

# *The Pegasus Symbol in the Childhood Stories of Sinclair Ross*

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It's all over and it's all beginning, there's nothing more required of you. April and the smell of April just as it was that day too . . .<sup>1</sup>

THESE ARE DOC HUNTER'S final words in *Sawbones Memorial*, Sinclair Ross's latest novel, published in 1974. On an April day forty-five years earlier, Doc Hunter had arrived in Upward, Saskatchewan to practice medicine. On this day in April, he has retired and his son will take his place. It's all over *and* it's all beginning.

This sense of ending-and-beginning is present in most of Sinclair Ross's short stories and novels. The endings may be devastating, as in "The Lamp at Noon," or tentatively hopeful, as in *As For Me and My House*, but, in all cases, the possibility of a new beginning results from the ending of a one-sided experience of life dominated by either happiness or suffering, creativity or destruction. Awareness of reality is refocused or expanded to encompass both values, to acknowledge a duality in life. In his work, then, Ross is not "affirming polarities of good and bad . . . but exploring what is real in the world."<sup>2</sup> In order to begin again, a recognition of both halves of the whole — insight into the interplay of creative and destructive elements — is necessary to understand and come to terms with life. Doc Hunter capsulizes this theme, of "what is real in the world," toward the conclusion of *Sawbones Memorial*:

The Great Mother and The Evil Mother, maybe one and the same, creating life only to turn and destroy it. . . . As if the

potter got his wheel going and then couldn't stop it — and not knowing what to do with all the jugs and bottles piling up, no storage space, no markets, had to rig up another machine to grind them into dust again. (p. 130)

An inkling of this cycle produces new beginnings from endings, because hope need never die. The pots ground to dust do not remain dust. Instead, they are moulded again into beautiful perfect vessels. Creativity and destruction, beginnings and endings are inextricably linked. The group of stories to be discussed here, "A Day with Pegasus," "Cornet at Night," "Circus in Town," "The Outlaw," and "One's a Heifer," deal with Ross's most optimistic and hopeful endings-and-beginnings. In each story, a child discovers the dimension of the imagination and the one dimensional understanding of life anchored in every day reality ends. Each child is awakened to a world of new possibilities and experiences — a phase in the potter's cycle when creativity dominates and the life-sustaining, benevolent side of the duality of life shows itself.

Until quite recently, studies of the works of Sinclair Ross have overlooked such purely literary aspects of Ross's art to focus on his place among those writers whose time and place is the Canadian prairie during the Depression. Largely because critical attention has been centred on *As For Me and My House* and *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories*, most Ross criticism is an outgrowth of the impression of Ross as prairie realist, portraying the human suffering and environmental effects of the dustbowl prairie environment. As a result, the role of the prairie landscape as it reflects character or as it moulds character receives much emphasis in this criticism. However, as attention shifts from Ross's earliest work to considerations of his total literary output, the role of the landscape becomes secondary. More formalist study of Ross has yielded patterns of image, symbol, and theme which emerge from his novels and short stories to inform the vision of reality, which happens to have a prairie setting but also exists independent of it. Ross's writing is a unit in which he expresses his understanding of life as a cyclical duality of endings and beginnings, of combinations of creativity and destruction, which make up the whole of life. Although recent criticism has

dealt with a range of symbols, such as the lamp as symbol of hope, the colour gold as symbol of beauty, the mirrors, false fronts, and the house in *As For Me and My House* as symbols of hypocrisy, no one has yet undertaken a complete study of the imagery and symbolism and how they contribute to the meaning of Ross's fiction. One important aspect of Ross's imagery is his use of the horse as symbol of the hopeful creative, imaginative half of the duality of life.

Horses, in the works of Sinclair Ross, are recognized by recent critics, such as Lorraine McMullen and Robert Chambers, as more than realistic props in the dustbowl prairie setting. The horse is a recurring image in Ross's works, always "linked to the imaginative life."<sup>3</sup> The sensitive reader is immediately aware of a special relationship between Ross's children and their horses. This closeness gives the horses personalities of their own, independent of the children, so that as nearly separate characters, they initiate experiences which go beyond the normal child-horse relationship. The horse, which is more than a peripheral link to the imagination, becomes the enspiriting essence of the imagination. Without their horses, the children are at a loss to discover the dimension of the imagination which awakens their dreams of fulfilment, creativity, and happiness for the future by ending their one-sided view of life.

Each horse becomes a Pegasus, soaring above everyday reality to a light-filled dimension of perfection and beauty. In Greek mythology, Pegasus, the white, winged horse born from the blood of the beheaded Medusa, created the fountain of Hippocrene, which was sacred to the Muses as the source of poetic inspiration. The only man to ride this magical horse was Perseus, who captured and gently tamed him with a golden bridle provided by Athena. He successfully rode Pegasus to kill the Chimera, but when he pridefully attempted to join the gods on Olympus, Pegasus threw him back to earth, where Perseus remained, while Pegasus became the thunder and lightning bearer of Zeus.

