The Dowser Character in the Plays of Gwen Pharis Ringwood

DENYSE LYNDE

GWEN PHARIS RINGWOOD'S accomplishments as one of the pioneering Canadian dramatists of Western Canada have been well documented.[1] One aspect of her work that has received less attention perhaps than it deserves is her attempt to create a distinctive Canadian mythology. In her plays, certain distinctive character types recur over and over; one of the most interesting of these is that of the apparently humble man of the people who is subsequently revealed as a repository of folk wisdom, a uniquely Canadian prophet. In her *Widger's Way* (1952),[2] for example, the most significant character is not the eponymous Widger, but Dowser, the mysterious pedlar, well-witcher, dreamer, buffoon, and prophet who suddenly appears out of nowhere to unravel the various confusions of the play and to restore order and harmony. Dowser is a man defined by his creative imagination and an intuitive understanding of things. He is a dreamer whose ability to see through the surface of life gives shape and focus to the existence of those about him, especially those whose own dreams have been threatened by the prosaic texture of daily life.

Dowser's significance, moreover, stretches considerably beyond *Widger's Way* itself. As a character he reappears in a much later work, *Mirage* (1979);[3] and in several earlier plays, Dowser-like figures appear to perform similar, though simpler, functions. Through a consideration of the evolution of this figure, this paper will attempt to show both Ringwood's developing interest in the character-type itself, and the growing mastery of comic form that is demonstrated by the progressively more successful integration of the Dowser-like figure into the dramatic action.

The Rainmaker,[4] an occasional piece commissioned in 1944 by Robert Gard, Director of the Alberta Folklore and Local History Project,[5] relates the passage of events that occurred the day a rainmaker was brought to Medicine Hat, Alberta. Framing this central plot is the story of Tom Arnold who, in the prologue and epilogue, reminisces about the time that Hatfield, the Rainmaker, was hired by the town, and the time his wife planned to leave him. The play explores the hopes and dreams of several characters, hopes and dreams made vulnerable by a brutal prairie drought. During the first part of the play, a musician, Sam, sits quietly strumming on his guitar, among the vendors who have been drawn by the promise of a miracle, the arrival of the needed rain. When Cissy, a young town girl, shows Sam her basket full of paper umbrellas, he offers to buy them from her. Although he is only able to buy thirty-seven of the forty-three, Sam is able to provide Cissy with enough money to fulfil her dream: she buys her father some tobacco.

The dreams of the rest of the town are not as easily realized as the day passes with no indication of coming rain. The mayor of Medicine Hat, unable to calm the rising anger of his townspeople, appeals to Sam to intervene. Singing a song to the tune of "Oh Susannah," he briefly quiets his neighbours, but they are immediately aroused again when Hatfield stands to address them. Faced by a shouting, faceless crowd, Hatfield is unable to speak and again Sam steps forward to speak:

> Take it easy, folks. Take it easy. Don't forget how to laugh. You've always been able to laugh before. You can do it now. Why there's Ad and Ella Jones — remember the last good crop they had four years ago? Best crop in the country and they were hailed out in a half hour. What'd they do? They made ice cream out of the hail stones that had smashed their wheat into the ground. They invited the neighbours in and somehow they laughed. Here, Walt, have an umbrella. Good for sunstroke. Tim, Charlie. (He hands out the umbrellas, giving one to *HATFIELD*). (p. 195)

Sam reminds the citizens of Medicine Hat how they all faced hardships in the past. By passing out Cissy's paper umbrellas, the particular symbol of her innocence and hope, the singer is able to appeal to the western farmer's strength and prevailing hope. The

paper umbrellas, a further testament of hope, become the appropriate symbol of the town people's confident and optimistic nature. With the crowd subdued, Hatfield begins to address them only to be interrupted by the sound of thunder. As the rain begins to fall, Sam accompanies the people of Medicine Hat in their jubilant dance of celebration.

