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Abortion in Canadian Literature: Comparisons with American Literature and Canada's Unique Contributions

Jeff Koloze

ABSTRACT: After reviewing the scholarship on abortion in twentieth-century Canadian fiction written in English, the essay discusses various abortion scenes in major Canadian works by comparing and contrasting them with major works from the United States. The essay then discusses post-abortion syndrome and illustrates passages in Canadian fiction on abortion where numerous characters display features of that syndrome.

LOCATING CANADIAN NOVELS concerned with abortion often approximates an archaeological dig since compilations of literary criticism frequently obscure, minimize, or lack references to abortion. Margaret Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*¹ has much to say about babies being an inappropriate solution for a plot's denouement, calling this technique the "Baby Ex Machina,"²

¹ Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto ON: McClelland & Stewart, 1972).

² Atwood, *Survival*, p. 247. The "Baby Ex Machina" denouement is well-established in Canadian fiction. Frederick Philip Grove's 1925 *Settlers of the Marsh* (Toronto ON: Penguin Canada, 2006) ends with two instances of children bringing closure to an otherwise disastrous plot: Bobby, a young man befriended by Niels, the main character, and encouraged to do well, has five children; Ellen, the love of Niels's life, realizes at novel's end that she needs to be a mother (pp. 215, 231-32). The "baby ex machina" is even used by Atwood herself in *The Edible Woman* (New York NY: Anchor Books, 1969), where the pregnant Ainsley rejects the idea of abortion as a solution to her pregnancy and runs off to marry another man. Alice Munro's vivacious narrator in *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You: Thirteen Stories* (New York NY: New American Library, 1974), originally bold enough to say that

but the closest she comes to noting the abortive tendency in many female characters is to use the phrase “life-denying” in answer to her speculation regarding

why most of the strong and vividly-portrayed female characters in Canadian literature are old women. If you trusted Canadian fiction you would have to believe that most of the women in the country with any real presence at all are over fifty, and a tough, sterile, suppressed and granite-jawed lot they are. They live their lives with intensity, but through gritted teeth, and they are often seen as malevolent, sinister or life-denying, either by themselves or by other characters in their books.³

Joseph Jones and Johanna Jones refer to abortion once in their *Canadian Fiction*,⁴ and that only as a quotation of other criticism by Roberta Rubinstein of Atwood’s *Surfacing*,⁵ where the critic considers that the number nine, which occurs as a motif in the novel, “suggests the human gestation period that [the narrator] never completed, either literally with

she “meant to have lovers and use birth control and never have any children,” immediately corrects herself, saying “actually I wanted to make an enviable marriage, both safe and passionate, and I had pictured the nightgown I would wear when my lover-husband came to visit me for the first time in the maternity ward” (p. 202). Cindi, whose abortion causes the rupture in her marriage with Ivan in Richards’s *Evening Snow Will Bring Such Peace* is pregnant at the novel’s end by her new lover; David Adams Richards, *Evening Snow Will Bring Such Peace* (Toronto ON: McClelland & Stewart, 1990). In a further variation of this deus ex machina, the main character in Fred Bodsworth’s *The Sparrow’s Fall* (New York NY: New American Library, 1967) is a hunter in the great Canadian north who fears that his wife and newborn child would die if he does not find food quickly. Returning to them after a prolonged hunt, his wife shares the joyous news that the child is still alive (p. 176).

³ Atwood, *Survival*, p. 237.

⁴ Joseph Jones and Johanna Jones, *Canadian Fiction* (Boston MA: Twayne, 1981).

⁵ Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (New York NY: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1972).

her own child, or psychologically with her self.”⁶ By the time of the second edition of John Moss’s *A Reader’s Guide to the Canadian Novel*,⁷ abortion could be mentioned openly, as in his discussion of Atwood’s *Surfacing*, where the narrator “is haunted by” many events in her life, including “the child she aborted.”⁸ While Dallas Harrison’s 1995 essay on Sandra Birdsell in *Canadian Writers and their Work* has much to say about the author’s “symbolism,” which is “clear,” and notes that although “this story...comes close to meeting a feminist agenda,” abortion is not explicitly discussed.⁹ Finally, Karen S. McPherson has confirmed that “there is nothing on abortion” in her 2007 monograph, *Archaeologies of an Uncertain Future: Recent Generations of Canadian Women Writing*.¹⁰

Perhaps the absence of critical discussion about abortion in Canadian literature can be attributed to greater attention to other themes that have occupied writers since the foundation of the country; one hopes that the absence of critical commentary on abortion is not due to squeamishness or lack of interest. Perhaps the absence is a symptom of a more serious literary illness: evidence of a national literature that still has not yet “arrived.” Critics have suggested that such an inherent inferiority complex was in control since late in the nineteenth century and has continued until the first third of the twentieth. Research on the

⁶ Jones and Jones, p. 123.