As for Perseus, the Pegasus propels Ross's children into flights of the imagination, in which they soar above earthly reality. Specific elements associated with the dimension of the imagination recur in these stories. Extreme clarity of vision is possible in

this dimension, beauty and light are prominent sense impressions, and a sense of timelessness is experienced. Like Perseus, with his golden bridle, the children tame their imaginations by combination with everyday reality, and channel them into, in some cases, specifically artistic creation and, in all cases, a new awareness or perception of the world. Although these flights of imagination are momentary and these children could, like Perseus, be thrown back to earth forever, all are aware of having seen an other-worldly dimension, of having had a "glimpse of the unknown,"<sup>4</sup> that is, a glimpse of the possibilities or opportunities of life.

*A Day with Pegasus*, published in 1938, Ross's second published work, is the prototype for his use of the horse as symbol of the spirit of imagination, symbol of the creative half of the duality. With the birth of his long-awaited colt, Peter Parker discovers the tangibility of dreams:

It was a strange, almost unbearable moment. The horse that for five months had served the extravagances of his imagination, that he had lived with, gloried in, and underneath it all, never quite expected to come true — it was a reality now — alive, warm and breathing — two white stockings and a star.<sup>5</sup>

Because this incredible dream has come true, Peter is transported by degrees into a world of pure imagination, where anything is possible. The newborn colt quickly outstrips even Peter's dreams of its speed:

The colt ran with him, more swiftly now than it had ever run before. With no earth beneath their feet they leaped across the garden and around the house — around the house and across the garden — then back to stand a moment eager and irresolute before the stable door. (p. 143)

Soon the spirit of the dream possesses him, kindling his imagination further:

His colt, grown fleet of limb, possessed a fire and beauty that enslaved him now, that he could not abandon for the blear-eyed reality in Bidley's stall. (pp. 143-44)

Peter's vision expands yet again. His colt becomes the Pegasus which carries him into the world of the imagination:

But it was a mile to school, and the reality could not last so far. The white-stockinged legs began to flash more quickly, the long limp neck to arch, the stubby tail to flow. Then suddenly as if by magic he was mounted, and the still May morning sprang in whistling wind around his ears. Field after field reeled up and fell away. The earth resounded thundering, then dimmed and dropped until it seemed they cleaved their way through flashing light. Until at last he stood quite still, impaled with a kind of wonder-fear that life should yield him such divinity, while the sun poured blazing, and the road stretched white and dusty through the fields of early wheat. (p. 145)

Peter is no longer conscious of the material colt; he rides a spirited, mystical horse through the barrier separating earthbound reality and the realm of the imagination. Like Perseus, he has been transported into a new dimension above earthly reality where he sees divinity, perfection, and purity.

Also like Perseus, Peter's flight is abruptly grounded by earth-bound reality. First, his farm chores break the spell of his imagination:

It was the colt, the colt he had raced with before breakfast across the garden, that made the feeding of the calves this morning such a humiliation. . . . Nigger — Daisy — Dot — as stupid and silly as their names, gurgling and blowing at him until there was no colt left at all — until for beginnings again he had to steal back to the stable, and pay another visit to the box-stall. (pp. 144-45)

Next, he is reprimanded by Miss Kinley, his teacher, when he attempts to share his excitement with his friends, but her anger is lost on him. Possessed by the spirit of his new colt, he is involuntarily pulled out of the classroom reality into the dimension of his earlier flight:

Hammer of mortification — of despairing foreknowledge that he would never solve the [arithmetic] problem — and gradually at last of galloping hooves. . . . The rhythm persisted, was stronger even that [sic] the implacability of Miss Kinley's tapping ruler. . . . Gradually the class-room fell away from him. The light flashed golden in his eyes again. The fields sped reeling young and green. (p. 146)

Also, Peter's friends, firmly rooted in farm reality, are untouched

by the spirit of the imagination embodied by the colt. When Peter must defend the colt from their insults, his faith in its tangible spirit is strengthened:

The colt, now that he had actually championed it, seemed more real, more dependable — seemed even reaching out to assure him that the flights of his imagination this morning had been something more than mere fantasy. (p. 151)

Such incidents cannot permanently ground or defeat the spirit stimulated for the first time by his Pegasus. In each case, Peter is renewed and reaffirmed in his new beginning by the spirit of the imagination.

