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Women and Place(edness)
in the Fiction of Elizabeth Spencer
by
Judith Wambera, M.A.

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of English

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

October 24, 1993

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The undersigned recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
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"Women and Place(edness)
in the Fiction of Elizabeth Spencer"
submitted by Judith Wambera, M.A.
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "L. TR McDonald", written over a horizontal dashed line.

Thesis Supervisor

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "M. T. Long", written over a horizontal dashed line.

Chair, Department of English

Carleton University
November 10, 1993

Abstract:

The papers of Elizabeth Spencer, an unjustly neglected "Southern Writer" from Mississippi who lived in Montreal for twenty-eight years, were recently deposited in the National Library of Canada. Drawing on these archival materials, as well as on personal correspondence and interviews with the author, this thesis outlines biographical information that should prove helpful to any future studies of Spencer, and explores some of the dominant themes and concerns of her fiction.

The critical focus of the thesis is on the struggle of the daughter for autonomy in a world that is deeply patriarchal and constricting. Spencer's fiction repeatedly probes the daughter's "place" in small-town Southern society, both in an environmental and sociological sense of the term. Her many daughters must come to terms with the way they have been "placed" in a social hierarchy without rejecting their roots in the "place" where they were born and raised.

Chapter 1: Introduction

It was ten years ago when I first picked up Elizabeth Spencer's collected short stories. The initial reading of these finely crafted, elegant pieces has stayed with me for years. Aside from this accident in a bookstore, Elizabeth Spencer would not ever have been known to me. Yet, here is a woman, now seventy-two years of age, who has in her canon over forty short stories, five novels, two novellas and one play. A contemporary of Peter Taylor, another Southern short story writer, Spencer inherits a long literary tradition, one headed by William Faulkner. Though Faulknerian resonances can be heard in her novels, she is much more closely aligned with Eudora Welty (a close personal friend) and Katherine Anne Porter.

Tony Hilfer in American Fiction Since 1940 points to two literary traditions in the American South. One is the tradition of grotesqueries and violence (72) that has at its core the study of alienation and rejection. The so-called irreverent nihilism of Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers and William Faulkner is placed within this tradition. The other Southern legacy Hilfer calls the tradition of civility, and it focuses on family and relationships with an "unfashionable emphasis on personal integrity [and] family tradition in an era where intellectual orthodoxy holds such values to be mere bourgeois mythology" (72). Hilfer

subtitles this fictional bias as humanist, traditionalist, and conservative (71). Within this tradition (71), he positions Reynolds Price, Anne Tyler, Josephine Humphreys, Porter and Welty (though it must be noted that Welty's early comic stories veer close to the wild comic violence of Faulkner). Elizabeth Spencer is also part of this tradition of writing. Her name does not once appear in Hilfer's book.

Spencer has been largely ignored both by literary critics and the academic community. As a first step toward encouraging the appreciation of a neglected but valuable writer, this thesis will introduce the reader to Spencer's life and writings, and explore what is thought to be best about her canon. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate that her canon warrants sustained exploration and further study.

This study has benefitted greatly from the fact that Spencer recently gave her papers (except for some early ones which belong to the University of Kentucky) to the National Library of Canada. In the National Library's holdings there are drafts and final copies of her novels and stories, research materials relating to her novels, and correspondence that was concerned with their publication. The library also has most of her non-fiction writing: transcripts of informal talks, introductions for other writers, book reviews, speeches at Southern conferences and the explanatory remarks she would make before reading one of her stories or a passage from a new novel. Of particular

interest are a number of articles in praise of her great passion for her Southern landscape. Additionally, the library has transcripts of most of the interviews she has ever conducted, including two on cassette. As Spencer is an exceedingly private person, access to her letters is restricted. These letters should prove interesting to future researchers since Spencer corresponded with such major Canadian writers as Marie-Claire Blais, Mavis Gallant and Irving Layton when she was on the executive of P.E.N. Though I did manage to read a few of her personal letters, I am at present waiting for a letter of permission from Spencer allowing me to read the rest of the letters in the library.

I also was fortunate to be able to meet with Spencer in April of 1992. At that time, I went to Chapel Hill, North Carolina and spent two days with her. The first day was passed talking to her informally and attending her creative writing classes at the university. The second day we taped an interview which lasted over three hours. The most unique thing about our time together was how candidly Spencer spoke about her tangled family relationships and her deep and unresolved antipathy to her father. After studying all the other interviews she has ever granted, it would seem that this is the only time she has spoken openly about her unresolved conflict with her father or about the deep schism between herself and her brother. Both conflicts are

important influences upon her writing and are outlined in the chapter on her life and milieu.

Though little formal academic attention has been paid to Spencer, there are a few critical studies of which I am aware. The first full-length analysis of Spencer's canon was published by Peggy Whitman Prenshaw in 1985. Prenshaw's book, which presents a descriptive picture of Spencer and her books, is largely laudatory and complimentary in tone, as its goal was to acquaint the academic community with the broadest range of Spencer's works. Prenshaw has also written an article about Spencer entitled "Mermaids, Angels and Free Women: The Heroines of Elizabeth Spencer's Fiction." It appeared in Women Writers of the Contemporary South and deals primarily with the sense of spiritual and physical "dislocation" experienced by many of Spencer's heroines (164). A second study, written in 1987, is the master's thesis of Marian Ham entitled "Quest for 'The Magic Circle': Four Women in Elizabeth Spencer's Fiction." Ham studies four of Spencer's women--Judith Kane, Nancy Lewis, Martha Ingram and Julia Garrett. She is interested in Spencer's obsession with defining, illuminating, and fusing these badly fragmented women. Ham finds Spencer's women compelling, as she feels they live in a world that is alternately disordered, denying and, at times, corrupt. However, Ham is more interested in the self-centredness of Spencer's heroines than in any of the wider issues of

Spencer's canon. Both Prenshaw and Ham limit their critical comments to the singular peculiarities of Spencer's women. This paper, by contrast, attempts to understand Spencer's women in their wider world of community and town, while, at the same time, emphasizing that Spencer had an acute sense of the female in a world that is not only specifically Southern and limited, but also patriarchal and controlling.

A different approach is suggested by Terry Roberts, a PhD student at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. It is Roberts's contention that Spencer's work is chiefly about the struggle between the community and the individual. He concludes that, in the final analysis, Spencer finds social and community values to be more important than individual ones and that true communion is only possible within the confines of the community. Whatever rebellion or restlessness Roberts sees as being expressed in her earlier works, he feels that her work of the last decade is deeply concerned with reconciliation and spiritual stasis (x). While in Chapel Hill, I was able to read a draft of Roberts's thesis, and he has subsequently sent me the introductory chapter and the chapter on her short stories. It is expected that his thesis will be published next year by the University of Mississippi Press.

The fourth assessment of Spencer was written by Elsa Nettels for Southern Women Writers: The New Generation

(1990). Nettels is more interested in Spencer's stylistic innovations than in her thematic concerns. Thus, she stresses Spencer's ability to reveal the "haunted verge," scenes which disclose mysterious forces, often sinister, and which blur the distinction between the actual and the imaginary (92).

The initial idea of this thesis was to approach Spencer primarily through her sense of place, drawing together the different ways that place was viewed by Spencer, particularly as delineated in her non-fiction writing. Most of her articles and opening remarks before a reading emphasize her sense of being Southern and her need to proclaim her alliance with the South. She always saw herself as "The Home Voice in a Foreign Land" (The Southern Review and Modern Literature, 126). It follows that there is much of value in Roberts' contention that Spencer has moved from a world that is alien and dislocated to one that is shared and complete. I began to explore place in Spencer's writings in a linear fashion--almost as if one could view her writing as a kind of verbal landscape painting. Spencer, herself, offered encouragement for such an approach. One of the main concerns of her work (again her non-fiction) is to explore the primacy of the Southern landscape. The fact that she is a Southerner, Spencer feels, gave her the impetus to write. Eventually, after living abroad for many years, both in Italy and in Canada,

Spencer returned to the South, much on the Wordsworthian model of nature exaltation, to rediscover and redefine her earlier memories and impressions.

Spencer herself is not unique in her fixation with people who are obsessed with the South. Such meditations on place and memory have also been explored by Eudora Welty in One Writer's Beginnings. Welty defines place in fiction as "the named, identified, concrete, exact and exacting, and therefore credible, gathering spot of all that has been felt, is about to be experienced, in the novel's progress" (122). If place within a fictional universe is described as a gathering spot of all that has been felt, or is about to be felt, we are no longer dealing with place as flat stage scenery against which the characters act and react:

Location pertains to feeling; feeling profoundly pertains to place; place in history partakes of feeling, as feeling about history partakes of place. (122)

"Place" expands beyond any initial, simplistic definition. In "The Home Voice in a Foreign Land," Spencer herself begins to give a broader definition of what she means by place. She describes how she was "dependent" on Mississippi as "place" to give her not only the landscape but also the story, the character, the speech and the incident. "How was I to continue to write anything in a [Canadian] landscape that was grey, if not actually white,

six months in the year" ("The Home Voice in a Foreign Land," 126).

As a consequence of Spencer's great honesty with me during our personal interview, I went over her fiction again with an eye to the ramifications of place for women within the universe of the father. Though she insists that she does not write autobiographical fiction, the conflict with the father is an especially telling theme in both her novels and stories. The patriarchal figure in her fiction can be the father, the husband, or a censoring society.

Instead of exploring Spencer's own conception of Southern place, it might be more useful to look at Spencer's sense of "placedness." Place, in her fiction, is physical, historical, mystical and stratified. The horizon of place in the Southern consciousness is the staggering heat, the dank swamps, the isolated country towns and the endless roar of the grey Gulf Coast. Within these horizons are the physical, specific Southern towns, towns that are small, patriarchal, smug, self-consuming, separated (even resolutely separated), from the ideological disruptions affecting Northern and Western American towns. The Southern towns that determine the "place" of Spencer's women are agrarian, hierarchial, obsessed with family and determined to investigate, delimit and control all inhabitants of the place, especially the daughters who must be defined as being "in place" within the web of town and family relationships.

The dead, as well as the living, inform the inhabitants of such towns. Thornton Wilder in Located Lives: Place and Idea in Southern Autobiography elaborates further:

Southerners were cut off, or resolutely cut themselves off, from the advancing tide of the country's modes of consciousness. Place, environment, relations, repetitions are the breadth of their being. (Introduction xv)

Place, environment, relations and repetitions become for Spencer, at their core, the relationship of the daughter to the father or the father substitute. The greatest value in her work seems to lie in her minute and telling descriptions of women coming to terms not only with the towns and cities where they live but also with the father that seems to stand silent, even censoring, at the "doors" of their consciousness. It is not just place that matters to Spencer; it is placedness. Her women must not only engage in their physical universes, but also the structures around them, the vast network or "stairs" of relationships that has first to be understood and eventually overcome. Spencer's vision is indeed narrow. Invariably her women seem to be well-groomed, wearing good leather shoes, silk suits, and dressed in the values of the staunchly middle-class. But whatever the givens of her female universe, she depicts the constrictions and "emphysema" of this world with great humour, wisdom and lyrical enthusiasm.

The ideology of place for women is Spencer's driving concern. Though Reynolds Price's observation (New York Times Book Review, 1981) that Spencer merely writes about nice middle class Southern women is quite demonstrable, within the limited parameters of her fictional discourse, she is able to explore the ramifications of being a woman in a world that is overtly patriarchal and controlling, a world that, for these specific women, was as hard to leave as it is was to stay in. The tactics deployed by Spencer's women to survive in a world that has marginalized and trivialized them is both instructive and evocative. As we shall see, she uses the stratagems of madness, other-worldliness, and adolescent rebellion to explicate the struggles of her women. The women she has chosen to look at are white middle-class women, usually American, who are circumscribed by town, village, birth, and marriage. The efforts of these women, both to realize themselves as well as to escape the enclosure of their historical towns, form the basis of her greatest fiction.

Elizabeth Spencer has written eight novels and over 40 short stories. The most successful of these stories are chronicles of women's effort for self-actualization. The medium of the short story seems to be much more effective for Spencer, as she is able, under the restraint of brevity, to crystallize the struggles of her women within their own worlds of confinement and circumscription. Her novels,

which deal with larger canvasses and often have a male protagonist, do not seem to be as successful in capturing this complex female reality.

Because Spencer and her work are so little known, particularly to Canadian readers, and because more has been recently revealed about her life, this study will begin with an overview of her fiction that links it to her biography. This introductory survey will be followed by a chapter that examines the sense of place as edified, even glorified by Spencer and other well-known Southern writers such as Welty, Faulkner and Peter Taylor. Spencer shares much with her contemporaries in that they all wrote alternately with love and with dread about growing up, living, and at times escaping from the South. The thesis will then move to study the most compelling theme in her fiction: the daughter in the universe of the father.

Chapter 2: The Life and Times of Elizabeth Spencer

In this chapter, I look at some specific events in Elizabeth Spencer's life and how they seem to have influenced her fiction. In her fictional writing, she shows an obsession with place that is both complex and ambivalent, while her non-fiction is largely about her notions of an idealized place encompassing "Southern sensibility." Her fiction thus depicts a very dynamic and unresolved sense of place, and it is here that Spencer's fiction is of special, possibly even enduring interest.

Similarly, Spencer's continuing problems with her father, an archetypal Southern patriarch, deeply resonate in all her fictional writings. Drawing heavily on an interview held in April of 1992, I chronicle some major events in her life with an emphasis on her on-going, and largely deteriorating, relationship with her father. Much of her writing is an indirect attempt to deal with her relationship with her father and what one can call Spencer's own specific "placedness."

Place has literal, romantic, idealized and, at the same time, ironic meanings for Spencer. Spencer, like many of her mature heroines, did not know her place, did not accept the daughter's "correct position" within the family constellation. This unresolved conflict between Spencer and her father receives an oblique treatment in many of her

mature (i.e. later) novels and short stories. As Spencer herself developed a necessary and liberating distance from her father, her female protagonists grow into women who could stand outside of their designated "place" in society. At the same time, they typically long to be back in environments that were both encompassing and familiar. Spencer herself says in an interview with Broadwell and Hoag, when talking about her short stories, that many of them are really about liberation and its ambivalent consequences:

That collection spans thirty-three years of story writing, but, yes, I believe there may be at least one recurrent theme. I think many of the stories are about liberation and the regret you have when you liberate yourself. You see, however much you might want to, you cannot both hold on and be free. (Conversations, 56)

This deep ambivalence is reflected in much of Spencer's work. There is the place from which you come--a complex setting that can be described in all its varied features--and then there is your placedness within that space. Place is therefore both an external constraint and an internal delineation of character. The unresolved tension between leaving and staying, between being defined by the place where you come from and liberating yourself from it, is what empowers the best of Spencer's fiction.

