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Outport and Cosmos: Meaning in *The Way of the Sea*

VIRGINIA RYAN

IN THE TEN STORIES comprising *The Way of the Sea* (1903), Ontario-born author Norman Duncan (1871-1916) used a turn-of-the-century Newfoundland outport setting as a symbolic battlefield on which to grapple with the phenomenon of man's ultimate helplessness in a world that is too harsh. With a persistently intrusive narrative voice and an epic style that might repel a modern reader, Duncan evokes a dark, harsh world where people struggled against natural elements invested with vindictive intent. Yet despite his somewhat archaic style, the vision Duncan developed through his visits to Newfoundland's northeast coast translated, in these stories, into a unique and powerful treatment of two timeless themes: man combatting an incomprehensible fate, and man evolving and using religion to help him cope with that fate. The conclusions he derived from his exploration of these themes are essentially tragic; his stories suggest that even the best of men are ultimately helpless against the might of the sea, and that the religion they create to deal with this helplessness, because deficient in love and understanding, can become grotesque. And Duncan's unique artistic use of the Newfoundland outport in addressing these ultimately ontological and theological concerns prevents matters of style from turning away sensitive readers. The strategies he employed to address these concerns, along with an analysis of his major themes and conclusions, are the focus of this essay.

Duncan's experience of Newfoundland began in 1900 when, "seized by an impulse to write of the sea" (Adams viii) and commissioned by *McClure's Magazine*, he set out from New York, where he was working as a journalist, hoping to reach St. Anthony and to write about the work of

Wilfred Grenfell (Moore 33). Biographer Thomas Moore reveals that Duncan had tried to get a “toehold” in various fishing communities along the eastern seaboard of the U.S. “but found them overcrowded with tourists and unsuitable for study in his writings” (33). Quite possibly, Newfoundland’s initial attraction to Duncan was that he saw it as uncomplicated, as stripped of those nonessentials with which the dawning 20th century was encumbered — making him party to that literary phenomenon Patrick O’Flaherty identified as the family of authors who have come to Newfoundland to “recreat[e] in this sparsely populated and primitive territory an image of their own diminishing frontier” (83). In 20th century North America, Newfoundland may have represented to Duncan one of the few locations where he could find basic man still pitted against an elemental world. What he found, though, was neither idyllic nor reassuring. Newfoundlanders, he decided, have demonstrated one great accomplishment: “they . . . maintain the sovereignty of the race to the edge of the uninhabitable” (*Way of the Sea* 108). However, he also concluded that they have accomplished this feat at great cost: the cost of having “to live in dread of the enemies thereto driven — Night, Solitude, and Cold” (108), and the ultimate, all-encompassing enemy, the Sea.

This “dread” that Duncan found at “the edge of the uninhabitable” permeated his treatment of the Newfoundland landscape and psyche, so much so, that he has been criticized for painting a too uncompromisingly bleak picture of the place. The sea, in Duncan’s writing, is a “reaper” of humans (104), and its ally, the north wind, “dream[s] of the bodies of men” (122). Gales are “wrathful,” the grinding of ice is “cruel” (37), and rocks are “like iron teeth” (42). Duncan’s depictions of nature in the fictitious Ragged Harbour he writes of seldom allow beauty to prevail over gloom: if a sunset is beautiful, the beauty is “a borrowed glory that, anon, [flees], leaving a melancholy tint behind” (15). If children play outdoors on a winter evening, they make “sport and laughter until the hoary old hills [grow] tired of mocking” (137). Some aspect of nature always “mocks” man’s levity in these stories. The reality Duncan ascribes to nature in Newfoundland is that it is always ultimately harsh and cruel, and further that its ultimate intent is to destroy. If the sea “fell into that rippling, sunny mood,” this was only a way for it to “gather strength for a new assault” (57). The fog that envelops the doomed boys in the story “The Chase of the Tide” is “in the form of a gigantic hand, shaped like a claw, being passed cautiously over a table, to close on a careless fly” (19). And if land and seascape imagery is luridly ominous, so too are depictions of the outport Newfoundlander’s psychic battles, particularly those of the child or man who is awakened to the horror of his lot.

The Newfoundlander who perseveres in staunchly facing Duncan’s relentlessly cruel, vindictive sea is usually defeated anyway — as happens in the stories “The Raging of the Sea,” “In the Fear of the Lord,” and “The

Fruits of Toil.” However, the mental and physical plight of the Newfoundlander who actually fears the sea is still more terrible, as the recurring motif of the “marked man” makes evident. The marked man in Duncan’s Ragged Harbour is generally different from the standard Ragged Harbour man — more delicately-built, more fanciful — and is thus physically and/or mentally unfit for the hard challenge of outpost life. As Duncan construes it, local Newfoundland legend warns that he who fears the sea will be killed by the sea, which has a particular appetite for such men.

We first see the marked man motif in “The Chase of the Tide,” in which two small boys are lost at sea and drown. The leader of the doomed odyssey is little Skipper Jo, who in chatting with old Sammy Arnold reveals that he fears the sea. This, the narrator informs us, is “the Mystery!” (6) The old man whispers prophetically to the child, “you be one o’ they poor folk that can’t abide the say . . . you be one o’they the say catches — like your fawther,” and “thereafter Jo knew the sea for his enemy” (6). Sure enough, at the story’s end the sea does “catch” little Skipper Jo, who meets his death with “the quiet admission of defeat at the hands of a long-fought enemy” (29).

In “The Strength of Men” we meet the marked man again in the person of young John Nash, out aboard a sealing schooner in a bad storm. John, we learn, “was a slight . . . boy . . . small measure of the bone and hard flesh of his mates.” He, the narrator adds, “was one of those poor, dreamful folk who fear the sea” (44). And it is clear in the ensuing story that John would indeed have perished at sea, had not his brother Saul shown superhuman compassion in saving him. The legend holds, however. Only an unexpected manifestation of the spirit of self-sacrifice has saved the marked man from doom.

The third time this motif appears is in “A Beat t’Harbour,” in which Dannie Crew, encouraged as a child by his father to make dreadful poetic associations between the sea and death, grows up fearing the sea and becomes the only man aboard his vessel to drown in a storm. His father regrets the fancies he has encouraged in Danny, sharing the local belief that the boy’s fear will doom him. In a belated effort to undo the fancies he has nurtured, he says to his son

The wind . . . is but wind; it lies in wait for noa man. The sea is but water; it has noa hands t’sretch out. Nor wind, nor sea, nor fog, nor night, hate men. But they’ll catch you, sure, an you is afeared o’them. (271)

These words come too late. The boy’s fears are formed, and so wretched is his subsequent existence that his final drowning is a form of relief, a “beat t’harbour” through which he is forever delivered from “toil and strife and the haunting fear” (303). A provocative implication in this story is that the very predilection for “dabbling with words” is itself the author of fear. Word associations like those made by Danny and his father — for example, the

“sea in the hoale” is “like Granfer Luff when he coughs blood,” and “the breakers under the window” are “the thud o’ clods on his coffin” (265-6) — create a capacity for fear not prevalent in minds less apt to deal in metaphors. “I’m thinkin’ that fancies make cowards o’ men,” the father growls (271), a suggestion which makes the reader recall details of Duncan’s own life. Duncan discovered en route to St. Anthony that “he was a poor sailor” (Adams viii), so poor that the trip was not completed. His first and subsequent summers in Newfoundland were spent on dry land at Exploits Island, Notre Dame Bay, where he obtained what we might now call a “hangashore’s” glimpse of life at sea. Moore too notes that in gathering material for his Newfoundland stories, “Duncan spent a great amount of time talking with the fishermen, but he rarely went fishing with them. His fear of boats and sea-sickness kept him on the shore” (41).

However, whether or not there is any basis for linking Duncan’s personal life and feelings with the dread that pervades his ten stories, and whether or not one subscribes to the bleakness of his vision of place and people, the literary effect of this vision, with its theological ramifications, is both powerful and thought provoking. In the ensuing sections of this essay, I will examine, first, the narrative techniques Duncan employed to develop his vision, and, second, the central themes embodied in the stories.