Peter's dilemma is, instead, that he is unable to convey to others the tangibility of the spirit of the imagination and, at the same time, this spirit prevents him from descending completely into reality. His short, but actual, friendship with a cowboy named Slim and his sensitized imagination combine into a day-dream over which he has little control. Imagination overpowers reality and an improbable fantasy results:

Slim must have another name, and fancifully it began to grow in Peter's mind that some day he might take horse and ride out seeking him again. . . . Then on again all four of them — unequal, yet in total virtue equalling: himself on the horse that was to be called whatever Slim's real name was — and a great cowboy riding Tony. (p. 147)

Later, the spirit of the imagination works in him so that he is consciously able to unite imagination and reality in a composition for Miss Kinley. He thinks of his colt and is again transported above the earth to the dimension of the imagination:

[T]here was a moment's stillness round him, clear and isolating like a globe of magic crystal; and then suddenly he was writing. As he had never written before. With the glow and enthusiasm of sheer inspiration. (pp. 151-52)

Rather than reproduce the Saturday which he considers "a limbo of unworthy dullness" (p. 151), "he transformed it — redeemed it with an inner, potential reality — rose suddenly like a master above the limitations of mere time and distance (p. 152). Now for the first time, Peter reproduces in a controlled manner the

experiences of his flight above the earth. He gives his Saturday the freedom of possibility, the inner, potential reality which pushes his experience in the sheer joy of being alive into the timeless, universal sphere of perfection.

Miss Kinley, like Peter's friends, demands pure earthbound reality. She insists that he write a completely accurate account of how he spent his Saturday and destroys the imaginative one, filled with possibility, hope for the future, and excitement. Peter is again thrown to earth in mid-flight. In confusion and frustration, he again seeks renewal from his colt, the embodiment of the spirit of the imagination: "all his pride in a peerless horse had become a humble need to see again and draw comfort from a wobbly-legged one" (p. 154). He enters Bidy's stall "in fearful hope of what awaited him" (p. 155), but the spirit of the imagination is still strong: "There was the same hush, the same solemnity" (p. 155), which he has felt on first discovering the colt. In addition, as he seeks renewal from the material horse, his dream expands once more from being merely a childish wish for a fast horse to become a dream of understanding, of seeing and knowing the mysteries which life offers.

Peter slips into the hay loft to interpret the awakening which has been inspired by the birth of his colt. Instinctively, he senses that this moment is the beginning of the fulfilment of his own destiny. With the birth of his colt, which inspired the birth of his imagination, Peter was born anew: "It was imperative to be alone a few minutes, to feel his way through and beyond this mystery of beginning" (p. 155). As he looks out over the prairie from the stable loft, Peter is able to describe this new awareness:

There was a state of mind, a mood, a restfulness, in which one could skim along this curve of prairie floor, and gathering momentum from the downward swing, glide up again and soar away from earth. He succeeded now. Borne by a white-limbed steed again, but smoothly, as if their passage were a flight: no rush of wind, no beat of thundering hooves. And in the flight the mystery was not solved, but gradually absorbed, a mystery still but intimate, a heartening gleam upon the roof of life to let him see its vault and spaciousness. (pp. 155-56)

He laments the fact that he has only just awakened to the possi-

bilities of his future and has wasted time, unlike his colt which is "[a]ble to go into and explore a whole new waiting world. . . . It seemed a pity that a boy was never born that way" (p. 156).

As Peter's awareness of the power of the imagination grows and he gains control over its influence, he becomes an artist uniting reality and imagination in a new way of perceiving the world around him. This is Peter's beginning, his first experience with the side of the duality of life which he had not known existed, and the first step toward the mature vision of the whole of the potter's cycle. The earthly horse acts as a Muse, the spirit in its purest form, to inspire in Peter recognition of an inner, potential reality, an awareness of the numberless possibilities life holds. Since the colt lived up to his expectations, the spirit of the imagination suggests that his hopes for the future are also possible. However, Peter's awareness advances one step further to make him an artist and bring him closer to affirming the duality. He still has no experience with the soul-destroying side of darkness which dominates in the stories about the dustbowl prairie. While Pegasus transports the boy into a dimension of crystal clarity, light, divinity, and beauty, he does, through the story of his Saturday, unite this creative side of life with its opposite, dreary, ordinary reality.

While Peter Parker has his knowledge of the two-sidedness of life expanded by the Pegasus spirit at the birth of his colt, some children are inspired to begin seeking life's possibilities by other manifestations of the same spirit. The earthly manifestation of Peter's flight to the dimension of the imagination was his inspired story about his adventurous Saturday. Similarly, music, the earthly manifestation of another artist's flight in the creative dimension, is the enspiriting force which begins Tommy Dickson's new awareness of the duality of life in "Cornet at Night."