⁷ John Moss, *A Reader’s Guide to the Canadian Novel*, 2nd ed. (Toronto ON: McClelland and Stewart, 1987).

⁸ Moss, p. 3. A 1998 reprint of the novel boldly asks the following question in a section of “Questions for Contemplation or Book Group Discussion”: “What clues in the novel suggest that the narrator is struggling to suppress memories of an abortion?” (Atwood, *Surfacing*, p. 204).

⁹ Dallas Harrison, “Sandra Birdsell” in *Canadian Writers and Their Work*, edited by Robert Lecker, Jack David, and Ellen Quigley (Toronto ON: ECW, 1995).

¹⁰ Karen S. McPherson, *Archaeologies of an Uncertain Future: Recent Generations of Canadian Women Writing* (Montreal & London: McGill-Queen’s Univ. Press, 2007); “Re: Information needed on ‘Archaeologies of an Uncertain Future’,” email to the author (15 April 2009).

production of Canadian literature by Gordon Roper shows that “up to 1880, some 150 authors had published little more than 250 volumes.” But the number of Canadian authors nearly tripled from that time until 1920, and their published works increased by over 500% to 1,400 volumes.¹¹ Despite the increased Canadian literary output in the rest of the twentieth century, Jones and Jones conclude their survey of Canadian literature in a section emphatically titled “Searching for *the* Canadian Novel” with borrowed poetic license that defines Canadian literature:

The poet John Robert Colombo had added (in 1967) his...“Recipe for a Canadian Novel,” specifying one Indian, one Mountie, one Eskimo, one Doukhorbor, to which should be added “one smalltown whore,” “two thousand miles of wheat” complete with farmer “impotent and bent” and his fair-haired daughter, “then a Laurentian mountain and a Montréal Jew.” Other ingredients include “a young boy with a dying pet,” “a mortgage unmet,” “exotic and tangy place names” (Toronto, Saskatoon, Hudson Bay). There is further mention of maple syrup, maple leaves, “one Confederation poet complete with verse,” all of which is to be garnished with a sauce of “paragraphs of bad prose that never seem to stop.” When simmered (but not brought to a boil) and baked, this concoction “serves twenty million all told—when cold.”¹²

¹¹ See Jones and Jones, p. 35.

¹² Jones and Jones, pp. 140-01. The 1960s may have been the decade for introspection about Canadian literature. Graeme Gibson alludes to the problems of Canadian literature in his *Five Legs* (Toronto ON: House of Anansi Press, 1969). Contained within a narrative style that borders on extreme abbreviation of dialogue if not psychobabble, characters in the novel discuss the problems of writing in this exchange:

“You’re doing some writing?” Sudden pain and glaring, I ... Nodding, and. It’s crap, all crap, he... “How’s it going?” ... “Difficult, yes.” Rocking he bends, he smiles with laughter in the room. “Particularly in Canada it seems,” what? ... “It’s difficult alright... The problems of a real Canadian literature.” ... “Goddamn Puritan mentality doesn’t simply you know, inhibit the development of naturalism or anything no! No, sir.” ... “It fears, that’s the thing, it demeans the very role of art itself!” (Gibson, pp. 236-37).

Despite the absence of critical commentary explicitly identifying the topic, numerous Canadian novels contain characters who have experienced abortion, and, like their American counterparts, the historical progression of these novels shows that abortion was not a topic of late twentieth-century concern. By the publication of Frederick Philip Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh*, characters freely discuss abortion; one woman in the novel discloses at least three self-abortions and a possible fourth in the span of four pages.¹³ By the 1960s, abortion became a frequent topic in Canadian literature, playing a significant role in character development in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, Graeme Gibson's *Five Legs*, Atwood's *Surfacing*, Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*,¹⁴ Audrey Thomas's *Blown Figures*,¹⁵ David Helwig's *The Glass Knight*,¹⁶ and David Adams Richards's *Evening Snow Will Bring Such Peace*). Abortion plays a less significant role in several other works, including Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*,¹⁷ and Sandra Birdsell's *Ladies of the House*¹⁸ among others.¹⁹

¹³ Grove, pp. 110-13. Grant Allen, could precede Grove's entrance into the abortion discussion. Although he speaks of motherhood as fulfillment for women and apotheosizes the unborn child in his 1985 novel *The Woman Who Did* (Toronto ON: Broadview, 2004) pp. 89, 106-07, his only claim to being Canadian is that he was born in Canada. Nicholas Ruddick, editor of a newly-released version of his novel, asserts that, although he "never hid his Canadian roots," Allen never lived in Canada beyond age fourteen (p. 14). Besides this historical fact, the novel functions as didactic fiction arguing for sexual license and illegitimacy more than as an argument regarding abortion or, as it was often called in the nineteenth century, infanticide.

