

# “THE PAST IS MAKING A COMEBACK”

## Michael Winter’s *Minister Without Portfolio* and the Gendered Island Culture of Newfoundland

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Mandy Rowsell

Memorial University, Newfoundland <u62mmr@mun.ca>

**ABSTRACT:** At the beginning of the 20th Century, Americans, living in increasingly crowded spaces and industrialised centers, were looking for a replacement for the frontier, something they believed was quickly vanishing. The ‘back to nature’ movement inspired by this search subsequently arose alongside a widespread fear amongst men of losing (what they perceived to be) their traditional manhood. Significantly, a number of men looked to the rugged and isolated island of Newfoundland for the opportunity to simultaneously escape consumerism and prove their masculinity. Decades later, similar ideas have found renewal in the contemporary fiction of Newfoundland writer, Michael Winter. Winter’s most recent novel, *Minister Without Portfolio* (2013), depicts the island of Newfoundland as haven from modernisation, presenting the island’s isolated areas as spaces where traditional modes of masculinity can be expressed. Though Winter’s past work has been described as sophisticated, cosmopolitan fiction that rejects any caricaturising of Newfoundland as solely rural, or in any way provincial, Winter’s most recent novel conversely celebrates traditional elements of the island’s culture. This celebration is ultimately significant for its connection to the elevation of prescriptive gender roles.

**KEYWORDS:** Newfoundland, contemporary novels, masculinity, tradition

The island of Newfoundland and its cluster of smaller surrounding islands (Figure 1) occupy a land area of 117,500 square kilometres and comprise the most populated part of the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador, home to just under 500,000 inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> The main population centre is St. Johns, the provincial capital, and the remainder of the population is scattered amongst isolated coastal communities known as outports and inland towns such as Gander and Grand Falls-Windsor. The region was a self-governing British dominion until 1934 and only become a province of Canada in 1949 after a contentious referendum vote. Due to its particular history, Newfoundland has maintained a distinct cultural identity (manifest in aspects such as dialects,<sup>2</sup> accents, folklore and culinary practices) and continues to have flourishing literary, musical and arts and crafts practices, many of which serve to perpetuate regional identity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Figures interpolated from Statistics Canada (2017: online).

<sup>2</sup> The variety of dialects, largely derived from South-Western English and Irish English ones, are evident in the extensive *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (Story, Kirwin and Widdowson. 1998/1999 – now online).

<sup>3</sup> With regard to this discussion, historian James K. Hiller argues that Labrador should be recognised as a “distinct region” with “independent characteristics and identities” (2007: 113) and critics such as