Duncan placed Ragged Harbour on the east coast of the Great Northern Peninsula, “thirty miles [south of] Englee” (173), an area that was particularly isolated, even by Newfoundland standards, in the early 1900s. Drawing upon the sights, sounds, and stories he gathered by living among the Exploits Island fishermen for a succession of summers, and aided by the deep friendship he enjoyed with at least one Exploits family (Moore 37), Duncan gradually fashioned this imaginary community into a composite of local places he had visited and heard about and peopled it with characters resembling in some way the outport inhabitants he met.

Duncan “grounded” his readers in Ragged Harbour and gave it a narrative cohesion and resonance in a number of ways. He used local place names consistently throughout the stories, until these “places” — “Mad Mull,” “The Rocks of Three Poor Sisters,” the “Grappling Hook fishing grounds,” “Lookout Head,” etc. — developed a repetitive and familiar ring. Incidents central to one story are referred to as remembered events in others: thus, the drowning of Jo and Ezekiel in chapter one (the stories are called chapters in this book) is remarked on in chapter three, and the death of Jesus Lute in “In the Fear of the Lord” is mentioned in an earlier story, “The Raging of the Sea.” Similarly, the names of many of Duncan’s characters recur in the stories: Job Luff, who is incidental in “The Chase of the Tide,” is the central character in “The Raging of the Sea”; little Billy Luff, who is incidental in that story, is the central figure in “Concerning Billy Luff and Master Goodchild,” where the little boys of “The Chase of the Tide”

also make an appearance. Occasional inconsistencies occur in the characters' names and identities: Little Billy Luff, portrayed as Job's son in chapter three, becomes his nephew in chapter five; Solomon Stride's wife is named Ruth in chapter eight, but becomes "Priscilla" in chapter ten. However, these discrepancies, probably resulting from the fact that the stories were written as discrete "sketches" rather than as components of a narrative whole, do not detract greatly from the sense of cohesion. Ragged Harbour has sufficient cohesive elements for the reader to forgive Duncan these evidently careless slips.

Further strategies Duncan employed to locate the reader in Ragged Harbour are his consistent use of local dialect, his periodic inclusion of riddles and folk songs (one of which recurs in several stories), and the names he gave to most of his characters. The characters' dialect, while it may seem foreign-sounding and implausible even to Newfoundlanders, is consistent throughout the ten stories and serves to represent the characters as members of an isolated and closely knit community. The riddles Jo tells Ezekiel in "The Chase of the Tide" to distract him from his fear (17), the fragments of folk songs they sing as they slip away from safety (13), and "The Song of the Pirate Mate" sung by young Jim Rideout in "The Love of a Maid" (178) and echoed by the crew of a schooner several stories later (274) suggest a shared outpost heritage which gives further narrative cohesion to Duncan's Ragged Harbour. They also serve his thematic requirements by juxtaposing human attempts at levity against a backdrop of gloom and hardship, which only makes the gloom seem more pervasive.

The names Duncan gave his characters provide a further indication of life in Ragged Harbour. With few exceptions, they are Old Testament names — plausible in a rural community ruled by fundamentalist doctrine, and evoking in the reader a sense of the rigid indoctrination and Old Testament fervour that would have prevailed in such a place. Many of these names, too, are keys to the nature of their bearers, sometimes indicating what manner of people they are, while at other times ironically underscoring what they are not. Solomon Stride is portrayed both in "In the Fear of the Lord" and "The Fruits of Toil" as a man more capable than those around him of maintaining both religious equilibrium and the conception of a compassionate rather than a vindictive God. He is therefore like the biblical Solomon in that he is wise, but he is utterly dissimilar in material fortune: King Solomon was noted for his wealth, while poor Solomon Stride goes to his grave in debt, without even being able to buy his wife a longed-for sewing machine despite sixty-odd years of toil. Ishmael, the central character in "The Healer from Far-Away Cove," is indeed an outcast and a wanderer, like the Ishmael of the Old Testament. However, Job Luff in "The Raging of the Sea" is somewhat different from the archetypal Job: he lives for many years as a successful man by Ragged Harbour standards despite the fact that he "cast

loose from religion when Old Dick Lute went mad of it" (73) (although in his eventual hubristic downfall he, like the biblical Job, loses something he has dearly cherished, so that his refrain might also be "Why is light given to man whose way is hid, and whom God hath hedged in?"). In one ironic reversal, Daniel Crew, the marked man of "A Beat t'Harbour," is so named by his father because "Daniel was the bravest man in the world" (261), and yet Daniel's whole life is haunted by his tragic cowardice. And consider old Richard Lute in "In the Fear of the Lord." In a fine stroke of irony, Duncan wrote that Richard "changed his name to Jesus when he was converted . . . but he died mad because . . . he dwelt overmuch on those things which are eternal" (221). So the pivotal New Testament name appearing in *The Way of the Sea* — a name associated with hope and rebirth — is here used to represent a character who could not cope with the religion that went with the name (an inability of which more will be said later).

Duncan varied his authorial distance and perspective as he wrote the stories in *The Way of the Sea*. The persona of the author/narrator is sometimes peripheral and shadow-like in the narrative, while at other times it is intimately involved in the reported proceedings. In "The Chase of the Tide," Duncan appears, brief and ghostlike, as the "stranger" little Jo interacts with in his interior monologue, the one who can describe the "harbour called New York" and explain where flour comes from (8), a stranger who always vanishes, leaving questions unanswered. In "The Healer from Far-Away Cove," however, as in most of the stories, Duncan makes his supposed involvement with Ragged Harbour anterior to the unfolding events: thus, in describing some of the archaic "cures" found in Ishmael's book of medicine, he writes from the first person perspective, "All this I know to be true, for I have seen the book and know what it contains" (193). In "In the Fear of the Lord," the narrator presents himself in the guise of the dutiful reporter, telling what he has been elected to tell. The reader is learning of Nazareth Lute's conversion because of the narrator's "compassion for Nazareth Lute," he says, adding, "I here . . . set down [these events] as they were told to him by one who told them to me" (249). On one occasion, it is even implied that the reader too has been in personal communication with Ragged Harbour: "Well," says the narrator, "as you may know, in the course of years Dan Crew was made a skipper" (278). The effect of such passages is to underscore for the reader the veracity of Ragged Harbour's existence.

Yet even as Duncan involved his readers in the Ragged Harbour experience, he also saw fit at times to remove them from it. He often makes it clear that he was writing about Newfoundland for readers in the more clement and industrialized world from which he had come (presumably, subscribers to *McClure's*, *Harper's*, and *Atlantic Monthly*). These revelations occur as contrasts between Ragged Harbour and the outer world and serve

further to underscore the harshness of the Newfoundland coast. In "The Love of the Maid," Duncan warns his North American reader that Elihu's "love" bears little resemblance to what we in the outer world know as love:

we must liken [Elihu's love] to a graceless weed rather than to a flower, as it may appear; for we live in a land where the perfume and splendour of flowers are a commonplace, nor should we stare at a lily or ask the name of a rose. (162)

This authorial tactic, far from drawing the reader into the story, serves to remind him that he is peering through a literary telescope at a remote and alien world. In the same story, the author/narrator steps still further outside the narrative to explain that "the folk of that remote place are still under the domination of the elements, which in this fruitful, populated land have been subdued, but with which they must watchfully contend, as their remotest ancestors did" (170-1). "This fruitful, populated land" is supposed to be the land and the reality of Duncan's readers — so even as he drew them into Ragged Harbour, so that its cliffs loomed large above them and they shared with him the sense of its harsh immediacy, he also felt a recurring need to remind them of how far removed they were from the Newfoundland experience, and of how great a psychic journey it is to "the edge of the uninhabitable."

