her adult fiction.

An extension and intensification of this notion of identity loss is found in both *Odessa Yarker* and the novels. Names as denominators of individuals and solidifiers of one's sense of who one really is are important concepts in the children's story and the novels. Although both Rufus and Geraldine experience name changes, there is a profound difference in their attitudes towards the change and the nature of the change itself. Not liking his name, Rufus is happy to change his to José; Geraldine's name change is imposed on her. But more importantly, Rufus changes only his first name; both of Geraldine's names are

changed without her agreement. The fact that Rufus Shingle becomes José Shingle and Geraldine Shingle becomes Odessa Yarker suggests that Geraldine's change is far more radical. This profound change of both names accentuates her foreignness from what was once important to her, and, of course, to all of us, namely family. To add further to her sense of dislocation, Geraldine learns of the nature of the new names she is given. She discovers that Odessa Yarker is not an actual human name or a person's name; rather it is the name of a road on the way to Kingston, Ontario. Presumably what this fact tells her is that she has been transformed not from one person into another, but from one person into a thing, clearly a degrading metamorphosis and an assault to her identity as a sentient being. She also comes to learn that Odessa is the name of a city in Russia; this fact, no doubt, would strengthen her sense of sudden alienation from her friends and family.

Actual names and name changes are also central symbols of identity change or loss in some of Engel's adult novels. In *No clouds of glory* Sarah Porlock's rootlessness and her concern about who she is and what her life means is reflected in the name change she contemplates for herself. As the novel opens, her two former lovers are now part of her past and her father has just died. For her, Sarah Bastard seems a more appropriate name than Sarah Porlock. Lou's infirm grip on her identity in *Bear* is symbolized by Engel's not giving her a family name at all. But the work in which names and name changes seem to play the largest role is Engel's penultimate novel, *The glassy sea* (1978).⁷ In this work, the protagonist, Marguerite Weber, lives through four different lives on her journey to wholeness. Initially she recounts her childhood for us where she lives under the name Marguerite or Rita Weber. When she casts off her oppressive Methodist past to become an Anglican Eglantine nun, she takes the name Sister Mary Pelagia. After some time as a nun, she leaves the convent to marry; her new husband christens her Peggy; and finally when this life fails (her hydrocephalic child dies and she and her husband divorce), she agrees, after considerable doubt and confusion, to re-enter the Eglantine Order of nuns once more. But this time the Order has changed its direction; rather than looking inward and avoiding the world, it now becomes a refuge or a haven for the world's rejected and down-trodden females. The reborn Sister Mary Pelagia accepts the challenge of running this reborn Order and finds her sense of identity, we are led to believe, in dedicating herself to others. Quite clearly in Marian Engel's fiction, names serve as important guarantees of uniqueness, existence and identity. To have a name is to have the beginnings of a real life. To have that name changed is either a symbol of the beginnings of a new life or a serious threat to psychic survival which signals the onset of psychological dislocation.

The final similarity between *Odessa Yarker* and the novels involves the character or personality of the protagonists. As I mentioned earlier, one of the weaknesses of *Adventure at Moon Bay Towers* was that the Geraldine and

Rufus of that story were scarcely distinguishable: they spoke, sounded and acted as one. Engel makes no such mistake with the Geraldine and Rufus of *Odessa Yarker*. Geraldine is an unmistakable Engelian female protagonist; she is strong, defiant, isolated and unrelenting in her desire to assert herself against the forces who chose to re-name her. A small indication of her later strength is evident early in the story. Rufus thinks she is “bossy,” and Geraldine refuses to share with him any of her seven hundred and fifty-two jellybeans that she “had won in the school guessing contest.” When Rufus threatens to invade her cache of jellybeans, Engel describes Geraldine as sharpening her nails. Clearly, from an early stage, the story suggests that this little girl is not going to let go of her name without a fight. The central scene where she exhibits her full strength and lets the world know who she really is has all the vigour and gutsiness of similar scenes in the novels. After having endured being called Odessa Yarker for as long as she can, she gets angry. Engel tells us that

She had had enough. She was not going to submit to being misused and mislabelled. If Odessa had been chasing her for two days, she could just turn around and chase Odessa.

Noticing a statue of a king in Queen’s Park, Geraldine

stood up on the king’s saddle. She used as footgrips his decorations and medals and his offensive buttons. She climbed up onto his shoulders. Then, balancing herself by grabbing his head, she stood fully upright with her legs astride and yelled and yelled at the world: MY NAME IS NOT ODESSA YARKER.

This powerful exertion of human will has dramatic effects:

Again and again she hollered her message. It made her feel good. Her chest filled up with it and the sound zoomed past the Parliament Buildings and through the University, past the hospitals and the Hydro Building, out beyond the library, beyond the museums and the greenhouses, the Conservatory and the concert hall, the grand shops and the grander hotels. Her voice hammered the entire city. People stared. Squirrels stopped chattering. Birds stopped singing. All the traffic in the circle stopped. The treetops in their military formations turned their heads. The weaker leaves lost hold of the trees. Two old men fell off park benches, and four members of the Provincial Parliament poked their heads out of a window of the dusty pink building across the road.