Lucinda H. MacKetchan in Daughter in Time: Creating Woman's Voice in Southern Story writes that many Southern women have written their way out of the "cage" of Southern patriarchy (10). The daughter's sensibility can become the enabling perception within the universe of the father. Though Spencer insists that her fiction contains little autobiographical content, her writings are rich with the conflict between a young woman seeking self-definition within the context of controlling patriarchal structures. Thus, in my interview with Spencer I mentioned that Mavis Gallant (Canadian Fiction Magazine, 1976) once said that in Canadian stories the theme of the father was the dominant one. Spencer became quite equivocal, saying:

I don't touch the situation with my father very much because it was so unpleasant. I don't want to be criticizing him. In a way, I formed an attachment with my uncle, my mother's brother.

(Personal Interview, 15)

In an interview with Terry Roberts (1990) Spencer made a most unusual reference to her family situation:

There's a hardship involved when you finally learn that the people who understand you least are quite often those who should understand you most. It's one of the grave things of life. As the Bible says, your enemies are those of your own

household. (Spencer's emphasis, Conversations, 218)

While Spencer was attached to her grandfather and her uncle, both figures were to an extent marginalized in the Southern setting--one because he was elderly, the other for doing the unforgivable and committing suicide. As such they could not present viable alternatives for her. Neither man seems to have been able to help free Spencer from that sense of her own limitation and constraint that came from being in her father's house. Spencer acknowledges writing several stories (Personal Interview, 9) drawing upon the lives of her uncle and grandfather ("Sharon," "A Christian Education," and Daniel Armstrong in Fire in the Morning), but even in these stories, her grandfather and uncle take marginal positions in a world that confines and restricts even them.

If the father was not to be seen as dominant or paramount in Spencer's fiction, I then asked her, in our interview, if she felt the mother to be central in her works. She immediately began to describe to me her mother's appearance ("I guess she was the Southern belle type" 10) and how she was completely controlled by her father ("You see, he ran the whole circus" 11). Her fiction, not surprisingly, has few, if any, memorable maternal figures (the only exception is her last novel, The Night Travellers). Her fictional mothers, much like Spencer's

own, stand at the margins, largely unable to effect or implement change. When questions are asked in interviews about her mother, Spencer usually responds in the way she did with me and goes on to describe how her mother used to read to her when she was a small child:

Part of that business of my being sick a lot was that my mother used to read to me. She had a very sweet voice as a reader and we liked the same things. She liked children's books. I had read to me all the Bible, all the Greek myths, all of Grimms fairy tales, Aesop's fables, all the Robin Hood legends, and all of King Arthur. I had a great background for literature by the time I was eight, it was just wonderful. (Interview, 11)

The influence of Spencer's mother is deeply aligned with the fact that she encouraged Spencer's writing (which she began at the age of six) and the fact that she was a McCain. The McCains were a Scots Presbyterian family, confident, lively and assured. Though not formally educated, they took their books seriously. Spencer remembers how late, on hot summer nights, they would sit on the porch mourning the loss of Fantine's hair and teeth in Les Miserables or debating the necessity of Dora's death in David Copperfield. She says she felt surrounded by oral presentations of Greek myths, Uncle Remus, Macaulay and

Robert Service ("Interview with Robert Phillips/1986," Conversations, 117).

Very little is known about James Luther Spencer's family background. His parents had apparently farmed somewhere in northern Mississippi since the 1830s, but they were a family that had not quite "made it" and weren't much talked about. There is little or no reference in Spencer's papers to her father's family. Spencer, when talking of her father's relatives in our interview, used such terms as "good people, nice people, religious, very human and humane" (9).

James Luther Spencer, however, did make it. At various times in his life, he owned local stores, a Chevrolet agency, the Standard Oil franchise, a cotton gin, and a farm. He could be said to have "provided" for his family. Spencer remembers her big house at the edge of the town, the creek running through the property, the tacked-on summer porches, coal fires, visiting cousins, her many ponies and the Negroes that lived just beyond their property line. Spencer's memories of her childhood are of such a positive nature that she was able to collate them with her own romantic notions of what it meant to grow up in the South.¹

Spencer herself was born on July 12, 1921. Her only brother was seven years older. She explains the early animosity that existed between the two of them as probably being due to the fact that she was a sickly child and

therefore "got in his way" (Interview, 8). He was sent away to a private academy when she was only five and they had little to do with each other for most of the rest of their lives. Eventually, he turned against Spencer with as much enthusiasm and bitterness as her father did in her young adolescence. Neither her father nor her brother would ever seek a reconciliation with her (In the whole of Spencer's canon only "Port of Embarkation" portrays a brother-sister relationship. Perhaps not surprisingly, the brother in this story is not at all an appealing figure).

Spencer's own idyllic childhood appears to have come to an end during her adolescence. At this time James Luther Spencer became increasingly obsessed with money and the privileges it could buy. Spencer remarks:

I began to feel real conflict between my father's values and my own. He thought that to be worth anything this meant dollars and cents. The contempt he had for teachers, doctors! Why? Because they weren't big money makers, not even the clergy. Business was his creed, really. But he was big in the church. He ran the church with money; they had to have the money he gave and so they turned to him. I began to hate that very early. (Interview, 17)

Spencer then recounted a story about her father that she felt revealed the essence of his character:

Something very significant happened back then. I lost something. I have forgotten if it was a fountain pen, a little pen knife. A little country boy found it and gave it to me. He was so proud. So I came home and said Claude, or William or whatever his name was, had brought back this pen. My father said you have got to give him a dime. And I said I am not going to give him a dime. It was a real funny thing to do. Oh yes, you will, he said. If I was given a dime, I told him, I wouldn't want to take it. He said you don't know how country people think. He made me take a dime up there and give it to that boy. I thought it was awful. (Interview, 18)

Due to strong pressure from her parents, Spencer attended Belhaven College, a Presbyterian College for women in Jackson, Mississippi. She completed her B.A. in 1942 and, after winning a scholarship, was able to undertake graduate studies at Vanderbilt University . There she worked directly under Donald Donaldson, a member of the Fugitive group (discussed later) that had been based in Nashville. She wrote her M.A. on Irish Literature and Mythology. While under Donaldson's tutelage, her first novel, Fire in the Morning, was published by Dodd and Mead in 1948.

Fire in the Morning, a deliberately masculine novel, chronicles the inter-relationship between two families in the rural South of small towns. The work introduces a central theme of Spencer's early fiction: the passage of male characters to freedom from self-destructive obsessions and imprisoning relationships. In each of her early novels, Spencer's male protagonists relive traumatic events that they must come to terms with if they are to survive. In this first novel the protagonist is the "son" who must right wrongs done to his father and is ignored by him.

In 1950, Spencer had a short story, "Pilgrimage," published in the Virginia Quarterly Review and it received honourable mention in Martha Foley's Best American Short Stories of that year. In 1957, The New Yorker published, "The Little Brown Girl" (a story they had rejected in 1944). This seems to have established Spencer's reputation as a writer of subtle, polished short stories. For the next fifteen years, she was a regular contributor to The New Yorker, and it published some of her most important short stories, including "First Dark," "Ship Island," "The Fishing Lake," and "Sharon." All of these stories empower the woman, struggling with self-definition in a world that to her is only superficially familiar and comprehensible.

Though few critics have dealt with this period of Spencer's life in any detail (she has not made the particulars of that time especially available), these were

actually very difficult years for her, for it was at this time that she and her father became increasingly alienated from one another. Also, during this period she developed debilitating illnesses that seemed to thwart her efforts to get away both from the constraints of her family and the whole interfering, curious, judgmental Southern milieu.

From 1948 to 1952, Spencer worked at various teaching jobs (private girls' academy, reporter on the Nashville Tennessean, University of Mississippi) and in this way supported her "writing habit." In 1952, she received a \$1000 "recognition award" from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, enabling her to spend that summer in New York City. She continued to receive encouragement from colleagues and publishers and she completed her second novel, The Crooked Way, in 1952. On the basis of her two published novels and the strength of her outline for a third, Spencer was honoured with a Guggenheim Fellowship. Spencer chose to spend a year in Italy.

In the spring of 1953, the spring she was to leave for Italy, her favourite uncle suddenly died. Spencer says of this:

My uncle was the victim of a very odd accident that looked like suicide. He supposedly shot himself while hunting snakes. After that, I became very distraught. I sort of sealed up my emotional life completely. I lost weight. I quit

eating. I became very ill. We don't know if it was an accident. About that time, when I was so run-down, I got the Guggenheim. I was so looking forward to getting out and going to Italy. It turned out I was too debilitated to do that, so I had a build-up period and hospitalization. But then when they finally let me go--and I was very much reduced in weight, I am sure I looked terrible--I was sent home. My family was practically stringing up ropes across the road to keep me home. (Interview, 21)

Her first few months in Italy were both liberating and exhausting. Though Spencer took nearly a year to regain her health, she still looks back upon her experience in Italy as a critical turning point both for herself and her work. She not only finished the third and best (according to the critics) of her Mississippi novels, The Voice at the Back Door, she also gained a new perspective on her "straightjacketed" Southern world.² She described the change that took place as "the breaking up of those long tides of existence in one locale that have yielded up countless novels, out of which the novels seem to unfurl so naturally, so rhythmic, so right" (Prenshaw, 12). She went on to characterize her experience as having been "broken into pieces, no less valid, perhaps no less interesting--

perhaps even more relevant . . . to the restless life of the world" (12).

In an interview with Irv Broughton in 1988, Spencer chronicled the critical turns in her life. She used words such as "confinement," "oppression," "paranoia." Though she had lived away from home for several years (from 1942 to 1953), she was still, during those years, a resident of the state of Mississippi.

The thing I didn't like about Mississippi, though I love it in one sense, was a sense of confinement I was brought up by a very strict family, Presbyterian, and the ramifications of my mother's and father's families extended over the entire state. . . . I felt every part of my life was being scrutinized. (Conversations, 161)

The summer that Spencer lived in New York City was the beginning of her efforts, which were ultimately successful, to get away from her father and the state of Mississippi. However, her time in Italy (she spent five years there) marked the most dramatic change in her life. There she really began the process of leaving home.

In the summer of 1956 Spencer returned to Mississippi for a visit. She confided to me that this time she was running from John Rusher, a British language teacher, whom she had been seeing in Rome. This visit home completed her

break with her family and set the stage for her marriage to Rusher. In recalling the visit, Spencer said:

My father was even more hostile than ever, he refused to give me any money and I had a hell of a time. After I had been there three days, my mother asked me to leave and go back up to the University of Mississippi where I had friends. He was being so difficult; he just railed at me all the time. I remember him suddenly screaming, in some kind of inarticulate rage at the table, over what I could not imagine. The truth was he just did not want to give me any money, that was the basis of his anger. He had promised it and then didn't want to give it. He even went so far as to hide bottles of liquor all over the house, in closets. He wanted to prove I was an alcoholic. Then he would go drink some of it himself, saying the bottle had gone down. (Interview, 23)

Spencer, now 36, sailed to England that September and married John Rusher in Cornwall, England. They lived another two years in Italy and then moved to Canada in 1958, where Rusher set up a language school in Montreal. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s Spencer wrote and published. Much of her best work dates from this period, when she began to develop the specifically quirky, sympathetic, unique female persona that invigorates her best fiction. Spencer

spent the next 28 years in Canada. She taught creative writing at Concordia University and was an active member of P.E.N.. Her very best fiction, in my opinion, was written while she was in Canada. Yet in an interview with Elizabeth Hay on CBC Morning, Spencer said that her time in Canada was probably very bad for her writing (CBC Sunday Morning, March 22, 1981). In 1987, she also remarked to Beth Cooley (Conversations, 137) that Canada as a "place" was an anathema to her imagination in that Spencer has never had a feel for the climate or any particular affinity with the place. "Order," she said, "is a mysterious thing that writers need and I never felt it in Canada." In an interview with Elizabeth Pell Broadwell and Ronald Wesley Hoag she went even further and described how, in writing her short story "I, Maureen," which is set in Montreal, she could not rely on rhythms, cadences and expressions of the Canadian environment. With all of Spencer's emphasis on the importance of place, it would seem that Canada functioned as the "blank page" in her fiction, a place to write within, not about. Though "I, Maureen" is a story that effectively captures Montreal, her other Canadian stories are not so successful.

The fact is that Spencer seems always to be "outside" when writing about Canada. There is a distancing, almost a coldness to her expression, that does not exist in her writings when events take place in Italy or the South. A

small excerpt from the story "Madonna" (Canadian Short Stories: Fourth Series) is illustrative of her sense of foreignness and distance from Canada:

The street outside, its leaves turning, its narrow modest French-Canadian look, is no part of her. Grey stone facades, green leaves in summer, grey stone with green leaves, leaves turning orange, grey stone in the snow--that's Canada. And dormer windows above the mansard's drop, painted to match the doorways--white or yellow, or blue, or red--and always the steep steps in shining grey paint: that's Montreal, French Montreal, and no part of her. (212)

Spencer, by age 39, had written three traditional novels and a score of short stories celebrating her Southern landscapes and her Southern childhood. Though she has spoken at length of Italy as a turning point in her life, it was not until she moved to Canada that she celebrated her Italian experience in her two novellas, The Light in the Piazza and "Knights and Dragons." In both works, Spencer abandoned the male protagonist and began to deal with the struggle of women for self-definition and for self-realization. With this new focus, her fiction becomes increasingly interesting, radical and complicated.

The Light in the Piazza brought Spencer both critical acclaim and commercial success (it was the only one of her

works to be filmed). It seems ironic that a work on which she spent hardly more than a month should bring her the greatest recognition. The Light in the Piazza is a Boccaccio-style tale wherein one very smart person (Margaret Johnson) out-wits another very smart person (Signor Naccarelli). The novella centres on the sparring between Johnson and Naccarelli--the pawns being their children in the oldest game in the world, the arranged marriage. The Light in the Piazza is everything that its name implies--light, enthusiastic, revealing, witty, contained. "Knights and Dragons" (1965) is everything else--complicated, dark, shadowy, indistinct, unpleasant and unnerving. One book made her reputation and the other nearly lost it for her.

