"What Am I? What Do I Want?"

An analysis of *The Glassy Sea* by Marian Engel

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Abstract

The essay is a study of *The Glassy Sea* by the Canadian author Marian Engel. The novel focuses on the main character’s self-exploration and her search for identity. A Jungian approach to this novel is particularly appropriate since the author makes use of several archetypes and symbols. Moreover, the novel is presented in an introspective manner that brings to the mind the method of self-examination used in psychoanalysis. The essay studies the development of the main character’s identity, Rita. Her quest can be summed up in two questions: Who is she and what does she want to do with her life? We follow Rita through a series of steps that will lead her to maturity and to an independent life. Her development takes place in stages and the essay focuses on four of these. There is a regularity of pattern at each stage; Rita lives in different homes where she is under the influence of a mentor, whose role model she accepts at first, submits to and finally rejects. Among the archetypal images that appear in the novel, we find that the mother archetype is omnipresent and that Rita’s growth process is strongly connected to the mother complex. The author also makes use of the *egg*, the *rose* and the *sea* symbols to underline certain aspects of Rita’s development. The essay seeks to connect Rita’s developmental phases to the initiation rituals and the individuation process described by Jung.
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1. Introduction

That we are bound to the earth does not mean that we cannot grow; on the contrary it is the *sine qua non* of growth. No noble, well-grown tree ever disowned its dark root, for it grows not only upwards but downwards as well. (Jung 1982b: 188)

The career of Marian Engel as a Canadian writer was short, as she died of cancer at the age of fifty-two. Nevertheless, she was productive. Among her narratives, the rather short novel *Bear* is perhaps the one that became best known and it was translated into several other languages. Marian Engel is otherwise almost unknown to the Swedish reading public.

Engel’s narratives can be read on different levels and the interpretation of her texts is always a challenge for the reader. Among her novels, *The Glassy Sea* is probably one of the most intriguing. This novel fascinated me at first because of the way in which Engel describes her main character’s development and her search for identity; it seems to mirror the kind of struggle that many women born in the twentieth century have to go through. Although this is a work of fiction, many of its elements also bring to mind the author’s life and experience. Of course, this is the case with many works of fiction but Marian Engel herself confirms that her “books generally come out of some kind of personal struggle and an attempt to organize experience” (Klein 29).

Born in Toronto in 1933, Marian Engel was adopted and brought up by the Passmore family. Her childhood was marked by the way of life in small town Ontario and by the values of the United Church. Her father, a kind but remote man with whom she had a good relationship, was a teacher. Her mother, who worked as a secretary and who is described as “a very large person” in her life, had a very powerful and energetic personality (Klein 24). Marian Engel held a university degree in French and German and she has written a thesis on the Canadian novel from 1920-1955.

Although she had decided never to become a teacher (because she knew too well what it was like) she taught at Montana State University for about a year. However, she felt a need to get a perspective on who she was and what her country was really like and she longed to get out of Canada. She studied in France, and taught and also wrote a novel in London. Of this first attempt at writing she says: “It wasn’t good enough, it wasn’t publishable” (qtd in Klein 8). Her travels brought her to Cyprus, where she tried to write detective stories, a form of novel which she
found enjoyable to read but annoying to write. While living in Cyprus in the early 1960s she also stayed in a convent.

Back in Canada, she started to write again after the birth of her children. Although she had very little time, she managed to write *Sarah Bastard’s Notebook*, a brash first novel that gave her a real start as a writer. She was politically active and involved in the women’s movement, but she could not accept some of its premises. She became really famous when she published *Bear*, a book that caused sharp and diverse reactions from both public and critics. Although the setting of her next novel is quite different, *The Glassy Sea* offers a clear parallel with *Bear*: the main character in both narratives attempts to find herself. Marian Engel has also written a few other novels, among them *The Tattooed Woman*, *The Honeymoon Festival*, and *Lunatic Villas*.

A number of studies offer a feminist approach to the work of Engel and most of them focus the situation of women and motherhood. However, the remark by Hutchison that “perhaps the most immediately apparent [mode for writing about times of internal crisis] is the method of psychoanalysis, the therapy of self-examination” seems to be particularly appropriate when examining *The Glassy Sea* (Hutchison 4). The introspective manner in which Engel presents this novel focuses to a great extent on the self-exploration and the search for identity, subjects that are quite often dealt with by psychoanalysts. Furthermore, two of the remarks made by the protagonist herself made me wonder if I could understand *The Glassy Sea* better by looking into it against the background of some of C. G. Jung’s work. The main character Rita Heber mentions having “read a book on Freud and dreams,” and she also fears that she “had read too much Jung” (40, 142).

Rita Heber’s life is characterised by a quest that can be summed up in two questions: “Who am I and what do I want?” Those are two basic questions in the life of any human being but in her search for answers, Rita seems unusual in that she wanders from one house to another, looking for a place where she can belong. She also goes from one mentor to another, seeking someone who can guide her in her endeavour to find out who she is. Each mentor helps her to go through a growth process leading to an independent life. Finding new mentors can thus be compared to taking tentative steps towards maturity because, as she puts it, “some of us hatch only in stages” (158). At the home of her parents, her first mentor (her mother) stands as the model of what a woman should be. A refusal of the values embodied in this model brings Rita to continue to other homes that seem ideal to her at a certain time and where other personalities will take over the role as her mentor.

As Engel herself makes Rita mention her interest in Jung and
psychoanalysis, I thought that it might prove interesting to see if the theories of Jung can be traced ‘between the lines’ of The Glassy Sea. In this essay I intend to look into how the homes and the mentors are described, and I shall concentrate my study on four of them: Eleanor, Mary Rose, Maggie and Asher. The regularity of pattern of the course of events points to the initiation rituals discussed by Jung. Furthermore, the descriptions of these homes might be considered as four important stages in Rita’s individuation process. In addition, I shall try to find out how the author uses archetypes and symbolism to underline the main character’s state of mind at the major turning points of her life.

2. Material

My primary source is the original, 1978 edition of The Glassy Sea. I have also consulted Lifelines: Marian Engel’s writings in which Christl Verduyn considers the whole of Engel’s production. She also dedicates a chapter to The Glassy Sea where she emphasizes Engel’s “investigation into the impact of dualism on women’s experience” in the novel (139).

There are few articles about The Glassy Sea and they are rather difficult to get hold of. I was nevertheless lucky enough to obtain a copy of Carroll Klein’s interview: “A conversation with Marian Engel.” In this very interesting article Marian Engel answers a number of questions about her life and her career and also gives a few comments on some of her books. We hear Engel’s own voice, as it were, and with the help of this article, the reader can also draw a number of parallels between Engel’s life and her narratives. This personal account of her work and thoughts has been very useful to me when writing about Rita Heber.

I also used Hutchison’s “Onward, Naked Puritans,” an article in which the parallels between the novels Bear and The Glassy Sea are shown: the first narrative represents a physical journey while the second is concerned with the mental process of a lifetime but, as Hutchison observes, both “heroines have a strong but latent wish to face their true self” (63).

During my research I consulted a number of essays and lectures by C. G. Jung. The work of Jung is so extensive that I could never hope to read more than a small part of his writings within the time allotted for this essay. I have, nevertheless, found some interesting points in Aspects of the Feminine, Aspects of the Masculine, Dreams and Psychic Energy, Dreams and Archetypes. Jung’s autobiography My Life has also been useful. Man and his Symbols, a collection of essays written about
Jung and addressing laymen, as well as two books on basic concepts in Jung’s theories (C. G. Jung’s Psychology by Jolande Jacobi and To Read Jung by Kurt Almqvist) have helped me.

Some of the quotations I used were found in Psychological Reflections by Jung, an anthology of his writings edited by Jolande Jacobi. Furthermore, I found inspiration in a study by Jill Barker: “Does Edie Count? A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Snowed up.” An essay by Elisabeth Wright, “Modern Psychoanalytic Criticism,” and a book by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan about specific aspects of narrative fiction, Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics, provided me with a theoretical background on narrative techniques.

