Study of the feminine perspective in the works of Gabrielle Roy

Kathleen Johnstone

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A STUDY OF THE FEMININE PERSPECTIVE
IN THE WORKS OF
GABRIELLE ROY

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Presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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The characterization and plot development in Gabrielle Roy's writing present a strong feminine point of view. Her French-Canadian protagonists are predominantly female, often very ordinary women whose lives center around their families. They are devoted and compassionate mothers, usually portrayed in their interactions with their children and in situations that their traditional role as protector of the home demands. The novelistic action often centers around this mother-earth figure who has to deal with all the routine concerns of being a mother, sometimes joyful, sometimes tragic.

Gabrielle Roy (1909-1983) grew up in a woman-dominated, French-Canadian family in an atmosphere of love and warmth which radiated from her beloved mother. Gabrielle Roy was greatly influenced by her mother and throughout her novels recreates versions of this loving home and the complex relationships between the daughter, mother and grandmother. Having experienced a traditional French-Canadian home, she is able to portray her female characters as authentic women, neither happy homemakers nor radical feminists, but genuine women viewed, described and analyzed by a woman, from a woman's perspective.

It is this feminine perspective on a French-Canadian woman's destiny that I discuss in this thesis. After a short description of Gabrielle Roy's literary career and brief summaries of her novels, I discuss the family home as Roy depicts it throughout her novels, emphasizing the roles of children, women, men, and marriage, and the complex relationships between successive generations of women within this household. Then I examine the stages of a woman's life as they are revealed through Roy's main characters. Finally, I discuss recurring themes related to Roy's feminine perspective: the painful separation between mother and daughter, the lack of freedom in a French-Canadian woman's life, and the circular cycle of poverty that is often a part of the French-Canadian woman's destiny.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION TO GABRIELLE ROY</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanation of Gabrielle Roy's Feminine Perspective</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plot Summaries of Gabrielle Roy's Novels and Short Stories</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II - THE ROLE OF THE HOUSEHOLD IN GABRIELLE ROY'S WORKS</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of Childhood</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of Women</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of Men</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of Marriage</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of Daughter, Mother and Grandmother</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III - THE STAGES IN A FRENCH-CANADIAN WOMAN'S LIFE</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Young Girl</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Middle-Aged Mother</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Elderly Grandmother</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV - THE THEMES INFLUENCED BY GABRIELLE ROY'S FEMININE CONCERNS</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Theme of Separation</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Theme of Lack of Mobility</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Theme of Destiny</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO GABRIELLE ROY

Gabrielle Roy, a contemporary French—Canadian novelist, said in an interview with Paula Gilbert Lewis that she ardently desires to be seen and to be remembered as "the last of the Mohicans," as "the last of the great storytellers."¹ She always wanted to be a writer and was greatly influenced by her mother who used to tell her children stories and legends from "the old country," Quebec. Gabrielle Roy was born in St. Boniface, Manitoba in 1909 and died in 1983. Her parents had been part of the large influx of "québécois" who emigrated to the West at the end of the nineteenth century. Her father was a colonization agent for the federal government and frequently had to be away from home, so her mother assumed the role of the strong central force in the family. Gabrielle then grew up near the French-Canadian city of Winnipeg in a spacious house on Rue Deschambault, the title of one of her two semi-autobiographical novels.

Much of her literary work is related to her childhood experiences, beginning with her parents' departure from Quebec. This attachment to and separation from the childhood home and from the past is a recurring theme in Roy's writing. Most of her female protagonists also left their homeland with their husbands, and many take trips back to their

place of birth in their adult lives. As a young adult, Gabrielle Roy also left her childhood home and family to study and work in other provinces in Canada, and later traveled to France to continue her studies. Gabrielle's departure for France was very difficult for her mother, and versions of this painful separation between mother and child are repeated throughout Roy's works.

Another autobiographical fact that greatly influenced her writing is the absence of her father in her childhood. As a government colonization agent, he worked mainly in Saskatchewan where he supervised the settlement of many immigrants and was gone for weeks at a time. He lost this job two years before retirement and ended up a very bitter, withdrawn man.

Gabrielle Roy was the youngest of eight children and was raised almost exclusively by her wise and loving mother who provided the warm, protective home recreated so often in Roy's novels. The mother figure in Roy's major novels is a version of her own beloved mother, and the father is usually absent or at least not significant to the action. As a child, Gabrielle Roy was sensitive and imaginative, spending long, solitary hours in her attic—dreaming, reading, writing, and discovering her vocation as a writer—as does Christine in Roy's two semi-autobiographical novels, Rue Deschambault and La Route d'Altamont.

Her mother encouraged her to become a teacher, and Roy has drawn on her teaching experiences in two of her novels. Ces Enfants de ma vie is a moving story about a young woman's first teaching position in a rural Manitoban village populated by unfriendly immigrants. La Petite Poule d'eau is an idealistic description of a family which
lived isolated on an island in the North-Canadian wilderness. Gabrielle Roy taught on this same island for two months one summer, but the family she depicts in her novel resembles her own family more than the one she was assigned to teach, which was actually quite unfriendly. She taught for a total of nine years, and in 1937 she left for France to begin her writing career.

In 1939 she returned to Canada, enriched by her experiences but saddened by her mother's death, which occurred during her stay in France. This memory is described in the last pages of *La Route d'Altamont*. She settled in Montreal as a journalist, started writing her best-known novel, *Bonheur d'occasion*, and published her first short stories which already reveal her feminine perspective as Paula Gilbert Lewis notes:

> It should be noted that Mme Roy's early short stories, published in the 1930's and 1940's, deal almost exclusively with female concerns, are peopled by many strong, independent women, and present, therefore, a raised feminist consciousness unusual for that period of time, especially in Montreal. Gabrielle Roy herself does not have any children.²

Roy frequently visited the French-Canadian quarter in Montreal where *Bonheur d'occasion* is set, talking with the people in order to make her story as authentic as possible. She actually saw a woman who was walking around forlornly looking for a place to live. This woman served as the novel's protagonist, Rose-Anna Lacasse. *Bonheur d'occasion* was published in 1945, cited by the French Academy, selected by the Literary Guild of New York, and in 1947 received the Prix Femina

in Paris. The novel became an international best seller, has been translated into many languages, and was made into a film which was Canada's official entry at the Moscow Film Festival in 1983.

In 1950, Gabrielle Roy and her husband finally settled in Quebec. Alexandre Chenevert was published in 1954, Rue Deschambault in 1955, and La Petite Poule d'eau in 1960. In 1966, Gabrielle Roy published La Route d'Altamont, a collection of four loosely connected semi-autobiographical stories. One of these stories, "Le Vieillard," is currently being made into a movie for Canadian television and will be shown in French this fall. In 1967, Gabrielle Roy published La Montagne secrète and was named "Compagnon de l'Ordre du Canada." In 1968, she received the "Prix du Conseil des Arts du Canada." La Rivière sans repos was published in 1970, and in 1978 Roy published her last novel, Ces Enfants de ma vie. Her novels generally take place during the first half of the twentieth century. She died of a heart attack in July 1983 at the age of seventy-four and was working on her memoirs at the time of her death.

Explanation of Gabrielle Roy's Feminine Perspective

In numerous interviews conducted during Roy's literary career, she made it clear that she wanted to be viewed as a humanist, not as a French-Canadian writer representing a political viewpoint or a determinist writer limited to a particular literary style. She does define herself as a feminist, but not in the modern sense which she believed encourages women to liberate themselves by rejecting the traditional role of woman as mother and homemaker. Paula Gilbert Lewis, in the interview previously referred to, explains Roy's position:
Maintaining her belief that contemporary Quebecois feminist literature has become obsessive and extremist, Gabrielle Roy insists not only that she is for the liberation of women but also that she was one of the first persons to support such a movement. She still believes, however, that despite the inevitable pain and struggle as reflected in the lives of her female characters, the greatest joy for any woman is to give birth to a child, to add one more life to humanity.\(^3\)

Nor does she support any theories that men are the cause of women's struggles. Although her male characters are often weak and incompetent or simply not essential to the plot, she describes them compassionately as individuals who are forced to deal with their destinies as well as they can. In *Bonheur d'occasion*, for example, the actions of the two male protagonists bring about great suffering for the two female protagonists. Yet, Roy characterizes these men with deep understanding, revealing how the misery and hopelessness of poverty brought about their insensitive behavior. Men are the main protagonists in only two of her novels: *La Montagne secrète* and *Alexandre Chenevert*. In *La Montagne secrète*, a novel about an artist's search for truth, there are no women in the novel. In *Alexandre Chenevert*, a novel describing a bank teller's disappointment with life and his search for happiness, the few women characters are very secondary to the plot. The male characters, therefore, dominate only in the two novels where there are essentially no female protagonists. In all her other novels, including those where men have significant roles, Gabrielle Roy's female characters are the predominating force.

These French-Canadian women are often portrayed as very ordinary women whose lives center around their families. They are devoted and

\(^3\)Ibid.
compassionate mothers, usually shown in their interactions with their children and in situations that their traditional role as protector of the home demands. The action centers around this mother-earth figure who has to deal with all the routine concerns of being a mother, sometimes joyful, sometimes sad. They all strive, and sometimes fail, to provide love, warmth and happiness in their home through their traditional role as mother. They are primarily middle-aged wives with numerous children, accomplishing their destinies in a family setting where their husband is often or totally absent and where, consequently, they are the central force in the home. In other words, Gabrielle Roy's female protagonists resemble, in varying degrees, Gabrielle's own mother. They are happy with their traditional role and not interested in a less traditional setting. Their struggle is not to have equal rights with men, but to maintain a loving home in spite of the many factors in contemporary society which contribute to the disintegration of the traditional family unit. Marie-Lynn Piccione, in her study of Gabrielle Roy and Michel Tremblay, explains this viewpoint:

Au terme de cette courte analyse, nous sommes en mesure de voir que, chez Gabrielle Roy, la femme, malgré quelques velléités passagères, ne souhaite pas au fond, changer de vie, se libérer. Profondément enracinée dans son pays, dans sa famille, elle se sent unie à sa mère et à ses enfants par une solidarité profonde, viscérale. Elle ne connaît jamais le désespoir, encore moins la solitude, car, en dépit des rudesses de l'existence, elle peut toujours se réfugier dans le passé. 4

Gabrielle Roy describes these women in their feminine settings as daughter, wife and mother. She writes about their everyday problems

and joys, their dominant role in the French-Canadian household and their struggle to determine their own destinies as women. Having experienced a traditional French-Canadian home, Gabrielle Roy is able to portray her female characters as authentic women, neither happy homemakers nor radical feminists, but genuine women viewed, described and analyzed by a woman, from a woman's perspective. It is this feminine perspective that I wish to discuss in this thesis. She described her female characters in terms of what interests them, that is their childhood, adolescence, motherhood and old age. The plot is usually developed around their very feminine concerns with their relationships with their children, their mothers and their husbands. I intend to examine in detail how this feminine perspective is developed in four of her principal novels: La Petite Poule d'Eau, La Rue Deschambault, La Route d'Altamont, and Le Bonheur d'occasion. I will also occasionally refer to her novel, Ces Enfants de ma vie, and to two short stories: "Un Jardin au bout du monde" and "La Rivière sans repos" from the short story collection bearing those same titles.

I would like to discuss how Gabrielle Roy reveals her feminine perspective in these novels through her treatment of the roles of childhood, women, men, love, and marriage and through her descriptions of the relationships between the daughter, mother and grandmother in the family. Then I would like to examine how she presents the stages in a French-Canadian woman's life: the young girl as daughter, the middle-aged woman as wife and mother and the older woman as grandmother. Finally, I would like to study three themes which appear throughout her literary work and which express her feminine perspective: the
painful separation of mother and child, the lack of freedom for the French-Canadian woman and the cycle of motherhood and poverty in the French-Canadian society. Before analyzing these feminine concerns, I will briefly summarize the novels and short stories previously cited.

La Petite Poule d'eau

_La Petite Poule d'eau_ is a beautiful lyrical novel about a French-Canadian family which lives in total harmony on an island, the Little Water Hen, deep in the Manitoban wilderness. The Toussaignants, Luzina and Hippolyte, and their nine children live an idyllic existence on this island which they share only with the sheep that Hippolyte raises and the natural wildlife. As the novel opens, Luzina is preparing to leave her husband and children for her yearly trip to the nearest city to have another baby. In spite of tearful objections from all her loved ones that she could manage to have the children at home, Luzina cheerfully undertakes this hazardous trip by boat, sleigh and train because she secretly enjoys the adventure, the change of scenery and the chance to interact with someone else.

Gabrielle Roy's description of this yearly departure reveals the love, warmth and humor that this family shares, but it also has a deeper significance. The only problem in the Toussaignants' life is the lack of formal education for the children. Luzina has very fond memories of the little rural schoolhouse she attended as a child, and she yearns to give her own children the same opportunity. The Canadian government requires that eight school-age children be enrolled before they will send a school teacher, and each time Luzina brings home
another baby, she is closer to her goal of having a schoolhouse on the island.

Luzina's attempts to bring learning to their isolation is only partially successful. The schoolhouse is built, but after a succession of three different teachers, Luzina realizes that she will have to send her children away to school. All of them have inherited Luzina's love of learning; and at the close of the novel, her main task in life almost done, she is alone on the island with her husband and her youngest child, who will inevitably also leave this idyllic island to pursue her own goals.

Rue Deschambault

Gabrielle Roy actually grew up on Rue Deschambault, the title of one of her two semi-autobiographical novels. Both novels are written in the first person by Christine, a personna of Gabrielle Roy, who describes events and people from her childhood in eighteen loosely connected stories. Throughout the collection, Christine's mother, Eveline, radiates her love of life. She is a joyous, enthusiastic, humorous woman, very much like Luzina and, of course, Gabrielle's own mother. The father is mentioned in only two of the stories, and is in sharp contrast to Eveline. Christine admits in one of the stories that this vibrant family was actually happier when their pessimistic father was absent.

The stories advance chronologically, beginning when Christine is a young child enduring a visit with a very boring aunt. Christine reminisces about her many hours spent in solitude as a sick child, about her
first experiences with flirtation and love, about her relationships with her mother and sisters, and about the numerous relatives and neighbors who visited this warm, loving house. The novel ends in a description of Christine's first year as a teacher. The narrative style changes perspective continually; Christine is sometimes a child who participates, and sometimes an older woman who describes in the present events of the past and then evaluates them as an adult.

La Route d'Altamont

La Route d'Altamont is named for a road passing through some hills in the otherwise very flat Manitoban plains. These hills remind Christine's mother Eveline of the mountains in Quebec, her childhood home. This novel again has Christine and Eveline as the two protagonists but is composed of only four stories and stresses the interactions between Christine, her mother and her grandmother.

The first story, "Ma Grand-mère toute-puissante," describes six-year-old Christine's visit to her authoritarian grandmother and about this grandmother's death at Christine's home. Christine is at first very intimidated by this senile but very independent old woman. She ends up respecting and adoring this almighty person who can make an entire doll from material found around the house. Thus, she is very confused when her mother forces this stubborn woman to move in with them because of the grandmother's declining health. This story is told with great warmth and understanding from Christine's perspective as a child watching her beloved grandmother become increasingly helpless and dependent.
The second story, "Le Vieillard," describes a touching relationship Christine has with an old man shortly after her grandmother's death. The third story, "Le Dépénagement," reveals Christine's sense of adventure and ultimate disillusion when she accompanies a moving man on his horse-drawn wagon.

The last story, for which the novel is named, deals with Christine's relationship with her mother as she is planning to leave home to study in France. Christine's mother, an old grandmother herself now, is very angry that Christine insists on leaving her alone. The two women, one at the threshold of her adult life and one at the end of hers, drive together through the countryside discussing many aspects of a woman's life, including the significance of the past and the complexities of the relationships between generations.

**Bonheur d'Occasion**

*Bonheur d'Occasion* takes place in 1939, just after the outbreak of World War II. The novel is set in a poor French-Canadian quarter of Montreal called Saint-Henri. It describes the attempts of a mother and daughter, Rose-Anna and Florentine Lacasse, to struggle against their destiny of poverty. The novel opens at the beginning of spring, a significant time for the Lacasse family. Rose-Anna, originally a lively country girl whose vitality has been crushed by her miserable situation, met her husband Azarius in the springtime, had her first child Foentine in the spring and since then has usually been pregnant every spring. Also, every May first, the Lacasse family has to move with an extra baby to a cheaper house because they cannot pay their
rent. Rose-Anna is now a plump, middle-aged mother, pregnant with her twelfth child, trying to support her insecure husband and vulnerable children against the forces of poverty.

Her husband, Azarius, had once been a builder, but is now unemployed. He spends most of his time in a local cafe, talking about the war or planning a new get-rich-quick scheme. He is a kind but ineffectual man, and his grandiose plans always leave his family in deeper poverty. Florentine, a dime-store waitress who supports the family, is a mixture of her father and her mother. Like her father, she protects herself from the reality of poverty by daydreams of unattainable wealth. But she possesses something of her mother's strength as well, and when she finds herself pregnant by an ambitious young man who deserts her, her strength saves her from despair.

Cyclical patterns of death and rebirth invest this novel with a universal significance which transcends the pitiful pattern of the life of an impoverished French-Canadian family trying to survive its ghetto life. The novel also ends in springtime. The Lacasse family has just made its annual move to a filthy shack across from a railroad track. It is here that Rose-Anna has her baby. It is also here that Florentine marries a man she does not love, but one who will take her away from the hated Saint Henri quarter and be a father to her expected baby. Azarius, who by the end of the novel has lost all possibility of regaining self-respect as head of his family, has joined the Army for the allowance he can give Rose-Anna and for the opportunity to escape his failure to provide for his family.
Short Stories

"La Rivière sans repos" is about a young Eskimo girl who has a baby fathered by an American soldier during one brief encounter. The baby looks very white and begins to have identification problems as he grows up in the Eskimo village. He runs away several times and finally never returns.