In this story, the musical composition, *Sons of Liberty*, is Tommy's counterpart to Peter's cowboy adventure day dream. The Pegasus spirit of this music, unfortunately, is not under Tommy's control:

There was a fine swing and vigor in this piece, but it was hard. Hard because it was so alive, so full of youth and head-high rhythm. It was a march, and it did march. I couldn't take time



to practise the hard spots slowly till I got them right, for I had to march too. I had to let my fingers sometimes miss a note or strike one wrong. Again and again this afternoon I started carefully, resolving to count right through, the way Miss Wiggins did, and as often I sprang ahead to lead my march a moment or two all dash and fire, and then fall stumbling in the bitter dust of dissonance.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike Peter, Tommy cannot control the Pegasus spirit, and rather than open to him a new perception of life, such inspiration is frustrating and confusing. In addition, he does not confront life with Peter's vigour, like an adventurous Perseus. For example, in a departure from the usual farm routine, Tommy's father sends him to town to hire a hand for the harvest. Cautious of hoping for too much, Tommy will not submit himself entirely to the sheer joy of this new opportunity:

For while it was always my way to exploit the future, I liked to do it rationally, within the limits of the sane and probable. On my way to the cows I wanted to live the trip to town tomorrow many times, with variations, but only on the explicit understanding that tomorrow there was to be a trip to town. I have always been tethered to reality, always compelled by an unfortunate kind of probity in my nature to prefer a barefaced disappointment to the luxury of a future I have no just claims upon. (p. 38)

The spirit of Pegasus, the luxury of a future, is a disruptive force in Tommy's life. He is not a dreamer on the possibilities of life, even though he has been touched by the spirit of the imagination through his music.

Significantly, Tommy is sent to town in the care of an old farm horse named Rock, which is outwardly not of the race of Pegasus. However, with Rock, Tommy knows the feeling of control, confidence, and superiority that a horse, a Pegasus, inspires. Like Peter Parker riding his dream horse on Saturday rodeo adventures, Tommy and Rock together are a match for the world, and Tommy, under Rock's influence, is awakened to his own capabilities and potential:

Alone with himself and his horse he [a boy] cuts a fine figure. He is the measure of the universe. He foresees a great many encounters with life, and in them all acquits himself a little more

than creditably. He is fearless, resourceful, a bit of a brag. His horse never contradicts. (p. 40)

Therefore, even stolid Rock belongs to the spirit of the imagination for helping Tommy experience, if only momentarily, how his life could be.

Naturally, under Rock's influence, Tommy is attracted to a man whose presence proclaims that he *is* the measure of the universe. Although the man is obviously not the farm hand his father needs to help with the harvest, he is "strong with a strength that was different from the rugged labour-strength I knew" (p. 42). Drawn by this inner strength, which he does not possess, Tommy hires Philip Coleman knowing he is unacceptable for harvest work. He *is* suitable, however, for Tommy's purpose. He corrects Tommy's impression that by subduing his flights of feeling, inspired by his music, by "keep[ing] slow and steady like Miss Wiggins" (pp. 45-46) when he plays, he would be less frustrated and perplexed. Philip disagrees. What Tommy needs to do is learn to control his imagination.

To illustrate his point, Philip plays his cornet. "[O]nly one fragment of a note" from the cornet "like pure and mellow gold" (p. 46) is necessary to transform the plodding Rock into a spirited Pegasus. At the briefest sound from the cornet, Rock leaves the road, carrying the wagon on a jolting gallop across the open prairie. Although his flight never becomes airborne, Rock responds to the spirit of the imagination and breaks out of routine reality. For Tommy, too, the stranger's cornet is the agent of the imaginative spirit which lifts him out of earthly reality, the notes flying and soaring like Pegasus, to expand his limited understanding of life for new awareness:

And I was right: when they came the notes were piercing, golden as the cornet itself, and they gave life expanse that it had never known before. They floated up against the night, and each for a moment hung there clear and visible. Sometimes they mounted poignant and sheer. Sometimes they soared and then, like a bird alighting, fell and brushed earth again. (p. 49)

Tommy feels the influence, not only of having found a kindred spirit, but of the spirit of the imagination ordering his life and giving him a destiny, a place to begin:

I could still feel the cornet's presence as if it were a living thing. Somehow its gold and shapeliness persisted, transfiguring the day, quickening the dusty harvest fields to a gleam and lustre like its own. And I felt assured, involved. Suddenly there was a force in life, a current, an inevitability, carrying me along too. (p. 47)

This is how Peter Parker felt at the end of "A Day with Pegasus." He was awake to explore and know the world. Now the awakened artistic spirit in Tommy has a purpose. The march Philip plays, which is controlled and disciplined, as *Sons of Liberty* should have been, inspires him to take advantage of life's possibilities: "It said that life was worth the living and bright as morning shone ahead to show the way" (p. 49).