3. Approach

“As in Life and Letters, of course,” reflects Rita on an event that takes place at the beginning of the novel (16). Those two words, life and letters, seem to be representative of the whole novel: she is writing a letter about her life. The epistolary form is a genre which has given women the possibility to express themselves within an accepted literary framework. My first thought was that the form chosen by Marian Engel places her among women writers in a traditional way. Nevertheless, the letter form itself could be considered in a psychoanalytic perspective. Rita’s letter tells us about a specific part of her life: presented against the background of her early childhood, the narrative is mainly about the crises and the processes of change she undergoes before she will find her real Self and her place in the world. Psychological criticism has compared writing literature to dreaming; the dream (or literary work) reveals the personality and the unconscious of the dreamer/author through the fictive lives of the characters (Wright 146). At the end of her letter Rita says: “Leave me here, please, to dream my redemptive dreams” (144), thus pointing to the letter as a clue towards an understanding of the psychological process she has been through.

If we compare the epistolary form to other genres, we find that it is a form where the writer can establish a dialogue with one, or a few, specific readers. If this were a biographical account of Rita’s life, the reader could be just anyone. But when writing the letter, Rita selects Bishop Philip Yurn as her addressee and this choice makes the reader feel that the letter represents an extended, imaginary dialogue between Rita and the bishop. This feeling is reinforced by the fact that she addresses him directly, not only at the beginning of the letter but also later on in the
text, exactly as one would in a conversation: “Oh, Philip” (34), “Do you understand now...” (35), “I know that what you are suggesting...” (94). In my opinion the choice of addressee is of crucial importance for a reading of the Glassy Sea. For the interpretation of dreams an outsider is needed: the psychoanalyst, whose role is necessary but almost invisible. Indeed, the interaction between patient and practitioner is often described as a dialogue but the role of the psychoanalyst is to trigger the patient’s own reflection and introspection through questions and remarks, not to provide answers or solutions: these have to be found by the patient himself. In this way, the treatment becomes a kind of introspective monologue carried out by the patient.

Rita’s letter, then, can be read as a monologue and it could be compared to a session with her psychoanalyst. The reader will discover that it is not the first time Rita makes this introspective journey. Here and there in the text, she mentions a Dr. Stern. Dr Stern is a psychoanalyst who helped her earlier in a difficult period of her life and with whom she has already discussed the matters reported in her letter. Furthermore, during one of her crises, she also got help from Brother Anthony Stone – the bishop’s messenger – who sounded “more than he knew like Dr Stern” (153). By going back into her memories, Rita goes into psychoanalysis again, seemingly on her own but still with the bishop as a ‘silent’ interlocutor in the background. Although the roles of Philip Yurn and Anthony Stone are parallel to that of Dr Stern, they offer a slightly different kind of guidance since their religious roles add another dimension to Rita’s reflections. They provide room for her spiritual needs. Philip’s important role is reflected in his remark: “If I robbed you of a certain amount of your past, I have given you a future” (11). In her essay, Wright comments on the psychoanalytic method that consists in letting the patient go back into his/her past experiences and “read the past in order to make sense of the present. [---] The teller of the story, be it the author or the patient, is himself engaged in an act of interpretation which involves the evaluation of past experience” (150). Well aware of this procedure, Rita is not only trying to understand her present psychological status but also to use this understanding as a foundation to build her life on. As she puts it, she wishes to “map the future in terms of the real past” (146).

An important part of the psychoanalyst’s work is also to determine what recurrent patterns emerge from the dreams and speech of the patient. Those patterns can be seen through the “repetition of structures” or the “patterns of behaviour” within the course of an individual’s life (Wright 157). Recurrent patterns serve the function of pointing to areas of the unconscious that will be of interest to the
practitioner. They can be situational, locational, or even linguistic. Such patterns can be found in Rita’s use of certain words or expressions but also in the rich symbolic values of certain images (among others the rose, the egg and the sea). The reader will also find a recurrent pattern of behaviour connected with Rita’s different homes. In each of these homes she is under the influence of a strong character, whom she will leave after a while, in order to continue her quest. There is also a hint of this pattern in Rita’s relationships with her mentors. Rita admires them as models at first but they behave later in a way that causes her to ‘leave the nest’ and thus experience a loss.

For Rita, moving from one place to another implies leaving behind a certain way of life to seek a new place and a new human and spiritual mentor. Rita’s quest is a search for perfection and for a way of life that will satisfy her need for ‘higher’ things, invested with a spiritual value. She makes the early statement: “I didn’t know where I wanted to go except that it was up.” On the whole, she admits that it is a feeling that is “vague” but “strong” (39). Her first mentor is her mother, Eleanor. However, Rita’s craving for beauty leads her to refuse her mother’s way of life. On her way through life she seeks guidance from people that she sees as diametrically different from Eleanor. Those people replace the mother figure in her life. Finding new mentors will not necessarily give Rita new answers but the impact of their personalities on her life ensures her own progress. Rita’s refusal of her mother as an ideal role model made me want to examine certain aspects of the mother-complex and its possible connections with the personalities of Rita’s different mentors. Inspired by Jungian texts, and keeping in mind the comparison between Rita’s letter and a psychoanalytic session, I shall examine the personality of the mentors, the possible connections with the mother-complex and the impact the personalities of the mentors have on Rita’s individuation process. I shall also look into how the author pictures Rita’s homes and how symbolism functions in these descriptions.

One of the first things the reader becomes aware of is the use the author makes of symbols and archetypal images. The archetypes, or “primordial images,” are psychological patterns of behaviour that human beings ‘inherit’ from their ancestors and, further back, from mankind’s “collective unconscious.” The primordial form of these archetypes cannot be represented. Nevertheless, its effects on the human mind make visualisation possible through images and ideas. Those archetypal images and ideas are present in religions and myths (i.e. the God-image, the Rebirth myth) and appear also in the individual’s dreams (Jung 1986: 40–41). In the novel, the recurrent image of the rose is perhaps the most obvious symbol, along
with other images of flowers and birds. The symbolic value of the rose has been widely exploited in literature and Rita Heber herself reflects on this: “Why, I wonder, did the rose become the valuer, the circle’s pure symbol? Because it didn’t last? Was perfumed? Blowzy? [...] And, ah yes, enhorned, thus enthroned” (24). Articles written on The Glassy Sea all mention the salient flower and bird imagery in the novel. Furthermore, the reader will find that the setting itself might also have a symbolic value. There is, for instance, a symbolic glassy sea in the text of the hymns sung by the main character as a child. The adult Rita also lives by a real seashore, when she finally retreats from the world.

4. Narrative structure

The novel consists of three parts: a prologue, a letter, and an envoi. These three parts build the framework around the novel’s different narrative levels. In the prologue Rita Heber has just accepted an offer from Philip Yurn, Bishop of Huron, to become Mother Superior at a nunnery called Eglantine House. Rita reflects on her decision and decides to read the letter she once wrote to the bishop.

In this letter, Rita Heber tells the story of little Rita who was born in West China County, Ontario. Her parents run a gas station in a rather harsh environment and Rita’s need for beautiful things is only fulfilled when she attends church. Quite early she is trapped between what her head knows to be the hard reality of her surroundings and her heart’s longing for ‘higher’ things. Her whole life will be an attempt to combine both of those aspects and to accept her own imperfections. Her development towards the discovery and acceptance of her Self takes place gradually. After university, Rita enters Eglantine House, a convent where she stays for ten years. She is, then, launched into the ‘real’ world of the Hibbert family where she has to learn how to cope with society. There she meets Asher Bowen, whom she marries. But after the death of their son, Rita realises that marrying Asher was a mistake. She breaks down, takes to drinking and, finally, she retreats into the countryside by the sea. It is a hard winter, everything seems to be falling apart around her and she has to struggle to survive despite her dark thoughts. In the middle of the physical and mental storm, the clergyman Anthony Stone appears, bringing an offer from Bishop Philip Yurn to return to the convent and become its Mother Superior. For Rita this is an opportunity to make a new start, to be reborn into a new life at Eglantine House. There she will at last be able to make a synthesis of her life and reach an equilibrium of heart and head “in the hope of finding a
situation for her where imperfection [is] sufficiently acceptable [so] that she [can] be involved with the world again” (Klein 29).