¹⁴ M. Laurence, *The Diviners* (Chicago IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974).

¹⁵ Audrey Thomas, *Blown Figures* (Vancouver BC: Talonbooks, 1974).

¹⁶ David Helwig, *The Glass Knight* (Ottawa ON: Oberon Press, 1976).

¹⁷ Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women* (New York NY: Vintage Contemporaries/Vintage Books, 1971).

¹⁸ Sandra Birdsell, *Ladies of the House* (Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1984).

¹⁹ While abortion plays a significant role as a basis for the theme in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (Boston MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), no significant abortion episode is worth mentioning here. However, readers will find an extensive commentary about the novel in Anne Barbeau Gardiner, "The

CANADIAN LITERATURE ON ABORTION
 CONTRASTED AGAINST THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Given the essential national comparisons between Canada and the United States (linguistic commonality allowing persons in both countries to read controversial works written in English regarding the rights of women and their changing roles in the family),²⁰ there are many parallels between Canadian fiction on abortion and its American counterpart, especially when one reviews the general philosophical ideas of the abortion movement. Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh* implies that women knew about self-abortion techniques and that they spoke of them only among themselves; the novel explicitly records one woman's techniques ("lift heavy things...take the plow and walk behind it for a day"²¹). Atwood's *The Edible Woman* contains the idea that a mother is not in possession of her body when she is pregnant²²—the bifurcation between "her" body and that of the unborn child being a creation of the mid-twentieth century. Gibson's *Five Legs* lists traditional abortifacients, focusing on ergot.²³ Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* cites traditional causes that were used as justification for abortion in the 1960s: mothers dying from childbirth and "crazy women [who] had injured themselves in obscene ways with coat hangers."²⁴ This same novel contains perhaps the longest section in Canadian literature, offering traditional images

Interrelated Defense of Abortion and Pornography in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Life and Learning XIII: The Proceedings of the Thirteenth University Faculty for Life Conference at Georgetown University, 2003*, edited by Joseph W. Koterski, S.J. (Washington, D.C.: Univ. Faculty for Life, 2004), pp. 87-101.

²⁰ Cf. supplementary material provided after Allen's novel *The Woman Who Did*, and Margaret Sanger's formulation in her 1938 autobiography of "seven circumstances under which birth control should be practiced." See *Margaret Sanger, An Autobiography* (New York NY: Norton, 1938), p. 193.

²¹ Grove, p. 110.

²² Atwood, *The Edible Woman*, p. 122.

²³ Gibson, pp. 4, 20, 80.

²⁴ Munro, pp. 88, 132.

that were used to argue for legalizing abortion:

I read about a poor farmer's wife in North Carolina throwing herself under a wagon when she discovered she was going to have her ninth child, about women dying in tenements from complications of pregnancy or childbirth or terrible failed abortions which they performed with hatpins, knitting needles, bubbles of air, I read, or skipped, statistics about the increase in population, laws which had been passed in various countries for and against birth control, women who had gone to jail for advocating it.²⁵

Atwood's *Surfacing* contains the idea that the child of the narrator was her "husband's,"²⁶ an idea that is unique in literature of the time (that the father has, in the context of abortion, any rights over the child he creates). The narrator in Laurence's *The Diviners* is afraid of becoming pregnant; her first husband calls children "accidents,"²⁷ symptomatic of the 1960s when sexual activity was viewed as the paramount reason for marriage and that any child conceived indicated more a failure of birth control or contraception than a salutary transmission of life. Birdsell's *Ladies of the House* conveys the impression that women could be driven to abortion because "nothing worked" whether contraceptive or other to alleviate women's fear of pregnancy,²⁸ a defeatist position used by the early feminist movement to encourage support for abortion. Finally, Ruby, a character in Richards's *Evening Snow Will Bring Such Peace*, views abortion as an act of rebellion, a pose dominant in the abortion movement since early agitation:

²⁵ Munro, pp. 182-83. The idea that abortion is a foreign matter, as evidenced here by the citation of a book read about a "North Carolina" mother, is repeated in Munro's *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, where abortion is viewed as something done in Crete and Spain (p. 168). Closer to Canada, Thomas's narrator in *Blown Figures* mentions an abortion in New York.

