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PLAINS SONG

WRIGHT MORRIS'S NEW MELODY FOR AUDACIOUS FEMALE VOICES

LINDA M. LEWIS

TRIUMPH BY DEFAULT

"Man's culture was a hoax. Was there a woman who didn't feel it? Perhaps a decade, no more, was available to women to save themselves, as well as the planet. Women's previous triumphs had been by default. Men had simply walked away from the scene of the struggle, leaving them with the children, the chores, the culture, and a high incidence of madness." The lines are from Wright Morris's *Plains Song: for Female Voices*; they represent a "brief resume" of the "forthcoming lecture" by Alexandra Selkirk, a feminist who has just arrived in Grand Island, Nebraska, to rally the daughters of the Plains to their incipient liberation.¹ Although the speech is assigned to a fictional leader of the women's movement, the sentiments about the default of man and the corresponding ascent of woman are those

of the novelist.

Morris's female characters are often types—the wizened great-aunt or grandmother, the domineering matriarch, the urban huntress, the repressed ice woman, the haunted siren. Those among them who triumph usually do so by default. The pioneering men of previous generations tamed the wilderness, then, through weariness or boredom, left women the less audacious task of maintaining the society and culture, such as they were, that the men had wrought. Morris's indictment of the patriarchy in terms of his default can be documented over a span of years. In 1957, Morris stated that man has defaulted in running the world and that woman takes her unconscious revenge by playing the role of tyrannical matriarch.² In his 1967 essay, "Children Are the Best People," he claimed that default has undermined the structure of the American family: "When the American male defaulted to the woman, relinquishing his role as head of the family, he established the pattern of the default in family matters of guidance and authority."³ In a 1975 interview about the novel *One Day*, Morris said his character Evelina Cartwright is *woman* in the mythic sense of the word. "She embodies a

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certain unpredictableness of temper, a rather ridiculous eccentricity, but she is basically a product of man defaulting in his role as man. The woman is left having to be two personalities in order to replace what the man has failed to provide.⁴ And in 1980, the year he published *Plains Song*, Morris stated that women control culture because men default. The men are downtown after business, the women uptown pursuing culture. This latter-day "Jamesian woman," who contributes the cultural embroidery to the canvas man has supplied, appeals to Morris: "Her enigma remains one of the fruitful enigmas of my life."⁵

In the early Morris fiction, the novelist seemed sure that a ruling patriarchy is unnatural and that women who rule their own households spiritually impoverish themselves and their entire families. Since patriarchies are unnatural, Amazons who triumph in victory by default are themselves also victims of a culture that is a hoax—a culture in which men have walked away from the scene of struggle. In the later fiction, however, Morris claimed to be more sympathetic with the new woman than with the old. He rejected the allegation that he was antifeminist and said that in the 1970s he was "shifting over to the female some of the audacity that seemed to be wasted on the males."⁶ Morris believed this shift signaled an important new direction in his fiction. *Plains Song: for Female Voices*, published on the author's seventieth birthday, was Morris's first attempt to strike the chords of an audacious new song written entirely for female voices and entirely about women's issues. If it proves to be better than the hoax of man's culture, that new song must be one of consciousness, of the singer knowing who she is, where she came from, and where she is bound.

AUDACIOUS WOMEN

Plains Song begins with the terminal illness of Cora Atkins, mother, grandmother, widow, and pioneer. As the dying Cora recalls the chronology of the Atkins women, the narra-

tion evolves as extended flashback. Early in the novel, a matrimonial bargain is struck for Cora, a quiet, solemn, tall, and somewhat plain merchant's daughter of schoolmarm attire and demeanor. Cora's attributes are her skill at figures, her ability to write in a fine Spencerian hand, and "the virtues of a good hired hand" (p. 5). Cora marries Emerson Atkins, a stranger with a dry sense of humor who has come to Ohio from his homestead in Nebraska to acquire supplies and a wife for his farm, and boldly sets out with him to his government claim on the Plains.