"Un Jardin au bout du monde" is about an old Ukrainian woman who lives with her husband in a very harsh area of Canada. Her children have all left, and she and her husband rarely talk; but against all odds of the severe plains, she has planted a beautiful garden.
CHAPTER II

THE ROLE OF THE HOUSEHOLD IN GABRIELLE ROY'S WORKS

In "Ma Grand-mère toute-puissante," the first story in La Route d'Altamont, Gabrielle Roy reveals her thoughts about the significance of the traditional family unit through a continuing conversation between Christine, her mother and her grandmother. One day, for example, the grandmother explains to Christine that the task of creating a home is a never-ending job:

C'est de l'ouvrage, me confia-t-elle. Oui, une maison, une famille, c'est tant d'ouvrage que si on le voyait une bonne fois en un tas, on se sentirait comme devant une haute montagne, on se dirait: mais c'est infranchissable!\(^5\)

The mountain the grandmother refers to is the symbol for the French-Canadian woman's most important duty in life: creating a home for the husband and children and investing it with warmth and security. This duty is the central preoccupation of all of Roy's female protagonists, who are described in the setting of their home: against the sound of the humming of a tea kettle or the whirring of a sewing machine or the murmur of children's voices. The home in Roy's literature, whether the cozy igloo in "La Rivière sans repos," the tenement flats in Bonheur d'occasion or the plain gray house in La Petite Poule d'eau, is always portrayed as a sanctuary for its inhabitants. Homes represent love, warmth and security like the mothers who give them life. In this

chapter on the French-Canadian household, I will examine how Gabrielle Roy expresses her feminine perspective in her treatment of the role of the home, childhood, women, men, marriage and of the relationship between the generations of women within the home.

In Roy's novels, the adult women leave their homes for various reasons: Luzina to have her babies, Christine's mother to fulfill a longing to travel and Rose-Anna to carry out various household responsibilities. In all of these situations, Gabrielle Roy describes the strong emotional feelings these women experience upon their return home. Although Luzina, for example, looks forward enthusiastically to the adventures she encounters during her trips, she is overwhelmed, on her return, by the sight of her own simple home:

Cependant, au bout de quelques jours à Rorketon, elle en avait tout à fait assez. Rien ne lui semblait plus chaleureux, plus humain que cette grise maison isolée qui, de sa butte entre les saules, n'avait à surveiller que la tranquille et monotone Petite Poule d'Eau.6

In Bonheur d'occasion, the home is constantly changing as the ever-enlarging family is forced each year to move into smaller and increasingly more squalid housing. Their home might be a damp cellar, three sweltering little rooms in a filthy tenement or the sooty shack near the railroad tracks. Nevertheless, Rose-Anna somehow manages to preserve the intimacy and security that is the significance of the foyer. This ability to maintain some sense of traditional family unit under the most pitiful circumstances is beautifully described by Roy

in the nighttime move from their flat to the railroad shack. New tenants have already taken possession of Rose-Anna's home when Azarius finally returns, late at night, with the news that he has found a new place for his family. Although Rose-Anna is exhausted from worry, and very pregnant, her natural strength of character and optimism give her the renewed energy which she imparts to her family. Roy details with moving tenderness how the family works together in the middle of the night in order to pack their few and shabby possessions, each child doing his part with even the littlest child importantly carrying something, contributing to his need to belong to this household.

There is a similar move described in "Le Déménagement" in La Route d'Altamont, but this time we experience the move from the perspective of young Christine, who has disobeyed her mother and gone with a moving man on what she expects to be a great adventure. Gabrielle Roy's preoccupation with the significance of the home is stressed by Christine's terrible disillusion as she observes a poor family's move from one pitiful place to another and their desperation to preserve the conscience of existing when this important sanctuary is being abandoned. As the mother tries to get her family settled into their new but equally depressing house, one of the children cries: "Retournons chez nous. Ce n'est pas ici chez nous. Oh, allons-nous-en chez nous."  

The Role of Childhood

Gabrielle Roy believed that childhood was a special, magical, significant period of life, and she treats all aspects of childhood

7 Roy, La Route d'Altamont, p. 182.
with great appreciation and respect. Paula Gilbert Lewis summarizes Roy's attitude toward childhood in this way:

Youth, in the fiction of Gabrielle Roy, brings a sense of freshness, honesty, liberty, and the hope of renewal to an adult world sadly resigned to being grown up. Parents often live for or through their children, inevitably lost when they depart from the protective home. Childhood itself, in addition, is a mirror of adulthood. It is both happy and tragic: children experience anguish, and they die. But most importantly, childhood foreshadows what it will become: children grow up and become adults. This aging process is, for Gabrielle Roy, the saddest aspect of the fragility of youth.®

The female protagonists all see the act of giving birth as an important part of their duty as women, and they cherish their roles as mothers. Luzina of La Petite Poule d'eau looks forward to her yearly trip to the hospital to give birth, and her return with the precious gift is met with awe and appreciation from the whole family. Even Rose-Anna in Bonheur d'occasion, as burdened as she is by her numerous children and miserable poverty, is momentarily liberated from all her burdens by the birth of her twelfth child.

Elle cédait au goût qu'elle avait eu, jeune mère, de se montrer toute en blanc à Azarius...L'enfant, c'était l'avenir, l'enfant, c'était vraiment leur jeunesse retrouvée, c'était le grand appel à leur courage.®

Elsa of "La Rivièrè sans repos" felt that in giving birth to a son she was reborn herself. Although she was not married and would never again see the father of her child, the birth of Jimmy gave his mother a new vitality:

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Son regard ressembla alors au ciel de son pays depuis long-
temps vide, quand enfin, avec des nuages plus délicats, avec
un vent attiédi, lui arrive le premier vol des confiants
oiseaux du Sud. Son âme, si longtemps absente, y revint briller,
mais plus grande qu'avant, plus aimante et plus émerveillée.
Ainsi parut-il à tous qu'Elsa, en donnant la vie à son enfant,
se l'était elle-même redonnée.  

Although all of Roy's older female protagonists are mothers with
many children, the birth of a child is mentioned negatively in only two
situations: Mme Laplante, Rose-Anna's embittered mother, refers to it
as her Christian duty, and Christine's mother and a friend are talking
within Christine's hearing about the misfortune of a pregnant woman who
is already in poor health. Christine's mother, in both novels, con-
siders her children as the best part of her life.

Gabrielle Roy devotes an entire novel, *Ces Enfants de ma vie*, to
children and their unique qualities of love and wonder. In this novel
the students, all young boys, are depicted as sensitive, impression-
able, spontaneous human beings with a great deal to contribute to the
adult world. The young school mistress brings one of her students
home, for example, to sing for her mother who had been in ill health
and depressed. This child has a precious gift of singing the old
Slavic songs his mother had taught him in such a clear, moving tone
that anyone who hears is deeply moved. After success with her mother,
the boy sings in several other situations and finally at an old people's
home where the rich beauty of his songs is almost too disturbing and
many of the elderly patients are moved to tears.

10Gabrielle Roy, *La Rivière sans repos* (Montréal: Beauchemin,
Roy believes that children live, for the most part, in perfect harmony with their environment. She brings this out most vividly in *La Petite Poule d'eau*, where the children play contentedly from morning until night on their secluded island which is their only source of education until their first school teacher comes. They are loving, respectful, vibrant children, but their mother's self-conscious last-minute admonishment, just before the arrival of the teacher, is a touching example of Gabrielle Roy's feminine touch. Luzina tells them sternly that they should not pick their noses in front of Mademoiselle Cote.

Childhood is a time of warm, secure memories that live on in adulthood and help the adults sustain themselves through hard times. The characters never totally separate themselves from their childhood, and their greatest joy is to remember this wondrous time. Part of the sadness of being an adult is the loss of childhood, which Roy's female protagonists seek to recreate. This Proustian concept is even present in *La Petite Poule d'eau*, where Luzina lovingly remembers her own little country schoolhouse and strives to recreate that memory for her children. She supervises every detail of the building of the new schoolhouse, and when it is finished, she looks at all the school supplies with childish enthusiasm, tracing areas on the map and trying out the new chalk. She even guiltily listens to the classroom instruction, crouched outside the window, mouthing the answers her children are asked.

In *Bonheur d'occasion*, Rose-Anna actually makes a trip back to her childhood home in the country, but with disastrous results. She leaves
Montreal with great expectations of finding the wonderful sense of happiness that thoughts of her childhood evoke. But when she arrives at the farm, she is overwhelmed by a sense of inferiority because her poverty is so apparent to her country relatives. She is a forty-year-old pregnant woman with too many children and an unemployed husband. She compares her children with her brother's healthy boistrous children and finds her own thin and withdrawn by comparison.

Christine's mother in Rue Deschambault also makes the return trip to her childhood home in Quebec, but she enjoys the trip very much and feels more appreciative of her home and family on her return. In La Route d'Altamont, Christine and her mother accidentally discover some small hills while driving around in their normally flat Manitoban plains, and Christine's elderly mother becomes almost ecstatic at this sight. She gets out of the car and climbs around by herself for a while and begs Christine to write down the route so they can return. These hills remind her of her childhood home in Quebec and bring her great joy and rejuvenation.

Mais que se dirent-elles, ce jour-là, maman et les petites collines? Est-ce que vraiment les collines rendirent à maman sa joyeuse âme d'enfant? Et comment se fait-il que l'être humain ne connaisse pas en sa vieillesse de plus grand bonheur que de retrouver en soi son jeune visage?

The Role of Women

Women are the pivotal force in the family home in Gabrielle Roy's novels, and their primary role is to take care of their family. All

11 Roy, La Route d'Altamont, p. 206.
of Roy's female protagonists except three are middle-aged, married women with numerous children. The three exceptions are Florentine, Rose-Anna's daughter in *Bonheur d'occasion*; Christine in *Rue Deschambault* and *La Route d'Altamont*; and the young Eskimo girl in the story "La Rivière sans repos." Florentine, already pregnant, does get married by the end of the novel, and Elsa, although never married, devotes her life to raising her son. Christine, of course, is the semi-autobiographical creation of Gabrielle Roy as a young girl. All of Roy's women characters also come from simple, often impoverished background, and all are versions of the French-Canadian mother-earth figure whose primary duty in life is to stay at home and look after the children. These women are usually portrayed in their natural background—their home. They are often in the kitchen bending over a stove fixing the daily porridge or hunched over a sewing machine sewing or mending children's clothes. None of them work outside the home except Florentine, who supports her family as a waitress and quits when she gets married. Christine's mother, who I will henceforth refer to by her first name, Eveline, did a little extra sewing in *Rue Deschambault* to secretly earn money for a trip to Quebec, but this was only temporary. Their traditional and accepted responsibility is to take care of their children, and this duty is their whole life's work.

They are never portrayed gossiping with their neighbors or participating in any other frivolous activity, and the idea of friendship is never raised. Luzina enjoys her yearly visits to the city where she makes temporary friends, but nevertheless, it is implied that the only serious relationships are within the family; and Roy stresses the
relationships between a woman and her daughters and her mother. Eveline in Rue Deschambault does occasionally chat with a neighbor who is also the mother of her children's friends, but the conversation is of a competitive nature—mothers bragging about their children and not a confidential woman-to-woman exchange:

Mon Lucien est presque trop appliqué, disait-elle; les Pères me disent qu'ils n'ont jamais vu un enfant tant travailler.
Ma mère retorquait: "Les Pères me disaient encore hier que mon Gervais est tellement intelligent que tout lui vient sans travail; il paraît que ça non plus ce n'est pas très bien."

The role of women in Roy's novels is to provide a warm, secure environment for the children, and this task is complicated by the fact that most of Roy's female protagonists are quite poor. Rose-Anna's entire day is absorbed with making ends meet. She buys nothing for herself and gets by with her old, ragged clothes because she never leaves the house or socializes. One day, however, she must leave her sanctuary where her poverty is at least hidden, and she observes her shabby appearance in a store-window reflection. She is shocked by her misshapen figure and worn-out clothes and reflects bitterly that Azarius still looks handsome and youthful. Later, she makes a similar comparison in the hospital where she is visiting her son Daniel. Daniel, the youngest child, born into poverty, has never had the benefit of much attention. Consequently, he develops a deep affection for his pretty young nurse Jenny who has the time to play with him. When Rose-Anna goes to visit him, she quite naturally feels jealous of this energetic 

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nurse and again thinks sadly about her own tired appearance. She
sacrifices her health and looks out for her family, staying up late
at night constantly sewing, trying to get a little more use out of
already thread-bare children's clothes.

When she gets the small amount Florentine gives her, she often has
to make painful, calculating decisions about how to best spend it. In
one touching episode, for example, she leaves the house with a few cents
and must decide whether to spend them on her sick son's medicine or a
flute he has been wanting for a long time. Hence, the title of the
English translation, The Tin Flute.

This painful calculating, which is part of the poor French-Canadian
woman's role, is also stressed in the episode where Azarius decides to
take the family to Rose-Anna's childhood home in the country. Rose-
Anna has been able to endure her poverty but is very anxious about
revealing it to her mother and other relatives. Again she must calcula-
te how to spend the few cents she has, whether to buy shoes for a
child who has none or some material to sew a makeshift jacket for
another child. The children, supposedly asleep, overhear her discus-
sions with Azarius, and each one clamors out what he or she would like
to have for their trip to the country.

Eveline must also make these painful decisions. In Rue Descham-
bault, her calculations are mentioned in several stories. At the end
of the novel, the now mature Christine remembers seeing her mother
red-eyed from sewing and realizes how willingly her mother sacrificed
for her children. In La Route d'Altamont, Eveline is sad that she
does not have enough money to send Christine to the country to visit
relatives because Christine is perpetually pale and underweight. In the story "Le Vieillard," which takes place during a sweltering heat wave, the listless Christine is invited to go to Lake Winnipeg with an elderly man she has met while playing. Again, we see Gabrielle Roy's feminine perspective beautifully expressed in Eveline's agony as she tries to decide whether to let her daughter leave for the day on a wonderful adventure with a man she hardly knows.

The French-Canadian woman's primary role is unequivocally her role as mother, and I will examine this role in more detail when I discuss the stages in a French-Canadian woman's life: the daughter, the mother and the grandmother. Gerard Bessette, in his article on La Route d'Altamont, summarizes the significance of this role:

La lecture de La Route d'Altamont vient confirmer que le sujet d' [inspiration] le plus fécond de Mme Gabrielle Roy, le plus prenant et le plus dynamique, c'est sa mère: de laquelle Rose-Anna Lacasse (Bonheur d'occasion), Eveline (Rue Deschambault) et Luzina Tousignant (La Petite Poule d'eau) ne sont que des [variations]. Les moments d'intensité maximal, le frémissement pathétique et sympathique qui animent les plus grandes scènes de Gabrielle Roy se situent toujours dans l'orbite maternelle. La Florentine de Bonheur d'occasion, dont l'angoisse matricielle est si vertigineuse, ne se définit, ne se conçoit et ne se sent qu'en fonction de Rose-Anna, la mère aux perpetuelles et obsédantes grossesses.13

The Role of Men

Men in the French-Canadian household have, of course, the role of provider. In Gabrielle Roy's literature, men are insignificant or absent except in the two novels where they are the protagonist. In

La Montagne secrète, the novel about the artist Pierre's search for absolute beauty, there are no women characters. In Alexandre Chenevert, the majority of the novel is devoted to Alexandre's search for happiness which takes him away from his family to live alone in the woods. Although his wife is mentioned rarely and in negative terms from Alexandre's perspective, the fact that they manage to communicate their love for each other before Alexandre's death is significant. In general, however, it seems that in the novels where there are strong female characters, the men are absent or very weak. Marie-Lynn Piccione makes this point in her article:

Pour une raison quelconque, les maris, les pères, sont absents, de corps ou de coeur, de leur foyer: Azarius, mari de Rose-Anna, est un faible, dont les 'jongleries' se révèlent impuissantes à faire vivre les siens; Hippolyte, l'époux de Luzina, est un brave homme, mais il s'en remet à sa femme pour toute décision importante; quant au mari d'Eveline, il voyage pour le compte du gouvernement et il est presque toujours absent de la maison, bien plus gaie et plus vivante, d'ailleurs, quand il n'est pas là, selon les dires de Christine, sa fille.14

It should also be noted that the most successful male characterizations in Gabrielle Roy's novels seem to resemble in some ways the female characters. One of Gabrielle Roy's most interesting male characters is Father Joseph-Marie in La Petite Poule d'eau. Like Pierre the artist, he has no female partner, but unlike him, he is a very satisfied man who has spent his whole lifetime working at what he most enjoys—bringing love to others. He travels around the most isolated areas of Northwest Canada in a threadbare frock spreading love to all who are interested, including non-Catholics and non-believers. His

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message that the closest resemblance to world harmony is found in the
family hearth permeates all of Gabrielle Roy's literature and will be
discussed in the conclusion. Pierre the artist and Alexandre Chenevert
are also rather atypical male characters in that they both devote their
lives to an idealistic search for abstract goals.