Set against Sam in his role of protector and preserver of dreams is one of the few characters explicitly associated with religion in the plays of Ringwood, Weird Willy, the eccentric lamplighter. As he passes through the play lighting the town lights, he tries to force his version of spiritual light on his neighbours. Calling on Hatfield to repent and give up what he calls Satan's work, Willy waits for confirmation of Hatfield's damnation. When the rain comes, the demented prophet curses his God for his failure to punish these misguided servants. Willy's Old Testament theology is placed in direct contrast with Sam's less doctrinal, but more enlightened, thoughts on religion, revealed throughout the play by the singer's actions and confirmed by his reflections on the events of the day. A young boy confesses his uncertainty about the cause of the rain to the older man and Sam explains his conclusions:

> JODY: Now I got to decide whether it's Hatfield or Him. Those towers look mighty imposing, Sam.
>
> SAM: So do the Rocky Mountains, Jody, and they've been there a lot longer.
>
> JODY: (after a pause) Guess you're right.
>
> SAM: Maybe Hatfield's just lendin' a hand. Anyway, seems like a miracle — this rain. It sure does. (p. 201)

Sam's God is characterized by the land that surrounds them, the elements that strengthen and succour them and the simple faith and strength of will that Sam recalls to his neighbours.

As a character, Sam is the most fully developed figure in the play. He remains only peripherally connected to the action, however. The play is episodic; while *The Rainmaker* offers a potentially interesting situation and a handful of attractive sketches, the individuals of the town remain an anonymous crowd while the mysterious Rainmaker remains an enigma. In the play, Ring-

wood fails to realize fully the dramatic implications of the action or people; her failure to integrate fully the Dowser Figure points to a larger failure to find an adequate comic form for the play.

Nigger John in *Stampede* (1945)[5] is a character similar in many respects to Sam. This play, a celebration of the prairie cowboy and the western stampede, traces the stories of Shorthorn, a trail boss with a tragic past, in the form of a murder, from which he is perpetually in flight; Nigger John, a close friend of Shorthorn and a member of the trail ride; Bud, a young cowboy who has aspirations to follow in Shorthorn's steps as a champion stampede contestant; Shark, a villainous bronco buster who will do anything to win; and various other cowboys who arrive in Calgary for the Stampede. By the end of the first act, Nigger John has clearly assumed the role of advisor both spiritual and temporal for most of the men. Only the evil Shark, who refuses to sit next to the negro, fails to respect the older man's opinions. During the course of the play, it is revealed that Nigger John knows about the crime in Shorthorn's past; it is this guilty secret that Shark stumbles upon and in his blind envy of Shorthorn's abilities as horseman and leader, the villain vows to make Shorthorn's real identity known.

Not only does Nigger John advise the younger cowboys, he also protects the Greenhorn from Toronto, cares for the drunken boys after an evening in the town and tries to help Bud understand and accept the fact that his broken rib necessitates withdrawal from the Stampede. Shorthorn forces Bud to withdraw; he agrees to take his place so that Shark will not have the opportunity to have two rides on the most dangerous horse. The mount, Midnight, a notoriously wild animal once cared for by Nigger John, presents the major challenge of the Stampede. Parallels are made between the characters of Bud and Shorthorn and between Shorthorn and Midnight. Shorthorn, who loves Bud's fiancé, Celia, seems to recognize his own youth and innocence in the young cowboy and therefore strives to protect him. As Shark continues to threaten Shorthorn, the outlaw senses his own future is precarious; this realization only strengthens the trail boss's resolve to safeguard Bud's future. Nigger John sternly counsels Bud to forget his anger:

BUD: No. I can't see nothing, except that I ought to be in there fighting it out with Midnight.

NIGGER JOHN: You couldn't ride Midnight. Look at you, you're all stiffened up. You don't have a chance. You go sit down somewhere and think things over. There's a lot of things you don't know about yet. Looks like one of them might be loyalty. You might think about that a while. (p. 247)

Bud comes to a partial understanding of Shorthorn's motivation, but he fails to realize the extent of Shorthorn's personal sacrifice.