"Knights and Dragons" gives us the Rome of winter--a dreary, damp, cold dungeon of a world where everybody was out to cheat, malign and deceive. "Knights and Dragons" is a psychological ghost story and is the novella that has given Spencer the most distress. She is haunted by it still and is acutely defensive when it is brought up (Interview, 25). In spite of the controversy over "Knights and Dragons," Spencer's fiction in the 1960s and 1970s became even more experimental and unapproachable. No Place for an Angel was published in 1967 and The Snare in 1972. She worked on both novels for five years and they, like the earlier companion novels, The Light in the Piazza and "Knights and Dragons," complement and contradict one

another. In both novels, despite place being acutely fractured in one and densely specific in the other, one woman bears almost the whole weight of the novel. Catherine Sasser carries the emotional weight of the many restless, self-indulgent, wandering souls of No Place for an Angel, while Julia Garrett in The Snare is a protagonist who can both embrace and survive her various experiences. Though Spencer continued to win prizes and recognition for her achievements in these years, her novels never again received the high acclaim they did two decades earlier.

Between 1970 and 1976 Spencer returned to Mississippi to spend several months a year with her ailing parents. It was during these years that she sought psychiatric help and entered a lengthy period of therapy. Even with the death of her mother in 1974, Spencer's father did not soften his position and they were still unreconciled by the time of his death in 1976. Tired of such painful memories, Spencer turned to me in our interview and said, "Well, I do have wonderful cousins!"³ Her health improved, and a little later in our talk Spencer remarked with a kind of wonder, that her health has been excellent for the last fifteen years (Interview, 20).

In 1968, Spencer published her first collection of short stories Ship Island and Other Stories. Though she had received the \$10,000 McGraw-Hill Fiction Award in 1960 for The Light in the Piazza and in the same year an O. Henry

prize for "First Dark," and then was singled out by Martha Foley in her Best American Short Story collections, Spencer was largely ignored between 1968 and the publication of her second collection of short stories in 1981. It was this one book, The Short Stories of Elizabeth Spencer, that did more to bring Spencer to the attention of the public than any of her other works. As a short story writer, she was beginning to be compared with Katherine Mansfield, Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty (Nettels 91). The stories are set in Italy, Quebec, and the South: the central characters include children, parents, students, teachers, husbands, wives, widows and widowers. But these stories, written over a period of thirty years, are notable not for their differences but for their unity of effect. Because of their brevity, the stories, more so than her novels, "highlight the most distinctive quality of Spencer's fiction: the emanation, in scenes rendered with the utmost clarity, of mysterious forces, indefinable, often sinister, placing characters within the 'haunted verge'--in Hawthorne's phrase--between the Actual and the Imaginary" (Nettels, 25).

As a consequence of this 1981 publication, Spencer was awarded the Merit Medal for the Short Story by the American Academy of the Institute of Arts and Letters in 1983. In 1985 she was inducted into the Academy and in 1988 she received her next major award, this one from the National Endowment of the Arts. Though Spencer received considerable

public attention over this decade, her canon was for the most part neglected by the academic world.

In 1984, eight years after the death of her father, Spencer wrote her first novel since The Snare in 1972. The Salt Line is a nostalgic novel that privileges Arnie Carrington as a latter-day Prospero searching for a world that is no longer--the world of the Louisiana Gulf shore that was destroyed by hurricane Camille in 1969. In a similar vein, Spencer published in 1990 a group of stories (several of these stories had appeared in earlier collections) entitled On the Gulf. They also evoke a paradise that has been destroyed. Though Spencer and Terry Roberts emphasize this shift in her work, describing it as "the burgeoning of the spiritual" (Roberts, Introduction, x), it seems to me to be a return to the Spencer of the forties and fifties where the South of her childhood is eulogized and inconvenient memories are suppressed.

Spencer's last volume of short stories, Jack of Diamonds and Other Stories, was published in 1983. These stories reopen the dialogue between Spencer's females and their constricting world; for this reason, they hold great critical interest.

In 1986, Spencer and John Rusher left Canada and moved to Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Spencer wrote her most recent novel, The Night Travellers, in Chapel Hill, publishing it in 1991. In this work. Spencer returns to her

"larger canvas," writing a story about the Vietnam war and its fallout in Canada and the United States. Spencer follows the path of Mary Kerr Harbison, a young thwarted dancer, and Jefferson Blaise, the insufferable radical and reluctant husband, as they move from the United States to Canada on account of the war, and back to the States again. This time, as opposed to Julia Garret of The Snare, Mary Kerr Harbison is not able to support the weight of the narrative. What is most interesting about the novel, in terms of this thesis, is that in The Night Travellers the central conflict in the novel is between Mary Kerr and her beautiful, destructive mother, Kate. This is the first time that Spencer has concentrated on the relationship between mother and daughter. This novel, therefore, is interesting in Spencer's canon because it moves away from her central concern of women trapped within the constrictions of a patrilineal world.

Spencer has one play to her credit, For Lease or For Sale. It was performed at the PlayMakers Repertory Theatre in Chapel Hill, North Carolina in 1989. The play is set in a large, antebellum house at the edge of a small Mississippi town and in many ways resembles The Cherry Orchard with its theme of the family having to sell the cherished family home and move away. The most interesting character is actually the house, for it stands for the collective spirit not only

of this family but also of all the families that came before.

Elizabeth Spencer has been writing fiction for nearly fifty years. Of greatest interest to academics will be her novels and stories written in the decades between 1960 and 1980. During this period she creates a medley of viable fictional characters that undoubtedly warrant critical study. Her women must come to terms with a world they both long to keep and know they must leave. Her most interesting stories and novels involve a ceaseless dialectic of appropriation and denial. Spencer herself describes the energy in her stories as the conflict between the community and the individual:

I think I was aware of this very early on, when I was a teenager. I learned in Math about centrifugal and centripetal forces--the forces that swing you out and the forces that swing back. And I used to lie in bed and think about that--going out and coming in. (Interview, 17)

Her very next words in the our interview are revealing: "I began to feel the conflict between my father's values and my own--his way was that to be worth anything--that meant dollars and cents" (Interview, 17). She then continues with her story about the boy and the pen. Though Spencer sees the idea of community as a philosophical concept and later she idealizes the community as a mystical paradise, she, in

many places in her fiction links, her father with a negative image of community. Thus, the ideology of her community is confining and patriarchal. It is also important to study Spencer for how she deals with the ambiguities, tensions, and stratagems for growing up female in a male world. Using specific and singular depictions of community in a very Southern milieu, Spencer finely delineates the many conflicts that rage between her women and their limiting universes.

Chapter 3: Place

The beginning for Spencer is the South. Her obsession with the South is not unique. She shares company, among many others, with Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor and Peter Taylor. The place, for all of these writers, the Southern landscape, frames and defines their fiction. Elizabeth Spencer was born in 1921; Eudora Welty in 1909. Peter Taylor was born in 1917; William Faulkner in 1897. These writers are all Southerners (Tennessee or Mississippi) and all grew up in small, rural towns where place is compelling and total: Holly Springs, Columbus, Natchez, Carrollton, Lafayette county, Tippah and Tishomingo counties. For the Southerner, whatever meaning is ascribed to place, it is equally given to identity. In Habits of the Heart, Robert Bellah has developed an interesting sociological schema for reading Southern stories. According to Bellah, certain stories tend to operate on a social rather than on a personal basis. This is especially applicable to the Southern experience. Families and communities, both living and dead, dominate the fiction of Southern writers. The real community of Southern fiction can then be called a "community of memory," one that does not forget its past. Bellah explicates further:

In order not to forget that past, a community dedicates itself to retelling its story, its constitutive

narrative, and in doing so it offers examples of the men and women who have embodied and exemplified the meaning of the community (153).

The stories that make up such a tradition contain conceptions of character, of what a good person is like, and of the virtues that define such character. But the stories are not all exemplary, not all about successes and achievements (153). A genuine community of memory will also tell difficult and awkward stories of "shared suffering" (153). A valiant community will remember not only the stories of suffering endured but also of suffering inflicted--dangerous memories, for they call upon the community to rectify ancient evils. The ignominy of the Civil War for the South is matched by the equally repulsive Southern history of racial abuse. Because these ends of the spectrum are so obvious in the Southern memory, the South presents an unique opportunity for Southern writers, be they White or Black, to tell a new story. Elizabeth Spencer says in an interview with Elizabeth Pell Broadwell and Ronald Wesley Hoag in 1980 that she feels that:

All Southerners have a Proustean sense about time, a sense that the past is never gone. Faulkner said that the past isn't even the past, that it is the present. People get old and die, times change; but along with the continual recurrence of loss, you have the recurrence of memory. The

glory is that through memory you can know.

Faulkner does a great deal with time and memory as forces that govern the present: I think this concept is especially true applied to the southern experience and that it has become a part of the southern consciousness. (Conversations, 58)

In her talk entitled "Being A Southerner," Spencer goes further in attempting to explicate the uniqueness of the Southern milieu. She asserts that small town Southerners "believe" in their stories, implying that belief is a denser term than a catechetical understanding ("Being A Southerner," 2). Belief, to Spencer, is not just an understanding of physical facts; it is also a belief in a system of understanding and explication that goes much further than the present moment:

Being a Southerner, a Mississippian, has a good deal to do, I now believe, with my ever having started to write at all. . . . I can now see that my kind of part-country, part-small town Southerners believed in stories and still remain, in my experience, unique in this regard. They believed, that is, in events and the people concerned in them, both from the near and distant past, and paid attention to getting things straight, a habit which alone can give true dignity to a character . . . the Bible, Arthurian

legends, oral stories about the Civil War . . .
all ran together in my head at that magic time--I
can trace any good books I have written, or
stories, right back to them. ("Being A
Southerner," 2)

What is this past that Faulkner, Glasgow, Taylor and Spencer have inherited? The Civil War and its ignominious defeat are within shared memory. Spencer's grandfather was a teenager during the Civil War and would have fought in the conflict except for pressure from his family to tend to the farm. Two of her great-uncles died in the conflict. Her own family was made destitute in the aftermath of the war. Spencer remarks (Interview, 10) that the landscape resembled Europe after the first world war. It wasn't until the thirties and the Depression hit the rest of America that there was a sense of what the South had been experiencing since 1865. The condition in many parts of the South was what Hugh C. Holman writes one of "bone-gnawing poverty and endless defeat. It rested on depleted soil, deflated markets, dilapidated buildings and debilitating malnutrition" (98). It is also infused, to this day, with a consciousness shaped by the nightmare of slavery and the dreams of a baronial past. It is unpaved, unpainted, agrarian and proud. It is fundamentalist, Protestant, pious. It is obsessed with its past and indifferent to its future. It dreads the fact that it must, one day, enter the

main-stream of American society. This is how Spencer sees the Southern family:

They with their materialism thwarted by too little money, their spiritualism cramped into Protestant sects, their desires toward a neighbour's wife, their bickering hatred toward some long-past, trivial incident, their fierce love toward their children whom they observe with satisfaction, urge even, to carry out their own pattern of hatred against the children of the enemy at school, in summer play. But it is our own dirt, they are as good as saying. It is the smell of our own bathroom and it is dear to our hearts. (Fire in the Morning, 103)

Even if the depictions of the Southern character are not completely accurate, they have entered into the subject formations of the Southerners themselves. What shocked Spencer's family about Faulkner was not the stories he told (everyone knew such stories) but that he had the bad manners to make these stories public. The images of the South, created by the new generation of writers (Faulkner, Penn Warren, O'Connor, McCullers) have infiltrated the explanations of the Southerners themselves. Michael Fazio in "Architectural Preservation in Natchez, Mississippi: A Conception of Time and Place" describes an obsession with the South as a "fixation with an exotic aura of place and

the aura of a Lost Cause" (138). The region, to him, stands as a sphinx that "seems to hold a secret, an answer to the riddle of American life" (138). The South has a fascination with its own place spirits which, in another sense, could be described as "a persistent, haunting nostalgia" (138). Spencer, in her non-fictional discourse, attempts to communicate to her audience her own sense of place spirits.⁴ Fazio sums up the Southern particularity as embodying not only an assumed "simpler time" but also "as a mysterious, special entity, a repository of ancient virtues and of regional identity" (142).

This sense of the South, demoralized, dilapidated, foolish and dangerous is as potent a symbol as the perception that the South is a place where the ancient virtues and authentic regional identity still existed. A group of writers and poets working out of Vanderbilt University in the twenties and thirties codified the South's sense of unique destiny and celebrated it in their articles and poems (published under the banner of The Fugitive magazine). Among the Agrarians were such writers as John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Spencer's own adviser, Donald Donaldson. Though the group tended towards reactionary politics (Donaldson was deeply suspicious of both left-wing intellectuals and aspiring blacks), they served a useful purpose by giving the intellectual South a discourse within which they could

function. Current Southern sensibilities, both white and black, still function within this agrarian, anti-industrial, traditionalist, familial schema.

The South was marginalized politically, economically and culturally. Its earliest writers extolled the vision of a lost past, even if this past is not completely paradisaical. The sense of community in the South becomes a fictionally potent symbol. The historico-mythical community dominates. Many writers became obsessed with such a past--a past that was outside of the main stream of American society, a past that put the interests of the community over and against those of the individual. The struggle was uniquely Southern in that it was quite out of synchronization with much of the literary energy in America during the first decades of this century.

Mainstream American fiction concerns itself with the Adamic ideal of the unattached, unformed young man who invariably goes "west" to create his own identity.⁵ Tony Hilfer in sees Cooper's Deerslayer, Melville's Ishmael, Fitzgerald's Gatsby, Ellison's Invisible Man, Updike's Rabbit and Penn Warren's Jack Burden as typical examples (Introduction, 7). Robert Penn Warren, himself a Southerner, gives a special ironic twist to Jack Burden's striking out to California in All the King's Men; Burden returns to the South a destroyed man. Most Southern writers, however, tend to turn inward and explore their tiny

villages and the memories held within these villages.

Hilfer states that "Southern fiction used the techniques of modernism to explore the tension between traditional values based on a local, relatively static world and the new conditions resulting in a more urbanized and dynamic but also more atomic world order--in short, Southern economic backwardness coupled with literary modernism allowed the articulation of a morally traditionalist critique of the dehumanization supposedly consequent upon the ever-expanding economic modernism of American society" (55).