Duncan's narration in *The Way of the Sea* is exceedingly self-conscious, and this could be said to be his principal authorial weakness. He had a message to impart to his readers, and he went to great lengths to ensure that they got it — through foreshadowing, the use of prologues and interpretive epilogues, and repeated authorial intrusion into the narrative, all of which, as previously mentioned, may well seem archaic to the modern reader. His liberal foreshadowing is employed to impress the reader with both the horror and the inevitability of impending destruction at the hands of fate. The prologues with which he begins most of his stories — intended in part, no doubt, to "set the stage" for a magazine audience which would read the given sketch in isolation, without reference to the cumulatively evoked outport milieu achieved by the ten sketches when collected and published in book form — establish the tone that will inform the ensuing tale, evoke the sense that a story of an epic or religious nature is about to be imparted, and suggest in some instances the interpretation the reader is intended to make of reported events. "The Fruits of Toil" begins with such a prologue. In a long, lyrical paragraph, set off from the body of the narrative, the narrator intones with a biblical resonance that

the sea is tameless: as it was in the beginning, it is now, and shall ever be — mighty, savage, dread, infinitely treacherous and hateful, yielding only that which is wrested from it, snarling, raging, snatching lives, spoiling souls of their graces. (309)

The Newfoundlander, he continues, slips "precariously . . . through life: he follows hope through the toilsome years" which are always black in retrospect, as he submits to "what chance allows" (310). This passage

establishes in the reader's mind that the sea is cruel, vindictive, and enduringly powerful, while the Newfoundlander is pitifully powerless in the hands of fate. The remainder of the story, while filled with pathos and powerful, sensitive description, is really only an elaboration and illustration of the prologue. Such a technique, while investing the narrative with a probably intended sense of the sermonic, is off-putting to many modern readers, who would prefer to be trusted to arrive at their own interpretations.

The prologue to "A Beat t' Harbour" begins similarly: in grand, gothic style, a child is born on a night when a "great gale" terrorizes the community. His father, sitting by the fire, muses that "the wind is the hand o' the Lard, without pity an' wonderful for strength; it holds the punts from the harbour tickle an' gives the bodies o' strong men t' the lop o' the grounds." He proceeds to pray: "Hold Thou me not back from the shelter o' harbour, lest the waters o' the sea get me" (260). The child is born, and named "Daniel" for courage — and the reader divines from the established mood that Daniel's future is fatally woven into that fearful world of wind and sea.

Duncan prepared and directed his reader in this fashion at the beginning of many of the stories. "The Breath of the North" begins with the North Wind singing a dreadful incantation about "gathering Sons of Men" from a ravaged sea (99). "The Strength of Men" is launched by warning that a grim moment of truth comes to most men in Newfoundland, when they must "pit" their "naked strength against the sea" (35). "The Chase of the Tide" begins and is laced with ominous portents: old men prophesying death with remarks like "The say do be hungry for lives this even" (5), references to "invisible terrors" (3) and dogs that mark the folkloric "sign o' death" (14). In story after story, the stage is thus set: the reader is told that the life of the sea is inevitably cruel and that he can expect no mercy in this tale, for mercy there is none.

Duncan maintained this imposed authorial directive in the texts and conclusions of the stories as well. In "The Healer from Far-Away Cove," having established the persona of Ishmael the faith-healer, the narrator remarks, prior to any further unfolding of the story's plot, that "the things of the wilderness and of the sullen sea . . . had undone old Ishmael Roth" (194). This narratorial comment directs the reader to view all further proceedings of Ishmael's as the deeds of a deranged man. The reader therefore is again not permitted to draw his own conclusions, this time, about a character's nature. Message inhibits art.

Yet perhaps these ten tales are not to be read strictly as short stories but rather as parables deliberately echoing the form and nature of the religious sermon, making them a kind of marine gospel in which Duncan reveals the metaphysical questions and conclusions he has reached while contemplating this psychic "edge of the uninhabitable." The stories' parabolic nature is particularly evident in the epilogues with which most of them conclude. In

some of these, Duncan has spelt out a moral for his reader. The epilogue in "The Chase of the Tide" begins with the words "How shall we interpret?" (30), and the narrator proceeds to explore a possible interpretation of the events that have just been told. Similarly, the epilogue to "The Fruits of Toil" repeats the notions laid down in its prologue, so that truly the message is conveyed by the story's introduction and conclusion, the narrative events being sandwiched in between them merely by way of illustration. In other stories, the endings are more enigmatic. At the conclusion of "A Beat t'Harbour," old Skipper Thomas says, "They's something wrong with the world . . . but I isn't sure just what" (305). Here, as in the other stories, it is clear that a message is to be found, but Duncan has left it to the reader to divine — having steered him carefully in the right direction, however, throughout the narration of the tale. And given the theological preoccupations of both Ragged Harbour residents and their earthly author, there can be said to be a kind of tonal and thematic appropriateness to the sermonic form and nature of these stories.

Allowing for Duncan's 19th century stylistic predilections, and keeping in mind that the conscious authorial "steering" of his prologues, epilogues, and narratorial intrusions may result at least in part from the deliberately sermonic nature of these stories — stories that deal with a people who themselves relate to their lives in biblical terms and that are written by a writer who is seeking to clarify metaphysical problems — we are left with a book of ten tales that do indeed cohere in the vision they portray of Duncan's Ragged Harbour. His grounding techniques have made the community real and consistently recognizable; his diligent authorial manipulations render Ragged Harbour immediate or distant as his themes require; his dark, prophetic, and allusive language creates and sustains the tone his message requires. And that message — that man "at the edge" seems pitted against an inevitable, often merciless fate, and that he must take care in embracing a religion to help him endure it — is developed in his stories through his exploration of two themes: man against the sea, and man as a religious being. The remainder of this essay will analyze the ways in which Duncan's stories explore these themes.

Four key stories devoted to the theme of man against the sea are "The Chase of the Tide," "The Raging of the Sea," "A Beat t'Harbour," and "The Fruits of Toil." In "The Chase of the Tide," the fate of the male Newfoundland outport child is sketched. He has no real childhood at all, just the dawning recognition of the inevitable battle that awaits him. "Achievement" to such a child is "a gunwale load snatched from a lippy sea" (3). The fate of his people is "to match their strength against the might of tempestuous waters" and "their spirit against the invisible terrors which the sea's space harbours, in sunshine and mist" (3- 4). The child realizes early in life that he hasn't been raised "for love" but for "the toil of the sea"

which has "enmity" for him (4) and "through which . . . most men [find] their exit from life" (24-5).

The Ragged Harbour child therefore grows up in what he perceives as a limited world; and little Skipper Jo, the central figure in this story, has some questions through which he seeks to transcend those limitations. Hemmed in by the sea on one side, an "impenetrable wilderness" on the other, and a hard, fearsome, and unexplained God up above, Skipper Jo's questions are: "Where did the tide go?", "What lay beyond those hills?", and "Who made God?" (7-8) And one afternoon, he sets out with little Ezekiel Sevier to find the answer to the first of those questions.

Unfortunately for the boys, the tide carries their boat out beyond the harbour's protection, with a strength they cannot combat. In true Duncan style, the sea is portrayed, not as an objective danger, but as a force with deliberate and deadly intent: "the water gripped the boat and drew her out — swift and sly as a thief's hand" (12). Drawn out to sea, they are encompassed by fog and wrecked, their "little bodies . . . flung against the rocks for a day and a night" by the waves (30).

Skipper Jo can be seen to represent rational man, the seeker, the learner, who is therefore an aberration in Ragged Harbour, where the time-honoured advice is that he should "sheer off" from his restless questioning (9). In Duncan's paradoxical rendering of the boy, his glory is the very fact that he inquires; but his fate is that, in striving to know, he is killed. Icarus-like, Jo does transcend his limited world-view. With startling perception, in a community where no adult has been able to answer the question, he does finally determine empirically what happens to the tide. However, he acquires this knowledge at the cost of his life and the life of little Ezekiel who, like the majority of Ragged Harbour residents, was content with not knowing and begged Jo repeatedly to turn back from the quest.