The male characters in Gabrielle Roy's other novels conform to
the stereotype of the male in the lower socioeconomic French-Canadian
society. They are victims of a degrading work-oriented system they
never chose. They are neutral, usually kindly, often frustrated
individuals who are defined in terms of their role as provider. They
are often absent from the household and, when present, seem to have
about the same status as children, remaining in the periphery of the
family interaction. They usually remain relegated to supportive
roles and are not the instigators of the action. Azarius breaks this
pattern twice in Bonheur d'occasion and makes assertive decisions which
both have very negative consequences: when he steals his boss's truck
to take his family to the country and ends up getting fired from a job
he desperately needs, and when he decides to enlist in the Army, leaving
his wife and children, including a newborn baby he has never seen.

Hippolyte in La Petite Poule d'eau is the most satisfied of these
male characters, partly because his job of tending sheep on the isolated
island is not degrading. He is rarely mentioned in the novel however.
He effaces himself in front of the exuberance of his wife Luzina and
voluntarily lets her take care of their numerous children and make all
household decisions, such as those related to establishing a school on
the island. Luzina treats him lovingly, like a well-intentioned but sometimes unreasonable child.

As for Gabrielle Roy's two semi-autobiographical novels, the father-husband is never mentioned in *La Route d'Altamont*. In *Rue Deschambault*, he is insignificant to the action and closely resembles her own father, who was much older than her mother, sixty years old when Gabrielle was born, and lost his job two years before retirement. He, like Edouard in *Rue Deschambault*, worked as a colonizing agent and was absent from the house for months at a time. Edouard is portrayed as a moody, frustrated, insecure man. Two of the stories, "Petite Misère" and "Le Jour et la nuit," particularly describe this broken-down, almost self-exiled man who sleeps late while his enthusiastic wife rises early, bustles with activity and radiates joy and love of life. For his part, Edouard feels much more appreciated by the immigrants he is helping settle than by his own family who find him stern and unaffectionate. Christine confirms that the house is gayer when her father is gone:

Papa était absent. Souvent il restait au loin tout un mois et même davantage. Papa était un homme estimé, honorable; cependant, il n'y a pas à dire, la maison était beaucoup plus gaie quand mon père n'y était pas.¹⁵

Azarius in *Bonheur d'occasion* is the most présent, but the least effective of the husband-father characters. He is a kindly, irresponsible dreamer who, after being laid off as a carpenter, never again succeeds in his role as provider. He loves his wife and children, but as his self-esteem suffers increasingly because of their daily struggle

¹⁵*Roy, Rue Deschambault*, p. 102.
against poverty, they seem more and more of a burden to him. He yearns to escape the reality of his failure and, unlike his practical, hard-working wife Rose-Anna, he prefers to spend his time away from home, discussing politics and his grandiose schemes to make money, plans which always put him and his family in worse debt. Like Edouard, Azarius is uncomfortable at home and feels more appreciated and successful when he is with his friends at a local café. Both families often see their men when they are the most worn-out and disheartened. Gabrielle Roy is obviously aware of and very sympathetic to the victimization of these men and paints them compassionately, while at the same time concentrating most of her interest on the amazing strength of their women who must make ends meet. Rose-Anna, although overworked and suffering physically more than Azarius, does not feel dehumanized because her struggle to clothe and feed her children is love-centered. She has the strength to continue the struggle while Azarius gives up and yearns only to escape. He finally succeeds by joining a great cause, the War in Europe, meanwhile abandoning his wife and children who are a constant reminder to him of his failure.

_Rue Deschambault_ is the only novel in which Gabrielle Roy makes definite comparisons between men and women. "Les Bijoux," is a story about Christine's first naïve attempts to wear jewelry, makeup and perfume. Her mother Eveline is angry with Christine's brother's encouragement of this foolishness. Eveline, normally a traditional French-Canadian mother, suddenly becomes a modern woman, frustrated that there is no equality between men and women and angry at men for
esteeming women's childishness and capriciousness rather than their more honest virtues:

Pourquoi flatter-tu un si cruel penchant, Robert?...Toute femme, disait maman, a dans le fond d'elle-même une pauvre petite âme païenne, et il me semble que vous autres, les hommes, c'est bien souvent cette païenne que vous adorez...Bien sûr, fit Robert en riant. Celle qui se joue de vous, celle qui se prepare à mille jeux durs et impitoyables, oui, c'est celle-là que vous encouragez. 

Au fond, il n'y a pas d'égalité entre les hommes et les femmes. Les belles vertus: la loyauté, la franchise, la droiture, l'admirable simplicité, vous les revendiquez pour vous, alors que vous prizsez les femmes pour leurs détours, leurs caprices. C'est très mal, d'abord pour vous-mêmes qui êtes les premiers à en souffrir, et pour les femmes que vous plaisez, on dirait, à maintenir dans un état d'enfance rusée. Oh! quand donc, fit maman, les mêmes qualités seront-elles bonnes pour tous!16

In another story in Rue Deschambault, "Les Déserteuses," it is Christine who observes the inequality in her mother's behavior. While they are looking up old relatives in Montreal, Christine notices that her mother mentions her husband all the time. She realizes that a woman who boasts of her husband is much better accepted than a woman alone:

Elle parla encore de choses et d'autres et trouva moyen de dire souvent quelque petite phrase comme: 'mon mari, fonctionnaire de l'Etat...' et j'ai vu combien une femme qui se reclama d'un mari est mieux vue dans la société qu'une femme toute seule. Cela me parut injuste; je n'en avais jamais remarqué qu'un homme eût besoin de parler de sa femme pour avoir l'air important.17

Gabrielle Roy rarely makes these kind of comparisons however. The most obvious differences between the male and female characters emanate from their life stories. Women are put in the concrete setting of the home and in general are very fulfilled with their roles of child-rearing.

16 Roy, Rue Deschambault, p. 239.
17 Ibid., p. 118.
Their maternal love seems to give them a direction in their lives which allows them to be very loving, joyful, positive individuals. Men, although much freer to pursue their own goals, seem haunted by a vision of a future which is out of their reach.

The Role of Marriage

The role of marriage is not a major topic in Gabrielle Roy's writing. She is much more interested in the relationship between the daughter, mother and grandmother in the French-Canadian household. Paula Gilbert Lewis describes Roy's attitude toward couples in her article in the French Review:

It is sad, therefore, that despite Mme Roy's own warmth and sensitivity toward such people, as recreated in her fiction, she does not portray much real love in the relationships of couples. She states that she simply writes about what she witnesses around her; she has seen very few couples deeply in love. Warm feelings do exist, in her opinion, between Rose-Anna and Azarius of Bonheur d'occasion and between Eveline and Papa of Rue Deschambault, but in general for Roy, couples in love are boring. The pathetic nature of spouses and their lack of mutual communication are far more interesting to depict. Similarly, she writes little about any positive sexual relations in her literary couples. Born and raised a Catholic and still influenced by her religious training, Mme Roy continues to feel that given the distinction between the body and the soul, sex usually causes a separation between two individuals.18

Two couples in Roy's writing definitely exhibit a "pathetic nature" and "lack of communication." Alexandre Chenevert's relationship with his wife is very unsatisfactory, and their reconciliation before his death helps Alexandre accept his disappointing life. In Un Jardin au bout du monde, the old Ukranian couple have grown to hate each other.

Their children have long ago left and have stopped visiting because of their parents' strange Ukranian ways and their hostility toward any acceptance of Canadian ways. The old man and woman maintain their stubborn resistance to modern times as mutual enemies, rarely speaking, silently blaming all their sorrows on each other. The woman, Martha, reflects upon the phenomenon of love which can seem so strong at one time and later turn into hate:

Martha se dressa un instant, regardant passer cet homme, son mari, le compagnon de sa vie, était-ce seulement possible? Et qu'était-ce que cet amour qui, dans la jeunesse, alliait parfois les natures les plus opposées?19

This theme of the disillusionment of love is suggested again in her two semi-autobiographical novels. In Rue Deschambault, in the story "Pour empêcher un mariage," Eveline sets off for Saskatchewan, accompanied by Christine, to talk her older daughter out of marrying a man considered unworthy. When Eveline asks her daughter why she is determined to ruin her life, Georgianna replies, "Je l'aime. Je vais me marier. Je l'aime...." And Eveline remarks, "Pauvre Georgianna... tu parles de l'amour comme s'il devait durer...Mais lorsqu'il finit... s'il n'y a pas autre choses pour prendre sa place...C'est affreux."20 Christine overhears this conversation and later asks her mother how one knows when marriage is right. "Il faut s'aimer..." Eveline answers, and Christine continues:

"Mais Georgianna dit qu'elle aime...."


20Roy, Rue Deschambault, pp. 60-61.
"Elle pense qu'elle aime," dit Maman.

"Est-ce qu'on ne le sait pas pour sûr, quand on aime?..."

"Des fois, non," dit Maman.

"Toi, tu le savais?"

"Je pensais que je le savais."  

Then Eveline irritably accuses Christine of being too prying and refuses to answer any more questions. Obviously one does not discuss male/female relationships.

In another story in Rue Deschambault, "Le Titanic," Christine overhears her adult relatives discussing the Titanic. Her uncle is stressing the tragedy of the sinking since many of the passengers were on their honeymoons. Christine then asks what a honeymoon is:

Il m'a dit ce qu'était la lune de miel: Le temps des amours, au début du mariage, quand tout est beau...Ensuite, c'est moins beau?...Ils ont ri un peu, mais mal à l'aise et en se regardant entre eux d'un air qui n'était pas franc. M. Elie parut fâché et tout sombre.  

This same train of thought is pursued in a later dialogue between Christine and Eveline in La Route d'Altamont. Christine and her elderly mother are talking about the grandmother who has died and her relationship with her husband:

Mais s'il est vrai, comme tu dis, qu'elle aimait tant grand-père, comment se fait-il qu'elle ne lui pardonna jamais tout à fait, en fin de compte, de l'avoir entraînée dans l'aventure de l'ouest?

L'amour trouve difficile justement de pardonner le moindre manquement à l'amour.

Et c'était un manquement à l'amour de la part de grand-père d'avoir tenu à tout prix à déplacer sa famille?

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21 Ibid., p. 65.

22 Ibid., p. 93.
Tous deux avaient raison, au fond. C'est ce qui fait sans doute qu'on est si loin les uns des autres en cette vie: on a presque tous raison l'un contre l'autre.

Ah vraiment, dis-je, si l'amour et le mariage sont ce que tu dis, ils m'apparaissent plutôt propre à diminuer l'être humain...

Diminuer! s'écria maman. Il faut donc que tu n'as rien compris à ce que j'ai tâché de t'expliquer. Que c'est le seul chemin, au contraire, pour avancer un peu hors de soi...."23

It seems that marriage is a necessary but unpredictable aspect of the French-Canadian woman's life. Gabrielle Roy does not suggest that it is the cause of any of her female protagonists' joy or sorrow, but it does seem to provide them with an opportunity to rise above their selfish concerns. Gabrielle Roy's characteristic preference for the interaction between her female characters, rather than between husband and wife, is revealed in the next and final discussion in this chapter: the role of daughter, mother and grandmother within the French-Canadian household.

The Role of Daughter, Mother and Grandmother

Christine continues to ask her mother questions about marriage, and in a later conversation, asks her if she would get married again. Eveline's answer reveals why the complex link between generations of women is such an important theme for Gabrielle Roy:

Si c'était à recommencer, te marierais-tu quand même?
Certainement. Car, je te regarde et me dis que rien n'est perdu, que tu feras à ma place et mieux que moi ce que j'aurais désiré accomplir.
Cela compense donc?
Cela fait bien plus que compenser. N'as-tu donc pas encore compris que les parents revivent vraiment en leurs enfants?

23 Roy, La Route, pp. 228-229.
Gabrielle Roy is very interested in the aging process within the family setting and in the interaction between the daughter, mother and grandmother. Again, she often draws on her own childhood experiences for her observations about how we live through both our children and our parents. She primarily deals with this theme in La Route d'Altamont by means of the continuing dialogue between Christine and her mother (Eveline) and grandmother, called Mémère, an affectionate term for grandmother. This exchange begins when Christine is only six, continues past her grandmother's death to her own mother's death and concludes with Christine an adult woman completing the cycle. What Eveline gradually comes to understand as she passes through the adult stages of her life is that life renews itself for a woman in two ways: through an increased understanding and love for one's mother as motherhood is in turn experienced by the daughter, and through one's children as they in turn mature and continue the female cycle.

At the beginning of La Route d'Altamont, Eveline tells Christine how Mémère was remembering la rivière Assomption, a little river in the hills of Quebec where Mémère was born:

Je ne savais pas qu'elle y avait tant pensé. Mais tâchez de comprendre à la fin: la rivière Assomption, c'est un peu la jeunesse de votre grand-mère, au loin, dans le Québec.²⁵

²⁴Ibid., p. 236.
²⁵Ibid., p. 49.
This new awareness allows Eveline to understand Mémère's preference for Quebec and her persistent bitterness at having been forced by her husband to move to Manitoba. This phenomenon repeats itself again at the end of the novel, but with different generations, when Eveline and Christine accidentally discover some small hills on a drive. The sight of these mountains causes the seventy-year-old Eveline to both recall her now deceased mother and also the dearly beloved mountains of her childhood home in Quebec. Eveline is temporarily rejuvenated and climbs joyfully around the hills in this circular return to her youth.

Eveline in Rue Deschambault actually makes the trip to Quebec, her childhood home, in this theme of age joining childhood. Rose-Anna in Bonheur d'occasion also makes this attempt to return to her childhood home in the country. She sets off with great expectations of experiencing the joy associated with her childhood, temporarily defeating her exhaustion and anxiety with youthful feelings of hope. However, her happiness is illusory and actually intensifies her sense of poverty and misery.

Mémère is also rejuvenated by being able to maintain her role as an independent woman. As the novel begins, she is still living by herself, coping with the alienation that old age often brings. She is already becoming senile and is losing her sight, hearing and memory; but she still has her sense of humor and self-reliance. In one poignant scene, several of her grandchildren come over for a short visit. She can no longer remember their names, but in hopes of getting them to stay for a while, she rushes down to her basement for some homemade jam. By the time she has returned to the kitchen, they have all left,
and only Christine, who is staying with Mémère, is there to witness her disappointment. Never intimidated, this self-confident woman turns to her youngest grandchild:

Toi, au moins, je connais ton nom. Puis elle me demandait: Comment c'est-y déjà que tu t'appelles? Je lui disais, avec un peu d'humeur: Christine. Oui, c'est bien cela, je le savais: Christiane.26

Mémère is temporarily rejuvenated during Christine's visit by being able to show off her skills to the impressionable Christine. Christine is so impressed with the doll Mémère makes entirely from material around the house that she compares her grandmother to God, which Mémère does not entirely deny:

Car, dit-elle, après un moment de réflexion, avec ce qu'il m'a donné de moyens et mis de bois dans les roues, j'ai quand même pas mal aidé sa création. J'ai peut-être fait tout ce que peut faire une créature humaine.27

But without Christine's encouragement, Mémère is nevertheless experiencing the loneliness and uselessness of an older person. In another dialogue with Christine, she complains that God should have had the good sense not to have taken her seriously when she complained about being overworked as a younger woman:

On est puni par où on a désiré, toujours. J'ai sans doute trop souhaité mes aises, un bon ordre établi et de n'avoir plus constamment des enfants dans mes jupes avec leurs jérémiaudes. Oui, j'ai souhaité une minute à moi. À présent, j'ai à moi un siècle!28


27Ibid., p. 28.

As Mémère becomes more senile, Eveline tries to get her to come and live with her and Christine. At first she refuses and even insists on planting an enormous garden. Christine is again the confidant to her mother's concern:

A la fin, maman, lui ai-je demandé, trouvez-vous que cela a du sens, une vieille femme seule cultiver assez de légumes pour nourrir tout un canton?^29

Finally, Mémère agrees to move in with Eveline, to in fact change roles with her daughter and to allow her daughter to look after her. After the loss of her independence, she ages very quickly, and Christine is witness to this confusing interaction where her mother is treating Mémère, whom Christine once considered indestructible, like her own baby:

Elle se tenait près de ce bloc immobile sous les couvertures qu'elle continuait toujours à appeler "maman," et je ne sais quel désarroi j'éprouvais d'entendre ma mère, vieille elle-même à ce qu'il me paraissait alors, s'adresser avec ce mot d'enfant à quelqu'un qui ne pouvait même plus ni manger ni boire seul. J'en ressentais je ne sais quelle confusion à propos des âges, de l'enfance et de la vieillesse, dont il me semblait que jamais je ne m'en tirerais.^30

Eveline is also changed by her new role with her mother. She develops a deep respect and understanding for Mémère, treating every thought she utters as precious. Mémère is bedridden and communicates rarely, but Eveline listens lovingly and interprets the marvelous things she has said, or meant to say, to Christine:

Maman prétendait pourtant que nous ne faisions pas assez d'efforts pour écouter grand-mère, que plus tard nous pour-

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29Ibid., p. 35.
30Ibid., pp. 51-52.
rions regretter de n'avoir pas mieux recueilli les dernières confidences d'une vie, qu'il s'agissait là d'une sorte de trésor inestimable offert peu de fois au cours de l'existence.31

Mémère is temporarily rejuvenated one final time in this linking of generations when Christine decides to show her grandmother the family photograph album. Christine remembers that two years earlier, when she was visiting at Mémère's house, Mémère had trouble remembering her relative's names, so Christine patiently names as many faces as she knows, elaborating on the ones she knows something about. She follows her mother's example of treating Mémère like a very cherished baby, talking gently to the motionless lump of blankets. Christine comes upon a snapshot of Mémère as a young mother, posed with her husband and several young children. She begins to understand how the feminine cycle renews itself through the next generation of females and is fascinated with this snapshot of her grandmother which in no way resembles the wrinkled old lady Mémère has become:

A travers elle enfin, je pense que je commençai à comprendre très vaguement un peu de la vie, tous ces êtres successifs qu'elle fait de nous au fur et à mesure que nous avançons en âge.32

She shows the portrait to Mémère, commenting on how beautiful she was then and believes she sees her grandmother's dulled eyes shine for a few seconds in response.