Once the Agrarians, or their inheritors, came to terms with their own historically naive idealization of the Southern past and their smug acceptance of social and racial injustice, the great explosion of a more accurate Southern consciousness could actually begin. Both black and white writers have been for some time able to deal with a much more diverse and complicated universe, all on this small postage stamp of place called Holly Springs, Columbus, Natchez or Carrollton. The position of marginality is providing a rich landscape for Southern writers. Spencer herself makes this point in an interview with Robert Phillips in 1986. She compares French Canada with the South--"a conquered society with different customs having to exist in terms of a larger, controlling nation" (Conversations, 126).

Spencer cannot be understood in isolation from this background. Her female protagonists exhibit most profoundly the Southern pull towards the family, the past, the town where they are born. They also struggle to define themselves outside of the strictures of this particular society, be it the town, or, most pointedly, the patriarchal family. Spencer's image of centrifugal-centripetal forces, "the forces that swing you out and the forces the swing back," is again useful here. If the community was not worthwhile, the escape would be easy, which for most writers, it clearly is not. Terry Roberts, though he has not used Bellah in his thesis on Spencer, continually refers to the community in his paper on Spencer. He sees Faulkner as the initiator of the thematic obsessions with the individual and the community for many Southern writers:

The haunting of Southern literary criticism by the idea of community is no where more evident than in Faulkner criticism. Faulkner's entire body of work concerns not only the mythic landscape of Yoknapatawpha Country but also the overlapping communal webs of native American, African American, poor white, and aristocratic gentry that populated that "postage stamp" of soil.

(Introduction, v)

The energy in the writings of Welty, Taylor, Porter and Spencer privileges the community. The individual achieves

self-development through his/her engagement with the community; the paradigm of the solipsistic individual striking out into the wilderness (be it the west, the city, or the sea) does not work in the South. The protagonist is only empowered as a result of this centrifugal, centripetal struggle between the individual and the community. Spencer's fiction shares many of the interests of Katherine Anne Porter, who also focuses on the values of family, as opposed to Faulkner and McCullers who emphasize the extremes of the dysfunctional community and its resultant violence. Porter attempts to balance the need for freeing the creative self from the constrictions of family and tradition with a severe reminder of the dangers of relying on ego and impulse alone to do the job (Hilfer, 64). The balancing of tradition and self-actualization is also a pivotal theme for both Spencer and Welty. As Spencer says to Terry Roberts in a personal interview:

The idea . . . of "community" is a kind of ancient theme as well. The whole mystical issue of just who your brothers and sisters really are. It occurs over and over again in religious writing. All the central characters in my stories do seem to have that problem--finding out where they belong . . . and who they belong with.
(Introduction, ii)

Spencer and Welty privilege place as the creative ground from which all discovery and actualization is made possible. Eudora Welty in One Writer's Beginnings attempts to clarify her own sense of the pivotal nature of place:

Like a good many other writers, I am myself touched off by place. The place where I am and the place I know, and other places that familiarity with and love for my own make strange and lovely and enlightening to look into, are what set me to writing my stories. (1)

Place achieves a complexity that is rare, if not alien, in mainstream American literature. Place can take on many historico-mythical guises. The mystical, lost paradise as described by Fazio constructs a sense of place that fabricates a powerful myth of paradise and the reconstruction of a more ideal time. Spencer's later fiction, which mythologizes the Gulf coast, is closer to the Fazio model of a lost, yet mourned for, paradise than it is to the Bellah social model. An alternate conception of place, one she shares deeply with Porter and Welty, involves the fictionalization of an actual place in order not only to define the parameters of the protagonist's possible experience but also to provide the foundation for both development and possible escape. Such a conception of place is close to Bellah's conception of communities of memories which provide the absolute of potential for all of its

residents. These communities of memory are the small towns of Spencer, Welty and Porter, towns that were censorious, enclosing, enriching, haunting and smothering. It is just such communities that provide a spiritual "battleground" for Spencer's beleaguered, witty women. In the next two chapters on Spencer's novels and short stories, this paper explores in the specifics of "placedness" for Spencer's many and disparate women.

Chapter 4: The Novels

Spencer, the novelist, begins very conservatively. Her first three novels (Fire in the Morning, The Crooked Way, The Voice at the Back Door) are staunchly in the masculine tradition of realistic novels. Spencer, herself, was proud that she was able to write a novel that was not weak and feminine:

I felt put off by sensitive women writers whom I'd read but did not want to be like, even though I'd started by admiring them. I mean someone like Katherine Mansfield, then later Virginia Woolf. I thought both were over-lyrical, not nearly tough enough. So I tried to get a natural bent to lyricism . . . out of my style, to develop a plainly-stated, hearty style. (Conversations, 127)

These three novels are set in Mississippi and reveal a wide cast of characters who are doing great, virile things. Place is explored in Fire in the Morning to the extent that the main protagonists battle the ghosts of the town of Lacey, and try to settle the unresolved injustices of the past. The novel is centred on revelation and discovery (facts of the past and the driving, righteous will of the protagonist). The women in the novel are mainly backdrop figures and are disturbing to the modern reader in both

their opaqueness and their absolute dedication to the superficial, which puts them right into the conceptual centre of the world of the "Southern belle." The women are largely observed as passive objects or acted upon by the men in the novel. Kinloch, the young protagonist, watches his wife sitting on a shelf of rocks by a stream:

She was leaning back on one arm; her head, with its capping of short dark hair, was titled upward. He did not call at once; instead he allowed himself the pleasure of standing silent and watching her until she should look up and see him. . . . It had been eleven months since he had first met her, yet time and time again when he looked at her she would seem completely new to him . . . he noticed how erectly, yet casually, her strong, light body rested against the rock and how smooth and still and undecipherable her finely-cut features could appear when she was not speaking."

(5)

The paradigm female in this early novel is Aunt Cherry Bell, a neglected mistress, who has come to town and come to stay. She also represents the intransigence of the town as her testimony could have undone all the wrongs done in the novel, but the townspeople feel it is inappropriate that a woman should testify at a trial, a fallen woman at that. Aunt Cherry Bell dimly hears the action of the novel--she

lies in her bed, half crazed with liquor and regretting memories. Her pathos is her most endearing feature:

She had come up for New Orleans to Tarsus for a week-end visit nearly forty years ago and what with combined forces of hospitality, misfortune and duty, she was still there. It was Bright's disease she had now, but it had started with a broken heart and progressed through scandal and secret drinking at last to become bounded by four stained walls and a slanting view of what once was garden. (63)

In The Crooked Way, Spencer's second novel, Amos Dudley, the poor man who makes an empire, dominates and controls the action of the novel. Though two of the female characters are given privileged discourse in the novel, the action belongs to Amos. Dolly, Amos's niece, and Arny, Amos's wife, each has a chapter in the novel; yet, they are but observers and reactors to the motion of the novel. They do not question the structure of place within this novel. Dolly, the daughter of dead Louise (sister of Arny), will only leave Amos Dudley's care because she says she is afraid of him. She is not sure why; she is not certain that anything sinister has happened to her. Arny, the long-suffering wife, is an extremely problematic characterization as she belongs to the tradition of the bright, spoiled, wilful girl who is "tamed" by the decent man in her life.

Arny's single great achievement is to shoot the only overtly threatening male in the novel--the conventional picture of the hired man who may or may not be the master's son, who may or may not be sleeping with the master's precocious daughter. This act does nothing more than re-invigorate the relationship between Arny and Amos. Of all of Spencer's works, The Crooked Way shows most clearly Spencer's debt to a conventional depiction of Southern white society that was prevalent in the early 1950s--that Southern white society in which the "steady beat of walking filled the air: the flattering, feminine high heels that Southern girls wore to the big games along with their new fall suits, their little hats; the paced, lazy, well-shod, decisive walking of Southern men" (The Voice at the Back Door, 320).

Spencer, from the vantage point of her apartment in Italy, wrote her first novel that overtly criticized her own community of memory and culpability. The Voice at the Back Door is her first attempt to write a novel that challenges the Southern attitudes and its prejudices towards the black. She recalls that the writing of the novel was partially motivated by her desire to straighten out her own thinking. As she says to John Griffin Jones, "I'd been brought up in a very traditional Southern atmosphere. I had taken the traditional attitudes more than I should I had actually believed what my forebears had told me about the inferiority of the black race" (Conversations, 93).

In The Voice at the Back Door, Beck Dozer, the black hired hand, is protected by the new white sheriff, Duncan Harper. The energy of the discourse centres around Harper's reluctant desire to protect Dozer against both the active and passive forces in the town. The events of the novel take place in the ambivalent, restless South of the early fifties. The town is hot, dusty, indolent, corrupt. The women are unchanged from Spencer's earlier novels--they languish, polish their nails, destroy each other's reputations, and casually have affairs with their friends' husbands. The description of the nineteen-year-old virgin, Cissy, seems to belong in the pages of Modern Love and True Romance:

The flesh of her arm was soft as freshly moulded butter; even the redolence of the bathroom when she left it held something all lazily like a sigh. She was not at all beautiful; she was not even pretty: she made everybody so nervous that nobody knew any better how she looked than Kerney Woolbright did, with her eyes like chocolate fudge still warm from the pan and her hair as glossy as a blooded chestnut's coat. (175)

The Voice at the Back Door is, nonetheless, unique in that Spencer creates her first woman to leave home. Marcia Mae Hunt marries a sailor and lives in San Diego for a time. She returns to Lacey but does manage to say: "Oh, just that

we'd start from nothing but ourselves, clean, out West somewhere. We couldn't stay in the South and be free. In the South it's nothing but family, family" (194). Marcia Mae Hunt may come home, but she remains unsatisfied and discontent. She is the first, however, to "get out." Her fantasy about life outside of Lacey is akin to those entertained by many of Spencer's later women, women who are alone yet reconciled in a strange city:

"I wish," said Marcia Mae, "that I was anybody's secretary in some big city. And that every morning I got up and put on a grey suit and a clean white blouse and went to work in a beautiful soundproof air-conditioned office one hundred and one floors up, with streamlined filing cabinets and a noiseless typewriter. I wish I had a little apartment with a view from the window of nothing but skyscraper tops. Then I would be happy."

(122)

Of all her novels, The Voice at the Back Door is singular in its presentation of two marginalized groups, women and blacks. Though Spencer herself would never consciously have put the two groups on equal footing, Peggy Whitman Prenshaw has made a statement in her study of Spencer that suggests it is possible to equate the woman and the black. Of Duncan Harper, the white sheriff in The Voice at the Back Door, she says, "in many ways Harper is a very

traditional Southern gentleman who takes seriously his obligation to protect women and blacks" (59). If Prenshaw is correct, then the study of Spencer's women could profit from a consideration of how Spencer characterizes blacks in her works. It might be tempting to treat her appreciation and sense of blacks as a kind of minor chord that complements her more central concern with women and the worlds (cities, towns, houses, families) in which they struggle to find a place that does not suffocate or dehumanize them.

Spencer begins with a fairly traditional view of race as depicted in The Voice at the Back Door. Beck Dozer is described here as being "frail, thin as though he had just come out of the jungle, but he had lost the savage's wiry drive" (17). Lu, another character in the novel, is a habitual drunk whom Dozer meets in the town jail. Spencer portrays Lu as a "slump-shouldered Negress who wrapped her head in a rag and carried her chin low and to one side, angling a sour eye at the world" (95).

Spencer's early depictions of blacks in The Voice at the Back Door and The Crooked Way do not show much understanding of the black as being particular, as opposed to being "Other." Even her late short story "The Business Venture" (1988), which is definitely her most adventurous in dealing with black/white relationships, has a passage which exposes a continuing antipathy toward blacks within the

Southern white communities. Rose Houston, a charming, coddled housewife, speaks for many white Southerners when she says:

"I'm not keeping anybody from voting--yellow, blue or pink," said Hope, who had got her "ideas" straight from the first, she said. "I don't guess any of us is," said Pete, "them days is gone forever." "But wouldn't it be wonderful," said Rose Houston, "to have a little coloured gal to pick up your handkerchief and sew on your buttons and bring you cold lemonade and fan you when you're hot, and just love you to death?"

Rose was joking, of course, the way we all liked to do. But there are always one or two of them that we seriously insist we know--really know--that they love us. (Spencer's emphasis, 135)

In general, there is little or no awareness in Spencer's canon that blacks and women might share a parallel, subordinate position in the world of the Southern patriarch. Spencer keeps her blacks definitely "separate" and apart (from whites, each other, genuine feelings) in her fiction. Furthermore, in The Voice at the Back Door, she tends to see the black as savage, alien, closer to the earth and primeval nature than even women are:

Black people are night people, and you do not drive a Southern road at any unearthly hour

without seeing them along the roadsides, going somewhere, or marking at a distance across the field the oil lamp burning full wick within the cabin. Sometimes, passing near a cabin that is totally dark as though for sleep, one hears break out again the low mingling of many voices; no crisis has brought them there, but the instinctive motion of their strange society has behaved like a current deep down in the river, and here they are. Savage, they came to a savage land, and it took them in. . . . Negroes married the land. Its image is never complete without them; if they are out of the picture, they are only just around the corner, coming or going, or both. (My emphasis, 235)

In the novels and short stories, with few exceptions, she deals with the black as "Other," someone who can only be seen through a lens of distance and condescension.

There is, nonetheless, especially in her later fiction, a fascination with the black as exotic, dangerous, Byronic and savage. What is even more interesting, in terms of this thesis, is that the black seen in this way is also the male holding a subversive, disruptive position, a position that challenges the authority of the white, dominant males of the South. Several of the male characters in her later novels have "the touch of the tar brush." This "mark" empowers

them by the very fact that it sets them outside of the normal strictures of the white town. Both Jerry Sasser of No Place for an Angel ("How dark he is! Catherine observed [as she watched him sleeping]. Against the pillows his face looked swart, his hair, lashes and brows so dark they startled her" 157) and Henri Devigny of The Snare ("his fleshy dark brooding face with its shag of iron-grey hair like a frame, heavy hunched shoulders, old black coat in winter, rumpled linen coat in summer, intense eyes. Smoking. Stained fingers. Soul knowledge. Like a Negro in some respects" 167) are described in terms of having black blood. Even though power is held in the hands of the dominant white male in Southern society, these men are still forced to behave within the strictures of such a society. They, like the women they dominate, also cannot act independently of the rules of the society to which they belong.⁶ Spencer, by "marking" some of her more radical males, is able to give them a freedom to operate outside of the basic restraints of Southern society. Being black, or "marked" is not necessarily a signifier for evil. It is more often a passport to actions that are radically subversive to the standards of the society around them.