Duncan's interpretation of this story, contained in its epilogue, is a condemnation of the way of the sea; but the narratorial monologue suggests that Duncan is grappling with something greater even than the sea: namely, the blind powers of nature and of fate, against which man cannot win. In wrestling with the idea of these children's deaths, the author/narrator is asking the question: is there a reason for their deaths, or do these deaths illustrate, rather, the existence of an evil force which pits itself against a helpless humanity? For surely, he argues, there is no "honour in this triumph" of the sea. The children had opposed the sea with "neither strength nor understanding"; the fight was utterly unequal from the start. The narrative voice then pursues the argument still further: if the sea's triumph was not one of honour, then it was "cruel as vanity . . . the pride of [brute] strength." Or, if the triumph was not one of pride, then it was a triumph "of greed . . . wanton as gluttony." Perhaps, the voice reasons, there is "glory" in the sea's power to kill because life in Ragged Harbour is too hard, and

“isolation and toil are things to escape,” thereby making the sea’s killing a “hidden mercy.” However, it concludes, if you do not accept the theory that when life is hard it is a mercy to die, then there is neither reason nor “glory” in what the sea does to the Jos and Ezekiels of the world. No glory, no reason — so then, “whose is the reproach? Thine, O Sea!” concludes Duncan’s narrator (30-1). This reversion to formal, biblical language in addressing the sea suggests that Duncan’s psyche was struggling with a force more fundamental even than the North Atlantic: he was grappling with the teleological notion of existence, and finding it lacking.

Job Luff, the central character of “The Raging of the Sea,” is, like Skipper Jo, an aberrant individual in Ragged Harbour. He has turned his back on the local religion and fishes in a homemade punt that is said to reflect his capricious personality. The people of Ragged Harbour are sure that he will be punished for his nonconformity and that his oddly-built punt will fail him in the end. As in most of the stories, the stage is set with a little prologue which invests the narrative with metaphysical overtones. Those things over which man does have control, such as his boat, which he makes himself, are juxtaposed against that over which he has no control. The punt “is small, finite, comprehensible: the heavy over-hanging sky, the illimitable sea and a coast veiled by distance are past understanding” (70).

However, the aberrant Job Luff is not killed by the sea, nor does his punt fail him — a source of subconscious disappointment to his more righteous neighbours in Ragged Harbour. Indeed, for years he ekes as good a living from the sea as any man, drawing his strength and his inspiration, not from religion or from thoughts of family (Ragged Harbour norms) but from the punt he has made. He draws his strength from the physical manifestation of the powers of his own mind.

An hour of truth descends on Job though, just as it does for all the key characters in *The Way of the Sea*. One day he lands a bumper crop of fish — a “gunwale load” far exceeding the typical daily catch. To make matters better, no other fisherman has caught anything that day, and we witness what is seldom seen in these stories, “a song in the heart of the man . . . the song of a victor” (80). Unfortunately, and predictably, Job’s victory is short-lived. Caught in a sudden storm, he must make his way home in peril of his life; and he commits himself to save not only his life but his precious cargo.

The ensuing conflict is between the wind and man’s “spirit and strength” (85); and Job, unlike the children of “The Chase of the Tide,” has this spirit and strength, and “the joy of conflict” fills him (86). Miraculously, and in view of the wondering people on shore, Job does manage to bring his punt and catch almost home, illustrating not only his own prowess, but also the excellence of his much-maligned boat. However, then Job makes his fatal error. Pride gets the best of him, and for just one moment

he forgets himself. He looks exultantly to the watching crowd, in his joy at having triumphed in this battle; but this glance "betray[s] the punt." His faculties, normally so shrewd, are "submerged in his exultation" (91), and this is a luxury fate will not allow him. The boat and its catch are lost, and though Job manages to get safely to shore his moment of pride has cost him his victory.

In the characteristic epilogue, again the reader must witness the waste the sea has wrought: the shining bellies of the prize catch float wasted among the splintered boat fragments (95). We read on to see if there will be an authorial interpretation, as there was in "The Chase of the Tide." However, all the narrator offers by way of explanation this time is, "It was a tragedy of that coast" (96). Therefore the interpretive task is left to the reader; and the easy divination is that man's pride destroys him, a moralistic interpretation that would tie in nicely with the fundamentalist doctrine of Ragged Harbour. However, throughout the narrative it has been obvious that the author applauded Job Luff, even though the community did not. Job's non-conformity and ingenuity, in the narrative presentation, serve more to underscore the community's small-mindedness than to condemn him for his independent spirit. It seems therefore that another interpretation of Job Luff's ultimate defeat is possible: that in a world where a small boy dies for transcending his limited world-view, a man is permitted neither the exultation of a creator nor the triumph of a victor. The tragedy in this story is that fate would not allow Job even one split second of a victor's pride, just as it would not allow Skipper Jo to penetrate unscathed the fog of his people's ignorance.

At the conclusion of the story "A Beat t'Harbour," a drowned man's father says, as earlier quoted, "They's something wrong with the world . . . but I isn't sure just what." Daniel Crew, the fated sailor, begins his life as a fanciful child, but as the narrative unfolds to show him lolling in childhood dreams, the authorial voice breaks through to warn child and reader that the days of childhood are numbered and that the inevitable "whip" of adult hardship will soon "crack" on Danny, in all probability sending him towards the "Rocks o'Wrecked Ships" (273). Hence the message is, as in "The Chase of the Tide," that a Ragged Harbour boy's fate is determined at birth; he has no choice but to submit to a life of hardship, and quite possibly death, at the hands of the sea. Danny, as he comes of age, confesses to a longing to earn his living as a maker of boots or songs so that he may "stay ashore." But his father responds, "'Tis not the way o'the world, b'y" (276), suggesting that in Ragged Harbour there is no perceived way out of the mode of life into which one has been born.

Accordingly, Danny becomes the skipper of a schooner, but he is terrified of the wind and sea and his whole life becomes a longing for "safe harbour." However, as an old sailor tells him, "they's noa such thing as

harbour" (296), and finally Danny succumbs to what he perceives as his inevitable fate and is drowned at the "Rocks o'Wrecked Ships." "They's something wrong with the warld," mourns his father; but as in "The Raging of the Sea," Duncan has left the reader to decide what that "something" is. However, if we compare the father's words of mourning with his earlier response to Danny's dream of becoming something else — "'Tis not the way o'the world, b'y" — the "something wrong" with Danny's world may be divined. There is something wrong, the story suggests, with growing up to the inevitability of hardship, something wrong with the human condition when a person is locked into a way of life with no escape but death.

In all three of the stories just discussed, Duncan is raging against this sense of helpless inevitability. The unanswered question is whether Duncan saw this human helplessness as a plight peculiar to outport Newfoundland, or rather as symbolic of the human condition everywhere. It would take a complete study of his life and writings to answer that question definitively. One can only surmise, from the little that is known of his real life preoccupations and a close study of his consistently dark vision in *The Way of the Sea*, that Ragged Harbour is in some way a microcosm for Duncan of the larger and more complex world beyond its confines.

The concluding story in the collection, "The Fruits of Toil," makes it seem that Duncan was *not* using Ragged Harbour as a microcosm for the world in general, but suggesting rather that the fate of Newfoundlanders was uniquely hard in the world of man. The tale begins with a contrast between the agrarian and the marine experience, and his thesis seems to be that there is no resemblance between the plight of the farmer and that of the Newfoundland fisherman. "The wilderness," he begins, is "savage and remote, [but it] yields to the strength of men." The sea, on the other hand, is "tameless," and while "the tiller of the soil sows in peace . . . the toiler of the sea — the Newfoundlander of the upper shore — is born to conflict, ceaseless and deadly" (309-10). Solomon Stride, the main character in the story, does everything a Ragged Harbour man can do to succeed at fishing, but still it is not enough. He is a magnificent specimen both "in pure might of body" and in "spirit" (316), the two qualities with which Duncan suggests Newfoundland men are armed against the sea, and he works unceasingly to "get ahead"; but he is utterly at the mercy of "chance" (318) and chance does not smile upon him. Only dumb human hope (which goes unrewarded, but enables him to proceed from year to year) keeps him heading forward into that endlessly bleak, hard life.