This complex link between daughter and mother and grandmother is not only expressed by the daughter taking on the role of mother toward

31Ibid., p. 48.
32Ibid., p. 56.
her own elderly mother, but the daughters in Roy's literature also begin unconsciously to resemble their mothers. Eveline makes this observation to Christine when, in her middle-age, she goes through the process just explained of renewing herself through her mother and consequently understanding her better:

Toute jeune, je me reconnaissais parfaitement en mon père et lui en moi: nous étions des alliés. Maman disait de nous, avec un peu de rancune, peut-être: deux pareils au même. Je croyais tenir de lui uniquement, et je pense que je m'en réjouissais... Je l'aimais presque à l'exclusion de tout autre.

Plus tard, fit maman, avec les premières désillusions de la vie, j'ai commencé à détecter en moi quelques petits signes de la personnalité de ma mère. Mais je ne voulais pas lui ressembler, pauvre vieille pourtant admirable, et je luttais. C'est avec l'âge mûr que je l'ai rejointe, ou qu'elle-même m'a rejointe, comment expliquer cette étrange rencontre hors du temps.\textsuperscript{33}

Not only do the daughters begin to resemble their mothers in character, there is a mother-daughter pattern of behavior which repeats itself in this cyclical link between female generations. As Mémère ages and Eveline's understanding of the process increases along with her feelings of love, Eveline constantly tries to discourage her mother from working, insisting finally that she move in with her so she can finally have the rest that she deserves. However, free time is not really what an older person wants, and Mémère is insulted by her daughter's efforts to spare her any work. Time passes, the grandmother dies and Eveline becomes in turn the elderly grandmother, and her daughter Christine continues the pattern, making the same mistake. One time, after Christine has begged her mother to sit down and rest,

\textsuperscript{33}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 225-226.
Eveline makes the observation that that is exactly what she begged her own mother to do and again experiences a deep understanding of her mother, of the aging process and of the complex interaction that links daughter, mother and grandmother:

Cent fois par jour, je disais donc à maman: Reposez-vous. N'en avez-vous pas assez fait? C'est le temps de se reposer. Elle, alors, comme si je l'eusse insultée, répondait: Me reposer! Il en sera bien assez vite le temps, va! Puis elle devenait songeuse et me disait: Sais-tu que j'ai dit cette même chose cent fois à ma propre mère, quand il m'a semblé qu'elle devenait vieille: Reposez-vous, lui ai-je dit, et c'est maintenant seulement que je sais à quel point j'ai du l'agacer.  

This theme of the adult daughter who begins to resemble her mother, and consequently to understand her better, is also developed in Gabrielle Roy's two short stories: In "La Riviere sans repos," the Eskimo Elsa has raised her illegitimate son with the help of her mother Winnie. As a young mother, Elsa rejected her Eskimo heritage in a misguided effort to raise her half-white son. She nagged her mother frequently about her slovenly appearance and constant smoking. The child eventually ran away and her mother died. The now middle-aged Elsa has lost interest in life and, like her mother whom she constantly criticized, also smokes and ignores her appearance. Like Roy's other female protagonists, she also understands her mother in a way she never had:

A quarante ans, elle eut tout l'air d'une vieille femme. Dans ses robes sans plus de couleur, aux pieds des bottes dépareillées, grise comme la terre, ne regardant plus le monde que d'un oeil, l'autre clos dans la fumée de cigarette, elle ressemblait de plus en plus à sa défunte mère. Un jour, deux

34Ibid., p. 200
commeres qui avaient bien connu celle-ci, en voyant venir par
la grève la même silhouette, leur sembla-t-il, s'écrièrent
ensemble:
—Mais c'est pas possible! C'est Winnie elle-même, Winnie
revenue sur terre!
Au passage, à travers le bruit chantant des vagues, Elsa
entendit la remarque et fit l'effort de se redresser pour ne
pas tellement ressembler à sa mère qu'elle comprit pourtant
alors comme jamais, dans sa chair délabrée, dans une sorte de
honte de l'âme.35

Martha in "Un Jardin au bout du monde" also goes through this
process. She left the Ukraine as a young woman, and her mother bitterly
predicted that she would not succeed in Canada. Now, as an old woman
herself whose children have in turn left her, she understands her mother
better:

Ainsi étaient-ils à présent irrémédiablement séparés, elle
restée à Volhyn, ses enfants menant au loin la vie de l'époque.
Pouvait-on les en blamer? Martha essaya d'imaginer ce qu'elle
aurait pu éprouver si, sa mère encore vivante, elle eût pu se
transporter chez elle, là-bas, et la retrouver vieille femme si
têtue, si ignorante, qu'elle avait prédit au jeune couple sur
le point d'émigrer au Canada: «Vous n'arriverez pas. Vous
n'arriverez jamais. C'est le vide quelque part, on tombe
dedans.»36

Rose-Anna's mother made a similar prediction on Rose-Anna's wedding
day as she prepared to move to Montreal with Azarius:

Tu crois p'têtre bien te sauver de la misère à c'te heure que
tu vas aller faire ta dame dans les villes, mais marque bien
ce que je te dis: la misère nous trouve."37

As a young newlywed, Rose-Anna ignored the warning, confidently ex-
pecting to find the happiness her mother had never enjoyed. What

35Roy, La Rivière, p. 226.
36Roy, Un Jardin, p. 179.
37Roy; Bonheur, p. 240.
Rose-Anna finds, however, is a different kind of misery, caused by city poverty, a misery equally difficult to endure. This poverty influences the interaction between the three generations in Bonheur d'occasion—Florentine, Rose-Anna and Mme Laplante—because the thought process needed to communicate love is worn down by the terrible effort necessary to survive.

Rose-Anna had never been very close to her mother, who defined her female role in terms of pain, suffering and misery. After Rose-Anna's discouraging arrival at her childhood home, the relatives suggest that the children go play in the maple forest where the annual maple sugaring is taking place. This is a childhood memory which Rose-Anna cherishes. She prepares to follow them, but Mme Laplante admonishes her because of her pregnant condition, and Rose-Anna stays in the house feeling like a frustrated child. Nevertheless, she draws her rocker up to her mother's and feels slightly ashamed to be coming up to her mother, not as a strong, confident, married woman, but as a child in need of help and sympathy. As they talk, Rose-Anna finds herself trying to present her impoverished situation in the best light possible, leaving out the worst details and embellishing others. At times, Rose-Anna considers confiding in her mother, but is discouraged by her bitter, self-sacrificing attitude toward life. As Mme Laplante philosophizes about a woman's cruel destiny, Rose-Anna notices how she fingers the edge of her chair:

Les doigts secs, jaunis, frottaient le bord de la chaise, usé à cet endroit par le geste habituel des mains, et semblaient souligner un doute constant.38

38Ibid., p. 240.
When she is ready to leave, her mother almost grudgingly gives her some cream, eggs and milk from the farm, and Rose-Anna accepts them, feeling slightly hurt, silently accusing her mother of only meeting her material needs.

Back in Montreal, Rose-Anna is nervously thinking about her own daughter Florentine and the difficulties of being a mother. As she frets about Florentine's withdrawn behavior, she unconsciously rubs her fingers against her chair anxiously, imitating her mother's same futile gesture:

Sans effort, comme si l'habitude fût déjà ancienne, elle esquissait sur le bord de sa chaise, le même geste futile de sa vieille mère.39

Just as Rose-Anna is unable to confide in her mother, Florentine withholds her confidences. Florentine almost confides in Rose-Anna twice, but is discouraged by Rose-Anna's cold, glaring look. When Florentine does reveal that she is pregnant, Rose-Anna turns away from her daughter, feeling embarrassed as if she shared the disgrace. Rose-Anna suddenly realizes that she is as harsh and uncommunicative as her own mother. She wonders if some mothers are so stern because they cannot protect their daughters from the suffering of being a woman. Again, like the other mothers mentioned, Rose-Anna comes to understand her mother better as she assumes her role as mother and realizes how hard it is to help a daughter in her secret miseries:

Est-ce que j'aurai, moi, quelque chose de plus à donner à Florentine quand elle sera une femme mariée et qu'elle aura peut-être ben besoin de moi de la façon que j'ai moi-même

39Ibid., p. 244.
aujourd'hui besoin de quelqu'un pour me parler? Elle croyait comprendre soudain l'austérité de sa mère. N'était-ce pas avant tout la gêne terrible de ne pas savoir défendre les êtres qui l'avaient ainsi fait se raidir toute sa vie?

On Florentine's wedding day, Rose-Anna half-heartedly attempts to finally communicate with her daughter. Florentine, although very depressed about her marriage to a man she does not love, is nevertheless determined to go through with this decision which will resolve the problem of her pregnancy. When Rose-Anna lectures Florentine on the importance of love, Florentine angrily accuses Rose-Anna of always preaching. Rose-Anna, who until recently had seen herself as a loving mother quite unlike Mme Laplante, is stunned at this possible image of herself, preaching like her own mother. A picture of her cold, straight-laced mother comes to mind, and she again becomes aware of the link between the three of them.

The difficulty of communication between different generations of women within a family is also stressed in Gabrielle Roy's two semi-autobiographical novels. The daughter-mother relationship is much stronger between Christine and Eveline because Eveline does not have the financial worries that Rose-Anna has and because Christine, as the last child still at home, becomes Eveline's confidant and friend as well as her daughter. Nevertheless, Eveline has trouble dealing with her daughters. In "Pour empêcher un mariage," in Rue Deschambault, she does not succeed in convincing her daughter Georgianna not to marry. Nor can Eveline get through to her unfortunate daughter Alicia who, in

Ibid., p. 244.
the story by the same name, has to be committed to an insane asylum and ultimately dies there. One day Eveline takes Christine with her to visit Alicia in a last effort to try to bring her back to reality. Christine is terrified by the prison-like atmosphere and looks to her mother for reassurance, but Eveline is too distracted to help her. Christine observes:

Elle ne s’aperçut même pas à quel point j’étais terrifiée.
Il fallait que maman eût bien du chagrin pour ne même plus voir le mien. Ils disent que le chagrin rapproche les gens; ce n’est pas toujours vrai; ce jour-là, autour de maman assise sur une chaise droite, le chagrin faisait un petit cercle bien fermé.  

There is also a misunderstanding between Christine and Eveline in the story "Wilhelm," named for Christine's first boyfriend, who Eveline again finds disappointing. Christine is forbidden to see him, so they talk on the phone. When this is forbidden, they write each other. Eveline finds the note in her room and continues to do anything she can to prevent this first romance. Christine reflects about the animosity between them:

Maman devenait comme une espionne, occupée à fouiller ma corbeille à papier; et moi, parfois, je pensais d’elle qu'elle était bien la dernière personne au monde à me comprendre! Était-ce donc là ce qu'accomplissait l'amour! Et où étaient nos belles relations franches, entre maman et moi! Vient-il toujours une mauvaise époque entre une mère et sa fille?  

Fortunately, Christine eventually loses interest in her Wilhelm, but it is not the end of conflict between mother and daughter. Christine has grown from an adolescent to a young woman and has made

41Roy, Rue Deschambault, p. 176.

42Ibid., p. 229.
her choice to become a writer. Eveline, who wants Christine to try something easier, is again very upset with Christine, but Christine reasons that it was her mother's influence that led her to choose writing as a career:

Maman eut l'air tracassée. C'était pourtant sa faute si j'aimais mieux la fiction que les jours quotidiens. Elle m'avait enseigné le pouvoir des images, la merveille d'une chose révélée par un mot juste et tout l'amour que peut contenir une simple et belle phrase....

In La Route d'Altamont, Eveline is also angry at Christine for deciding to go to France to start her career as a writer:

Elle me considéra longuement et tout ce temps comme en s'éloignant, en s'éloignant terriblement de moi. Ce me fut insupportable, lui ayant simplement dit que je voulais m'en aller, de la voir, elle, prendre les devants, se retirer la première. Puis elle éclata en reproches véhéments:

T'en aller, toi aussi donc! Voilà ce que tu complotes. J'aurais dû m'en douter....

They argue back and forth, Eveline insisting that Christine would do better to stay in their little village and write, and Christine insisting that she has to leave. She is determined to make her return trip, this time farther back than Eveline's hills of Altamont, even farther back than Mémère's Quebec:

Que veux-tu, dis-je, j'ai été élevée à croire que la France est notre vieille mère patrie à tous et que je pourrais m'y trouver comme chez moi.

In Europe, Christine constantly thinks about what she will do and how much she would like to accomplish for her mother before returning:

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43Ibid., p. 246.

44Roy, La Route, p. 237.

...je me hâtais, je me pensais toujours au bord de ce que je voulais devenir à ses yeux avant de lui revenir. Et je pense bien que cette hâte où j'étais de ce que je deviendrai m'a caché tout le reste.\textsuperscript{46}

This preoccupation with accomplishing the projects the mother has conceived is the final concept I wish to discuss in this treatment of the interaction between the daughter, mother and grandmother. There exists a progression in Roy's novels whereby the daughter attains the goals of the mother. It is part of the renewal process the mother and grandmother experience. Eveline shares her gift for words and storytelling with Christine who, in turn, becomes a novelist. Before going into writing, Eveline encourages her to become a teacher, which Christine also did. Eveline confided to her daughter several times that had she not married so young and had so many children, she herself would have liked to become a teacher:

\begin{quote}
Et elle me confia ce qu'elle désirait pour moi de toute son âme: Si tu voulais, Christine, devenir institutrice!... Il n'y a pas d'occupation plus belle, plus digne, il me semble, pour une femme...Maman avait souhaité faire de toutes ses filles des maîtresses d'école—peut-être parce qu'elle portait en elle-même, parmi tant de rêves sacrifiés, cette vocation manquée.\textsuperscript{47}
\end{quote}

This same phenomenon is present in \textit{La Petite poule d'eau}. The children all inherit Luzina's love of learning and eventually leave the island to pursue their education.

This progression from mother to child endures in all forms and also includes the suffering that Mme Laplante passes on to Rose-Anna who, in turn, raises a daughter who will perpetuate this cycle of female

\textsuperscript{46}Ibid., p. 255.

\textsuperscript{47}Roy, \textit{Rue Deschambault}, p. 283.
misery. Each generation of women in Bonheur d'occasion is determined to break this cycle. Rose-Anna, raised in a home without love, marries the man she deeply loves, confident that she will be much happier than her mother. The love between Rose-Anna and Azarius lasts, but it is greatly strained by their terrible poverty. Florentine, raised in a home without financial security, is obsessed by a vision of being rich and throws herself at the man she believes will help her achieve her dream. When he abandons her, she acts again on her frantic need to escape her mother's fate and marries a man who can provide the financial security she craves although it is a marriage without love.

Each generation of women affects the next female generation in a continuing cycle which Gabrielle Roy describes from her unique perspective as a French-Canadian woman. Because she grew up in a traditional, woman-centered home, she is able to authentically describe the significant interaction that takes place. Her literary sensitivity, deep respect for women and unique feminine perspective allow her to create novels in which the roles of children, mothers, grandmothers, husbands, and marriages are given their true significance in the French-Canadian home.
CHAPTER III

THE STAGES IN A FRENCH-CANADIAN WOMAN'S LIFE

In the previous section, I established the significant role of the daughter, mother and grandmother in the French-Canadian household in Gabrielle Roy's novels. In this section, I intend to analyze in more detail the characters that represent these roles. Gabrielle Roy's female protagonists each fall into one of three distinct stages in their roles as females in the French-Canadian society. Florentine and Christine represent the young girl. Luzina, Rose-Anna and Eveline are all middle-aged mothers with many children. Finally, Mme Laplante and Memere are the two elderly grandmothers who, as we have seen, have a significant role in the traditional French-Canadian family unit.

The Young Girl

The fact that Gabrielle Roy treats the stage of being a young girl with such seriousness and compassion is another indication of how her feminine perspective influences her literary work. Florentine and Christine are the antithesis of each other, and they represent two dominant social types in the French-Canadian society. Florentine represents a young girl struggling to grow up in a ghetto of lower socioeconomic French-Canadians whose traditional way of life is changing due to economic forces. Christine's family has financial problems, but they are a stable, respectable family unit with strong ties and definite goals and values. Both girls are often confused about the adult world.
and their future role as women, but Florentine's troubled world centers around her desperate struggle to escape poverty, while Christine's confusion stems from the natural problems which occur within her family: the aging and death of loved ones and the conflicts which develop between herself, her mother and her grandmother.

Both Florentine and Christine resemble each other in their frail appearance. Each is described as anemic-looking. Roy does not describe Christine any further except to stress how pale and thin she is. In Rue Deschambault, her father calls her "la petite misère" because she is so often sick, and her grandmother calls her "la petite chétive" in La Route d'Altamont because of her frailty.