The novel ends with an envoi where she summarises her thoughts and feelings after reading the letter and where she starts making plans for the future. The prologue and the envoi share a specific temporal frame since they take place within the same evening, in the kitchen of the sea shore house where Rita has found a retreat. Verduyn mentions that the prologue and the envoi bracket the letter, which is the main body of the narrative (142). This idea is suggested in the text by Rita herself who claims: “Life ... is a sentence between brackets” (146). Between those brackets we find, indeed, the letter that summarises her childhood and adult life in Ontario and the events that occurred prior to this evening. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan comments on this type of structure:

[T]here may also be narration in the story. [...] A character whose actions are the object of narration can himself in turn engage in narrating a story. Such narratives within narratives create a stratification of levels whereby each inner narrative is subordinate to the narrative within which it is embedded. (91)

5. Analysis

The four stages that I have chosen to look into present interesting similarities. The pattern of behaviour of the main character seems to repeat itself at each stage: Rita starts in a place she considers as her “home” and she is under the guidance of a strong “mentor.” Each place and mentor will contribute to the development of Rita’s personality and the discovery of her own Self. At a certain point in time, Rita will have received all the help she can get and she will have to seek a new mentor and a new home. Breaking with both home and mentor is psychologically difficult but it is a necessary step, which allows the transition to the next stage. In the head-notes to one of Jung’s essays, John Beebe rightly comments: “Jung’s notion of the stages of life implies a lifelong series of initiations. The developing individual struggles successively with problems considered to be typical of certain periods of life, and these problems are never fully solved. Rather, they serve the purpose of promoting consciousness” (Jung 1989a: 28). As mentioned, staying in different homes is to be considered as taking steps towards the discovery of the Self. Jung also explains in *Man and his Symbols* what the term “initiation” implies:
Initiation is to be seen as a process beginning with a submission ritual, followed by a period of self-restraint and then by an emancipation ritual. In this way, man reconciles the contradictory elements of his personality and reaches an equilibrium that will give him true humanness and real control of himself. (157, my transl.)

In his work about archetypes C. G. Jung has commented on the psychological contents of the mother archetype “which appears under an almost infinite variety of aspects,” the most obvious of these being the personal mother, and any woman with whom a similar relationship exists (1982a: 109). The mother archetype can also be expressed through symbols of the mother in a figurative sense. Although the qualities associated with this archetype are ordinarily solicitude and sympathy, there is an ambivalence inherent in them, which Jung indicates by using the phrase “the loving and terrible mother” (1982a: 110). In The Glassy Sea, the main character seems to be engaged in a conflict, primarily with the values her mother embodies. Nevertheless, her mother is also a role model and Rita’s refusal of that model will deprive her of the mentor she needs. By and by, she meets other people whose role in her life is to replace the mother-figure. In her letter to the bishop Rita gives the readers hints that facilitate their understanding of her mother and other mentors. She also underlines the description of the mentors’ personalities by allowing them to be mirrored in the physical environment of the four homes where she stays.

5.1 Eleanor’s house

“I was a child, once, a little female child.” This is how Rita begins the story of her life as she presents her first step into the world. At first, we are under the impression that the picture she gives of herself is a tender one, as everybody seemed to like her and “fussed over [her]” (20). But the author’s choice of words when describing Rita’s childhood qualifies these first memories and gives the reader a more complete picture of Rita’s world. A superficial reading conveys the feeling that Rita appreciates her hometown. In the small place where she lives, the villagers – among them her own family – are not “made for mysteries” and so they act according to specific moral standards (20). They are straightforward, down-to-earth people, who are living a rather hard life, and whose stability and reliability are well proven. Rita nevertheless insists on deploying certain, negatively connoted
adjectives that will come back with an unusual frequency. In her description of the family, the recurrence of these words is of particular interest because their choice causes the early, reliable picture of her childhood to be tarnished before she goes further into the story of her life.

The people around Rita, as well as their way of life, are “plain” and “good” and we are presented with an evaluation that seems to have a positive connotation (20-22). In this local world, those words denote the basic qualities a human being should possess; people take pride in being plain and simple (28). After a few sentences, nevertheless, another evaluative word is added: “plain country people” (24). The word country has a connotation that serves to nuance Rita’s standpoint as, more often than not, it is used in a derogatory way, opposed to urban and urbane. In using the word country, Rita is perhaps pointing to the fact that, in her opinion, the world of her childhood was not as perfect as her people pretended it to be and that there might be better things elsewhere. This feeling is later confirmed by her use of the phrase “country bumpkins,” a clearly pejorative expression that occurs in the text on several occasions (38). Together with the child’s discovery of the world around her, the reader is presented with evaluations on a falling scale: good, plain, country and bumpkin. The recurrence of these words through the text is symptomatic of how Rita positions herself vis-à-vis her childhood world. Although it is steady and safe, it is, on the whole, not a good enough world. This judgement is also reflected in Rita’s description of her environment.

In the novel the reader will find descriptions of a number of homes, or houses. When Jung worked on the analysis of his patients’ dreams, he gave a good deal of attention to the account they would give of the environments and of the buildings the dreams took place in. He would do the same when analysing his own dreams, and this led him to find a connection between these buildings and his own, or the dreamer’s, psychic status. He found that parallels could be made between the configuration of the buildings and aspects of the dreamer’s personality. The comparison gave a kind of structure to the psychic life of the dreamer and Jung meant that the ‘house’ in the dream was a representation of the Self (Jung 1989b: 152 and 1966: 52-53). It might prove interesting to keep this in mind when taking a closer look at Rita’s environment.

The Hebers live in a village that consists of a store, two houses and a gas station. The gas station is placed in a bleak field along a bad road and we understand that out of the heavy clay land, people as well as plants “have to force their way up through the soil” (18-22). The surroundings are grim and uncompromising and the personalities of the inhabitants mirror the landscape. The
women are “rather muscular brides” with qualities shared by plough-horses (“solidity, calm, lack of temperament”). The ideals conveyed by the community to the adolescent girl imply a rejection of movie stars, a disapproval of lace, scorn of “luxury.” Rita is given to understand that “real class [is] all wool and a yard wide.” This is an environment that offers advantages for people who comply with its standards or who are not willing to fight for anything “better” (30-31).

When Rita comes back to her parents’ house after a breakdown, the reader is given a good example of what is at stake. Since she feels weak, she experiences this period as a return to the safe nest of her childhood. The description of her bedroom connotes stability. It is a sunny room with flowered wallpaper, the bed has a good mattress and the furniture consists of a solid maple dresser with “big honest” knobs, a big oak table and a “good heavy” lamp (58). During Rita’s illness, her mother is also allowed to resume her duties as the mother-figure her moral standards compel her to be. She is efficient and caring while Rita behaves just as her milieu and her mother would have expected her to do; she is ill and passive (70). The description of Eleanor’s house appears particularly interesting because Rita sees the basic qualities in the landscape and in the house of her childhood as reflecting the qualities of her mother. This is not unusual in literature; after all Shakespeare often allowed the mood of his character to be reflected in natural phenomena.

In contrast to her mother, Rita sees herself as a misfit in her milieu and family; she describes herself as “beige” in a line of colourful “Black or Red Hebers” and in her own opinion she is bad and perverse. She adds: “Left-handed too. I drove my mother wild” (21-22). Furthermore, whereas she is expected to be practical and good at household skills, “Rita the dreamer” possesses the gift of imagination, something quite unacceptable to her mother. Therefore, Rita feels that she is not good enough and that she does not belong to the world of her childhood. However, the reader is also given hints of how fundamentally important the values of this reliable world are to Rita.

In one of the descriptions of his own dreams, Jung gives an account of how exploring his mother’s house could be interpreted as exploring his Self and its different levels of consciousness. He goes from room to room and discovers aspects of the house that he was never aware of in real life. Going further and further down, he comes to the cellar, where memories of his ancestors are gathered, and finally he sees a trap in the floor. When lifting it he realises that he can go even further down and he eventually discovers some withered bones in a cave. Those bones are symbols of the collective unconscious hidden deep down in every human being.
(1989b: 151). At one point Rita mentions the cellar of her mother’s house and she remarks that “underworld is innate. Every child knows and fears the cellar stairs [---] behind the new fruit is the old, which has been there for ever.” Instead of the withered bones of Jung, Rita finds something mouldy and rubbery in the cellar. It is perhaps then that she becomes aware of the weight on her shoulders of the values of earlier generations (26). In a Jungian perspective, the “new fruit” can be considered as a metaphor of the child, while the “old” represents older generations. Behind the consciousness of the child are the experience and memories of the ancestors and, deeper, the collective unconscious.