Emerson's honeymoon is a dismal failure, for the awkward bridegroom is neither enlightened nor romantic; when her "assailant" consummates the marriage, the pain for Cora is comparable to an operation without the anesthesia and, to prevent crying out, she bites her clenched fist to the bone. Emerson later conceals her shame by telling the doctor that the wound is a horse bite. As the pastor terms it, the "wages" of Cora's single sexual encounter is the pain of childbirth. Cora's daughter, Beulah Madge, is the first female in a long line of daughters and granddaughters—it being a curse that the women in the Atkins family "bear only daughters, if anything at all" (p. 1). In due course, Emerson's brother, Orion, takes a backwoods bride from the hills of Arkansas; when the somewhat uncivilized Belle Rooney Atkins dies in childbirth and Orion goes off aimlessly chasing after adventure as a hunter and soldier, Cora becomes, by default, the mother of two more girl children. The intelligent and lively Sharon Rose, first-born child of Belle and Orion, is the adored playmate of Cora's listless and lazy Madge. The independent Sharon becomes Cora's second generation counterpart, a figure for the new woman as Cora is for the dying breed of grandmothers.

The first half of the novel depicts Cora's young womanhood; the second half depicts the career of Sharon Rose. Unlike Cora's daughter, Madge, who settles for the conventional female role of marriage and motherhood, Sharon escapes the farm, first for the

university, later for the city. In Chicago, she pursues her natural bent as musician. While Cora is growing old in the company of her family, Sharon is growing into middle age avoiding attachment "to persons and places, to kinships, longings, crossing bells, the arc of streetlights, or the featureless faces on station platforms, all of which recede into the past" (p. 137). Unlike Cora, the younger woman is unsure just where she ever will be anchored. Sharon becomes a professor of music; Cora becomes a widow.

Finally, Cora's descendants converge on the home place one last time for her funeral, and the narration in time past catches up to the narration in the present. On her flight to Nebraska, Sharon meets the feminist Alexandra Selkirk, who reminds her of Cora. Selkirk impulsively invites Sharon to join her at a women's convention in Grand Island. After the funeral, Sharon meets the audacious plains women at the convention center, and the final scene of the novel is a tableau of optimism.

There are fifteen females in the novel, spanning four generations. As Joseph J. Wydevan points out, the female voices function through counterpoint, "layers and layers of voices . . . swelling into a chorus." The plains songs are often more cacophonous than harmonious, for the two strongest voices are those of Cora and her niece Sharon, and their voices are among the most discordant melodies of the novel. These two women are only one generation apart in the genealogy of the novel, but their circumstances, values, and world views are poles apart. Cora and Sharon are more alike in character, however, than either would admit. They are representatives of Morris's older female and his new woman. Cora is just as audacious in her way as her young niece who flees the Plains for the East, and Sharon's choices have been just as limited by the constraints of character as Cora's were. The redeeming difference in Sharon is her consciousness. A woman of today, Sharon has come to understand that she is a strong woman precisely because she shares the nature of the audacious women who have preceded

her. In Morris's fiction consciousness is among the highest tributes, and Morris would call Sharon's understanding a consciousness of the past without nostalgia.

THE ACQUISITIVE SPIRIT

The midwestern farm novel often focuses upon the pioneer trying to wrest a living from the land and to prosper in a vast and hostile wilderness. Within the settler versus the land theme, the settler is sometimes cast as acquisitive. The goal of the plains farmer is to fill his barns, then build bigger barns. In *Plains Song* the Atkinses turn the temporary house into a granary and build a bigger house. Cora, as plains matriarch, represents the acquisitive spirit. She arrives as chattel on Emerson's farm on the Elkhorn River, but she gradually shapes the place by her own energy and puts her stamp of ownership on everything. Cora is a tireless worker: "That work was never done reassured Cora. She knew how to work and asked only that she work to an end" (p. 19). First she acquires chickens, and with her egg money she buys Christmas-colored linoleum to brighten her kitchen, even though she is slightly embarrassed that her purchase borders on ostentation. Then there are her garden, her storm cave, and her sheds that Emerson builds for her hens. Finally, an invisible line is drawn between Emerson's farm and Cora's yard, and Cora sets about beautifying "her own domain" as she has her kitchen floor. "It was her yard, it would be her grass, and she would manage to care for what was hers" (p. 56).