Florentine is described in great detail, both directly and through the eyes of the other protagonists. The following is a description of how Jean first perceives her when he is a customer at the diner where she works:

Elle avait un visage, mince, délicat, presque enfantin. L'effort qu'elle faisait pour se maîtriser gonflait et nouait les petites veines bleues de ses tempes et en se pincant les ailes presque diaphanes du nez tiraient vers elles la peau des joues, mate, lisse et fine comme de la soie. Sa bouche était mal assurée, et parfois esquissait un tremblement, mais Jean, en regardant les yeux, fut soudain frappé de leur expression. Sous le trait surélevé des sourcils épilés que prolongeait un coup de crayon, les paupières en s'abaissant ne livraient qu'un mince rayon de regard mordoré, prudent, attentif et extraordinaire avide. Puis les cils battaient et la prunelle jaillissait entière, pleine d'un chatoiement brusque. Sur les épaules tombait une masse de cheveux brun clair.48

Both girls become very interested in clothes, makeup and jewelry—with the difference that Florentine's vanity rules her life, while

Christine's interest is merely a brief adolescent stage. Christine's preoccupation with her looks is described in the story "Les Bijoux" in Rue Deschambault. She becomes fascinated with all kinds of cheap jewelry, makeup and clothes which she experiments with in the privacy of her bedroom. One day, however, she ventures downstairs in her high heels, reeking of cheap perfume and bedecked in all her dimestore jewelry and makeup. Her mother merely smiles compassionately and tactfully compliments her on her natural looks, but her brother Robert encourages her and gives her money to buy more jewelry. Eveline is angry, as described earlier, and complains bitterly about the way women are encouraged to be coquettes.

Florentine is the epitome of the coquette who offends Eveline's respectability. She is flirtatious and devious. She foolishly believes her dimestore looks will be the means of escape from her terrible poverty, boredom and emptiness. Florentine's obsession with her looks, unlike Christine's, is a desperate struggle to trick her fate. However, ironically, it is also part of the cause of her failure because this obsession with her appearance prevents her from enjoying any real human interaction. While working as a waitress to support her destitute family, she meets a young man, Jean Levesque, who is only casually interested in her. He takes her out to dinner after work, and on the way to the restaurant she thinks constantly about her nice clothes at home going to waste:

Elle pensa avec détresse, avec une réelle détresse, à sa jolie robe neuve, très ajustée à la taille, qui lui faisait des seins ronds, tout petits, et des hanches juste assez saillantes. Avec un serrement de cœur, elle passa en revue tous les petits bijoux de son coffre dans lequel elle aurait pu choisir une
Then she becomes worried that she does not have her lipstick and begins frantically looking through her purse. She is so reassured at finding it that she keeps ahold of it, with her hand hidden in her purse. At the restaurant, she continues to be preoccupied with her makeup and finally embarrasses Jean by taking everything out of her purse and laying it on the dinner table. Jean is humiliated by her behavior and looks around the restaurant, hoping no one has seen them. When he realizes she is going to put on more lipstick at the table, he points out a mirror in a corner. When she returns to the table, she is heavily made up and wearing so much cheap perfume that the other diners turn and smile at her. Jean is equally absorbed in trying to impress people and constantly asks himself why he asked her out when she so obviously personifies a working-class girl. Neither of them, in fact, has a real dialogue. Florentine is constantly thinking about the run in her nylons, when she can put on more makeup and, occasionally, if she is impressing Jean. Jean is always irritated with Floretine's behavior and carries on an internal dialogue with himself about his reasons for asking her out:

Pourquoi l'ai-je amenée ici? Se disait-il, serrant le bord de la table. Oui, je sais, je me le suis dit assez de fois: pour la voir telle qu'elle est véritablement et n'avoir plus d'illusion à son sujet...Il la regarda qui s'avancait si maigre dans son étroite robe...Ou bien, est-ce pour la voir

49Ibid., p. 79.
manger au moins une fois à sa faim? Ou bien, est-ce pour le combler...et ensuite la séduire, la réduire à une misère plus grande encore?\textsuperscript{50}

Jean is humiliated by Florentine's awkward behavior but also sympathetic. He pities her and would like to help her since he has also experienced misery. He was orphaned at a young age and adopted later by a wealthy but unloving family. They adopted him because they promised God they would take an older child if their very sick child survived. The child survived but died later, and the parents were always emotionally distant with Jean. He grew up to be proud, mocking and calculating and ran away as soon as he could. He also experienced terrible poverty, but he is very ambitious and by the time he meets Florentine, he is doing better and studying on his own to improve his job outlook. Florentine is attracted to him because he seems sophisticated and wears expensive-looking clothes. While she perceives him as someone who is going to rescue her from her misery, he sees her as representing a lifestyle he wants to escape:

\begin{quote}
Et le jeune homme eut soudain une vision de ce que pouvait être sa vie, dans l'inquiet tourbillon de Saint-Henri, cette vie des jeunes filles fardées, pimpantes, qui lisent des romans-feuillots de quinze cents et se brûlent à de pauvres petits feux d'amour factice.\textsuperscript{51}
\end{quote}

Both of them want to get away from the Saint-Henri slum, but Jean's route is through professional self-improvement, while Florentine's vision is limited to a fantasy she has that she will be rescued by a rich man.

\textsuperscript{50}Ibid., p. 83.

\textsuperscript{51}Ibid., p. 14.
It is the difference in family and environment which primarily influences the two young girls' destinies as women. While both families are poor, Christine grew up in the outskirts of a small village near Winnipeg, in a big, rambling house with plenty of privacy inside and a virtual paradise for a child outside: a small stream, woods, fields, gardens growing delicacies like strawberries and raspberries, and finally a nearby family with children. She experienced an idyllic childhood which was enhanced by her mother's close relationship with their many relatives. Many of Christine's fondest moments were spent listening to adult conversation. Her uncles were all farmers and brought her family fresh food as well as stimulating conversation, which greatly alleviated their sense of poverty.

Florentine's family also has country relatives, but Rose-Anna is so ashamed of her own pitiful poverty that she rarely visits them. She unknowingly deprives her children of the benefit of outside contact and ideas, as well as extra food. There is no privacy in Florentine's home, which actually is a series of different, increasingly more squalid places, as explained earlier. Florentine shares a bed with her sister, and the younger children sleep piled up on couches and chairs in the living room. Urgent conversations take place furtively late at night, in whispers:

Nul endroit ne leur offrait la solitude dans cette petite maison encombrée. Toute leur vie, ils s'étaient parlé ainsi, vite, contraints, à la dérobée, tout bas. Les confidences attendaient le silence, l'obscurité, la nuit.52

52Ibid., p. 71.
While Forentine's ultimate goal is to flee this oppressive environment, Christine has a difficult time separating herself from her secure and loving home, and stays home so long her ultimate departure is very painful for her mother. Christine finally leaves to go to France in order to pursue her career as a writer, and this choice of a career also stresses a significant difference between these two girls. Florentine is already working as a waitress when the novel begins, and she is the sole support of her large family. She quit school as early as possible like all of Rose-Anna's children. Rose-Anna is so overwhelmed with the basic problems of feeding, clothing and sheltering her family that she has no time or energy to guide them in their personal and vocational development.

Florentine was the first of Rose-Anna's twelve children, and her birth brought her great joy. She lavished attention on her and dressed her beautifully, in spite of the way the neighborhood women prophetically mocked her for her extravagance:

Elle se revoyait, en de rares moments de détente, poussant la voiturette de Florentine dans le soleil. Des voisines se penchaient sur les rubans, les dentelles, et disaient: Vous vous donnez bien du trouble; quand ça sera votre dixième, vous en ferez pas autant.53

Indeed, with each birth her life became harder, her husband lost his job, and she has to spend all her time and energy just meeting the children's material needs. She stays up late at night mending and remending the children's pitiful clothes, and she often keeps them home from school for lack of clothing or because they are sick.

53Ibid., p. 97.
Ils étaient tous d'âge d'aller à l'école, sauf la petite Gisèle, mais Rose-Anna les gardait à la maison depuis quelques semaines: Lucile, parce qu'elle n'avait pas de couvre-chaussures, et Albert parce qu'il avait un mauvais rhume. Quant au petit Daniel, depuis déjà deux mois, il dépréssait tout doucement, sans symptômes évidents de maladie sérieuse. Philippe, qui atteignait ses quinze ans, refusait obstinément de retourner à l'école. Rose-Anna le surprenait à fumer les mégots de son père ou d'Eugène et à lire des romans policiers. Il avait mauvais teint, la figure eczémateuse et des dents qui pourrissaient. 

Florentine, therefore, grew up raising herself, her brothers and sisters, supporting her family financially, and receiving no guidance from her mother about alternative ways of living out the role of women. She depends totally on outside forces she cannot control—her ability to attract a man who will answer all her dreams and will carry her away from being a poor waitress.

Christine was the last born of an equally large family, and although Eveline also stays up late at night mending and sewing, she seems to have the emotional energy and special wisdom necessary to guide her children spiritually, both directly and as a role model. Whereas Rose-Anna's conversations with Florentine are limited to gloomy complaints about their terrible poverty, Azarius' refusal to work, or the unfortunate fates of the other children, Christine's mother shares her enthusiastic appreciation of life and sense of humor with her daughter. While Rose-Anna rarely leaves the house and never has visitors, Eveline loves getting out and interacting with others and especially enjoys recounting her "adventures" to her children. She also takes time to discuss her own feelings, ideas and frustrations.

54Ibid., p. 94.
with Christine, and is very aware of Christine's own struggles and aspirations. She naturally knows how to help her learn and be enriched from her failures. Christine flourishes under Eveline's loving upbringing, and also matures through a series of exchanges with other people. This positive exposure to neighbors and relatives expands Christine's outlook and increases her ability to understand and appreciate other people, attributes which Florentine is sadly lacking.

The story "Le Vieillard et l'enfant" in La Route d'Altamont, for example, describes Christine's special friendship with an old man in her neighborhood. Shortly after her beloved grandmother dies, this sensitive and impressionable child meets a lonely old man who has the time, patience and insight to appreciate her efforts to understand the adult world. Later, she must deal with a favorite sister's bizarre cruelty when this child becomes increasingly out of touch with reality and eventually is put in an insane asylum where she later dies. Christine gets to accompany her mother on many instructive trips, including the one to the insane asylum, the trip to talk Georgianna out of marriage and the trip to Quebec to visit relatives and old friends. On these trips and in other situations, she hears puzzling conversations between adults about life, love, marriage, and death. Being such a sensitive, pensive young girl, she contemplates the significance of all these experiences and this continuous internal dialogue enriches her perception of the world and her role in it. Florentine, on the other hand, goes blindly through life in a frenzied, unenlightened pursuit of an impossible dream.
Christine also inherits her mother's self-determination. Eveline manages to be a devoted Catholic wife and mother and yet occasionally meets her own needs. Unlike Rose-Anna, who is content with her role though not the poverty, Eveline yearns for adventure and confides to Christine that she wished she had worked and traveled before her marriage. In fact, during one of her husband's absences, she boldly takes a trip without his permission, farming out the older children in convents and taking Christine with her. At first Christine is upset with her mother for this unorthodox behavior, but eventually she sees how the traveling rejuvenates her. It is not surprising that Christine chooses to temporarily reject the traditional role of wife and mother to pursue a career. Florentine, on the other hand, does not make a conscious choice but submits to her fate as wife and mother due to her limited outlook which is the natural result of her social situation.

Each girl's brief romance also reflects their different family backgrounds and upbringing. Christine is a serious, thoughtful, obedient young girl whose world is her family, neighborhood and Catholic school. Besides interacting with her family and friends, her main interests are reading and music. She meets her first love at the home of a family friend; it is he who pursues the relationship and she who ultimately ends it. Florentine's world is the dime store where she works. She has not had the time or encouragement to develop many interests but enjoys going to cafes, smoking cigarettes while listening to music, or going shopping. She meets Jean at work, pursues the relationship aggressively and somewhat shamelessly, and it is he who ends it. Christine guilelessly tells her mother about Wilhelm, while
Florentine is guarded and secretive about Jean, precluding any possibility of an insightful dialogue.

Eveline is horrified that Christine is seeing this awkward, older Dutchman, Wilhelm, and forbids all communication. Christine's innocent purity, in contrast to Florentine's deviousness, is emphasized in her reaction to her mother's ban. Although she would never consider disobeying her mother, she manages all the same to continue her forbidden liaison. Wilhelm, an accomplished violinist, calls her on the phone, and if Christine answers, he proceeds to play for her. This subterfuge continues for awhile, with Christine spending hours silently holding the phone until she suddenly finds her behavior foolish and hangs up in the middle of his performance.

This innocent foolishness is the antithesis of Florentine's romance which is a serious and tragic struggle to escape her destiny of the poverty of the French-Canadian lower class world. The relationship is doomed from the beginning, however, because Jean perceives the fateful misery in Florentine which he himself is fleeing:

Il comprenait que Florentine elle-même personnifiait ce genre de vie misérable contre laquelle tout son être se soulevait. Et dans le même instant, il saisit la nature du sentiment qui le poussait vers la jeune fille. Elle était sa misère, sa solitude, son enfance triste, sa jeunesse solitaire; elle était tout ce qu'il avait hâi, ce qu'il reniait et aussi ce qui restait le plus profondément lié à lui-même, le fond de sa nature et l'aiguillon puissant de sa destinée.55

After their dinner date, Jean makes no further attempt to see Florentine. This rejection drives her to a state of almost uncontrollable frenzy.

55Ibid., p. 209.
Chaos reigns equally at home where her mother confides to her that she is expecting another baby, her father has lost yet another job and they have been evicted for not paying their rent. Florentine suffers silently in the midst of this confusion, nervously smoking cigarettes, staring into space and hearing every footstep outside with the hope it is Jean. When her parents decide to spend the day in the country, Florentine declines to go with them and pursues Jean as he is leaving the factory where he works. This time she is not heavily made up, and Jean is disarmed by her terrible vulnerability as she bursts into tears. She imprudently invites him to come to her house the next day, and he accepts, expecting a boring family get-together.

Jean is shocked and disgusted to find Florentine alone and realizes she will go to any lengths to trap him. She plays both the role of homemaker and seductress. She makes fudge and shows him snapshots of herself in the family album; then she flirts shamelessly with him in her black silk dress. Jean makes feeble attempts to resist this fatal encounter by suggesting they go to the movies, but they end up on the old leather couch, which also doubles as a bed for her sisters—a sad symbol of the poverty which ultimately drives Jean away from her. In fact, he begins leaving Florentine almost the minute their sexual encounter is completed:

Déjà la pensée de Jean avait dépassé cette frontière où la vision d'une faute commise arrête l'esprit, le retient en suspens, comme si la vie dès ce moment devait prendre une nouvelle tournure. Il se voyait au-delà de cette étape, l'ayant franchie et ne pouvant pas plus s'arrêter aux conséquences de sa conduite que le vent lâché sur les plaines considère ce qui il a détruit, saccagé derrière lui. L'immense désarroi dans lequel il avait laissé Florentine, il le fuyait, s'en éloignait un peu plus à chaque pas, ce soir.
Et cette petite voix transie demandant: On se rencontrera demain, oui, Jean?...ne l'atteignait plus qu'à travers une distance sans cesse accrue. Au moment où elle lui avait posé cette question, il avait été conscient de son hésitation à répondre. 56

The consequences of this imprudent encounter are very serious: Florentine becomes pregnant and Jean leaves with no forwarding address. She bitterly sees the trap she has unconsciously set for herself. Her whole life goal was to escape the cycle of poverty and babies personified by her mother, but she now finds herself in a worse predicament, expecting her first baby with the added shame of not being married. Because of Florentine's limited outlook, she sees her destiny as a woman in terms of two opposite fates: she either ends up a poor, submissive woman like her mother or she ends up married happily ever after to Jean. Her pregnancy forces her to confront reality, but she never really understands that although her mother is miserably poor, she somehow manages to maintain the youthful love and joy of life which sustains her through her worst times. Rose-Anna has an indomitable spirit which her daughter Florentine lacks.

Florentine continues to allow her fate to manipulate her. She runs into a previous acquaintance who comes from a middle-class family. She realizes that marrying him, although she finds him boring, would be a solution to her urgent problem of pregnancy. She is also attracted to the fact that he willingly buys her anything she wants. As the novel ends, she is pregnant with her second child, enjoying her home,

56Ibid., p. 213.
new clothes and jewelry, and resigned to her fate, although she finds it much more difficult than she expected to pretend to love her husband.

Gabrielle Roy has traced both girls' lives up to the point where they are young adult women. Whereas Florentine perpetuates the feminine cycle of marriage and babies into which she was born, Christine breaks this cycle by choosing a career. Each young woman represents an important social archetype in the French-Canadian society. Florentine, for whom Bonheur d'occasion was named, has a brief fling at a superficial happiness before getting married and having babies, like her mother and grandmother before her. Christine becomes a writer and shares her experiences of being a French-Canadian woman with the world.

The Middle-Aged Mother

The significance of the mother in Gabrielle Roy's literature has been established. She is the pivotal force in the French-Canadian household Roy describes, the center of a loving radius which touches all the other characters. Luzina of La Petite Poule d'eau, Eveline of Rue Deschambault and La Route d'Altamont, and Rose-Anna of Bonheur d'occasion are the principal representatives of Roy's idealization of traditional motherhood. They are all strong, dominant characters, devoted mothers of children with absent or insignificant husbands. Luzina, Eveline and Rose-Anna make up a spectrum in terms of their social and personal happiness. Luzina is on the far end of idealism and contentment. The home and family she reigns over seem perfect. Her only disappointment is the inevitable departure of her children from their isolated island. Eveline is in the middle of this spectrum.
The problems and frustrations due to her poverty are mentioned but not oppressive. She also radiates love and warmth but has difficulties with her husband and children and cherishes a timid yearning for a more expansive life. Rose-Anna represents the opposite end of the spectrum and is overwhelmed by her situation. She lives in such abject poverty that she cannot care for her children adequately. She is over-worked, physically and emotionally exhausted, and pregnant. Her children all have serious problems typical of this French-Canadian socioeconomic group.