Nigger John tries unsuccessfully to protect Shorthorn's secret from Shark. Likewise, he deeply regrets the fact that Midnight has been entered in the Stampede competition. Fully understanding the implications of the situation, he is nevertheless unable to save either horse or man from their fate. Shorthorn is forced to flee, and the horse has been permanently scarred:

NIGGER JOHN: No, Ma, I'm just sorry. Midnight trusted me and now he's been hurt, deeper than his skin, deeper than any spur can rake him.

MA: He'll be famous.

NIGGER JOHN: Yeah, he'll be famous, cause there's nothing can hurt him any more. He's got a good clean hate inside him and he don't figure there's a man living he could carry on his back without lowering himself.

MA: If you could buy him from Tilson and keep him quiet for a while —

NIGGER JOHN: Not now. From now on papers is the only part of Midnight anybody will ever own. You see he knows now what he was always afraid of, he knows that man's got a mean streak in him, a queer, twisted mean streak that likes to hurt, to turn the knife. They've made an outlaw of him and he's on his road. He'll be the greatest bucking horse that was ever born, but he won't trust anybody again. (p. 231)

Before Midnight's owner, Tilson, entered the horse in competition, Nigger John was the only man who could ride him. The horse, distrusting all other riders, tossed them off. Likewise, the only person that Shorthorn trusted was Nigger John but, once he is threatened with exposure, he realizes he must totally abandon his present lifestyle and leave alone. He turns his portion of a ranch jointly owned by the two older men over to Nigger John

for Bud. Entrusting Nigger John with the land and the care of the young man, Shorthorn clearly establishes Nigger John as the protector and preserver of dreams in the play.

One weakness of *Stampede* lies in the nature of Nigger John's antagonist in this play. This character, the catalyst of the main action, is simply defined as a villain. From his first appearance when he questions Shorthorn's abilities as trail boss until his last exit in the final act where he is carried off, knocked unconscious by an outraged Nigger John, Shark merely fulfils his own name. Perhaps the tension of the play could have been strengthened and deepened if the climax arose directly from the complexity of the two major characters and the situation in which they appear. Nigger John certainly exhibits the potential for such a climax; the simple villain, however, only serves to diminish the stature of his opponent, and more indirectly, of the play in which they both appear.

The protector and preserver of dreams is transformed into a well-witcher and pedlar in the next play, *Widger's Way*. The miserly Widger must learn the true value of his present lot in life as well as acknowledge his love for his daughter, Roselle. At the beginning of the comedy, he is instructed to hold a bag of gold for the murderous Planter, a stranger to the area. When Planter is later found dead, suspicion falls on the innocent Widger who, trying to keep the gold for himself, behaves very suspiciously to his neighbours: the politician Sokolander, widow Anastasia, the visiting Professor Bond, and Officer Dockett. Dowser, the well-witcher and pedlar, finally unravels the series of misunderstandings which allows the play to happily conclude with a celebration.

Dowser first visits Widger when he is painting a fence which separates his property from that of a church. The miser is sure that if he performs this task, God will take care of him and his gold. The pedlar tries to counsel Widger against marrying his daughter to the rich politician but the miser only considers the financial security of such a match and his bag of gold. Roselle, confessing her love for Sokolander's nephew, Peter, turns to Dowser for help and he arranges for her to steal away from her father's house on the eve of the wedding to hide in his sister's

house. When Widger is accused of murder, he too must turn to Dowser for help:

> DOWSER: All — there you have it. Here's a poor man, over sixty, a farmer with a daughter, pays taxes, votes a respectable party and was baptized. That's all you know.
>
> WIDGER: Oh, no! (*It is a cry*) There's more. There's much, much more!
>
> DOWSER: (*Fast*) Yes, there's the fear and the malice and the envy. The pricking conscience and the greed, and the skeleton in the respectable closet. The little hurts to pride, the desire to know things, and the desire to own. The urge to get on and the fear of death. (*Widger looks at Dowser*) And there's the will — the thin bright spire of a man's will thrust forth from the encircling cave. (*Gently*) There's love and a need for loving.
>
> WIDGER: (*Whispering*) Yes, Dowser.
>
> DOWSER: Oh, there's more to a man than flesh and bones and his name on the census. What do we know of any one at all? There's your question. Give me three spring notes twirled from a birch tree any time. That's simple. (*Slight pause*) (pp. 319-20)