The way in which Rita pictures her mother and her childhood home gives the reader clues to her further development. The importance of the first years of one’s life is underlined by Jung, who remarks:

Children is important not only because various warpings of instinct have their origin there, but because this is the time when, terrifying or encouraging, those far-seeing dreams and images appear before the soul of the child, shaping his whole destiny, as well as those retrospective intuitions which reach far back beyond the range of childhood experience into the life of our ancestors. (1986:130)

5.2 Resistance to the mother

There is no doubt that the character of the mother is central in Rita’s home. Eleanor Heber is the pillar on which the whole Heber house rests. A very good reason for this is that the person supposed to be the strong character in a patriarchal model of a home, Rita’s father, seems rather colourless. The Hebers have four children officially, but there is a fifth one, “the oldest child of all,” her father (25). He is a shadowy figure who got “gassy lungs” in the Second World War. His physical appearance is put in a sharp contrast with the mother’s: he is small, dark and cool while she is big, fair and has a temper (27). Eleanor has grown to fit into the landscape both physically and morally, perhaps because, as Rita puts it, “growing up is simply a process of incorporating one’s inculcated values with those one finds oneself among” (37). In such an environment, adjusting to the community is the only way a woman can become accepted and survive. In fact, we learn by and by, as Rita did, that Eleanor has not always been the strict, hard-working woman we now see. To her surprise, Rita hears that her mother, who now picks off the lace from the
children’s underwear, once actually wore pink chiffon dresses, went out with other men and used lipstick in her youth (39). Furthermore, this earth-bound woman also dreamed of going to university to study Spanish (58). But Eleanor has succeeded in internalising the values of the society she lives in and she is the model the community expects Rita to follow.

Rita’s childhood is happy in a limited kind of way because she is trapped between the model her head presents as a reasonable one and the “better things” her heart longs for (35). Although the appearance of the church, “with its walls the colour of pee” and its brown pews where you “stuck to the varnish in summer” (28), matches the overall impression given by a community of plain people, this is the place where Rita finds what her heart wants. According to herself, she is “fatally seducible by ear and eye” and thus manages to find two beautiful things in the church, one for the eye and one for the ear (36). She loves the singing that enables her to escape from reality and makes her feel good; when she states “we sang as one foundation,” the reader understands that she has a feeling of belonging to the congregation (29). Furthermore, her eyes, otherwise surrounded by the plainness of brown and “yellowy-beige,” delight in the sight of the glass-window representing a knight in bright armour, holding a rose (28). The rose is the symbol of beauty that Engel relies on thematically all through her novel. We shall see later on that the knight also reappears in the text. Church is the place where she has access to beauty, and going to church could perhaps be considered as the trigger that opens her senses to other needs, and awakens her consciousness. It is in church that Rita begins to compare herself to the infant Jesus, the archetypal image of the child. One of the important features of this archetype is that it points to a developmental process and a transformation of the personality, since the child in itself represents the future (Almquist 39).

Rita’s mother considers beauty as “fancy,” and in the community “fancy goods don’t last” (31). To have access to beauty, rebellion is necessary. Rebellion will take place against the one who most closely embodies community values, namely her mother. It is vis-à-vis Eleanor that Rita develops an “overwhelming resistance to the maternal supremacy” (1982a: 118). Interestingly, Jung has given us an account of the form that rebellion against the mother can take:

[R]esistance to the mother can sometimes result in a spontaneous development of intellect for the purpose of creating a sphere of interest in which the mother has no place [---]. Its real purpose is to break the mother’s power by intellectual criticism
This is exactly what Rita intends to do. She will study at university, thus distancing herself from the world in which she has been brought up, and she will refuse to “stick to her own kind” (44). This is a big step to take in a community where women are expected to be typists or kinder-garden teachers while waiting to be married. At first, Rita expresses her rebellion shyly and states she wants to be a philosopher! What a shock to her mother, who does not think her “ugly duckling” will survive in the academic world (45). Although Rita has struggled “to meet the imperatives of the contradictory forces in her life” before, she now turns her back on the family values and chooses to go her own way (Verduyn 143). She has previously been trapped between the values of ‘head’ and ‘heart’ but thinks she has come to terms with what she wants. At this point she does not believe the family traditions to be compatible with her sense of quality and beauty. She explains her choice by remarking that she “never [saw] why it was Christian to choose the ugly over the beautiful if they were both at the same price” (36). But there is, at first, no clear break with the family values because Rita goes back and forth between her home and the outside world, still hoping to get some understanding from her mother. Putting some distance between herself and the mother-figure is a slow, gradual process.

5.3 The egg symbol

In The Glassy Sea Rita connects the symbol of the egg with the feeling of loss she experiences on several occasions in her life. Nevertheless, the egg seems to be a symbol of more than loss. In her chapter about symbols, Jacobi comments on how symbolic pictures are related to one another and also how they tend to change in the course of consecutive psychoanalytic sessions. Symbols are never chosen consciously; they are brought to the mind intuitively and they can represent widely different things (120-121). The symbols emerging in a person’s mind have their origins in the archetypes existing in a collective unconscious. They are also shaped by the life and experience of the individual and, although similar symbolic pictures might arise in the mind of different individuals, the content of those symbolic pictures will probably differ a great deal from person to person. Although Rita herself presents the egg as a symbol of loss, this is a shallow connotation. Rita gives the reader several clues pointing to a deeper meaning of the symbol.
An early, less obvious and well concealed reference to the egg, is presented when, as a little girl, Rita goes down to her mother’s cellar. Rita says: “And that was where I knew the mome raths outgrabe” (26, my italics). The italicised phrase is taken from the nonsense poem that Alice, Lewis Carroll’s character, reads in the Looking-Glass book. She cannot understand the words until Humpty Dumpty explains them to her. Humpty Dumpty is shaped as an egg. In this context, it is useful to remember that Through the Looking Glass is a story about the process of growing up. Rita also makes another reference to Carroll, as well as to her own growth process, before she re-reads the letter to Philip: “It’s as if I haven’t quite walked through the looking glass” (13). Since the cellar is a representation of Rita’s deeper level of consciousness, a reference to the egg-shaped character points to the egg as a possible symbol of the Self.

A decisive step in Rita’s life, and a point of no return, occurs when she chooses to stay at Eglantine House instead of working and supporting her family. Her relationship with Eleanor had already deteriorated, but after opting for the nunnery there will be no way back to the Ontario village; Eleanor has a fit, accuses Rita of every evil, and throws her darning egg at her daughter (70). At this point, the egg is an item from the real world. But when Rita’s mother throws the darning egg, she also throws away something more symbolic; she gives up her responsibilities and her ambition to form Rita’s personality. The rift between mother and daughter becomes tangible and, from this moment, Rita is alienated from her parents. They now belong to two different worlds: Rita’s will be the world of roses for the next ten years while Eleanor’s remains the world of thorns. Although her mother was angry with her when they parted, she kept hoping that they would come to an understanding. After Eleanor’s death, this hope is forever lost, and Rita is left to describe her feelings of emptiness and deprivation: “I was empty. I incorporated my egg. I was a white swollen thing, gut blown before painting” (100). Of course, Rita suffers a loss that is much more important than she ever thought it would be. But, when she mentions her mother’s custom to paint Easter eggs, she also brings forward the mother-figure she does not accept. In fact, Rita suggests a parallel between the fate of the gut blown egg and that of Eleanor’s children, whose minds had to be emptied from “imagination” and “fancies” before she applied on them the varnish of community values. When she picked up the darning egg, Rita suddenly had her life and growth process put into her own hands. But it was still possible for her to give it back, to fall back into her mother’s power and thus be reconciled with her. When this possibility is forever gone, the egg becomes fully symbolic and impossible to get rid of. Rita is on her own, and she has
to take full responsibility for her life and for the development of her Self.

