

Closing Circles: Symbolism and Narrative Patterns in Jack Hodgins's *The Invention of the World*

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Abstract

'The Invention of the World' (1977) is the first, and probably the best known novel of the Canadian writer Jack Hodgins. Often depicted as eccentrically regional and extravagantly parabolical, portraying a larger-than-life community, the novel trespasses the thin boundary between real life and magic, benefiting from an almost geometrical structure, which most likely derives from Hodgins' life long passion for mathematics. My paper will discuss the circular narratological patterns in Hodgins's work, focusing mainly on the circle as dominant symbol in The Invention of the World.

Key words

Key words: Canada, circle, magic realism, regional

“Keneally had been particularly careful to design the settlement in the shape of a perfect circle” (Hodgins 121), and so did Jack Hodgins with his first novel, *The Invention of the World*. The novel was described by the critics as a “mingling of the eccentrically regional and the extravagantly parabolical” (Woodcock) and it is, beyond its magic realism, a masterpiece that explores the most intricate depths of the human soul. The circular pattern of the novel, determined by the many ends followed by many other new beginnings, is symbolic for the style of a writer about whom the literary critic Peter Buitenhuis said that he is “basically an optimist about human nature”, preferring “the affirmative vision” (103) to the destruction and despair. One of the best ways to describe the structure of this novel would probably be to compare it with an infinite string of interlapping circles, illustrating the convergent destinies of the characters that populate the story. This paper will focus on only three of these characters, namely Donal Keneally, Lily Hayworth and Maggie Kyle, discussing the “troubled gender relations” (Hannan 48) between them and analyzing the importance the circle holds in the overall symbolism of the novel.

The passion for mathematics that Jack Hodgins cultivated along his life could be a reasonable explanation for the way the Canadian writer decided to structure his first novel. *The Invention of the World* benefits of an impressive and coherent structure, with built-in stories that converge in a perfectly drawn circle. Fine observer of the world myths, Hodgins could not have missed such a wonderful

opportunity to include some of these myths into his novel, and let himself be inspired by the beautiful symbols that they offer. One of the most important symbols he used in the novel discussed in my paper is the circle. Present all over the world, the circle has an incredible array of meanings, most of them being common to a number of cultures, regardless the geographical position. Some of the meanings of the circle which are to be found in Jack Hodgins's novel number the circle as an ancient and universal symbol of unity and wholeness, the circle as symbol of the sun and of godly power, as symbol of the feminine spirit or force, the cosmos or a spiritualized Mother Earth, and a sacred space, or as a symbol for renewal. Also, the circle is used as a symbol of controlling one's passion, of enlightenment; the circle also means the atom of hydrogen, the very particle that stands at the basis of the creation of the world. Last, but not least, the circle is, in scouting, the symbol for end of the trail, gone home. Hidden in the text, these meanings reveal themselves to the eye of the reader and bring new depths to the story.

Although this novel succeeds in "[q]uestioning the 'truth' of conventional archetypes, particularly the myths of the male saviour and self-denying mother", while „[embracing] alternative feminine myths of creation", as Annika Hannan notes (48), one of the most important characters of the novel remains Donal Keneally, the founder of the Revelations Colony of Truth, the almighty patriarch of the community. Often directing his wrath towards women who proved to be "unmanageable" (Hannan 64) to use a term of same critic, Keneally's myth is completed by cancellation by Maggie Kyle, a woman who would fit perfectly to this definition.

An almost mythological figure, Donal Keneally was said to have been born from an idiot mother and a bull god (Hodgins makes an innuendo on the legend of Zeus), later on came to Canada, to Vancouver Island, and brought with him an entire Irish village, with the promise of a better life. The promised life turned out to be full of misery and misfortune, the new colony resembling to something rather similar to a labour camp, with Keneally disposing at will of the people there. An island should be a safe place, where no harm can reach the people. An island is, according to Jung¹, a place where one can find "refuge from [...] the 'sea' of the unconsciousness, [...] a synthesis of the consciousness and the will" (Cirlot 160). Keneally's promised island is rather a remote place of both damnation, and resurrection. Mastering rhetoric and having *inventio*² as a second nature, thus easily discovering arguments which will support his plans, Keneally invents his new world from its very basic – the logos, the initial word.

