Martha Ostenso : Romance Versus Realism

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MARTHA OSTENSO: ROMANCE VERSUS REALISM

BY

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Abstract

Martha Ostenso's career as a novelist can be summarized as one of overnight success, loss of reputation, and finally obscurity. Still, her life, coupled with her fiction, provides a paradoxical and fascinating story. It might even be viewed as representative of the emerging consciousness of the American woman during the early part of the twentieth century.

In 1924, at the age of twenty-four, she was awarded the highest sum ever granted a North American author for a first novel; by the time of her death in 1963, she was virtually unknown and unreputed as a serious author. The following analysis traces the life of Martha Ostenso from the mountains of Norway, the land of her birth, to the plains of the Midwest, to the wilderness of Manitoba, to New York City's Greenwich Village, and back to the lake region of Minnesota. Throughout the analysis the emphasis shall be on various factors that formulated her philosophic outlook and thus her fiction. The analysis attempts to answer why Ostenso's fame was so brief, what prompted her to formulate the ideas that she expresses in her fiction, and why she chose to write popular fiction rather than a more serious genre. The analysis is divided into five chapters, each of which explores a given aspect of Ostenso's development as a woman and as an author.

The first chapter deals with Ostenso's family history and her early childhood. Here one sees Martha as the alienated child of
an indigent immigrant father, then as a courageous adolescent who took any type of employment she could to elevate herself, including teaching in the Canadian wilderness, and finally, one sees Martha as the lover of one of her first English professors, Douglas Durkin, whom she follows to Greenwich Village and into a lifestyle far more liberal than that of her upbringing.

The second chapter discusses some of the possible influences that Village life had on Ostenso's consciousness and speculates on the possibility that the Bohemian atmosphere of the Village was the source of many of the "pagan" sentiments that Ostenso refers to throughout her writings.

The third chapter explores some of the internal and external factors that led to her declining fame—family pressures, unsympathetic critics, and a hapless stagnation of her creative energy; but most devastating of all factors that led to her demise appears to be a conscious or unconscious "death wish" that she shared with several of her contemporaries.

The fourth chapter, "Idols of Love," discusses the female protagonists of Ostenso's first novel, Wild Geese—Lind Archer and Judith Care. They represent a compromise between the Genteel Tradition of the late nineteenth century and the emerging "flapper" of the early twentieth century. It contrasts the traditional role of woman as chattel to her husband with the image of woman as a sexual being that was becoming acceptable to the popular mind during the first few decades of this century.
The final chapter deals with the composite image of the Ostenso heroine that one gathers from all fourteen novels, with emphasis on the heroines of Wild Geese (1925), The Young May Moon (1929), The Waters Under the Earth (1930), The Stone Field (1937), and The Mandrake Root (1938). These novels were chosen by this writer as the most integral, imaginative and readable of all the Ostenso novels. The Ostenso heroine emerges as a feminine ideal that represents one woman’s return to the archetypal female in quest of her identity as a twentieth century woman. For this reason, the Ostenso quest for self-actualization, which was influenced by such diverse sources as Northern European paganism, urban Bohemianism of the twenties, and her own personal dream-like fantasies, makes her story of interest to any woman who seeks the integrity of the "self."

The Hodges of the contest stated that "Miss Ostenso's novel was so far superior that no other story submitted seriously rivaled it." They chose it "because of its universal appeal, its unflinching picture of life and its compelling story." Yet reviews were divided. Some admired the story’s melodramatic aspects. Others thought the subject matter trite, meeting of the herman. Mary Rolars of Commonweal called it "a fairly promising literary beginning, nothing more. . . . While there are indispensable beauties of style, there is almost no sign of that creative interpretation of character by the authority of which every fine new writer of fiction speaks." Perhaps
INTRODUCTION

At the age of twenty-four Martha Ostenso "swept the literary world off its feet"\(^1\) when she won a "first novel" contest sponsored by Pictorial Review, Dodd Mead, and Famous Players-Lasky Corporation. Her novel, *Wild Geese*, was chosen "best" among 1,389 other entries. It was serialized in *Pictorial Review*, then published in book form in 1925. It was eventually translated into several languages and made into a silent film. Ostenso was paid $13,500, the largest sum ever awarded for a first novel by a North American author.\(^2\) She never equaled this triumph in the course of her prolific twenty-nine year career which ended with her death in 1963.

The judges of the contest stated that "Miss Ostenso's novel was so far superior that no other story submitted seriously rivaled it." They chose it "because of its universal appeal, its unflinching picture of life and its compelling story."\(^3\) Yet reviews were divided. Some condemned the story's melodramatic aspects. Others thought the subject matter trite, reeking of the barnyard.\(^4\) Mary Kolars of *Commonweal* called it "a fairly promising literary beginning, nothing more. . . . While there are indisputable beauties of style, there is almost no sign of that creative interpretation of character by the authority of which every first rate writer of fiction speaks."\(^5\) Perhaps
the most glorious review came from Stuart P. Sherman: "Here is a novelist with genuine dramatic imagination, power to penetrate to the viscera of very diverse lives, and withal, endowed with a sense of form which has hitherto been rarely coupled in American writers of fiction with anything like Miss Ostenso's vital sense for substance."6

The publicity that surrounded the contest and the reviews that praised Ostenso's promise as a writer so roundly have become the most important criteria by which Ostenso's contribution to North American fiction has been measured, specifically Canadian fiction. In 1961, Carlyle King, a notable Canadian critic, called *Wild Geese* a "pioneering achievement" in his introduction to a reissued paperback edition of the novel. He contrasts it to the Canadian "Sunshine School" of fiction, the prevalent mode of Canadian writers during the period between the two world wars.

Human nature is fundamentally noble and Rotarian morality always triumphs. The main characters are basically nice people. Nobody ever suffers long or gets really hurt or says "damn." At worst, people make some dirty faces at one another, but before the end of the book, tears are wiped from every eye and most of the characters live virtuously ever after. This cheerful and dishonest tradition obviously was of no use to a novelist who proposed to make the chief female character in her book a seventeen-year-old girl, as wild as a broncho and as vivid as a tigress, who runs into a clearing in the bush, strips off all her clothes and presses her breasts against the earth.7

King is here referring to Judith Gare, Ostenso's woman of the
soil in *Wild Geese*. It is the character of Judith, most particularly, that has ensconced *Wild Geese* as a classic of Canadian fiction: "It was prairie writers such as Robert J. C. Stead (1880 - 1950), Martha Ostenso (1900 - 1963) and above all Frederick Philip Grove (1871 - 1948) who began the systematic transformation of Canadian fiction from romance to realism."

Ostenso's realism is chiefly attributed to her recognition of the Canadian land as a significant influence on the lives of the people. According to Carl F. Klinck, a Canadian historical critic, the vast majority of Canadian novelists had little relationship to the Canadian environment: "By far the great majority of the novelists of these years . . . made no effort (to come to terms with the environment of the prairies). Most of them conceived the novel and the short story merely as a media of light entertainment and contented themselves with providing some form of romantic escape." Klinck evaluates the contribution of *Wild Geese* by these standards in his *Literary History of Canada* (1963):

Although the novel has a modified happy ending, its prevailing tone is sombre in the extreme. The primitive characters and their primitive setting are described powerfully and vividly, and the atmosphere is one of relentless tragic pressure . . . The physical appearance of the characters, the farmhouse, and the landscape are described in great detail, the three elements are fused into a single amalgam of harsh power.
Ostenso's other thirteen novels are generally dismissed as formula pieces, romantic and conventional:

Martha Ostenso's later novels, . . . were most all set in the Northern United States, and were more or less unsuccessful attempts to repeat her own achievement in *Wild Geese*. But *Wild Geese* itself is the single most consistent piece of western realism to appear before the novels of Philip Grove, and has a niche of its own in the history of this phase of our [The Canadian] literary development.11

The image of the "one book author" was established early in her career. It was something that her publishers did their best to dispel. Grant Overton, in his book called *The Women Who Make Our Novels* (1928), also published by Dodd Mead, is generous in his praise of *Wild Geese*: "The book has a very rare thing in American fiction, tragic quality." He extends this praise to the two works that follow, *The Dark Dawn* (1926) and *The Mad Carews* (1927), stating that they have the same "story interest, element of drama and sure characterization, yet sufficiently different, too, and perfect evidence that Miss Ostenso is no mere 'repeater.'"12

In an article published in 1973, Clara Thomas went against the consensus of Canadian critics by praising a second Ostenso novel, *The Young May Moon* (1929). Thomas calls it even more finely crafted than *Wild Geese* and indeed, "existential" in philosophy. Thomas states that the "seriousness of Martha Ostenso's themes was largely lost on reviewers and readers who only expected and only found decorously passionate love stories in her novels."13 Aside from Thomas, Canadian critics have been content to embrace *Wild Geese* as the only Ostenso novel of significance. They seem content
to embrace the novel and discard the woman:

With Martha Ostenso we encounter an example of that problem which so often confronts the Canadian literary historian, is the author properly considered a Canadian? For Martha Ostenso was born in Norway, grew up in Minnesota and North [sic.] [South] Dakota and lived in Manitoba only from 1915 to 1921, when she left for permanent residence in the United States. The answer is, I think, that Martha Ostenso is an American novelist, but that her first novel *Wild Geese*, set in Manitoba and a product of her Manitoba experience is a Canadian novel.¹⁴

American criticism has been slight on the subject of Martha Ostenso's fiction. Frederick J. Hoffman, a major literary historian of the twenties, mentions her in a single footnote in his work: *The Twenties: American Writing in the Post War Decade*. He notes her as the author of *Wild Geese*, a "notable historical novel."¹⁵ Other criticism is chiefly to be found in the form of reviews, biographical publicity that surrounded the contest and an occasional notation concerning the quality of her work in biographical encyclopedias. The most substantial work of criticism on Ostenso's novels by an American is an unpublished Ph.D. dissertation by Joan Buckley, written for the University of Iowa in 1976. Buckley is currently teaching at Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota. She summarizes Ostenso's contribution as follows:

Her major contribution as a writer lies in this realistic depiction of villagers or farmers together with elements of frank naturalism. In a day when farm novels tended to be legion, Ostenso had the audacity in her best novels to write realistically and describe the situation accurately from a woman's standpoint.¹⁶
Buckley names *Wild Geese*, *The Young May Moon*, *The Waters Under the Earth*, and *O River Remember* as Ostenso's most successful novels. She also views the strengths of Ostenso's novels as her naturalistic depiction of pioneer life and the accurate satire of small town morality. Buckley attributes Ostenso's weakness as a novelist to the fact that she chose to write for a popular audience. Buckley attempts to prove that the author took that course out of a necessity to support a large number of family members.17

Each of the above evaluations of Ostenso's contribution to literature contains an element of truth, but they all stop short of the total picture. By attempting to categorize Ostenso with a larger school of fiction, these critics slight the author's actual contribution not only to literature, but also to the growing consciousness of women during the twentieth century. For Ostenso saw woman's highest duty as being to the self—to actualize the needs of the self above all else. But if one insists on classifications Ostenso is most correctly a popular writer of romantic fiction. She had a strong talent for observing detail, but her occasional naturalistic observations do not classify Ostenso as a naturalist. She may have used the forces of heredity and environment as elements that shaped the lives of her characters, but she did not attempt to scientifically observe and record life, as did naturalists such as Frank Norris or Emile Zola. Her view of nature is romantic, as we shall see;
she was not above contriving unrealistic situations to make her plots neat and to reinforce her romantic outlook. On the whole, Ostenso depicted a universe that may have been relentless, harsh and even hostile, but it was ultimately just. To Ostenso the main source of evil in this universe originated in the greedy, petty, and conniving nature of man.

In addition to the "blinding publicity" that surrounded the publication of *Wild Geese* there are other factors that have limited the critical objectivity of Ostenso's reviewers. These include the prejudices of "Eastern-establishment" reviewers and critics against regional "farm" novels; male-oriented reviewers and critics who saw such feminine pursuits as love, marriage, and motherhood, as superficial concerns; and (as previously pointed out by Clara Thomas) the fact that Ostenso's popularity "shrouded the seriousness of her themes."18 Thus, by the mid-thirties Martha Ostenso's literary reputation had faded from a respectable status as a serious, realistic author to that of a romantic novelist who wrote for a mostly female audience.

It is indisputable that there is a readily discernible Ostenso formula that varies—sometimes notably, other times slightly—from novel to novel, but within that formula are a number of remarkable observations on the condition of humanity, particularly women. Moreover, in spite of this obvious weakness
and the fact that she adhered to the convention of the "happy ending," Martha Ostenso's fiction is worthy of notice because she helped to popularize the Bohemian consciousness of the twenties; attempted to reinstate the acceptability of female sexuality by aligning this force with the forces of nature; and she created a new ideal for women—the pagan heroine—who has subjectively freed herself from the bonds of Christian patriarchy.

Ostenso's pagan heroine represents a woman's version of the Lawrence woman. This is a point of significance since Lawrence, inspired by such writers as Havelock Ellis, has set a pattern of sexual attitudes for many of the twentieth century. Beneath Ostenso's conventions and romantic idealism, each novel illustrates a model of feminine behavior that was rapidly being adopted by women of the twentieth century—Ostenso's popularity attests to this. On the surface there is little that is either revolutionary or offensive even to the most conservative reader about the Ostenso heroine, but on a metaphoric and psychological level, there is much for the reader to reckon with in the character of the heroine.

Ostenso equated her heroine with the powers of the earth—the giving-passive aspect of the female. This innocent association is, however, not as innocent as it appears. For it is the earth man relies on for his livelihood, and to abuse the earth (as we are rapidly finding out) is to jeopardize one's standing in the
universe. Thus woman, as representative of the powers of the earth, has an awesome free will—to either refuse or to grant her favors, any favors, to man. This is the power of woman that women of the twentieth century discovered. Ostenso popularized a heroine who was not afraid to say "no" to the demands of the patriarchy. She was willing to perform all of the "natural" functions of the female, but when it came to a question of serving the male or harming the integrity of the self the Ostenso heroine preserves her own integrity first.

Reviewers and critics have seldom delved into this aspect of Ostenso's novels. This analysis shall attempt to supply this omission by exploring the cultural and psychological influences that prompted Ostenso to create her pagan heroine.

The first part of this analysis will examine the life of Martha Ostenso in terms of her philosophic conflict between realism and romance: first from the point of view of a successful author looking back on a childhood of alienation and poverty; then from the point of view of a young woman who has abandoned the safe patterns of female behavior for the free Bohemian life of New York's Greenwich Village; and finally from the point of view of a woman who has actualized her dreams and found them inadequate and unfulfilling. The purpose of the first half of this paper is to show how the social attitudes of her time, including the esoteric philosophies of the Village were inadequate for creative women such as
Martha Ostenso—they did not provide adequate freedom or a fulfilling identity. This led her to both capitalize on her writing talent and to lay aside artistic purposes. Her true feelings became internalized and this internalization took a peculiar form of symbolism in each novel. In her private life this struggle overwhelmed her, leading to alcoholism and finally death.

The purpose of the second half of this paper is to analyze her novels: first, for the popular conventions of love that were gaining prominence during the time she wrote; second, for certain archetypal patterns of the female, particularly mythical ideals of Norse mythology, which left a strong mark on her characterization of women, specifically, her heroine. Emphasis will be placed on the following novels: *Wild Geese* (1925), *The Young May Moon* (1929), *The Waters Under the Earth* (1930), *The Stone Field* (1937), and *The Mandrake Root* (1938).
Notes

For Introduction


5 Mary Kolars, Review of Wild Geese, Commonweal, 20 January 1926, p. 76.


9 Klinck, p. 297.

10 Klinck, p. 678.

11 Klinck, p. 678.

1928), pp. 245-250.


14 Klinck, p. 678.


17 Buckley, p. 17.

18 Thomas, p. 49.

19 "Miss Ostenso starts out for Mexico Again," Minneapolis Tribune, 22 January 1933, sect. 3, p. 7, col. 4. In this article Ostenso claims to have the same birth date as Lawrence, September 17. Facts, however, do not confirm this casual remark. Ostenso was born September 17, 1900, Lawrence, September 11, 1885. These dates are, perhaps, close enough to be of astrological significance; moreover, this statement of Ostenso's shows a willingness on her part to be associated with Lawrence on an intuitive level.
"What could be more proper than that a realistic writer should herself be the heroine of a romantic experience?" Thus Grant Overton describes the event that brought Martha Ostenso from "utter obscurity" to "blinding publicity"20 -- her winning of the Dodd Mead contest. From the beginning of her public career as a "famous author," Martha Ostenso perpetrated an image of the perfectly cast romantic heroine. Her unassuming demure manner typified her as a fateful recipient of this quasi-heroic triumph:

Seated in an office of Dodd-Mead and Company in New York Miss Ostenso, a fluffy-haired ashe blond with calm eyes the color of shallow sea water and a mouth widely facile, related the incidents leading up to winning the contest. It was purely accidental, she said enunciating with the precision of an old-time actress. "I sent in my novel just the day before the contest closed. I had written the first draft in a month working feverishly. Then I laid it aside. Several months later I came to New York. I read the drafts to friends who liked it. They persuaded me to finish it. To my amazement it won!"21

The facts of this story are told again and again with some variation in nearly every interview she held for the next ten years. The experience on which Wild Geese is based dates back to Ostenso's term as a country school teacher in 1918 in the Manitoba wilderness. The manuscript was written shortly after her teaching experience but lay dormant for a few years. Ostenso came to New York in 1921, but had little opportunity to write. When a "friend" told her of the Dodd-Mead
contest in 1924 she returned to her parents' home in Winnipeg and completed the second and final draft on a rented typewriter which she could only afford to keep for a month. The rest of the story has a legendary quality. The publicity that accompanied her victory appeared in major newspapers in New York, Chicago, Winnipeg, and Minneapolis. Martha's calm, self-assured reticence coupled with her photogenic beauty did much to enhance her fame. Her photograph accompanies nearly every early account of her early success.

Another romantic aspect of Martha that these early accounts emphasize is her exotic "Viking" heritage. Several biographical accounts of Ostenso include the following passage from an autobiographical sketch that appeared first in Ostenso's book.

Place where the long arm of the Hardangerfjord penetrates farthest into the coast of Norway, the Ostenso family has lived, in the township that bears its name since the days of the Vikings. The name means Eastern sea, and was assumed centuries ago by an adventurous forbearer who dreamed of extending his holdings over the mountains and through the lowlands of Sweden, eastward to the shores of the Baltic. Although his dream never came true, the family name recalls it and the family tradition of land holding has persisted unbroken; the land that borders the lovely fjord is still in the family possession, handed down from eldest son to eldest son.

My mother's parents lived high up in the mountains remote from the softening influence of the coast towns. At their home it was near the little village of Haukeland, that I was born. This the first of
many small towns in which I lived is known to me only through hearsay, for when I was two years old we came to America.23

Martha's parents were Sigurd Brigt Ostenso and Olina Olavsdatter Tungeland. Both were buttermakers employed by the Redalen creamery near Mjosa in Budbrandsdalen, Norway. They were married in 1898. Sigurd was not the eldest son so he was not entitled to the farm, and because his income as a buttermaker grew inadequate, he decided to join his wife's brother, John Tungeland, in Winnipeg, Canada, where the latter had a successful cold storage business. His wife remained at the Tungeland farm. There, Martha was born September 17, 1900.

When the child was two years old and strong enough to travel she emigrated with her mother to Wilmar, Minnesota, where her father had secured a job with the creamery and utilized his professional skill as a buttermaker.24

Martha was, indeed, proud of her Norwegian origin. One of the first things she did with her prize money was to return to the land of her birth with her mother. In an interview conducted by Dorothy Dunbar Bromley in 1926 for the Literary Digest International Book Review Bromley accurately captures the personality of this suddenly-famous young author, as she does the mood of Martha's first trip to Norway. Says Bromley: "As soon as you meet Martha Ostenso you realize that she is a person primarily interested in the adventure of living."25 Martha speaks with a rare candor in this interview.
The following description of her first meeting with her grandparents poetically describes her fundamental conflict between romance and realism as an inborn condition. Note the contrast between the families of her father and her mother. Of her father's people she says:

"It is a family . . . in which ancient tradition and religion count a great deal; so they could not understand me, any more than I could them. The fact that Wild Geese had sold 10,000 copies in Norway within a month made no difference to my grandmother. She must judge it by her own literary standards. If a book is sincere, if it has intrinsic integrity, she will forgive any amount of realism in it.