The confrontation between male and female is also a theme frequently addressed in plains farm novels. A conflict of values occurs because the female is supposedly seeking security, aesthetics, and the amenities, while, as Leslie Fiedler put it, the typical male protagonist is a "man on the run" trying to escape the "civilization" of sex, marriage, and responsibility, and he considers the new land to be as rugged and wild as he is.⁸ In *The Territory Ahead* Morris acknowledged that this confrontation of male and female values is a

frequent conflict in the American novel.⁹ In *Plains Song*, however, there is only temporary conflict between male and female because Emerson defaults. Morris accepted the stereotypical idea that woman needs to domesticate man. The domestication of Emerson is complete when he bows to Cora's recommendations on farm management and when Cora becomes a more vital and imaginative farm manager than her husband. She shapes Emerson's Madison County homestead as she thinks it should be. "Emerson liked to say when he came in from the field he wondered whose farm it was. People who knew Cora could believe that" (p. 67). Eventually Emerson agrees to drink his buttermilk and do his belching away from the table because it is "Cora's house" (p. 71). Cora's dominance of the household is a more gentle version of the rule of Mrs. Porter in Morris's *The Deep Sleep*:

The first Commandment of the House reads—Thou shalt not give a particle of gratification. Thou shalt drive from the Temple the man who smokes . . . and thou shalt drive from the bed the man who lusts . . . and thou shalt drive from the bathroom the man who farts . . . and thou shalt drive from the parlor the man who feels, and he shall make himself an island in the midst of the waters, for the man who feels undermines the Law of the House.¹⁰

Morris's admirers point out that he is taking a new direction in *Plains Song*. For example, Lynn Waldeland calls the novel the best feminist work in the past fifteen years.¹¹ But the truth is that—although this novel speaks in women's voices—the loss of masculine audacity is just as great a loss, and the female audacity of Cora fills the void.

More than Emerson, Cora has the vision to imagine what the farm can become. She spends not a penny on herself, but she buys a player piano for her house and a new rug for her parlor, and she makes new curtains for her windows with the fabric Sharon sends from Chicago for Cora to have a new dress. When Cora wants electricity, running water, and a flush toilet, she finds a way to acquire them

just as she had a gasoline motor to irrigate her garden. When Sharon Rose visits her Nebraska home, she is returning to "Cora's weathered house—one defined it as Cora's" (p. 95). At the end of the novel the aging Sharon, who now teaches music at Wellesley and has not been back on the home place for many years, is met at the airport by Caroline, Cora's granddaughter. On the drive home, the younger woman pulls her car off the side of the road so the two can look at the pitted field and stumps of dead trees that demarcate what is left of Cora's farm. And that is exactly how the women think of the farm—as Cora's farm, not as Emerson and Cora's.

Caroline is capable of seeing the farm only with a pathetic sense of loss, feeling that all of Cora's work adds up to nothing. Her house, lawn, chicken run, and sheds have been torn down to make way for progressive farming techniques, for the new generation to farm the land in new ways. While listening to the hymns at Cora's funeral service, even Sharon thinks that Cora's works and meager efforts have been erased from the earth. Cora's descendants agree that her chores kept her going so long, and that when she could no longer work, Cora lived long enough to see the fruits of her labor disintegrate. Caroline despises the life of her dead grandmother because Cora suffered without complaint, worked until she dropped, and seemingly never questioned what her life as woman should have been.

GRANDMOTHER HECATE

Morris's fiction includes numerous caricatures of the grandmother as a type. He wrote, "Grandmother is my fiction. I know her."¹² His aging pioneer woman, held in a corset of character that makes her inflexible and rigid, is shaped by meaningful chores and does not understand idle distractions. When relegated to the rocking chair, she makes afghans, makes trouble, and sometimes makes hell. Morris believed that he understood why Cora works to exhaustion, shapes the farm to her own personality, refuses to let the people in her life

penetrate the rigid corset of her character, and regrets too late (after Emerson is dead) that her husband has been a stranger to her and she to him.