They say he spoke for an hour and a half. They say he began with a lengthy explanation of the habits of the Neolithic men, who seemed to have some fondness for the circle as a symbol, [...] that he gave a quick

¹ For further references see also Jung, C.G et al. *Man and His Symbols*, London - New York : Arkana Penguin books, 1990

² For more information you can visit <http://www.uni-tuebingen.de/uni/nas/definition/rhetorik.htm>

rundown on the heroic and mystical feats of such men as Finn MacCool, Cuchulain, Brian Boru [...] all of whom were clearly intended to be understood as predecessors to their present leader, that he listed a catalogue in astonishingly minute detail of the task-by-task contribution of every adult in the colony towards the clearing of the land and the building of the houses and the construction of The House of Revelations [...] (Hodgins 124)

Keneally's attitude, that of a father of the community, placing himself as the center of power, reminds of the circle as symbol of the sun and of godly power. His strategies point to a charismatic leader, a patriarchal figure that sees himself empowered by the divine, and who relates himself not only to the Irish heroes, but also to the biblical ones. As Haim Hazan remarks, "[t]he mystical properties of such links and lineages evoke the sense that one's ancestors originated in mythical times. Similarly, the identification of a culture's mythical figures with its elders may be seen to bestow upon the latter the attributes of the former" (71). A good actor, Keneally played his part as a prophet to the poor and desperate; his visions found a fertile ground and thus the steps towards establishing a new colony have been made.

[H]e offered an intricate and completely incomprehensible explanation of his own role in the whole business, with vaguely worded hints in the direction of Moses and [...] Jesus Christ [...] by the time he neared the climax of his speech his voice had transcended all possibilities of the human voice and came to them like the wind, from somewhere beyond the earth, and was felt to the very centre of their bones. (Hodgins 124)

Keneally's trajectory is similar to an Ouroboros, the self-devouring snake, forming a circle and eating itself from the tail up. A lifelong game of power exercised over the members of the colony, with its tremendous amount of abuse and killings, comes in the end against the aged Keneally. While his third and last wife, Lily Hayworth, was trying to pull him away from the colony, to take him somewhere else, he started digging a tunnel under the Revelations House, the physical center of power of the colony. In a reversed myth of creation, he disappears in this tunnel, as if eaten by his own invention. At the same time, this aspect can be seen as a natural consequence of the fact that Keneally had reached the older stage of his life, as also Lily noticed: "Old, he had got old, he was slowing down" (Hodgins, 280) and therefore the others, feeling his weakness, wanted already to prohibit him "from interfering, making decisions, expecting any reward, or engaging in reciprocal relationships" (Hazan 44). His social status is lost as he is stripped by Paddy O'Mahony of his role as patriarch of the community, and is left only with a "roleless role" (Hazan 45). At the same time, a reversal of the original roles³ takes place, and the leadership goes now to Lily, even though she exercises her power with difficulty.

She went out sometimes, forced herself to go out, only to remind them she was still here, that one of them was still in charge. It was his land,

³ Haim Hazan also discusses this idea of role reversal in the context of aging; for more information on the title see bibliography

after all, and his buildings, and he was still nominally the leader of the colony, though she had persuaded them to allow her to stand in for him. (Hodgins 279)

The circle, so often mentioned until now, represents also the feminine spirit or force, the cosmos or a spiritualized Mother Earth, and a sacred space. In *The Invention of the World* it is the women who carry the circular thread of the story to its completion, and one of these women is Lily Hayworth herself. She was by Keneally's side in his last years, and witnessed not only his power, but also his weakness and his death – a fluctuating path, going up and down, that is also a discreet hint to the Rota Fortuna, the Wheel of Fortune (Cirlot 372) that can turn people's lives around.

"Lily fears Keneally for much the same reasons that Maggie fears her first husband – for the influence he had over her" notes Jan C. Horner (14). The entrapment Lily feels is more than material, it extends itself at the spiritual level, too. The same critic notes that "Keneally seems to suck Lily into his obsessive digging" (14), and her own obsession about going away, escaping, changing the place grew stronger while the tunnel was increasing its length.

