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A Bird in the House – A Death in the House: An Analysis of Metaphorical and Symbolical Imagery in the Collection of Stories by Margaret Laurence *A Bird in the House*

Abstract

This paper offers an interpretation of the functioning of symbols and metaphors in the collection of short stories by Margaret Laurence *A Bird in the House*. Drawing on the theories of symbols and metaphors developed by English and Slovak literary scholars, the author interprets eight short stories from this collection, whose narrator and central character is an adolescent girl Vanessa McLeod, an aspiring writer who wants to embody her life experience in her writing. The author identifies the central metaphor and symbol of these stories – a bird which does not only signify death (for example, in the story “A Bird in the House”) but also the sad fate of the marginalized First Nations in Canada (“The Loons”).

Résumé

Cet article propose une interprétation de l'emploi des symboles et des métaphores dans le recueil de nouvelles *A Bird in the House* (*Un oiseau dans la maison*) de Margaret Laurence. En s'appuyant sur les théories des symboles et des métaphores établies par des chercheurs en littérature anglais et slovaques, l'auteur interprète huit nouvelles de ce recueil dont la narratrice et protagoniste, Vanessa MacLeod, une adolescente aspirant à devenir écrivaine, vise à refléter sa vie et ses expériences dans ses écrits. L'auteur identifie la métaphore et le symbole central de ces histoires – un oiseau qui représente non seulement la mort (par exemple, dans la nouvelle « A Bird in the House », *Un oiseau dans la maison*) mais aussi le triste sort des Premières Nations marginalisées au Canada (« The Loons »).

In my contribution I intend to deal with metaphorical and symbolical structures in the short story collection *A Bird in the House* by Margaret Laurence. At first I will offer a brief survey of theoretical opinions on the nature of the metaphor and symbol. I will try to show that almost all of these examples can be found in the analyzed short stories.

Margaret Laurence is undoubtedly one of the most important post-war Canadian fiction writers. She was born in 1926 in the small prairie town of Neepawa, Manitoba, and died in 1987. Of her works, four novels – *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969) and *The Diviners* (1974) – can be considered the most prominent. They are all set in the fictitious prairie town of Manawaka, which is also the setting of the short-story collection *A Bird in the House* (1970). Laurence was twice awarded the Governor General's Award and was made a Companion of the Order of Canada in 1972 for her literary achievements.



And now I wish to include a brief survey of theoretical approaches to understanding two basic tropes that create a transferred meaning in literary texts: the metaphor and the symbol. I trust these will help in understanding better the functioning of textual strategies in the analyzed story cycle. At first I want to mention *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* by J. A. Cuddon. Under the term “metaphor” this critic mentions only that it is “a figure of speech in which one thing is described in terms of another” (Cuddon 542). However, he is more elaborate with regard to “symbol.” He claims that “[i]t is an object, animate or inanimate, which represents or ‘stands’ for something else” (Cuddon 939). He then mentions several examples such as scales symbolizing justice, and the orb and the sceptre symbolizing monarchy and power. However, symbols can also be actions and gestures: “The clenched fist symbolizes aggression. Beating of the breast signifies remorse” (ibid.). Later on he lists more sophisticated or literary kinds of symbol: in the works of Virgil, Dante and James Joyce there is the journey into the underworld; *Macbeth* has a recurrence of the blood image symbolizing guilt and violence, and in *Hamlet* weeds and disease symbolize corruption and decay. There are other works mentioned, like *Moby Dick* by Melville, Kafka’s novels, *The Lord of the Flies* by Golding and plays by Synge, O’Neill and many others. Let us now look at some definitions by Slovak theorists. Tibor Žilka in his *Poetický slovník* states that the symbol is “generally each sign that arises on the basis of conventional designation. ... Things and objects also fulfil a secondary function deriving from the fact that they acquire a sign character; they function as a sign. A stone in itself does not mean anything, but if it marks a border between two states, it becomes a sign. ... A word denoting a particular object acquires an abstract meaning. It can designate sorrow, loneliness, freedom, life, beauty, etc” (Žilka 108–109). Žilka then mentions such examples as bread and salt symbolizing hospitality, a black cat as an omen of bad luck, etc. However, he gives a more detailed discussion of metaphor than Cuddon does. In his view, the metaphor is an indirect description of a thing or person based on a transfer of some quality from one object to another and can have four basic types:

There can be transferred qualities of things (a) onto inanimate objects or phenomena: ‘the emerald of the grass’; and (b) onto animate objects and people: ‘a heart turned to stone,’ ‘he burned with shame.’ Qualities of living things (people) can be transferred onto (a) animals and birds: ‘a small singer’ (as a bird); and (b) onto inanimate objects: ‘a field was burning,’ ‘a dead sea,’ ‘the sun sits.’ (Žilka 92)

He explains the essence of metaphor in such a way that “[i]n one’s mind there appear two elements of reality by which there arise two words, two signs, a so-called ‘double image’” (Žilka 93). As he claims, “the specificity of the poetical image is based on the fact that it does not deny the primary meaning, but also a new meaning is added, which is valid only in this poem” (Žilka 94). He explains this semiotic mechanism in this way: “There occurs a mutual oscillation between the primary and the [secondary] meaning by which a verse is enriched with connotations, so-called ‘inter-perceptions,’ which arise from the mutual influencing of both semantic fields” (Žilka 94).