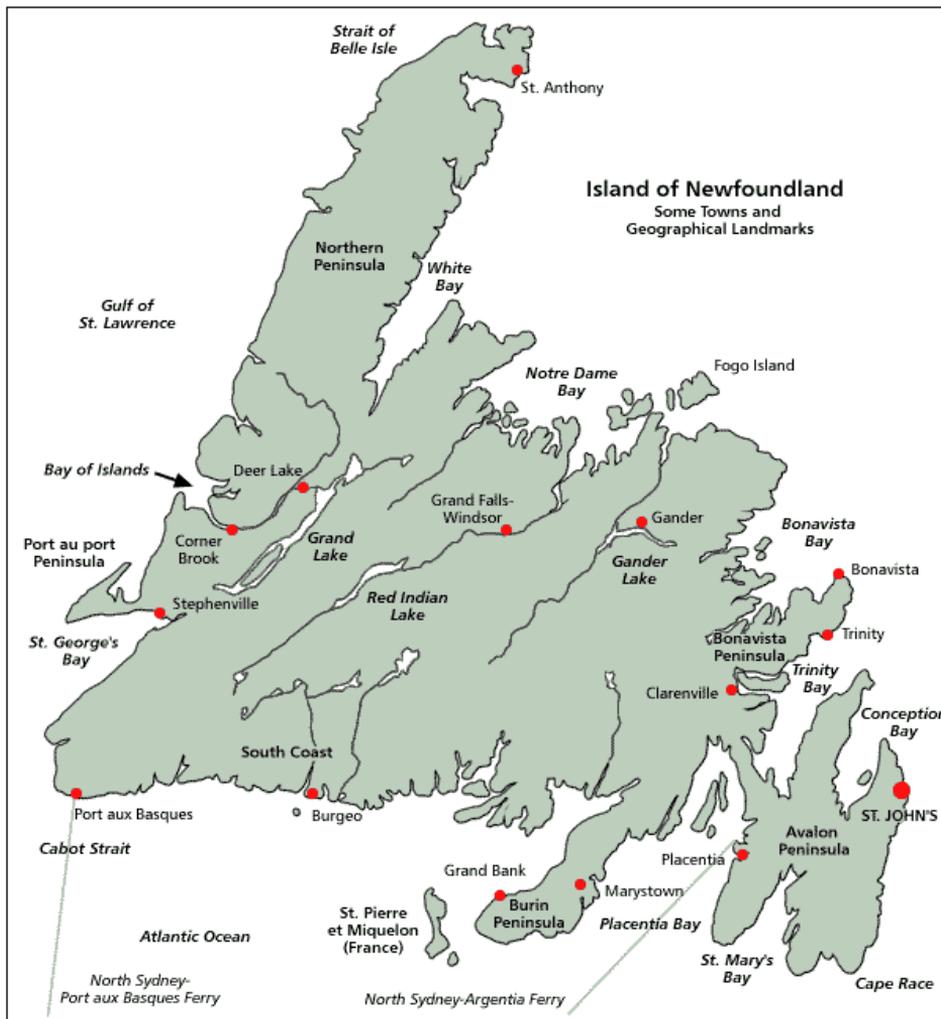


Figure 1 – Map of Newfoundland by Duleepa Wijayawardhana ©1999 - Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage Web Site; used with permission).

Michael Winter's most recent novel, *Minister Without Portfolio* (2013) (henceforth referred to as *Minister*), embraces what Adrian Fowler (2004) refers to as the "myth of the Old Outport" (1985: 71) an understanding of Newfoundland outport life as fundamentally responsible for Newfoundland's cultural identity. According to this myth, the 'real' Newfoundland includes only those parts of the province that are remote from cities and towns. It is only within the primitive areas of the island that one can experience a regional culture untouched by globalisation's homogenising influence. In *Minister*, the outport specifically becomes the necessary space for the struggling male protagonist to find his

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Jennifer Delisle have contended that Labrador has "a separate literary culture with unique issues and concerns, which merits its own critical study" (2013: 4).

ostensibly authentic masculine identity. In this way, the novel conflates the island's identity with male identity, suggesting that both are only able to flourish when based in rural areas.

In the recent past, Michael Winter's body of work has been described as "contemporary postmodern art" (Armstrong, 2010: 37). His settings are "urban" and "cosmopolitan," and his narratives revolve around characters who work in service and cultural industries (Wyile, 2011: 93). Most of Winter's novels satisfy these descriptions. *This All Happened* (2000), *One Last Good Look* (2001), and *The Architects are Here* (2007) all follow the same protagonist, a male writer who lives only in cities, usually those outside of Newfoundland. *The Death of Donna Whalen* (2010) is based on a true crime story that happened in urban Newfoundland in the 1990s. *The Big Why* (2004), Winter's foray into historiographic metafiction, actively works to deconstruct any romantic ideas one might have about Newfoundland's past by following the disappointing experiences of a fictionalised Rockwell Kent, an American painter who was ordered to leave Newfoundland after living there for only a year in the early 20th Century. *Minister Without Portfolio*, however, cannot be described in such a way. Through its romanticisation of the outport, *Minister* embraces the very stereotypes that critics argue Winter's work normally attempts to deconstruct.