Margaret Atwood pointed out that the strong women of Canadian novels are aged Hecate-crones, figures who, like that goddess of the underworld, preside over death and have oracular powers.¹³ With the exception of the claim to prophetic powers, the type that Atwood described is much like Morris's grandmother type, imprisoned in the corset of custom, a frozen harridan audaciously haunting her descendants with her intractable nature and the values by which she has defined her own existence. Women like Cora, with their frugality and self-deprivation, their stoic acceptance of an often cruel universe, and their self-sufficient pride, are common types in both the fiction and the experience of the Plains. Cora Atkins is supposed to remind us of our grandmothers.

The literary character that strikes me as most like Cora is Hagar Shipley of Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, an example that Atwood cites to support her Hecate-crone thesis. Both Cora and Hagar are large women, Cora six feet tall and thin as a rail, Hagar large and stout—an Amazon, Laurence says. Both are motherless daughters, indulged by store-keeper fathers—although Hagar's father has educated her for better things than being a farmer's wife and disowns her when she marries without his approval; Cora's father, a defaulting gentle man with a "cracked pleading voice," urges her to marry someone who will appreciate her virtues (p. 2). Both women marry farmers several years older than themselves; both hardly know the men they marry and never bother to understand them—Cora, because she requires a shroud of privacy, reciprocates by not seeking to know Emerson's soul, while Hagar arrogantly believes she is better than Bramton Shipley, who is common as dirt or "bottled beer."¹⁴ Both women work like dray horses (Hagar's term), and both put egg money aside to enrich the aesthetic side of life on the prairie—Cora with her player piano

and Hagar with a gramophone. Cora and Hagar are both uncommonly strong and stoical; Cora refuses to scream out in pain during childbirth even though the midwife recommends yelling, and Hagar hitches up the horse and drives the buggy to town alone to give birth to her son. Both women lack a natural and demonstrative affection for their children, and both feel guilty that they do not have stronger maternal instincts.

Hagar and Cora exhibit the Hecate archetype that Atwood noted. A nearly senile, ninety-year-old Hagar runs away from the son and daughter-in-law who contemplate sending the incontinent and quarrelsome old woman to Silverthreads Nursing Home. In her exile, Hagar encounters two children whom she frightens away; then she realizes that she has just played the role of witch to their Hansel and Gretel. In *Plains Song*, both Belle and Cora are connected with witchcraft; the voluptuous Belle is said to have "bewitched" Orion, and Cora, with her sharp elbows habitually lifted high, reminds Orion of a witch.

Finally, the protagonists of *The Stone Angel* and *Plains Song* are alike because they have gradually become frozen in their isolation. Both have an intense pride that refuses to allow them to be "beholden" to anyone (and in Hagar's case that includes the Protestant God); both refuse to allow penetration of the stiff and corseted framework of their souls to expose the women inside. Laurence's Hagar is, like the Hagar of *Genesis*, an emotional castaway, and she is finally turned to stone because she can neither ask for nor receive forgiveness and cannot express approval, love, or any kind of weakness. As Hagar says, it is an "awful strength" (p. 59). Though she is not as hardened as Hagar, Cora possesses a similar awful strength. In her final hours, her grandchildren do not call her "Grandma" or raise their faces to be kissed. "Not that she is cold, unloving, or insensible. She is implacable" (p. 2).

If we sense that Hagar is more a flesh and blood woman than Cora, it is because Morris intended that we read Cora as both woman

and as myth of woman. She is, he said, an icon for the Plainswoman.¹⁵ She is a type for the female settler who overcame loneliness, poverty, hard times, and her own pride and emerged as something of a heroine to her descendants. The photographer-novelist illustrates Cora as icon by his use of two portraits. The first is an image in Sharon's memory; Cora's "remarkable face had no likeness for Sharon until she saw a book of paintings in the library. The intense staring eyes were those of icons" (p. 88). And in another memory, Sharon realizes that it is "Not her image, not her person, but the great alarming silence of her nature, the void behind her luminous eyes" (p. 200). The second portrait is a cheap photo snapped at the World's Fair in Chicago. The aging Cora observes in her photograph the shrinking head, enlarged ears, and set, pleated lips of an elderly woman, "so bizarre it left no afterimage . . . She was no longer the person she had been, but something more or less" (pp. 142-43). To her granddaughter Caroline, Cora is less, and to the sensitive Sharon Rose, she becomes more. When Sharon meets Alexandra Selkirk, she recognizes the image recurring in the outspoken feminist, whose bird-like legs and talon-like hands remind Sharon of her dead aunt. For Sharon Rose, as for Wright Morris, Cora represents something beyond the woman she was; with her pride, her work, and her intractable nature, she is an icon for the womanhood of the passing generation.