In another manual of literary criticism written by Findra, Gombala and Plintovič entitled the *Dictionary of Literary Critical Terms*, the symbol is subsumed under the category of



metonymy, which is explained in the following way: “It arises when the author transfers the designation of one phenomenon to another one on the basis of their notional, real dependence, i.e. their temporal, local and causal dependence. Thus it differs from a metaphor in that it is connected with a direct meaning by some internal or external connection or relationship (interconnection)” (Findra, Gombala and Plintovič 209–210). It is then stated that frequent examples of metonymy become symbols, like those typical for Slovak poetry in the 19th century which aimed at raising patriotic consciousness such as the Danube and the High Tatras mountain range, which represent the historical motifs of Slovak statehood from the 8th–9th centuries. However, he also mentions universal symbols valid for the whole Indo-European civilization, such as the symbolical figures of Prometheus, Icarus or Faustus (Findra, Gombala and Plintovič 209–211). As far as the metaphor is concerned, they also perceive the substance of metaphor as a transfer of meaning connected with facts, qualities or things (including human beings) to other facts, qualities, etc. However, what is interesting is that they try to explain its *raison d’être* in this way: “This transfer of meaning is not a purposeless act. Metaphor aims to emancipate things from conventional relationships, to de-familiarize reality and make it less routine-like, to discover its unknown facets and hidden sense. Metaphor not only has an image-like (poetical) but also a noetic (cognitive) function” (Findra, Gombala and Plintovič 206). What is also worthwhile mentioning in their definition is the fact that while the classical metaphor is based on the relationship of similarity, the modern or even surrealist metaphor is often based on “... contrast and opposition, ... a ‘short circuit’ of two or more mutually distant semantic fields. ... [The] surrealist metaphor builds upon a loose sequence of images and takes things out of their logical connections (relationships)” (Findra, Gombala and Plintovič 207). These definitions look dispensable. However, I will try to prove that most of the aforementioned examples were utilized by Laurence in the analyzed work.

At first, I wish to describe this collection in a few words. It contains eight stories and is set in the small prairie town of Manawaka in the 1930s; its narrator is Vanessa MacLeod (a future writer), who narrates various stories from the age of 10 to approximately 19 years of age, yet from the perspective of an approximately 40-year-old writer. The form of this narration and its time framework is aptly described by Caroline Rosenthal:

Vanessa MacLeod tells the story of her childhood from an adult perspective, which splits the narrative subject into a reflecting, mature Vanessa and an experiencing and acting younger self. This bifurcated point of view doubles events and people in *A Bird in the House* as they are constantly portrayed through the eyes of the innocent younger child and from the perspective of the knowing older self. (Rosenthal 221–222)

These stories are inhabited mostly by members of Vanessa’s family so they create a short story cycle (similarly to collections by Alice Munro or the book of stories by Stephen Leacock, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*). They contain a strong autobiographical element. Vanessa lives with her mother Beth, her father Ewen Macleod, a physician, and alternately with her paternal grandmother and the Connors, her maternal grandparents, and also with her younger brother Roderick.



When we start to perceive the fictitious world of Laurence's stories, at its very threshold we encounter in the first story, "The Sound of the Singing," a powerful symbol that is about to be repeated throughout the whole collection: "That house in Manawaka is the one, which, more than any other, I carry with me. Known to the rest of the town as 'the old Connor place' and to the family as the Brick House, it was plain as the winter turnips in its root cellar" (Laurence 11). It is difficult to count exactly how many times this image of the "Brick House" is mentioned in this cycle, but the reader shall meet with this image again. I would like to underline that these buildings in which Vanessa's maternal or paternal grandparents live not only add to the representation of their living environment but express the very basis of their identity. They represent the foundation of their social status: Grandfather Connor was the first to have a brick building in Manawaka. Vanessa invariably has problems with these houses, which she does not want to live in, although she is forced to, as she confesses in the second story "To Set Our House in Order": "We had moved in with Grandmother MacLeod when the Depression got bad ... but the MacLeod house never seemed like home to me" (Laurence 46). And her grandmother also explains to Vanessa the reasons for being proud of this house: "When I married your Grandfather MacLeod, he said to me, 'You're used to having a proper house and you shall have one.' He was as good as his word. Before we'd been in Manawaka three years, he'd had this place built" (Laurence 48–49). As it will be clear later, this was a case of competition between the Irish ancestors of Vanessa from her maternal side and her Scottish ancestors from the paternal side.