*Minister* is also noteworthy for the way it contradicts particular trends within the broader context of contemporary Atlantic Canadian literature. In his book, *Anne of Tim Hortons: Globalization and the Reshaping of Atlantic-Canadian Literature* (2011), Herb Wyile argues that, in recent Newfoundland fiction, there exists a trend "of writers highlighting the disparity between outsiders' expectations about life in the region and the more complicated and less idyllic lived realities" (ibid: 1).<sup>4</sup> These writers engage with the altering cultural, political, and social environments of Newfoundland, highlighting changes in industry and emphasising the large amount of recent outmigration, something that Jennifer Delisle explores at length in her book, *The Newfoundland Diaspora* (2013). Laurie Brinklow explores this topic by looking at how Michael Crummey's novel *Sweetland* (2014) positions the eponymous protagonist's death as embodying the titular island's death, "disappearing when its people start to leave, when it is no longer remembered" (Brinklow, 2016: 141). A novel about present-day resettlement in Newfoundland, *Sweetland* is, in part, a reversal of Winter's narrative. In Crummey's text, the male protagonist is forced to leave his outport home, and give up the island that shares his family's name. However, instead of leaving, he fakes his own death and then lives as a sort of castaway on the island. Rebecca Weaver-Hightower argues that "castaways" in fiction were able to "control the naturally bounded space of the island as they control the naturally bound space of their bodies" (2006: xi). This is not true for *Sweetland*, whose inability to survive as a castaway reflects how he no longer has control of the land. His increasing lack of control over his body (as he suffers hallucinations and various illnesses) foreshadows the ultimate loss of his island home. Conversely, protagonist Henry Hayward's ability in *Minister* to lay claim to the island outport indicates agency and authority, as he uses his bodily strength to literally build his home. *Sweetland* is unable to maintain his isolated existence, and the novel's final scene has him join a community of ghosts, signaling not only his final departure but the end of traditional Newfoundland more generally. *Minister* subverts this narrative trajectory, as the text suggests that Henry's life is actually just *beginning* when he moves to outport Newfoundland. What I find particularly significant about this recent change in Winter's work is the way it corresponds to the 'crisis of masculinity' rhetoric popular in American

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<sup>4</sup> Wyile includes Lisa Moore and Michael Winter in this group of writers. Including the latter may seem fairly ironic within the context of this paper however, since *Anne of Tim Horton's* was published two years before *Minister* was released.

and Canadian culture. Christopher Grieg and Wayne Martino argue that, “at a time marked by deep economic and social uncertainty brought on by the advent of globalization... the contours of what constitutes masculinity are being contested, reformed, and redrawn” (2012: 1). That is, as profound social and economic changes in the late 20th Century have “shaken dominant versions of heteronormative masculinity,” many journalists, educators, cultural critics, and others have claimed the existence of a “crisis” in masculinity (ibid). This crisis asserts that advances in women’s rights and changes in industry and work have caused men to question their role in society. One proposed solution is that men return to wilderness spaces, where they are able to escape the allegedly feminising influences of civilization.<sup>5</sup> The rural parts of a region are often considered as examples of such wilderness space. Although the relationship between rural spaces and gender is complex, David Bell argues that many associate the rural with masculinity and the urban with effeminacy: “urban men... are constructed... as feminized and effeminate, as... physically weak... queasy about the hard facts of rural life” (2000: 552).<sup>6</sup> Thus, one of the more prominent understandings of rural spaces in the 20th Century is that they offer “space to reconnect with a lost sense of ‘natural’ masculinity,” or a “remasculinization for feminized city men” (ibid: 558). *Minister* proposes a similar solution for Henry, who leaves behind any social uncertainty when he returns to a place that is ostensibly beyond the scope of globalisation’s influence. Henry is only able to grow as a man when he trades his life in war-torn Afghanistan, where he worked as a contractor for the Canadian Armed Forces, for a more satisfying existence in one of Newfoundland’s outports.

Reviewers of *Minister* write about how the novel analyses the “hidden fallout of war” or shows a character struggling with “existential despair” (Trevelyan, 2014; Collison, 2013). Although these commentators are right to look at Henry’s “disintegration and rebirth,” many elements are left out of their conversations (Gillis, 2013: online). While Winter’s novel does effectively explore the trauma that its protagonist experiences after the death of his friend, Tender Morris, in Afghanistan, the novel is, at its core, a love letter for outport Newfoundland. It gradually reveals how Henry can only relinquish his guilt — and gain a more thorough understanding of himself as a man — when he moves to the not so subtly named Renewes. Here, Henry learns to love again after a broken heart, as he also begins to build things with his own two hands. He endeavours to take care not only of himself, but his neighbors (a tight-knit group that he often refers to as “his 100”). While escaping from the influence of industry, war, and consumerism he becomes part of a community. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, he becomes a surrogate father to the child that Tender leaves behind, sufficiently satisfying all of the traditional goals of masculinity that the text establishes throughout: physical competence and strength, fatherhood, a rejection of technology and other modern conveniences, and being able to conquer the natural world.