In fact, one can find a model for such a disruptive figure in Spencer's early novel, The Crooked Way. Joe Ferguson (who definitely embodies evil in this novel), the "changeling" son, lives and consorts with the blacks on the

Dudley estate. Through Ferguson all the latent evil of a society that is unknown, dangerous, superstitious ("that Negro smell, the open privy smell" [175]) is unleashed.⁷

It would seem that, on the one hand, Spencer shares the Southerner's fascination and horror of the black as being something primal, fearful, and threatening to the rational order of the town, and yet, on the other, this Other enables the men in these novels to act outside of the strictures of their Southern milieu. Henri Devigny, the grandfather in The Snare, who will be looked at much more closely later on in this chapter, stands outside of traditional society and provides for his granddaughter Julia a vibrant, at times terrifying, example of the possibilities of human experience, totally and absolutely "outside" of the experiences of traditional, acceptable Southern society.

Prenshaw equates blacks and women in her reference to A Voice at the Back Door. Spencer challenges the characterization of woman as weak, fragile, childlike and needful; she is, nonetheless, unable to confront such a similar depiction of blacks within the Southern communities. Spencer is much more interested in exploring her fascination with the black (or more accurately the white with black blood) as a force that both challenges and subverts the universe of the good, white fathers. The most fully developed of these figures is the elusive and compelling figure of Henri Devigny.

Though Spencer wrote The Voice at the Back Door while she was in Italy, the real change her in fiction occurred in Canada. Early in her time in Canada, she wrote the two novellas that totally revolutionized her fiction. Both stylistically and thematically her fiction is dramatically altered. Spencer attributes the change in her fiction to what she refers to as the bright sunlight of Italy which managed to break up the "long tides of existence in one locale" (The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer, x). Henceforth, her subsequent novels and short stories will reflect this fracturing and refiguring of experience and perception.

Though The Light in the Piazza is a highly integrated piece of work, it is carefully refracted through the lens of the Italian landscape. Spencer herself describes the novella as a statue where all sides can be seen. "You can walk around The Light in the Piazza; you can look at it from this angle, from that angle . . . much like the experience of sculpture; it is always there; it is always just itself" (Conversations, 28). Spencer conflates the bright light of Italy with an ability to see more clearly. Though the Southern world is as hot and tropical as Italy, there is an assumption by Spencer that one just cannot "see" as clearly in the South. She may be only referring to her own experience of living in Mississippi as a good, little, Mississippian girl. All home towns are shrouded in a kind of weak light, a poor refraction of understanding.

Something dramatic happened to Spencer in Italy. She attempted to use the metaphor of the light to deal with the changes she herself had experienced. In Italy, for the first time, landscape is no longer a given. It becomes an active agent within the lives of all of Spencer's characters.

Spencer begins to "see" place for the first time. The greater the critical distance that Spencer puts between herself and her subject, the greater the dissolution of the categories in her fiction. Once place comes to be questioned, both fictionally and factually, everything else can be questioned as well. Margaret Johnson, who, like Spencer herself, is a character outside of her established milieu, queries not only her home town, home country, home attitudes but also comes to redefine, even reshape her own site within the original "place."

The Light in the Piazza is a deeply integrated picture of Florence, Americans and Italians. The place, Florence, is as critical a player in the personal drama as are the various parties themselves. Both Spencer and Margaret Johnson start with the light of Italy. "She never got enough of it, and now in the clear evening light that all the shadows had gone from--the sun being blocked away by the tight bulk of the city--she looked at the splendid old palace and forgot that her feet hurt" (4). Margaret Johnson goes to Florence with a dream ("Nobody with a dream should

come to Italy. No matter how dead and buried the dream is thought to be, in Italy it will rise and walk again." 33) and the efficacy, mischief and wonder of the place makes certain dreams come true. Margaret Johnson may surrender (33) to the dream that her child, ironically named Clara, should have a marriage, but also Margaret Johnson will become more Margaret Johnson. The last lines in the novel are curiously triumphant:

Though weary of complexities and more than ready to take a long rest from them all, Mrs. Johnson was prepared on the strength of her belief to take one more gamble yet, namely, that however Noel [the husband] might rage, no honeymoon was going to be interrupted, that Signor Naccarelli was not going to be searched out and told the truth, and that the officials of the great Roman church could sleep peacefully in rich apartments or poor damp cellars, undisturbed by Noel Johnson. He would grow quiet at last, and in the quiet, even Margaret Johnson had not yet dared to imagine what sort of life, what degree of delight in it, they might not be able to discover (rediscover?) together. (66)

Due to the deconstruction of categories (the good wife, the patriotic American, the despairing mother, the retarded child) in Italy, Margaret Johnson dares to make a change.

She will marry her retarded daughter (an accident made her so when she was still a child) into a rich Italian family without either informing the family (of the retardation) or her husband (of the marriage). But the light in Italy does not merely encourage such a singular, audacious act. She radicalizes her own sense of reality; she risks. For Margaret Johnson, once she embraces the strong exposure of the sunlight of the city ("In Florence, at four o'clock, everything seemed to take a step nearer, more distinctly, more totally to be seen" 56), begins a total shift in her own original sense of "placedness." Whatever happens to Margaret Johnson when she returns to America and confronts her husband, a transformed woman will be dealing with her original reality. Margaret Johnson has been able, in a distant and utterly strange place, to effect change. She has the uniqueness of her Italian situation to help her realize her innate charm, power, and capabilities.

Though Martha herself is ultimately triumphant, Noel, though far away in America, is always a figure on the periphery of the novel. Though he never appears in the novel, he seems to control the action from the director's chair; Margaret Johnson worries constantly about what Noel might think and how he might approve or disapprove of her actions. It is her success (due, simplistically speaking, to those strange lights in Italy) that she returns home a fuller, more complete woman.

Margaret Johnson is the first of Spencer's women in rebellion. In her modest, middle-class way, she proves herself in Italy. She is both able to deal with a society totally different from her own and also, possibly for the first time, to accurately perceive her husband and his subtle dominance. She, unlike Marcia Mae Hunt in The Voice at the Back Door and Arny in The Crooked Way before her, wins a stature that has, up to this time, been denied Spencer's women. Spencer's earlier characterizations were able to realize only a woman who questioned her place; Margaret Johnson is the first to effect change.

For Martha Ingram in "Knights and Dragons," place, once again Italy, exerts a similar, transforming power. The dialectics of the two novellas are parallel as a woman leaves her original "placedness" and embarks on an adventure to a "new" place which is utterly unlike anywhere she has been before. Italy, through its sheer novelty, colludes with both women in order to shock them into change. A conflicted sense of place informs and contains the action. The exploration of gender in relation to place is especially overt in these two novellas, for they both are framed by the dark, unforgiving, controlling male figure, more father-like than husband-like. Though Noel in The Light in the Piazza is a rather distant, unformed figure, Gordon Ingram in "Knights and Dragons" is the destructive, unrelenting, though invisible (much like a nightmare) power in the novel.

Spencer creates in this novella a portrait of the threatening, potentially destroying, yet tacitly hidden (for Martha Ingram has left her husband), male.

Just as the sunny piazzas and bright parks surround Margaret Johnson, the labyrinths and the cool stench of the narrow streets enclose and circumscribe Martha Ingram's world. Place, more and more in Elizabeth Spencer's fiction, begins to resemble and appropriate her protagonist's state of mind. Martha Ingram arrives in Rome, escaping from her husband: "that huge figure, sitting in the heavy armrests, the shaggy head, and big, awkwardly tilted feet" (129). Emissaries, spies, enemies, come from the States and begin to stalk (or so it would seem) Martha. Rome enters into a conspiracy with her and weaves impossible labyrinths, narrow streets, dark corridors around her, and, in a profound way, seeks to hide and protect her.

Whatever was clear in The Light in the Piazza is shadowy and uncertain in this novella. The time is winter and the weather is rain. Place, in this curious book, is used in ways Spencer will never use it again. Place and the main character of the novel form a conspiracy and proceed to act and react together. Place is constructed as totally sympathetic to the plight of Martha Ingram. Venice becomes a grey ghost ship for her, launching itself (and her) "into a thicker element." It provides winding streets, shutters,

rain, air as heavy as cloth. "In the heavy air Martha had all but dissolved" (145). It even follows her into her dreams:

The rain-coloured shadows collected and washed over the image and she half awoke, then slept again, but could not summon up the dream. She remembered saying to herself, perhaps aloud, "What a strange city this is." For it lay like a great sleeping ear upon the water, resonant and intricate. All the while the rain poured vastly down and could be heard even while sleeping and dreaming, speaking one continuous voice. (146)

Rome as well as Florence enters into Martha Ingram and carries her through her own tramontana, her own dark windy night of the soul. She uses madness as a way to liberate herself from the persecutions and hauntings of her shaggy, distant, unrelenting husband:

She bent with complete compassion, fleshless, invisible and absent, above the rapidly vanishing mortality of Gordon Ingram, at the same time she swung happily, even giddily (there went that streak again, the necessary madness), around the Colosseum, where the fresh glittering traffic, like a flight of gulls, joyous in the sunlight, seemed to float and lilt, fearless of collision. (218)

Place in The Light in the Piazza and "Knights and Dragons" works in collusion with the main protagonists; there is a symbiotic relationship, as characters react to place, and place responds to and influences the characters. The relationship is secret, mutual and empowering.

The critical factor in both of these novellas is how Spencer has framed her stories: the male figure oversees and dominates the fiction. He stands on the outside, controlling the action. The man, hidden, powerful, and threatening, haunts the women in these two pieces. Spencer, following her first time away from her Southern milieu and the domination of her own father, begins to articulate in her fiction the change in her own relationship to the patriarchal space that shaped her. Though the male dominates Spencer's earlier fiction, it is only in this novel that he assumes a psychological status that is both unnerving and compelling. The silent, censoring male, the father, the God controlling the puppet strings, becomes one of the most powerful images in all of Spencer's fiction.

Spencer experienced great personal difficulties throughout the writing of these two novellas, especially with "Knights and Dragons". As she told Charles Bunting in 1972, "I admit that as a person, without going very much into things that are really important to me, certain dreams and memories and replays of things did haunt and upset me for a long time and were destructive to me personally. I

think that just in last couple of years that's changed, so that I suddenly find that dreams and memories have become life-giving again" (34). Though The Light in the Piazza and "Knights and Dragons" are not autobiographical in the obvious sense that they represent actual events in Spencer's life, they body forth autobiographical, psychological dimensions that are new to her fiction.

In 1967, two years after the publication of "Knights and Dragons", Spencer published No Place for an Angel. In structure, the novel resembles her earlier Mississippi novels. It has a wide cast of characters, shifting narrative points of view, and an emphasis on action as opposed to the characters' inner monologues. It explores a theme especially interesting to Spencer at the time, the theme of Americans abroad, living in Italy and Germany in the aftermath of the war. All the characters, in one way or another, must face the alienated, disaffected world of the postwar era. The spectre of the atomic bomb and the resultant cynicism, coupled with the excessive affluence of Americans after the war, dominate the tone of the book. In No Place for an Angel Spencer, for the first time, attempts to write without a fixed locale: her characters move from Sicily, to Texas, to Paris, to Rome. Though Spencer attempts a massive dislocation of space in this novel, the placedness of her women within the hierarchial societal structure remains the same. Spencer again uses the retreat

into madness as a way to cope with a society dominated by the centrist, confident, dominant male. Catherine Sasser, the pivotal figure in a cast of five, makes her own painful journey from a protected childhood in Texas to a marriage that eventually dissolves into disillusionment and despair. When the meaninglessness of her life (without the protection of the setting, the town, the village) overwhelms her, she moves into a psychiatric hospital.

The catalyst for Catherine's breakdown is the difficult figure of her husband, Jerry Sasser. Though he is overtly shallow, even tedious, it is important to look at him more closely. Spencer is attempting, in this novel, to give a face to the shadowy men that both threaten and intimidate the women in A Light in the Piazza and "Knights and Dragons". Jerry Sasser is handsome, dynamic, dishonest, driven and successful. He is also to Catherine mysterious, powerful and poisonous (62). In Sasser, Spencer is attempting to create a male that is both compelling and evil. Catherine herself does not deal with Sasser. Though much of the book will go to great lengths to explain, using psychological terminology, how Sasser got to be as bad as he is, Catherine seems to be unable to respond to his behaviour (law suits, corruption, affairs) in any way other than that of going mad, what Sasser himself describes as "Strain and crisis . . . same old trouble" (63). Sasser, however, as does Gordon with Martha Ingram, haunts the periphery of

Catherine's consciousness. Catherine, after meeting Sasser in a hotel lobby, says to herself:

I guess I'm as big a bitch as the next one . . .
and huddled her frail shoulders against the cold,
moving her delicate shoes from time to time on the
pavement. As for landscapes, she thought, the
only one I'm liable to end up with is Jerry's
face. Those two craters are his eyes, and there's
a dark rumple of hair, straight across the
forehead. . . . And there were the high, Indian-
straight cheekbones, reaching back like twin
ridges, one of which, just beneath the eye, after
a certain number of drinks, blotched with a mound
of red. (65)

Spencer ends the chapter with the wonderful line: "She entered her hotel through turning glass door, intractable with the dark opaque look of winter water" (65). Here again, Spencer shows her unique ability in a single telling image to reveal her female protagonist's struggle in a world she has yet to clearly, selfishly, carefully define.

Though Spencer has gone to great lengths to clarify, to flesh out her dominant, threatening male, her protagonist is still unable to deal with both the man and her circumstances. Catherine cannot make sense of the doors around her, dark as winter water. She can only retreat. She will use the hospital as a refuge and later in the novel

finds a kind of stasis in her life by moving in with her son (who, like Clara in The Light in the Piazza, is disabled; Latham has had polio) in a little house in a New England town, "a town strong enough and old enough to envelop her" (253). Catherine, as the title of the book suggests, is unable not only to direct the events of the book, but also to control the passions and complications of her own life. There are "no places for angels" in a book that uses angels in its title and yet rarely mentions angels. Spencer seems to be saying that such angels, women who are passive, sincere, principled do not belong in the "real" world of men and action; their place is that of mental hospitals, engaged in their own particular deceptions of madness.

Spencer picks up these emerging themes and develops them again in The Snare. Once again, the shadowy and all powerful male frames the book. Julia, the heroine, must, as a lightning rod, accept and respond to all of these experiences. Spencer again continues to explore the immersion of her protagonist in a place that is the antithesis of place that one finds in her earliest books--the farm, the plantation, the city square, the church picnics and the girls with their smart suits and high heels. In The Snare, which Spencer has told Beth Cooley is her best work (Conversations, 136), Julia Garrett enters her own inferno of place, specifically New Orleans. Julia experiences all parts of New Orleans as if it were a living,

breathing organism. She necessarily touches evil as much as good.