However, Tommy's beginning is not as assured as Peter's is. Life on a farm dictates that artistry like Philip's is insignificant. He merely delays the harvest and leaves a bittersweet memory of his short intrusion: "A harvest, however lean, is certain every year: but a cornet at night is golden only once" (p. 51). This conclusion is ambivalent, and Ross's revisions of this story indicate that he meant it to be so. As McMullen comments, "Ross eliminated the lines which specifically indicate that Tommy now sees he too must be a musician — or at least an artist."<sup>7</sup> Ross has no successful artists in his work, only those who are beginning to pursue that dream with "tentative self-knowledge."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, after "A Day with Pegasus," the potter's cycle of "creation one day, destruction the next,"<sup>9</sup> imposes itself more strongly in Ross's fictional world, as is evident in "Cornet at Night." An intimate knowledge of the dimension of the imagination is strictly balanced with a bitter taste of the dimension of destruction, a more extreme version of the everyday reality which opposed Peter's flight.

The strengthening of the destructive side of the duality is evident in "Circus in Town," even though the child, Jenny, does have her awareness of life expanded by a flight with Pegasus. A torn poster advertising a circus transports Jenny from the reality of her bickering parents into a flight of imagination.

The bit of poster had spun a new world before her, excited her, given wild, soaring impetus to her imagination; and now,

without in the least understanding herself, she wanted the excitement and the soaring, even though it might stab and rack her, rather than the barren satisfaction of believing that in life there was nothing better, nothing more vivid or dramatic than her own stableyard.<sup>10</sup>

Jenny's awareness of life's possibilities grows out of her initial wish merely to prolong the wonder and excitement of her fantasy-circus. Under the influence of the Pegasus spirit, she sees life going in two directions:

This sudden dilation of life — it was like a bubble blown vast and fragile. In time it might subside, slowly, safely, or it might even remain full-blown, gradually building up the filmy tissues to make its vastness durable, but tonight she was afraid. Afraid that before the hack of her mother's voice it might burst and crumble. (p. 71)

To prevent the bubble of this beginning awareness from bursting, she retreats from the world to remain untouched by reality in her imaginative reverie:

[F]or once the threats of what would happen next time failed to touch her. The circus went on. All night long she wore her new purple tights and went riding Billie round and round the pasture in them. (p. 73)

While Jenny's dream-circus seems unforgettable, it also appears to be only a momentary escape from the bickering and unhappiness of her family life, rather than a permanent beginning leading to fulfilment outside the farm. Like Tommy Dickson, Jenny's insight into the possibilities of life is not as complete as the awareness of Peter Parker, perhaps because of the encroachment of the destructive dimension of the duality.

Jenny and Tommy Dickson wander in their imagination-states, enjoying the freedom and emotional intensity, but have no concrete goals formulated from their flights of imagination, no clear beginnings initiated. Only Peter Parker is able to articulate what he has learned from his flight with Pegasus. He is an artist, able to synthesize the dimension of earthly reality and the dimension of the imagination to explore the world. However, Peter McAlpine, in "The Outlaw," is thirteen, older than Peter, Tommy, and Jenny, and the first child to be confronted with the harsher,

dark side of the duality which is dominant in the stories about adults coping with the dustbowl prairie. In short, Peter McAlpine is the first child to experience the polar opposites of the duality, the extremes of experience which correspond to the images in the potter's cycle, for the most complete perception of life in Ross's childhood stories.

Peter McAlpine and Isabel and Peter Parker and his new colt have much in common. Both boys ride exquisitely beautiful and spirited horses into the dimension of the imagination. The imagery used to describe their flights connotes a realm of pristine beauty, crystal clarity, absolute timelessness, and an aura of the magical or mystical. However, the exotic, black Isabel is much more complex than the purely spiritual white-limbed creature in "A Day with Pegasus." Initially, she is described as "beautiful but dangerous,"<sup>11</sup> a killer which no one expects the thirteen-year-old Peter to ride. She is kindred to the destructive elements of the prairie environment:

[S]he was a captive, pining her heart away. Week after week she stamped and pawed, nosed the hay out of her manger contemptuously, flung up her head and poured out wild, despairing neighs into the prairie winds and blizzards streaming past.