Year by year, as Solomon struggles to pay back the debt he owes, his wife, who has always stood by him, echoes with diminishing conviction his optimism about coming seasons. All his years of toil, hope, and patience yield "only enough to keep their bodies warm and still the crying of their stomachs" (316). Their only child starves to death one lean winter, and at

the end of Solomon's life, these are the "fruits of his toil": he uses sugar instead of molasses in his tea, he is \$230.80 in debt to the merchant, and, too old to be out fishing anymore, he almost perishes in a storm, is found and revived, but dies of consumption from the exposure (322-4).

Dying, this simple man speaks sincerely of how blessed he and his wife have been all their lives (328-9), but the irony inherent in the title of this story is clear. The fruits of Solomon's toil have been negligible, and he is symbolic of the "generation upon generation" of Newfoundlanders who "go forth in hope against" the sea, only to "age and crumble and vanish, each in . . . turn," with "the wretchedness of the first" being "the wretchedness of the last" (331). Duncan obviously saw little or no hope for altering the Newfoundlander's fate; the vision he conveyed, in this story as in others, is that the outport man toils fruitlessly against a "mighty and malignant" sea, which conquers him in the end.

Hence in all four of the stories just discussed, we divine an authorial "why?" — why are men born to struggle and toil against forces that inevitably conquer them? Jo and Job Luff illustrate the archetypal Icarus motif; they try to transcend what are perceived as their limitations, only to be cast down. Dannie and Solomon, on the other hand, conform to the strictures of their inherited world-view — one grudgingly, the other with simple good will — but they too are conquered, and thus neither aberration nor conformity is singled out as the author of mischance. The forces that govern the lives of those who live by the sea are, to Duncan, "past understanding" (70), and in these stories he probes to determine whether or not there is indeed a reason for the tragic quality of outport existence. And as his epilogue to "The Chase of the Tide" suggests, it is a grim toss-up whether you ascribe to fate some vindictive purpose, or view what happens to man as being without any purpose at all — a philosophic stance which suggests that Ragged Harbour existence, though a socio-geographical extreme, is in some sense being explored as illustrative of far more general teleological concerns. Duncan's treatment of religion in Ragged Harbour, as we are about to see, illustrates that man has a profound (and often concurrently debilitating) need to believe that there is a reason for what happens to him. For as both the characters and Duncan himself seem to suggest, the alternative — that there is no "reason," no standard to go by, no guiding force nor ultimate justice — is even more unbearable.

To analyze the function of religion in *The Way of the Sea*, it is necessary to form a picture of the marine gospel Duncan depicted as governing the day-to-day lives of Ragged Harbour people. What were these people? What made them "tick"? What values did Duncan see them as having acquired to enable them to survive this hard life of theirs? His physical descriptions of the men and women of Ragged Harbour strongly resemble the descriptions of Quebec peasant farmers in Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine* and Philippe

Aubert de Gaspé's *Canadians of Old*, books centered on the "agrarian gospel" just as *The Way of the Sea* centered on a "marine gospel." The idealized rural men and women to such Canadian regional writers were, quite naturally, the ones best physically suited to the lives they had to lead; and they often tended to be perceived as bearing physical resemblance to the elements surrounding them. Ragged Harbour men were "big, thick-chested fellows, heavy with muscles and bones — most with forbidding, leathery faces . . . men of knotty oak, with that look of strength, from the ground up, which some gnarled old tree has" (38). The ideal Ragged Harbour woman was one who "could lift a barrel of flour." One such woman was described as "a buxom maid, a plump, hearty, laughing maid, with . . . a wealth of red blood — a maid sound in wind and limb, with mighty hands and arms, and a will for work as great as her biceps muscles" (163).

Duncan's perception of the Ragged Harbour man's creed is epitomized at the conclusion of "The Strength of Men," through the musings of Saul Nash, who is revelling in the comforts of home after a perilous sealing venture. His mission is to provide for his family, and he considers it an ample reward if his efforts enable the children to "pass their plates for more" (66). His attitude towards the ceaseless labour this demands is that it does not really bother him, since "there comes a night wherein a man may rest." Further, Saul via the narrator reasons, "Ease is a shame," and the privilege of living to an old age is not worth worrying about, as all it promises is "a seat in a corner and the sound of voices drifting in" (66). These ideas are offered by Duncan to represent the internalized work ethic with which the Ragged Harbour man perseveres in the rigours of his life.

The female psyche in Ragged Harbour undergoes less formal scrutiny, as women are only minor characters in the majority of the stories. However, several female motifs recur in Duncan's writing, and they are enigmatic in that while their ostensible purpose is to represent the Ragged Harbour attitude towards women, they seem quite possibly representative of Duncan's personal attitude as well. Woman as evil temptress is shown to be a male Ragged Harbour perception through the character of Old Eleazar Manuel in "The Breath of the North," who is morally outraged by the persona of the biblical Eve. "It was a proverb in Ragged Harbour," the narrator informs us, "that [Eleazar] couldn't abide Eve." In the story, Eleazar enumerates the ways in which he would punish her for her sin, if only he could get his hands on her. His interpretation of Old Testament doctrine has led him to blame Eve for man's eternal hardship: "'N it hadn't been for Eve," he informs his foster son, "you'd have a fine garden t'walk in . . . An' you wouldn't have t'goa out t'the grounds in a brewin' gale" (102-4). However, the motif of woman as temptress is found elsewhere in Duncan's narratives. In "The Chase of the Tide," he wrote that the tide was like "the hand of a woman on a victim's arm," leading him with "her winks and empty chatter" to his death

(12-13). A related simile later in that story describes the treacherous sea as being “like a fair finger beckoning” (30). Clearly, whether or not Duncan himself perceived woman as the agent of evil, he wove his motif into his narrative cloth because he found it somehow conducive to the delivery of his overall message.

Woman in *The Way of the Sea* can also be perceived as the embodiment of primitive superstition. It is “age-wise women of the place” who have a hag-like knowledge of the approach of death (148); there is a woman in “In the Fear of the Lord” whom people consult to find out about the “time and manner of death” because “she was famed in seven harbours for her glory fits” (222).

Woman is also portrayed in the stories as the maternal smotherer and the grim guardian of the most conservative interpretations of religious doctrine. In “Concerning Billy Luff and Master Goodchild,” Billy’s mother is an unwitting perpetrator of her son’s tragic death, because she encourages in him the most punitive and life-denying interpretation of Christian doctrine. Putting him to bed one night, she “clucked and cluttered like a wrathful hen . . . [and] patted the bedclothes, and tucked and tucked, and patted again” (145). But as she smothered him with these maternal ministrations, she also checked his already-dwindling ability to perceive the possibility of mercy and forgiveness in life, because she herself had embraced, without introspection, the “hell-fire and damnation” doctrine touted by the local parson. As they discuss two storybook boys who have been punished by death for “making games of the minister,” Billy reflects, “ ‘Tis sad t’think o’ the miserable death o’ them b’ys.” His mother, however, insists on the divine justice of their death — “But they was so wicked” (143-5) — thereby further reinforcing the moral code which poor Billy has internalized far more than is good for him.

Elsewhere in *The Way of the Sea* woman is again shown to subscribe most readily to the grimmest interpretations of the Word. In “In the Fear of the Lord,” Solomon (the “wise”), unlike his neighbours, is able to envision the Christian God as being a loving and merciful one. “The dear Lord is wise — wise an’ kind, noa matter what some poor folk tries t’make Un out,” he tells his wife. She replies, “quickly, speaking in fear, ‘The Lord God’s the Lord God A’mighty’,” and is worried that her husband might be damned eternally for his blasphemy (223). The effect of this passage is to expose the irony of a religious interpretation in which love and mercy are considered blasphemous. Again woman is shown to be the agent of superstition and conservatism.