What is most interesting about the novel is the framing device of the dark, oppressive, shadowy male figure--her grandfather at the beginning of the novel, and, to a lesser degree, the body of Marnie at the end. Spencer has described to Hoag and Broadwell her own horrified investment in this part of the novel. She comments on the scene in which Julia crawls into the cistern to find the stash of heroin.⁸ Julia faces the double horror of the corpse of Ted Marnie below her and a vision of Henri Devigny, her beloved grandfather, curiously above her:

I was afflicted with a real horror. I can't say what effect the reader might get, but the imagined vision of the thing gave me something of the sense of horror of reading Dante, his approach to the depths of hell, Satan chained at the bottom of the pit. At the bottom of the cistern was where Julia found the body of Ted Marnie. Marnie is a kind of debased image of Henri Devigny. (Conversations, 73)

Of all her novels this is the one that Spencer links clearly and without hesitation to the power of the place and the power of the man to enter into the entelechy of the woman. But there is a tone in this book that celebrates both the city and the dark male figure. Peggy Whitman

Prenshaw (Conversations, 195) offers a more conventional reading of the book when she asks Spencer if she finds in at least two of her books (The Snare and "Knights and Dragons") a relationship that is fatherly but destructive. "Is there an inevitable link between the impulse to father and to destroy?" she asks. Spencer has an interesting answer:

I don't know. I never had a very good relationship with my father. There were a lot of comings and goings that sometimes had masked meanings, but he disapproved of me. I think he was very tyrannical in his ways. (Conversations, 195)

This response of Spencer's seems to indicate that the true conflict in the novel is not between Julia and her dark, brooding grandfather. The essential friction is between Julia and the proper New Orleans establishment represented both by her uncle Maurice and also the family of her fiancée, Martin Parham. Spencer is obliquely responding to Prenshaw's question in saying that there is not an actual parallel between Henri Devigny in The Snare and George Ingram in "Knights and Dragons". Spencer in her fiction sets the relationship to the grandfather outside of her preoccupation with the struggle between the father, or the society holding the father's position, and the rebellious, restless daughter. Though much is made in the book of the sinister, dangerous personality of Henri Devigny, the actual

events of the book do not deal with the grandfather as a destructive figure. In spite of Spencer's own claim that Devigny and Marnie, the one, true and absolute criminal in the book, may share similiar universes, such a statement does not reflect the actual energy of the novel. Julia is only able to take her journey into her Southern inferno due to the strength, courage and curiosity given to her by her grandfather, whom she calls "a constant heavy sun along the horizon of her spirit's self" (24). As Julia herself says when she comes back to New Orleans:

She knew why she had come to Audubon Place, not to confide in her aunt and uncle, not really for books either, but to touch home, to find her touchstone, now when she need to. In other words, to touch Dev. Now that she had, her glory was with her. (25)

The world of Spencer's own father is represented in this novel by the stable, sanitized New Orleans of Julia's uncle and aunt. Spencer's father and Uncle Maurice want to keep such women as Julia in their place. It is Julia's inheritance from her grandfather to explore the darker reaches of human society, to find meaning in "this dark sluggishness of passage," and to break out, finding her own, unique way in such a world, such a society, such a city. Henri Devigny, the brooding grandfather, rescues Julia after the abandonment by her own natural father, and then

deliberately exposes her to a world that is, in many ways, the obverse of the one presented by her uncle and aunt. Though Spencer uses such words as "debased" or "evil" when talking about Henri Devigny (he sells pornography, has a mulatto mistress), there is such a profound sense of approval in the novel that it does much to obviate Spencer's comment to Broadwell and Hoag that Marnie is the debased image of Henri Devigny. Later in the interview, Spencer provides a more accurate "sign-post" into the book by saying that it "rests on a Manichean understanding of evil as an independent power to be dealt with" (73). Spencer sees evil as an active force in life, as life-giving as the forces of obvious good.⁹ Julia Garrett has to touch all the powers that exist in our brief passage through life; the one character who gives her courage and endurance to make such a journey is her grandfather. Both Dev and Julia are inversely blessed; the "mark," the touch of the tar brush, gives them a power, a natural alienation from the normal expectations of society, to discover a world quite "other" than that of Audubon Place. Thus, while Spencer does not parallel the oppressions of race and gender in her fiction, she does use blackness as a signifier of subversion, power, and in Julia's case, ultimate success.

In some basic ways, the novel seems to be much closer to her short story, "A Christian Education," than to some of her other novels about fathers and daughters, for it sets up

a framework of rebellion for the grandfather and the grandchild. Uncle Maurice, when talking about Julia and her grandfather, describes them as having circled him for years, having gone off and off and off again from the "framework" of his household, to play their games together, whatever they were:

He always saw them walking away, out of Audubon Place, like two escaping, gone into something instead of away from it. They should have been outsiders, with their extremes of age to cope with, putting them on opposite rims of the circle, or to say it another way, at the window looking in on the warm life he shared with Isabel. Instead, they'd turned the tables, made him and Isabel feel in a cage, ignorant and uninformed, while they roved free. (Spencer's emphasis, 168)

Under the tutelage of her grandfather, Julia finds herself empowered to taste and explore all the ramifications of potential human experiences. Henri Devigny liberates Julia to a world of all experience. One must always remember Spencer's insistent claim that Julia is her one protagonist, to this point, who can bear the weight of her experiences.¹⁰ The flight in the book (and there are many) is fundamentally the flight from the establishment which is depicted in the descriptions of the life of Aunt Isabel and Uncle Maurice ("He and Isabel were happy, no happier couple

had ever existed, but happiness is placid. The stir of life, its harsh brightness, its murky side as well, all this had been thrashed up in his head since seeing Julia that day" 167). The flights are also from the life of Martin Parham (a name very close to the family that Maureen rebels against in "I, Maureen"), the rich Texas millionaire that wants to marry Julia. In fact, the descriptions of Martin Parham and his family's obsession with money is strongly reminiscent of Spencer's own father and the double life she must have led when she was at home (177).

To Julia, all experience, good and bad, sour and indifferent, must be embraced. In her embracing, there will inevitably be knowledge. At the end of the novel, she finds some coloured marbles near the site of an old mansion that was being torn down. She longs to discern something, to create some order out of these fragments:

She ached to start shaping them, smoothing, polishing, fitting the patterns in which her artist boss said she was finding a growing elegance. Fragments of a city. She thought of them as being allowed to find a new voice, though broken, fractured, torn from their original purpose. (402)

Both Julia and Spencer turn to the creative impulse, the transforming properties of art, to make sense out of the great disorder around them, be it the large city, the

hurricane ravaged coastline, or the diminished and fading small town.

The four novels of Spencer's middle period (The Light in the Piazza, "Knights and Dragons," No Place for an Angel, The Snare) concentrate on the theme of women attempting to find their own particular place within the universe of the father. The next novel after The Snare, The Salt Line, restores women to the marginalized positions that they held in her earliest novels. They fall into stereotypical formations almost as solidly as did her women in A Voice at the Back Door or The Crooked Way. All the women in the novel are totally dependent on Carrington for their welfare and development. Women fall for Carrington like flowers in his path--an old lover returns, her sixteen-year-old daughter melts in his arms and sleeps with him (with hardly a glance) in an old lighthouse. The resolution of the novel involves Arnie enabling Barbara K, the little mulatto, to set up a day-care centre and Mavis to teach weaving and needlework in her crafts shop. Arnie has not only been able to restore his sexual potency, revitalize part of a hurricane devastated town, but also, on this one small street of the town, he is able to return women to their traditional places. They become, like Penelope, weavers and observers in the presence of the benevolent male.

The Night Travellers, Spencer's latest novel, makes a

radical departure from most of her work in that it privileges the mother and daughter relationship. The Night Travellers, nonetheless, follows the pattern of the young woman trying to escape from a home that is enclosed, smothering, and confining. Kate, the mother, for all her oppressiveness, does not act in the way the domineering males have acted in earlier novels (there may be some similarities with Amos Dudley). Kate is direct, violent, cold and possessive. The dynamics of the book are totally changed as Kate does not want to contain or control Mary Kerr; she deeply wants to get rid of her. There is a Gothic intensity to the actions of the mother that undercuts the seriousness of Spencer's theme. The daughter, for instance, attempts suicide as a way of dealing with her alienation and despair. The result of such an extreme act does not lead to a wider vision of the town, a liberation from the strictures of home. Instead, Mary Kerr loses her small daughter (if only temporarily) to her mother. The destructive, vain mother now has a second generation of women to control.

Spencer's women engage in many stratagems to deal with their sense of confinement and restraint. Mary Kerr attempts suicide; Marcia Mae Hunt runs off with a sailor in The Voice at the Back Door. Yet, for most of them, during their process of self-articulation, madness is a temporary retreat for women who cannot cope with the pressures of their reality. Such a woman is Catherine Sasser in No Place

for an Angel. Madness is also its own place, a place of revelation, power, and control. Madness is a specifically female option for Spencer. She almost uses it as an alternate "place" (one can stay there at times; one can also just visit) where a woman can achieve a kind of vision that both separates her from her everyday world and at the same time allows her to "see." Spencer most fully develops this theme in her short story "I, Maureen," but it is also a particular concern in these four novels of Spencer's middle period. Margaret Johnson has her moment of "madness" on that hot afternoon in Florence when she gets lost in the city and is traumatized by her wild carrozza ride. This experience of difference mobilizes her to begin her own process of action, a process which results in dramatic changes. Martha Ingram slips in and out of madness, obsessive dreams, and paranoia to deal with her absent husband. Though Catherine Sasser is the ideogram for all the mad in her world, she also is able to move out of the psychiatric hospital and find a place for herself outside. Elaine Showalter in The Female Malady makes an interesting differentiation between women who use madness to get out of their father's house and women who are mad as the logical consequence of living in their father's house:

Was the hysterical woman a feminist heroine, fighting back against confinement in the bourgeois home? Was hysteria--the "daughter's disease"--a

mode of protest for women deprived of other social or intellectual outlet or expressive options?

(147)

Spencer's heroines go further than Showalter's in that madness for them is more than a protest within the house of the father. Madness is almost a right of passage, a stage necessary for self-discovery and eventual liberation. As Peggy Whitman Prenshaw writes in "Mermaids, Angels and Free Women: The Heroines of Elizabeth Spencer's Fiction":

[Her] stories involve spiritual and physical dislocation. What Spencer's heroines do not have and yearn for is a sense of place, a habitation that does not suffocate or dehumanize them. . . . They learn that the price of autonomy is just as Lillian Hellman describes it in The Unfinished Life--those who are willing to take the punishment are halfway through the battle. (164)

Chapter 5: Short Stories

The shorter fiction of Elizabeth Spencer is the most interesting of her canon. What little academic attention her work received has largely centred around her novels. Prenshaw is promising to write a book about her short stories "one of these days." Terry Roberts devotes only one chapter in his thesis to the shorter fiction. Yet, it seems to me, Spencer's most original works are her short stories. Prenshaw says quite tellingly in Elizabeth Spencer that Spencer "has composed a considerable body of short fiction that in most respects is quite distinct from the novels in conception and craft" (131). She goes on to say that "understanding the demands of the form, [Spencer] concentrates in the stories more often on the telling image, the gesture that can make a story cohere, than on plot and action" (131). It would seem, therefore, that Spencer's literary talent is much more suited to the constraints of the short story form which forces on her a more condensed, compact, focused "event." Experience is described not in a linear but in a circular, much more oblique fashion. Discovery often comes outside of the realm of either logic or the strict and absolute appreciation of the "facts." The narrative line of her stories is not just linear but also circular, enclosing and problematic. This sense of the contemporary relevance of past time, that is, of the past

"mixing" with the present, and the living with the dead, returns us to Elsa Nettels's description of the "haunted verge" that she found so compelling in Spencer's short fiction. I would go so far as to say that when Spencer gave up her need to write the masculine novel she became a much more interesting writer. Unfortunately such an observation would probably deeply offend Spencer as she is very proud of her Hardy-esque, tough-minded, muscular novels.

The appropriated voice does not prove to be as successful for Spencer as the voice of the middle-class, white, Protestant, questioning woman (that she is herself). Elaine Showalter explores this issue when she attempts to define the "psychodynamics of female creativity" (248) in her essay "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." The essay provides a useful context for appreciating the gender specific formalities of Spencer's own "voice." Showalter tentatively locates the origin of a female voice in "the cumulative weightings of experience and exclusion" which have marked the history of women's writing (249). The experience of being excluded from most dominant cultural modes is constitutive of both the female voice and female creativity, and Spencer is able to delineate her own position as woman much more convincingly than she can the voice of the dominant male. Even her most successful stories which have male protagonists are those which depict the man himself posited outside of the dominant power

structures of his town or village. The story "Indian Summer" will be looked at later in this paper as an example of such a positioning.

Yet, in spite of Spencer's rather casual attitude towards her stories, she has published more than forty of them over a forty year period. Most of her stories have been collected in two volumes: The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer, published in 1981, and Jack of Diamonds and Other Stories, published in 1988. Only a very few of her stories have not been collected ("The Pilgrimage," "The Name of the Game" and "Early Life as a First Cousin to a Miracle Child") and copies of these stories can be found in the archival holdings of the National Library. "To the Watchers Walking Home" is still only available in Best Canadian Short Stories: 1983 and "Madonna" can be found in Canadian Short Stories: Fourth Series.

Spencer seems to have come to short fiction out of the pressures of her personal life. She has said that she wrote most of these pieces in the seventies when she had not the time nor the energy to put into a novel. The strains of caring for her family were no doubt greater at this time. It should also be noted that though Spencer found the Canadian milieu extremely difficult for her fiction--in that it did not enter her fiction in the same vivid and unbidden way as did her sense of the Mississippian landscape and the

great teeming lights of Italy--she wrote most of her best stories in Canada.

It is possible, I believe, to find a common theme or even a unifying principle in Spencer's stories. It is the theme of personal liberation and the regret you feel when you liberate yourself, the essential conflict between inner need and outer, imposing reality, the universal experience of the self torn between a private, self-conscious inner life and a compromised, shared outer life that demands, at some level, a forfeiture of consciousness or even separateness. Spencer's women are acute and telling "lightning rods" for such a conflict, such an awareness. "You see," Spencer says in her interview with Broadwell and Hoag, "however much you might want to, you cannot both hold on and be free. And that's the crux in a lot of those stories" (Conversations, 56).