With my mother's people I felt more at home; they are mountaineers who do not take religion too seriously. They have a touch of wildness about them, and express themselves in native spontaneous art. All of the family are musical except myself, and my aunt has written poetry--troll stuff.

Perhaps my most vivid memory is of the day when my mother's father, an old man in mountaineer's cap, went down the mountains with me to Hardangerfjord. We stood at my grandmother's bedside. She held one of my hands in her frail little white hand, while he held the other in his toil-worn mountaineer's hand. There was I, the child of those two families, suddenly conscious that their blood had fused in me."26

Ironically, this image does not manifest itself in any predictable fashion in the characters of Sigurd and Lena. Sigurd Ostenso, unlike his strict, religious parents, was a "story-teller" and a rounder. Lena was the "backbone of the family" who held the family together with "intelligent, accepting endurance." She outlived her husband, Martha, and her youngest son.27
In addition to her Viking heritage, the romance of Martha's American success story was another area of her background that was keenly exploited. The image of an immigrant girl winning such a large award for her first writing attempt, had an obvious public appeal. Her parents are described in one account as speaking of their daughter with pride in "broken accents."

Martha is characterized as a girlish young woman with strong family ties and a generous patron to her poor family. Martha denies neither the luck of her great fortune, nor the unlikely promise of her meager beginnings, but she uses a cunningly evasive tone when she describes the actual conditions of her childhood. "My father ... was free to indulge his roving disposition ... The story of my childhood is a tale of seven little towns in Minnesota and South Dakota. Towns of the field and prairie all, redolent of the soil from which they had sprung and eloquent of the struggle to the farmer the world over .... "

In reality, her early childhood was hardly a roving adventure led by the free and amiable will of her father. Her family situation was one of poverty and struggle. Her father's job is often referred to as "establishing creameries" which he did in a number of prairie towns, which included Strandberg, Hazel and Clear Lake, South Dakota and Danvers, Morton, Wilmar, and Benson, Minnesota. (Not necessarily in that order.) But quest for adventure was hardly what accounted for these
wanderings. The main reason for the vagabond nature of Martha's childhood was her father's drinking problem. Both family and friends speak of this, but it is further evidenced in the fact that the drunken father is a recurring stock character in several of her novels. Often this father is a philosopher and a man of profound wisdom who is not appreciated by the townspeople. This is frequently a source of shame and embarrassment for the central female. In Love Passed This Way, the drunken father embarrasses his daughter by delivering a pithy, but uninvited, speech at her graduation ceremony. In There's Always Another Year, The Young May Moon, Prologue to Love, The Dark Dawn, and The Sunset Tree either poverty, or the reputation of the father, or an act of assumed murder, curse the heroine's family and cause her to evade love until the truth comes out, or the beloved male accepts the heroine with her inborn fault. In each case "bad blood" becomes an obstacle to be overcome.

Ostenso's characterization of rural life demonstrates a genuine empathy for the lesser members of small communities of the Midwest--indolents, drunks, unsuccessful farmers, unwed mothers, haggard wives and frustrated old maids. The main characters are often people who grow up in such environments, but overcome their restrictions. A biographical summary written in 1940 for a WPA project which analyzed the contributions of immigrant women to American literature credits this empathy
to Ostenso's first hand experience with alienation as a child:

"An impressionable child, scenes, incidents, pathetic and tragic characters, were absorbed in her consciousness and served as raw materials for future novels. Petty jealousies, strifes, misery and loneliness did not escape her observation."\(^{30}\)

In spite of, or perhaps because of, these conditions, Martha's romantic outlook prevailed--even as a child. Prior to attending public school she spoke only Norwegian. She had few friends her own age, but her imagination became her most reliable and constant companion. She was never at a loss for imaginative games. One of her favorite games was one that she later called "playing school":

She made herself a school out behind the house, in a patch of pigweed. She pulled the weeds out in the center making a little cleared space for teacher. Facing her table—a clump of ragweed, a thin circle of weeds were left standing to represent the pupils.

'I gave names to some of them.' She says, 'and used to stay out and teach them for hours at a time. They were all Norwegians, of course, and told me stories in Norwegian, the only language I knew. I can still remember some of those stories, the life secrets of my pigweed pupils . . . as I remember the stories Mother used to tell us, in the long cold winters of Minnesota and South Dakota, sagas of the Vikings, legends of gods and goddesses, riding the wind, told with all the vigor of her Norwegian imagination, harsh and perhaps the least bit cruel, as fairy tales so often are."\(^{31}\)

Martha's romantic inclinations extended to her romance with a new language called English that she first encountered when she attended public school in Clear Lake, South Dakota. The very sounds of the words were magical to her:
"And what a lovely language I found it to be, with words in it like pail and funeral and alone, and ugly words too, like laughter and cake and scratch.

Later, in another of the little towns, I learned that it was fun to make things with words. I was living in a little town in Minnesota [Benson] that I became a regular contributor to the 'Junior Page' of the Minneapolis Journal. . . . In the public school of that town there still hangs, perhaps, a large print of a rural scene in a resplendent frame, with a neat name plate at the bottom of it. That also came from the Journal, in recognition of an essay which in my eleven-year-old opinion, placed abreast of Emerson."32

When Martha was fifteen the Ostenso family moved by freight train to Winnipeg, Manitoba. She attended Brandon Collegiate School in 1917 and graduated from Winnipeg Kelvin Technical High School in June, 1918. During these years she wrote a few war poems which were published in the Manitoba Free Press. In 1918 she acquired a teaching permit and traveled to the northwestern lake district of Manitoba to the settlement of Dog Creek, 200 miles north of Winnipeg. Her experience as a teacher became the basis of her first novel, Wild Geese. It was an isolated community composed of Icelandic, Hungarian and Ruthenian settlers. The nearest railroad was thirty-five miles away. Martha taught grades one through six, students of all ages, in a small log school house. The family with whom she lived became the Gare family of Wild Geese.33

At seventeen, Martha Ostenso was thrust into a naturalistic drama that haunted her imagination until she was able to record it some five years later. The fact that the story was taken
directly from experience is perhaps the best argument for its being an example of naturalism. But even if the novel is naturalistic in mood, as pointed out by a number of Canadian critics, it is not a product of a naturalistic technique. For she admits that she did not scientifically observe the lives of these people, nor did she strictly adhere to the facts in her rendition of the story. As she says of the character of Caleb Gare in a 1926 interview: "People attack me for having created so melodramatic a character as the old man. As a matter of fact he was even more brutal than I have pictured him." Of Judith, one of the heroines of the novel, she says: "Judith ran off with her lover. In real life he was not so gallant a youth." In actual life, it was Martha who provided the young woman with an avenue of escape from the tyranny of the old man, Caleb. The Ostenso family befriended the girl and made it possible for her to get a job in Winnipeg.

There were other departures from what actually took place in that Dog Creek settlement in 1918. In *Wild Geese*, Caleb Gare dies—sucked into a muskeg the night his daughter runs off with her lover. In reality, the farmer with whom Ostenso boarded was quite well when she left and vowed to kill her if she ever returned. In *Wild Geese*, Lind Archer, the demure and sensitive school teacher, who is a slightly fictionalized version of the author, conveniently falls in love with the neighboring architect who, having become exhausted by city
life, offers to be the temporary custodian of a farm neighboring the Gares. He is also, most astoundingly, the illegitimate son of Amelia Gare, Caleb's wife, and Caleb's sworn enemy. These convenient intrigues are very unlikely naturalism or realism. In fact, they detract from the credibility of the plot. Had Ostenso told the story as it had actually happened, it would have certainly been a superb naturalistic accomplishment.

Wild Geese effectively identifies Ostenso's conflict between romance and realism, although nature is depicted as awesome and indifferent to man throughout most of the novel. Ostenso's conception of nature is one of justice. When Caleb is destroyed in the swamp, it is almost as if the hand of nature reaches out and grabs him in punishment for his many sins. Nature, correspondingly, aids his daughter's escape, by pre-occupying the old man with a fire in his beloved flax field. Another example of this conflict between romance and realism can be found in the characterization of the two heroines of the novel; contrary to Carlyle King's assertion, Judith Gare is not the only heroine of the novel. Lind Archer, the well-bred school marm, shares the billing--and Lind would never be dirty-faced or say "damn." Both of these women provide a conventional ending for the novel, as cited above. Each is a successful Ostenso woman--since each finds love.

None of Ostenso's later heroines duplicate the savage quality of Judith, nor are any as refined as the artificial Lind.
They become an integration of the two women, enigmatic ethereal creatures who shun both conformity and compromise. The wildness that prompts Judith to hurl an axe at her father becomes internalized into a passive resistance to conformity; the gentility, by contrast, becomes externalized as an affinity toward art, literature and poetry. The primitive aspect of these women is tempered by culture, but the needs of the self are never denied. Each is a rendition of the Ostenso heroine which shall be the subject of the last section of this paper.

In her own life, Ostenso was certainly a woman who shunned conformity, even as a young woman. This is illustrated by the types of employment she chose, after her short career as a school marm, which was brought to a swift conclusion after one term with an outbreak of "Spanish Fever." During the spring of 1919 she worked as a baggage clerk in the Union Station of the Canadian National Railway. At nineteen the slight, but sprightly, Martha "refused all offers of male assistance in this ninety-dollar-a-month job." From September through December of that same year she enrolled in the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg.

There she met Douglas Durkin who was one of her instructors. He was the author of two books at that time: The Fighting Men of Canada (1918), a conventional romance "set in a railroad construction camp near the Saskatchewan border, with
considerable feeling for the country." Peter E. Rider, a Canadian critic, gives the following account of Durkin's life in his introduction to The Magpie (1923), Durkin's third novel:

Born in 1884 in Parry Sound, Ontario, of Irish stock, Durkin spent his early childhood there, but when he was fourteen he moved with his parents to the Swan River district of northern Manitoba. His mother was an extraordinarily determined, staunch Methodist who hoped that her son would become a missionary in China. Although the impact of his mother's personality remained with him and partly accounts for the strong female figures in his novel [The Magpie]. When he was a young man, he worked with the railway gangs and as a pianist in Winnipeg theaters featuring silent films. Following graduation in arts from the University of Manitoba, Durkin taught at a number of schools in the west, the most notable of which was Brandon College, where he was a lecturer in English at the University of Manitoba. Two years later he was made an assistant professor. During this period he began to mature as an author. Although Durkin did not adopt the occupation favoured [sic] by his mother, his rebellion was yet to be completed. His first marriage was to a young woman whose views would have complimented a religious career but whose effect on Durkin was to restrain his life style. Rebelling against a disciplined existence, he left his wife and family and sought a new life of freedom. In 1920 he visited New York and taught a summer course at Columbia University. Finding New York City and its social activities agreeable, he left Canada to take up residence there in 1921. His ties with the city were broadened by his sister, Lillian known as "The Girl with the Golden Voice," who sang for Ed Wynn in the Show The Hey Days. Martha was soon to follow Durkin to the city. For theirs is the love story that recurs in several Ostenso novels. It was an affair that lasted over twenty-five years. They were finally married in 1944, a year after the death of the first
Mrs. Durkin. This prolonged courtship partly accounts for
the romantic mood she created in her novels.

Martha Ostenso is representative of the struggles of American
women during this century--born in 1900, a child of immigrant
parents, a woman who, at the age of seventeen, found herself
alone in the wilderness with only her wits and her intelligence
to combat the harsh, raw struggles for survival that governed
the values of the people. To escape from this brutal existence
she went to the city--first Winnipeg, then New York. There
she found a class of people her own age who were seeking alterna-
tives to the materialistic puritanical values personified
by Caleb Gare. This new group of people provided her with a
vocabulary and philosophic framework in which she could place
her own revolt against the established values of her day.
Notes

For Section One

20 Overton, p. 245.


22 "Benson Wins Claim," p. 1, col. 4-5.

23 Overton, pp. 246-247.

24 Buckley, p. 2.


26 Bromley, p. 577.

27 Personal correspondence between Olly Bazzachini and Laura Bosch, 30 March 1978.

28 Taafee, p. 9, col. 1-2.

29 Overton, pp. 246-247.


32 Baldwin, pp. 4-5.
They were thus released from the restrictions of the Midwest, specifically Durkin's wife who refused to grant him a divorce—perhaps because of her religious beliefs, perhaps because of the strictness of Canadian divorce laws which, at that time, only granted divorce by an act of Parliament.

Bohemianism was at its height when Durkin and Osmon took residence in the Village. Notable artists and writers such as Theodore Updike and Ada St. Vincent Millay were but two of the celebrities of the pre-War Village. After the war a number of famous and unknown writers and artists were part of a phenomenal migration to this and other bohemias throughout the world. The strong bond among these young people was the desire to break the rules of the older generation which the young saw as inhibiting to life—puritanical and bourgeois.

The new generation of writers [found themselves born into a world that had] drained away all its spiritual resources in a
Ostenso did not join Durkin immediately in New York--she had to first earn her way. To do this she took a job as a reporter for the *Manitoba Free Press* in 1920: "For eight months she wrote obituaries, fashion notes, advice to the lovelorn, book reviews and what not, saving (as best she might) for a try at New York." Ostenso joined Durkin in Greenwich Village in 1921. The Village community was ideal for the couple. They were thus reprieved from the restrictions of the Midwest, specifically Durkin's wife who refused to grant him a divorce--perhaps because of her religious beliefs, perhaps because of the strictness of Canadian divorce laws which, at that time, only granted divorce by an act of Parliament.

Bohemianism was at its height when Durkin and Ostenso took residence in the Village. Notable artists and writers such as Theodore Dreiser and Edna St. Vincent Millay were but two of the celebrities of the pre-War Village. After the war a number of famous and unknown writers and artists were part of a phenomenal migration to this and other bohemias throughout the world. The common bond among these young people was the desire to overthrow the values of the former generation which the young saw as inhibiting to life--puritanical and bourgeois: "The new generation of writers [found themselves born into a race that had] drained away all its spiritual resources in a
struggle to survive, and that continues to struggle in the midst of plenty because life, itself, no longer possessed any meaning." These young people initiated radical changes in America's attitudes toward money, art, religion and sex which (for better or for worse) was soon adapted by the mainstream of American thought. The old values of hard work, self denial, and getting ahead, which had formed the consciousness of Americans up until that time, were being replaced by the new values of self-gratification, living for the moment, and creating art as an expression of the self.

The youth were questioning a system where money was often the ultimate measure of human value--where human life was clearly of minute importance, as the war had shown them. Although the culture of the Village perhaps offered no discernable solution to the dilemmas that beset the values of the middle class, it did attempt to set the record straight and to expose hypocrisy:

In the old American tradition, the possession of wealth has been taken as a measure of virtue. Although the Puritan belief that material success was evidence of election has long since lost its theological basis, social attitudes that went with that belief have survived. A man with money has occupied a position of leadership in American life based less on his economic advantage than upon the moral advantage which wealth has given him, which poverty has been accepted as a sign of laziness, lack of thrift or lack of capacity.
In Greenwich Village the acquisitive drive was not less intense, but it lacked all the moral implications. ... Possession of wealth did not confer leadership.43

The Villagers blamed the Puritan for most of the evils of American society:

The Puritan was blamed: first for having overrated morality and suppressed art; then (in his historic role as pioneer) for having exalted ambition and suppressed a normal life; and finally (as a modern businessman), for having made both morality and art the servants of financial success. Everything not done on schedule, not measurable in terms of practical, tangible results, was considered a form of idleness; the writing of poetry, the painting of pictures, education, if it became 'impractical.'44

But the "Puritan" was viewed as more than a prudish "Mrs. Grundy." He was a deranged pathological force in the lives of Americans. "Such books as Frank's Our America (1919) and Harvey O' Higgen's The American Mind in Action (1920) read like lengthy case histories of the Puritan as the archetype of all neurotics."45 Sexual freedom was the main way in which the new generation attempted to release itself from the grip of the "Puritan." Prompted by the writings of Freud, women all over the country were attempting to lose their inhibitions. Both men and women became more in touch with their inner needs, but the changes were far more noticeable. Dresses were shorter; make-up was commonplace. Women took jobs outside of the home as stenographers or as factory workers. Even if Martha Ostenso had not become a "famous author," she
is representative of a category of adventure-seeking women

who embraced the new found freedoms of the day:

Characteristic of a growing portion of Village residents [were]... girls with good to fair stenographic or secretarial positions... Their reasons for residence in the Village was principally convenience and the type of apartment available, but also a slight for freedom and adventure.46

... Typical of those whose individual adjustment bade fair to be unsuccessful was a young woman who had come to the city to escape from the smugness of her home community and to study music. Eager, adventurous, and intense, she threw herself into the city with vigor and courage. In the course of a year and a half much of her resilience had been destroyed. She had lived successively with a man who befriended her when her funds ran out before she found a job, with a musician whom she supported out of her slender secretary's salary which was barely enough to enable her to have a room with a piano, and, when he dropped her, with an aggressive, middle-aged man who boasted of the number of women whom he had possessed. In each case, her own emotion was intense and genuine, she believed that the relationship was reciprocal, and, though hurt by being thrown over by each lover in turn, she accepted this on the simple assumption that their love for her had passed. Yet these men and their friends talked caustically and contemptuously about her, and she found herself without the respect of the group with whom she moved and down with the strain of her genuine effort to make adjustment.

... The story of this girl could be repeated countless times from the records of the Village, varying in each case according to her luck, her economic security and her emotional stability.47

The life style of the Village was, therefore, often liberating for women only in a superficial sense. For men
were neither willing to accept the promiscuity of women, nor were they willing to accept children born out of wedlock. This attitude accounted for the large number of abortions that were performed in the Village. It was, perhaps, the only effective method of birth control available to many of these women. According to one longtime acquaintance of Martha Ostenso's it was the method she elected to use. Abortions were, in fact, readily available within the Italian community. [Italian] midwives... performed abortions, and one at least was known to maintain a sort of probate hospital where abortions were performed and where girls who had gotten into trouble were sometimes secreted until after the birth of their child. According to one of the reputable midwives, "That woman is perfectly brazen. When she gets caught, she just lets the police wagon call for her, rides up to the station, pays her fine and goes back to work!"48

Martha Ostenso's first job in New York was with the Brooklyn Bureau of Charities. For two and a half years she was an accounts settlement clerk in Brooklyn's "famous Red Hook District."49 According to Joan Buckley: "She was supervisor for eighty destitute families who lived in the dirtiest slums on earth." She was paid seventy-five dollars a week.50

True to her romantic inclinations, Martha chose to suppress the memory of these first years of struggle in the city--"I couldn't see any use of writing about life when it was all so horrible. There was no contrast such as you are sure to find on the prairies between the beauty of nature and the ugliness of human nature."51 In 1929 she recalls the experience
with a mixture of idealism and exasperation: "I got some harrowing, but I think valuable experience. I tried to do the best I could--I don't know how good that was. Nobody can go in and make over the lives of other people unless he is almost super humanly equipped for such work. . . . It put me to bed and I don't like being put to bed."52

Martha did not dwell on this harsh confrontation with human misery, which would have been a rich source of naturalistic material, had she chosen to adapt it to fiction. Rather she relied on the inspiration of her imagination for the small amount of writing that she did accomplish during these years, 1921-1924. This included a number of poems that she would sometimes sell to a magazine in order to buy a pair of shoes. These poems were collected and published by Thomas Seltzer as A Far Land in 1924. The feeling created by these poems has a distinct similarity to the moods she later creates in her novels. They show a wondrous fascination for natural phenomenon--not merely as it appears to a casual observer, but for the sentiments and the images it evokes, as one sees in the following poem:

Before Storm

Now the tawny unicorn
Beats a path around the moon,
And on the ashen air is borne
A twanging little tune,
A sudden lonely hollow note,
A lofty pool of pausing sound,
Where hot and numb the shadows float
Upward from the ground.  
Across the mist moor there flies  
Pale as snow and thin as air  
With a ghost in both his eyes  
A solitary hare.

Sexual imagery is evident in this poem, the rain is the union of love between the earth and the sky. The Unicorn symbolizes the phallus, the moon the objects of its love. The hare, barely alive, a ghostlike phantom of new life flees in confused excitement. Words like "lonely" followed by "lofty pool," followed by "hot and numb" in addition to the references to fog and shadows all have sexual connotations.