Luzina is a sturdy, plump, capable woman who radiates kindness to the world. She possesses a healthy sensuality and a natural grace. She is the mother-earth figure par excellence—delighting in the simple and natural joys her home and family offer her. She is warm, loving and affectionate and has no misgivings about her role as wife and mother. She sees only the positive side of life, smiles and laughs easily, and has an eager and youthful interest in her world and in the people she meets on her yearly trips to the city to have her babies. As previously described, she worked hard at establishing a school for her children. They inherit her love of learning and all of them except one eventually leave the island to pursue their education and careers. As the novel ends, Luzina considers keeping the youngest child, Claire-Armelle, on the island with her for company in her old age. But one cold, wintry evening, she begins to teach her the alphabet, as she had patiently done with all her older children, and this last child's destiny to leave the island is thereby determined. Luzina's love and sacrifice are greatly appreciated by her children, who are now dispersed
throughout Canada and who write her regularly about their various schools and careers. One of her daughters, Josephine, has become a teacher and writes Luzina this letter, which beautifully captures Luzina's devotion in her role as mother:

Joséphine avait commencé cette année sa première classe. Elle écrivait: Chère maman, quand je suis entrée ce matin dans ma classe et que j'ai vu se tourner vers moi le visage des enfants, j'ai bien pensé à toi. Dire que ce bonheur, je le dois en grande partie, ma chère maman, à ton esprit de sacrifice, à ton dévouement... Un grand merci du fond du coeur... ton dévouement... ton abnégation... C'est toi qui nous a donné le goût d'apprendre.57

Eveline is a more complex character than the idealized Luzina and most resembles Gabrielle Roy's own mother. She is again the predominant force in a large, traditional French-Canadian family. In Rue Deschambault, they live at the edge of a rural town near Winnipeg and her husband is often absent. In La Route d'Altamont, they live in Montreal and the husband is never mentioned. In each novel, they are a poor but very respectable French-Canadian household with strong family ties and values. Eveline has the same sense of humor, youthful enthusiasm and all-encompassing love that Luzina does. Her life is harsher than Luzina's because poverty seems to be more oppressive in a big city environment. However, Eveline is resourceful and makes ends meet unselfishly with love and humor and her completely joyous appreciation of life. During a conversation when Eveline is telling Christine that they have little money left, Christine reflects back on how difficult her mother's life must have been, and like Luzina's children, appreciates her sacrifices:

57 Roy, Poule, p. 162.
Although Eveline radiates love and warmth, she is not totally content. She has contradictory feelings about her role as wife and mother. As explained before, Eveline's husband is a moody, older man whose presence causes a certain constraint in the normally lively household. Nevertheless, Eveline tries to fulfill her duties as a French-Canadian wife and mother but has persistent and painfully unfulfilled desires to be freer to travel and have other experiences:

Et, tout à coup, sur le pont maman me dit qu'elle aimerait pouvoir aller où elle voudrait. Maman me dit qu'elle avait encore envie d'être libre; elle me dit que ce qui mourait en dernier lieu dans le coeur humain ce devait être le goût de la liberté; que même la peine et les malheurs n'usaient pas en elle cette disposition pour la liberté...Maman me parlait assez souvent de telles idées, peut-être aussi n'avait-elle personne d'autre que moi à qui les dire.

Mais maman, dans le passé, avait déjà parlé d'être libre, et il n'en était résulté que plus d'enfants encore, beaucoup plus de couture, beaucoup plus d'ouvrage. Si captive, pourquoi donc maman ne cessait-elle pas de souhaiter la liberté! **59**

Christine is disturbed by her mother's thirst for freedom and annoyed that she could want for anything except being eternally chained to her house:

Mais qu'est-ce qu'elle avait tant voulu avoir de la vie? lui ai-je demandé. N'était-ce pas une maison, son mari, moi et les autres enfants?

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58 Roy, Rue Deschambault, pp. 282-283.

59 Ibid., p. 99.
Maman a dit que non, que dans sa toute première jeunesse du moins, ce n'était pas ce qu'elle avait souhaité uniquement; pourtant, a-t-elle ajouté, son mari, sa maison, ses enfants, elle ne les échangerait contre rien au monde.  

Eveline decides to fulfill her yearning to travel when she is forty-nine years old. She secretly makes plans for a trip to Montreal when her husband, who would never give his consent, is absent. She makes elaborate plans for the care of the children, and Christine realizes with increasing uneasiness that her desires for freedom rule her almost as strongly as her duties as a French-Canadian wife and mother. She earns money for this unusual trip by sewing for a neighbor, and Christine continues to be amazed by her obsession to get away as she observes her mother sewing every spare minute and late into the night.

They take the train to Montreal to visit relatives, and the journey is filled with exciting sights which fascinate Eveline. But Montreal, peopled in her imagination with warm, loving relatives, is disappointing because she finds her husband's family boring and pompous. She does succeed in finding and greatly enjoying an old school friend who has become a nun.

All of these activities—leaving without her husband's authority, leaving the children behind, working to make extra money, and seeking out an old friend—seem very unorthodox for a French-Canadian woman, and Eveline does feel guilty. She confesses to an ineffectual priest who ignores her anxiety. Then she confides in a woman who is very

60Ibid., p. 100.
critical of her for leaving her husband and coldly informs Eveline that she has spent her life dutifully caring for her invalid husband.

The return journey is bleak and interminable because the sense of adventure is past. Christine notices that Eveline begins to look old as she gets closer to reassuming her traditional role. Her distraught husband is somewhat placated when she brings greetings from his family and reminders of his childhood back in Montreal. Eveline settles wistfully back into her role as a dutiful French-Canadian wife and mother, but with a wealth of memories to sustain her.

Rose-Anna Lacasse of *Bonheur d'occasion* is Gabrielle Roy's major woman protagonist. She represents the prototype of the oppressed lower class French-Canadian woman, struggling in spite of terrible odds to provide a secure and loving home for her husband and children. She grew up in the country and married Azarius Lacasse although her mother was against the marriage and prophetically predicted that he was too impractical. They moved to Montreal and the first years of their marriage were beautiful and full of love. When the middle-aged Rose-Anna begins feeling overwhelmed by her pitiful circumstances, she often thinks back to those happier years. She most resembles Luzina in terms of satisfaction with her role, and nostalgically remembers making Azarius' breakfast while he got ready for work and then sending him off with the lunch she had lovingly packed for him. He had worked as a carpenter, but when the depression of the 30's came to Canada, he lost his job and then his self-determination. He remained unemployed, but the babies kept coming almost yearly and their financial problems became worse and worse. As the novel opens, they are living in a
French-Canadian quarter called Saint-Henri, peopled by other poor families who, like the Lacasses, join the annual spring migration of improverished French-Canadians who are evicted for not paying their rent.

Rose-Anna is now a dumpy, wrinkled, tired woman in faded, outmoded clothes. She is pregnant and already has eleven children who are malnourished and often frail and sickly. Several have died and the last few births have been very difficult, probably due to her poor physical health, exhaustion and age. All her children have health and emotional problems typical of their socioeconomic group, compounded by the fact that they often miss school because they are sick or lack adequate clothing. Consequently, they get behind in school and quit as soon as possible. Her suffering and fatigue are reflected in her expression which reveals a beaten, apologetic look and a pathetic smile.

One night, after an exhausting day spent looking for lodging in the depressing tenement area, she confides her worries to Florentine. They sum up her difficult situation:

Et son coeur était si plein d'inquiétude, le poids pesait si lourd sur son cœur, qu'elle aurait dit des mots-là tout haut, même si elle eût été vraiment seule. "Qu'est-ce qu'on va devenir si ton père ne se trouve pas d'autre job quand nous v'là encore à la veille de déménager. Les logis coûtent de plus en plus cher, et maintenant, maintenant..." Elle hésita au cord d'une dernière confidence. Et dans le noir, dans le grand noir qui semblait vide et morne, sans yeux, sans oreilles, sans pitié, elle laissa tomber: "Quand on n'était rien que dix, c'était déjà difficile d'arriver, mais à c'te heure, qu'on sera bientôt onze."61

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61 Roy, Bonheur, p. 89.
Rose-Anna manages to survive all these troubles because she has tremendous inner strength as well as deep compassion and love. Like Luzina and Eveline, she is the central force of the family, and her instinct for survival is what keeps them together. Her greatest skill is her ability to cope with her endless problems. She is not an idyllic figure like Luzina and gets very depressed by her misery; but after a period of depression, she summons up a reserve of strength, energy and hope. For example, after moving into their last refuge, a dark shack near the railroad tracks which shakes with every passing train, Rose-Anna rises early the next morning to finish moving while everyone sleeps. Her unconquerable spirit takes over and she unpacks and cleans with a fresh flow of hope that things will somehow work out.

Her greatest weakness, on the other hand, is her inability to give emotional support to her children. Rose-Anna is so overwhelmed by her burdens and so busy with her responsibilities, which include daily hand-washing and mending of the children's few shabby clothes, that she does not really have time to get acquainted with her children.

Et sans plus d'interruptions elle se remit à coudre. Est-ce qu'on avait le temps depuis toutes les années qu'on était ensemble d'arrêter sa besogne pour apprendre à se connaître? La roue de la machine se reprit à tourner; elle tournait insensible à l'ennui de Florentine et à la rêverie de Rose-Anna, elle tournait comme les années avaient tourné, comme la terre tournait, ignorant dans son cercle éperdu ce qui se passe d'un pôle à l'autre. Ainsi la maison semblait prise dans ce mouvement inlassable de la roue. La besogne emplissait la maison; elle rejetait la parole, toute compréhension. Elle filait, les heures avec elles, les confidences perdues avec elle, et tant de voix se taisaient, tant de choses restaient inexprimées pendant qu'elle ronronnait, elle, l'infatigable.62

62Ibid., p. 170.
Ordinarily, she is not very talkative with her children. Communication between her and the younger ones is generally limited to amicable scoldings. The two older ones, Eugene and Florentine, are like strangers to her. Eugene is rarely home and is secretive about his whereabouts:

Et c'était vrai qu'ils se sentaient presque étrangers l'un vis-à-vis de l'autre, le jeune homme qui ne rentrait au logis que pour manger, se coucher, et elle qui n'avait plus de lui, au fond, que vêtements à raccorder.63

Florentine has been uncommunicative, nervous and irritable for some time, and now Rose-Anna suspects she is pregnant. She has no idea how Florentine feels about this or who the father is because they are so out of touch with each other. Rose-Anna feels that another daughter, Yvonne, an example of French-Canadian pious Catholic fervor, has never been part of the family. She spends every possible moment at the convent, and Rose-Anna occasionally admonishes her and points out that God would really want her to help her family. Her son Daniel seems to be the culmination of all the negative consequences of their poverty: he was very small at birth and always frail and sickly. He was a serious child, loved school and did well in the beginning. However, he missed a great deal of school because of his health and each time he returned he was farther behind. Then Rose-Anna started keeping him home because he did not have adequate clothing, and finally he just resigned himself to staying at home. Since he played quietly without complaining, she ignored his symptoms because she did not have the time to pay attention

63Ibid., p. 70.
to his illness or the money to buy him medicine. Rose-Anna realizes her shortcomings in this area and wishes she could do more for her children, but can do not more than barely survive a series of disasters that befall her family.

The first setback happens on their return trip from the visit to Rose-Anna's mother. Just before the trip, Rose-Anna had succeeded in getting Azarius a truck-driving job by personally begging the employer to help them out. It is Azarius' idea to take the ill-fated trip. Rose-Anna resists, as explained earlier, because of her children's ragged clothes. At the same time, she longs to see her mother and her old home and finally consents. She sends Azarius out to buy a few necessary items, including some material, and spends the whole night washing, mending and sewing to make her children as presentable as possible. Rose-Anna loves the trip and joyfully recognizes each landmark of her childhood:

Un à un, elle reconnaissait les villages de la vallée du Richelieu et quelque chose comme son ancienne joie de jeune fille lui soufflait des remarques que seul Azarius comprenait.64

On the way home, they have an accident, and Rose-Anna discovers that Azarius did not have permission to borrow his employer's truck. He is consequently fired from this badly needed job, and the family's situation worsens because they are also faced with eviction.

Next, she discovers that Daniel is seriously ill and needs to be taken to the hospital. Rose-Anna is so preoccupied with worry and overwork, it is difficult for her to find the time, money and energy

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64 Piccione, "La Femme Canadienne-Française," p. 62.
to visit him, but she does occasionally and it is a painful experience for her. Daniel has become completely devoted to the beautiful young nurse Jenny who has time to play and talk with him. He answers Rose-Anna's questions indifferently or impatiently, longing only for Jenny's return. Rose-Anna enviously compares herself to the energetic nurse. Rose-Anna, with her baby due any time, is shapeless and exhausted. It is an ordeal for her to simply make the trip to the hospital, which is an English one a long distance from the Saint-Henri quarter. In one touching scene, Daniel is working on a magnetic alphabet board Jenny had given him, and finally succeeds in spelling out Jenny's name. Rose-Anna is hurt that he had not spelled out "maman," and then feels guilty about not feeling happier that he has finally found some peace. He dies of leukemia shortly after this visit.

Events happen quickly after the move into the railroad shack. Florentine gets married and Eugene joins the Army. Azarius disappears for long periods, and Rose-Anna continues to care for the other children with a vague dread of some impending disaster. When Rose-Anna goes into labor, she knocks on the thin wall between the shacks, a prearranged signal for the woman next door to call the mid-wife. She has never been to a doctor or hospital except to visit Daniel. After the birth, she again experiences the brief moment of joy which each new baby brings her. She dresses in white and waits for Azarius to come and see his new son. When he walks in the door, she knows by his footstep that something is wrong. He refuses to turn on the light or look at the newborn baby and finally announces dramatically that she will not have to put up with him anymore. He has joined the Army and will
be leaving soon; Rose-Anna will receive monthly checks from the government. Rose-Anna has never stopped loving Azarius and has always been able to forgive all his failures. She is an unselfish, compassionate woman who desires only that her husband and children be happy. Azarius does not realize that it is not money she needs, but his love and support. Rose-Anna instinctively knows that wealth without compassion and love can be as painful as poverty. She feels very betrayed by Azarius although she will finally be rich, by Saint-Henri standards, with her monthly checks.

All three of these mothers share the same qualities of inner strength, devotion to their families, and love and compassion for all. The most powerful image of Rose-Anna is one of her trudging along in her old black coat now turning green with age, looking for lodging for her family or trying to persuade someone to give her husband a job. Eveline can be remembered in her cozy kitchen, in the midst of a stimulating conversation with her family. Luzina leaves an image of idyllic happiness as she bakes a molasses cake for her children to have after their first day of school.

The Elderly Grandmother

Grandmothers play a significant role in the French-Canadian household, and Gabrielle Roy describes two interesting grandmothers in her novels: Christine's grandmother in La Route d'Altamont, affectionately called "Mémère," and Florentine's grandmother in Bonheur d'occasion, Mme Laplante. Marie-Lynne Piccione analyzes Gabrielle Roy's unique feminine perspective on old age:
Donc, chez G. Roy, la vieillesse, bien loin d'être sentie comme une période aliénante et impuissante, où l'on subit passivement l'inexorable dégradation de soi, s'enrichit au contraire de tout le poids du vécu: la vieillesse est sentiment d'appartenance à une famille, à un coin de terre; la vieillesse est surtout souvenir, lien avec le passé. Or, nous verrons plus loin que chez cet écrivain d'inspiration proustienne (1) la mémoire seule permet de défiler le temps et de triompher de la peur de la vie et de la mort.65

Mémère and Mme Laplante both married young, had many children and worked extremely hard in the harsh rural Canadian environment to provide homes for their families. Both seem bitter in their old age about the overwhelming responsibilities they had to assume and angry at their husbands for the submissive roles they had to play as French-Canadian women. However, Mémère tempers this anger with a wonderful sense of humor and philosophical resignation, while Mme Laplante complains ceaselessly about her burdens as a Christian woman: "Elle avait, selon son expression, 'endure son purgatoire sur terre.'"66

Mémère grew up, married and started her family in Quebec, then was forced to move to the Manitoba plains by her husband. She had to start all over and never really forgave her husband for this extra work:

J'ai peut-être fait tout ce que peut faire une créature humaine. J'ai deux fois construit le foyer, me dit-elle, ayant suivi ton trotteur de grand-père d'un point à l'autre du vaste pays. J'ai recommencé, au Manitoba, tout ce que j'avais fait là-bas, dans le Québec, et que je pensais fait pour de bon: une maison.67

She was very resourceful and never bought anything. Her husband and children wore hand-made clothes from head to foot—even the buttons

66Roy, Bonheur, p. 197.
67Roy, La Route, p. 28.
were made from bulls' horns. She was stubborn and independent and insisted on using her own out-dated vocabulary right up to her death. She called children's whining "les chignages," for example. She was critical of everything modern, including her grandchildren and, consequently, had few visitors. She was determined to live alone and plant a huge garden each year until her increasing senility finally forced her to move in with Eveline and Christine.

In the story "Ma Grand-mère toute-puissante," Christine is invited to stay with Mémère in her isolated house on the edge of the prairie. Christine was very apprehensive because of Mémère's strictness:

Elle passait pour tant aimer l'ordre, la propreté et la discipline qu'il devenait impossible dans sa maison de laisser trainer la moindre chose.68

Christine is at first very bored, and Mémère accuses her of sounding like a wailing coyote when she complains. But Christine grows to love her venerable grandmother for the knowledge the old lady has acquired through the years and for her humorous and independent spirit. In a fine scene already described, Mémère makes Christine a beautiful doll out of odds and ends, and Christine is so impressed she decides that God must be an old woman with extremely capable hands like her beloved Mémère.