DAUGHTER OF THE MIDDLE BORDER

Although she is Cora's niece, Sharon is more like Cora than is Cora's daughter, Madge. Madge marries a local carpenter who leaves to his wife all matters that he cannot hammer, saw, and measure. Like Emerson, Orion, and Cora's own father, Ned Kibbee is included in the lineage of defaulting males. The last time Sharon sees him, he has not prospered; he is a silent, stooped old man, furtive as a rabbit. Madge is a stolid person like Emerson, and like her mother, Madge takes infinite joy in work. The smell of washed and

ironed clothes, the sight of finished laundry hanging on the line, and the feel of soap and washboard give her pleasure. Like Cora, she runs a household of daughters, but unlike Cora, she takes pleasure in sex; and she regrets that this special bond of love is something she cannot discuss with Sharon, her best friend. Sharon Rose is jealous and resentful of Ned and Madge's relationship, which represents to the celibate Sharon a rupture in the bond she and Madge have known from babyhood. When sisters become wives "thick with child," their sisterhood becomes secondary to the definition of the self. And what is lost between sisters seemingly cannot be restored.

If Cora reminds us of the Hecate-crone of prairie fiction, then Sharon reminds us of another type in plains literature: she is the daughter or son of the middle border who flees in order to escape the ugliness of the Plains. Characterized by adjectives like "tireless," "cunning," and "domineering," the first-born daughter of Belle Rooney declares her self-sufficiency early in the novel. Like Willa Cather, she leaves home and returns with her hair cut short like a man's; like Thea Kronborg in Cather's *The Song of the Lark*, Sharon is a *Wunderkind* who flees the suffocating air of the West to nurture her musical talent in the East. Sharon's search for refinement and education naturally leads her in the opposite direction from the male characters who follow the Horace Greeley dictum and light out for the territory ahead like a generation of Huck Finns. Retreat to the East is retreat to culture and refinement. As her letters and visits home become more infrequent, Sharon believes that she has abandoned her past. Throughout her life, however, she is merely discovering that she is "Cora's girl" (p. 216). If the first half of *Plains Song* is written for Cora's shrill voice, then the second half is written as Sharon's song.

Sharon moves first to Chicago where she studies piano and works in a library. She finds a cultured friend in fellow musician Lillian Baumann and falls in love with the refinement of the Baumann household, but the

relationship becomes strained when Sharon refuses to travel with her new friend at Lillian's expense. Like Cora, she will not be "beholden" to anyone. She deflects the interest of youthful suitors and of Professor Grunlich, who talks to her of art. She briefly takes an interest in Madge's older daughter Blanche and rescues her from the dreary and unfulfilling life on the Plains, seeing to it that the child has a good school and proper friends. But when Sharon discovers that Blanche is susceptible to the attractions of the opposite sex, she quickly loses interest in her young niece and sends her home with the excuse that Blanche misses her family. Sharon believes that Blanche, like her mother before her, can fall prey to the trap that man and nature have set for her, that she will "soon appeal to some loutish youth stimulated by the seasonal fall of pollen, and be thick with child" (p. 148).

Like Cora, Sharon is incapable of the deep "natural" feelings that society insists women are supposed to have for their kin. Cora always felt somewhat guilty for not being more affectionate with her daughter and nieces, and Sharon feels guilty because she neither likes nor dislikes Orion, her father, but is only indifferent to him, and because the strongest feeling she has for Cora is pity. As a music teacher at a women's college, she is carefully aloof from her students; she does not want the kind of emotional attachment that can result in pain. She has had pain over her relationship with Lillian and, like Cora's experience with sex, one event of that sort is quite enough for a lifetime. Lillian is correct when she tells Sharon that her fear of being "beholden" is really a fear of her own emotions.