Both her novels and these early poems show a fascination for rain. In her novels many important developments take place during the rain. The rain often gives strength to her sympathetic characters. The heroines of her novels watch the rain for hours through an open window at which they kneel in homage. Several of these early poems focus on the occurrence of rain wind, snow, and other elements of weather, but it is always from the point of view of awe and respect that these elements are envisioned.

Another kind of poem that appears in A Far Land is the love poem. These are of two varieties--a lament for unrequited love, and the celebration of love as an enchanted state:

"Sing No More of Camelot"

Sing no more of Camelot,  
Nor dream of Guinevere--  
Glamoured castles fashion not  
Sea-green and sun-sheer,
Ebon no barge for white Elaine
Nor armour Lancelot--
Nor plume a visored steed again
If thou has once forgot--

If thou hast once forgot the dear
Token of the King--
Who ere he left thee set a tear
For a jewel on thy ring.

This next poem might easily be applied to Marcia Vorse

Gunther, Ostenso's protagonist in The Young May Moon, who

imagines herself haunted by her dead husband:

The Stranger

SOMETHING--some fearful, unbodied thing haunts her.
See how too-softly she walks.
Something--some near thing and dark thing is listening,
Hear how too--softly she talks.

Something that's shaped like a hazel-tree's shadow
Cling to the ground at her feet.
And hear all about her the wind-sound of swallows

Something, some strong thing like wind on a hillside
Has fastened his hand on her wrist.
See, in the gloom how she fades into something
That shrouds her like moonlight and mist.

The poem entitled "The Witch" appears to be an accurate expression

of Ostenso's uncertain relationship with Durkin.

The Witch

When you were poor
I was a witch
And stirred my kettle
and made you rich.

Now I have given
You all my gold
The night is dark
My broom is cold.
Now you are King
Why can't you carry
Me in your pocket
Like a fairy?

"Caution" expresses the glory of two lover's oneness with nature; it is quite similar to Lawrence's famous sex scene in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*:

Caution

Let us go dressed in wind
That only the piquant buds of the white birch tree
May see us.

Let us go dressed in rain
That only the sad ghost swaying in the willow tree
May see us.

Let us not garland
The shining, naked bodies of one another,
Lest in the scattered silver of the moon
The white tulip tree blossom green with bitterness.

These poems capture childlike fascination for nature, and a tendency to personify both the external and the internal (psychological) forces of nature. The coming of the first snow may remind her of "an old bitter witch"--the rain, a sexual dance--the blue sky, the clear eye of a god; but, the feeling of lost love becomes hard, like the jewel of a ring, and guilt becomes a ghost-like presence. The poem "Caution" demonstrates a need for the human to bare his soul and body to nature. The following poem hints that nature has the capacity to respond:
Brushwood

If there be anything of God left in the world
It must be here he walks on full-moon nights.

By day there's not a sorry crow would tilt
A rusty tail upon the broken fence
That now and then leans on the empty air
As if it still kept something in or out.
The sun will show you traces of the flame
That lost seasons since came down the wind
And ate the very souls out of the trees;
Stunted, youngish populars, over leafed
To hide the truth about their inner selves.
And willows blotched and matted at the roots--
Prayer rugs, you'll say, they're kneeling on.
The grass—it isn't grass. The earth is here
A wasted crone who wears a wig of thatch.
By day the lowest cloud will shun this place.
But when the light has gone, some secret gate
Swings open with the sound of coming wings,
Forgotten dreams steal in and wake the woods--
Perhaps a long gone lover comes and walks
With it and sings a tender little song.
It is a world of dew—and shadow-light,
And darkling shoals of silence where they blend.
And here the million little popular discs
Quiver like a single misty gem
Fallen from some burdened star to earth.
You may pause and be a giant gnome
In a fairy forest where the dew
Is white wine cupped in shallow chrysoprase.
You may listen farther than the moon
To the enchanted converse of the stars.
You may listen just within the ring
Of glow-worm light you're standing in and hear
A wakeful little cricket's afterthought.
Or you may listen nearer 'till the mist
Encloses by the beating of your heart.

If there be anything of God abroad the earth,
I think he listens here when there's a moon.

Martha's childhood, her teaching experience, and her first years in New York were often grueling ordeals, but her romantic outlook prevailed. She saw nature as a divine hand of justice.
that would rectify the evils done by humanity, even in the
wake of the holocaust of the First World War. "Brushwood"
eloquently expresses this sentiment. One might better under-
stand this need for romance in terms of the following astute
observation made by Gertrude Stein:

"After all everybody, that is everybody who writes, is interested in living inside themselves. That is why writers have to have two countries, the one where they belong and the one in which they live really. The second one is romantic, it is separate from themselves, but it is really there." The second of these countries, the country of the imagination, is the fortunate place to which they go, prepared to think well of it. In a sense it is an unreal place, and it remains an unreal place no matter how often one goes there or how long one stays. [emphasis added]53

For Martha Ostenso, the country of her imagination was her "Far Land." It was a magical kingdom born out of the patterns that the old Norse sagas imprinted on her mind as a child. It was a land of elves and trolls and unicorns and gods, where only the really evil creatures are punished and the good are always generously rewarded. She needed to believe in this land--and didn't her winning the contest prove that it existed? This need to believe in this land is expressed very simply in the poem which gives her book of poetry its title:

A Far Land
Dark cannot blot the dark
In the place I know,
Rain cannot drown the rain,
Wind cannot blow
The wind of the stormed land,
Where stillness falls
On sudden wings, like a band
Of quiet birds on ruined walls.

Stein expresses the writer's fluctuation between the real and the ideal in terms of countries, but this in merely a metaphoric comparison. For Ostenso the country may have been, as Thomas Baldwin suggests, Norway. It may be, as discussed above, the interior realm of the imagination, or it can be a conception of the soil, the country, itself, as an entity of power and strength for those who worship it. This demands a certain kind of land, a primeval, mysterious land--swamps, virgin forests, rough mountains, the sea--these are precisely the kind of terrain one finds as giving strength to the heroines in Ostenso's novels. Crop land and tamed farms are less a source of inspiration and more a source of wealth to her unsympathetic characters. Thus the heroine is not merely a hard-working farm girl who is pure because she has had neither time nor opportunity to be anything else. Ostenso's heroines are in rhythm with the uncorrupted forces of nature.

This ideal, being attuned to nature, may at first appear to be contradictory to the path the young author actually elected--the Bohemian life of the Village--but the philosophies that lured her to the city are not contradictory to her desire to mature as an author and to experience life to its fullest, which is another prominent theme for her fiction.

This criticism of the middle class was almost a wholly urban thing; the critics were augmented from time
to time by numbers of refugees from the Midwest. And, although they scattered to various parts of the world they seemed agreed about the broad outlines of their attack. . . .54

The outlines of their attack were of course the puritanical, bourgeois, philistine values of the societies in which they were raised. Although the length of Ostenso's stay in the Village is difficult to determine, it is clear that she and Durkin were profoundly affected by the values that shaped the Bohemian consciousness. This is neither outstanding nor unlikely, for these same ideas that began as a revolt during the last half of the nineteenth century and continued as an influence into the early part of the twentieth century were to become the status quo of the intellectuals of the twenties, and later of mainstream America. By the thirties: "Self-expression and paganism encouraged a demand for all sorts of products--modern furniture, beach pajamas, cosmetics, colored bathrooms with toilet paper to match."55 This commercialization came later.

When Ostenso and Durkin came to the Village in the early twenties, Bohemianism was in its hey day:

Painters and literary people especially--were the first to make the Village a refuge from the social controls of Main Street, and to establish the positive feature of its challenge. A proper treatment of their role would call for a literary and artistic history of post-war America. For a large portion of the writers of these years resided at one time or another or had their associations in the Village.56

In 1960 Martha recalls this time of her life with an understandable degree of relish: "Nights were spent in discussions

Other famous people with whom she had occasion to associate include John Barrymore, Burl Ives, Fannie Hurst, Edna Ferber, Sinclair Lewis, Dorothy Thompson, Faith Baldwin, Lillian Gish, Dorothy Parker, Margaret C. Banning, Carl Sandburg, Vicki Grown and Meridel LeSeur.

Malcolm Cowley, one of the major spokesmen for his generation, the generation that came of age during the twenties, refers to the philosophies which bound the Village together as a unit. He calls this the doctrine of Bohemia. His loose summation is as follows:

1. The idea of salvation of the child.--Each of us at birth has special potentialities which are slowly crushed and destroyed by a standardized society and mechanical methods of teaching. If a new educational system can be introduced, one by which children are encouraged to develop their own personalities, to blossom freely like flowers, then the world will be saved by this new free generation.

2. The idea of self-expression.--Each man's each woman's purpose in life is to express himself, to realize his full individuality through creative work and beautiful living in beautiful surroundings.

3. The idea of paganism.--The body is a temple in which there is nothing unclean, a shrine to be adorned for the ritual of love.

4. The idea of living for the moment.--It is stupid to pile up treasures that we can enjoy only in old age, when we have lost the capacity for enjoyment. Better to seize the moment as it comes, to dwell in it intensely, even at the cost of future suffering.

5. The idea of liberty.--Every law, convention or rule of art that prevents self expression or the full enjoyment of the moment should be shattered and abolished. Puritanism is the great enemy. The crusade against puritanism is the only crusade with which free individuals are justified in allying themselves.
6. The idea of female equality.--Women should be the economic and moral equals of men. They should have the same pay, the same working conditions, the same opportunity for drinking, smoking, taking or dismissing lovers.

7. The idea of psychological adjustment.--We are unhappy because we are maladjusted, and maladjusted because we are repressed. . .

8. The idea of changing place.--They do things better in Europe." England and Germany have the wisdom of old cultures; the Latin peoples have admirably preserved their pagan heritage. By expatriating himself, by living in Paris, Capri or the South of France, the artist can break the puritan shackles, drink, and live freely and be wholly creative.59

Cowley's doctrine can be simplified into a simple three-phase pattern: **Escape, Self-Gratification, and Self-Manifestation.**

It was the pattern prescribed by, and often followed by, the artists of the day. The artist escapes from the stifling tyranny of his home life, goes to the place where he can be completely free from restraint and inhibitions; there, he satiates his repressed desires, comes to terms with himself and is then able to express the truth of his existence, and his being, in art. This is the pattern of a great deal of fiction during the time, including the fiction of Martha Ostenso.

Escape was viewed as fundamental to the artist, especially if the artist were from the Midwest. It is significant that the majority of the expatriates of the time were from rural, Midwestern backgrounds. France became their "second country" according to Gertrude Stein's definition. The Midwest began to emerge as a symbol for all that was stifling and restrictive to the American artist. It was the stronghold of the "Puritan."
The symbol developed into a metaphor which became a common formula of popular fiction:

The hero grows up ("is reared") on a farm, in a village, in a colorless, monotonous small town of merchants and ministers, or at best in a small commercial city, a provincial metropolis. In one way or another he discovers his parents, realizes them as an alien, elder generation, who have been taught to adhere firmly to a code that seems inappropriate to the circumstances of their living. The hero proceeds along two lines of education; his parents (or so he thinks) have had only one. He is forced to obey the tradition of the fathers, he searches for another tradition. Books, music, the arts, become valuable sources of the new--the real--education; but good literature and good art are hard to come by. There are "sympathetic souls": a school teacher perhaps, an aging or defeated musician or sculptor; an "intellectual" (often a lawyer; a doctor, a professional of some sort, rarely a minister); or a girl who is vaguely dissatisfied with the choices available to her.60

Ostenso adapts a version of this metaphor to each of her novels, with a number of variations: It is not the hero, but the heroine, around whom the story is centered as the one who is seeking the freedom necessary for an artistic life; the city may be a necessary cultural influence in the heroine's development, but she does not advocate escape to the city as a solution for one's dissatisfaction. Ostenso had a more cyclical view of the artist's development. She believed that the correct response to one's past was to elevate it from within. This meant that the rural life could provide the artist with inspiration--inspiration found in nature. Often her heroines never left the soil, but would find the beauties of nature
adequate simulation for their pursuit of self-knowledge. Martha did not buy the escape patterns offered by such authors as Sherwood Anderson or Sinclair Lewis. As she says in 1927:

Life in some of the small towns may be sordid and drab and 'Mainstreety' but there is plenty of romance in them if one knows where to find it. [She continues by saying that she wants to write.] ... a story of Minnesota town life which would have a woman character like Carol Kennicott, heroine of Main Street who would find in her small town an outlet for her spirit.

The outlet for the heroine's spirit in the Ostenso novel is most often found by writing poetry, singing, playing classical music, or joining an intellectual group in the community. But the ultimate and most meaningful escape from the mundane is perhaps what women today often view as merely another form of escape—the union in love she finds with her fated lover. This is where nature rewards the heroine for her diligent pursuit of self-discovery. Still, this union can only take place when the lovers are at one with nature, with the soil, and functioning as natural uninhibited man and woman. In pursuit of this union, the heroine is most singleminded—the male protagonist's choices are often the factors that complicate the heroine's quest. He may marry the wrong girl or choose wealth over noble, natural pursuits. The heroine shines above him as one who intuitively knows the right way to love—by working in harmony with nature.

The underlying belief is that those who draw their living from the soil are somehow purer than those who are removed
from their "Mother"—the agrarian myth. This theme can be found in a number of works of fiction of the time: Gone With the Wind, O Pioneers, and So Big. Each is a variation of the agrarian myth. It is significant that these novels are written by women and for women. Again one sees the need of woman to recognize her natural function as a woman by contemplating the feminine forces she finds in nature.

Novels that deal with the settling of the American West or with farm life are usually classified as either "historical" or "regional"—the assumption being that they are of interest to a rather limited audience: if they survive it is because they become curiosities that provide a limited amount of information about a very specific time and/or place. Ostenso's Wild Geese, The Mandrake Root and O River Remember are often categorized as "historical"; her other novels are either termed "regional" or updated "western romance." The historical novel has traditionally been viewed as naturalistic: first, because it is based on actual historical events, ideally accurate to life; second, because the power of nature frequently plays a major role in the lives of the pioneer. One sees a very graphic manipulation of the human species by the hand of nature in such books—there are crop failures, grasshopper plagues, tornadoes, epidemics, and an assortment of natural disasters. Nature becomes one of the central characters of the drama, the archenemy of the settler, but not so in the Ostenso novels. J. T. Frederick points out:
The pioneer material lends itself, in the case of some writers in the movement to romantic treatment, which produces work different from and, in my opinion inferior. . . . This method tends to place emphasis upon the broad outlines of the pioneer struggle to the exclusion of veracious details, and to treat relatively trivial matters sensationally for the sake of securing artificial stimulation of the reader's interest. The work of Martha Ostenso seems to me to fall in this category.

The trivial matters that Ostenso treats sensationally are those matters concerned with the courtship of the central male and female. Such human concerns seem trivial in the face of a situation where nature is such an ominous and ruthless force. But Ostenso does not deal with nature in quite the same way as do the genuine writers of historical western fiction. As we saw in the examination of Wild Geese, she did not strictly record the facts as they happened. She had a very idyllic view of farm life. She saw the farm as a place where the roles of men and women could not be contrived or artificial, where the division of labor was natural, and where men and women grew in unity because they depended on each other equally for survival. (It might be wise to insert here that she, herself, did not grow up on a farm.)

Ostenso saw this proximity with the soil as having another effect on the consciousness of women. Women, when close to the processes of nature, begin to witness the vital importance of the female aspect of nature—the soil giving life to plants, mother animals giving life to their young, gentle pods ripening in the sun. This is the psychic union that Ostenso emphasizes—
life of the country as reward to the artistic woman's recognition of her need to fulfill the self.

Within this phase of the heroic quest for self-understanding, the Bohemians of the twenties invented their own symbols and expressions as well as patterns in which the questor must pursue his "true" identity. The Bohemians believed that anything that oppressed natural appetites was evil (thus the personification of human inhibitions in the form of the "Puritan"). Because the "Puritan" was representative of all that was life destroying about the Christian Church, the Bohemians decided to revert to a time when there was not yet this influence on human behavior—to paganism. Thus, the young people declared themselves pagan, partly perhaps for shock value; partly because it gave them a license to satiate their appetites for pleasure and to live as they chose outside of Christian laws, codes, or mores.

There were two overt symbols of this neo-paganism in the Village—sex and alcohol. As Carolyn Ware notes in her study of the Village:

In most groups, pressure toward sex experimentation was strong. There was difference of opinion as to the most desirable sorts and the quantity of sex experience, but there was general intolerance of any who were disinclined toward experimentation and a virgin was the object of contempt. 54

Drink became not only an avenue of escape, but a symbol of defiance. However irrelevantly, sobriety went overboard along with "virtue" and "success." 55
Drinking "became a more acute problem among the Bohemians after the enactment of Prohibition." It was no longer a bottle of wine for dinner that constituted their drinking habits but a nightlong bash that was referred to as the "studio party." As Cowley says in Exile's Return, "We didn't know what to do, so we got drunk." The following description of the "studio party" shows it to be as much the forerunner of the modern bar, as the site of Dionysian revelry:

Jo's was located in the basement of a tenement building. In the low, narrow room, cheap, brightly colored tables, rickety chairs, a few booths and an old piano were crowded as tight as they could be jammed. Liquor was not served, but it was assumed that the patrons would bring it, and order sandwiches and ginger ale. The place was usually crowded and always informal. Girls making a first visit to the place could be sure that the men beside whom they found themselves seated would assume that they were a party for the evening at night. If the girls were first at a table, they were sure to be joined. From time to time someone started to play the piano and people danced in the crowded aisles between the tables with whatever strangers they happened to be sitting beside. The proprietor stood by the door, greeting everybody, eyeing all newcomers and making announcements. Many of those present were young girls and boys with pale faces and circled eyes who drank heavily. The rest were a few middle-aged men who had obviously come for relaxation and to pick up a girl; and a number of older people, some with an artistic or literary past, who were known as habitues. A young Chinese communist came to pick up someone who could help him translate and criticize his work. Certain familiar figures who were always known to be trying to borrow money were cold-shouldered by everyone. A couple of young girls from the South who obviously came from substantial homes and a cultivated background were regularly present and conspicuous, dancing together and constantly drunk.

Ostenso's writings popularize these symbols of freedom. She conveys a liberal, if not wondrous, attitude toward the use of alcohol; she attacks a number of sexual restrictions—chiefly against
premarital sex and divorce. But her paganism grew beyond the outward symbols of revolt—sex and alcohol. She believed in a form of pantheism, and her heroines worshiped nature directly as a means of finding their "true" selves. The influence that nature had on the lives of the heroines might be as complex as the rhythm of a comet or as subtle as a leaf falling in homage to a newly closed grave. 69

Actualization of the self is the third phase of the heroine's development. It is also Cowley's third aspect of the Village doctrine. The artists of the twenties saw art as the highest expression of humanity, the highest glorification of the individual. This took on a number of phases and was often manifested in the extreme. In one extreme, art was merely an excuse for dropping out of society; in the other extreme, it became a religion: "Art is separate from life, and the artist is independent of the world and superior to all lifelings."70 Ostenso equates the higher consciousness of the pagan heroine with a higher consciousness that we normally associate with the artist.

Both the artist and the pagan view themselves as favored by nature and both assume a certain harmony with nature. The difference is this—the pagan is attuned to an exterior reality, the artist to an interior reality. The artist may be compelled to externalize his inspirations, but the pagan sees all nature as a work of art so he is quite in harmony with the reality of nature that he perceives. Where the artist and the pagan join forces is in their relationship to the world of man—the stifling forces of civilization. In the twenties this inhibiting influence was the Puritan who became the
disembodied scapegoat for all that was viewed as inhibiting to youthful freedom.

The generation of the twenties had been criticized because it offered no positive solutions to the problems at hand—that it centered its energies on mere escapism—sex and alcohol, the prominent means of escape—instead of confronting the social problems of the time. This is possibly quite true, but the methods they elected to take, the hedonistic, sensation-seeking glorification of youth were not rejected but adopted by later generations; certainly the post-War generation was not the only one lost and befuddled by exterior values. The most dramatic change that was taking place in American life from the twenties to our own day was in the lives of the American woman. Martha Ostenso had her own part to play in this dramatic transition of values.