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<sup>5</sup> Writers from either end of the 20th Century, including Robert Baden Powell (*Scouting for Boys*, 1908) and Robert Bly (*Iron John*, 1990), have promoted outdoor adventures as a way for men to renew their masculine identities. In his book, *The History of Men*, Michael Kimmel writes that, “the effort to recreate American manhood [in the 20th Century] went outside the home...to include the rediscovery of the tonic freshness of the wilderness” (2012: 53).

<sup>6</sup> Bell notes that there also exists the notion of the rural as a “pre-cultural site for free love,” a place free from “social norms, making same-sex desire” natural (2000: 553). Therefore, Bell suggests that the country, or the rural, can also be viewed as a space for alternate masculine identities to be expressed.

Considerations of Newfoundland as a place of both respite and adventure have a lengthy history.<sup>7</sup> Fiona Polack argues that islands are “typically conceived” as possessing “definite borders between one kind of space and another” (2002: 2). As a result of this geographical separateness, many perceive Newfoundland as possessing its own distinct identity. In particular, Newfoundland has been understood as a ‘desert island’ for those wishing to flee the social and political changes accompanying modernisation. Gregory Woods argues that the “desert islands fantasy” has fascinated Western culture since the 18th Century (Woods, 1995). This fantasy relies, in part, on “throw[ing] off the trappings of ‘civilization,’” as these spaces provide “fertile landscape” for fantasies of “pre-lapsarian sexuality” and “pre-industrial peacefulness” (Woods, 1995: 115). It is only on such a deserted island that the human body can “resume its ‘natural’ condition” (Woods, 1995: 115). This understanding of desert islands finds similar expression within frontier ideology, something that Patrick O’Flaherty argues figures prominently in the cultural imagination of Newfoundland. He states that the “romanticized” projection of Newfoundland as an “American frontier” drew many “literary and artistic visitors to its shores” during the early-20th Century (O’Flaherty, 1979: 83). Frontier ideology “suggests a place that is new, where the old order can be discarded... a line that is always expanding, taking in or ‘conquering’ ever-fresh virgin territory” (Atwood, 1972: 26). With the American frontier said to be “gone” at the turn of the 20th Century, Newfoundland offered a new way for Americans (and, over time, its own inhabitants) to ‘rough it,’ allowing them to engage in hunting, camping, and other, often dangerous, activities which could not possibly be undertaken in the more densely populated areas of civilization (Turner, 1893: 38).<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, rural Newfoundland has become, for many, both a desert island and a new frontier. As features of an island that is often considered harsh, natural, and authentic, Newfoundland’s outports are, for many, the perfect space for throwing off the trappings of civilization, conquering new territory, and subsequently proving manhood, something which critics have generally implied requires feats of physical strength, resilience, and dominance over nature. Throughout the last two centuries, men have “run away to join the army, been kidnapped or abandoned on desert islands, gone west, or...run off to the woods for an all-male retreat,” actions that Michael Kimmel describe as “retreats [from] feminization” (Kimmel, 2005: 20).<sup>9</sup> Winter’s protagonist enacts a similar sort of retreat when he moves to Renew. Before decamping to the island, the narrator follows Henry as he lives and works in both Alberta, at an oil field, and Afghanistan, experiences that similarly end in tragedy.<sup>10</sup> In both places, Henry not only witnesses but is partly responsible

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<sup>7</sup> Tracey Whalen explains that, “Americans, historically, have made Newfoundland a site of escape and intrigue” (2004: 55).

<sup>8</sup> In *The Frontier in American History*, originally published in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner argues that, as of the end of the nineteenth-century, the frontier “has gone” (2010: 38). He quotes a “bulletin of the Superintendent of the Census for 1890”: “Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it cannot, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports” (ibid: 1).