As Sharon places distance between herself and her family, she begins to feel patronizing toward them. Unlike Hagar Shipley, who feels that she is simply of better breeding than Bramton and his kin, Sharon acts as though aesthetic development and intellectual acquisitions have made her infinitely superior to the people on the Nebraska farm and in the towns of Norfolk and Battle Creek. Morris illustrates Sharon's contempt by her repeated compari-

sons between the rural Nebraskans and their animals. In either the narrator's voice or the characters' voices, the Morris fiction often remarks upon the similarity between people and beasts. In *Plains Song*, both Belle and Orion are compared to calves and Belle to a rabbit; Sharon Rose is cat-like; babies come in "litters;" and Cora notices that Emerson walks like a horse at ease in harness and that he purses his lips like a fat hen's bottom when he spits. Sharon's analogy, however, is contemptuous rather than picturesque. She says that the Plains people are "like beasts of the field," leading lives "more like that of livestock than aspiring human beings" (pp. 124, 85-86). Avery Dickel, the young man who marries Sharon's sister, Fayrene, plans to become a veterinarian because he likes animals, and Sharon sarcastically tells him that he should love farming because everybody on the farm is an animal. She notices that Avery's teeth grow forward like those of an animal meant to crop grass. To Sharon, Cora is the only person for whom the human and livestock comparison seems natural, not repugnant. "What she admired in Cora, yet disliked in Emerson and Avery Dickel, was that they were less persons than pieces of nature, closely related to cows and chickens" (p. 135). Sharon is especially troubled by the easy-going nature of her former companion Madge, who moves around "like a grazing cow" and "ooz[es] creature comfort" and whom Ned pats as he would the rump of a horse (pp. 130, 133).

The Wright Morris hero is frequently a fictional study of the question of whether one can go home again. *Plains Song* is a departure for Morris because a daughter of the middle border asks and answers the same question. Sharon Rose cannot go home again because she is changed in a manner and to a degree that makes home no longer habitable to her; she is no longer of the same domesticated breed.

Sharon is redeemed by an enlarged sense of consciousness that results from her final visit to Cora's home. During her brief stay, Sharon is confronted with a series of memories, but

the most important is an epiphany of sorts in which she remembers a whack with the hairbrush that Cora administered when, as a young girl, Sharon denounced Madge's beau. Reflecting on that image, that no-win confrontation between stubborn mother and willful child, makes Sharon conscious that an audacious woman's character is not lost in death and that the living woman carries within herself the character of her mother. No matter how much we might admire Cora, the sturdy pioneer woman, for her endurance and strength, Morris believes that the unexamined life is missing something. Caroline Kibbee and her generation present yet another extreme. They have followed Sharon's example and "don't get married anymore unless [they] want to" (p. 196). Caroline's viewpoint on the subject of male/female relationships and feminism is also an unexamined view, but her conclusion is the opposite of Cora's. In Sharon, Morris presented a woman limited by the pride and inhibitions of the audacious pioneer women who preceded her, but one who finds and affirms the past that is the key to understanding both present and future.

SONG OF CONSCIOUSNESS

In *About Fiction*, Morris wrote that the new fiction of America may be fresh or it may be stale, but that the difference "will be a matter for our enlarged or diminished consciousness."¹⁶ In *The Territory Ahead*, he compared writers like Whitman, Melville, Thoreau, and Twain who light out for the open road, the open sea, the deep woods, or the territory ahead, but he concluded that all directions are forms of nostalgia. An admirer of Henry James, Morris maintained that only James bridged the past and present in a way that makes sense and that the bridge is consciousness. While the other writers of his age were going West, James went East—taking to the wilderness of culture instead of the wilderness of romantic nostalgia—and only he faced the crisis of the modern imagination without resorting to nostalgia. James opted for living in

the present; to live elsewhere is a deception.¹⁷ Morris's interest in the enlarged consciousness of the artist applies also to the audacious female voice that we hear in the novel's final pages. Sharon Rose also takes to the East. Like James's retreat to Europe, her escape is a search for refinement and culture. Yet her epiphany does not occur in the East but on a trip to the place of her childhood. In revisiting the scenes from her past Sharon successfully marries the world of the West (the pioneering spirit of the stiff upper lip) and the world of the East (culture, refinement, and education).