The egg symbol crops up again when Rita has to leave the nunnery, pushed into a world she does not want to know about. She leaves Eglantine House sitting in a car beside her *egg*: “In the back with me sat Loss, round, complete, an enormous egg” (97). It is the second time Rita has to leave her home and now there does not seem to be a way back to the nunnery since the Eglantines are a “dying” Order. The egg recurs, in yet another shape, when Chummy (Rita’s son) dies. Back from the funeral and starting to make her husband’s supper, she says: “I looked up from the egg I was scrambling just so” (127). Rita could have looked up from her pots and pans but Engel makes her look away from a crushed and scrambled *egg*, from her irreversibly smashed and scrambled motherhood. Another symbolic egg appears in connection with Rita’s divorce when she has not only lost every hope of ever having a functioning relationship with her husband, but also when she is almost losing her mind of grief. Her friend says: “Somewhere in your head, somewhere in that scrambled egg you have for a brain, is a lawyer” (134). This is mentioned at a time when her mind is entirely and solely filled by destructive thoughts about her own failure as a mother and as a wife.

Rita sees herself as having one of the “great unfinished minds” (79). She defines herself as an ‘egghead’ and it is in her conscious mind – and its quest towards her Self – that the problems she has in finding her place in the world arise. In the study of one of his patient’s dreams, Jung mentions that “[W]e often find spiral representations of the center, as for instance the serpent coiled round the creative point, the egg.” Jung develops this idea, adding: “What is particularly noteworthy … is the consistent development of the central symbol. We can hardly escape the feeling that the unconscious process moves spiralwise round a center, gradually getting closer, while the characteristics of the center grow more and more distinct” (1982b: 291). Although a raw *egg* is a shapeless mass, it can also be considered as a symbol of development, since it will grow from shapeless into a functioning being. This developmental aspect has been pinpointed by Jung: “In alchemy the egg stands for the chaos apprehended by the artifex, the *prima materia* containing the captive world-soul. Out of the egg […] will rise the eagle or phoenix, the liberated soul” (1982b: 276). When throwing away the darning *egg*, Eleanor gives up trying to form her daughter’s life according to the small town standard. After catching this egg, Rita is liberated from her mother’s influence and feels free to decide about her own life. What happens when Rita is out of balance at the time of Chummy’s death and her divorce is only a reminder of the fragility of Rita’s developing Self; just like an *egg*, it can be smashed easily.
The egg enters Rita’s mind again on the evening of her decision to become Sister Superior of Eglantine House. She has “this one night to turn the matter over and over again in [her] hands like a darning egg” (159). The image of the darning egg and the matter of her developing Self merge into one symbol. It is true that Rita will have to give up “what is called the world for the worldly-unworldly” life at the convent and lose some of her recently acquired freedom (159). But the egg she now imagines to be in her hands is a whole egg: her Self is healed. At the same time, mentioning the darning egg can also be seen as a reference to the practical qualities she inherited from her mother. Those qualities are no longer something she rejects. On the contrary, she understands that those practical skills might be needed in her future life at the convent. Now she knows that the fate of her Self is in her own hands, but she has also accepted her ‘roots.’ The clues given to the reader all point to the egg as a symbolic representation of the core of Rita’s developing personality, this ‘inner part’ that Jung calls the Self.

5.4 The house of the roses

It is at Eglantine House that Rita takes the second step of her growth process. The nunnery is the house of the wild roses (Eglantine is the French name of the wild rose). The symbolic flower she once saw in the hand of the Knight represents, among other things, the beauty which is present in every respect at the nunnery. Rita is very articulate about the meaning of the eglantine: “A rose is a woman, perhaps, but also a symbol, a flower, and the symbol of the mystery of the flower, and for me of a place and a life” (19).

Everything at this house seems to be in good repair. Rita notices this already on her first visit, when knocking at the front door of the “grandest building” she has ever been in: the door is “thick, beautifully painted and varnished.” The house has the components that Rita has been looking for: it is “beautiful in its plainness” (63). From her childhood, Rita has retained a taste for plainness – a quality she has been taught to consider as basic – but the beauty that her parents’ house lacked is to be found at the nunnery; it is a house that is clean, scrubbed and austere but where the severity is always smoothed by the presence of the roses or ... the smell of furniture polish! Although Rita describes the house as “cool and soft as a psychiatric ward,” she also takes in the calm harmony and radiant graciousness of this “earthly paradise” (75, 77). If she refers to Eglantine House lyrically as a “sonnet” when comparing it to the farmhouses of her childhood, it is because she
finds there many things she has been missing earlier. There is discipline but also
time for music and reading. There is a vegetable garden but also a place for growing
roses. There is a chapel where embroidered kneelers and altar cloths have replaced
“pee-coloured walls.” There are carpets instead of floors worn-out by cleaning. The
nuns do not use fancy clothes, they are all dressed in navy blue, but everything is of
good quality and agreeable to wear. And if talking about yourself still is forbidden,
it is nevertheless allowed to chat about the birds and the flowers. In other words,
Eglantine House is the home that Rita would have wished to have from the
beginning, since it combines basic practicality with beauty and harmony. There she
will spend the “happiest and most innocent ten years” of her life (73).

Life stands quite still at the nunnery, perhaps because some of the Sisters
do not like changes. The phrase “innocent years” refers to the fact that instead of
being launched into the world as would be normal after her time at university, she
retreats into a place that is very much like her parents’ home, but filled with
symbolic roses, and into a role that, at least at the beginning, is very much like that
of an obedient child. Life is therefore also standing rather still for Rita for whom
entering the nunnery is only a way of escaping from reality. Roses are very often
mentioned by Rita when she wants to evade the dull or even nasty realities of life,
something she is conscious of herself: “I wanted roses and was willing to endure
what I thought would be thorns. I wanted to escape the world” (24). The forces at
work within Rita’s personality are best represented by the dichotomy between the
earth-bound way of life where reason reigns (head) and her longing for higher
things where her feelings dictate (heart). This dichotomy is best expressed through
the manner in which Rita tells the reader about episodes of her life she resents as
difficult. When she starts writing to Philip, her intentions are to tell him about her
childhood, but she has problems getting on with the letter. Her first attempt is a
short, flashback picture of the village where she was born: a store, two houses, and
a gas station. Rita seems somewhat reluctant to tell the reader about it and she
immediately turns her mind to the roses on her present walk of life, in a beautiful
scenery (18). The next flashback is a picture of herself as a child trying not to feel
the mosquito bites. Again, we find her reverting to the picture of the roses: “I
concentrated my whole soul on the roses” (18). This pattern comes back whenever
she wants to get away from bad memories. After telling Philip about the awful
uncle Eddie she interrupts herself: “I’ve just remembered another thing about roses”
(23). When she remembers painful details of her father’s sickness she comforts
herself: “But I live in unutterable luxury here, for the wind is like silk and I can
think of roses” (25).
Sudden changes of the topic of conversation, fainting, going into trance or into fits of rage are phenomena that were observed by Jung when his patients stumbled on psychologically difficult stages of their treatment. Rita appears to have developed the same kind of symptom since she clings to the idea of the roses every time she is confronted with a traumatic memory. Rita has a similar mental blockage at the marriage of her friend, Christabel, when she is reminded of what was the ordinary fate of women in her surroundings. Christabel is pregnant; she has to give up her studies and get married. This is too painful for Rita who faints, thus arranging with her consciousness to “absent [herself] from the pain of this vision” (58). From the time when she contemplated the knight holding a rose in the local church, thoughts of the roses have been a way for Rita to compensate for disorientation. It is not strange, then, that she chooses Eglantine House when she wants to escape the world.

5.5 The loving mother

While Eleanor could be described as being Jung’s “terrible mother,” the reader feels that Mary Rose, Sister Superior at the nunnery, might be “the loving mother.” At first, the reader might be tempted to see those two women as opposite poles. But this notion is not altogether correct since there are also parallels between the personalities of Rita’s biological mother and the mother figure she finds at the nunnery. Both women are the pillars, the strong characters, in the house where Rita lives at the time. They have in common a capacity for organizing and controlling events and people around them. Eleanor has her family in a fast grip and this is also the case with Mary Rose and her ‘family’ of Sisters. Both Eleanor and Sister Mary Rose are wise and strong. What makes the main difference between them is their general attitude towards life. Eleanor has given up the dreams she might have had in her youth. She has concentrated all her energy on the practical and non-glamorous side of life, and she appears to consider everything else as sinful. Although also a very practical woman – after all, life at the nunnery also implies worldly tasks like washing, cooking, mending – Mary Rose does not think that life should only be considered in terms of the thorns it bears. She wants her Sisters to live a simple but yet comfortable life and although she demands that they respect a number of rules, her aim is never to present hardship as the way to achieve an eternal life. Rather, she is anxious to avoid that the Order be split by the contradictory wills of different personalities. The different dispositions of Eleanor and Mary Rose are indicated by
the names Engel has given the sisters: Rita’s convent name is Mary Pelagia and the other Sisters are all Marys (Mary Rose, Mary Elzevir, Mary Cicely etc.) in contradistinction to the ideal women from Rita’s village who were mostly Marthas. These two biblical names usually represent two contrastive female ideals. Mary, Jesus’ mother, connotes purity and spirituality. She embodies the unattainable ideal of the woman whose nature is above that of common mortals. Martha, her sister, was known for her practical skills and for the way she followed and served Jesus. She represents the hard working woman who lives near reality.