Gabrielle Roy's persistent theme of the linking of generations is emphasized when Mémère moves in with Eveline and Christine. Her old age is a symbol of the irony of life. Once she longed for tidiness and peace, and now her days at her daughter's home pass monotonously as

68Ibid., p. 9.
Eveline continually urges her to rest. Once she cursed her prairie home, and now she yearns to be there. She weakens quickly under her daughter's pampering, and Christine is very confused by the change:

Ma grand-mère travailleuse, elle gisait paralysée de la tête aux pieds, ses yeux seuls encore vivants.  

 Whereas Mémère is described mainly through the eyes of her six-year-old granddaughter Christine, we get to know Mme Laplante mainly through Rose-Anna, her middle-aged daughter. Mme Laplante is a stern, unloving, self-righteous French-Canadian Catholic whose priority is her Christian duty. She raised fifteen children, but Rose-Anna remembers that she never held them except when they were babies. She is a bitter, fatalistic woman who listens to other people's misfortunes with a mistrustful smile that communicates her belief that there is no such thing as happiness:

Elle était de ces personnes qui prêtaient une oreille attentive aux récits des malheurs. Aux autres, elle accordait un sourire méfiant. Rien ne la surprenait tant qu'un visage épanoui. Elle ne croyait pas au bonheur; elle n'y avait jamais cru.  

 She had correctly warned Rose-Anna, when she was so happy before her marriage to Azarius, that her joy would not last. When Rose-Anna comes to her as a middle-aged woman overwhelmed with problems, Mme Laplante acknowledges her misery in her fatalistic, but characteristically unsympathetic, fashion:

Pauv' Rose-Anna, j'ai ben pensé que t'avais eu de la misère, toi aussi. Je le savais ben, va. Ça pouvait pas être plus drôle pour toi que pour les autres. Tu vois à c'te heure que

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69 Ibid., p. 51.

70 Roy: Bonheur, p. 197.
la vie, ma fille, on arrange pas ça comme on veut. Dans le temps, tu pensais avoir ton mot à dire.

Mme Laplante’s pessimistic remarks to Rose-Anna could equally be made by Mémère. Each elderly grandmother realizes in her old age that life does not always turn out the way you want. Mme Laplante’s daughter makes the same remark to her daughter when Florentine is critical of Rose-Anna’s twelfth pregnancy. Rose-Anna cries out indignantly: "Qu'est-ce que tu veux, Florentine, on fait pas comme on veut dans la vie; on fait comme on peut." And Florentine thinks resolutely to herself, just as her mother did when Mme Laplante warned her of life's disillusions, that she will never be unhappy like her mother.

Each middle-aged mother is still tormented by unfulfilled longings: Luzina yearns for time to stand still and for her children to always remain with her on the island joyfully attending school. Eveline nurtures her deep love of travel, adventure and freedome. Rose-Anna longs for a warm and loving home where her husband and children are happy. At the same time, these mothers are moving toward the elderly grandmothers' resignation at the impossibility of fulfillment. The two young girls, Christine and Florentine, still believe in their dreams but are also moving toward the ultimate acceptance that their grandmothers have achieved. Christine must deal with her sadness and feelings of guilt when her mother dies of old age, but also of loneliness, while Christine is studying in France. Florentine resigns herself

71Ibid.
72Ibid., p. 90.
to a marriage without love. This cyclical continuity of life between generations of women will be explored further in the last chapter which examines three themes that emphasize Gabrielle Roy's feminine perspective.
CHAPTER IV

THE THEMES INFLUENCED BY GABRIELLE ROY'S FEMININE CONCERNS

We have seen how Gabrielle Roy's feminine perspective influences her fiction. We have also examined the French-Canadian household which forms the framework for her novels and have analyzed in detail the complex relationships between the successive generations of women within this household. In this last chapter, I will examine the underlying themes which relate to this link between the daughter, mother and grandmother. I will discuss three themes which predominate in her writing and which also express her feminine perspective: the theme of separation—a mother's inevitable and painful separation from her children, the theme of lack of immobility—a French Canadian woman's link to her home and family, and the related theme of destiny—the traditional French-Canadian woman's fateful cycle of marriage, babies and financial insecurity.

The Theme of Separation

One of the significant changes in contemporary French-Canadian society is the gradual disintegration of the close family unit. "The two World Wars and the accompanying changes of industrialization and urbanization brought far-reaching modifications at all levels of Quebec society."73 The French-Canadian family, previously isolated in a rural

environment, began to disperse as children left home to pursue careers in the city and to join the war effort. This change is reflected in Gabrielle Roy's novels through the perspective of the mother dealing with the successive departures of her children. We have seen how Roy's mothers live through their children. This process of renewal makes the ultimate separation extremely painful.

In La Petite Poule d'eau, Luzina encourages all her children to go to school, learn English and pursue their vocational goals. One by one, they make the voyage from their secluded French-Canadian home to the outside world. The novel begins and ends with this theme of separation from the maternal home. As the novel begins, it is the mother who leaves, returning with a precious baby who will help people the wilderness of the island and eventually attend the little school. An ironic precursor to the final separation occurs when the first school teacher arrives and totally captures the children's attention. Luzina had always been the dominating force on the island and feels shut out of their lives. Even when classes are over, the mesmerized children follow Mlle Cote everywhere, leaving Luzina feeling threatened and, in a sense, preparing her for their final departure:

Pendant longtemps elle avait été la seule à voyager. Presque tous les ans elle partait, et elle faisait vite enfin de revenir avec un enfant de plus contre le desert à peupler. Maintenant, elle restait, et c'étaient les enfants qui partaient. Luzina voyait en quelque sorte la vie. Et elle n'en croyait pas son bon coeur: la vie qu'elle avait tant aidée, déjà, petit à petit, l'abandonnait.74

74 Roy, Poule, pp. 146-147.
She feels threatened again at the end of the novel when Josephine, who has become a teacher thanks to her mother's encouragement and sacrifice, offers to take and educate Claire-Armelle, the only child remaining with Luzina:

 Ça, non, par exemple! L'oncle curé avait eu trois enfants. La Tante Blanche trois également. Le docteur Pambrun de Saint-Boniface avait eu Edmond qu'il aidait dans ses études. Le Sud en avait attiré d'autres qui tenaient à vivre plus près des communications.\(^7\)

Luzina's children are dispersed throughout Canada except Claire-Armelle, whom Luzina had hoped to keep with her for company in her old age. In spite of her loneliness, Luzina perpetuates the cycle by teaching Claire-Armelle the letters of the alphabet, thereby guaranteeing another painful, but inevitable, separation:

Dès lors, les lettres qui partaient de la Petite Poule d'Eau étaient écrites selon la pente coutumière, mais l'enveloppe portait une autre écriture. C'était une écriture extrêmement appliquée, d'une enfantine rigueur. En examinant l'enveloppe de près, Edmond et Joséphine pouvaient voir, point toujours effacées, les lignes tracées au crayon par Luzina pour aider la petite fille à écrire bien droit.\(^7\)

Eveline in Rue Deschambault and La Route d'Altamont also nurtures the hope that Christine, her last child remaining at home, will live with her in her old age. Eveline has already endured many painful separations. The death of loved ones is a predominant theme in Gabrielle Roy's writing, and Eveline has lost two of her children through death. Alicia, as explained earlier, had to be confined to an insane asylum where she eventually died. Eveline endured, therefore, two painful separations.

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\(^7\)Ibid., p. 162.

\(^7\)Ibid., p. 164.
separations with Alicia: when she was committed and when she later
died. Eveline also had to deal with two much less final departures
with her daughter Georgianna. She had left the family much earlier to
work in a distant city and then, as explained before, married a man
whom Eveline considered unworthy and thereby further separated the
family unit. Finally, another of Eveline's daughters, Odette, became a
nun. Christine was too young at the time to understand the implication
of this decision, which was not uncommon in the French-Canadian house-
hold, but remembers often finding her mother crying after Odette made
the announcement that she was joining a convent.

In a story entitled, "Ma Tante Thérésine Veilleux," in Rue Descham-
bault, an asthmatic mother by the same name is the one who must con-
stantly leave her children. Her husband keeps moving, ostensibly in an
effort to find a climate where her asthma would be less severe, but
Gabrielle Roy suggests that it is also to fulfill his own adventurous
spirit:

Nous laissons des enfants dans chaque ville où nous passons,
écritait ma tante; il ne nous en restera bientôt plus aucun...
Quel éparpillement!77

Eveline is, therefore, alone except for Christine and very upset
when Christine tells her she is going to France to continue her writing.
Like Luzina, Eveline encouraged Christine to have a career, but now in
her anguish accuses Christine of deliberately plotting against her:

Que veux-tu dire? Tu n'en es pas toi aussi à songer à
partir?

77Roy, Rue Deschambault, p. 195.
Oui maman, pour un an ou deux.

Elle me considéra longuement et tout ce temps comme en s'éloignant, en s'éloignant terriblement de moi. Ce me fut insupportable, lui ayant simplement dit que je voulais m'en aller, de la voir, elle, prendre les devants, se retirer la première. Puis elle éclata en reproches véhéments:

T'en aller, toi aussi donc! Voilà ce que tu complotes. J'aurais dû m'en douter.  

Eveline constantly tries to talk Christine out of leaving. During one argument, she points out that Christine would do just as well to stay and write about the people in their little village because they represent the feelings of all human beings, including the pain of separation: "Ici comme ailleurs il y a à décrire la joie, les chagrins, les séparations."  

But Christine leaves the following fall for France and writes her mother long letters about her experiences. Christine works feverishly to become an accomplished writer before returning to her mother, but Eveline dies quite suddenly before Christine returns. This also happened in Gabrielle Roy's own life, and Gerard Bessette believes that Roy's entire literary work was written to assuage her guilt feelings for having left her mother and gone to France. This would explain why Gabrielle Roy's literary mothers so resemble her own and why they have such dominant roles in her novels, although I believe there are many factors influencing the portrayal of mothers. Gabrielle Roy dealt with her sadness over her mother's death by making her relive as Luzina, Eveline and Rose-Anna in her novels.

78Roy, La Route, pp. 236-237.

79Ibid., p. 238.

Rose-Anna's family in *Bonheur d'occasion* represents the consequences of urbanization and industrialization on the lower class French-Canadians. There is, as in all of Roy's literature, a pattern perpetuated through the successive generations of women. Rose-Anna begins by leaving her traditional French-Canadian rural home for the city. We have seen how big-city poverty influences the destinies of the Lacasse family. Both Rose-Anna and her mother Mme Laplante lost several children at birth, and Rose-Anna's last three children were born underweight. These deaths are undoubtedly due to many socio-economic causes, including the fact that the French-Canadian mothers typically do not seek medical care, are over-worked, have too many babies, and in Rose-Anna's case are undernourished.

We have seen how these factors affect Daniel. He is kept home from school for both sickness and lack of clothing, and Rose-Anna is too overwhelmed by other pressing problems to focus on a sick but uncomplaining child. Rose-Anna must endure several painful separations where Daniel is concerned. The first is his placement in an English hospital a long distance from her French tenement flat in Saint-Henri. She can only visit her child occasionally because it is an expensive, time-consuming, exhausting ordeal for her to get to the hospital. Daniel's strong attachment to his pretty, young English-speaking nurse Jenny also intensifies his separation from his mother. In the following scene, Rose-Anna is leaving Daniel after a visit, and her pitiful awkwardness in the unfamiliar environment, which almost overrides her mother's grief for a hospitalized child, is poignantly described
as she tried to recall enough English to ask what medical treatment Daniel is receiving:

La garde fut aussitôt à son chevet.
- He's getting tired. Maybe, tomorrow, you can stay longer.

Les paupières de Rose-Anna papillotèrent. Elle comprit vaguement qu'on la congédiait. Avec la docilité des humbles, se découvrant si parfaitement en visite, elle se leva tout de suite, mais en chancelant; car c'était maintenant, après ces quelques minutes de repos, qu'elle sentait des tiraillements au long de son corps. Elle fit quelques pas lourds, appuyant ses semelles cette fois de tout leur poids sur le parquet glissant. C'est loin de chez nous, c'est pas pareil ici, déraisonnait-elle au fond d'un sentiment empli et têtu. Puis elle croisa le regard de Jenny, et elle baissa la tête comme si elle s'était sentie pénétrée jusqu'au fond de ses pensées.

Elle fit encore quelques pas hésitants et, dans sa répugnance à s'en aller, il y avait tout l'effort qu'elle mettait à se souvenir de quelques mots anglais. Elle cherchait à s'informer du traitement que subissait Daniel.81 Daniel has leukemia and Rose-Anna, like many poor French-Canadian mothers of the Saint-Henri quarter, must endure this last and final separation.

Rose-Anna also is faced with the departure of many of her other children. Eugene, her oldest son, has been like a stranger in the house for sometime. He is hardly ever home and does not communicate when he is. Finally, he joins the Army, and Rose-Anna is very saddened by his decision. She tries, as Eveline had done with Christine, to get him to stay. She feels his departure is her fault, and characteristically feels guilty, apologizing for not having given him more spending money. This same pattern of a strained relationship which terminated in actual departure is true of Florentine. Florentine has

81 Roy, Bonheur.
been withdrawn, hostile and non-communicative with her mother for some time. Both mother and daughter are overwhelmed with personal problems which have already been explained. Florentine makes her actual departure when she marries Emmanuel and moves into her own house.

The last daughter specifically mentioned is Yvonne. She does not physically leave Rose-Anna during the novel, but is zealously religious, as explained earlier, and never participates in family life. She rises before anyone else in the morning, takes a small piece of stale bread, and steals away to the convent-school. Rose-Anna feels shut out of her life, much the way Luzina did when her children were so devoted to their teacher.

The theme of painful separation between loved ones is mentioned in other works by Gabrielle Roy. In Ces Enfants de ma vie, we witness the heart-rendering situation where the child must leave his home for the first time to come to school. The community where the narrator is teaching, an isolated area in the Manitoban plains, is made of many different immigrant groups who are all mutually suspicious of each other and equally distrustful of the Canadian government and the school where they are required to send their children. Roy vividly depicts the trauma of that first day. Vincento, for example, clings so tightly to his father he has to be wrenched away from him and dragged into the school room. All of the children are upset, many are crying, and none speak French or English; but the narrator-teacher calms them down by having them draw pictures of their houses on the blackboard. Again, we see how important the home is to Roy's literary characters.
In this same novel, we witness the opposite separation when the teacher, who has created a kind of secure and protective home in the schoolhouse, loses several children. Like Luzina's and Eveline's children, the narrator-teacher's pupils leave one by one for different reasons. One of the most moving scenes involves the departure of Médéric. He was a hostile, disobedient child when he first arrived at the schoolhouse, riding his stallion which he kept tied up in the schoolyard. He was the oldest child in the school and covered his awkwardness with open defiance. But the teacher slowly wins him over and they become very close. She is extremely disappointed when his father takes him out of school, but when she herself leaves at the end of the school year, Médéric rides his stallion beside her departing train and throws a bouquet of wildflowers through the open train window. This touching gesture sweetens the pain of separation.

Two short novels also stress the theme of separation between mother and child. In La Rivière sans repos, Elsa's troubled son Jimmy has a difficult time dealing with his identity because he is half white, half Eskimo. He turns his confusion into hatred for his Eskimo mother and runs away twice. The second time, he never returns. Elsa grows old, and everyone else in her family also leaves or dies. Elsa then loses all interest in life and laments:

Une famille humaine, cela se défaisait plus vite en un sens que certaines paires d'oiseaux qui traversaient du moins toute leur vie ensemble.82

82 Roy, La Rivière, p. 218.
In *Un Jardin au bout du monde*, the protagonist, a very old Ukrainian woman, reflects upon her life spent in the harsh Canadian plains. Her three children have long since left the hostile environment, have become integrated into the Canadian society and never visit. Her husband never speaks to her. As she is nearing her own death, a flood of memories come to her, and she also laments the inevitable sadness of the linguistic and cultural separation which was as grievous as the physical separation:

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Et, soudainement, ses trois petits furent devant ses yeux—les avait-elle vraiment eut à elle, sinon dans leur toute petite enfance? Le temps de leur enseigner le parler d'Ukraine, quelques chants, quelques danses de Volhynie, puis l'école du gouvernement les avait pris, leur enseignant l'anglais, les façonnait à sa manière pour une tout autre vie que celle qu'elle aurait pu leur apprendre.83
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**The Theme of Lack of Mobility**

The old Ukrainian woman and the parents of the immigrant school children resent the fact that the Canadian government seems to be taking their children away from them. This feeling of mistrust for government agencies, including schools and hospitals, is a prevalent feeling among the lower socioeconomic French-Canadian society and is a factor in their lack of mobility.

The lack of social and cultural mobility is emphasized in Gabrielle Roy's female protagonists whose limited options are marriage and babies. In the traditional Catholic society, the differentiation between male and female roles is significant. We have examined these roles in

Chapter II. Although Roy's strong independent female protagonists stray from their traditional role in the ways we have seen, they are still supposed to be restricted to their home and family. Since they are so intelligent, creative and expansive, they have contradictory feelings about their roles and responsibilities. They are very satisfied with their roles as mothers, but still have painful yearnings for experiences beyond the limits of their husband and children.