Of course, this powerful assertion of who she is not works. And it works, presumably, because Geraldine has shown a power and strength, a concern for her identity and a willingness to enforce her own will against the society that has oppressed her. Odessa Yarker once again has become herself, Geraldine Shingle.

This dramatic assertion of the will to survive and to fight against various types of personal or societal oppression is most clearly evident in Engel’s second novel, *The Honeyman festival*. At the end of this work, Minn Burge, who has struggled with life’s meaning for herself during the course of the shallow

Honeyman film festival party held in her house, comes to the aid of one of life's walking wounded, Richard, the ineffectual boy friend of her boarder Marvella. When a policeman and the supposed father of Richard come to Minn's door to take Richard away, Minn, in an advanced stage of pregnancy, hurls herself at them, kicking, biting and scratching. Unprepared to sacrifice Richard to mindless authority and aware of the struggles that she herself has endured, she shows her defiance in this act of physical violence, thereby becoming a grown-up version of Geraldine Shingle.

The physically violent sexual relationship in *Bear* also makes Lou, initially a frightened weaking holed up in the basement of the Historical Institute, a typical Engel woman. Lou comes to a greater awareness of who she is in a particularly bizarre and unconventional way, but her strong resolution to confront the bear, to enjoy it, to revel with it is typical of her soul mates' strength of character in other Engel novels.

Harriet, the protagonist of *Lunatic Villas* also demonstrates a great deal of strength throughout the novel which is symbolized at the end by a burst of physical energy. Although she herself does not participate in the cross-Canada bicycle race, her boarder Mrs. Saxe and her son Mickle do. The race becomes a symbol for the hardships of life itself, hardships which Harriet, throughout the novel, has experienced, confronted and, in a sense, defeated merely by confronting them. While watching the bicycle race on television she draws the analogy between it and life:

Life is long and flat like the prairies, Harriet thinks, and your knees become extensions of bicycles and you're a machine by the time you get across. (p. 235)

Peddaling a bicycle through life, yelling, scratching, biting, loving are all signs that Engel's protagonists are vigorous, alive and defiant. And to be alive in an Engel novel means to fight either against society or against your own will to capitulate in the face of apparently insurmountable difficulties.

Two other novels, although less physically assertive than the ones mentioned above, do, nevertheless, emphasize the importance of fighting, questioning and making sense of one's world. In *No clouds of glory*, we witness a struggle, albeit an internal one, in Sarah Pollock's mind. Sarah could easily turn away from her oppressive present and escape to the earlier glories or Europe and romantic Paris. The fact that at the end of the novel she rejects this easy way out of dealing with present unhappiness and sorrow, and deliberately chooses to remain in unromantic Toronto, suggests that she has developed an inner toughness which allows her to see that living in the present, however unpleasant, is more real than wallowing in the dreams of the unrecoverable past.

The same is true of Marguerite Weber in *The glassy sea*. Marguerite's various lives have all been failures; she has succeeded neither as a child, a nun, a wife, a mother. As the novel opens we see her in splendid isolation withdrawn from life, living peacefully beside a glassy sea. To live in isolation is to live without

pain, but is living without pain really life, given the nature of the world? Marguerite finally decides to return to life in a very vigorous manner: she agrees to head a reborn Order of nuns whose main task will be to assist rejected, despised and failed women. Marguerite, of course, is the ideal candidate for this job because she has experienced rejection, hatred, and failure throughout her various incarnations.

The need to be someone, to assert oneself, to live and involve oneself in the present moment rather than escape to a happier past or to the world of daydreams is a central concern throughout the Marian Engel canon, children's stories notwithstanding. If my sense of Engel's work is correct, her fictional vision of endurance in the face of life's wretchedness must have served as a source of tremendous consolation for her during the last few years of her life when that life began to imitate her art and she knew that she was dying. For from all accounts, it would appear that she, like her Geraldine, Minn, Lou, Sarah, and Harriet, came to experience and to accept "the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to." And she, like her protagonists as well, will survive: they as vivid products of her fertile imagination, she as their creator and, finally, their real life counterpart.⁸

NOTES

- ¹ *Adventure at Moon Bay Towers*, illustrated by Patricia Cupples (Toronto and Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin, 1974), unpaginated. See review in *CCL*, 1, pp. 66-7, by Sylvia du Vernet.
- ² *My name is not Odessa Yarker*, illustrated by Laszlo Gal (Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1977), unpaginated. See review in *CCL*, 21, pp. 80-82 by Phil Lanthier.
- ³ *No clouds of glory* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968).
- ⁴ *The Honeyman festival* (Toronto: Anansi, 1970).
- ⁵ *Bear* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart-Bantam, 1977).
- ⁶ *Lunatic Villas* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978).
- ⁷ *The glassy sea* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978). 8Appreciation of Marian Engel's life and work appears in articles by Alice Mumro, Timothy Findley, George Woodcock and others, in *Room of one's own*, vol. 9, no. 2, June, 1984.

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