<sup>9</sup> This is also in keeping with the ‘back to nature’ movement perceived by Peter Schmitt in his book, *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America* (1990). Schmitt argues that, alongside a widespread feeling of unease amongst the business and professional classes in North America, there arose a fear amongst men of becoming “effete,” of losing vitality and manhood, features that were associated with physical labour and the outdoors: only “raw experience” could make life real again (1990: 13).

<sup>10</sup> Henry is a Newfoundlander, but he has spent the majority of his life in the island’s capital, the city of St. John’s. Immediately before moving to Renew, he spends time in both Afghanistan and Alberta.

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for devastating accidents that lead to death, in one case, and multiple broken bones in the other. Both of these situations show how the modern world is, both literally and metaphorically, destroying men. Present-day culture is presented as hostile, disorientating, and ultimately harmful. Moreover, it is important to note that the role Henry has in Afghanistan is not as a soldier, but as a subcontractor who helps service the Canadian forces, supplying compounds with waste management and water supply. Whereas a soldier is someone Henry believes is deserving of respect, he is conversely ashamed of his own work in Kabul. When a man in Canada sees Henry in uniform and thanks him for his service, Henry feels like a “fraud” (Winter, 2013: 103). This moment highlights one of the main reasons Henry has left the war in Afghanistan to return home: although war is typically considered one of the most masculine activities a man can engage in, Henry's role in this war is to make a profit. Thus, the text clearly separates the adulation serving in a war can inspire from the shame treating a war as an industry can conversely bestow. Money becomes the dividing line in this situation. Thus, when Henry decides to leave Afghanistan, it is not that he is choosing to leave the war, but rather that he is refusing to financially benefit from this conflict. Notably, it is Henry's incompetence in Afghanistan that leads to Tender's death, as Henry's fear of roadside bombers causes him to accidentally disarm Tender, leaving them both vulnerable to attack. The more masculine pursuit for Henry, the text posits, ultimately becomes living somewhere where economic concerns are no longer of such importance. He must learn to become the sort of man — self-possessed, courageous, and skilled with tools — that would not have been so ill-suited to serving in a war.

The text's blending of the past with the present — enacted through flashbacks and the general interest in history expressed by various characters — shows how the past elements of this culture continue to exert a powerful influence on its inhabitants, particularly in terms of gender roles. In *Masculinity in the Modern West: Gender, Civilization and the Body*, Christopher Forth argues that “new modes” of masculinity always “appear haunted” by a time when men were “harder, more physically virile, and less constricted by civilization” (2008: 10). This is true for *Minister*. Part 2 of the novel begins with a chapter that outlines the history of Renew's:

*Renew's was an old place... the locals speak of the Mayflower coming into port in 1620 to take on fresh water and slaughter animals before continuing on to Plymouth... [The] pirate Peter Easton operated from here and buried his treasure beneath... peculiar rocks. The native Beothuck were driven inland early on, terrified of the European destruction. The masterless men followed, living illegally along the riverbanks. (Winter, 2013: 160)*

Although some of these events *could* have occurred here, the novel suggests that specific locations are not important: it is every Newfoundland outport's legacy to be rooted in significant historical moments, particularly when they are connected to male founding figures. It is these past events that form the identity of the outport, and any technological, industrial, or political advances only serve to strip the island of its sense of authenticity. Winter's narrator claims that “the invention of refrigeration and the majority vote for confederation with Canada tore away any sustainable fishing practice that made sense to a small community,” causing Newfoundland to become “the only independent country in the history of the world to voluntarily give up self-rule”—adding a sharp “damn you England

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Thus, he is not exactly an ‘outsider,’ as he was born on the island and spent decades living there. Yet, he is a newcomer to the outport.

and to hell with you Canadian wolf" (ibid: 161). These statements condemn changes in industry (the advent of refrigeration) and politics (confederation) for the negative impact they both had on the island. This passage laments the loss of a nation, as Newfoundland's financial struggles caused it to become a province of Canada. The novel positions such a willing concession of power as emasculating, and Henry's move to Renew's is, in part, significant for the way it places him as seemingly beyond the purview of national control. Once free from the urban spaces that remind him of his impotent condition, he is able to become the man that he should be—a powerful and independent producer, much like those who once thrived on the island (from the pilgrims to the pirates). Winter's novel therefore condemns those forces of society that it contends both strip Newfoundland of its autonomy and deny men their experience of real masculinity.