Let us now look at the personality of Grandfather Connor, which is best depicted in the story "The Mask of the Bear." Vanessa starts her narration with the words: "In winter my Grandfather Connor used to wear an enormous coat made of the pelt of a bear" (Laurence 62). She says about this coat that it was so "vile-smelling when it had become wet with snow that it seemed to have belonged when it was alive to some lonely and giant Kodiak crankily roaming a high frozen plateau" (ibid.). I think it is quite obvious what Vanessa's attitude is towards her grandfather. This is shortly afterwards confirmed by the statement: "In my mind I sometimes call him 'The Great Bear'" (Laurence 63). Although at this point Vanessa connects in her mind the image of a wet and foul-smelling coat with her grandfather, it is interesting that she also points out that "[t]he name had many associations other than his coat and his surliness" (ibid.) By this expression she undoubtedly means that her grandfather represented a strong patriarchal figure manipulating all the people around him, wanting the whole family to obey him without any comment. In this story, Vanessa's aunt Edna was visited by her suitor Jimmy Lorimer. But since Grandfather Connor argues with all of Edna's suitors and finally expels them from his house, Vanessa's grandmother asks him to be kind to Jimmy. She tells her husband to do so "[f]or my sake." Grandfather at first agrees, but he cannot keep his word. There is an argument between him and Jimmy. This reminds the reader of another argument between Timothy Connor (Vanessa's grandfather) and his brother Dan, after which Dan leaves. However, Vanessa's grandmother makes his husband call Dan back. Only later does the reader find out that the power which the grandmother had over her husband was his adultery from the past. Nevertheless, only later, after the grandmother dies, does Vanessa witness her grandfather's weakness and vulnerability, which is for her a new experience: "Then he did a horrifying thing. He bent low over me, and sobbed against the cold skin of my face" (Laurence 79). And



Vanessa closes this story with the memory of visiting a museum of Haida Indians, who she would see many years later. Then she connects the bear mask which she saw in this museum with the character of her grandfather. He had lived all his life under the pretence of being a strong and independent man although inside he was weak and fallible: “I remember then that in the days before it became a museum piece, the mask had concealed a man” (Laurence 86). I think that in this we can see how metonymy, metaphor and symbol merge into a sophisticated artistic expression of tragic human fate in Grandfather Connor. This point is also underlined by a comment by Margaret Atwood: “The metaphor she chooses for [Grandfather Connor] is, with its suggestion of a shell concealing a life that has been repressed to the point of extinction, a perfect one for the whole tribe of Canadian grandfathers” (Atwood 140).

At this moment I wish to explain the crucial image of the collection in a story with the eponymous title “A Bird in the House.” The first innocent remark that points in this direction is made by Vanessa: “I stood there holding the feather duster like a dead bird in my hands” (Laurence 52). However, it is still not clear what this means. Later in the mentioned story there appears a crucial metaphor. During a winter storm a sparrow gets into the house through one of the holes which let fresh air in the house. The sparrow cannot get out and is flying senselessly in the room. Then Vanessa gets panicky and opens the window. However, the sparrow cannot fly out and so its situation does not get better. At this moment Noreen, a maid working for Vanessa’s parents, states: “A bird in the house means a death in the house” (Laurence 98). Afterwards, Vanessa, who does not like Noreen very much, realizes that it was Noreen who helped the sparrow and not herself: “‘Poor little scrap,’ she said, and I felt struck to the heart, knowing she had been concerned all along about the sparrow, while I, perfidiously, in the chaos of the moment, had been concerned only about myself” (Laurence 99). The fact that Noreen’s words have a deeper symbolical meaning appears later on because soon after this incident, in the same winter, Vanessa’s father becomes sick and dies. It is interesting, as Rosenthal points out, that this bird motif also appears in the story “The Loons,” but here it has the opposite connotation: “The bird motif, which persists through the story cycle occurs in ‘The Loons’ as well, but where in other stories it signifies the wish for freedom, here it stands for freedom lost” (Rosenthal 227).