Mary Rose knows what Rita’s right course of action in life ought to be, but unlike Eleanor, she listens to Rita, they have discussions, and she understands her intellectual needs (81, 94). Eleanor’s demands on her family are characterized by negativity: “What her heart demanded was failure ... all she wanted was for change to be decay” and, accordingly, she expects her children to stay around her, to comply with her standards and never to grow away from her (98). Mary Rose, on the other hand, thinks it is her duty to send both the young Mary Cicely and, later, Rita away and to inspire them to start a life outside the convent (94). When she fails integrating Mary Cicely into the world she is disappointed because she realizes that Mary Cicely will not develop into an independent human being. The personality of Sister Mary Rose goes well with the house of the roses and everything would remain a paradise for Rita if worldly matters did not begin to creep in.

Reality cannot be kept outside forever. At the time when freezers and television soap operas become part of the convent’s life, the roof of the chapel begins to leak and the hydro bills no longer get paid. The fact that disintegration begins to set in is reflected in the health of Sister Mary Rose who starts having trouble with her heart. From then on, everything begins to crumble around the community. Two of the sisters die, another becomes fanatical, Sister Mary Beatrice grows blind – she is not even able to trace the stem of a ‘symbolic’ rose in her needlework – and Sister Mary Cicely cries non-stop. Rita is aware of the fact that things have begun to “fall apart” and she tries very hard to restore “the gloss” (93). But it is too late. Her daily routines do not include meditation any more. Instead she has to keep accounts or to order things and her personality begins to show signs of the wear and tear: she is irritable and harassed and she even admits at one point that she is falling in love (85). With the failing of Mary Rose Rita is left alone, she does not know where to turn and finds it generally hard to “accept the idea that roses fade” (81).

Even if Rita’s place of refuge is shaken in its fundaments, this has a positive effect on her growth process. She suddenly realizes that, for practical
reasons, she has become the leader of the community and that the qualities she despised earlier are very useful. As she compares herself to a mother of six children (the frail and ailing Sisters), she also feels that a whole row of Macraes and Hebers (her ancestors) stand behind her with their practical skills of ‘Martha’ that she cannot do without at this time of crisis (87-88). She is now a misfit in a dying Order and admits that she became an Eglantine Sister by mistake and was driven not by faith but by her taste for beautiful things (40, 65). If she wants to survive she will have to get away from the convent. Loving mother that she is, Mary Rose understands this and sends Rita to the Hibbert family where she will help Maggie, the wise mother, and run the house.

5.6 Maggie’s house

After being protected for ten years, it is high time for Rita to take her third step into the ‘real’ world and learn how to manage on her own. During her stay with the Eglantine sisters she has been working as a teacher and has had a few glimpses of what reality is like but she has always been able to seek refuge within the safe and motherly nest of the nunnery. Commanded, for her own good, into the world of Maggie Hibbert, she will now have to adapt, or otherwise perish. The period of time she will spend with the Hibberts can be seen as an initiation into the adult world. Rita’s situation can be compared to that of a teenager. There are similarities between the home of her new mentor, Maggie, and the home of Rita’s own mother: Maggie’s house is full of children and the father is a weak figure, “a tall, thin, pale man, personality wiped away by the strength of his family” and probably of his wife (102). In the way she deals with her everyday life, Maggie has many things in common with Eleanor; she is depicted as “immensely practical” and giving a great deal more than she gets. She has a steady grip, not only on the people around her but also on events and objects that she keeps in order with the help of domestic routines and “labels and lists” (101). She seems to be reliable and caring at a time when Rita needs her support.

The house itself reflects its mistress and, just like her, it is “overpowering” (102). Although the reader will find similarities between Maggie and Eleanor, the differences must also be pointed out. Eleanor was hard working, plain and sexually virtuous (37); Maggie might be hard working but she is hardly plain and nothing is said about her virtue. Her home has the money and glamour that Eleanor’s home lacked. The house is beautifully decorated and shows outward signs of the financial
status and good taste of its owners: paintings, rugs, magnificent furniture (102). But even if the Hibberts are a glamorous family, reality is always present through the “pervasive smell of [the children’s] socks” (102). Somehow, Maggie manages to combine the good qualities and necessary efficiency of a mother with some of the features that Rita longed for in her childhood. It is the ideal mother-figure Rita sees in Maggie when she declares “I saw the mother in her” (103). The fact that Rita and Maggie have a mother-daughter relationship is confirmed when Rita describes herself: she is “a kindergartener” and “a miserable child” as helpless as a baby when Maggie explains this “new world” to her (102-103). In that respect we find Rita once again in the position of a young child.

However, at the Hibberts’ Rita finds a more useful kind of mentor than her own mother or Sister Mary Rose ever were. The repressive Eleanor had a set of educational values from which fun and freedom were banished. Life was more like something to be endured than enjoyed and her life was mainly ruled by reason. In the case of Mary Rose, Eleanor’s down-to-earth and practical qualities were complemented by a capacity for taking in beauty and allow the heart to rejoice. Nevertheless, Mary Rose was not sufficiently in touch with the real world to be a good model for Rita. According to Maggie’s set of values, having a good time is not a sin and she offers guidance that will enable Rita to pass through the transition stage from childhood to womanhood.

Teenagers’ rebellion against their parents’ authority expresses itself through symbolic actions; they wear clothes, listen to music or have friends that the older generation disapproves of and, on the whole, they try to break the limits that have been imposed on them. When Rita comes to Maggie’s, her development is arrested. At the convent, she never questioned the way of life imposed on her, and now she will have to be pushed into a rebellion that should have taken place earlier. This is where Maggie comes in; the navy blue clothes (Rita’s “uniform” for years) are cast off, her hair is re-done, shoes and underwear are chosen for her. Rita suddenly feels like “the sulky teenager” she should have been once (103). Furthermore Maggie puts her on the Pill, a breach of the rules Rita has been brought up with (104). The effect on Rita turns out to be substantial and she admits that “Maggie [is] like a tonic thrust down [her] throat” and that “the chemistry of the house [is] beginning to work on [her]” (103, 105).

Like Sleeping Beauty, Rita is awakened from her slumber and undergoes a radical change, gradually adjusting “to the fact that in the great world it is no evil to dress well or lead a social life.” One of the first signs of her awakening is the fact that, defying her ‘mother’ on one occasion, she chooses, all by herself, a sexy,
shiny blue dress for one of Maggie’s parties. She is also conscious of the changes in her personality as she realises that the house and its inhabitants get her hormones working. Suddenly she understands that she might have a kind of future after all and something to live for (107). Although this change does take place, Rita is still under the strong influence of the ‘super-woman’ Maggie and remains a rather weak character. In discussing different aspects of the mother-complex, Jung comments on the “bloodless maidens” who identify with their mother, something which leads to the paralysis of the daughter’s feminine initiative. The risk of clinging to the mother – as Rita still does – is that the daughter will have a shadowy existence. This does not mean that the daughter will never depart from her mother. As Jung puts it: “These bloodless maidens are by no mean immune to marriage. On the contrary, despite their shadowiness and passivity, they command a high price on the marriage market” (1982a: 117). It is during this period that Rita meets Asher Bowen at one of Maggie’s parties.

5.7 The Church and the Knight

Asher’s sudden appearance at the party coincides with Rita’s fourth step. She is a rather passive member of the Hibbert family and she lives a “shadowy” life, since she feels inferior to the competent and effective Maggie. Although Rita’s personality is developing, she still shows signs of the “feminine indefiniteness” that Jung describes as being the result of a negative mother complex. He also adds: “Because of the woman’s characteristic passivity ... the man finds himself cast in an attractive role: he has the privilege of putting up with the familiar feminine foibles with real superiority, and yet with true forbearance, like a true knight” (1982a: 118).