The novel's central preoccupation is Henry's transformation: it traces his development from someone who lives in cities, and resists the influence of the past, to someone who lives in the country and welcomes history's influence. Near the beginning of the novel, the narrator states that "Henry had visited Renew's a few times, but living in a small place was not something that had appealed to him" (Winter, 2013: 12). Instead, Henry "appreciate[s] a city giving you a movie to watch, rather than having to constantly make your own movie" (ibid: 13). Rural areas are strictly "for excursions," not daily living, and Henry initially values the modern conveniences that a city provides (ibid). The reader will note that the past, according to the text, is also always connected to the future, in that it is those characters who care about the past, or who have these ancestral connections, like Tender and their friend, John, who also have families or are planning families; they are the ones who are "laying down roots" (ibid: 86). When Tender shares with Henry and John his plan to "fix up" the old family home in Renew's, Henry hears something more: he "listen[s] to these men betray a spirit of making a family and owning something old, of cherishing the past and digging your feet into soil that other generations had also been digging in" (ibid: 38). Henry admits that he is nervous about "commitment," asking himself "was he a strong enough man to pull it off?" (ibid). Although Henry decides at this time that he has "none of this attachment to the past or to old things" (ibid), his attitude gradually begins to change. He later decides to buy the late Tender's house, thus making the decision to "own something old" and consequently "cherish the past" and "dig in" his own feet. The narrator states that "[Henry] felt like he was starting a new life, venturing into new but old places" (ibid: 83).

The house clearly belongs to the past, and, for the first time in his life, Henry appreciates this historical connection:

*Newsprint and flour paste seeping under the wallpaper. He searched for dates and found them, between the world wars... There were beds that were thirty years old... Under a seat cushion a... letter. It was typed, from an American military fellow... He stood there in the room... and looked out the window. Others had looked out this window but how long ago and who? (ibid)*

Henry reads the letters and looks at the old pictures and realises "I am concerned" (ibid: 85). He acknowledges that, "he was letting all this affect him" (ibid: 85). Henry comes to further realisations in this house, realisations about himself and his ex-girlfriend, Nora. The house allows him this kind of introspection. He spends one of his first nights in the community sleeping next door, at John's house, and thinks "about the house across the field holding hands with this house under the earth... The people who had lived and died in these houses" (ibid: 86). He asks himself "why does this matter to me?" and states, "I am no

kin. Kin... [is] an ancient thing" (ibid). In this way, the reader can already view a shift in Henry's opinions regarding the past, including his feelings towards ancestry. Namely, Henry begins to show his desire to have connections to the past.

We receive other signs of Henry's change. For example, one of the things that Nora says to Henry when she ends their relationship at the beginning of the novel is that "she wanted to live a dangerous life" (ibid: 4). Henry fixates on this phrase and the narrator repeats it multiple times throughout the course of the text. The second time it appears is after John tells Henry about the job opportunity in Kabul, working for Rick Tobin and his company, who take care of water, wiring, and waste management for the overseas Canadian Armed Forces. The phrase leads into a discussion of Rick's wife, Colleen, who is likely having an affair with her neighbour in Renew. The reader is told that Rick is a brilliant business man, but he is frequently away from home, and many believe that Colleen has "taken up" with Noyce, who lives in the lighthouse (ibid: 15).

*You sign on for a year with one trip home and four-day stints touching down in the United Arab Emirates. Health, dental, a seven-hundred-thousand-dollar insurance policy... Security provided by her majesty's government. Tender Morris will take care of us. Live a dangerous life. The one unsmooth element in the story of Rick's life around the bay was the rumour that his wife was having an affair... On financial matters Rick has life solved and he wanted to share that solution with his friends. (Winter, 2013: 15)*

Here, the text uses the phrase almost ironically, at least in hindsight. Henry feels compelled to take the job in order to show Nora that he can live dangerously, yet the text's immediate connection of this type of work to a 'cuckolded' man suggests that this job is not what Henry actually needs to prove his own masculinity. In effect, this moment can be read as a type of foreshadowing: Rick loses a piece of his manhood through this job, as it forces him to abandon his wife for long periods of time, an activity that the text suggests leads to her affair. This prophesies Henry's own loss of masculinity that occurs while working for Rick, as we see his desire to live dangerously, while profiting from the war, backfire, as Henry's inexperience and fear leads to Tender's death. Moreover, that the suggestion to live dangerously is made by a woman is not insignificant. Nora's desire is not Henry's desire: he is momentarily distracted from what is important by this woman, but in the end he realises that true masculinity comes from a man pursuing what *he* believes is more important. For Henry, this includes "marshalling up an inner strength to help what existed outside of himself" (ibid: 129). It occurs to Henry that what is important is his community: taking care of his '100' is the most valuable way he can prove his manhood.