Morris pointed out that culture itself may be a wilderness, and in Sharon's case it does not bring consciousness. In the final scenes of *Plains Song: for Female Voices*, Sharon is shocked by Caroline's outspoken rejection of the past in her rejection of Cora. Then Sharon joins Alexandra Selkirk at the Grand Island Crossways Inn where the feminist convention is underway. There Sharon merges with a bustling throng of women—some fleeing the internment camp of marriage and some seized with the mania to be many people. The consciousness-raising Women World Wide group gathered in Grand Island contrasts with the "primitive ceremony" of males that Sharon and Caroline had noticed just a few days earlier at the football stadium in Lincoln, the men as "blind as the dinosaur to what was happening" (p. 195). At the appropriately named Crossways Inn, Sharon is confronted with a troubling collage of images of womanhood and manhood: an androgynous punk rocker in the club's bar, his microphone a phallic symbol thrusting upward and outward from his crotch; an amorous couple grappling in the motel's laundry room and looking like a single two-headed monster; a woman suffering Valium withdrawal symptoms and her male companion asking Sharon, "Ma'am, what can we do to be saved?" (p. 223); and Selkirk, an exotic, stork-legged reincarnation of Cora Atkins, carping about the masculine gender of the creator who made everything in His image. From the confusion and noise of the convention center—complete with the Oneida March-

ing Band at practice—Sharon and Alexandra escape together to witness the dawn. As she watches her first sunrise since childhood, Sharon finally knows that the spirit of Cora has made its peace with things and that—for both good and ill—the legacy of her pioneer aunt-mother has made her what she is. With a renewed consciousness Sharon takes her place in the contemporary world because she has finally confronted her past without either contempt or nostalgia.

If Morris's fiction has changed as he claimed it has, the change is merely that he has finally decided female audacity is acceptable. The audacity of Cora is the vitality and perseverance of our grandmothers; Cora is an icon of the world that is gone, and her voice has been stilled. The audacity of Sharon's song, the song of consciousness, is the voice of the daughter of the 1980s.

NOTES

1. Wright Morris, *Plains Song: for Female Voices* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), pp. 188-89. Further references will be included parenthetically in the text.

2. Wright Morris, "Letter to a Young Critic," *The Massachusetts Review* 6 (1964-65): 99. Examples of Morris's tyrannical matriarch include Mrs. Ormsby in *Man and Boy* and Mrs. Porter in *The Deep Sleep*.

3. Wright Morris, "Children Are the Best People," *A Bill of Rites, A Bill of Wrongs, A Bill of Goods* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), p. 54.

4. Wayne C. Booth and Wright Morris, "The

Writing of Organic Fiction," in Robert E. Knoll, ed., *Conversations with Wright Morris* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), p. 97.

5. Robert Dahlin, "PW Interviews: Wright Morris," *Publishers Weekly* 217 (22 February 1980): 7.

6. Booth and Morris, "The Writing of Organic Fiction," p. 100.

7. Joseph J. Wydeven, "Wright Morris, Women and American Culture," in Helen Winter Stauffer and Susan J. Rosowski, eds., *Women and Western American Literature* (Troy, N.Y.: Whitston Publishing, 1982), p. 219.

8. Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Stein and Day, 1966), p. 26.

9. Wright Morris, *The Territory Ahead* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), pp. 88-90.

10. Wright Morris, *The Deep Sleep* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1958), pp. 278-79.

11. Lynn Waldeland, "Plains Songs: Women's Voices in the Fiction of Wright Morris," *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* 24 (Fall 1982): 7.

12. Wright Morris, "Going Crazy in Miami," *A Bill of Rites, a Bill of Wrongs, a Bill of Goods*, p. 67. Morris's "grandmothers" include Miss Caddy and Aunt Angie in *The World in the Attic*, Grandmother and Aunt Elsie Herkimer in *The Man Who Was There*, and Aunt Clara in *The Home Place*.

13. Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), pp. 199-210.

14. Margaret Laurence, *The Stone Angel* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), p. 43. Future references will be included parenthetically in the text.

15. Robert Dahlin, "PW Interviews," 6.

16. Wright Morris, *About Fiction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 134.

17. Morris, *The Territory Ahead*, p. 230.