²⁶ Atwood, *Surfacing*, p. 30.

²⁷ Laurence, p. 164.

²⁸ Birdsell, p. 75.

It was not inherent in Ruby to forgo anything that was new or irreverent—and this is primarily what attracted her to abortion. What umbrellaed her concern was not so much that it would be right, but that it would be rebellious and gain attention. Like everything else Ruby did.²⁹

Often, Canadian similarities with American counterparts operate at the linguistic level. One recalls the American man's and Jig's word-play surrounding the pronoun "it" in Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants,"³⁰ the quintessential template for abortion narratives. The use of this third-person pronoun to refer to the dehumanized unborn child can be found in Atwood's *Surfacing*, although the word "child" is introduced into the exchange as well.³¹ Atwood weaves the affectionate term for the fetus ("child") and the depersonalized "it" in another novel. Confronted by the mother of his unborn child, who wants him at least to stay in the child's life if not marry her, Len in *The Edible Woman* exclaims that he does not "want any son at all! I didn't want it, you did it [become pregnant] yourself, and you should have it removed."³² A

²⁹ Richards, pp. 133-34.

³⁰ Ernest Hemingway, "Hills Like White Elephants" (1927) in *Men Without Women* (New York NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2006), pp. 69-77.

³¹ Atwood, *Surfacing*, p. 187.

³² Atwood, *The Edible Woman*, p. 233. Moreover, the idea that the unborn child is alien to the mother's body or less than human (an essential step in the depersonalization that, as William Brennan demonstrates in *Dehumanizing the Vulnerable: When Word Games Take Lives* (Chicago IL: Loyola Univ. Press, 1995), must occur before abortion can be performed with impunity, occurs rarely in Canadian literature. American critics may be more concerned with the "alien" or "otherness" nature of the unborn child than their Canadian counterparts. In fact, American critics often use the first term to depersonalize the unborn child by equating it with the extraterrestrial denotation of the term. See, for example: Peter Swiggart, *The Art of Faulkner's Novels* (Austin TX: Univ. of Texas Press, 1962); John L. Cobbs, "Alien as an Abortion Parable," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 18/3 (1990): 198-201, where he expresses the proportion that the alien within the body of the astronaut in the film *Alien* is "like an embryo within a uterus" (p. 200); and Lucy Ferriss's *The Misconceiver* (New York NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997), which, like Cobb, again conjures

more recent example of linguistic comparison between American and Canadian fiction on abortion is Cindi's assertion in Richards's *Evening Snow Will Bring Such Peace* that she is "fine" after her abortion, which recalls Jig's ambiguous assertion in Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants."³³ "I'm fine," Cindi asserts one page after her abortion is performed.³⁴ The assertion of health becomes suspicious when the same phrase is repeated fifteen pages later,³⁵ just as Jig's repetitious use of the phrase challenges the claim made in Hemingway's story.³⁶

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AMERICAN AND CANADIAN LITERATURE ON ABORTION

Despite these similarities, Canadian fiction on abortion differs significantly from its American counterpart in several respects, one being the step-by-step description of abortion procedures, whether those that occurred before or after legalization, which is relatively absent in Canadian work. Granted, there are examples in American fiction of abortion episodes told "off stage." For example, Annabelle Marie Strang relates the details of her abortion to J. Ward Moorehouse in John Dos Passos's *The 42nd Parallel*, the third part of his *U.S.A.* trilogy,³⁷ in such a way that the narrator simply says that "[h]e heard the details in chilly horror."³⁸ Even Richard Brautigan's *The Abortion: An Historical*

up the image of fetuses being similar to space aliens (p. 82).

³³ Hemingway, p. 192.

³⁴ Richards, p. 141.

³⁵ Richards, p. 156.

³⁶ A briefer use of this signal term in abortion stories can be found in Margaret Atwood's short story "Giving Birth," in the anthology *We Are The Stories We Tell: The Best Short Stories by North American Women Since 1945*, edited by Wendy Martin (New York NY: Pantheon Books, 1990), pp. 134-49, here p. 139.

³⁷ John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.*: I. *The 42nd Parallel*; II. *Nineteen-Nineteen*; III. *The Big Money* (New York NY: Modern Library, 1937).

³⁸ Dos Passos, *The 42nd Parallel*, p. 198.