The third section of this analysis concentrates on the aftermath of Ostenso's fame as a writer. It speculates on some of the factors in her personal life that may have led to her obscurity as an author and her disillusionment with life. It analyzes her as a woman of the twenties who was confused by the contradictory roles that were expected of women of her time. It demonstrates some possible reasons why Ostenso was driven to reject a number of these classifications and how others paralyzed her creative talents.
Notes

For Section Two

39 Baldwin, p. 7.


41 Hoffman, p. 11.


43 Ware, p. 77.

44 Hoffman, p. 34.

45 Hoffman, p. 12.

46 Ware, p. 256.

47 Ware, pp. 258-259.

48 Ware, p. 179.


50 Buckley, p. 9.

51 Maury, p. 1.

52 Maury, p. 1.

53 Hoffman, p. 25.

54 Hoffman, p. 319.


56 Ware, pp. 240-241.

57 George Grim, "'My Fifteenth Novel is Going to be Very Different,' Says Martha Ostensø," *Minneapolis Tribune*, 17 April 1960,
Based on personal correspondences with Olly Bazzachini, Pat Mark and Barney Ostenso between 1977 and 1979.

Cowley, pp. 60-61.

Hoffman, p. 328.

Taafe, p. 9, col. 1-2.


Ware, p. 257.

Ware, p. 240.

Ware, p. 258.

Cowley, p. 47.

Ware, pp. 252-253.


Cowley, p. 144.
DISILLUSION

Upon winning the Dodd-Mead contest, Ostenso was most generous to all the members of her family. As she says in a 1925 interview: "The money really should be used to help relatives, of whom there suddenly appears a large number, and your kind heart always conquers your selfish instinct." She bought her parents a spacious home in St. Louis Park, a residential community in the Twin Cities. She traveled with members of her family and Durkin to Norway, Mexico, Cuba, throughout Europe, and on various car trips throughout the United States. In the early thirties she financed the construction of a cabin on Gull Lake, seventeen miles from Brainerd, Minnesota. It was to become the summer home of the Ostenso family, their many friends, a number of itinerant artists, and a menagerie of wild and tame animals. She also invested in a turkey farm that supported her brothers Barney, Øivind, their cousin, Albert Ostenso, and the families of these three men. This was, in fact, the first authentic farm on which any of Sigurd Ostenso's children lived and worked as farmers, aside from Martha's stay in the Canadian wilderness as a school teacher in 1917. Although Martha enjoyed the serenity of the Gull Lake cabin, her lifestyle more closely resembled that of Fitzgerald than Thoreau's.

She kept an apartment in New York throughout most of the thirties, but she also enjoyed various terms of residence in Mexico,
Beverly Hills and Minneapolis. The income she made from her writing enabled her to live very comfortably. According to Joan Buckley she earned "from fifteen to sixty-five thousand dollars per novel." With the money she received from her short stories Buckley says that "Martha's income annually averaged from thirty to forty thousand dollars."

The prestige established by *Wild Geese* assured her not only of a ready audience and a steady means of support, but also a permanent acceptance among the literary elite. Perhaps the most prominent social circle in which she moved was Dreiser's:

Thursday afternoons at Dreiser's came to be an accepted feature of New York intellectual and artistic society. Crowds of people mill around in the enormous wood-panelled room, pausing in their chatter only long enough to lift a cocktail from the tray. Writers, actors, actresses, opera singers, dancers, Hindu swamis, even scientists and lawyers, and business tycoons—anyone of public interest in the period from 1926 to 1931. My recollection brings back too many names to include here, but among them were Fannie Hurst, Lillian Gish, Mariam Hopkins, Nina Koshetz, Alma Clayburg, Martha Ostenso, Mary Fanton Roberts, Libby Holman, Wahrton Eshrick, Burton Roscoe, Sherwood Anderson, Karl Bercovinci, Samuel Hoffenstein, George Luks, Jerome Blum, Willy Pogany, Horace Liverwright, Otto Kahn, Arthur Garfield Hays, Count Karolyi. [emphasis added]

It is evident that Ostenso and Durkin enjoyed both the glamour and the notoriety that the fast life afforded them. They were both flamboyant in their approach to living. Martha's Scandinavian beauty and unflinching candor were decidedly her most notable social assets.
Still the persona that she projects to her public in interviews and the one found within the context of her novels do not indicate this worldly image. It is only after one is able to assemble all the clues to this paradoxical and contradictory woman that one can appreciate the true scope of her struggle for identity. If one were to rely exclusively on the interviews that she held with reporters or the biographical and autobiographical statements that have survived, one would have a very inaccurate portrait of Martha as a straight-laced Midwestern immigrant's daughter. We find such a portrait in the interview she held in 1929 with Jean West Maury:

"My family was very religious. After they came to America my father and mother tried hard to keep all the old traditions of Norway—the ideas and ideals taught by their church. They were very simple, those ideals, and I see now, very fine. Honesty in all one's business dealings, honesty toward one's self and toward one's neighbors, one's God and justice to all. There were a lot of things that went along with them such as the strict observance of Sunday, going to church, and abstaining from worldly pursuits."

In view of the actual conditions of her childhood, the above statement seems a bit pretentious, and in view of the lifestyle she led during the time of this interview they seem downright ludicrous in tone. In this same interview she states that she "shuns such artificial stimulants as coffee and tea." This is the pose she adopted for her audience throughout her life—perhaps it was demanded of her by her public, her publisher, and her family. It has also been the experience of this observer that it is the pose that her family reinforced even after her death. This conformity
to public standards has made it both intriguing and difficult to get at the "real" Martha Ostenso.

This persona that Ostenso bound herself to in both private and public life forced her to confront the social situations and the attitudes to which she objected through a most subtle medium—the medium of the unconscious. Thus she uses in her novels the most basic settings, the most elemental problems that confront women in order to appeal to that which is basic to the female experience. When viewed in conjunction with the problems that she faced in her own life this adds another dimension to the works: she did not have an opportunity to marry Durkin as a young woman or to make public their affair—but she did attack the narrow-minded attitudes of the middle class against divorce and premarital sex. She did not choose to have children out of wedlock—but she expresses compassion for both women and children in this situation. She carried an awesome responsibility for the financial support of a great number of people which most likely inhibited her freedom as an artist—but she attacks most roundly the attitude of ownership that parents often adopt toward their offspring.

To expand on the latter, according to Joan Buckley, she supported her mother, her father, her two brothers, Durkin, his wife, three sons, Lillian Durkin Baker, and Baker's daughter. This is quite likely a sweeping statement on Buckley's part since Barney and Øivind were able to support themselves with their
turkey farm, Lillian Baker was obviously a successful singer (or at least had been), and Durkin as a collaborator and disciplinarian of Martha was certainly entitled to share in the profits. Peter E. Rider speculates that Durkin collaborated with Ostenso on every novel that she wrote, including *Wild Geese*. The only reason that he denied himself credit was that the contest was open only to writers who had not had any previous publications. Durkin had already published three novels and a book of poetry by that time. These novels, *The Heart of Cherry* (1919), *The Lobstick Trail* (1921), and *The Magpie* (1923) are as romantic as any of Martha's. In fact they contain several of the same stock characters that later appear in Martha's novels and also deal with the "return to the land" motif.

It is impossible for any outsider to know what takes place between two writers who collaborate. But whenever this investigator put the question to people who knew Durkin and Ostenso as a writing team, they said that she offered her ideas, and he gave her the "form." As a matter of pure speculation, for an entire study could be made of this point, it appears that Durkin's "form" included conforming to the conventions of the romantic novel. For he was certainly shrewd enough to know what would sell.

Martha herself appears to be an unmaterialistic woman, determined and independent enough to survive under almost any circumstances, but Durkin, even though he had abandoned his wife who remained in Winnipeg, was obligated to support his family and had a far greater motive for wanting to capitalize on Martha's talent than
self-contained inner beauty. The Stone Field is also a rarity for it is a genuinely happy Ostenso novel as is noted in the Christian Science Monitor: "There is unwonted sunniness about this book, due partly to Jo's wholesome, valourous spirit. . . . Whether we are willing to go as far as the author does in affirming that earth users are the best of earth's people. . . . we surely cannot argue with a timely piece of conservation propaganda."

Olga Owen says of The Stone Field: "powerful and beautiful in its pure descriptions." Others were not so kind: "This is a good book and a readable one. Furthermore, it is honest, sincere, and well written. It is hard to say why it isn't better." Another said: "The book has readable quality as a story and yields some moments of delight as it describes the beauties of the land. But it really has little new to offer."

The Mandrake Root followed in 1938. It is a powerful statement about the ruthless instincts of the female. Critics objected to it mainly because they thought the situation incredible and the heroine, Lydie, too immoral to believe: "Maybe such a plot could be made real, but Miss Ostenso has not made it so in this novel."

James Gray says: "In the background of Miss Ostenso's story are a number of rural characters, living pathetically through the crises of labor struggles, unemployment, and emotional starvation. But the three central characters seem not to belong to this milieu at all. With their tortured subtleties of feeling, their brittle wit, their passion for Chopin preludes and literary
conversation, they seem like exotics transplanted from the world of drawing-room tragi-comedy." R. C. Feld, however, had no trouble believing the plot: "Under the hand of a less gifted artist, this novel, would have been artificial and sensational, its characters unreal and unworthy. Miss Ostenso's power lies in her ability to bring integrity to the motives which guide Lydie and to clothe her and those whose lives she changes in the garments of dignity and decency." The prejudice against "regional" fiction is clear in several of these statements, the assumption being that any fiction set in the country cannot vary too greatly and is of little interest to those outside of that setting.

Throughout her career Ostenso also wrote twenty-nine short stories which, in addition to several of her novels, were serialized in magazines. These appeared in such magazines as The American-Scandinavian Review, Pictorial Review, Hearst's International-Cosmopolitan, North American Review, The Delineator, McCall's, Country Gentleman, Redbook, Good Housekeeping, and Liberty, among others. From 1940 through 1958 (the date of publication for her last novel), Ostenso wrote five novels: Love Passed This Way (1942), O River Remember (1943), Milk Route (1948), The Sunset Tree (1949), A Man Had Tall Sons (1958). During this period she also collaborated with Durkin and Sister Elizabeth Kenny on the story of the Australian nun's life as a therapist for polio victims. The book was called And They Shall Walk which was published in 1943 and made into a movie entitled Sister Kenny starring Rosalind Russell in 1946.
Nothing could equal the overnight acclaim that Ostenso experienced upon winning the Dodd-Mead contest, but certainly, September 30, 1943, "Martha Ostenso Day" in the Twin Cities, would be the second most exciting event of her career. It was a day to honor Ostenso's simultaneous publication of both the Sister Kenny story and *O River Remember*, which was also chosen by the Literary Guild. The Guild furnished the novel with ample publicity, and the book's Red River locale assured it a sizable audience in Minnesota and North Dakota, but the book was not a critical success. Some reviewers were patronizing, others derogatory, but none could have been more disheartening than the following review by E. H. Crowell: "Not good, not bad—but will draw the usual Ostenso reader." It is clear that the author intended for this to be her long-awaited *volte force*, the one that would turn her career around and establish her without question as a writer of stature in the eyes of both critics and the public.

Perhaps the major fault of the novel was that it tried to be everything and consequently accomplished nothing. It was historical, regional, Norwegian, contemporary, romantic, anti-war and biographical. It contained elements from virtually every novel that she had written as well as influences from *O Pioneers*, *So Big*, and *Giants in the Earth*. In 1962 she states that she believed it to be her best book. It's easy to see why she put so much stock in the novel. It encapsulated her entire life. The Norwegian immigrants represented her grandparents. She, in fact, interviewed her grandparents in Norway to get some background on the historical
period of the early settings. The main conflicts are between Norwegian and Irish families who are romantically drawn to each other, but who are prevented from marriage by a beautiful, scheming matriarchal figure who wants only prestige and power in the new country. The third generation is finally able to unite in love and in marriage. They embrace the life force and rectify the evils of the past. This theme of the continuity of life may represent the author's unconscious desire for motherhood. But the promise of O River Remember was short-lived and did not turn her life around, nor did her marriage to Durkin which took place in 1944.

After this failure, she began to drink even more heavily.

One would not have suspected anything of the sort from the following passage found in Minnesota Authors as it appears in 1962. It is a modification of an earlier autobiography which first appeared in Grant Overton's book in 1929. She states that the only thing she felt compelled to change was the fact that she had become Mrs. Durkin:

My husband, himself the author of several novels and short stories, has been my severest critic and most exacting collaborator. We live the year round in our cabin on Gull Lake, in northern Minnesota, where wild deer sometimes pause to peek in through our windows when we have music going on our "stereo." Every summer evening a family of raccoons comes down the hill for dinner which I lay out for them in a little hollow behind the cabin. And every autumn the stray cats left behind by summer visitors come looking for food and shelter. I am undoubtedly the best cook in Cass County--in the opinion of our wild animals, that is.

... More and more, it seems, young writers come for advice on how to get started in the field of letters.
And oddly enough, it becomes harder and harder to offer any practical advice. Variety of experience among people is essential of course, any experience, any people. Beyond that, I really cannot offer much guidance. As a matter of fact, each new novel I sit down to write brings its own peculiar set of problems. If you want to be a writer, then—live and write! But the thing to write about is the thing you know.

In contrast to this level-headed, modest and even idyllic account of her life, the following one written by George Grimm of the Minneapolis Tribune in 1960 presents quite another view of the then sixty-year-old author:

She greeted us in a black leotard, with a gold-flecked sort of housecoat. Shelves of books—among them her fourteen novels, [sic fifteen] comfortable sink-down furniture, a relaxed informality made you feel you've visited there before.

... inclined to believe.) But there is another side to the work—play—the need for freedom even of self-destruction.

Every day is a writing day at the Durkins. They try to sleep late. Durkin writes Westerns [under the pseudonym of Conrad North] and short stories. Often they collaborate. Three or four thousand words a day is normal production.

... They have more time for writing ever since slot machines became illegal. "I think Doug and I furnished the Elks Club in Brainerd," she chuckles. "Some mornings we couldn't get our fingers apart—stiff from pulling those darned levers. We don't dare go near Las Vegas—"

The latter portrait is reminiscent of the rebellious spirit of the twenties. Still, the image of a sixty-year-old woman greeting her guests in a gold-flecked leotard is less defiant than ridiculous. It was a generation not without its casualties—Fitzgerald, Hart
Crane, Hemingway and a number of other lost and displaced souls.

When one generation rejects the established codes of the former, it creates a vacuum that the human, who needs meaning and order in his life, must fill. Perhaps the desperate atmosphere of the twenties can be attributed to the fact that they had nothing with which to fill the vacuum. They could not fathom returning to a world that had nearly destroyed their generation in war, a world in which the individual was little more than a name on a casualty list. This generation was determined to make their individuality felt to an uncaring group of elders—thus the tremendous outcropping of artists at this time. In art the individual reaches the pinnacle of his worth in the eyes of the world, for the world cannot ignore individual greatness when expressed in art. (So the artist is inclined to believe.) But there is another side to the worship of the individual that is a bit more complex—the need for absolute freedom that echoes of Dostoevsky, the need for the individual to exercise his free will and his appetite for freedom even at the expense of self-destruction.

Malcolm Cowley discusses this alternative in relationship to Harry Crosby whom Cowley chooses as his symbol of the consciousness of the twenties. Cowley sees Crosby as a man who chose the latter path—the path of destruction—because he was satiated with freedom. He was driven by a compulsive need for ecstasy in his life, and finally after a succession of explosive bursts of sensation and satiation he exploded with a final burst of free will—he chose to put a bullet through his head.
Harry Crosby is in some ways a fast and furious male version of Martha Ostenso; Martha Ostenso is a romantic female version of Harry Crosby. Cowley attributes Crosby's disillusion with life to the fact that he came so close to death in the war—that this led him to a recognition that the human was of very little consequence. He came to despise life and humanity in general. His art gave him little satisfaction. His marriage and his family were of minimal consequence to him. He chose, rather, to live for sensation. He drank heavily, entertained his friends with wild extravagance, used opium, hashish, indulged in illicit sex and extra-marital sexual affairs. He was born into one of the richest families of Boston bankers, so he could comfortably afford to indulge himself in this way, despite a poor showing as a poet.

Martha Ostenso, too, came from a background which led her to devalue her worth as an individual—the immigrant daughter of an indolent father. Her disdain for the human became even more pronounced as she confronted the harsh realities of the Brooklyn slums as a social worker. The reality she preferred became the reality of her dreams. When some of these wild dreams came true, with the winning of the Dodd-Mead contest, she became even more like Harry Crosby, able to afford the things she never thought possible. But final fulfillment of her fondest dream, the dream of marriage, was held in check by forces that could not be altered. Because reality arrested her development as a woman in the courtship stage, so, too, were her artistic abilities arrested. Hers also became a life of sensation—entertaining famous guests, attending
the parties on an elite social circuit.

On December 11, 1929, Harry Crosby was found in the apartment of a friend with a society woman, Mrs. Josephine Bigelow. "There was a bullet hole in Mrs. Bigelow's left temple and another in Crosby's right temple. His right hand clutched a small caliber automatic pistol of foreign manufacture." 95

The facts of Ostenso's death are as follows: "On November 22, 1963, Martha Ostenso died in Seattle, Washington, where she and Durkin had gone to visit his son's families for the holidays. She began hemorrhaging on the train enroute there, and she died shortly after arriving in a Seattle hospital. The cause of death was cirrhosis of the liver." 96

The artists of the twenties who rejected the stifling, puritanical organization of the past, began to look into themselves as a source of more fundamental truths. Tired of having an order imposed on them from without, they began to trust the interior wisdom of their intuition, which is another way of saying that the unconscious (the feminine aspect of the human psyche) was directing them to a new order. This introspection led them to come to many of the same conclusions about humanity's position on earth as did the ancients. The artist of the twenties saw himself as a being controlled by powers—appetites for sensation, for sex, drunkenness, fame, control, wealth; moreover, he felt that it was his right and privilege as an individual to satisfy these appetites. Because the unconscious directed him, and because the unconscious was most readily communicated within a semi-conscious state, the
effects of drugs, alcohol, and sexual euphoria were highly desirable states. For in such states, the unconscious could speak to the artist, could provide him with certain subjective truths.

If one accepts Jung's theory of the Collective Unconscious, both the artist and the ancients were in fact inspired by the same patterns of the unconscious and directed by a basic human need to see order in the universe. The ancients personified these powers and made them their gods. Some of the artists and would-be artists of the twenties also came to worship these same "gods." Harry Crosby and Martha Ostenso are two such artists.

Harry Crosby came to worship the sun, Martha Ostenso, nature. Of sun worship he says: "The human soul belongs to the spiritual world and is ever seeking to be reunited to its source (the Sun). Such a union is hindered by the bodily senses, but though not permanently attainable until death it can be enjoyed at times in the state called ecstasy when the veil of sensual perception is rent asunder and the soul is merged in God (in the Sun)."\textsuperscript{97} Cowley comments:

Because the sun was the center of his life, because the center of his life was empty, no living impulse being able to cross the moat of fire with which he had surrounded himself.... The sun became a cold abyss, a black sun, a fluf of death into which he would some day hurl himself estatically, down, down, downwards, falling into the Red-Gold (night) of the sun.\textsuperscript{98} Ostenso's gods were typically female symbols—the earth, the moon, mountains, water. The following analysis of her novels will make this more clear but recall the poem "Brushwood": "If there be
anything of God left in the world. It must be here he walks on full-moon nights."

It is the only poem in *A Far Land* that mentions God, and this is done in a clearly dubious manner. If she did, as a close friend says, "believe in God," it seems that she did so in a very theoretical way and that she believed in the supremacy of nature above the patriarchal conception of God within the context of Christianity. If she felt herself to be a pagan, however, her paganism would naturally emulate the ancient form of paganism practiced in Scandinavia. It would entail a respect for nature and an awe of nature's power, but it would also involve certain rituals, not the least being the ritual of drink.