Another short story, entitled “The Half-Husky,” is a perfect example of the way metonymy is connected with particular characters (i.e. a detailed description of the shabby and squalid living conditions of the lower social class) and creates an interpretation of their behaviour; thus it becomes a certain metaphor or symbol of their behaviour. For example, Harvey, a boy delivering newspapers to Vanessa’s home (which is the house of Grandfather Connor), behaves in a seemingly unmotivated way and with an irrational aggressiveness towards Vanessa’s dog, a half-husky she got from a neighbour. But when later this boy steals a telescope, and the grandfather and Vanessa go to retrieve it from him, the reader can somehow understand the motives of his behaviour. It is his bad social situation, his feeling of frustration, etc. The place where he lives is described in these terms:

The North End of Manawaka was full of shacks and shanties, unpainted boards, roofs with half the shingles missing, windows with limp hole-spattered lace curtains or else no curtains at all. ... The cement sidewalks were broken, great chunks heaved up by frost and never repaired. ... At one time it



must have been white, but it had not been painted for years. The rust-corroded gate stood open and askew, having apparently once been wrenched off its hinges. (Laurence 156–7)

When Vanessa arrived there with her grandfather, Harvey gave her the stolen telescope because his own grandmother had some power over him. But Vanessa never found out what this power was. She only stated at the end of the story that Harvey had killed the Chinese shop-owner for whom he had previously worked and taken all the money in the shop. However, in this short story we can see two causal relationships which parallel each other. Harvey is a “victim” of his social background; he behaves brutally and aggressively towards innocent targets of his frustration. He also starts to punish and even torture an innocent dog. This dog in turn starts to be dangerous for everybody except Vanessa’s family and has to be killed by the veterinary doctor. This is a paradox Vanessa does not solve. She only comments upon it and calmly accepts the situation: “Harvey Shinwell got six years. I never saw him again. I don’t know where he went when he got out. Back in, I suppose” (Laurence 160).

In dealing with the last story in the collection, “Jericho’s Brick Battlements,” I would like to return to the beginning of the analysis of this collection and say that the motifs are connected with the house they lived in; the social status conferred by owning a certain kind of property is at stake: “Before we moved into it, the Brick House had always been a Sunday place to me. It was a fine place for visiting. To live there, however, was unthinkable” (Laurence 161). And as I have mentioned, the earlier “competition” between the Connors and MacLeods is again depicted in the last story, when the family situation forces Vanessa, her mother and brother to come to live under the roof of Grandfather Connor. When Vanessa’s mother brings her own plates and glasses to the house of Grandfather Connor, her father, he flatly forbids the use of these things for the simple reason that they come from the “rival” MacLeod family: “‘It’s the MacLeod china,’ she said. ‘It’s Limoges. I thought we’d use it.’ ... ‘We don’t need no china of the MacLeods. We got plenty of our own.’ It was edged in gold and it had tiny moss roses on it. She shrugged and began wrapping it up in newspaper once more” (Laurence 163).

Now I would like to briefly mention two more examples of using the metonymy–metaphor–symbol. In “The Loons,” Vanessa goes with her father to the lake to listen to the sounds of these birds, but Piquette Tonerre refuses to go. Only later, when Piquette is long dead (a victim of class and ethnic marginalization due to being a member of mixed ethnicity of the Métis people, she is an alcoholic and dies in a fire in a small shed), does Vanessa find out that Piquette was the only one who heard these birds: “It seemed to me now that in some unconscious and totally unrecognized way, Piquette might have been the only one, after all, who heard the crying of the loons” (Laurence 120). In this powerful symbol there is an equation between the fate of the loons which are pushed away from their natural habitat and the destiny of the original people living on the American continent before the arrival of the white colonizers. Another example is offered by the story “Horses of the Night.” In this story, Vanessa’s cousin Chris pretends to be the owner of some horses in order to raise his social status in her eyes. However, later on she finds out that he only takes care of them. After some time, these living animals turn into objects of his troubled imagination when he comes home from the atrocities of World War II. He locks himself in his own world. As Vanessa mentions, one quotation can be applied to his mental state as well as being an element of characterization of the situation



in the world: “Slowly, slowly, horses of the night” (Laurence 144), which is taken from Ovid, *Elegy XIII*. For Vanessa, Chris remains a puzzle because she does not know whether he is still tortured by memories of terrors experienced during the war or if he has found inner peace: “I could not know whether the land he journeyed through was inhabited by terrors, the old monster-kings of the lake, or whether he had discovered at last a way for himself to make the necessary dream perpetual” (*ibid.*).

In saying this, I would like to end my contribution. I just want to point out that although I did not fully uncover the whole intricate web of metaphors and symbols in the chosen work by Laurence, I hope that I have managed at least to uncover these problems and show their richness and polysemantic potential. I hope I have thrown some light on the chosen work of this undoubtedly important figure of Canadian literature in the 20th century.

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