(p. 24)

For Peter, she is the composite of equine beauty and spirit:

She was one horse, and she was all horses. Thundering battle chargers, fleet Arabians, untamed mustangs — sitting beside her on her manger I knew and rode them all. There was a history in her shapely head and burning eyes. I charged with her at Bala-klava, Waterloo, scoured the deserts of Africa and the steppes of the Ukraine. Conquest and carnage, trumpets and glory — she understood and carried me triumphantly. (p. 25)

Isabel embodies all time and all experience. She understands and transmits to Peter the mystery of life, its potential and its dreams:

To approach her was to be enlarged, transported. She was coal-black, gleaming, queenly. Her mane had a ripple and her neck an arch. And somehow, softly and mysteriously, she was always burning. The reflection on her glossy hide, whether of winter sunshine or yellow lantern light, seemed the glow of some fierce, secret passion. There were moments when I felt the whole

stable charged with her, as if she were the priestess of her kind, in communion with her diety [sic]. (p. 25)

Isabel glows golden like Philip's cornet, but much more sensually. She too has a presence of her own, an electrical charge, "a force in life, a current, an inevitability."<sup>12</sup>

Isabel's personality, then, adds another dimension to the imaginative spirit which initiates Peter's new awareness of life. Peter must fight the temptation to ride Isabel because her reputation is tainted with evil, not just disobedience. In a scene which, as McMullen suggests, echoes the temptation of Christ by Satan,<sup>13</sup> Isabel shows how, as co-conspirator, she could raise him to a respected position among his peers:

And then, temptress, she bore me off to the mountain top of my vanity, and with all the world spread out before my gaze, talked guilefully of prestige and acclaim.

Over there, three miles away, was the school house. What a sensation to come galloping up on her, the notorious outlaw, instead of jogging along as usual on bandy-legged old Pete. . . . How sweet to wipe out all the ignominy of my past, to be deferred to by the older boys, to bask in Millie's smiles of favour.

Over there, seven miles away . . . was town. Where fairs were sometimes held, and races run. On such a horse I naturally would win . . . (p. 26)

Peter childishly attempts to keep the boundary between good and evil sharply defined, while Isabel would blur the focus because true awareness of the mystery of life requires experience with both. As a result, Peter will be confronted with a two-sided reality. Isabel *is* a killer, but, because she is so dangerous, she can provide the self-respect which Peter so desires. She *is* a temptress, coaxing him toward disobeying his parents' order not to ride her, but she also offers knowledge of the unknown. In describing Isabel as "one horse, and . . . all horses" (p. 25), Peter unwittingly acknowledges this duality. He has ridden Isabel in wars, situations of life and death, carnage and glory, where destinies are decided. In addition, Isabel in her very essence, burning with sensual devotion to her deity, combining sensuality and spirituality is not, according to W. H. New, "affirming polarities of good and bad, but . . . exploring what is real in the world."<sup>14</sup>

True understanding of the mystery of life is gained from knowledge of both good and evil. Since Isabel represents all experience in the potential, inner reality of life, Peter must conclude that life will bring his worst fears as well as his most desired dreams to fruition. By resisting Isabel, Peter remains a child, resisting a complete awareness of the two-sided mystery of life.

As the imaginative spirit, Isabel's motive for Peter's ride is to share with him the secrets of her deity. As she has promised, the actual ride is more spectacular than Peter has ever imagined. She is Pegasus, the flying horse:

She didn't drop to a trot or walk as an ordinary horse would have done, but instead, with the clean grace and precision of a bird alighting on a branch, came smoothly to a halt. (p. 30)

She shows him beauty he has never seen before, a deeper awareness of the landscape not possible without the influence of the spirit of the imagination:

And I too, responsive to her bidding, was aware as never before of its austere, unrelenting beauty. There were the white fields and the blue, metallic sky; the little splashes here and there of yellow strawstack, luminous and clear as drops of gum on fresh pine lumber; the scattered farmsteads brave and wistful in their isolation; the gleam of the sun and snow. (p. 30)

All the elements of Peter Parker's dimension of the imagination are here, but Isabel adds more. She insists Peter see the world as it really is, two-sided:

Look, she said firmly, while it's here before you, so that to the last detail it will remain clear. For you, too, some day there may be stalls and halters, and it will be a good memory. (p. 30)

Isabel directs his awareness to the future, but just as Peter suspected, not only do dreams come true, but also fears and a harsher reality. She heightens this cruel, dark, fear-inspiring side of the mystery on the return ride:

She disdained and rebelled against her stall, but the way she whipped the wind around my ears you would have thought she had suddenly conceived a great affection for it. It was a strong wind, fierce and cold. . . . Her mane blew back and lashed my

face. Before the steady blast of wind my forehead felt as if the bone were wearing thin. (p. 30)

Peter manages to stay mounted while Isabel gives him a taste of this destructive side of life. He suffers frozen ears for the experience. However, more significantly, like prideful Perseus who attempted to ride Pegasus to Olympus to place himself among the gods, the moment Peter thinks *he* is in control of this experience, Isabel throws him into a snow drift:

Being able to ride an outlaw was not the same thing at all as being accorded the privilege of riding one, and for the good of my soul, it was high time I appreciated the distinction. (p. 31)

Riding Pegasus is an opportunity not to be missed or taken for granted. Other such chances will be available to Peter, but he must take responsibility for his actions. As Pegasus, she naturally explains this through the metaphor of horsemanship:

From the bottom of her heart she hoped I wouldn't be so unfortunate another time. So far as she was concerned, however, she could make no promises. There had been one fall, she explained . . . and there might easily be another. The future was entirely up to me. She couldn't be responsible for my horsemanship. (p. 31)

Within this experience, then, Isabel shows Peter both sides of the mystery of life. By riding this two-faceted Pegasus, he accepts the challenge of a new beginning, the challenge to encounter life as a duality of light and dark, creativity and destruction, and to deal with the phases of the potter's cycle. Therefore, Peter has not, as McMullen suggests, "move[d] from the fantasy world of the child to the real world of the adult,"<sup>15</sup> but has linked the two for a new awareness of life. Peter McAlpine's flights of the imagination with Isabel are not replaced by tangible, realistic dreams of impressing his friends at school, as if the tangible reality were superior to the imaginative reality. Isabel shows him the calm, perfect beauty of the landscape from a Pegasus point of view and qualifies this insight with: "Someday there may be stalls and halters, and it will be a good memory" (p. 30), because full complete awareness of the mystery of life depends on knowledge of both sides of the duality.



A much more intense manifestation of the destructive dimension of life is experienced by an unnamed boy in "One's a Heifer." Like Peter, he is thirteen and takes a horseback ride which changes his awareness of life. In "The Outlaw," Isabel rewards Peter with a glimpse of exquisite beauty when he takes charge of his own life by doing a thing forbidden by parents who think he is still a child. The boy in "One's a Heifer" voluntarily takes on the adult duty of searching for lost calves, but rather than ascending to a lofty vision of perfection and beauty, he descends to a dark, hellish atmosphere which, nevertheless, accords him a new awareness. Both boys are passive participants in this growth toward insight; neither boy looks voluntarily at the unknown. Peter is forced to appreciate the beauty of the landscape by Isabel, and the boy in "One's a Heifer" is drawn involuntarily and fearfully to the dark mystery in the boxstall by an uncontrollable urge. Both forces, light and dark, beauty and terror, are equally strong as manifestations of the unknown.

While the boy's visions expand in opposite directions, one toward light and the other toward darkness, the role of the horse remains constant. Like Isabel, Billie, and Peter Parker's colt, Tim is also associated with the warmth, light, and clarity of vision of the creative dimension. For example, Tim reluctantly leaves the farmyard, where perception is clear:

After the storm the drifts lay clear and unbroken to the horizon. Distant farm-buildings stood out distinct against the prairie as if the thin sharp atmosphere were a magnifying glass.<sup>16</sup>

He naturally becomes disheartened as the cold saps the warmth which associates him with Isabel and the cornet as manifestations of the spirit of the imagination: "despite the cold his flanks and shoulders soon were steaming" (p. 120). Tim and the boy follow the calves to "a poor, shiftless-looking place" (p. 121), which is devoid of light and comfort: "Darkness was beginning to close in, but there was no light in the windows" (p. 121). Tim has carried his rider to a place of insight into the dark side of the duality, just as Isabel carried Peter McAlpine to an awareness of the light-filled dimension of the imagination.

This boy cannot respond to the experiences of this newly discovered dimension with joy and spontaneity as the other children reacted to their flights in the creative dimension. Vickers, the man who lives in this dark, cold environment, is threatening. Furthermore, his unlit barn has a presence which seems the essence of darkness and evil:

Behind the light from his lantern the darkness hovered vast and sinister. It seemed to hold its breath, to watch and listen. . . . My eyes were fixed on him so intently that he seemed to lose substance, to loom up close a moment, then recede. At last he disappeared completely, and there was only the lantern like a hard hypnotic eye. (p. 123)

This looming and receding movement has been experienced by the children associated with the bright side of the mystery as their focus on reality weakened or dilated and they were overcome by the quiet, timeless clarity of the dimension of the imagination. Rather than an expanded vision, however, the oppressive, dark presence has focused the boy's awareness onto the lantern, a yellow glow, which is almost defeated by the darkness: "It held me. It held me rooted against my will" (p. 123). Peter Parker is also unable to shake off his imaginative vision, but this boy's glimpse at the unknown has a sinister quality from which he wishes to escape:

I wanted to run from the stable, but I wanted even more to see inside the stall. Wanting to see and afraid of seeing. (p. 123)

This mystery is not carefree and prolonged with enthusiasm; the boy willingly escapes when Vickers offers an excuse to leave the boxstall uninvestigated.