In the *Rainmaker*, Sam quiets the crowd by telling them who they really are; here Dowser looks beyond the immediate situation and the particular man to offer basic truths about the nature of all mankind. Although Widger is marched off to jail by the bumbling policeman, Dockett, clearly the wise and generous Dowser will solve the mystery and bring the series of misunderstandings to an end. In the following scene, the pedlar once again rescues the miser — this time from a murderous attack made by Jake, the disguised partner of the dead Planter. Finally it is Dowser who hands over Jake to the Mounties and who settles the ownership question that surrounds the gold. As the play ends, Widger joins the party held to celebrate the wedding of Roselle and Peter, a ceremony made possible by the intervention of the pedlar.

The character of Dowser is again seen in *Mirage*, a play that chronicles the lives of three generations of a family who settle in southern Saskatchewan in 1910. The new settlers must, guided by Dowser, come to an adequate understanding of the land. As a well-witcher, Dowser holds some special power which enables him to understand clearly the relationship that exists between

the farmer and the land. When John Ryland first arrives in Saskatchewan, he believes he owns the land, that he can conquer it, that he can make it solely his. Dowser, realizing the folly of such blindness, reminds the young farmer of the past:

> DOWSER: (*turning*) There were Dinosaurs on this place once. Long ago, before the Buffalo. Did you know that?
>
> JOHN: No.
>
> DOWSER: I've seen bones. Perhaps this was no plain then. A jungle. But Dinosaurs roamed the land, bigger than elephants. Don't plough all your land, John Ryland. Leave a strip here and there in prairie wool — obeisance to the Dinosaurs. (p. 499)

John fails to listen to Dowser's advice and later confesses his error when the brutal weather of the late twenties and early thirties strips the land of its soil: "You were always at me to leave some of the prairie wool on the place, Dowser. Reckon you've been saying 'I told you so' these last years" (p. 515). Dowser quietly and patiently tutors John, his son, Ryan, and his grandson, Hilt, although it is the women who intuitively understand his teaching.

Dowser is also closely associated with the medicine bag that was found on the land when John and his wife Jeanne first arrived. The bag becomes a symbol of the power of the land, encompassing the past, present, and future. While Dowser watches, Jeanne immediately senses the bag's special qualities: "You know when I hold this pouch, I feel as if I hold someone's life in my hands. I'll keep it. The owner may come for it" (p. 499). When her husband is away at war, she relies on the medicine bag to sustain her:

> Help me. Whoever you are, whose life is in this bag, help me to endure. I've never told John how afraid I am without him here. I'm afraid of the sound of wind at night. Afraid when the creak of the windmill wakes me or the house cracks as it settles in the cold. How afraid I am when the snow comes and there's no one nearer than five miles away. I never told John but I'm full of fear. Perhaps I should have taken Ryan home to Scotland like John wanted me to. Will I ever feel at home here? Help me to endure. (p. 502)

Jeanne recognizing the special nature of the land understands that the land is not theirs to own. They can live on it, borrow it

for a time, but finally it will remain the "no easy gods" that are celebrated in the prologue and the epilogue.

The medicine bag symbolizes the nature of the land outlined in the prologue:

> No easy gods, and yet they challenge, crying "hunt us down,
> Uncover us from beneath your monuments of wood and stone,
> Come, dance and sing with us,
> For without us you are homeless.
> Hunt us down for without us you are forever homeless."
>
> (p. 490)

Dowser must guide the different generations of the Ryland family to this understanding. Ryan, John's son, realizing this when he considers selling his land and retiring, acknowledges that Dowser always knew the truth: "A man doesn't own the land. The land owns him. A man just holds it, in trust. You always felt that way. Yet you never worked the land" (p. 543). At the end of the play, John's grandson, Hilt, struggles with this concept as Dowser once again offers counsel.