Gabrielle Roy's male protagonists have more mobility. They possess the freedom to travel and to make choices about their jobs, including where they work and even the decision not to work. There are advantages and disadvantages to both roles. Women represent the warm, loving home as well as the entrapment that their role imposes. Men represent the outside world of work, travel and adventure, but are also trapped by their obligation to provide for their families and the dehumanization of their work or the anguish of being unemployed. The male protagonists are not necessarily more fulfilled in their role of provider, but they definitely have more options to influence their destinies than their female counterparts. We have seen how Pierre in *La Montagne secrète* spends his lifetime trying to excel as an artist. He is tormented by his inability to create what he wants, and it is suggested several times in the novel that the love and harmony found in a family home is really the closest one can come to perfection. Women, while trapped in their concrete roles, seem to have more love and direction in their lives because having children forces them to live more in the present and also allows them to live through their children. Male protagonists like Pierre and Alexandre Chenevert are more likely to devote their
lives to an abstract ideal. When Alexandre Chenevert finds his job as a cashier too dehumanizing, he quits, leaves his wife and seeks a more idyllic atmosphere which will enhance his own self-growth.

Azarius is like Alexandre Chenevert in that he feels trapped by the role society has given him. He also is free to make decisions about the quality of his life and to reject aspects of his role which stifle him. The result of this mobility is that Azarius turns down jobs he feels are demeaning, and eventually does not look for work at all. He spends his time wandering within the city or interacting with other unemployed males in the local cafés, while his wife Rose-Anna does not have these options and must spend all her time coping with a miserable situation Azarius has, in part, created. He does not have to be accountable to his family either, but Rose-Anna almost never leaves the house. He stays away when he likes, and much of Rose-Anna's time, as well as that of Gabrielle Roy's other female protagonists, is spent waiting for him. Azarius finally chooses to join the Army and thereby be able to fight for a cause as well as escape his family situation. The cause, the war in Europe, is again a very abstract ideal compared to Rose-Anna's efforts to feed and clothe her children.

The other male protagonists in Bonheur d'occasion also reveal their greater mobility. Jean, the man Florentine loves so passionately, took charge of his own destiny when he ran away from his unloving adopted parents. He studied on his own after work to improve himself professionally, and was considering a better job offer when he met Florentine. Florentine is always waiting for Jean, hoping he will come by the dimestore or her house. After their brief sexual encounter, he
makes the decision to accept the new job and moves freely toward a future he has chosen, while Florentine is left pregnant and even more deeply trapped in her role. Florentine's brother and husband also join the Army. The two men and Azarius are all interested in the possibilities of travel, adventure and escape as well as the political concerns about the war in Europe. Meanwhile, Rose-Anna and Florentine have no choice but to stay home and care for the children while waiting for the return of their adventurous men.

Mémère, Eveline's mother in *La Route d'Altamont*, is also married to an adventurous man. Christine recounts the story as she remembers it:

Tout ce que j'en savais était peu de chose: un jour, grand-père avait aperçu en imagination—à cause des collines fermées peut-être?—une immense plaine ouverte; sur-le-champ il avait été prêt à partir; tel il était. Grand-mère, elle, aussi stable que ses collines, avait longtemps résisté. En fin de compte elle avait été vaincue. C'est presque toujours, dans une famille, le reveur qui l'emporte. 84

Mémère never really forgave her adventurous husband for forcing her to move west with young children, and in her characteristic bitter humor, was angry at him again for dying first and leaving her exiled in Manitoba.

In *Rue Deschambault*, Eveline's husband has to travel extensively as part of his job, and he cannot understand why she would ever want to travel:

**Bien sûr, dit-elle, nous apprécions ce que nous avons; mais, tout de même, parfois, il serait bon de quitter la maison. Elle expliqua:**

84Roy, *La Route*, p. 196.
Il y a des fois, Edouard, ou je changerais de vie avec toi: voyager, voir du neuf, parcourir le pays....
En parlant, elle s'était emballée; ses yeux se mirent à briller, Je ne voyais rien là pour tant fâcher papa, mais voici qu'il se mit à traiter maman de trotteuse, de vagabonde, d'instable.

Maman, un peu piquée, répondit que c'était bien d'un homme de parler ainsi; qu'un homme, parce qu'il avait de la chance de sortir de la maison, s'imaginait que la maison, c'était le paradis.85

Eveline feels very restricted by her confining role and longs to travel like her husband. In the French-Canadian society Roy is depicting, the women do not have this kind of mobility. Mémère has to follow her husband west, Rose-Anna has to accept that Azarius is leaving and Eveline cannot take a trip for the purpose of satisfying her adventurous spirit. The women have few options beyond fulfilling their roles of wife and mother. Even Luzina who gets to travel yearly and frankly loves the adventure, travels only in her function of carrying out her role as mother. When she stops having babies, she stops traveling. Eveline finally takes a trip at the age of sixty, without her husband's approval, but she still acts out her role by searching out her husband's relatives in an effort to tie family bonds, or perhaps, to justify her unorthodox behavior. The first thing she says to her husband on her return is that his relatives send their regards.

Eveline in La Route d'Altamont never travels except in her function as a mother visiting her children dispersed throughout Canada. However, she loves to tell Christine about the long trip her family undertook when she was a child, leaving Quebec City for Montreal.

85Roy, Rue Deschambault, p. 106.
She thus passes onto Christine her love of adventure, which Christine inherits. Christine has two significant adventures as a child before she leaves Canada as a young adult to study in France. In the story "Le Vieillard et l'enfant," Christine, whose family is too poor to travel anywhere, visits Lake Winnipeg with an elderly gentleman. Every aspect of the trip excites her imagination and she returns with her adventurous spirit confirmed.

This yearning to travel, which all of Roy's characters reveal, is again apparent in the story, "Le Déménagement." Christine's desire for adventure is so strong that she disobeys her mother and sneaks out of the house early one morning to accompany a moving man on his route. The indifferent moving man finds nothing exciting about his job, but Christine is bursting with enthusiasm at the possibility of seeing new sights. Although the reality of moving poor people from one run-down shack to another is upsetting, Christine's sense of adventure is not diminished. On her return, she expects her mother to punish her, but Eveline, who has always nurtured unfulfilled longings to travel, hugs her and exclaims: "Toi aussi donc! Toi aussi tu aurais cette maladie de famille, ce mal du départ. Quelle fatalité!" Eveline understands Christine's desire for new experiences because she has these desires herself and believes that it is a fateful condition of her family. In Christine, this fate is manifested by her desire to be a writer and visit France, but in Roy's other female characters, this fate is often manifested by a cycle of marriage, babies and misery.

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86Roy, La Route, p. 185.
The Theme of Destiny

Gabrielle Roy's other female characters are trapped in a cycle of poverty. They move in concentric circles, caught in a deterministic whirlwind of motherhood, poverty and misery. This destiny of motherhood is described by André Brochu in his article, "Thèmes et Structures de Bonheur d'occasion":

Florentine, avons-nous dit, est promise dès le départ à un destin de mère. N'avons-nous pas là l'explication de cette hérédité qui pèse sur elle, la faiblesse héréditaire, la misère profonde qu'elle perpétuait: Nous avons vu que la misère était l'attribut de la femme, comme de Saint-Henri; de la femme, c'est-à-dire de la mère. Rose-Anna est l'incarnation même de la mère misérable. Dans Bonheur d'occasion, c'est la femme (mère) qui souffre, et non l'homme; Florentine se demande avec dépit: Ne pourrait-elle donc jamais le faire souffrir, celui-là (Jean), comme déjà il la faisait souffrir. Celui-là, c'est-à-dire cet être extérieur, de par sa nature masculine même à la souffrance qui est en elle. De la même façon, Rose-Anna reproche à Azarius d'être resté jeune, beau de sa santé inaltérable, alors qu'elle montrait des marques si évidentes de fatigue et d'usure.87

Gabrielle Roy's preoccupation with the deterministic destiny of the French-Canadian woman is most intensely developed in Bonheur d'occasion, but this theme is present, to a lesser extent, in all her novels.

In La Petite Poule d'eau, Luzina is the prototype of the ideal earth-mother. Yet, even in this idyllic novel, the theme of a cyclical destiny is apparent. Luzina's yearly trips to have her babies are a positive experience for her, but each time she brings back a newborn, her circular road of motherhood has returned her to the inevitable and painful departure of another child, of the end of her youth and

motherhood, and of each child's route toward his own destiny away from the family and the traditional rural environment.

In the two novels where Eveline is the protagonist, Gabrielle Roy's preoccupation with the female cycle of marriage and babies is revealed through many conversations between Eveline and Christine. Eveline confides over and over again to her youngest daughter that she wished she had not married so young:

Souvent...Jeune, sais-tu que j'ai ardemment désiré étudier, apprendre, voyager, me hausser du mieux possible...Mais je me suis mariée à dix-huit ans et mes enfants sont venus rapidement. Je n'ai pas eu beaucoup de temps pour moi-même. 88

It is undoubtedly Eveline's many similar revelations that influence Christine to think beyond marriage and choose a career. Eveline's willingness to share her private thoughts with her daughter ultimately lead to her daughter's departure. Christine's decision to make her writing a priority comes not only over marriage, but also over her mother.

In Bonheur d'occasion, the female protagonists are tormented by their tragic destinies. The female cycle of marriage, babies and misery is intensified by the extreme poverty. The whole tragedy of the novel stems from Rose-Anna's and Florentine's desperate struggle against their destiny as lower class French-Canadian women. Rose-Anna embodies submission to her fate, while Florentine represents a misguided and unsuccessful effort to escape her feminine destiny.

88 Roy, La Route, pp. 235-236.
Rose-Anna's cyclical road of motherhood goes back to her childhood home where her mother, with her fifteen children, personifies this maternal destiny. Each of the three generations of women—Mme Laplante, Rose-Anna and Florentine—experiences a different kind of misery in her role as mother. Mme Laplante allows her bitterness about her life to destroy her relationship with her husband and children. She eliminates, therefore, the redeeming part of her role which is the love and warmth of family life. Rose-Anna rejects her mother's negative outlook and is determined to create a warm, loving home for her husband and children. On her wedding day, she ignores her mother's warning that she is fated to suffer. Her first few years of family life are beautiful, and she again ignores the negative prophecies of the older neighborhood women who are already caught up in their closed maternal circle. Their warnings, however, prove true because Rose-Anna's home becomes slowly undermined by the anguish of big-city poverty. Florentine, in turn, rejects her mother's kind of misery and becomes obsessed with the glamorous world of wealth. She marries a man without loving him because he can provide her and her baby with comfort and pretty clothes. Florentine is young and pregnant when she marries and perpetuates this female cycle by returning to her grandmother's misery of a loveless family life.

Both Mme Laplante and Rose-Anna warn their young daughters that they will ultimately be tied to their fate of motherhood and misery, but neither daughter believes this in her youth. When Rose-Anna confides to Florentine that she is expecting their twelfth child, Florentine responds sarcastically that eleven should be enough.
Rose-Anna tries helplessly to explain to her daughter that a woman does not really have control over her life. Florentine does not believe this: "C'est pas vrai, songeait Florentine. Moi, je ferai comme je voudrai. Moi, j'aurai pas de misère comme sa mère." In the dime store where Florentine works, she sees her mother come in and is astonished at how tired and depressed she looks. Again, Florentine vows never to end up like her mother. She is terribly limited, however, by her environment.

Il ne lui arrivait pas de croire que son destin, elle put le rencontrer ailleurs qu'ici, dans l'odeur violente du caramel, entre ces grandes glaces pendues au mur où se voyaient d'étroites bandes de papier gommé, annonçant le menu du jour, et au son bref, crpitant, du tiroir-caisse, qui était comme l'expression même de son attente exaspérée. Ici se résumait pour elle le caractère hâtif, agité et pauvre de toute sa vie passé dans Saint-Henri.

Florentine is still young enough to believe in an incredible romance and is pathetically vulnerable to the promise of love and security. Hence, when a well-dressed, confident machinist makes casual advances to her, she immediately sets about building up a passionate affair which will be an escape from the female destinies of her mother and grandmother. Her obsession to escape her destiny ultimately traps her. It is ironically during her mother's visit to her grandmother that she and Jean have their brief sexual encounter. While Mme Laplante is complaining bitterly to Rose-Anna about her harsh fate and while Rose-Anna is trying to convince her mother that she is not as miserable

89 Roy, Bonheur, p. 11.
90 Ibid., p. 11
as she seems, Florentine is home alone with Jean bringing about her ultimate downfall. Once pregnant, her circular road of motherhood is determined. Life repeats incessantly and on Florentine's wedding day, Rose-Anna tries to warn her, just as her own mother had done. Whereas Mme Laplante warned Rose-Anna about the misery of life, Rose-Anna tries to convince Florentine that marriage is serious and that she should not marry a man she does not love. Florentine is no more inclined to believe her mother than Rose-Anna was to believe hers. Each generation of women is predestined to live out their destiny of marriages, babies and misery.
CONCLUSION

This thesis has been an examination of Gabrielle Roy's feminine perspective in her characterization and plot development. This perspective has been analyzed in her emphasis on the French-Canadian household in her novels and short stories, including the role of children, women, men, love, and the interaction between the daughter, mother and grandmother within this household. Gabrielle Roy's female protagonists fall into three distinct age groups which also have been examined in terms of the characters they represent: the young girl represented by Christine and Florentine, the middle-aged women represented by Luzina, Eveline and Rose-Anna, and the elderly grandmother represented by Memère and Mme Laplante. Finally, three themes which illustrate Gabrielle Roy's feminine perspective were discussed: the theme of ultimate separation between mother and child, the theme of lack of mobility for the French-Canadian woman and the theme of a woman's destiny of marriage, motherhood and unrealized dreams. It is evident throughout her literary works that Gabrielle Roy has a profound understanding of, appreciation for, and interest in women. This concern is manifested by her sensitive portrayal of ordinary women who act out their destinies with amazing love, warmth and humor.

Gabrielle Roy's interest in women is expressed by her genuine female characterization and by the authentic situations she creates for her female protagonists. When Luzina, normally loving and tolerant, lashes out at her children as they zealously follow their teacher, her
uncharacteristic jealousy seems realistic. We smile indulgently at Eveline and understand the underlying anxiety in her question when she asks her six-year-old daughter if she thinks it is reasonable for her grandmother to insist on planting an enormous garden. Most women have experienced Florentine's anguish as she sits home alone, night after night, hearing every little sound which might be interpreted as a sign that Jean has finally come over. Gabrielle Roy's deep understanding of a woman's concerns is again beautifully portrayed in the poignant scenes where Rose-Anna visits her son in the hospital and feels so alienated. Rose-Anna is overwhelmed with contradictory feelings of pity for Daniel, a vague realization that he does not miss her in his peaceful hospital room, and unexpected jealousy about the affection he feels for his nurse. Gabrielle Roy records the plight of her female protagonists with great tolerance, compassion and humor. After reading her novels and short stories, one feels the same indulgent love and compassion toward her characters that a mother feels toward her children. In fact, one can imagine Gabrielle Roy as the infinitely loving earth-mother, tenderly creating her characters with a wistful sense of maternal love.

The wistful mood in Gabrielle Roy's female characterizations is caused by the author-mother's realization that she cannot create a perfect life for her protagonist-children. Her female characters experience fleeting joy and hope which is followed by inevitable pain and struggle. None of the women are really in control of their destinies, and Gabrielle Roy never offers a solution for their female dilemmas. Each generation of women learn, as they move through the
stages of their womanhood, to modify their ambitions and to compromise with their circumstances. Rose-Anna gives her daughter the same warning her mother gave her—that you end up doing what you can in life, not necessarily what you want to. Florentine, of course, ignores the warning. Part of the sadness of motherhood is the realization that you cannot teach experience to your daughters, protect them from the painful aspects of their female destinies or assure them that they will realize their dreams and aspirations.

Although there is this wistful mood in Gabrielle Roy's writing, her fiction nevertheless radiates love, warmth and joy. Her novels and short stories are like the warm, protective home each woman seeks to create. Although there are seemingly unsurmountable obstacles, Gabrielle Roy's strong, independent women have unconquerable spirits. Their sense of humor, enthusiasm for life, and love and tolerance for others give them the strength to rise above their sorrows. Even Rose-Anna, the most oppressed of Roy's female protagonists, always manages to summon up a reserve of strength and energy to cope with her many family crises. She is never totally defeated because of her sense of hope and joy which serves her in the worst misery. This loving, unselfish mother's only wish is to have her family living happily together in security. Their pitiful poverty destroys their happiness, but Rose-Anna has no longing for wealth as an ultimate goal. Consequently, she is very sad when she learns that her husband and son have joined the Army, although it means an end to her financial problems. She would rather stay together as a family and try to work out their problems together. Love is Rose-Anna's dominating force and it is
what gives her strength. When she reads a headline telling of the invasion of Norway, she places herself in the position of the European mothers whose sons are also in danger. She is able to commiserate totally with all the mothers of all places and all times who must be separated from their loved ones:

"Elle les connaissait bien soudain, toutes ces femmes des pays lointains, qu'elles fussent polonaises, norvégiennes ou tchèques ou slovaques. C'étaient des femmes comme elle. Des femmes du peuple. Des besogneuses. De celles qui, depuis des siècles, voyaient partir leurs maris et leurs enfants. Une époque passait, une autre venait; et c'était toujours la même chose: les femmes de tous les temps et les hommes défilaient."

This ideal of 'love is Gabrielle Roy's unrealized dream. She is committed to a way of life where peace, harmony and communication prevail. This ideal is no closer to being realized in real life than in her fiction, but in Gabrielle Roy's works it is apparently women who come closest to realizing this humanistic goal.

91Roy, Bonheur, p. 204.
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