Her stories have to do with many kinds of human conflict, but particularly with the struggle of the woman divided, the ambivalent woman who longs for connecting ties to others and yet at the same time yearns for escape and for a breaking of the very ties. By way of contrast, only three of her stories deal with the male protagonist in conflict with his place: Gavin Anderson in "The Finder" comes into conflict with his town through his gift of second sight; Weston, the child prodigy, falls afoul of his dreams in "The Eclipse"; and Uncle Rex of Spencer's Merilee stories is

cast, more obviously than her other male protagonists, in a decidedly marginal (i.e. feminine) position in "Indian Summer."

Most of Spencer's stories centre around women who are still suspended in Bergsonian "lived time" as opposed to actual time. These women seem to be preternaturally young, uncertain, and ambivalent. They are usually intelligent, witty, ironic, holding a kind of daughter position in most stories. It is immaterial that they range in age from seven to fifty. They all behave as the perpetual daughter, seeking to find their way in their father's house. In her most successful pieces, the daughters eventually grow up. Maureen in "I, Maureen" and Nelle in "The Business Venture" are examples of women who have successfully escaped from the limitations of a father-dominated universe. These two stories belong to her later period; it is important to look at the stories that preceded them.

In explaining Spencer's driving preoccupation with the passage of woman, any woman, from a place that is both confining and suffocating to a newer, changed place, it is useful to categorize Spencer's stories. The stories can be looked at in three broad groupings: woman trapped; woman inactive but an authentic observer; woman finally free.

The women in Spencer's earliest stories are acutely circumscribed and actively self-limiting. Spencer, like Eudora Welty and Katherine Anne Porter before her,

remorselessly chronicles the lives of all such women, especially Southern women with indistinct features, but dutiful and devoted spirits, who invariably "fade" throughout the passage of their lives:

In varying degrees of poverty and wealth, they gave up their lives day by day, like sand running through a visible hourglass, to some trembling cross old father or invalid brother or failure of a husband or marvellously distorted and deeply loved child. ("Knights and Dragons", 168)

Prenshaw in "The Heroines of Elizabeth Spencer's Fiction" describes these women as "ladies imprisoned and enclosed in towers" (148). Prenshaw notes how these early texts are full of words such as "closed," "enclosed," and "confined" (148). She goes on to say that the response of these women is a reactive one, an emotional numbing that seems to be the only answer possible to the expectations of the society around them (148).

In one early story, "The Absence" (1965), Bonnie Richards, in the absence of her husband, finds herself gradually becoming the person she actually wished to be: "She wished to be a person, a being, who appeared and disappeared. She should have liked, conveniently, to have the power to disappear even from herself, to put herself away like something folded in a drawer, or simply not to be when there was nothing to be for" (223). Bonnie Richards

needs outside eyes to appraise and make sense of her existence.

While Bonnie Richards fantasizes about removing herself from all conflict by the strange act of folding herself in a drawer, another character in the story "The Adult Holiday" (1964) goes even further. In this story, Spencer describes her heroine (a woman significantly without a name and known only as "she" or "the mother") as "clinging" about the house in corners all day long, a woman utterly intimidated and devoid of certainty in herself and in her actions. She actively works at disappearing:

She didn't know...she didn't know. She turned herself all the way into a maid, and got out the silver to polish it. She did not wear her gloves and thought that now her hands would be splotched, which he didn't like She turned out a closet and straightened it, taking care to make no noise at all. She could not compose a grocery list, though she tried, and once she peeked down through a crack in the floor abovestairs and saw him eating lunch. . . . She lay hugged to the floor, thinking she would never eat again, but nonetheless admiring him, as a girl in the scullery might admire the lord of the castle.

(118)

These early stories of pathetic confinement open up into a story entitled "The Bulfords" (1967). Here Spencer creates a kind of schizophrenic character in Miss Jackson, the school-teacher. Miss Jackson cannot "appear" in the town where she lives. She can only take on her other persona and become "Lelia" on weekends when she dates men she hardly knows, from towns far away.

Spencer's bitterest story of entrapment is the story "Judith Kane" (1968). Both Judith Kane, and to a lesser extent the narrator, need to be seen and henceforth valorized by others, in this case, the young men in their lives. Though Prenshaw in Elizabeth Spencer has described this story as an exploration of destructive narcissism (145), it seems to be, as in "The Adult Holiday," an acute study of the female who lacks definition without the male gaze. An old lover is finally seduced back into her black sense of self(lessness):

She was almost present then, his thought of her had summoned her before us both, alive in the strong disaster of her looks, which his intelligence and wit and everything I admired about him could only multiply until she had wrapped him up in a million ways and drawn him down endlessly. (257)

Though Spencer censors Judith Kane in this story, it nonetheless seems to be a perfect example of John Berger's

thesis that a woman's psyche is split in two by her constructed awareness of herself as a visual object and her resulting double role as actor and spectator¹¹:

He came to the house the next afternoon. I was upstairs working so did not see him on the street, and he must have just walked in without knocking, because no one challenged him or went to the door. I heard his first step down below and knew what had happened. The whole house knew it too, that ramified abode of women, women, women, over the long years. Turret to basement, it had needed for a long time, that stride in the hall, that step on the stairs. Out in the upstairs corridor, I heard him blundering, trying one door after another, saying "Judith? Judith?" Then he found her. "Who?" she said and then with a low cry, filled with surprise, opening toward joy, "Scott? Oh, Scott!" She must have risen then, out of her ruins, to go to him. I heard her stumble, fall and get up, or be lifted up by him. (My emphasis, 258)

A final story in these early explorations into a fractured and hidden female psychology is "First Dark" (1958). Spencer conflates in this story the absent father (one assumes he has died) into the omnipresent and suffocating town. Frances Harvey is simply unable to

extricate herself from the trappings of Richton, Mississippi. She experiences a "final confusion" after the death/suicide of her mother. Without the agency of Tom Beavers (who lives away from the town, coming only on weekends), Frances would be confined to the town for the rest of her days. She is paralysed by her sense of responsibility to the town and to all its inhabitants, both the living and the dead. Tom Beavers is able to perform the role of necessary destabilizer of all the categories and forces in this small Southern town and Frances has to depend on Tom Beavers to get her out. He seems intuitively to understand that the only way to get Frances "out" is to run away. She leaves the house, the furniture, her mothers' clothes and drives away:

She locked the door when they left, and put the key under the mat--a last obsequy to the house. Their hearts were pounding ahead faster than they could walk down the sidewalk or drive off in the car, and, mindful, perhaps, of what happened to people who did, they did not look back. (40)

Spencer soon tires of trapped women who "give up their lives" day by day. In the story "The White Azalea" (1960), Spencer has the spinster, Miss Theresa Stubblefield, symbolically bury her family (in the form of letters from home) in a pot of azaleas that are sitting on the Spanish Steps in Rome. Miss Theresa Stubblefield, who is

precariously on the brink of giving up her own life by caring for all the aged and infirm relatives in her small Southern town, buries them, totally and absolutely, figuratively and literally. She liberates herself from the image of a nice, caring, hometown girl into a woman who imagines herself (if only for a startled, breathless moment) as "some heroic classical woman whose dagger dripped with stony blood" (69).

Though "The White Azaleas" is an early story, it belongs to my second category of women confined, but questioning. In fact, most of her stories written in the 1960s and 1970s, privilege the bright, restless, wry female observer who, though at the margins, is able (maybe even better able) to subvert the major text (the patrilineal dominant discourse) most effectively through her habits of surveillance. Spencer's three Merilee stories deal specifically with the young woman who, though she lives away from the town, returns to see her home alternately with both critical and loving eyes.¹² In "A Southern Landscape" (1960), Merilee Summerall goes back to her home town (Port Claiborne) and remembers an earlier time (her late teens). Her journey back (for she has lived away for nearly twenty years) is one that is both nostalgic and unsentimental. To Merilee, the world of Port Claiborne is not transformed or even transmigrated by the passage of time--there are no ghosts and no dashing heroes (Foster Hamilton, her long-lost

boy-friend, is probably still a drunk). It is just (and essentially) the place where she began, the source of her rootedness. The implication in the story is that, without this rootedness, there would be no way for Merilee to begin to develop in this world. Spencer is here exploring a self that comes out of the community of memory, what Merilee calls her permanent landscape of the heart (52).

The second Merilee story, "Sharon" (1970) has the same structure as "A Southern Landscape" in that it brings the narrator back home to recall an incident in childhood. Her job is not to reconstruct a definite landscape; rather she is engaged in an act of deconstruction. Merilee remembers how as a child she used to visit a favourite uncle on a plantation, called Sharon, near her home. Merilee, the narrator, realizes one hot summer day that everything she once thought she knew and understood about her uncle, and about his relationship with his negro cook Melissa, is not at all how it first appeared. Merilee, by accidentally seeing her uncle and Melissa together in the house, comes to realize that they are a "couple" and that things will never be quite the same again. She now perceives that the four black children she plays with are closer than she ever realized; she sees now that they are blood:

Their awful racket seemed a part of me--near and powerful, realer than itself, like their living blood. That blood was ours, mingling and twining

with the other. Mama could kick like a mule,
fight like a wildcat in a sack, but she would
never get it out. It was there for good. (290)

In the last line, "It was there for good," Spencer acknowledges that her narrator is able to see in a final and absolute way. In such stories, the female narrator is empowered by her clairvoyance and her ability to be a valid witness.

In many of the stories of this middle period, the female narrator seems to be able to employ only one strategy to escape from confines of the town or the power of the father: she moves away. Aline in "Mr. MacMillan" and the sister in "Prelude to a Parking Lot" live away from their small Southern communities and allow themselves only the interference of memory in their struggles for self-development. Both of these women find an answer in fulfilling the dream of Marcia Mae Hunt in A Voice at the Back Door. They, like Marcia, live as single women in small apartments with the views from the windows being as innocuous and innocent as the tops of skyscrapers.

Another of Spencer's most interesting stories of this period, and one that stands quite by itself, is "Ship Island: the Story of a Mermaid" (1963). It is the only story where Spencer employs the strategy of other worldliness to liberate her protagonist. Nancy Lewis is "out of place" in a place which should be her own. She is literally and

figuratively a "fish out of water." The place she feels so alien from is the coast between Biliox and New Orleans. Spencer artfully uses the device the mermaid myth to illustrate Nancy's profound sense of alienation. The glittering boulevards, the cars cruising up and down the streets, the shelf of clouds, the island with the remains of the Civil War fort, her mother lying on her bed in the dampened dark, her father playing, his perennial glass of Scotch in one hand, with his china donkey in the living room, each in turn become increasingly alien and foreign to her. The story, however, only goes so far as to make the point that Nancy Lewis does not belong. It allows Nancy the liberation of diving (she jumps into the sea) into a new and fantastical place. Spencer does not let us know if this dive is incidental or absolutely fatal:

"I guess it's just the way I am," Nancy murmured.

"I just run off sometimes."

Her voice faded in a deepening glimmer where the human breath is snatched clean away and there are only bubbles, iridescent and pure. When she dove again, they rose in a curving track behind her. (110)

In the stories of Spencer's later period, the late 1970s and the 1980s, her women not only rebel against the strictures and restraints of their societies, they for the first time also succeed. What is most interesting about

these later stories is that Spencer's protagonists effect their transformations within the parameters of the town. The four stories that best illustrate this are: "Indian Summer," "I, Maureen," "The Girl Who Loved Horses," and "The Business Venture."

"Indian Summer" (1974) is the third Merilee story. Here the female narrator is no longer the subject of her own scrutiny. The revelations this time centre around her Uncle Rex. Merilee observes Uncle Rex both in his own home (its rolling, piney acreage, its big two-story house, its circular drive to the gate) and also with his "other" family, a common-law wife and an illegitimate child.

Uncle Rex is the one who is disenfranchised (his plantation is the property of his wife and her family), and, like the women in other stories by Spencer, he flees. When Uncle Rex does finally decide to return to the home of his wife, Spencer manages to leave the ending of the story uncertain and ambiguous. There is a brilliant evasion of closure as the last scene of the story uses a dream of the son, Andrew, the son who had precipitated the family crisis by threatening to sell some family land:

Aunt Martha gave him supper and poured hot chocolate down him, and he went to bed with nothing but the sounds of a shrieking wind and the ticking clock, in the old room he'd had from childhood on. He felt (he told me later) like nothing and nobody.

Nothing...nobody: the clock was saying it too.
There was an ache in the house's core and at some point he dreamed he rose and dressed and went out into the upstairs hall. There he saw his father's face, white, drawn, and small--a ghost face, floating above the stairwell.

"Why call me 'Son' when you don't mean it?"

There wasn't an answer, and he woke and heard the wind. (400)

In this story, Spencer depicts the male in the marginal position. She allows for the fact that the struggle for autonomy is not necessarily a gender question, that it can also have generational and class implications. The struggle for a place, a personal, individual, self-affirming place can affect both the disenfranchised father and the awkward, alienated son. The narrator too begins to understand the complexities of her own rebellion within herself and from the town. She realizes that an Indian summer is just that--a brief period of rebellion. She now sees that she cannot just leave the town as she would a suitcase at a train station; she too, must find her own, unique way to develop herself and still live within her own history and memories:

There is such a thing as father, daughter, and grandchild--such a thing as family that is not blood family I thought about Indian summer which isn't summer at all, but something else.

There is the long hot summer, heavy and teeming, more real than life; and there is the other summer, pure as gold, as real as hope I saw the problem Rex Wirth must be solving and unsolving every day. If this was the place he belonged and the family that was--though not of blood--in a sense, his, why leave them ever? His life, like a tree drawn into the river and slipping by, must have felt the current pull and turn him every day. . . . Come back, Uncle Rex!--should I run out of the woods and tell him that? No, the struggle was his own. (398)

Spencer here makes clear her understanding that the struggle for autonomy, though perhaps more acute in the daughters of her fictional universe, is critical both for Uncle Rex and even his son, Andrew.

Place, as a vertical, limiting and confining concept, receives a more complete treatment in "I, Maureen" (1976), and again in "The Girl Who Loved Horses" (1977). In "The Girl Who Loved Horses," Spencer reintroduces the theme that women are "out of place." The presence and dominance of men in this story takes on a sinister colouring that, at times (because it is so mutely described), surpasses in darkness The Snare, the novel that studies evil as a dominating and controlling factor in Julia Garrett's life.