This female conservatism is used to explore a more general adaptation to outpost existence in “The Love of the Maid.” Life in Ragged Harbour, as has been established, is a never-ceasing battle, and requires that most of the trappings of civilized culture be subjugated to the need for survival. In

"The Love of the Maid," young 'Melia Mary, an infinitely desirable woman by Ragged Harbour standards, is wooed by two men. The old man offers her food in a time of famine and the promise of security; the young man offers her passion and a love she can return. As Duncan put it, "The one was rich in punts and nets, the other in brawn and laughter: which latter are more to be desired by maids than cod-traps and schooners when stomachs are full" (162). The point of the story is that when stomachs are not full, love becomes a luxury which must be sacrificed to that more basic animal necessity of survival. 'Melia Mary marries the old man, a "safe place" being the best "achievement" a beautiful woman can hope for on Newfoundland's "bleak coasts," although, the narrator adds wistfully, "other blessings may by grace be added unto it" (183). We are not intended to scorn 'Melia Mary for her choice, however. Duncan suggests that she has done all that a person in her circumstances can do. And lest we think otherwise, the story closes with Jim Rideout, Elihu's youthful rival, "falling in love with" another girl the following spring. "The heart of Jim Rideout was no heart for a tragedy," the story concludes (185). What is meant is that, as in the harsh, agrarian existence of Hémon's Maria Chapdelaine, people living "on the edge" cannot afford to entertain sensibilities that inhibit survival.

The psychosocial fight for survival, with its inherent conflict between ideals and bodily needs, is explored on a deeper level in "The Strength of Men," which uses man rather than woman to illustrate this battle of spirit and flesh. This story, which portrays the way men treat each other in a life-and-death situation, indicates, as does "The Love of the Maid," that when put to the test most people's instinct for self-preservation is stronger than any moral ideal. In "The Strength of Men," the crew of a sealing vessel is reduced by adverse weather to battling with each other for a space upon an ice pan, and for space in which to cling to the side of the departing ship, when there is not enough space to go around. The time-honoured creed among Ragged Harbour men is that at such moments " 'Tis every man for his life" (46). As the narrator explains,

At such times, escape is for the strong: the weak ask for no help; they are thrust aside; they find no hand stretched out. Compassion, and all the other kin of love . . . flee the hearts of men: there remains but the brute greed of life — *more life*. (46)

And sure enough, as the stranded men struggle to grab hold of the departing sealing schooner, they are shown fighting like animals for self-preservation. Men who have been lifelong friends try to push each other into the icy water to gain a chance of survival, with curses pouring "from mouths that were used to prayers" (53), suggesting that religious doctrine as well as brotherly love is cast aside when life is at stake. Moreover, Duncan is careful to show that these men at any other time are infinitely compassionate. They comfort the skipper for the loss of his boat prior to the expected wreck, even though each knows his life may soon be over (43), and use their last words in offering

solace to the very mates they had earlier tried to drown — once they are no longer competing with them for a chance at survival (59-61). However, in the final analysis, given a chance to survive their nature compels them to grab it, even at the cost of another man's life.

Among these men, however, is one man, Saul Nash, in whom the spirit of self-sacrifice overcomes the instinct for survival. Saul helps his frail younger brother to grip the boat, even though in so doing he loses his own chance to hold on (54). The narrative proceeds to describe the subsequent fate of Saul who, owing to his incredible physical and spiritual strength, manages to survive a night on a fragile ice pan in a raging storm and to make it safely home. He alone, of the men who were unable to board the ship, has survived. This uncharacteristic happy ending — for Duncan's characters often perish in their battles with the sea — is open to a moralistic interpretation. Perhaps Saul has been rewarded both by God and by the author for transcending human self-interest. The narrative does not address this issue; the reader is left to decide for himself whether there is a reason beyond sheer luck and brute strength for Saul's survival. Perhaps Saul's actions, being Christ-like, can be interpreted as an allegory for the transition from Old to New Testament, with Ragged Harbour and the psychic results of its fundamentalist doctrine representing the Old Testament, and the transcendence of Saul representing the salvation offered by the New Testament. In any event, the every man for himself creed illustrated in this story serves as a convenient springboard to an investigation of the function of religious belief in *The Way of the Sea*. Humanly understandable in a life and death situation out on the ice, such a creed becomes grotesque as it is manifested in religious practice on dry land.

In several of Duncan's stories, the human quest for spiritual knowledge and redemption (which is Ragged Harbour people's "comfort and relaxation" at times when physical "salvation" is not in immediate jeopardy) becomes malignant and destructive. The mob frenzy of the sealers in "The Strength of Men," centered, as it is, on the panic-stricken fight for life, assumes a more perverse tone in "Concerning Billy Luff and Master Goodchild" and "The Healer from Far-Away Cove," where humanity en masse, exhibiting a singular lack of compassion, flock to the bedside of a dying child — or to that of a newly-born one, who dies because of them — to have their own needs satisfied.

In "Concerning Billy Luff and Master Goodchild," as young Billy lies dying to an excess of fundamentalist doctrine, Duncan describes the people of Ragged Harbour hastening to his bedside to hear him transmit wondrous revelations of the Word of God. The authorial intent is clear: people "set out for Billy Luff's home in a state of delicious excitement," gaining their "heart's desire" by being admitted to the little boy's death chamber (148-9).

Such words indicate the selfish intent of the men and women who, despite the tragedy of so youthful and needless a death, are opportunistically striving to reap from it some personal revelation. Again in "The Healer from Far-Away Cove" mobs of people descend on the home of a newly-born child, even though the mother has just died in childbirth, because the boy is the "seventh son of a seventh son" and folk belief has it that touching him will work cures for people who are ill. Once more this mixture of folk-belief and mob behaviour results in a tragic irony: the infant dies because so many people have "hugged and handled" him in his first moments of life (200-01). What seems to be decried here are the quasi-religious beliefs the people have developed to "comfort and relax" them; not because belief in itself is necessarily wrong, but because somehow the beliefs that have evolved in Ragged Harbour are deficient in love and compassion. Even Priscilla Stride of "The Fruits of Toil," who steadfastly supported her husband's dreams and strivings early in their marriage, gradually turned, through the bitter disappointments of their unrewarded toil, to contemplating the "mystery of the Book." This so preoccupies her in her old age that as her husband lies dying, too weak to speak and drifting off to his final reverie, three times she calls him back to beg him to spend his dying breath to answer a puzzling question about the Bible. The last words she wishes from him are not of love or of their lifetime together; her moan as his breath fails him is not from grief that he is gone, but from despair that she has failed to glean an answer to a religious mystery. The lifelong bond between them becomes secondary to her need to have this "Mystery" unravelled (328-31).

What, then, is Duncan's message with regard to religion in Ragged Harbour? That he was preoccupied with religious concerns is revealed in Moore's biography. "The two subjects which Duncan writes about most prevalently," writes Moore, "are Newfoundland, and spiritual salvation." In his later years, Moore continues, "the undying if somewhat amorphous love of God" became a persistent theme in his writing, although he seemed "to have been pessimistic about man's salvation in both this life and the next, except when he was inspired from time to time by a personality such as Sir Wilfred Grenfell" (68). Even in his last wanderings, faith, according to Moore, was a special consideration of Duncan's, and "he was continually awed by the deep faith and spirituality of others," (80), although he could not seem to share it with them. That faith manifested itself in grotesque ways in *The Way of the Sea* has already been illustrated. What, then, was its function in Duncan's Ragged Harbour, and what lessons, if any, did he seek to impart through its portrayal?