Rita sees in Asher Bowen a symbol of perfection. She had already met him because they went to the same college; severe in profile, he looked neither left nor right and his grey and dark blue clothes bore the marks of strictness and integrity. The young Asher lived among his mother’s beautiful things, in a splendid house surrounded by flowers. His parents were positioned above common mortals. His father was a judge and Rita hints that his mother was probably more refined and civilized than the rest of the community. According to Rita, Asher was already then “a vision of the perfect knight” (37). When Rita meets him again at Maggie’s, he is still handsome, although “very bald” (107, 108). Marriage to Asher equals the state of happiness for Rita.

As a little girl, Rita was captivated by the glass window of the church
where she contemplated “the light of the world in a nightgown but with a splendid border of blue and red; and on one side a pallid knight, drooping in dusty armour, holding, of course, a rose” (28). Because he is standing together with the symbol of the rose, the knight is directly connected to the ‘higher’ things Rita wants to achieve. Asher is a synthesis of the values symbolized by the knight (strictness and spirituality), by the rose (beauty and quality of life, implied by an independent financial status) and by the church (the place where Rita first experienced spirituality). In other words, Asher represents earthly as well as spiritual perfection. It is by asking her to church that he finally wins Rita’s heart.

The fact that Asher is an ardent churchgoer seems to be crucial for Rita and it has to be connected with her previous contact with religion. Going to church was an important experience in her childhood and the Church was omnipresent at the nunnery. Rita’s religious moods and quest for “grace” are interesting enough but Jung was also concerned by what his patients associated with churches. He mentions another aspect of the Church:

In these associations the patient is describing a very important experience of his childhood. As in nearly all cases of this kind, he had a particularly close tie to his mother. By this, we are not to understand a particularly good or intense conscious relationship, but something in the nature of a secret, subterranean tie (...)

(1989a: 39)

According to Jung “the Church is, in the fullest sense, a mother.” It also represents “a higher spiritual substitute for the purely natural, or ‘carnal’, tie to the parents” (1989a: 40). In his study of the mother archetype, he clarifies his meaning: “There are what might be termed mothers in a figurative sense [---]. Many things arousing devotion or feelings of awe, as for instance the Church, [the] university ... the sea or any still waters ... can be mother-symbols” (1982a: 109). Rita associated her mother with the church: “I felt good there. My mother had fur cuffs on her Sunday coat, and when I was bored or tired or plain hungry for the feel of them, I put my face on her arm and felt and felt” (29). Later on, when Rita enters the convent, it is not only for the religious experience but mainly because she has psychological need for a home and because life at the nunnery very much reflects the personality of Sister Mary Rose whom she considers as a mother. Throughout her story, Rita weaves a net of associations related to the Church, as well as the archetypal image of the mother, and the need to know who she is and where she belongs.
Although Maggie seems to be a more efficient and more complete mother-figure than Eleanore or Mary Rose, Rita, once again, rebels against the ‘Mother’ and she runs away from Maggie. Still not grown enough to be independent, Rita sees in Asher the model and mentor she needs and consents to marrying him. Marriage, according to Jung, can in such a case be considered as an option “for the sole purpose of escaping from [the] mother” (1982a: 119). Rita makes Asher her friend and her comforter and she trusts him to take on the burden of her emptiness. What is more alarming is that she also makes him her God and her home (108-109). Rita thus reveals that she is the victim, not of human love, but of a longing for a God which, according to Jung, is “a passion welling up from our darkest, instinctual nature (...) deeper and stronger perhaps than the love for a human being” (1989a: 79). Later on, Rita will admit that marrying Asher was a mistake and that she was driven by snobbery which originated in her longing for self-improvement (37).

5.8 The house of Asher

Jung warns against the marriage caused by the resistance to the mother: “All instinctive processes meet with unexpected difficulties; either sexuality does not function properly, or the children are unwanted, or maternal duties seem unbearable, or the demands on marital life are responded to with impatience and irritation” (1982a: 119). All of these prophecies become truths in the house of Asher. As Hutchison rightly remarks, Asher’s house “resembles Eglantine House gone wrong” (66). The parallel traits are, of course, the beauty of the place and the fact that it belongs to someone that Rita sees as a spiritual mentor. But something is wrong from the beginning since Rita does not feel that she is part of Asher’s life but rather that she is an object to be displayed, like other things owned by her husband.

The reader feels that in this beautiful house reigns an eerie atmosphere. The overall impression given by the rooms is strict: black, brown and white colours together with brass furniture. A greenish and depressing painting of the crucifixion hangs over the bed and contributes to the general feeling of gloom. Rita aptly remarks that nobody could make love under one of those! The fact that Asher has hung the painting there might reflect an unconscious wish from Asher to go on living like a bachelor or perhaps like a monk. Rita has not had any part in the buying or decorating of the house and she has no part in the daily routine either, since Asher makes every decision together with the housekeeper and the gardener.
He is also controlling every detail of their married life; not only does he make nightly rounds of the house to check if anything has been moved but he also has Rita in a fast grip. He decides what she is to wear, what she should read and study. At an early stage he changed Rita’s name into Peggy, a violation of her identity. At the same time, she feels inferior because of her origins and of her accent. The knight has revealed himself to be a dictator and Rita confesses that he has taken her over and fills her mind, her thoughts and her body (109).

The pattern which unfolds itself in Rita’s fourth stage reminds us of her flight to Eglantine House: she leaves a mother-figure, she is attracted by the spiritual strength of a mentor, she changes her name and she lives in a house where order and discipline are important. There is, however, a major difference: in Asher’s house, she simply does not belong. Just as she did during her stay at Eglantine House, Rita has now come to a point of no return. Instead of developing, she regresses again into a child’s state of dependency. This time nevertheless, Rita’s developmental process will be urged on by the person of Chummy, the symbol of the failure of Rita and Asher’s relationship.

The arrival of the hydrocephalic Chummy on the scene will have one main effect on Rita’s life. When she gives birth to Chummy, Rita’s negative mother-complex will intensify and lead to what Jung refers to as an “hypertrophy of the maternal element,” which he explains as an “intensification of all the female instincts, above all the maternal instinct.” This negative aspect is seen in the woman whose only goal is childbirth and who regards the husband only as an instrument for procreation. The woman clings to the children because without them she has no existence whatsoever and it often results in annihilating her own personality (1982a: 115-116). This is exactly what happens when Chummy takes over the house of Asher. Rita only cares for the child and she neglects her husband, except when the latter becomes ill and weak, and gives her at last an opportunity to gain power over him. From the moment when Chummy was born, Rita would not care for anything else and she admits later on that her child was an obsession and also that, as a couple, they lived an empty life (117).

After Chummy’s death, she will consequently have nothing left. By then, the knight has revealed his true nature, which is his weakness. Asher was not able to deal with Chummy’s imperfection: “[T]he knight who plucked [Rita] found that he could not bear [her] thorns” (144). Their marriage fails and, as Rita is not having any real share in Asher’s life, she is completely alone with her grief and she soon finds herself on the verge of madness. Once again she leaves her home and parts company with the person who was once her mentor.
5.9 The house by the sea

After her fourth experience of finding a home, Rita is now in the position of the daughter who has not only rejected the mother-figures offered to her but also rejected herself as a potential mother, after her failure with the traditional mother/wife role. She now knows “what she does not want but is ... completely at sea as to what she would choose as her own fate” (Jung 1982a: 119). Her growth process is far from completed and now begins a time when Rita has come to the final trial, after having gone through the intermediate stages. She is on her own in her house by the seashore, where she can see herself “stand purified and free at the edge of a body of water,” just as in the vision she had earlier (92).