Drink, as a glorious release from the tyranny of reality, is the license of the poet of the sagas—the Sacred "mead" was won by Odin from the god of poetry Bragi. Often escape is necessary for those who are too sensitive to deal with the harsh realities of life. But more than that, drink was the soma by which the poet would come in touch with the unknown, the unconscious and creative aspects of the imagination. Jung viewed this as a union of the masculine (the conscious) with the feminine (the unconscious). Esther Harding echoes this same sentiment and praises the use of the soma as a means by which humanity can best unite with the unconscious elements of the human personality that motivate the creativity of the artist:

To raise the veil of Isis [the goddess of wisdom] must mean to see Nature as she really is, to understand what it is that underlies the manifestations of this world, and of the emotions which so move us, to see them in their ultimate reality not veiled any longer by custom or convention, by rationalization or illusion. He who is able to do that and so to face
reality, becomes consciously immortal, or perhaps it should read "conscious of immortality," for he has released his mind, himself, from the conditionings of time and space, and especially from the distortations of fact brought about by his own ego orientation. His center of consciousness has shifted from the personal "I" of his ego, to a more disinterested focal point, which embraces in its outlook a larger range and his inconsequence a more detached attitude.101

The struggles of Ostenso's life were struggles to resolve the conflicts between the unconscious, feminine, romantic side of her nature and the conscious, masculine, realistic side of her nature. Clearly the social conditions under which she lived did not permit this integration to take place. Gradually romance, in the guise of the primal female force, began to encompass her total being. Because there appeared to be no consolation in reality, she chose to live in a state of unreality; had the world been kinder to her and women of her kind, there would not have arisen this need. "How much greater a sacrifice was demanded of those worshipers who believed that God, like the moon, was black as well as white, destructive as well as creative, cruel as well as kind."102

The case of Martha Ostenso is particularly distressing because her tremendous promise as a writer was never actualized, for her instinctive need for romance and optimism was arrested in a courtship stage merely because the customs of the day and the stubbornness of attitudes did not permit her to actualize the innermost need of her psyche. Had conditions been different, America and Minnesota might have seen one of the foremost writers of this century.
The following poem was published in *A Far Land* in 1924, but it also received a Minneapolis Poet's Seminar Award in November of 1939. It poignantly captures the mood of Ostenso's struggle to maintain a romantic outlook, and ironically, the futility of the task:

**Romance**

High hangs the gauntlet on the wall,  
Grey with dust—  
The white steed stabled,  
The glimmering scimitar sheathed in rust.  
Oh, for the dream that knows no fading,  
The quest that knows no broken trust!

Far are the hills, and vision-blue,  
The window barred,  
The strong door bolted.  
Argosies of ivory, amber and nard....  
Oh, for the wind that knows no prison,  
Oh, for the sea that knows no guard!

Adventure now but a flame in a grate—  
Fear but fear  
Of a hungry morrow.  
Gather in from the storm for cheer....  
But oh, for the kiss that is not for comfort,  
And the unwept sorrows of yesteryear! 103
Notes

For Section Three

71 "Martha Ostenso Is Back to Get 'Stuff' For Second Novel,"

Minneapolis Tribune, 29 September 1925, p. 17, col. 3.

72 "Martha Ostenso Buys Home Here," Minneapolis Journal,

15 August 1926, p. 6, col. 4.


74 Barney Ostenso, personal interview, 27 November 1977, and

"Martha Ostenso to Have Own Farm, Raise Turkeys," Minneapolis


75 Joan Buckley quotes "Forbatterinnen med Millionsplogene,"

Scandinaven, 27 September 1928, n.p. for this information.

76 Joan Buckley attributes this information to a statement made

by Margorie Fansler, Wayzata, Minnesota, 12 August 1975.

77 Louise Campbell, ed. Theodore Dreiser's Letters to Louise


78 Maury, part 6, p. 1, col. 8.

79 Buckley, p. 17.

80 Rider, p. xvii.

81 Klinck, p. 659, Rider, p. xvi.

82 Review of The Stone Field by Martha Ostenso, Christian Science

Monitor, 14 April 1937, p. 11.

83 Olga Owens, Review of The Stone Field by Martha Ostenso,

Boston Transcript, 13 March 1937, sect. 6, p. 3, col. 3-5.


93 Grim, 17 April 1960, Feature Section, p. 1, 5.

94 Cowley, pp. 246-250.

95 Cowley, p. 246.

96 Buckley, p. 21, verified by Martha Ostenso's "Certificate of Death."

97 Cowley, p. 258.
In addition to being part of the ancient heritage of the love story, two other factors may affect the condition of the source of some of the information in stories that have determined our Judeo-Christian view of the marriage and marriage. In this charming little tale the backgrounds are a matter of values and sexual attitudes prevalent at the time. It is clear that the women have little to say about the outcome of the transaction. Each negotiates with the father and finally wins the hand of the chosen woman. The opinions of the women are not considered in the deal. Also, the worth of a woman appears to be measured by her beauty and little else—great Beauty demands a price, which, of course, means seven years of service—Rachael, fourteen. If the price is met, the transaction is over, married life is entered into as a state of bliss. The wife performs
The indefinable human experience called "love" has been with us since ancient times. The story of Rachael and Jacob serves as an early example: Rachael, the younger of two sisters, is chosen by Jacob, contrary to the custom of the land that the eldest should be wed first. Jacob, a stranger in the land, prefers the "shapely" beauty of Rachael to the "dull eyes" of Leah. He indentures himself to the father for seven years for the woman of his choice, but when the time for marriage comes, he is tricked by the father into taking Leah. When Jacob discovers the deception, he consigns himself to another seven years for Rachael, gladly, because "his love was great." (Genesis 29:15-30)

In addition to being an example of the ancient heritage of the love story, the above illustration is an apt rendition of the source of some of the patriarchal attitudes that have determined our Judeo-Christian views of love, courtship and marriage. In this charming little love story, there are a number of values and sexual attitudes presented: first, it is clear that the women have little to say about their choice of mate. Jacob negotiates with the father and finally earns the hands of these women. The opinions of the women are not considered in the least. Also, the worth of a woman appears to be measured by her beauty and little else—great beauty demands a great price. Leah is worth seven years of service—Rachael, fourteen. Finally, once the price is met, the transaction is over, married life is assumed to be a state of bliss. The wife performs
her duties without question, and the husband continues in his support.

This is as much a tradition of barter as of love. Woman trades her beauty and her services; man provides her a livelihood. The woman who objects to her position is viewed as disagreeable and shrewish. Those who refuse to conform, who seek sexual relationships outside of marriage can be punished by death. Still, a married woman was far more fortunate than her unmarried sister. The latter type of woman was granted only the freedoms that her father allowed.

Conditions remained as such for centuries. Indeed, in 1896 Edward Carpenter discerns the alternatives available to women as being precisely those to be found in the society of Biblical times. He categorizes these as such: the doll, the serf, and the free woman (the prostitute). He states that each of these conditions is limiting to the free and natural condition of the female. The doll is an allusion to Ibsen's Nora; the serf is the lower class woman, the unpaid servant of the husband and the family; the prostitute is considered free since she, alone, remains undominated by man (in Carpenter's estimation).

A late twentieth century observer of the patriarchal system, Eva Figes, views these conditions as a direct result of the capitalistic system of the West. "The rise of capitalism is the root cause of the modern social and economic discrimination against women, which came to a peak in the last century."

Figes also is of the opinion that the period of the Middle Ages was the last period in which there was an equitable division of labor between
the sexes providing a natural order in the society of the West. With the husband as a craftsman or a farmer, and the wife as a housekeeper and mother, the roles were not affected by the measure of value that capitalism promulgated later in the history of humanity. Wealth became man's symbol of virtue and success; woman's virtue became her passiveness. "Man buys love and woman sells it, which is considered 'moral' while it is considered immoral for a man to sell love and for a woman to buy it," said Ellen Key in 1912. She continued: "The more submissive she is the more she satisfies his feelings of ownership." Since the rise of capitalism allowed man to acquire more and more, he came to demand rarer and rarer qualities of his wife. Thus the Victorian ideal (idol) called for a pure, ethereal, literally disembodied woman—the perfectly giving, never demanding, woman—wife and mother—in service to her man and through him, her culture.

Beauty and loyalty are woman's greatest assets under this system, the qualities most prized by man. She quietly cultivates the virtues of her culture and passively awaits to be the recipient of an offer with which she can live. Thus evolved the customs of the West: man spends his life in quest of wealth and success which will earn for him love, and woman spends her life in reticent waiting and hoping to be worthy of love. This romantic tradition became a quest for man and a cult of Fate worship for woman. Woman, powerless to control her life, demurely waited for the "right man" to come along and free her from her loneliness and dependence. As Figes says:
"Although we may regard marriage with dependence as a form of
slavery for women of the past, it was regarded as the only possible
form of freedom—it was only through marriage that she could become
a woman in her own right in the eyes of the world."

To compensate for their lack of control over their own lives,
women came to regard their way of life as closer to God than the
lives of men; they became paragons of the passiveness of Christ.
They fancied themselves as the "lillies of the field" of the
parable—creatures who could subsist on the graciousness of their
husbands and of a God who had promised to exalt the humble. Thus
evolved the "true love myth" which varied from generation to
generation, but remained fundamentally unchanged from the days
of Jacob and Rachael. It promised those who were romantically
inclined, that for every man in the world there is a woman for
whom Fate (or God) has ordained a match. A woman must merely
uphold the values of her culture (cultivate the virtues that men
prize), man must be "pure at heart," and "true love" will unite the
virtuous couple. The ideal woman was thus a "pure spirit," totally
in harmony with the religious virtues of Christianity and the
popular, pure values of her culture. The underlying premise is
that if woman were to interfere with the workings of Fate and, for
instance, attempt to pursue her own man, she could well upset the
entire balance of her life and be doomed to a miserable mismatch.
This passive vision of woman simplified courtship, marriage, and
the roles of the sexes for centuries. But by the last half of the
nineteenth century, woman began to see through the facade.
During the late eighteen-hundreds, both men and women were attempting to discredit the image of the ethereal woman as a credible ideal. William Wasserstrom saw this process as taking place largely in America, where the vital and free-thinking woman became an international inspiration and the new ideal in the Western World. The old Victorian idol was getting more difficult to keep polished each year. She was being attacked on two fronts. On one front the International Woman’s Movement strove to liberate the minds of women by calling for more political and economic freedom. On a psychological front, others strove for a greater recognition of man’s conception of the total being of the female—body and spirit. It is the latter group that had the most impact on twentieth century views of woman from the twenties through the fifties—the time in which Martha Ostenso wrote. Among those who attempted to discredit the Victorian idol in favor of the new idol which unified body and spirit were Edward Carpenter, Havelock and Edith Ellis, and Ellen Key. These writers were reacting, of course, to the temperament of the time as well as other influential thinkers such as Ibsen, Shaw and most significantly, Freud; but Carpenter’s, the Ellises’ and Key’s ideas bear a significant resemblance to those later adopted by such writers as D. H. Lawrence and Martha Ostenso. They are the immediate predecessors of Ostenso’s attitudes toward love, passion, and the ideal role of woman.

Historical observers have called Carpenter’s Love’s Coming of Age (1896) a pioneering achievement, one which "helped to justify attacks upon the lines Victorian morality had drawn."109 Havelock
and Edith Ellis' many writings in psychology and anthropology have
given Mr. Ellis the title of "the intellectual father of much of
our present thought and social practice in the field of sex."^{110}
Ellen Key, a follower of Ellis, professes many of the Ellises'
same views, but she goes a bit further and attempts to make children
born out of wedlock and premarital sex socially acceptable—if not
essential—to the health of the society. All three of these
writers have a similar conception of woman that was a radical
departure from the Victorian ideal. First, they believed that
women have sex drives that are just as vital to their psychological
well-being as those of men; second, that the society as a whole
suffers when these needs of women are stifled or denied; third, that
love, symbolized and consummated in sexual intercourse, can put man
and woman in touch with a higher consciousness, and reaffirms
the human's oneness with the natural order of the universe.
Finally, that pure sex, sex sanctioned by love, frees the human
spirit for higher pursuits.

Carpenter:

It must not be pretended that the physical passions
are by their nature unclean, or otherwise than
admirable and desirable in their place. Any
attempt to absolutely disown or despite them, carried
out over long periods either by individuals or bodies
of people, only ends in the thinning out of the human
nature—by the very consequent stinting of the
supply of its growth material, and is liable to stultify
itself in time by leading to reactionary excesses.
It must never be forgotten that the physical basis
throughout life is of the first importance, and
supplies the nutrition and the foodstuff without which
the higher powers cannot exist or at least manifest
themselves.^{111}
Ellis:

The communion of bodies becomes a communion of souls. [Here he quotes his friend Olive Schreiner.] "Sex intercourse is the great sacrament of life, he that eateth and drinketh unworthily eateth and drinketh his own damnation; but it may be the most beautiful sacrament between two souls who have no thought marriage."

... ...

The erotic personality fortifies the entire personality remains ill-developed and unharmonized.

Key:

The erotic life of the woman as well as of the man of genius exhibits two phases: in one they are attracted by their opposite, in the other by a congeniality of souls; in one phase they have sought sentiment, intimacy, nature; in the other soul, passion and culture. The Woman of the future will not as do many women of the present time wish to be freed from her sex; but she will be freed from her sexual hypertrophy, freed to complete humanity.

These writers mystified, if not mythified, the sex act. The Victorian ideal of "pure spirit" was being changed into a new ideal of "superior intuition." Woman brought with her a willing participation in the sex act, a mystical quality that has been traditionally assigned to the woman—an intuitive knowledge of the forces of life that man is too busy to notice. This is a quality that aligns women with a higher knowledge that elevates the base, physical, quality of the sex act. The act was becoming revered in the eyes of man as a union of the body (man) and the soul (woman). Moreover, the act was, for the first time since perhaps pre-Christian times, being viewed as pleasurable and fulfilling to
both parties. The act was no longer viewed as the wife's duty to the husband and to the propagation of the species; it was viewed as an act which set the woman free to express her physical nature and man free to express his spiritual nature in love. Love was viewed as the mutual binding power of the relationship and sex the symbol of that love. Still, these writers were not ready for any proclamation of equality between the sexes.

In Ellis' estimation, women were still the superiors of men, not only the spiritual superiors, but the evolutionary superiors as well. He pointed to the observable evidence that their bodies are more refined than the brutish male—less body hair, a more delicate bone structure as well as a number of other things. This was a curious compromise between the sentimental idolatry of the female that the genteel tradition upheld and the move toward equality between the sexes. In 1969 William O'Neill makes the following comment about Ellis in *Everyone Was Brave*:

> Ellis had a lively sense of justice and believed in the equality—more properly the "equivalence"—of the sexes, but this mystical approach to feminine nature had unfortunate consequences. He saw all life as made up as opposites, contradictions and polarities, he naturally believed the sexes to be profoundly unlike, although not unequal. To Ellis, "the question of the superiority of either sex does not arise, just as it does not arise between mind and matter, or hydrogen and oxygen. However different they may be, the two sexes are designed for each other and are complementary to each other."

It appears that this image of the new woman was as much man's creation in relation to the needs and demands of women of
the time. The passionate woman was an effective antidote to a gentility that was becoming too abstract and spiritual for either sex to uphold. A union of opposites was called for both in terms of creating a new ideal and in terms of the relations between the sexes. The evolution of this new ideal was also making itself felt in the literature of the time.

As early as Poe's "Ligeia," American writers have recognized the duality of the feminine nature—the evil and the good woman—the sensuous and the ethereal. William Wasserstrom points out in his Heiress of All the Ages (1951) that America gave Western literature a vital image of woman that gradually moved away from the Victorian ideal and was later adopted by women of the twentieth century. Wasserstrom says: "The leading heroine of genteel fiction [was] neither angel or devil, but somehow joins the benignity of the first with the piquancy of the second." As to her erotic nature: "New answers to this pressing question about the meaning of sex, therefore, had to be composed for a society in which human energy and vitality suddenly were given high value." The new society that demanded vitality was the frontier society of the American West, with its rugged individuals of whom energy, vitality, and endurance were demanded. Literature of this time reflected this change, which was again a compromise:

The new sensibility helped to mold fiction which does not quite reject the old code but instead tries to modify and supplement. Gentlemen who lament the death of angelic ladies are replaced by rich, brisk young men who admit they admire women "of a sensual kind" and therefore prefer a "well-developed
form to the finest countenance." If the girl is too virtuous, inflexible, if she believes that the manners of the day are sinful, usually she dies a martyr in the cause of gentility. 117

The New England virgin was rapidly fading as a model by the 1890's as is symbolized in the following excerpt from a story by Mary E. W. Freeman:

The lover asked the heroine for one of the lilies in her basket. "I wanted to give him one of those flowers more than anything else in the world! ...had my fingers on the stem of the finest lily there.... I stood still gazing at him.... As I gazed, his face changed more and more...it finally--I cannot explain it--it looked at once beautiful and repulsive. I wanted at once to give him the lily and would have died rather than give it to him, and I turned and fled." 118

The heroine of the West was not a singular type as was the ethereal Victorian heroine. The rugged terrain was a natural proving ground for the strengths that the individual woman could develop. Those who settled the West were forced to deal directly with the awesome powers of nature and instinctive behavior naturally surfaced where affectation and sentimentality were more difficult to maintain. The first type of distinctively Western woman to make her appearance in literature was the completely uninhibited woman:

"Heroines like Hurricane Nell and Calamity Jane, who lighted cigars while riding full speed, drank whiskey, shot guns, swore like men. That is to say, popular fiction chose women who were as 'bad as men'--like the Western hero, they had unusual equipment for love." 119

These women who lived life with a passionate intensity were also women of intense passion. But this was not the only kind of heroine to be found in Western fiction. There were also the Eastern
lilies, who brought with them the gentility of the former
generation of the East and attempted to civilize the West through
their affinity with the culture of their forebearers. In each
case the design of fiction was to reflect a symbiosis that was
taking place between the two worlds. The wild, savage woman like
Frank Norris's Moran of Moran of The Lady Letty is an example.
Moran was paired with a man of a European bent, Ross. In the
Western setting, the man is freed from the restrictions of his
puritan background, and the woman benefits from his civilizing
influence. By contrast, Ruth Ghent of William Vaughn Moody's play,
The Great Divide, is a woman of culture who brings refinement to
the Western man. The man offers the best of the land, a gold
mine, to Ruth, and she offers gentility, the best of her New
England heritage. The latter is the most commonly adapted version
of the symbiosis.

Martha Ostenso's Wild Geese is another example of this
symbiosis that was taking place on the American frontier; even
though it actually takes place in Canada, the motifs are the same.
Wild Geese is a study of both the savage and the genteel woman's
pursuit of happiness. The conclusion that the author makes is that
either route can bring woman fulfillment and love. Judith Gare
represents the savage, untamed country (Western) woman; Lind Archer
represents the genteel, educated city (Eastern) woman. Ostenso
compares Judith to a wild horse, and Lind to wild honey—the
rough and the refined aspects of the wilderness. Judith recognizes
both her need and her capacity for refinement just as Lind benefits
from her raw confrontation with the land and its people.

Judith's quiet introspections reveal her position as a woman who is gentle and refined at heart but knows only the hard work of the land: "She knew what beauty was, and love, and the things in no way connected with the rude growth of the land." She hated her own animal nature. She saw herself as "coarse, brutal, with great beast breasts protruding from her, and buttocks and thighs and shoulders of a beast." The very qualities that Judith deplores in herself are precisely those that make her an interesting character. She is far more "real" than Lind. She gives in to her passions. She becomes pregnant by her lover, Sven Standbo; she hurlrs an axe at her father, with the intent to kill; she works like a man, and most magnificently wrestles with her lover to emphasize her unflinching spirit of independence. Indeed, Ostenso's vivid characterization of Judith Gare is the main reason that Wild Geese has been ranked as a classic in Canadian Literature.

By contrast, Lind is a rather stereotypical figure--the waifish schoolmarm who goes West. She is, likely, an idealized version of the author. Lind, who is necessary as a narrator and an outside observer, adds some objectivity to the story, but she lacks the vital conflicts that the reader witnesses taking place in Judith. The following conversation between Lind and a neighboring farmer, Fusi Arenson, illustrates the function of Lind in the story. She is removed from the land enough to see its beauty:

"I was just thinking how lucky you people are up here to have spring so close to you."
"Yes, we are very, very lucky," he responded slowly, carefully. "But few of us know it."

"Don't you think most of the farmers realize it—in one way or other?"

"No," he said. "Here the spirit feels only what the land can bring to the mouth. In the spring we know only that there is coming winter. There is too much of selfishness here—like everywhere."

Because Lind is an autobiographical character, her conflicts and struggles, which seem apparent to the reader, are never fully explored—her formidable task of teaching students of all ages in a one-room schoolhouse—adjusting to a reclusive, bizarre family—falling in love with a mysterious man—encountering and living with a totally alien culture. Lind hardly changes from the first page of the work. She seems amazingly in control of every situation that she comes up against; moreover, she appears to return unscathed to the same environment from which she came. These elements of Lind's characterization detract seriously from the realism of the novel. Her "rider's club" relationship with the land, restricted to her daily walks, riding excursions, and visits to the neighbors are a sharp contrast to Judith's very intimate relationship with the land. For Judith is a woman who has not only worked the soil and knows that her life and the lives of others are dependent on it, she also finds power in the soil and develops a mother-daughter relationship with the earth.