On one level, Duncan construed Ragged Harbour religion as a primitive agent for keeping people in line, and therefore as an externally imposed phenomenon. The world of the spirit and that of the flesh worked hand in hand to keep people on the straight and narrow: the spiritual world would

punish you for worldly transgressions, just as the material world would punish you for spiritual ones. In "The Chase of the Tide," as they leave the harbour little Jo and Ezekiel try to guess whose demise is being heralded by the old dog's "sign o' death," its barking; and Jo figures it must be Job Luff, because "I heered un curse God last even." Pondering this, Ezekiel finally agrees: "I 'low 'tis Uncle Job . . . He've a rotten paddle to his punt" (14-15). Further along, they feel confirmed in their suspicions when they remember that "Job Luff do be Seven Days Adventist. Hell be for un — iss, sure" (21). In other words, it follows in their reasoning that a person who does not accept the local doctrines would fish from a poorly equipped boat, and will necessarily be punished in Hell, both for being careless and for being different, the two being conceived as synonymous. Then as the boys begin to fear for their own safety, Ezekiel strives to measure their own "sins," to see if they are due any punishment. "Is you been good the day, b'y?" he asks Jo, and the answer to that no, Jo has not "spread [his] caplin quite — quite straight" (24). That they have somehow been remiss in the performance of their daily chores fills little Ezekiel with the fear that their current dilemma is an inevitable punishment for not being "good" and that they may end up in hell. If you curse God, the sea will get you; if you do not spread your caplin straight, God will get you. Ragged Harbour people are locked into a religious code that closely regulates their day to day behaviour, forcing them both to conform to an accepted norm and to perform their tasks in the fashion most conducive to survival.

However, Duncan suggests elsewhere in *The Way of the Sea* that religion to Ragged Harbour people was not simply an externally imposed code. Indeed, the parson is not mentioned often in all the ten stories, and he does not reside in Ragged Harbour. Unlike depictions of French Quebec (in the writing of such authors as Louis Hémon, Hugh MacLennan, and Philippe Aubert de Gaspé) where the priest is a pervasive presence, rigorously steering his congregation along an established path, most of Duncan's Ragged Harbour characters seem compelled by some inner need to embrace their concept of faith, without any authority figure present to make sure that they do. This need, as earlier mentioned, seems to be the need to believe that there is a force, an order, directing their lives. And this teleological concern is illustrated with particular clarity in "The Healer from Far-Away Cove."

In this story a man named Ishmael has adopted a hermit's existence. Solitary and lonely, he eventually begins to seek a communication with "the Lord" and to acquire some sense of divine mission, so that he will have a purpose to his life. The psychology of how a person convinces himself that he is destined to do something is explored: Ishmael develops the belief, through a string of circumstances which have resulted in his possessing an old book of "Medicine" and through his growing sense that he has heard the Voice of the Lord, that he is "meant" to be a "healer by dreams."

Meanwhile, in Ragged Harbour poor Ezra Westerly, a consumptive, longs by some miracle to overcome his illness, and waits "for a singular manifestation of the Lord's favour and great power to heal" (193-4). Ishmael and Ezra meet, Ishmael resolves "with the Lord's will" to heal him, his "holy dream" comes to him, and the "cure" is undertaken. Ezra has new hope that he will be cured.

Unfortunately, the cure does not work, and Ishmael is even more devastated than the dying Ezra, haunted by the notion that he is "nothin' but a misled man." The idea that the divinely prescribed cure was incorrect, and/or that he has been deluded in thinking he has communication with the Almighty, is unbearable to him. However, Ezra eventually conceives an interpretation of the "failure" that changes everything; he reasons that, since the Lord does not make mistakes, the error was not in the cure, but merely in Ishmael's administration of the cure. And here, with touching irony, Duncan conveys the extent of the human need to believe: now Ezra is happy, even though he is dying, because his sense of spiritual order has been restored (213-15). The message seems to be that man needs faith more than he needs results. As long as he can believe in the particular construction of order he has created, he can accept defeat, and even death, with resignation. Far from being bitter through his conviction that Ishmael's supposed error has cost him his life, Ezra dies happily because he has been restored to his belief that there is a God who does not make mistakes and who can cure you if the human instrument of the cure follows directions closely enough.

Through the persona of Ishmael, though, Duncan hints that there may be a more universal implication in this story. The "light" of restored faith that now burns in Ishmael's eyes, he writes, is "the light that might have burned in prophets' eyes." The suggestion is that perhaps what has just been depicted in Ragged Harbour is all that faith has ever been anywhere in the world. Duncan offers the hint, but draws no conclusions. Instead, he allows us to follow Ishmael home, where he shows us that Ishmael too has found a way to deal with what has happened. Ishmael reasons, "The Lord has not failed me . . . I've failed Him." And as long as this belief-system is restored, intact — as long as faith in something bigger than himself is reinstated — he can cope with his own human error. That is something over which he feels he has some control: "I'll be preparin' myself further," he declares. What Duncan leaves us with at the story's end may possibly be his own vision of the plight of man: Ishmael, the man of restored faith, proceeds to old age waiting to hear the "Voice and the Call" and, waiting, he dies (215-16). However, whether or not he ever hears it (and the implication, at the end of the story, is that Ishmael never does) is of no consequence to the man. What he needs, we see, is to believe that the voice is there.

In "The Healer From Far-Away Cove" as well as in several of the other stories, Duncan affirms that the Ragged Harbour man uses faith to help him

cope with the hardships of life. However, he also went to great lengths to illustrate that this faith evolved into a destructive phenomenon, and that there was therefore something inherently wrong with it. The casualties of Ragged Harbour faith can be seen in "The Healer from Far Away Cove." Ezra would probably have died anyway, so he cannot necessarily be counted as a casualty, but Ishmael's earlier patients certainly can be. Ishmael, in his delusion that the cures he imagines are God-inspired, relieves James Elder not only of a painful corn but of the foot that it affected; the cure he prescribes for Jabez Tulk's "rheumatiz" gives the man pneumonia which he only survives "by grace of an iron constitution" (202-05). The message is clear: through a sort of black comedy, we see that Ishmael's enactment of his faith is wreaking havoc. However, the casualties of Ragged Harbour faith are more tragic in some of the other stories.

In "In the Fear of the Lord," in which the contrast between the human conception of a passionate deity (the "dear Lord") and that of a punitive and merciless one (the "Lord God A'mighty") is explored, Nazareth Lute, a "man of sin," converts to the local religion and is thus "saved." He proceeds to lead an exemplary life (according to Ragged Harbour dogma) until, undertaking the building of a schooner to save him from the sin of idleness, he comes to love his creation more than the religious dogma decrees that he should.

The extent of his love for and pride in the schooner is developed, at length, in the narrative. The authorial intent, conveyed throughout the narrative, works as an ironic counterpoint to the local interpretation of what happens to Nazareth. One of his key "sins" as a youth, we are told, had been his "unfailing jollity" (224), for which the community considered him blasphemous; once he is "saved," however, "he put the sin of jollity far from him," but "his eyes were blinded to all those beauties, both great and small, which the dear Lord has strewn in hearts" (232). Hence, while the community comes to see his growing love for his schooner as idolatrous, the narrator ensures that we see it as Nazareth's yearning for something to love, something of which conversion to the doctrine of a "Lord God A'mighty" has deprived him. Indeed, in a small passage evoking the pathos of the man, Nazareth, reverting momentarily to the conception of a gentle, loving God, dreams of God saying to him, at death, "Good an' faithful sarvent . . . enter into thy reward, for you done well along o' that there schooner," and further, "Nazareth Lute . . . I'm proud o' you, b'y" (244). Clearly we are meant to see in Nazareth a man longing for recognition and for loving communion with his deity.

In the continuing story we see that the strictures of Ragged Harbour religion deny him this possibility. With Old Testament wrath, Simon, the village elder, likens Nazareth's schooner to the biblical golden calf, and warns that "The Lard God A'mighty 'll punish you for lovin' she moare 'n you

love him" (247). Nazareth, who has thereby been "struck a mortal blow," then dreams that the Lord has commanded him to "scuttle" the schooner (250). What follows is a figurative reenactment of the story of Abraham and Isaac, as Nazareth, the tortured "father," despairs at having (as it were) to kill his only "son." Amidst this darkness, Solomon Stride, already discussed as a sage figure in this essay, tries to counsel Nazareth, insisting that "'Twere not the Lard a-speakin' " in Nazareth's dream, and reminding him, contrary to Ragged Harbour doctrine, that God was merciful in the Isaac story, sending "an angel in time t' save that poor lad's life" (254-5). Surely, Solomon is implying, the "dear Lord" (as opposed to the grim "Lard God A'mighty") does not really want Nazareth to destroy his creation.