Romance 1966,³⁹ a work written when the turbulence of abortion agitation was at its height before legalization in the U.S., relates the intimate details of Vida's abortion occurring off stage as well.

While characters in Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy relate their abortion scenes *ex post facto*, other abortion scenes in American fiction became increasingly more detailed, and subsequent authors placed the readers in the immediacy of the abortions being performed. Although Charlotte's abortion in Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*⁴⁰ occurs off stage, the amount of detail accorded the preliminaries to the event has increased:

She boiled the water herself and fetched out the meager instruments they had supplied him with in Chicago and which he had used but once, then lying on the bed she looked up at him. "It's all right. It's simple. You know that; you did it before."

"Yes," he said. "Simple. You just have to let the air in. All you have to do is let the air—" Then he began to tremble again. "Charlotte. Charlotte."

"That's all. Just a touch. Then the air gets in and tomorrow it will be all over and I will be all right and it will be us again forever and ever."⁴¹

Similarly, the abortions described in Book Five, titled "My Three Abortions," in Brautigan's *The Abortion: An Historical Romance 1966* occur off stage, but they are mentioned with significant attention to detail; for example, the narrator of the novel, the father of Vida's unborn child, sees the abortionist's teenaged attendant take a bucket to another room and hears a series of toilet flushes, after which the attendant returns with the bucket empty. By the time of John Irving's *The Cider House Rules*⁴² the depiction of abortion becomes not merely routine, but a moment of philosophical speculation and apotheosis for Homer Wells, the abortionist:

³⁹ Richard Brautigan, *The Abortion: An Historical Romance 1966* (New York NY: Simon and Schuster, 1971).

⁴⁰ William Faulkner, *The Wild Palms* (New York NY: Random House, 1939).

⁴¹ Faulkner, p. 220.

⁴² John Irving, *The Cider House Rules* (Toronto ON: Bantam, 1985).

He chose the curette of the correct size. After the first one, thought Homer Wells, this might get easier. Because he knew now that he couldn't play God in the worst sense; if he could operate on Rose Rose, how could he refuse to help a stranger? How could he refuse anyone? Only a god makes that kind of decision. I'll just give them what they want, he thought. An orphan or an abortion.

Homer Wells breathed slowly and regularly; the steadiness of his hand surprised him. He did not even blink when he felt the curette make contact; he did not divert his eye from witnessing the miracle.⁴³

In contrast, Canadian instances of abortion are mostly retrospective events with little detail supplied. Grove's self-aborted mother in *Settlers of the Marsh* gives no details about her abortions except for the barest of facts. Naomi in Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* is barely able to relate her failed attempts to self-abort. The main character in Atwood's *Surfacing* describes not so much the procedures of her abortion as much as she depicts in quick succession the arrangements for the abortion and the immediate aftereffects. Eva's self-abortion in Laurence's *The Diviners* is reduced to one quick "sentence" divided over two paragraphs: "Eva shivers, cries a little but not much. / And aborts herself that night with a partly straightened-out wire clotheshanger."⁴⁴ Isobel, the main character in Thomas's *Blown Figures* provides more of a traditional description of a surgical abortion than any other author considered thus far:

Scrap. Small detached piece of something, fragment, remnant (pl.) odds and ends, useless remains, allied to *scrape*.

Dr. Biswas was going to scrape her out. How tiny he was. She could have reached out from the trolley and held him between her forefinger and thumb. A few scraps left. An embryonic finger maybe, or a toe. A little lost eye. It doesn't—always—all come away at once.⁴⁵

⁴³ Irving, p. 568.

⁴⁴ Laurence, p. 123.

⁴⁵ Thomas, p. 132, italics in original.

In Helwig's *The Glass Knight* Elizabeth glides over significant details of her abortion: "It had come out of her body. The doctor had probed her more deeply than she had thought possible. He had torn something in her, something he didn't know or care that he had touched." Elizabeth then advances in her narrative to the time immediately after the abortion procedure: "She had curled up in the back seat like a child beginning to grow. She would grow back whatever it was she had lost."⁴⁶ Cindi's abortion in Richards's *Evening Snow Will Bring Such Peace* is denoted only by the briefest phrases spanning two paragraphs: "when the procedure started," "from behind the door," "as if she was being hurt," "She kept looking out the window because she couldn't look at Dr. Savard," and "'How do you feel?' he said finally."⁴⁷

Canadian fiction that concerns abortion is in further contrast to its American counterpart in three socio-political areas. I have commented elsewhere on three frequent themes in contemporary American fiction on abortion: devaluation of parenthood and children, a bias against the Roman Catholic Church, and demonization of right-to-lifers.⁴⁸ Canadian fiction does not display these negative tendencies as its American counterpart.