The soil is Judith's most faithful companion and confidant. The elemental strength she draws from the earth is demonstrated by her intimate love of the powers of the earth as one sees in the
following scene:

Judith took off all her clothing and lay flat on the damp ground with the waxy feeling of new, sunless vegetation under her. She needed to escape, to fly from something—she knew not what....

Oh, how knowing the bare earth was, as if it might have a heart and a mind hidden here in the woods. The fields that Caleb had tilled had no tenderness, she knew. But here was something forbiddenly beautiful, secret as one's own body.

Jude hid her hands behind her and pressed her breast against the cold ground. Hard, senseless sobs rose in her throat, and her eyes smarted with tears. She was ugly beyond all bearing, and all her life was ugly.

Suddenly she was bursting with hatred of Caleb. Her large, strong body lay rigid on the ground, and was suddenly unnatural in that earthy place. Then she relaxed and wept like a woman.

This scene is clearly more tender than her encounter with her lover, Sven Standbo: When Sven returns from a job in the city, Judith, strong from her hard work on the farm is prompted to challenge him to a wrestling match:

"I wonder if I can throw you," she said suddenly.

"Kiss me first," said Sven.

"No—after," Judith said steadily.

So they wrestled. Judith was almost as tall as Sven. Her limbs were long, sinewy, her body quick and lithe as a wild-cat's. Sven, who started the tussle laughing, could get no lasting grip on her. She slid through his arms and wound herself about his body, bringing them both to the earth. As their movements increased in swiftness and strength, Sven forgot to laugh and became as serious as Judith. It did not occur to him that he might have to use his real
energy in defending himself until he saw that the girl's face was set and hard, her eyes burning. He realized suddenly that she was trying to get a head lock on him that he himself had taught her. He caught both her hands, twisting her right arm backward. She threw herself upon him violently, almost somersaulting over his shoulder, freeing her arm with a terrific jerk. Sven turned quickly, caught her about the waist with one arm and pressed the other against her throat, so that she was bent almost double and unable to breathe. He looked at her, saw that her eyes were closed and her face almost scarlet and dripping with perspiration.

"Had enough?" he asked, lightly loosening his hold.

Judith took advantage of the moment, and with a twist of her head was out of his grip like an eel. Her eyes were blazing, her breath coming in short gasps. She lashed out with her arms, striking him full across the face. While Sven, half stunned from the weight of the blow, was trying to understand the change in the issue, she hurled herself against him and he fell to the earth under her. Then something leaped in Sven. They were no longer unevenly matched, different in sex. They were two stark elements, striving for mastery over each other.

Sven crushed the girl's limbs between his own, bruised her throat, pulled her arms ruthlessly together behind her until the skin over the curve of her shoulders was white and taut, her clothing torn away. Her panting body heaved against his as they lay full length on the ground locked in furious embrace. Judith buried her nails in the flesh over his breast, beat her knees into his loins, set her teeth in the more tender skin over the veins at his wrists. She fought with insane abandon to any hurt he might inflict, or he would have mastered her at once. The faces, throats and chests of both were shining with sweat. Sven's breath fell in hot gusts on Judith's face. Suddenly her hand, that was fastened like steel on his throat, relaxed and fell away. Her eyelids quivered and a tear trickled down and mingled with the beads of perspiration on her temple. Sven released the arm that he had bent
to breaking point. He was trembling.
"Judie," he muttered, "Judie--look at me."
Judith raised her eyelids slowly.
"Kiss me--now," she said in a breath.

This scene is very similar to the one found in Norris' Moran of the Lady Letty, the only difference being that Moran is a woman of the sea, not of the earth, but each element is a clearly feminine one. Moran fights the gentleman, Ross, for mastery of a ship that they have taken over in mutiny. Again as in the case of Sven: "It is not Moran whom he fought, but her force...he set himself to conquer." Once conquered, she is transformed, made gentle and womanly..." 'You've conquered me [she says]...and I love you for it.' Unlike Judith, who marries Sven and goes to the city to seek refuge from the brutalities of the farm, Moran returns to the sea and dies there. William Wasserstrom concludes in his discussion of Norris' novel that this was necessary since there was not place in American society for her.

The image of male and female fighting for supremacy is a peculiarly Teutonic one. It recalls the struggle between Brunhild and Sigurd, which as an ancient motif, might even be construed as a symbolic overthrow of the matriarchy by the patriarchy. Sigurd justifies his brutality and his deception of the superhuman woman, Brunhild, as such: "I now lose my life to a girl, the whole sex will grow uppish with their husbands for ever after. Though they would otherwise not behave so." Predictably enough, when Sigurd wins the battle and renders Brunhild over to her husband who is given the full pleasures of her body, Brunhild is transformed into a passive
female: "For at love's coming her vast strength fled so that now she was no stronger than any other woman."

It is significant that in each of these contests women are viewed as creatures who have an unconscious wish to be dominated and subdued by men—that they enjoy the sexual conquest as much as they enjoy the physical contest. Men appear to know, from the beginning, the outcome of the contest, but still enjoy the game. Therefore, women of the caliber of Judith, Moran or Brunhild are merely the glory of the man who can subdue them, and no serious threat to male supremacy. This does not, however, diminish the power of Ostenso's scene, for it is indeed emblematic of the struggle that was ensuing between the sexes during her time and prophetic of our current struggles. For to have depicted such an uninhibited woman as Judith was a remarkable contribution to the image of woman, especially for a woman author.

In summary, Wild Geese can be viewed as a transitional work both in terms of Ostenso's career and for North American literature. It contains two types of protagonists who represent opposite ideals—the savage and the genteel, the primitive and the cultured. Each one can find fulfillment in love and both can be accepted into American culture if they undergo the prescribed symbiosis. Ultimately, balance is all. The savage woman is tamed by the influences of the city, and the genteel woman is enlightened by her experience with the raw realities of life in the wilderness. Although less of a discernible change takes place in Lind Archer, Ostenso herself, as
representative of Lind, was later to modify her own ideal womanhood.

Ostenso's later heroines were an integration of both of these characters. The new heroine retained her vitality, but tempered her violence. She does not hurl axes, break horses, or wrestle with her lover in a literal sense, but she would not relinquish her freedom to the demands of the culture and the inhibiting forces on her life. Like Judith, this new heroine found strength in the knowledge of the self which was found by attuning the self with the powers of nature. This shall be demonstrated in the final section which discusses Ostenso's creation the pagan heroine.

Viewed in other terms, *Wild Geese* integrates the sensuous and the genteel natures of woman, which several observers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw as a conflict between paganism and Christianity. As Havelock Ellis saw it: The Christian Church "sought to reduce sex to a minimum because the pagans magnified sex." He goes on to say that this culminated in an inordinate prohibition on this natural instinct and a neurosis that one associates with puritanism. Key calls for: "A new society with new morality which will be a synthesis of the being of man and that of woman, of the demands of the individual and those of society, of the pagan and Christian conceptions of life of the will of the future and a reverence for the past." 

Carpenter saw it as a poetic need in the human soul to reawaken female passion:

Far back out of the brows of Greek goddess, and Sibyl, and Norse and German seeress and
prophetess, over all this petty civilization
look the grand, untamed eyes of a primal
woman the equal and the mate of man; and in
sad plight should we be if we might not
already, lighting up the horizon from the
East and West and South and North, discern the
answering looks of those new comers who, as
the period of Woman's enslavement is passing
away, send glances of recognition across the
ages to their elder sisters. 130

The purpose of this section has been to illustrate that the
late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed a significant
change in the accepted standards of female behavior, particularly
their sexual standards. For the first time since pre-Christian
times, it was socially acceptable for a woman to have a sexual
appetite. This was brought on by a movement to abolish the double
standard and to reinstate the existence of human sexuality as a
positive aspect of human behavior. Writers such as Carpenter,
Ellis, and Key saw this as a natural and vital function of the
female as well as the male. This movement corresponded in time
with the International Woman's Movement, but it had little to do
with the political and economic freedoms that the latter group
worked to achieve. The ideas of the former group, which was
composed of both men and women, were later adopted by writers of
both sexes, and finally became the standards of the twentieth century.

The following quotes from a popular magazine and a newspaper
of the twenties demonstrates the confusion that beset the average
woman of the time. The Woman's Movement had become dormant; the
vote was won, but women worked for no serious political unity.
Flirtation became the prominent mode of sexual expression; skirts
were shorter; makeup was for the first time popular. Sexual prohibitions were loosening, but no one apparently knew what a woman was supposed to be. Dorothy Bromley Dunbar looked with disdain upon the "feminists" of her time. The year was 1927:

"Feminism" has become a term of approbrium to the modern younger woman. Because the word suggests either the old school of fighting feminists who wore flat heels and had very little feminine charm, or the current species who antagonize men with their constant clamor about maiden names, equal rights, woman's place in the world and many another cause.

She further outlines the following rules that guide the conduct of the "modern woman":

1. Young women want careers, home and children. She will sacrifice professional greatness for these.
2. A young woman feels no loyalty to other women who are vapid, silly, noisy, strident, and domineering.
3. Free love is impractical although not immoral.
4. She wants home, child and an ideal marriage, notably for its freedom and honesty and self-fulfillment through work.
5. She wants her cake and to eat it too. 131

Fannie Hurst, another popular writer of the time, and a personal friend of Martha Ostenso's, views the "new woman" as still very much a child. As she also reflects in 1927:

We vote--most of the time, listlessly as a class, or man-ridden. Or sexily refusing to give our ages or setting the polls a-snigger at the manner in which we greet the question. There has sprung up in the wake of manifestation of emancipation...a beauty parlor and hair dressing industry unparalleled in the history of beautification.

As to the short skirts, the constant public application of the vanity box and rouge stick in
order to keep pace with sister's rubyness of lips or snow-whiteness of nose, the tall headed evening slippers upon which women prance for shopping and marketing, the sheer stockings that springs a run if you step too hastily down on the curb—sisters, if this be freedom give me death.

To the average American woman the Woman's Party is merely a phrase. The prosperous middle class American woman is as classic an example of chattel as any wife in the days of old when knights were bold.
Notes

For Section Four


106 Figes, p. 70.


108 Figes, p. 76.

109 Hoffman, p. 23.


111 Carpenter, pp. 11-12.


113 Key, p. 153.

114 O'Neill, p. 334.


Popular art is normally decried as vulgar by the cultivated people of its time; then it loses favor with its original audience as a new generation grows up; then it begins to merge into the softer lighting of "quaint," and cultivated people become interested in it and finally it begins to take on the archaic dignity of the primitive. This sense of the archaic recurs whenever we find great art using popular forms.

By equating popular and primitive art, Northrop Frye makes a number of interesting parallels between the two genres. The very qualities that make popular art appear naive are the same qualities that make it an accurate encapsulation of a by-gone culture or cultural group. For popular literature, especially, captures the emotions, the prejudices and the temperament of the common people far better than the sophisticated literature of the same period. When viewed in this light popular literature can be a valuable study for a number of reasons: it is an accurate rendition of the values and the dreams of a large number of people; it conveys the mood of the time; it is a form of communication that was aimed at voicing and upholding these values, not shallow ideal values or abstract idealistic values, but the values that people actually attempt to live by. And because communication is of the foremost concern to the writer and because he/she is not writing for a sophisticated audience, the writer often relies on some of the most elemental patterns of human thought and symbols that convey universal significance, indeed the primary symbols of
human thought and abstraction—what Jung calls archetypes. "Archetypes are most easily studied in highly conventionalized literature; that is for the most part naive, primitive, and popular literature." 134

Although Ostenso often deals with some rather esoteric concept in her novels, the basic form she uses is quite conventional. This form is the form of the Western romance, a form of fiction that dates back to the novels of James Fenimore Cooper and is still a big part of American fiction as well as Americana. The Western romance is basically a love story set in the wilderness. Sometimes the two lovers represent the East and the West, Europe and America, or the city and the country. The interpretation is often a matter of personal choice. On another level the Western romance can be viewed as a quest, a quest for self-fulfillment which is found in love. The central male and female often become larger than life, taking on all the positive qualities of their culture or the personal ideals of the author.

In the Ostenso novel it is the latter. She centers the quest on the heroine’s conflicts because she is not merely telling a love story. Love is rather the symbol of the success of the heroine’s quest—a quest for self-knowledge and self-actualization. As a result, the male protagonist is often reduced to a mere symbol, the ideal or the animus of the author. Frye defines romance as a ritualized quest in which a heroic figure engages in a quest for self-knowledge: this is certainly Ostenso's pattern. Frye also states that the romance is very close to myth in that each serves
an instructive purpose: "The nearer the romance is to myth, the more attributes of divinity will cling to the hero and the more the enemy will take on demonic qualities." The Ostenso novel cannot really be termed a myth both for this reason and for the reason that it does not, in fact, express the views of a culture, but only of, at best, a select group and of the author herself. But it would not be out of line to call the Ostenso novel a recorded dream, and this dream-like aspiring quality indicates possible reasons why the author has a tendency to repeat several of the same characters and themes in a number of her novels:

The romance is the nearest of all literary forms to wish-fulfillment dream and for that reason it has a curiously paradoxical role. In every age the ruling class or intellectual class tends to project its ideals in some form of romance, where the virtuous heroes and beautiful heroines represent the ideals, the villains, the threats to their ascendancy.

As a new thinker of the twenties, Ostenso was proposing some of the values that she had been exposed to during her time in New York; as a child of the Midwest, she was reacting to the land on an intuitive level; and as an immigrant from Norway, she was also recording some of the rather primitive, unadulterated feelings of intuitive religion. But she also wrote during a time when great changes in attitudes toward the sexes were taking place. As the last section demonstrated, she was arriving at a feminine ideal that was an integration of the genteel and the savage woman. This new woman became the heroine of her novels. The antagonists of the heroine were thus representative of the puritanistic values of the
Midwest that Ostenso saw as destructive to her heroine’s quest. If there is an intangible quality to the ideal woman that Ostenso created, it can be attributed to the fact that the "Puritan" and the values that the Puritan represented was a identifiable symbol in the minds of young people at this time, but the natural woman (or the pagan heroine) was purely Ostenso’s creation--born out of the influences of her time and her culture, and unique to her imagination.

Corrupt civilization versus pure nature is a theme as old as civilization itself. Ostenso had a very intimate relationship with nature. She meditated on natural phenomenon, prayed to the forces of nature for guidance, and believed that nature could speak directly to the individual who was attuned to its rhythm. This is clearly illustrated in her characterization of the pagan heroine. This does not categorize Ostenso in any one particular intellectual school or religion; in fact, her beliefs are quite ancient--reactionary--if one chooses. She was searching for an identity for women to emulate, and she found it in a most indefinable and subjective realm--the realm of her unconscious, within her self, or if one chooses to use Christian terms--within her very soul.

Because nature was so fundamental to the development of her heroine, Ostenso sets her novels in rural areas, close to nature. And because she firmly believed that a writer should write only about what he/she experienced first hand, most of her novels are set in the Midwest--Minnesota, South Dakota, or a setting that can readily be classified as such. Exceptions are Wild Geese, Prologue to Love,
and The White Reef, which are set in Canada. Just as the settings and the symbols that she uses are natural, so too do her female characters symbolize facets of the female nature—what C. G. Jung calls archetypes. "An archetypal symbol is usually a natural object with a human meaning and it forms a part of the critical view of art as a civilized product, a vision of the goal of human work." 137

Romance as a highly conventionalized form of fiction is simple in design and closer to the elemental functions of the human mind and, therefore, according to Frye, ripe as a source in which one might study archetypes. If the reader keeps this in mind, the fact that Ostenso wrote a number of formula novels may detract from her literary reputation, but the formula she created shows an uncanny consistency of purpose. The ritual of the formula works on a very primitive level, as a chant or an incantation, an attempt to control a hostile situation as well as to communicate that situation to others. The situation is the one in which she was torn asunder by the many roles her life demanded of her—lover, woman, author, socialite, breadwinner—each demanding a separate identity and each conflicting in some way with the others. The formula, therefore, might be an attempt to "change the order of the world with the order of words." It might reflect a need to be understood by her readers or it might simply be a need to escape to a less hostile world—a world where love, indeed, prevails and conquers all. Any of these motives on the part of the author would explain the popularity of her novels.
In spite of the fact that Ostenso repeated a number of her characters and themes throughout her novels, she was not, as early reviewers and critics are fond of dismissing her as being, a one-book author. As a matter of record, she wrote fifteen novels. Of these, only five, in this writer's opinion, have an integrity of their own that qualify them as autonomous works. They are: *Wild Geese* (1925), *The Young May Moon* (1929), *The Waters Under the Earth* (1930), *The Stone Field* (1937), and *The Mandrake Root* (1938). There may be some elements of characterization and theme that repeat themselves in these works, too, but they are generally well-conceived and imaginative enough to engage the reader's authentic empathy for the situations in which the central character of each novel finds herself. These five novels are, therefore, Ostenso's most outstanding for the following reasons: First, the characters are for the most part realistic and well developed. With some minor exceptions, they are given a life of their own—motives for their behavior and they act according to the way the author has drawn them throughout the course of action. Second, these five novels deal with mature, human problems, not the simplistic, adolescent concerns of pursuing a mate; rather, they center on such questions as guilt, loneliness, loyalty to tradition and to one's parents. Third, in each of these works, Ostenso achieves an awesome mood that is perhaps the most dramatic of all her achievements as a "realistic writer." The mood is one of the human being as a pitifully small creature, struggling in the face of an indifferent universe, among
indifferent humanity. The mood evolves because the Ostensio heroine is born out of what Robert Graves would call the inspiration of the "White Goddess" and what Coleridge would call a product of "pure imagination."

The following analysis shall examine the ingredients of this mood more closely. The emphasis shall be on Ostensio's creation of her pagan heroine. The heroine shall be examined in terms of patterns of the archetypal female, particularly those found among the goddesses of Scandinavian myths. The premise of this analysis of the pagan heroine is that Ostensio was promoting a feminine ideal that originated in her own imagination, prompted by some of the circumstances of her life discussed above, perhaps the subconscious associations that were seeded in her imagination as a young child, hearing the Norse sagas prior to attending school or perhaps, and most likely, a human need to find order and meaning in life. No attempt will be made to defend Ostensio's image of the ideal woman as a "true" and/or "natural" one. Let it suffice to say that it is one woman's ideal that is fascinating in and of itself.

The word pagan recurs throughout all of Ostensio's novels. It is often applied to the qualities of her central female. This is not surprising since the word had certain shock value for the rebels of Ostensio's generation. The free thinking, free behavior, and self-indulgence of the young needed a term, and paganism seemed appropriate. To be pagan was to reject the order of Christianity for what the youth felt was a superior system of anarchy—paganism.
Most often it was merely a license for licentious behavior and had little religious significance to those who used the term. Ostenso might have picked up this term during her stay in the Village, but the pagan ideals that she presents in her novels show a far more refined view of the term than the hedonists who used it. For there is a discernible pattern that she uses to characterize her heroine.

First, the heroine is endowed with an earthy beauty which sets her apart from conventional conceptions of beauty. Second, she is a woman who is endowed with artistic talent. Her talents are usually of a musical or a poetic nature. These are enhanced by rare opportunities to develop them. Third, she is fated to a union with her male counterpart in fulfillment of nature's plan for her life. Finally, her consciousness of nature is highly developed. She has an intimate relationship with the forces of nature and this relationship leads her to a personal revolt against puritanical Christianity. Her resulting consciousness extends to a keen knowledge of her own inner nature. She knows the needs of the self and makes no compromises where the welfare of the self is concerned.

Ostenso describes the beauty of her protagonists in a refreshing manner. She chooses to exalt the unusual, making the beauty of each heroine unique: the blue vein in Elsa Bower's cheek, Lydie Clarence's lilac-leaf face, structured around her huge violet-blue eyes, Jo Porte's perpetually smiling lips—each serves to enunciate an uncommon quality of beauty. It is not the Christian symbol
of the "pearl of great price"; rather, the Ostenso heroine is the rough-hued gem of value only to one who is capable of response to its rarity—her fated mate, the male protagonist of the novel.

