A Farmer’s Wife:

A Critical Study of Gender Roles on the Canadian Prairie Farm During the 1930s

The experience of life on the Canadian prairie farm during the 1930s was unique to each individual. There were, however, many commonalities and obstacles shared among the families who lived there. The cultural setting, the weather, and several economic factors all contributed to the overall reality of the struggle to survive during this time in Canadian history. In particular, the constraints Canadian rural women faced during this era under a patriarchal system were immense. Canadian author, Sinclair Ross wrote “The Lamp at Noon” to describe the physical and psychological struggle of farm life during the Canadian Depression of the 1930s. Ross portrayed the female character, Ellen, within the domestic sphere of farm life to present the complexities of human struggle during this era. Although many women contributed significantly to survival on rural farms during this period in history, Ross’s description of Ellen affirms the reality of male authority. He reveals the inequities of the culture, illustrates the unrecognized effort of women and highlights the individual experience.

The era between wars that began with the Wall Street crash in 1929 and ended with the invasion of Poland in 1939 profoundly affected the western Canadian population more than any other decade in history (Gray 1). To describe this time simply as ‘The Depression’ somehow seems inadequate. Several factors contributed to the actuality of three separate depressions. The effects of the market collapse, the agricultural depression and post-war inflation all overlap and,
therefore, become this one period of time entitled ‘The Great Depression’ affecting all aspects of life:

The October crash was not in itself a primary cause but a synergist that set off a chain reaction within the other depressions and produced a greater total effect than the sum of their individual effects would otherwise have been (Gray 2).

Equally important contributing factors were unemployment and the high costs associated with mechanization (Gray 2). In 1931, twenty-three percent of the Canadian population lived on the prairies in western Canada (Leger-Anderson 47). This is a significant portion of the Canadian population, and their collective experience sets the stage for Sinclair Ross to write “The Lamp at Noon,” highlighting his characters’ struggle during the mid 1930s.

The weather was a considerable force to contend with. The farm drought began in 1929 and grew progressively worse until 1937. The extreme part of this drought was confined mainly to Saskatchewan and the adjoining corners of Manitoba and Alberta, the area called the Palliser Triangle (Gray 2). These years were coined ‘The Dirty Thirties’ by the people of Saskatchewan who also suffered from the resultant dust storms. Dust storms occurred as strong winds blew loose sand and dirt from the earth’s dry surface with such force that crops were annihilated. The dust storms began in mid June of 1931 and increased in their severity each summer throughout the drought (Friesen 386): “Dust storms reduced visibility to a few feet, lakes went dry and farmers actually raced out to cut Russian thistle in order to feed starving cattle” (Friesen 386-87). The extreme heat during summers combined with the severe blizzards of winter and infestations of insects also aggravated life on the prairies and contributed to the tragedy Ross’s characters faced.
The hardships faced by women were intensified during the dust storms and Depression of the 1930s. The repeated crop failures wiped out the working capital and livelihood of many farmers with Saskatchewan being the worse hit. It is estimated that by the time 1937 came along, two-thirds of farming families were destitute (Friesen 388). Sinclair Ross was born on a Saskatchewan homestead of one hundred and sixty acres in 1908. When Ross was three years old, his parents separated and he remained with his mother who supported herself and her son by working on various farms as a housekeeper (McMullen 15-16). Solely, his mother raised Ross, and consequently had a profound influence on his life. She was an educated woman who valued reading and worked very hard to give Ross an education. Mrs. Ross was from upper class ancestry and saw “herself as somewhat superior to other homesteaders and farmers” (McMullen 17). Her attitudes did not fit the small prairie town stereotype and as an example, she spoke out against the Ku Klux Klan during a time when the Klan was making headway in small prairie communities (McMullen 17). Sinclair Ross retained his mother’s compassion and sense of social responsibility, which is why he may have chosen to highlight the inequities of the culture within his writings.

Most of Ross’s early stories such as “The Lamp at Noon,” dealing with homestead life and the bleakness of the Dust Bowl, were published between 1933 and 1942. Although living in Manitoba at the time, Ross considered these stories “one hundred per cent Saskatchewan” (Ross qtd. in McMullen 19). Ross highlighted the patriarchal society of the time by presenting Paul as the decision-maker on the farm. As an archetype, Paul could be viewed as a slave to the land, one who worked hard to preserve a way of life (Mitchell 5). When Ellen accused Paul of not taking care of the land, he responded by stating that she is a farmer’s wife and it no longer matters what past she has come from or what upbringing she has had. Paul reflects a
condescending attitude towards Ellen at this point in the story, demonstrating the male-dominant traits of his character.

Ross presented Ellen as a sensitive young farmer’s wife who is overwhelmed with the harshness of life on the prairie farm. The couple has a baby, and it becomes clear as the story progresses that Ellen could be suffering from postpartum depression or depression as a result of isolation and the years of conflict with the natural world. Either way, she battles with deep emotional despair. The dust storm itself symbolizes the turmoil between man and wife, and as the storm intensifies, so does the argument and failure of communication between the couple. Ross accentuated Ellen’s inability to shut out reality by focusing on her eyes and her inability to close them: “Her eyes all the while were fixed and wide with a curious immobility….Now she could not close them” (Ross qtd. in McMullen 31). Ellen has seen clearly the wasted years and the hopeless future; she has reached her breaking point. “Paul refuses to sympathize, seeing her hysteria as female weakness” (Mitchell 10) and leaves their home to retreat to the barn. Again, Ross lightly touches upon male dominance within the prairie culture through characterizing Paul’s inability to show emotion or tenderness.