This is not to say, however, that literary evidence does not exist to support some of these three negative features. With the notable exception of children being metonymically reduced to "accidents" (as in failure of contraception) in Laurence's *The Diviners*, Clara in Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, for example, is adept at calling her children dehumanizing and vulgar names, as when she compares a newborn to an "octopus" or calls another child a "bastard."⁴⁹ Although her own life is in shambles, Elizabeth in Helwig's *The Glass Knight*

⁴⁶ Helwig, pp. 134-35.

⁴⁷ Richards, pp. 140-41.

⁴⁸ See especially ch. 9 of my *An Ethical Analysis of the Portrayal of Abortion in American Fiction: Dreiser, Hemingway, Faulkner, Dos Passos, Brautigan, and Irving* (Lewiston NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005).

⁴⁹ Atwood, *The Edible Woman*, pp. 28, 34.

acknowledges that her parents had a good marriage and a good life together.⁵⁰

Regarding attitudes toward the Roman Catholic Church, there is neither the vituperation against well-meaning Catholics who espouse a pro-life position nor narratological hostility against the institution of the Church. A character in Atwood's *Surfacing* explains the large number of children she sees in a village in Quebec thus: "They must fuck a lot here.... I guess it's the Church." She then immediately becomes mock-penitent (or does he mean it seriously?): "Aren't I awful."⁵¹ Atwood's casual comment about the Catholic Church extracted from an interview supplied at the back of the *Surfacing* volume may help readers understand the activities of the unnamed narrator, but it does not persuade the reader to adopt a negative view against the Church.⁵² Similarly, in Gibson's *Five Legs* the discussion that Felix has with his parents about his desire to convert to Catholicism shows the reader more the parents' bias than the view that readers should take toward Catholics and their position on abortion. Richards's depiction of the abortionist Armand Savard in *Evening Snow Will Bring Such Peace* is noteworthy for the anti-Catholicism that informs the Quebecois abortionist's character more than the life-affirming positions of the Church, which are not attacked in the novel.

Finally, regarding the third negative feature of contemporary

⁵⁰ Helwig, pp. 133-34.

⁵¹ Atwood, *Surfacing*, p. 9.

⁵² Her full remarks are that "ever since we all left the Roman Catholic Church we've defined ourselves as innocent in some way or another. But what I'm really into in that book [*Surfacing*] is the great Canadian victim complex. If you define yourself as innocent, then nothing is ever your fault" (p. 210).

Another instance of possible anti-Catholicism occurs in Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*. When Garnet's mother identifies one of his former girlfriends as a Roman Catholic, she asserts that "'Married her you would have been poor,' said his mother significantly. 'You know what the Pope tells them to do!'"'; Garnet counters this attack by responding, "You did okay without the Pope yourself, Momma" (p. 246).

American abortion fiction (demonization of right-to-lifers), I find no evidence in Canadian fiction of attacks against those who advocate the pro-life position to the degree that, for example, Howard Fast and Mary Logue attack those who oppose abortion in their novels, *The Trial of Abigail Goodman*⁵³ and *Still Explosion*⁵⁴ respectively.⁵⁵

THE UNIQUE IN CANADIAN ABORTION LITERATURE

In final contrast, the Canadian might be the first world literature that documents the deleterious effects of abortion on women. American fiction, especially since the 1980s, has tended to be dogmatic about abortion as an issue of rights, as though all feminist thought should view abortion as the highest good and a matter only pertaining to women themselves. Canadian literature, in contrast, reflects much more on abortion's effects on women, their relationships, and their lives. One can categorize discussion of the effects of abortion on women under the rubric of "post-abortion syndrome" (PAS), a concept that has gained currency in the psychological literature and that has practical use for literary study.

A relatively recent item in the psychological literature, David C. Reardon began discussion of PAS with his *Aborted Women: Silent No More*.⁵⁶ Although primarily written for an American audience, his research concludes that women could suffer a range of five consequences after abortion, including "guilt and remorse," "broken relationships and sexual dysfunction," "depression and a sense of loss,"

⁵³ Howard Fast, *The Trial of Abigail Goodman* (New York NY: Crown, 1993).

⁵⁴ Mary Logue, *Still Explosion* (Seattle WA: Seal Press, 1993).