The second aspect of the heroine that Ostenso describes is her artistic talent. This is usually a musical ability or a talent for poetry. The Muse has touched her life. The forces of fate tend to accentuate her natural gifts. Often she is granted opportunities for education that are rare for a woman of a poor, rural background: Jo Porte is granted the opportunity to get a high school education when she saves the life of a rich companion. Carlotta Weiland is given an opportunity to attend college, a privilege she, alone, of seven children is granted. Thus, the Ostenso heroine is favored by the most wily aspect of nature, Fate.

These first two qualities serve to establish the reader's identification with the heroine. She gains the reader's sympathy because she is an exceptional woman, but she also gains the reader's empathy. For underlying the heroine's individual happiness and fulfillment in the love union is a strong implication that every woman can gain this same form of happiness in her own life. The process of mating is viewed as a most fateful occurrence. With occasional exceptions, all the women in Ostenso's novels, even the minor characters, are shown to be spiritually linked to male counterparts. Those who deny this link or are prevented from marriage by other circumstances, inevitably drift through life without purpose, as do their lovers.
Male-female balance is fundamental to the scheme of nature. In Ostenso's novels, both protagonists are people of the soil; therefore, their union reflects a union that is akin to the harmony of nature. The symbol of the heroine's successful quest, her marriage to the male protagonist, is a ceremony of fertility which often gives harmony to the natural world: "Fertility means food and drink, bread and wine, body and blood, the union of male and female. The precious objects brought back from the quest, or seen or obtained as a result of it, combine the ritual and the psychological associations." In the Ostenso world the reader is wrought by an anxious disorder as long as the central male and female are not in harmony, not only because they are unhappy, but also because their lives are not at one with nature—crops fail, violent thunderstorms occur, loved ones meet untimely deaths.

The union of the two protagonists becomes a microcosmic union of the harmony between male and female elements found in nature, similar to the mythological structures one finds in the Kabbalah or in the universe of Blake. The Ostenso male reacts to the soil on a sower-provider-ruler level. The female reacts to the soil on the creator-lover-destroyer level. This motif of balance is fundamental to mythic and archetypal structure, as can readily be seen in the god-goddess structures of ancient paganism. Jung calls this union of opposites that form a whole a "syzygy." The yin-yang of Zen Buddhism is another example of this same symbolic union. In the Ostenso world the male is usually a farmer or a writer who is
inspired by the deeds of his pioneer ancestors, or he might also be a botanist or breeder who attempts to make a scientific contribution to agriculture. He views the soil as a means by which he makes his living, yet he embraces the toil of his labors and often uses hard work to escape the reality of his temporarily unhappy life. By contrast, the female reacts to the soil on an intuitive, poetic level. She meditates on the power of the soil on a very primal level. She prefers the primeval swamps, forests, mountains, and rocky fields to the cultivated land. She may also lose herself in healthy farm work, but it is the type of work traditionally assigned to the female—gardening, cultivating flowers, or kitchen work. The heroine worships the processes of nature; the male its products.

This syzygyic union is consummated by the passionate love bond between the male and female. The sensuous nature of the heroine is one of her most distinctively pagan characteristics; even so, she does not exhibit any qualities that the typical Ostenso reader might construe as socially unacceptable. She may indulge in premarital sex, but she is always sorrowful and penitent and is usually caught and punished for her transgressions. She may get pregnant, gain a bad reputation, or withdraw from society out of a personal sense of guilt. The heroine may be noted for her candor, but she always speaks with the most genteel tongue. The heroine may replace the first wife of the central male, but she never intentionally breaks up another woman's home. (Esther Clark of
The *Sunset Tree* (1949) is an exception to this, but she does this during her quest for self-knowledge, not as part of her fulfillment, and the deed is not presented as admirable by the author.) The heroine never actively seeks out her man. She may take advantage of certain circumstances and she may lend a hand in his housekeeping, like Lind Archer of *Wild Geese* or Jo Porte of *The Stone Field*, but this is only done in compliance with his secret desires.

The archetypal passionate woman, or the love goddess, has an interesting and paradoxical role in ancient mythologies. She may be devoted to either the pleasure or the destruction of the man pursuing her. Often she is symbolized as a cat. In ancient Egypt she is the cat goddess "Bast" whose nature is both fondling and "pantherlike."¹⁴¹ In Norse mythology she is the goddess Freyja who is also depicted as a cat goddess; she roams the world in her chariot drawn by cats, the cats "symbolizing the sly fondling and sensual enjoyment."¹⁴² Freyja is the goddess of love between men and women. But she is also a goddess of death. Heroes who died honorably on the battlefield and who loved their wives in life are assigned to her in the afterlife. The lovers are united in Freya's own great hall, similar to Odin's Valhalla.

The story of the goddess Freya closely parallels the story of Marcia Vorse Gunther of Ostenso's *The Young May Moon*. Both women leave their husbands for rather selfish reasons. Marcia declares that she will go to another man because she is unsatisfied with the affection that her husband Rolf has shown her: "She asked
for so little, it seemed to her. She asked for his love, his real love—not the secret, somehow shamed desire he had rarely shown her.... She had never asked another man for that. She had never wanted to. Freya leaves her husband Oder (Sense) to journey to the mountain of giant women who were reputed to have lovely treasures. She spends a night in the cave of dwarves (ugly, obscene little creatures) in order to obtain directions to the mountain from them. When Freya gets her directions and goes to the mountain, she is given a necklace, but she is also laughed at by the women. She returns home to find that her husband has vanished. Determined to find him, she searches the world in her chariot drawn by cats. The other gods tell her that he shall always be just ahead of her, and that she will never see him again. Her necklace is named Brisingamen, the necklace of tears. These tears become the morning dew.

When Marcia returns home to her husband, after merely walking along the railroad tracks all night, she is also embraced by the morning dew. It is a form of baptism. For she then vows that she will be content to only give, never take love. She returns to the home that she and her husband have shared with his puritanical mother Dorcas. Rolf is nowhere to be found! She finally goes to the edge of town where she finds Rolf drowned in the shallows of the lake. He is gripping her necklace which she retrieves as a symbol of her "murder."

In addition to her associations with Freya, Marcia is also associated with the power of the moon. Her life is attuned to the
moon cycle. She falls in love with her husband under the influence of the "young May moon." On the unfortunate night of her mock-escapade she looks at the moon over her left shoulder and is filled with a "thrill of fear and beauty." She feels the first life of her child during the full moon. When Marcia finally flees from the house of her mother-in-law she is associated with a Valkyrie who sang on "nights of rain or very clear starlight (and) was an omen that bore harkening to." According to folk tradition, rain does not occur, nor are stars as visible during a full moon.

In Norse mythology, the Valkyries were the thirteen maidens of Odin, one for each full moon of the year. They brought dead heroes from the battle field to Asgaard. They sang mournful songs when the moon was out of phase—they sing as do the elves of the hillsides because they know that they are among the damned—just as Marcia suspected she was. Marcia's special talent is that she sings beautifully and is also schooled in classical piano, but she makes her living once she leaves her mother-in-law as a piano instructor and by selling vegetables from her garden. She and her son, Little Rolf, lead a free, natural life in an abandoned homestead cottage made of stone near the town. Little Rolf is called a "bronze headed Pan" who was, of course, the god of vegetation in the Greek tradition.

These mythical associations attempt to characterize Marcia as a woman who is at one with the powers of nature. She is in rhythm with a higher source of knowledge which she intuitively feels
grants her a higher reality. Ostenso nearly achieves this, but she falls somewhat short. When Rolf dies, Marcia professes to have direct communications with him. She says that she can speak with him any time she desires. But this statement is never authenticated for the reader. The townspeople and her mother-in-law view her as a bizarre and deranged woman. One morning Dorcas sees Marcia talking to her dead husband under a catalpa tree in the yard. The town begins to notice her unkept appearance. Yet, Marcia appears to be of super-human consciousness and remains uninfluenced by others. She has an uncanny relationship with Jonas Gunther, Dorcas' mentally deficient brother. He functions as a kind of a Shakespearian fool to Marcia. He pesters her with the very crux of her guilt and the problems that plague her—the fact that women cannot rise up once they are down (the negative opinions of the townspeople who destroy a woman of questionable morals). Jonas questions Marcia about women who "run away," recalling her part in the "murder" of her husband. This union with Jonas has the effect of making Marcia's madness ordered with a strange spiritual order as does the final description of the book that appears to describe Rolf's release of Marcia's consciousness. She is outside of the cottage. A waft of warm air surrounds her in a "perverse embrace" and suddenly releases her. She seems, for the first time since his death, at peace.

The Young May Moon is a most subtle creation. Reviewers were faint in their praise of the book for two reasons: They thought
Marcia beneath admiration, and they thought the language too ornate and pretentious. The first criticism shows the prejudice of the male reviewer which the following excerpts clearly demonstrate:

"One is cheated from full satisfaction in a colorful book by the feeling that if the heroine had been gifted with one grain of common sense in addition to the courage with which she was lavishly endowed, she would have solved most of her problems in short order." 149 

Another reviewer says: "Marcia is a stupid, self-centered young woman, and all Miss Ostense's efforts to make her admirable are in vain." 150 

On a more positive note:

"If you can accept Miss Ostense's premises, her syllogism comes off fairly enough."

Only one reviewer of the time, notably a woman, understood the subtlety of Ostense's attempt:

The distinction of The Young May Moon is neither of character nor action; but in the author's capacity to let events slip hazily by while she submerges herself in sweeping scene and strange verbage. She writes of the ovate moon, of birds, scuttling somberly, of threening, scarp and nacre—and this is not ostentation but a delicate, conscious improvization upon an instrument whose voice she loves and for the playing of which she has a decided talent. 151

The natural symbols—blood-red beets being boiled by Dorcas—pink snake-like vines climbing the walls of the house—fluttering birds resembling disembodied souls—are all keeping with the mood of the tale and indeed serve a vital purpose in the course of action. Perhaps the main defect of the novel is that these descriptions should have been attributed in a more definitive way to Marcia
and not intermingled with the author's point of view. This destroys the objectivity and tends to confuse the mood for the reader.

Natural images are also used to exemplify the mood of the heroine in *The Waters Under the Earth*, Carlotta Welland. She like Marcia Vorse Gunther is also a very passionate woman. The following scene in which Carlotta attempts to seduce Jared, the straight-laced love of her youth, is one of the most graphic and sensuous sex scenes to appear in any of the novels:

He brought her to the shadow of the nearer vines, where they had seated themselves. Close above them hung the darkly shining burden of grapes, and the sky beyond darkly shining of the same voluptuous, untamed color. The presence of Jared was very near her—and abiding demand within her own body. She drew her arms about his shoulders, urging him down to her lips moving close and quick over his mouth and throat, her fingers going swiftly, then to his hair and straining its crispness vehemently back from his brow in the strength of her grasp knowing the deep strong mysteries of his body. Then his breath had been suddenly expelled on a low exclamation and he seized her by the shoulders and thrust her back from him.

"Carlotta Welland!" he whispered. "Have you lost your senses? You're acting like a—like a wanton!"

The carefully controlled language seems rather comical to a modern audience, but the single element that is not restrained is the behavior of Carlotta. Her actions are intensified by the background. The scene evokes an image of a Dionysian orgiastic rite. The author is using the imagery precisely because her audience would associate the vines with alcohol, sex and the
free spirit of the pagans. This effectively skirts the conflicts between complying with the standards of her audience and her publishers and communicating her feelings.

Carlotta is never afraid to act on her natural impulses. She later abandons Jared because she realizes that she will not be satisfied with him. She knows that she will only replace his mother and never be able to express the sensual side of her nature that she finds so vital. In this same novel Ostenso offers a definition of what she calls the "true pagan" and it is Carlotta who exemplifies and defines Ostenso's pagan consciousness. Carlotta's brother describes her as such: "She is a true pagan. She never takes more than she can use, but she'll use a lot, or I miss my guess." The statement carries with it a number of implications: First, that the pagan has a moral obligation to respect nature, to take no more than is necessary for the self. Second, that the pagan has a duty to the self to know what it needs and to meet those needs. Finally, it hints that the more one is, the more one needs, the more one must demand of the self. Part of this same sentiment is expressed in an old Norse poem:

"'Tis better not to pray
Than too much offer
A gift ever looks to a return
'Tis better not to send
Than too much consume."

The integrity of the self above all else is a particularly Teutonic notion, but the necessity of accepting the awesome force of nature would naturally produce a corresponding philosophy that demands self-preservation. The archetypal female is again
one of creation-love and destruction—ultimately indifferent
to the needs of the individual. Robert Graves' White Goddess
embodies these same principles. The White Goddess is "The mother
of ALL-Living, the ancient power of fright and lust—the female
spider or the queen-bee whose embrace is death." These are
the same qualities that Jung associates with the Great Mother
archetype:

The qualities associated with her are maternal
solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority
of the female; the wisdom and spiritual
exaltation that transcends reason and any
helpful instinct or impulse; all that is
benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that
fosters growth and fertility. The place of
magic transformation and rebirth, together with
the underworld and its inhabitants, are presided
over by the mother. On the negative side the
mother archetype may connote anything secret,
hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead,
anything that devours, seduces and poisons, that
is terrifying and inescapable like, fate...

These powers are also accredited to the Fates of classical mythology
and the Norns of the Norse sagas: the spinner (creator), weaver
(lover), cutter (destroyer).

They refer to the three temporal stages of all growth
(beginning-middle-end; birth-life-death; past-
present-future). Two of the Norns spin and twist
the thread, the third lays a curse on their gifts.
Later generations sought to create a connection
between the three stages of time, past, present and
future, and the three names of the Norns: Urth,
Verthandi, and Skuld.157

The Ostenso heroine creates through her art, or by bearing
children or by sharpening her intellect. She loves nature, the
soil, her fated lover and her children. She destroys whatever
inhibits the needs of the self, even if they are the very things
which she once created or loved. She mirrors the powers of nature, and from nature she gets the direction of her truth—what should be eliminated and what should be retained or embraced. There is an obvious ruthlessness in this outlook for the weak are destroyed in a universe where self is the highest good.

The universe of the pagan plagued with doom is the same found in the sagas of the north and in the mythology of Scandinavian and Teutonic cultures in general. Ragnarok was the constant threat of man and gods, alike; Werden, Fate, the ultimate power of the universe, just as winter personified by the brutish, destructive frost giants annihilated most of life each year. Seldom were the gods granted anything of value without a price. Even knowledge had its price. Odin hangs on Ygdrasill, the tree of life, for fourteen days in order to gain the secret knowledge of the runes. This has been interpreted as man's submission to the unconscious, feminine powers of nature, the tree, a feminine symbol, granting intuition to the male after he suffers the ordeal of submission.

It is a ritual remarkably similar to the pagan code of ethics that Ostenso outlines in The Stone Field. The persona through which the author speaks is Phineas Baggot, a mysterious recluse who gave up being a Catholic priest to meditate on nature.

...man is a child of Nature. When he turns against his mother he's done. He may not find out about it right away, but he will.... a man can break God's laws and be forgiven. That's what they teach us. But when he breaks Nature's laws there is no forgiveness—and no escape. Sooner or later he pays the penalty, or
his children pay it—or his children's children. It doesn't matter much. It must be paid.... The third lesson is the hardest of all to learn. It's hard to know when we sin against Nature. Greed is a sin against Nature. And ambition, to sit in a place above your fellow creatures is a sin against Nature. And wasting your substance is a sin against Nature. You may not know the meaning of what I tell you, but you'll know it some day.¹⁶⁰

Nature has a feminine personality in this passage. God, Himself, appears to be subject to her laws, just as Odin or Zeus were subject to the final power of the Fates. This statement seems to indicate that the unconscious intuition of the feminine is more than just the logic of the masculine. Esther Harding put it this way: "There are not wanting critics who say that conditions are too complex for man's intelligence to cope with and that less misery and unfairness occurred under nature's ruthless yea and nay than under any humanly devised code."¹⁶¹ There are other implications in the statement that God's and Nature's laws are not the same. This may appear to contradict the basic premise of the Crucifixion, that all sins are forgiveable, but it recalls a more ancient symbol of another hanged god: "The male, who is in this stage largely unconscious, lives in a fatalistic world driven by the wind of destiny; one for proof that fate is experienced only passively."¹⁶² This same idea that nothing can be forgiven is developed further in The Young May Moon when Marcia Vorse rushes to Paul Brule for consolation over her guilt for the part she had in the death of her husband. She
tells him that she does not "feel forgiven" as her religion assures her that she should feel. He answers her with one of the strongest indictments against Christianity to be found in any of the novels:

None of us can [feel forgiven]. Because we're alone. So damned alone. Just look at it will you? Here's our little preacher, this Reverend Neering going about the country, always in a hurry doing all he can after his own fashion to make this rotten world a decent place to live in. Think of the hours he must have by himself—for after all he isn't a fool—think of those hours when he has to fight like hell against despair and do it alone—all by himself—on a lonely country road, perhaps, at night. And that little woman of his—the sweetest of God's innocent creatures—making her prayers—for you and for me, mind you!—and Dorcas Gunther—picture her on her knees in her room with the door going over the abyss, praying for us and alone! And that queer brother of hers—Jonas—isolated in life where only a thin ray of light enters once in a long, long time. We fill our lives with ideas—loves, hates, ambitions—thinking to make companions of them, so to speak. But something in us always remains separate, never-the-less unapproachable. Now you [Marcia] you and your puny stubborn will—you've been deceiving yourself with the belief that all life hangs on something called atonement—nothing but illusion—a companion to your own peculiar aloneness. There is no such thing...[It all] covers up the fact that you've done something irrevocable.

The moral burden on the pagan is far more demanding than that on the Christian who is assured forgiveness. The pagan's universe is cold and ruthless, with no clear guarantees of a formula salvation. This philosophy is directly out of the Teutonic-Norse tradition:

The men of the north knew they walked along a precipice edge, their precarious security
threatened constantly by the sword, the storm, the attack of an enemy. Disaster might reach them at any time, whether heralded by gloomy omens or falling rocks from a blue sky.

... .

It has been remarked that the most moving themes of their poetry were concerned with the remorseless power of Fate.

This philosophy of doom was as omnipresent as the threat of Ragnarok, the end of the world, which will destroy not only mankind and the earth, but the reigning gods, as well. It is an attitude which has been called "mature" in contrast to the Greek vision of gods sipping nectar and eating ambrosia:

The Greek dwelt in bright and sunny lands, where the change from summer to winter brought with it no feeling of overpowering gloom. The outward nature exercised a cheering influence upon him making him happy and this happiness he exhibited in his mythology. The Greek cared less to commune with the silent mountain, moaning winds, and heaving sea; he spent his life to a great extent in the cities, where his mind would become more interested in human affairs, and where he could share his joys and sorrows with kinsmen. While the Greeks thus were brought up in an artificial society of the town, the hardy Norseman was inured to the rugged independence of the country. While the life and the natural surroundings of the south, would naturally have a tendency to make the Greek more human, or rather to deify that which is human, the popular life and nurture in the north would have a tendency to form in the minds of the Norsemen a sublimar and profounder conception of the universe.

It is logical that these ancient values would surface during times of great primal stress such as the settlement of the frontier of this continent and the Great Depression of the thirties.
Both of these periods of time were frequently used as the settings of Ostenso's novels. *The Mandrake Root* (1938) coordinates the two periods. The main action takes place during the thirties, but accounts from a pioneer diary are interspersed to emphasize the similarities between these two eras of bitter struggle. The unifying theme of *The Mandrake Root* is the necessity of destruction, as a means by which nature strengthens herself. The pioneer woman, Tanis Judkin, and the woman of the thirties, Lydie Clarence, each personify the feminine tri-force of creation, love, and destruction. Both of these women actualize a similar need--the need to bear a child, a privilege that their husbands are unable to grant them.

Sibert Mueller, a minor character of *The Mandrake Root* who functions much the same as does Phineas Baggot of *The Stone Field*, defines the force which drives these women. It is:

> Some thing [sic] primordial--some impulse in Nature that drives up without our own choosing. It resides in the female--it was in the first woman--as it will be in the last. She it is who carries on the work that Nature has planned... It is for that impulse that we have what we call beauty in the world. It is for that we have pride and strength--the arts of peace and the glories of war.

There are two developments in the plot of *The Mandrake Root* which are most uncommon for a "romantic" novel. First, Lydie does not repent her action, even when it leads to the suicide of her husband. She tells her lover, "I'm going to be terribly glad!"