Ross is careful not to assign blame to either character as the story ends. Throughout the story, the lamp itself seems to symbolize hope, but at the same time, to light the lamp at noon signifies the darkness of the couple’s situation. As the storm dies down, Paul is no longer blind to desolation of the land or the validity of Ellen’s arguments. When Paul returns home to find the open door, the extinguished lamp, and the empty crib, he finally sees reality. The open door signifies nature’s victory over human error in taking care of the land; the extinguished lamp reveals the loss of Ellen’s hope; and the empty crib foreshadows the baby’s death (McMullen 33). The irony of this story is Paul can now see the real world. Ellen, who at first saw reality very
clearly, has now passed into an illusionary state. The family becomes victim to the frailty of their own humanness. Ross’s fictional story echoes the reality of what he observed while living in Saskatchewan.

Very little is actually written on the real lives of women during the 1930s. Information on gender ideals and how they influenced everyday life are expressed within studies focused on feminists’ complaints about a male-dominated society (Bye 135). The burden of survival on prairie farms fell to a great extent on women due to the variety of skills they possessed. There was a great deal of work to be done and families could not afford to hire additional male help (Bye 141). As stated previously, no part of Canada suffered more during the Great Depression than Saskatchewan. Between 1929 and 1933, the province’s per capita income fell by seventy-two percent, compared with forty-two percent nationwide. Wheat prices fell to a four hundred year low, and by 1937 two thirds of Saskatchewan families were on government relief (Bye 138). These economic and environmental conditions taxed many families to the limit and forced them to abandon their farms.

Saskatchewan women’s ability to feed and clothe their families with very few resources through dairy and poultry sales contributed significantly to the province’s overall economy (Bye 139). A woman’s “husband might not be the family’s true breadwinner, but the good farm woman behaved as though he were” (Bye 140). This statement reflects the emotional role women played by being “tension managers” (Bye 145). By providing the emotional support for those men discouraged by their failed crops, women derived part of their status within the community by boosting their husbands’ reputation. Women’s concern over male morale reflected their own tendencies to downplay their contributions to the family’s well being (Bye 146). These projected images are compatible with the ideals of a patriarchal culture.
The task of nurturing family members fell mostly to women. Women were responsible for instilling religious, moral and social values in children. Farm wives were expected to not only bear and raise the children but also to handle the domestic chores such as cleaning, cooking, laundry, sewing and mending. In addition to these duties, an increasing number of women performed fieldwork and other male-related tasks due to the fact that their families could not afford to hire farm hands. This type of flexibility was crucial to survival on Saskatchewan farms during the 1930s (Rollings-Magnusson 225). Women became the invisible farmers and bore the weight of both domestic and productive labour (Rollings-Magnusson 226). The reversal of roles was seldom true because men were “more reluctant to shift attention to feminine tasks and risk a possible loss of power in the home” (Rollings-Magnusson 227). As reflected in Ross’s story, men were considered the decision makers when it came to running the homestead. These types of expectations reveal that women carried a tremendous amount of responsibility but had no legal power.

Government laws reflected attitudes regarding women as dependents within the agricultural community. Restrictive laws such as the Dominion Lands Act of 1872 prevented married women from owning property. The 1930s brought some changes, but there was no equality of ownership while women’s husbands were living (Bye 149). Without direct access to land, women were in a position of dependency. Men owned and controlled the fields and therefore made decisions on what to grow and produce as indicated in Ross’s discussion between Ellen and Paul. These types of prevailing attitudes contributed towards the social and legal gender-based inequalities of this period in Canadian history.

Dependency contributed to the emotional and endless struggle for survival. A painful example of real hopelessness can be found within the document files of Prime Minister R. B.
... Please help me by lending me some money and I will send you my engagement ring and wedding ring as security ... My two rings cost over $100 15 yrs ago but what good are they when the flour is nearly all done and there isn’t much to eat in the house in the city I could pawn them but away out here I haven’t been off the farm this winter. (Friesen 398).

“Bennett sent five dollars as a gift” (Friesen 398), which could be construed as a dismissive attitude towards a perception of female hysteria. As pointed out earlier, Ross, with his male protagonist’s treatment of Ellen, illustrated a similar attitude. The extraordinary circumstances surrounding the Great Depression lead many to the brink of despair. Ross’s character, Ellen, was an example of what poet T. S. Eliot meant when he wrote “humankind / Cannot bear very much reality” (qtd. in McMullen 31). Human beings are vulnerable.

Although Ross depicted Ellen within the stereotypical role of a farm wife, he gave his readers insight into her inner turmoil. Many women had different and unique experiences of farm life during the Dust Bowl; not all of them were driven to insanity. Ross described his own mother as a “determined woman and a fighter” (McMullen 16). Many women had hoped to empower themselves and others through their immeasurable contributions towards survival on the farm. Unfortunately, many women ended up reinforcing the patriarchal system. As a result, rural women today still struggle with both personal and community expectations of what their roles actually entail (Bye 155). Decades earlier, Sinclair Ross recorded these types of human conflicts with an artistic eye through which he viewed his world. He sought authenticity within
the core of personal experience. He wrote about what he observed, and thus exposed the naked truth of societal expectations within the patriarchal system.

Works Cited