⁵⁵ Both of these novels can be dismissed as didactic if not propagandistic efforts to demonize opponents of abortion, whose actions respond to the fact that abortion is legal in the United States throughout the entire nine months of pregnancy for any reason whatsoever.

⁵⁶ David C. Reardon, *Aborted Women: Silent No More* (Westchester IL: Crossway Books, 1987).

“deterioration of self-image and self-punishment,” and suicide.⁵⁷ Researchers on PAS in Canada include Elizabeth Ring-Cassidy, whose *Women’s Health After Abortion: The Medical and Psychological Evidence* (2nd edition co-authored with Ian Gentles),⁵⁸ can help to elucidate the behavior and thought of aborted women in Canadian novels. Summarizing their research of psychological risk factors and complications following abortion, these researchers report:

Women who have abortions are at risk of emotional difficulties after the procedure, especially those with pre-existing factors such as relationship problems, ambivalence about their abortion, adolescence, previous psychiatric or emotional problems, pressure by others into making a decision to abort, or religious or philosophical values that are at odds with aborting a pregnancy.⁵⁹

Evaluating the effects that abortion has on interpersonal relationships specifically, these same researchers conclude:

Women’s marital or partner or family relationships can be significantly affected by abortion.... When a woman or adolescent girl has been coerced into having an abortion, typical reactions include feelings of betrayal (by partners or family members), anger, depression, sadness, and breakdown of trust and intimacy in relationships.... “Suppressed mourning” has very negative outcomes, often leading to feelings of numbness and/or hostility and anger, and to difficulties in forming future relationships and in bonding with later-born children....⁶⁰

Professional organizations are ambivalent about the existence of PAS, and the reasons for such temerity are obvious; abortion is not only controversial as a political issue, but also an economic force in the

⁵⁷ Reardon, pp. 121ff. Other American researchers into PAS include Priscilla Coleman (Bowling Green State University) and Vincent Rue.

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Ring-Cassidy and Ian Gentles, *Women’s Health After Abortion: The Medical and Psychological Evidence*, 2nd ed. (Toronto ON: de Veber Institute for Bioethics and Social Research, 2003).

⁵⁹ Ring-Cassidy and Gentles, p. 149.

⁶⁰ Ring-Cassidy and Gentles, p. 232.

Western world. Proving that abortion is big business or that it is a political question inspiring fear in some circles is not the purpose of this paper. One can, however, learn the attributes of the theory and determine whether women in Canadian literature who engage in abortion manifest those characteristics.

The post-abortion evidence from the novels—especially remorse, anger, and sense of loss—is obvious. One paragraph in Atwood's *Surfacing* directly recounts the narrator's abortion episode:

He said I should do it, he made me do it; he talked about it as though it was legal, simple, like getting a wart removed. He said it wasn't a person, only an animal; I should have seen that was no different, it was hiding in me as if in a burrow and instead of granting it sanctuary I let them catch it. I could have said No but I didn't; that made me one of them too, a killer.⁶¹ After the slaughter, the murder, he couldn't believe I didn't want to see him any more; it bewildered him, he resented me for it, he expected gratitude because he arranged it for me, fixed me so I was as good as new; others, he said, wouldn't have bothered. Since then I'd carried that death around inside me, layering it over, a cyst, a tumor, black pearl; the gratitude I felt now was not for him.⁶²

The anger in the above passage may only become evident when one verbalizes the words, and a dramatic rendering is necessary since, except for the absence of punctuation, which rushes some phrases together, there are no linguistic markers to emphasize one word over another. Moreover, the pain and guilt that the narrator feels is matched only by her resentment against her lover for arranging, persuading, or coercing her into an abortion. Certainly, the literary creation is wonderful to behold; the narrative torques between the narrator's present experience in Quebec and her reminiscences, a loss of linearity in narrative design that challenges the reader's certainty regarding what time period the narrator is in or to whom she is speaking. How unfortunate that the reader sees that the clear statement of the narrator's abortion should

⁶¹ Forty years earlier, Ellen's mother in Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh* calls herself a "murderess" for having self-aborted (p. 113).

⁶² Atwood, *Surfacing*, pp. 145-46.

come three-fourths of the way into the novel, nine years after the event. It has taken that long for the main character to express her anger and to identify the source of the distresses in her life.

Although Morag in Laurence's *The Diviners* does not have an abortion,⁶³ the self-abortion that Eva, her childhood friend, performs is cited often throughout the novel. The abortion occurs after more than one hundred pages into the work, to be recollected about sixty pages afterwards; thirty pages later, the reader learns that the main character of Morag's novel self-aborts much like her childhood friend Eva did. Eva's aborted child is mentioned a final time towards the end of the novel. Thus, Eva's self-abortion is a loss that has profoundly affected others.