As I briefly state above, the belief that contemporary society is based in feminised consumerism has often encouraged crisis of masculinity rhetoric. As a result, men — both fictional and real — search for ways to escape what they perceive as an emasculating environment. In 'American Women and the Making of Modern Consumer Culture,' Kathy L. Peiss elaborates on the pervasiveness of the belief in the existence of a feminist consumer society. She writes:

*Consumer culture is part of the air we breathe, and women's role as consumer seems almost a natural one—a role captured in the phrase, 'born to shop.' Even in this age of market segmentation, when men are addressed as style-conscious buyers, the association of femininity and consumption remains nearly seamless. And these terms have been mutually reinforcing. Consumption is coded as a*

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*female pursuit, frivolous and even wasteful, a form of leisure rather than productive work.* (Peiss, 1998: online)

She explains how “modern American consumer culture” arose after 1890 as the “outcome of a synergy of economic and cultural forces,” noting that “one of the cultural products of this new infrastructure was an explicit conception of consumer identity, an identity that was simultaneously bound up in notions of the feminine” (ibid). A resistance towards consumerist structures, including big corporations, large cities, and brands and logos, is something that *Minister* reflects. While living in *Renews*, Henry intentionally avoids shopping at box stores, choosing instead to ‘live off the land’ as much as possible. For example, when he digs up plants that he finds growing along the coast, planning to bring them back to his garden, he considers how:

*he did not understand, truly, why he did this. Why didn't he just spend a hundred dollars at the gardening centre in the Goulds and get an instant backyard in easily transferable potted shrubs and perennials. Something, he knew, was happening to him.* (ibid: 164)

The text ensures that the reader acknowledges Henry's change as a movement away from consumerism and materialism — products of an unauthentic, urban lifestyle, often associated with effeminacy— to austerity and naturalism, traits often associated with both anti-capitalism and masculine prowess. In particular, Henry notes how these trees are “the children of the children of the bushes and plants that used to service the families of Kingmans Cove” (ibid: 164). Henry appreciates the plants for the way they join together generations and let him be a part of this history. Furthermore, it is while he is out sourcing plants that he sees a strange, orange horse. When he meets Tender's ex-fiancée, Martha, at the house later, she, too, has seen this horse, and Henry considers this a sign: “They had been waiting for an image or a conversation and the horse comment had made Henry take her hand and she agreed to climb the stairs” (ibid: 165). Ultimately, this sighting of the horse leads to their first time making love in the old house and Henry is thus rewarded for his journey into the wilderness. If he had visited the gardening store instead, he and Martha never would have shared this moment. In this way, Henry's new life in the outpost encourages a return to a time when men were more than just consumers.

The reader will note that the past, according to the text, is also always connected to the future, in that it is those characters who care about the past, or who have these connections, like John and Tender, who also have families or are planning families; they are the ones who are “laying down roots” (ibid: 86). Eventually, the narrator explicitly informs the reader that, “the past is making a comeback” (ibid: 195). The reader begins to notice that everything that Henry owns or purchases is both new and old.<sup>11</sup> This works as an overt metaphor of the way that historical elements are infiltrating the contemporary culture. The text describes Henry's boat, left to him by Tender, as “brand new” but “built traditional” (ibid: 240). Rick describes Henry's house as “more a thing from the past than a dwelling to

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<sup>11</sup> With this statement, I draw attention to the fact that Henry is still a consumer. Yet, even these examples show how he is trying to separate himself from normative consumerism. Namely, he purchases things second-hand, or inherits them from others; any problems that he has with the purchasing of the house—and he does suffer during his confusing negotiations with the real-estate agent—gesture towards the way bureaucracy has negatively impacted ownership. It is not possible that he entirely escapes the dominating cultural force that is consumerism, but he tries to distance himself as much as possible.

be inhabited now" (ibid: 241). The stove Henry and Martha buy is "old fashioned" with "nothing ornate about it," yet as they drive it home, the wind cleans out its firebox, leaving it "as though a junk of wood had never been burned in it" (ibid: 253-4). Near the end of the text, Henry considers how he has become "a slave to origins," as "the past was forcing him to live the way it wanted him to live" and "he was open to it" (ibid: 287).