She also refuses to marry her lover for she does not want to mar the reputation of her husband. Here as in *The Young May Moon*,
Ostenso defines immortality as the impression the dead leave on the minds of the living. Lydie's husband becomes a martyred saint. He could not endure a life without the complete love of his wife. He is defeated by his unbending, unnatural adherence to Christian morals. He could not understand that Lydie's need to bear a child did interfere with her spiritual loyalty to her husband. Lydie is not sorry because she becomes objective enough to see that the destruction of the weak is necessary for the strong to endure. In Lydie's mind, this process of nature is more magnificent than any single human life. Worship of the power of nature is the same force that leads Jo Porte to erect a "cairne" at the sight of a ravaged rabbit nest where crows had killed the newly born and "Nature had shown her ruthless way."

The stones lying about were plain, unworthy, but she gathered them with reverence and made a little pyramid in the center of the hollow. Then still on her knees, she lifted her eyes and saw the tops of the oak trees foaming in the blaze of the full sun. Her hands went slowly upward, her palms open to the sky, and a sense of being pierced all through with a wild exultation pervaded her.

It is the same force which causes Carlotta Welland to convince her sister, Sophie, that death is preferable to her lonely life of sexual frustration that was driving her mad. By consulting a Ouija board, Carlotta convinces her sister that her lover is waiting on the other side. Sophie wanders out of an open window and meets him in death. Ruth, a third sister, is horrified by her suspicions and confronts Carlotta with them:
"Nothing would bother you, not even murder. You would stop at nothing. I can't believe Sophie fell."

"What in the world are you talking about, Ruth? Do you mean I pushed her or what?"

"You fooled her. You got her thinking things. She made up her mind that Bert was waiting for her. You did that."

"Well, but he was dead, wasn't he?"

"You didn't know that at the time."

"Even so," Carla replied, "the gods were on my side."169

As has been illustrated in the examples above, the powers of the pagan heroine extend from her own consciousness to a super-consciousness which may include other spiritual entities. These "gods," as the ancients personified them, guide the pagan, insuring her of a "true" path. The question remains—"Whose gods are these?" One answer is offered in The Waters Under the Earth. They are "the voice of the original God, the free and golden soul of man."170 This is a highly subjective, mystical view of morality. Such a view serves often to complicate, rather than simplify the individual's position on earth—for one must assume that everyone can act on an intuitive distinction between self-actualization and self-gratification. For the first is a manifestation of the self according to the plan of nature and the other is simply a pursuit of hedonistic pleasure. As the "paganism" of the twenties clearly illustrates, a universe where self is all can likely become a battle ground for supremacy rather than a community of cooperation and peace.

Community, cooperation, love, and peace—such are the catch words of Christianity. But this was not what Ostenso saw being
practiced as the religion during her day. The Christians of Ostenso's novels are judgmental, uncharitable, and materialistic. Often they are confused, like Andrew Clarence, and unable to cope with the ruthless realities of life. Other times they are petty small town gossips who are jealous of any life which has freed itself from the conventional restrictions of puritanical morality. Often her characters are materialistic and greedy, worshipers of Mammon who merely call themselves Christian. Because she was revolting against not only the religion of her time, but the entire status quo that inhibited the needs of the self, often the former generation, her antagonistic characters are frequently a personification of the values she abhorred. They fall into two distinct categories: the materialistic wife and the Christian tyrant.

The materialistic wife is a stereotypical figure who appears in a wide range of popular fiction. She is a shallow woman who is dedicated to appearances. In the Ostenso novel she is a rather innocuous figure who is a slight obstacle between the union of the heroine and the male protagonist since she is usually his first wife. The man is typically tricked into marrying her because of her family's wealth and the declining finances of his own family, or he is dazzled by her beauty and fails to see the shallow personality beneath the beautiful exterior. Once the male protagonist sees his wife for what she really is, he is swift to abandon her for the pagan heroine who is a woman of natural refinement and keen sensibilities. In most of the
novels, the materialistic wife or woman advances little beyond the stereotype described above. However, there are exceptions. Natalie Monroe of *The Mandrake Root* represents an actual reversal of the reader's usual sympathies. Lydie, the woman of nature, is characterized as singlemindedly ruthless in her needs to actualize her need for motherhood; Natalie, the materialistic city woman, appears genuinely in love with Eric Stene, the central male.

Another example of a materialistic woman who is humanized by Ostenso is Esther Clark, who is in many ways an autobiographical character. Esther's need for fine things is explained as a result of a deprived childhood and a need to escape the stigma of poverty.

The Christian tyrant is far more complex than the materialistic woman. Like all of Ostenso's strong characters, the tyrant finds power in the life processes of the soil. But the tyrant's power is drawn from exploitation, not communion, with the soil. The tyrant can be either male or female, but is a Christian without charity who conquers the earth solely for material gain. He is willing to sacrifice the lives of both his family and his workers to attain his ends. His Christianity is strictly dogmatic and judgmental. He attends Church mainly to secure his position in the community which is one of his main sources of power, or he is pathetically entrenched in a superstitious sort of Christianity that causes him to shun the vital nature of his personality because he fears eternal damnation.
Caleb Gare of *Wild Geese* fits into the former category, a man who hungers for the wealth that the land can render onto him; Matt Welland of *The Waters Under the Earth* falls into the latter. Each is determined to enslave his family for his own personal pursuits. Magdali Wing of *O’ River Remember*, Dorcas Gunther of *The Young May Moon*, and Hatti Murker of *The Dark Dawn* are examples of a female Christian tyrant. Each of these women worships her public image and her power in the community above all human consideration.

These tyrannical characters are usually accompanied by a counterpart of the opposite sex—a sort of perverse syzygy: Caleb—his daughter Ellen; Matt—his daughter Jenny; Magdali—her brother Roald; Dorcas—her brother Jonas; Hattie—her brother Bert. These connotate a number of pathological conditions about the tyrant: He/She is somehow unnatural, perhaps sexually perverted in some way; the tyrant is also an evil being, the counterpart of their personality acting as a familiar spirit to the tyrant. In Jungian terms, the subordinate would act as the anima or animus of the tyrant—supplying the tyrant with the subordinate service that his/her need for power demands. Each would, in fact, fulfill the other's corresponding need to either dominate or be dominated. The function of the weak characters is to show the reader that only weak-minded or extremely weak-willed people would ever comply with the authority of the tyrant.

Perhaps Ostenso did not see much virtue in the way Christianity was practiced during her day, but it should not be assumed that
she condemned all Christians or all principles of Christianity. Some of her sympathetic characters perform very "Christian" acts. The aspect of Christianity that she saw as being ultimately destructive was that which was in opposition to nature and the needs of the human soul. The most fundamental of these is love, which, to her, expresses itself in its highest possible earthly form in the sex act. The fact that Christianity has often equated sex with sin, even in marriage, was particularly distressing to Ostenso. She saw it as a basic unifying force between man and woman—body and soul, just as did many of her contemporaries; to condemn the act was to make man and woman enemies and to relinquish any hope for the syzygyic balance vital to the scheme of nature.

For the pagan universe is not void of hope and of love. There is an aspect of Scandinavian mythology that is very much concerned with the redemptive elements of life and of the universe. It has been generally disregarded because the early Christians have usurped the myth and made it into a metaphor for the Second Coming. This was once the myth of Baulder. Baulder was the god of love, also the god of summer and vegetation. He was the most beautiful and gentle of all the gods. His mother Figg, who knew all that the future held for the gods, knew that Baulder would die, so she asked that an oath be taken by all things living and dead that they would not harm Baulder. She forgot, however, to ask the plant mistletoe to take the oath for she thought that it was harmless. Loki, the trickster of the sagas,
placed a sprig of mistletoe into the hand of the blind god, Hoder, who threw it at Baulder in a game that had become common among the gods since all things bounced off of Baulder and since all had promised not to harm him. Baulder was pierced through the heart by the mistletoe and consigned to the underworld. Attempts by Figg to persuade Hel, the goddess of the dead, to release Baulder were futile, but Baulder will reign again in a new and better earth after the old gods are destroyed in Ragnorok.

This myth shows not only an obvious Christian parallel, but also a vital belief in the total processes of life that in fact life and love are the most powerful forces in the universe. And it is this myth that is most in keeping with the spirit of the Ostenso novel. In the Ostenso novel, it is man-woman love which promises the highest fulfillment of the love emotion on a human plane. The sex act is a ritual, a homage to the power of love. It is necessary, therefore, for each participant to enter into the act not only freely but eagerly. For only when the lovers render their consciousness to the higher power of love do they truly expand that consciousness.

The Ostenso heroine's quest for love and particularly sexual expression in the midst of a puritanical society is best exemplified by Carlotta Welland's "unimplicated" will. She prevails in the midst of the broken lives of her family by developing a nature which concentrates solely on the needs of the self. The paradox of this confrontation is that her power comes full circle to emerge as awesomely as that of the tyrant.
Matt Welland wanted only one thing for his seven children—to remain children, children living under his roof, supporting his needs and living by his strict, bigoted moral code. On the night of Carlotta's birth he prays: "Forgive me, O Lord, for my lust, forgive me, I beseech Thee! for the weakness of my flesh. Visit not my sin upon this child of my iniquity. Strengthen me, O Lord, that my accursed seed may not...etc...etc...." According to the Ostenso "love ethic," Matt's sexual encounters with his wife were sinful because they were not acts of love. As Sara Welland, the mother, explains to Carlotta:

"It was a long time before I discovered that the only person that Father ever really loved was his only brother, Felix. When they parted I did what I could to make up for the loss. I have never quite succeeded."

"Could any woman have succeeded?"

"I might have succeeded myself, Carla. If I had begun early enough to assert myself. But I didn't have the courage."

Thus, the seven Welland children were, in fact, a product of lust and not love. They became a constant source of either jealousy or shame to him—jealousy, for they might find in their own lives the love he was never able to have, and shame because they remind him of his supposed "sin." He spent his life inhibiting the lives of his children through a gentle tyranny that keeps them afraid of their own natural impulses, a "fear of living, fear of thinking—sown in the wells of wonder—fear of the crucifying doubt of holy things. Terror in the mystery and the power of self, housed in the fugitive flesh of a dream." Thus one of the children who is not able to escape Matt's tyranny
describes his own dilemma.

The title, *The Waters Under the Earth*, is most likely a reference to the rivers of Hades or the rivers that feed the roots of Ydryssil, the World Tree of Norse Mythology. They are evoked in a Biblical passage that Matt reads as a warning to one of his sons who plans to leave the family: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven images or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the waters beneath the earth...." 175 Matt's methods are diabolically effective. One by one each of his first six children turn to illicit love affairs or unnatural sublimations for their sexual desires. They are so transfixed by their father's morality and the inspiration of fear that he instills in them that they do not break away. Carlotta, the youngest of Matt's seven children, is the only one who manages to break away.

From childhood, Carlotta is characterized as sensuous and beautiful. Ostens attempts to show the reader the inner workings of Carlotta's mind. As the book opens, the scene is her sister Ruth Welland's wedding. Carlotta is nine. She tells herself that she will concentrate only on the tastes and the smells of the day. The images are highly sensual—the wedding cake, the flowers, the first cherry of the season, traditionally offered to Matt, the groom who smelled "obnoxiously of sen-sen and perspiration and cheap toilet water." 176 Throughout the novel Carlotta's "fluted laughter" echoes through the corridors of the Welland house, as her brother, Paget, describes her: "that kid could laugh
any time, anywhere, when the spirit moved her."177

As an adolescent, she becomes a part of a bizarre occurrence which brings about the death of Ruth's husband. She follows the husband who is staggering to the farm in a drunken state. Carlotta attributes this rather bold maneuver to an inner perverseness. When the man turns around at the door of the cellar (where he intended to hide a bottle of liquor), he discovers her, grabs her, and it is implied that his intentions are rape. Strictly in defense of herself: "She buried her teeth in the cords of his neck and Clint dropped her with a stark oath."178 She then bolts the door of the cellar. When Ruth returns home and finds her husband absent for the third day in a row, she is overcome by a mad rage and sets the house afire. Carlotta confesses her part in the drama only to her brother Paget. It remains their secret for several years. Ruth never marries again because she is afraid that no man would want her if he knew what she imagines herself to have done to Clint. When Carlotta finally tells her, Ruth's self respect is so debased that she refuses to believe Carlotta.

Carlotta's part in her sister Sophie's romance with Bertram Seiffert is even more diabolical. As a young woman Sophie loved a man named Bert Seiffert, but his religious convictions did not coincide with those of Matt. They were not allowed to marry. He departs; Sophie teaches country school. She uses her small salary to help support the family. The recurring image one has
of Sophie is of a demure, sentimental, lovely woman enveloped in a mist. She "never notices anything."\(^{179}\) She enjoys locking herself in the bathroom (ostensibly taking long baths), even refusing to come out on one occasion when the house was afire: "The family had come tacitly to ignore Sophie's frequent and prolonged bathing—there was something about it secretly reprehensible, obscurely embarrassing as there might be in a wild animal's doing something disturbingly human."\(^{180}\) Actually what was disturbing was to see a cowed human doing something disturbingly animal.

Sophie drifts about the house half-attentive to her surroundings, speaking only to the children when they make too much noise. On birthdays she comes a bit down to earth. She takes charge of the celebration by baking a cake, decorating the house, and picking flowers. Birthdays are of prime importance to her, and she is an avid reader of horoscopes. But on all other days she drifts in a self-contained world of signs, symbols, and numerology. One day she has an adventure.

A new boy, older than the regular elementary school boys, appears in her classroom. He bears a striking resemblance to Bert Seiffert. When she detains him after school, she is overcome by an intense longing for love. She kisses him "fiercely on the mouth."\(^{181}\) The boy tells his friends. Word gets around, and Sophie bluffs a denial from the lad before the class. But the greatest horror takes place when the boy's father explodes into the schoolhouse, grabs the boy, horsewhips the child just outside
of the school in view of the entire class and makes him apologize to Sophie again. Carlotta, alone, senses the truth of what took place but remains silent. Sophie resigns.

The final chapter in the unfulfilled loved of Sophie Welland is the most bizarre. Gradually Sophie and Carlotta become more and more enclosed in a mystical circle. Ruth overhears them "questioning a Ouija board" with Sophie "taking the experiment seriously!". Privately Ruth is rather amused, "under her fear, ran a perverse amusement. Matthew Welland held that Ouija board operation and like practices were consorting with devils and an abomination in the sight of the Lord. How droll something so odious to Matt should be going on secretly under his roof!"

The implications are that Carlotta contacted Bert Seiffert through the Ouija board and tells Sophie that he is dead, on the other side waiting for her. One day while the three women are cleaning the attic, without apparent motive or forethought, the dreamy Sophie walks over to an open window and falls to her death.

One sees that in contrast to the others, Carlotta embraces the "terror and the mystery and the power of the self." She is the only member of the Welland family who emerges with any remnant of human dignity. She finally rejects Jared, Matt's choice for her as a husband, for the controversial Kingswood, to whom she will be a lover, not a substitute mother. She does this in direct defiance of Matt—simply by doing as she pleases, not asking his permission. Even though her pagan morality is, as an early reviewer put it, "most subjective, indeed," she shines as
an example of the beauty of a truly uninhibited life. Her
dignity goes beyond ordinary human consciousness.

Reviewers disagree on the quality of *The Waters Under the
Earth*. A few said that it merely repeated the old theme of the
tyramical father that was introduced in *Wild Geese*; others
said that it was deficient as an art work because it merely told
the reader what happened instead of showing the reader: "We
grasp, in other words, the intellectual and thematic values of the
book, but we do not live in its pages."\[186\] The one consistent
quality of the work that was praised was the mood that Ostenso
created: "There is no doubt about it--Martha Ostenso can create,
establish and perpetrate a mood. More than in any of the others,
she has done it in this, her fifth novel."\[187\] "*The Waters Under
the Earth* is an absorbing book. It is among the fine things that
have been written during the present decade."\[188\] Again one of
the common complaints of reviewers is that her heroine was not
admirable--the objections against her were that she was selfish
and strong willed, unbending: "Miss Ostenso, in recording the
slow triumph of her paragon over such an unpopular figure as a
puritanical father, and in championing the cause of rebellious
youth, has found the formula for another success, with her large
public, which is doubtless composed for the most part of heroine-
worshipping young women."\[189\] Perhaps--perhaps not.

Still the question remains: "What is the author proposing
in the creation of Carlotta Welland?" Perhaps Carlotta evolves
to a complexity that goes beyond the intentions of the author.
Her concern for her own freedom appears to be the sole guiding principle in her life. Ruth never re-marries because Carlotta does not clear Ruth's name with the family and with the authorities in regard to the accidental death of Ruth's husband. Sophie, another sister, kills herself at Carlotta's prompting. Jared is jilted. Matt is betrayed, and Carlotta has no moral qualms about any of her actions. She simply refuses to think about them, saving her energies for artistic and intellectual pursuits. As her brother Tom says of her, she is utterly "unimplicable," meaning that she has such a strong sense of self that she cannot be molded by the opinions, the goals, or the morality of others.

The power of *The Waters Under the Earth* is its enigmatic quality. Ostenso creates a moral paradox: to condone Carlotta's morality is to agree that each human being can act on pure intuition to determine the rules by which he lives—this includes inflicting his value system on those who are weaker than he is and even making judgments as to whether another's life is worth living or not (as Carlotta does to Sophie); to condone Matt's morality is to say that it is right for a father to gnarl the growth of his children and to terrorize them with fear and guilt. Both of these two religions fail because they are not universally applicable. They are neither Christianity or paganism, they are simply "Carlotta's religion" and "Matt's religion." Each is designed to serve its creator. The frightening truth, however, is that Carlotta comes across as the more human and the more admirable of the two characters. Her power is a complex act of self-
The Waters Under the Earth is the most prophetic of all the novels. It shows how the forces of puritanical Christianity, which inhibit the natural forces of the self, produce an antithetical reaction which glorifies the self beyond restraint. The obvious shortcoming of such a philosophy is that the weak and the unheroic among humanity are left out in the cold. For the self is a very indefinable entity, subject to rivalry and domination. Such a universe is designed for the heroic by the heroic—and even the heroic are subject to the ruthless forces of nature by sins for which there is no forgiveness. And yet, the most awesome force against the self is the power of loneliness, which has carried even the most heroic of humanity to the brink of despair. This universe of the pagan has been historically rejected in favor of a religion of love and forgiveness—Christianity. The advantages were apparent to humanity at that time but not so to Ostenso. Perhaps this is because the type of puritanical Christianity that Ostenso saw being practiced in her time ignored the basic premise of its own doctrine—compassion.

If there is any message to be deciphered from Martha Ostenso's creation of the pagan heroine, it is this: That the women of her time were inhibited from expressing their sexual natures by the restraints of their society. In order for a woman to free herself of the stigma that sex was sinful, Ostenso chose to reject the order
of puritanical Christianity that she saw practiced and to create her own moral order based on the needs of the self and inspired by the functions she observed in nature.

The Ostenso heroine is an example of one woman's search for truth and meaning in life. In terms of the author's own life, friends and relatives refer to a number of her outstanding personal characteristics, but the one most often mentioned is her love of nature. Her cousin tells how she would sit for hours through a snowstorm, covered with a blanket and feed wild birds. Her niece tells how she grew wild flowers in preference to tame varieties. She had a virtual swarm of pets—raccoons, squirrels, muskrats.... She loved the soil and the peaceful contentment that it gave to her spirit. The truth of her convictions ring clear in the creation of her pagan heroine.
Notes

For Section Five


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135 Frye, p. 187.

136 Frye, p. 186.

137 Frye, p. 113.

138 Martha Ostenso, *The Mad Carews* (New York: Dodd, Mead and
Company, Inc., 1927), p. 117 and *The Mandrake Root* (New York: Dodd,
Mead and Company, Inc.), p. 192, hereafter abbreviated as TMC and
TMR.

139 Martha Ostenso, *The Stone Field* (New York: Dodd, Mead

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141 Erick Newman, *The Great Mother*, trans. Ralph Manheim,
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168 TSF, p. 68.
169 TWUTE, p. 282.
170 TWUTE, p. 71.
171 TWUTE, p. 89.
172 TWUTE, p. 63.
173 TWUTE, p. 286.
174 TWUTE, p. 97.
175 TWUTE, p. 69.
176 TWUTE, p. 31.
177 TWUTE, p. 51.
178 TWUTE, p. 84.
179 TWUTE, p. 160.
180 TWUTE, p. 55.
181 TWUTE, p. 212.
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184 TWUTE, p. 97.
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