The narrative structure of Thomas's *Blown Figures* is not as unique as it first seems. Brautigan's style, for example, often combined long passages with smaller ones, and the abortion episodes in his novel are minimized by the interpolation of seemingly unrelated chapters. Thomas's novel, however, is a more radical departure from traditional narrative style. Nearly 70% of the novel (373 of the 547 pages) consists of brief one-line statements; rarely does the text reach a half page. While the details of Isobel's abortion have been mentioned above, what remains are the literary features that manifest PAS features. The narrator questions Isobel regarding her two abortions, and the use of a narrator questioning the main character is further evidence that the main character herself cannot yet address her own abortions. The questioning occurs within parentheses, adding one more layer of remove from the questions, in a rapid, punctuation-free, stream-of-consciousness style that precludes objective consideration of the abortions:

([...] How does it feel, lying there in the hot, oppressive room, remembering. Where is your baby Isobel, the one you wanted, your little dead tot? The lamp does not light, the door does not open the windows are mirrors the mirrors are

⁶³ She does become pregnant and considers abortion, but Morag is freed from the need to decide on whether to abort or not when she menstruates.

doorways, the flowers are children the children are dying—what happened to your little dead tot whom you last saw curled in the silvery basin? And the other one, Richard’s son—where is he now?)⁶⁴

It seems appropriate in terms of a satisfactory dénouement that, sixty pages from the end of the novel, Isobel can describe her abortion in semi-expository, yet still poetic paragraphs.

Elizabeth’s abortion in Helwig’s *The Glass Knight*, recounted about halfway through the novel, blends present actions with past over several paragraphs. The absence of subjects or predicates for many of the “sentences” in the passage which follows further challenges the reader to an easy understanding of the emotions that the main character feels:

The body curled around its wound. Curled like a secret child, like Elizabeth curled on the floor in sunlight on a white rug. In a suburb of Montréal. A doctor with a strange accent and eyes that looked friendly although he didn’t say one friendly word, as she left said *Try not to come back* and the nurse smiled.

She hadn’t imagined. Couldn’t imagine the pain. All she knew was that she must hold it inside herself, hold her pain like a rich gift, that if she screamed the world could come apart in the pieces of her scream....

She sat up and went to the radio. Turned it off. Went and lay down on the bed, lying on her back, straight and still. He fucked her, dim and insistent. She must get rid of him somehow. Decided to phone and tell him she wouldn’t see him again.⁶⁵

A characteristic of PAS is that the emotional force of the abortion event will recur repeatedly; nearly forty pages later, the reader learns that Elizabeth’s abortion occurred four years earlier.

As a final example, the reader could have interpreted a passage in Birdsell’s *Ladies of the House* merely as the alienation that Truda feels in a complex world, until three words alter the scene: “And Truda saw

⁶⁴ Thomas, p. 153.

⁶⁵ Helwig, pp. 97-98, italics in original.

the *tiny white coffin*.”⁶⁶ At the mention of “tiny white coffin” the reader must re-evaluate the passage before and after this notation. Had Truda aborted? The pages before and after this notation are ambiguous and uninformative. Like the abortion episode in Atwood’s *Surfacing*, it takes the narrator much time to disclose even this alienation effect of a possible abortion. Perhaps Truda is a character who still cannot reach the point of disclosure about her abortion and thus still suffers.

This study began with a facetious list of elements deemed necessary for Canadian novels circa the 1960s. Besides the fact that more works are now established in the Canadian canon, fictional representation of abortion has altered the list considerably. While the references to the impact of historical influences on the nation, tawdry items aligned with popular sentiment about Canada, and an appreciation of the land itself will always inform Canadian literature, some new items can be added to the list, many of which are connected with aborted women.

An updated list of characteristics of Canadian fiction would include, first, a rejection of the American tendencies to engage in *ad hominem* attacks against those who hold opposing views on abortion. Second, it would include those women who reflect deeply on the great sorrow caused by their abortions. Finally, the updated list would include those who ponder how their abortions have affected not only themselves, but their lovers and relationships with others. These three items may qualify Canadian literature on abortion to fit the category of tragedy as the dominant literary mode; it is this tragic sense that may constitute Canada’s greatest contribution to the world’s literature on abortion.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Birdsell, p. 131, emphasis added.

⁶⁷ Additional sources consulted in the preparation of this paper:

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