The final phase of Henry's change occurs after he falls into an incinerator, symbolically rendering him as garbage, or waste. Many contemporary American novels, such as Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) or Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001), use literal waste as a metaphor for American society: they condemn waste as the inevitable by-product of a capitalist culture. A proliferation of waste can correspond with a movement away from caring about society to only caring about oneself. After Henry is discovered and removed from the incinerator by two men from the community, he considers "[How] much danger made a dangerous life unacceptable? Why did a life have to be dangerous? Should it be?" (ibid: 229). He wants to escape from the waste of capitalist culture—and risk becoming waste himself—and the book suggests that the way to do so is with help from the community.

That night, at home, Henry sees a ghost standing on the stairs above him, "a girl in a white dress" that "was not... a real person" (ibid: 230). Henry:

*understood his sense of the world was drifting away. He was not in a house now but some larger place, some fathomless atmosphere... He panicked and was losing even his sense of self and then he felt a tickle brush his wrist and he pulled and the light arrived all around him... He phoned Martha and told her about the girl in the stairs. It felt like a reaction to the incinerator. Somehow this small ghost... was a retreating wave from the high tide of the incinerator. (ibid: 230-1)*

Here, Henry connects his sighting of the ghost to his near-death experience in the incinerator. Méira Cooke argues that "ghosts materialize at moments of crisis, at the incurable break between a traditional past and an unstable present, between cultural loss and ethnic reinvention" (2004: 134). That Henry sees a ghost after escaping from the incinerator, symbolic of his movement away from capitalism, is significant. As a "carrier of tradition," the ghost signifies the importance of the past, showing that certain "social bonds have loosened" (ibid). Henry is "moved" by what is happening around him. Although he at first considered himself to be only "forcing himself to adopt this life," he realises that he has been "been baptized by fire" (ibid: 236). He has made this place his home and he has changed in the process.

That this ghost takes a feminine form is also important. This "girl in a white dress" symbolises a particular iteration of the past: she is the 'Angel in the House,' a passive, purely domestic female figure. Taken from the name of Coventry Patmore's poem, published in 1854, the 'Angel in the House' symbolised the ideal woman in British society at that time. Sarah Schoch argues that the poem suggests that, "without a female subject over whom to wield his masculine power," the male loses his innate sense of superiority and dominance, "upon which his masculine identity constitutes itself" (2012: 3) In *Minister*, Henry returns to a home where a feminine figure from the past is waiting to greet him, to welcome him, the masculine subject, back to his domain.

The house becomes an obvious metaphor for Henry's transformation: as the house is rebuilt — or renewed — so is Henry. As something that was once old and crumbling is

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restored, in an effort to not erase its history but celebrate and maintain it, Henry is also able to develop a sense of self that was earlier denied him. The text suggests that the same is true for Newfoundland: that it is only through an embracing of the past, a renewal of traditions, and a rejection of modern constructions that the island can maintain its unique identity. Ultimately, this way of thinking promotes a romantic ideology, where technological, economic, and political change is viewed as something negative and not progressive. One of the problems with a text that makes such an argument is that, by glorifying the past, it necessarily glorifies all elements of that past, including certain stereotypical gender roles. Positioning the island's outports as an escape from consumerism and a haven for tradition ultimately establishes the island as a region where alternate expressions of manhood are not welcome: any man who expresses his masculinity in a way that the text dismisses as inauthentic is led to fear being rejected and excluded from the community, as Rick Tobin ultimately is. By implying that Newfoundland society will only succeed if it eschews anything urban or modern, the novel situates Newfoundland as a space where progressive or alternate gender notions are not always sustainable.

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