In the description of her life by the sea shore, Rita pictures herself as a child walking on the beach and experiencing the physical feeling of the water between her toes, or the wind in her hair. Her eyes are those of a child when she looks for crabs or shells, or when she watches birds spiralling in the sky. Returning to the shore, and thus to the water, is reverting to a state of innocence. The sea often symbolizes the origin of life – the amniotic fluid – and, by extension, it is a link to the archetype of the mother, the source of life (Jung 1985:145). It is therefore the place you long for and can truly call home, where you belong and where you can become “in fact, a child again” (76). The water has a symbolic meaning in the landscape of Rita’s thoughts. When she sees herself coming “out of a clam-shell” (76) and refers to her convent-name Pelagia, that “false cognate of Marina who is Aphrodite”, she makes a connection to water as a symbol (141). Rita is retreating into the house by the sea because she wants to escape all the problems she has with herself and the world. The house protects her like a ‘shell’ surrounded by water.

Having taken refuge into a child-like state of mind, Rita is quite happy as long as the weather is warm and as long as living does not demand any effort from her. Food comes from the shop or is found on the shore and life is simple also in other respects. Nevertheless, the world around her makes itself felt when winter starts and she suddenly has to keep alive in the cold. Keeping the house warm is a struggle and, as everything seems to fall apart, Rita enters into a psychological crisis and begins to consider death as a rest from the world, a final escape from all problems. The house enfolds Rita who gets deeper into her dark thoughts and closer to the decision of letting death take over. But somewhere in her heart there is room for “a small eternity: a resurrection.” Brother Anthony appears right in time and Rita gets a “faint but interesting frisson that the future [she] did not believe in [is] on the menu” (152). Anthony offers Rita a new life, through the proposition from
the bishop that Rita be Sister superior of the nunnery. If she accepts the offer, Rita will not only resurrect Eglantine House but also resurrect herself. The old Rita, together with her mistakes and imperfections, will be brushed aside and the new Rita – or Sister Mary Pelagia – will “step out of her shell” and be reborn.

In a lecture concerning the concept of *rebirth* as an archetype, Jung discusses the transformations that a human being can go through during his lifetime:

> Rebirth is not a process that we can in any way observe ... it is entirely beyond sense perception. We have to do here with a purely psychic reality, which is transmitted to us only indirectly through personal statements. (1992: 50)

According to Jung, all ideas of rebirth are founded on a process of *natural transformation*, which he also calls *individuation*. He describes it as

> a process of inner transformation and rebirth into another being.

This ‘other being’ is the other person in ourselves – that larger and greater personality maturing within us, whom we have already met as the inner friend of the soul (1992: 64)

Rita’s psychological crisis is reflected in the state of the house: both are more or less falling apart in the stormy winter, a season which is more often than not a symbol for death. Her “resurrection” will be inspired by Brother Anthony Stone, whose name and role in the novel are closely connected with the concept of rebirth. The above-mentioned “inner friend of the soul” is pictured by Jung as an inner voice or a “spiritual friend” with whom a person can have a discussion. This discussion can be described as “talking to oneself” or as a kind of “meditation.” When Jung discusses further the concept of transformation and rebirth, and the idea of the inner friend, he refers to the transformation of chemical substances and to the Alchemist’s *Stone*: “So for them the inner friend appeared in the form of the Stone.”

To this he adds: “The seeker after truth hears both the Stone and the Philosopher speaking as if out of one mouth.” According to Jung, both the Philosopher and the Stone correspond to the god Hermes who was friend and counsellor of the alchemists and lead them in their work (1992: 67). When Rita and Anthony Stone sit talking to each other, Brother Anthony seems to be the counsellor she needs. In the way their conversations are presented, Rita’s reflections appear clearly as her own (“Listen, I said”, “Look I said”) while Anthony’s comments sound more like
an echo of her thoughts. Although Anthony’s role is significant in these dialogues, we feel that he stands somewhat in the background (153, 154). Brother Anthony’s surname, together with the way those conversations are presented, led me to see a parallel between the Stone mentioned in Jung’s lecture and the role played by Rita’s interlocutor.

When Rita accepts the challenge to lead Eglantine House she also accepts life as it is and the fact that she is not perfect and never will be. Hutchison remarks that “the home she now envisions, or ‘resurrects,’ embodies the best of her former homes.” In this new home Rita will live in harmony with herself: “She can now accept her puritan legacy of hard work, but she can also acknowledge the existence of ‘Rita the dreamer’” (Hutchison 67). In the rebirth of Mary Pelagia we can see Rita’s individuation, which is a process of transformation. The importance of this process of transformation was already hinted in the title of the novel; as Hutchinson has pointed out, The Glassy Sea is the name of a hymn about resurrection (65).

6. Conclusion

In my introduction I mentioned a regularity of patterns that pointed to Jung’s initiation rituals. After following Rita’s laborious work through four of her “stages of life,” we can say that the rituals mentioned by Jung – submission, self-restraint and emancipation – can be recognized in the recurrent pattern of her behaviour. We find that the normal submission of the young Rita to her parents (here especially to the mother) finds a continuation in her submission to the mother-figures Sister Mary Rose and Maggie. This pattern also reappears in the house of Asher although, this time, Rita shows submission to what could perhaps be seen as a father-figure.

The phase of self-restraint takes place when Rita complies to the order of the different houses. This is also the time when she discovers more about herself and when she is split between the ‘Mary’ and ‘Martha’ ideals that dwell in her mind. During her stays at the different homes, Rita’s life can be compared to a balancing act between those two extreme female role models. At her parents’ house, Rita is expected to be a hard working and down-to-earth ‘Martha’ but she has a longing for higher things. At Eglantine House the circumstances are the reverse: she is one of the ‘Marys’ (Mary Pelagia) but the practical demands of the real world accumulate. At Maggie’s house, Rita has once again use for the worldly qualities she was brought up with and she has hardly time to think of her spiritual needs. Those needs are revived when Asher appears. Once in his power, Rita discovers
that he wants her to be a ‘Mary,’ the symbol of perfection who stands above worldly matters. By and by, Rita finally understands that she will have to take elements from both role models to be able to cope with her life.

The phase of emancipation implies a rebellion against the model that is imposed on Rita. At first, she rebels against her mother. Later she rebels against the mother-figures who replace Eleanor, and further against her “God” Asher and his values. Many archetypal images appear in the novel. Among those, we find that the mother archetype is omnipresent through the four stages. The archetypal image of the mother (which is the foundation of the mother complex) appears ‘between the lines,’ since we recognize different aspects of the resistance to the mother and of its impact on Rita’s personality and behaviour.

The individuation process can be described as the conscious striving towards an understanding of one’s Self (Jung et al. 166). This process takes place when Rita goes through the final crisis in the house by the seashore. It also continues after she has agreed to the offer from the bishop, Philip Yurn. Once she has accepted the fact that she cannot attain perfection and that she has made mistakes, Rita is able to come to terms with herself and what she wants. The ‘psychoanalytic session’ has been successful: Rita’s aim was to “know how to put past yesterday so that remembering is not a pastime preoccupying the soul for ever” and she has now achieved that time past will not preoccupy her soul in the future (14). The questions asked by the girl Rita: “Who was I? What did I want?” find an answer during the night of her decision: “I wanted a world I could legislate, make my own; not to own, not really control, no, not that. Ah, but that was it: have an importance in” (41, 157). When Rita now re-opens Eglantine House and makes it into a home for women who have been hurt by the world, she achieves what Jung meant to be the goal of the individuation process: “Individuation does not shut one out from the world, but gathers the world to oneself” (1988: 136). The introspective journey that Rita Heber makes in her letter enables her to accept herself. Now she will be able to build a future because she has a better knowledge of herself. In that respect, the letter can be compared to the work Rita would have achieved together with a psychoanalyst.

The epistolary form favoured by Marian Engel in this novel places her traditionally among women writers; it positions her within a ‘marginalized’ group, since women have always had difficulties in being accepted into the literary canon. However, since the theories of C. G. Jung pervade her text, we can see in the novel an effort to appropriate theories and methods of analysis which have been mainly in the hands of men. The important thing, nevertheless, is not that
these ideas were produced by men originally, but the specific use to which they are put and the effect they produce (Moi 205). Engel brings forward women’s need to relate to the mother-figure and to its different representations. She also dismantles the stereotyped ‘Mary’ and ‘Martha’ models. These models were defined by a patriarchal society; but a woman’s goal in life should not be limited to serving or giving birth to male Gods. When they struggle to establish their identity, women must realize that finding their own models is a crucial issue. That is the reason why it is important to emphasize the relations and ties between mother and daughter or between women in general.
7. Works cited

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