The boy spends the night with Vickers rather than return home through the darkness without his calves, which he believes are locked in Vickers's stall. He spends an uneasy night. At first, he and Vickers play checkers and Vickers talks about his former housekeeper. When he does go to bed, the boy dozes and dreams, waking to find Vickers's owl starting at him and Vickers still at the checkerboard, apparently in combat with an invisible enemy. The boy dreams about rising and going to look in the boxstall:

There was a bright light suddenly and the owl was sitting over the door with his yellow eyes like a pair of lanterns. The calves, he told me were in the other stall with the sick colt. I looked and they were there all right, but Tim came up and said it might be better not to start for home till morning. . . . I agreed, realizing now it wasn't the calves I was looking for after all, and that I still had to see inside the stall that was guarded by the owl.

(p. 130)

The owl is Vickers. His eyes have seen the secret contents of the boxstall and he guards others from such knowledge. In the dream, the boy realizes that this knowledge, not the calves, is what he searches for.

In the morning, despite this dream, the boy still believes the calves are hidden in the boxstall. When he goes to the barn to get Tim, he uses a nervous horse as a diversion to distract Vickers long enough to attempt to look in the stall. As he tries to open the door, he comes to realize his desire to see inside has nothing to do with the calves or Vickers. His search is now focused on knowledge of the essence of darkness, the side of the duality which is unknown to him:

Terrified of the stall though, not of Vickers. Terrified of the stall, yet compelled by a frantic need to get inside. For the moment I had forgotten Vickers, forgotten even the danger of his catching me. I worked blindly, helplessly, as if I were confined and smothering. For a moment I yielded to panic. . . . Then, collected again, I forced back the lower bolt, and picking up the whiffle-tree tried to pry the door out a little at the bottom. (pp. 132-33)

The boy escapes and returns home cold, exhausted, and emotionally distraught. The calves, he learns, had returned shortly after he had set out. The boy is stunned to silence by the realization that the secret Vickers guarded was that he had murdered his housekeeper and hidden her body in the stall. Though the boy has not actually seen into the stall, he has glimpsed this dark divinity of death through his experiences with Vickers.

The other children, Peter Parker, Jenny, and Tommy Dickson, experience flights to the light-filled imaginative realm, the opposite dimension to the one experienced by this boy. As with Peter

McAlpine, in "The Outlaw," who faced the destructive dimension by making his own decision to ride Isabel, the boy in "One's a Heifer," by searching for the calves, also comes into contact with the potentially dangerous side of life. However, for both boys, the urge to experience both sides of the mystery, the light and the dark, is strong. Rather than grow increasingly more frightened the longer he stays with Vickers, the boy becomes more and more determined to look into the boxstall. When an initially pride-inspiring ride becomes the opposite, the dimension of destruction and the dimension of the imagination are linked in one experience. The boy becomes disturbingly aware that a mature understanding of life includes knowledge of both light and darkness, that elements of both sides make up the true essence of life. For this child, as for Ross's other child characters, "it's all over and it's all beginning." A childish one-sided understanding of life ends and a sometimes dangerous, potentially disappointing and painful world of new possibilities and challenge begins.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Sinclair Ross, *Sawbones Memorial* (1974; rpt. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1978), p. 143.
- <sup>2</sup> W. H. New, "Sinclair Ross's Ambivalent World," *Canadian Literature*, No. 40 (Spring 1960), p. 28.
- <sup>3</sup> Lorraine McMullen, *Sinclair Ross* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), p. 91.
- <sup>4</sup> Sinclair Ross, "Cornet at Night," *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1968), p. 49.
- <sup>5</sup> Sinclair Ross, "A Day with Pegasus," *Queen's Quarterly*, 45, 2 (Summer 1938), p. 143. Subsequent references to this story appear in parentheses following the quotation.
- <sup>6</sup> Ross, "Cornet at Night," p. 38. Subsequent references to this story appear in parentheses following the quotation.
- <sup>7</sup> McMullen, p. 40.
- <sup>8</sup> McMullen, p. 40.
- <sup>9</sup> Ross, *Sawbones Memorial*, p. 130.
- <sup>10</sup> Sinclair Ross, "Circus in Town," *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1968), p. 24. Subsequent references to this story appear in parentheses following the quotation.
- <sup>11</sup> Sinclair Ross, "The Outlaw," *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories*

(Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1968), p. 24. Subsequent references to this story appear in parentheses following the quotation.

<sup>12</sup> Ross, "Cornet at Night," p. 47.

<sup>13</sup> McMullen, p. 42.

<sup>14</sup> New, p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> McMullen, p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> Sinclair Ross, "One's a Heifer," *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1968), p. 119. Subsequent references to this story appear in parentheses following the quotation.