Nazareth, however, succumbs to the Old Testament notion of damnation, rather than to the New Testament belief in mercy. At the end of the story he scuttles his schooner — his lifework, embodying all his remaining love and happiness — "even as he believed the Lord God A'mighty, his god, had commanded him to do" (256). In this story we can see very clearly what Duncan found missing in Ragged Harbour faith. What is being suggested is that a religious code, while it may be a necessary means for man to cope with his life, becomes injurious if it is divested of love, mercy, and compassion. The religion of Ragged Harbour, derived, as he says, from "the teaching of grey seas and a bleak coast," has evolved into a tyrannous doctrine which robs people of life's joys. The "hard religion for a hard life," according to Duncan, is too hard. God as the embodiment of love and hope is a notion denied to Ishmael, "for the doors of that poor heart were fast closed against Him" by the way in which the Ragged Harbour psyche responds to the harsh environment. "In Ragged Harbour," the narrator explains, "some men have fashioned a god of rock and tempest and the sea's rage . . . and in the right hand of the shape is a flaming rod of chastisement." For such people, "the voice of thunder is a voice of warning, but the waving of the new-blown blossom, where the sunlight falls upon it, is a lure to damnation." And Duncan's opinion of this creed is evident in this narratorial judgement: the "Lord God A'mighty" conceived by the Ragged Harbour people, he wrote, is "a fantastic misconception, the work of the blind minds of men, which has small part with mercy and the high leading of love" (219-20). In the case of Nazareth Lute, this blind and loveless dogma has cost him his lifework; but in the still more poignant story of Billy Luff, it costs a young child his life.

In "Concerning Billy Luff and Master Goodchild," young Billy, converted at the tender age of eight to the grim fundamentalist religion operating in Ragged Harbour, is encouraged by his mother and the itinerant parson to the very darkest religious interpretation of the meaning of life. Billy owns "the only story-book in Ragged Harbour," and this archaic volume, filled with perverse exhortations to young readers to adapt "real and early Piety," advises them to look to the welcome "release of death"

at an early age as the surest road to grace. Young Billy, an impressionable child, seeks in particular to emulate the storybook character Master Goodchild and his friends, and as “these children died young” Billy “wishes that he, too, might die young” (131-5). His mother and the parson, delighted with what they consider to be his exemplary piety, encourage him in his grim interpretation of “divine grace.” So Billy turns his back on the levity of childhood and will not play with the other children, convinced by his storybook that playing is sinful idleness. Instead, he tries to be good as the storybook children are good and to prepare himself for a glorious death.

Sadly, death does come to Billy. Falling into the ice at recess one day, he “determined to sit in his wet clothes until school was out” lest “he should lose some useful piece of knowledge.” This religious penchant for expecting punitive lessons to follow perceived transgressions takes Billy, with an incurable fever, to his deathbed, to which (as indicated earlier) the folk of Ragged Harbour rush eagerly, hoping that in the death of this “holy child” the “Lard ’ll send a sign.” However, in a tragic scene Billy realizes too late that he does not want to die. “I’m feared . . . I’m feared,” he cries, and then valiantly struggles to say what his religion has taught him is right: “Jesus is mighty t’ save.” But in the final moments of his life, Billy becomes again a natural little boy, forgetting “all about Master Goodchild” and clinging to his mother’s hand. The mother then realizes the horror of the life-denying dogma she and the parson have urged him to adopt, so that “the garment and mask of Master Goodchild [is] changed for the pure white holiness of childhood; and now first, she [understands] that her boy [is] lovelier thus robed” (146-56). However, this realization has come too late and Billy, clinging not to the gloomy faith he has learned but to the warmth of his mother’s love, dies. Billy’s death is significantly similar to that of little Ezekiel Sevier in “The Chase of the Tide”; Ezekiel, like Billy, has been thoroughly indoctrinated into Ragged Harbour religious convictions, and as he begins to fear for his life he “turn[s] to his religion for consolation. He [thinks] deeply of hell.” But just as for Billy, religious dogma falls away at the moment of death and he cries for his mother. Ezekiel, explains the narrator, “had forgotten his God. He cried for his mother, who was real and nearer. God had been to him like a frowning shape in the mist” (24-30).

Duncan’s message is clear: by clinging at the end to their mothers instead of to God — as they had been taught to do — they illustrate that the concept of God their culture has developed is of something external and, ultimately, unloving. So in their extremity they abandon God altogether and reach instead for love. Thus Duncan, while demonstrating how faith seems to function to make life bearable, suggests that the hard religion for a hard life notion that emerged in Ragged Harbour has failed to provide for the human need for mercy and compassion — the same problem theologians expose in comparing Old to New Testament doctrine. Life in Ragged Harbour

is too hard, and its harshness has inspired its people to create a belief system which, while it may help them to explain and to order life, becomes grotesque because it does not allow for mercy or for love. "The Lord God A'mighty," wrote Duncan, is "a fantastic misconception" (219). And whether Duncan felt that there might indeed be a more loving deity, a "dear Lord," is unclear in these stories. The question of the existence or non-existence of an order, a reason, a God, while at the root of Duncan's writing, is not resolved in the stories comprising *The Way of the Sea*. What is clear is that the grim God of Ragged Harbour, drawn with Duncan's sombre pen, resembles too closely the grim, harsh life itself. To Duncan, neither the way of the sea he found in the outports nor the spiritual code with which these Newfoundlanders sought to accept its cruelty was bearable. And his ten stories seem to be his "voice in the wilderness," crying "why?"

Hence, Duncan's turn-of-the-century journey to the Newfoundland outports to see elemental man engaged in a struggle with an elemental universe seems to have revealed to him what Newfoundland writer Margaret Duley termed nearly forty years later "a war between people and place, with the strength of both contending forever" (2). But in Duncan's stories this war became a metaphysical battleground as well as an elemental one, because while the strength of men and of sea might "contend forever," Duncan found in this perennial battle a challenge to the whole notion of meaningful existence. The dark vision of Newfoundland for which he has been criticized, typified in his depictions of vindictive and malevolent natural forces to which both marked and ordinary outport people generally succumb, seems to stem from the unbearable physical and spiritual harshness he found in this life at "the edge of the uninhabitable." In fashioning stories to deal with the questions this harshness raised, he adopted a para-biblical style in keeping with their essentially theological nature, a style replete with epic prologues, interpretive epilogues, and a persistently intrusive narratorial voice which made sure the reader attended to the mysteries and ironies being addressed.

As this essay has tried to make clear, the timeless nature of Duncan's questions, together with the unique, evocative settings and characters he used to address them, makes *The Way of the Sea* an important treatment of Newfoundland life despite his stylistic deficiencies. Ragged Harbour lives and breathes and suffers, for us; Duncan has given it an authenticity that transcends his sometimes heavy-handed descriptions and sermoniacal narratorial extrapolations. The timeless questions the outport milieu embodied for Duncan are of course worthy of consideration. Through the characters and events in Ragged Harbour, Duncan questions the idea of an inherent universal order, exposing with poignancy the human need to believe in such an order, but condemning the vision of order that has evolved from the attempt to justify constant defeat. He deplores a way of life that, although enduring, represents human struggle and suffering taken to extremity, and causes its

participants, themselves haunted by teleological concerns, to embrace a faith that obscures rather than nourishes the sense of hope, mercy, and of love already lacking in their existence, making them look to something harsh, punitive, and external rather than to anything gentle and forgiving for their answers. In *The Way of the Sea* Duncan seems to send a plea for mercy out to the very spheres, while indicating his grave uncertainty as to whether there is anything out there to hear him. Like Solomon Stride, he is sure that it is wrong to believe in a "Lord God A'mighty" fashioned of wrath and condemnation; unlike Solomon, though, he cannot be sure of the "dear Lord" as an alternative—not in a place where the "fruits of toil" are so meagre and so grim.

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