In this story, Deborah Tyler is a wild, reckless, young woman who seems able to risk all. She is described as a child who is "always out romping, swimming in forbidden creeks, climbing forbidden fences, going barefoot too soon in the spring" (415). Yet in spite of Deborah's apparent confidence and freedom, she is totally circumscribed by the men in her life. Her gentle, conventional mother (who escapes the confrontations in the house by reading Middlemarch) has no ability to influence or to help Deborah. Even Deborah's naming has limited her--she must carry the childish name "Deedee" that her father has given to her.

Spencer deliberately blurs the distinctions between Clyde Mecklin, her manipulative, indifferent husband; Deborah's father; and the hired man. This conflation of characters is clearly shown in Spencer's description of Deborah's response to Clyde:

When he had kissed her ears drummed, and it came back to her once more, not thought of in years, the drumming hoofs of the calico, and the ghosting father, behind, invisible, observant, off on the bare distant November rise. (417)

The ghosting father and Clyde also seem to resemble the hired man that was around the house for a time. The hired man tries to rape her, and it takes Deborah a few minutes to realize that he is not Clyde, that this is an act of genuine violation (421).

As her marriage collapses (Clyde begins his series of affairs), and she feels fear in jumping horses for the first time, this dark shadow begins to follow her around. The dark figure, a stand-in for both her father and her husband, becomes the drama through which she will exorcize herself from control of father figures. In a hair-raising ride down a country road, the hired man holding a gun in Deborah's side, Deborah begins to realize that here is her moment, the instant in which she can change the whole orientation of her life. She remembers how Clyde and her father used to exhort her to conquer her fear and control her horse:

"It's you or him, Deedee." All her life they'd said that to her from the time her first pony, scared at something, didn't want to cross a bridge. "Don't let him get away with it. It's you or him." (427)

During this ride down the country road, Deborah remembers all sorts of events in her life. She recalls how she one day mistook a tramp for her father, how Clyde has so often tricked and deceived her. When the gun is forced into her side, Spencer uses a curious description:

But the prod of a gun's muzzle just under the rise of her breast was [not familiar]. It had never happened to her before. She shuddered at the touch with a chill spring-like start of something

like life, which was also something like death.

(426)

Deborah, with utter clarity, knows that this is her moment, a moment where she must act to make sense of her past and future lives.

Deborah asserts herself in a more visible way than any other of Spencer's protagonists. At the end of the long ride, after the hired man has been left in the ditch by the side of the road, Deborah knows she has just begun the process of real change: "Righting the big car into the road ahead, she understood what was demanded of her. She pressed the accelerator gradually downward toward the floor" (427).

The story ends with Deborah asserting that it is now time for her own children. This is her act of self-assertion and defiance. She is no longer a little girl, a plaything; she is willing to grow up:

"It's the last horse I'll ever break," she said, more to herself than not, but Clyde heard and stood up and was coming to her.

"Now, Deedee--"

"When you know you know," she said, and turned, her face set against him: her anger, her victory, held up like a blade against his stubborn wilfulness.

"I want my children now," she said. (429)

Spencer continues to elaborate the successful struggle of the daughter in the house of the father in two very different stories, "I, Maureen," and "The Business Venture." In both, the sacrifices made by the two protagonists are ultimately supplanted by the personal achievements of actual, unique, constructive self-actualization. Neither woman regrets her struggle for self-actualization nor the high price she must pay to stand "outside" of the constrictions of her society.

In "I, Maureen," the central conflict of the story lies in the struggle between Maureen and the bourgeois, rigid, controlling Partham family. Her husband, Denis, is a somewhat confused and devoted man who has loved his wife strongly and has never faltered in his admiration and appreciation of her. Even at the end of the story, he will say with bewilderment, "I don't know why you ever had to turn into a spirit at all! Just a woman, a wife, a mother, a human being--! That's all I ever wanted!" (360). Nor does Maureen quite understand what has happened to her. Though Spencer employs the device of madness to explain Maureen's behaviour (suicide attempts, moments of oblivion, unsocial behaviour such as breaking her mother-in-law's china), Maureen's retreat from the Partham world is not just a retreat but the embracing of what can almost be called a spiritual order, another existence:

Doctors wait for something to be said
that fits a pattern they have learned to
be true, just as teachers wait for you
to write English or French. If you wrote
a new and unknown language they wouldn't
know what to do with you--you would
fail. (344)

In the same sort of way, Maureen moves outside of the normal categories of accepted behaviour around her. She has the courage to make the move and the necessary sense of self to remain at peace in her new existence. Maureen should not be seen as leaving her husband and children; rather she is leaving a certain way of becoming. The stable, rich, vacuous world of the rich Parthams, with their secure categories, fur coats and wood panelled rooms, just will not work for Maureen. She begins a journey, a quest, and though part of her journey is into madness (as all good knights know there is a time in the dark wood), it is really only part of a process of her growing awareness and acceptance of a self that could never be understood by the Parthams. Maureen does not escape into regret and wishful thinking; instead she creates and embraces a reality that is startlingly her own:

Sitting out on my balcony, watching the people
drift by, smoking, the way I always like to do, I
put a blanket over my still damp head, for it was

only March, and the world was still iced, crusted in decaying snow. I sat like a squaw woman, but inside I felt a little stir of green feeling. I would be happy in this world I'd come to, not just an exile, a maverick that had jumped the fence. I would feel like a woman again. (348)

"The Business Venture" (1988) marks the final turn of the wheel. Spencer returns to all the elements that so dominated her early novels and short stories--the beloved Southern town, the obsequious black, the close-knit group of friends, the country club and the life of "drinking and feasting, dancing, pranking, laughing, flirting, having fun" (149). Spencer even uses one of her traditional female characters to tell her story--a woman that would have been quite at home in A Voice at the Back Door or "A Southern Landscape." The innocent, enthusiastic voice of Eileen adds significantly to the story's poignancy and authenticity.

Nelle Townshend, who comes from a family inclined "to keep everything just the way it was," sets up a dry-cleaning business with a black, named Robin Byers. This single, seemingly mildly defiant act brings into question all the categories and assumptions (some hidden, some overt) of a small Mississippian town.

Nothing thereafter quite fits as it used to. Nelle Townshend, elegant, beautiful, does not marry. Nelle's

mother, the traditional Mrs. Townshend, demands that Nelle's old friends stay away (she uses a rather large shotgun as a way to make her point). Nelle sets up a business with a black and not a particularly handsome black ("Robin Byers was not any Harry Belafonte calypso-singing sex symbol" 140). The close group of friends that Nelle belongs to is described by the narrator:

It sometimes seemed to me, in considering the crowd we were always part of, from even before we went to school, straight on through, that we were all like one person, walking around different ways, but in some permanent way breathing together, feeling the same reactions, thinking each other's thoughts. (127)

The destabilizing action of Nelle Townshend and Robin Byers turns the town upsidedown; the disordering of Nelle and Byers reverberates through all other relationships in the town. Blacks no longer keep their place (Byers rides in the front seat of the car beside Nelle), the friends begin to cheat on each other, and the honourable town fathers bring Nelle and Byers to court on the charge that their dry-cleaning business is polluting the town. In spite of the pressure on them, neither Nelle nor Byers retreats from the town. Spencer leaves the resolution of the story "in the air." She gives the last words to Eileen:

I think we are all hanging on a golden thread, but who has got the other end? Dreaming or awake, I'm praying it will hold us all suspended. Yes, praying-- for the first time in years. (159)

The critical "turn of the wheel" that this story represents in Spencer's fiction is that the woman no longer breaks under the brunt of a concerted attack from friends, townspeople and the accumulated values of the town. Nelle Townshend is not daunted by the town and its censure. Instead, the town has to bear Nelle Townshend and her disruptive influence.

Elizabeth Spencer's short fiction is woman-dominated and woman-centred. She deals with a world that is vivid and circumscribed, ebullient and searching. If there is a common theme in these stories, it is the simple struggle of women to become actualized in a world that is encircling, compelling and patriarchal. Her stories progress from simple and gentle nostalgia, to biting criticisms of the marginality of women, to her final stories where a true peace of mind is finally, after a long struggle, achieved.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Catherine Sasser in No Place for an Angel opens a hotel door whose glass is "intractable with the dark opaque look of winter water." Spencer has a knack for opening such difficult doors. She focuses on human affairs, family affairs, love affairs with her own "lens" of understanding and deep compassion. Her work can be seen largely as an effort to clarify what is opaque, frightening, assumed and hidden in the secret, multifarious coding of human behaviour and attitudes. She has created a rich world of young girls, awkward children, confused wives and lonely spinsters--all of them trying to make sense of the world in which they live and seeking to find a "place" that is unique and satisfying. As Prenshaw sums up in her "The Heroines of Elizabeth Spencer's Fiction":

In Spencer's fiction, as in myth and modern psychology, representations of female alienation or otherworldliness may take many forms, ranging from seductive but evasive mermaids to ethereal, passive angels. The alienation embodied by these images, and the conflicts that Spencer's heroines experience between inner need and outer reality, are not, however, exclusively female territory. These characters express the universal modern experience of the self torn between a private,

self-conscious inner life and a compromised, shared outer life that demands forfeiture of consciousness or separateness--the preeminent theme of twentieth century literature. (148)

Spencer's fiction is neither casual nor trite. She works hard and successfully to express her own frustrations, attachments, and passions associated with growing up in a Southern milieu where deep-rooted bonds of kinship wrap themselves, like ivy, around lives. She transforms a sense of place into a profound vision of placedness. Her female protagonists, especially, attempt to find a place for themselves in a complicated, fractured, structured, ambivalent, traditional, restless universe that is the particular "place" for the late twentieth century. I should allow Spencer herself the last word:

I did a good deal of conscious trial and error about finding strong women characters. The world I was brought up in depended on the absolute first consideration always going to the male. So it was especially hard to seek out women characters who stood on their own. A break-through was Margaret Johnson in Light in the Piazza, who defended her right to make a decision for her daughter's happiness, going dead against her husband's wishes. Then with Martha Ingram I got sunk into neurosis and self-involvement. Also Catherine

Sasser never showed the positive force she should have, though I found her very appealing. With Julia in The Snare . . . I felt at last I found a female tough enough to withstand practically anything. One could hate her perversity and blame her lack of consideration for others, but she could last out and survive. (Personal correspondence, February 23, 1993)

And one can add to this list Maureen Partham, Deborah Tyler, Nelle Townshend, Theresa Stubblefield, Merilee Summerall, and Nancy Lewis.

This study has attempted to bring Elizabeth Spencer to the attention of a wider, critical audience. My hope is that this thematic exploration of her work will catalyze greater academic interest in a fine, but neglected Southern writer. Though one may feel certain reservations about some of her earlier novels, it seems that, in the main, Spencer's canon is rich, varied, and immensely satisfying. I would like to suggest a reading of Spencer that centres itself around the response of the daughter figures to the possessive, patriarchal strictures represented by fathers, husbands, and brothers. The struggle of woman for autonomy in Spencer's fictional universe is instructional, emotional, timely and lyrical.

Endnotes

¹ "In the South, a child habitually went barefoot. There was the invariable argument in April as to whether it was warm enough or not; the grass was green and soft and so sensual an excitement was permeated through one's body by its touch on the winter-tender sole that it still makes me shudder to remember such bliss . . . going barefoot, mosquito nets, malaria, chills and fever, watch out for snakes and quicksand, the wham of basketballs on outdoor courts, tennis balls white over nets of twilight, fishing, languid heat, and everywhere, the sense of love." "A Southern Childhood" 3.

² "Someone much wiser than I once told me that Southern families were cannibals. He was an enthusiastic Southerner himself, so I felt even more the weight of that judgment. The family assigns unfair roles, and never forgives the one who does not fulfil them. Of course, a sense of freedom is a large part of my own nature. I can't be straightjacketed." Conversations 117.

³ "My cousins at home have followed me, approve of my writing. Now, when I go back to Mississippi, it is quite wonderful because I don't have to go through all that heavy stuff that was mixed up with my own original family. My parents have died and my brother lives elsewhere" (Personal Interview) 20. Spencer celebrates these cousins in her

recent short story "The Cousins" in Jack of Diamonds and Other Stories.

⁴ "I am apparently very sensitive to environment. I'm very superstitious; I believe in place spirits. Where it comes from, I don't know. Maybe it comes from the thoughts and experiences of the people who live there, or maybe, if you want to be like Borges about it, it might come from the spirits of the place that influence the thoughts of the people in the place." Interview, Lucille King-Edwards 28.

⁵ An exploration of the isolated self trying to evade social definition can be found in R.W.B. Lewis's The American Adam (1955), Richard Chase's The American Novel and its Tradition (1957), and Leslie Fiedler's Love and Death in the American Novel (1960).

⁶ Gavin Anderson, in the short story "The Finder" gives up his gift of second sight in order to be reintegrated, "re-accepted" by the forces (both male and female, young and old, living and dead) of his Southern town.

⁷ Arny, in The Crooked Way, would enter the kitchen after Ferguson had been there and she would find "the air so thick from the sense of them [Negroes], I would instinctively protect my face with my hands, as though I had entered a cave of bats." 209.

⁸ "She was always hanging in the stench and the sight of Marnie and the buzzard and thinking her fate was there too,

to fall in and never be heard from, if not to fall in to let go deliberately; such reasoning as the old man logician [Henri Devigny] once commanded seemed now to be tearing into her again. She scratched the wall seeking for loose stones, and stones fell. Once she felt the whole side of roughbuilt cistern ease forward and again home-made cement sanded down into her mouth and eyes, and then she suddenly found the parcel, neatly wrapped." The Snare 406.

⁹ "The Snare is about evil as a positive force and the people who have to deal with it--it was an exaggeration of the way people live. People have to find a way of living within the ambience of evil." Personal Interview 28.

¹⁰ Spencer, "Over the years, as I wrote about women characters--primarily Margaret Johnson on--I searched for women who could sustain a weight of experience, both intellectual and emotional . . . But when I finally discovered Julia, I found in her a person who could take it and survive." Conversations 75.

¹¹ "She is most continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid watching herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually." John Berger, The Ways of Seeing, quoted in The Female Malady 212.

¹² Spencer has said that she finds Merilee to be a kind of alter-ego for her. "Merilee continues my other life. If I had stayed in Mississippi and not become a writer, I think I would have been like Merilee, content or discontent, in a Mississippi way." Conversations 57.

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