The idea of the past is constantly linked with the present and future by the symbol of the medicine bag. Dowser stands amazed and awed by the treasures of the past, the present beauty of the natural world and the settlers, and the potential wealth of the land and coming generations:

> Secrets under the ground; minerals, oil, fossils, all down there crushed under that oncoming ice. Sometimes I stand and this prairie turns into a tropical jungle; palm trees, ferns, great purple flowers. Dinosaurs roaming the land. Tyrannosaurus Rex. Brontosaurus. Triceratops. Mastodon. Higher mammals clashing around in the swamp. Oh I can feel them down there. . . . Secrets under the ground. Untold secrets. (pp. 532-33)

Untold secrets lie in the medicine bag; recognizing its significance, Jeanne creates a new pouch, a flour sack, to mark her family's time on the land in which she places certificates, mementos from important events, and a newspaper clipping, brought by Dowser, which reports the landing on the moon. While the medicine bag chronicles one time, the sack, another time, will be passed to Jeanne's grandson, Hilt, while her granddaughter, Laura, will leave her home, following in her grandmother's steps, and begin

a new receptacle. While John struggles to possess the prairie land, his wife, Jeanne, merely collects souvenirs. She unconsciously realizes that no one can own the land. The Indians before could not: they merely camped on it. To mark her time there, she saves Dowser's willowstick fossils and a gopher tail to remind her of a particular past. They become her own medicine bag which will be passed on to her ancestors.

Hilt's sister, Laura, does not find any value in the medicine bag or the flour sack. She must leave the prairies to find new gods that demand to be conquered. Dowser knows that the young girl has made the right decision:

> LAURA: That's right. I'm going to wind my way through the labyrinth in Crete and see Scylla and Charybdis. And who knows . . . perhaps I'll cut a willow wand and find an underground river that's been there since time began.
>
> DOWSER: You have the power, Laura. Like I told you, you have the power. (p. 539)

She leaves the land but her brother will remain. By holding the medicine bag and the flour sack in trust, he too will come to understand the independent, at times, ruthless nature of the land.

Ringwood's experiments with Dowser and his companion figures, Sam and Nigger John, show clearly the growing mastery of her craft over the course of her career. In *The Rainmaker*, Sam remains peripheral to the main action, although clearly the townspeople turn to him and trust him. The epilogue and prologue, centring on Tom, are misleading in that they suggest a particular story which is never realized, just as Miranda, Sarah, and Ed are only partially developed characters; in the end, the play finally remains vaguely dissatisfying as no central character or specific action emerges. In *Stampede*, a stronger situation is created in which the playwright is able to develop interesting characters and action. Nigger John, central to the main plot and subplots, sustains continuity in the busy western panorama and provides some relief to the bleak drawing of the villain, Shark. Through the development of this character, Ringwood is able to establish explicit parallels between Shorthorn and the horse Midnight. The well-witcher and pedlar, Dowser, found in *Widger's Way*, is pivotal to the action of the play. Not only does

he provide solutions to the several problems, he develops substantially the simple view of life first introduced in *The Rainmaker* by Sam. While Sam spoke of God in terms of nature, Dowser outlines a more coherent philosophy of the complexity of man, and his place in the world. In *Mirage*, Ringwood explores through the character of Dowser the relationship of pioneer and prairie, man and nature. The western farmer must learn that he can never conquer the prairie land: like the Indians before him, he can only constantly engage nature in a perpetual, never ending battle for survival. In this play, Ringwood allows the prophet figure his full voice, creating a moving and dramatic testament to the prairie pioneers.

NOTES

[1] Geraldine Anthony, *Gwen Pharis Ringwood* (Boston: Twayne, 1981).

[2] Gwen Pharis Ringwood, *Widger's Way* in *The Collected Plays of Gwen Pharis Ringwood*, edited by Enid Delgatty Rutland (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1982), pp. 287-337. All subsequent references will be to this edition of the plays.

[3] *Mirage*, pp. 489-548.

[4] *The Rainmaker*, pp. 181-204.

[5] Anthony, p. 73.

[6] *Stampede*, pp. 205-54.