"We don't have to stay here", she said. "We could go, anywhere you want. We could go back, to Carrighoun if you wish, or the stones. Maybe, if you unravel things right back to their beginning..."
But he pulled back, his red eyes quivering. (Hodgins 281)

Later on, Lily found escape indirectly through Maggie, who was sent to "unravel things" and return Keneally's ashes to the place of his birth. Also, by accepting to tell her story to Becker, Lily gain a certain amount of freedom, shaking the past away. The actions of both of the women, Lily and Maggie, led them to the starting point of very important moments in their lives, and have also a circular pattern, this time as a symbol of controlling one's passion, or fears in this case.

Lily fears Keneally, and she fears herself. Next to this feeling she experiences, there is also pity; she saw glimpses of childishness and lunacy with the almighty Keneally.

The first time I saw him in that outfit I laughed. Lord, Becker, I had a good laugh, my big sexy hero was a little boy playing dress-up. I thought, *What have I walked in on – a musical comedy?* Any other sixty-year-old man I'd ever known was busy counting his money or slipping candy to his grandchildren but I'd never before met one who was playing at – what? – Superman? Satan? Banana Plantation Owner? Whatever it was, it could have been harmless enough – you have to let people play their games – if the others hadn't believed in it. (Hodgins 256)

She also proves to be protective, and the fear she carries in her soul is not only fear for her own safety and well-being, she fears for her husband. After chasing away the bunch of people who were menacing Keneally, she stated clearly that "[m]y first concern was him. [...] Villain, god, demon, magician, con-man, call him what you want, he was my husband" (Hodgins 262). This is far from the image of the perfect couple, but somehow the two of them belonged together, as Lily told Keneally himself "Nothing in my experience had run to circles". He

answered: "In some cultures [...] the circle represents enlightenment. And perfection." In a peculiar way, Lily and Keneally were a matching couple.

More than frightened or impressed, Lily is thou amazed and disgusted, especially at the fact that the people of the community allowed Keneally to act like a demon and a tyrant. Next to the other two wives of Keneally, as Annika Hannan notes, she also "lack[s] both the supernatural or the non-supernatural power to alter [her] own [life]" (65); nevertheless, she will find later in time an opportunity to change the wrong that had been done, to turn the wheel of fortune, close the circle of wrong deeds, in a conscious effort to reestablish the order of things. This desire of undoing the wrong does not come from the fact that, once reaching the old age, Lily becomes wiser, it rather means she kept taking care about Keneally even after his death. Her failure in saving him from being swallowed into the tunnel he dug himself is redeemed with the help of Maggie. Also, her desire of completing the circle of Keneally's fate, by having his ashes transported to Ireland could come from a strong feeling of anger⁴, mutating even into rage. This anger was caused by the fact that she was convinced she failed to save him, to save herself, or even to be able of doing something against Keneally's abuses on the people of the colony. She places a strong emphasis on memory; her monologue, heard only by Strabo Becker, is a recollection of past events that attempts to shed light on the present. In opposition, Keneally seemed to have wished for an absence of memory that would have set him free.

"They told me my mother had no memory". [...]

"Without memory what would we be?"

"Free." [...]

"Not for me. I'll take the anguish thank you, for the comfort of knowing I'm alive." (Hodgins 281)

In yet another circular part of the story that the author brings to completion, Keneally's mother was swallowed by the earth as she gave birth to her son. This is a symbolic image that is repeated towards the end of the book, when Lily remembers the last days of Donal Keneally and how he dug himself down a tunnel. Whether he disappeared into the guts of the earth as in a primordial motherly womb or he was swallowed by the mother-earth into oblivion, the parallel between the two destinies is striking. While Annika Hannan notes that "Keneally's mother [is] a victim of the mythology" (51), we can claim that Keneally is the victim of his own created mythology, disappearing into his own legend.

Maggie's part of the story is one that speaks about coming of age and finding the purpose of an entire life. This tall and splendid Maggie Kyle, a young mother of 33 whose son of 19 is getting married at the beginning of the novel, had no personal encounter with Donal Keneally, her main connections with him being the fact that she bought the land of the former revelations Colony of Truth, and the fact that Lily came to live with her in the Revelations House. Ironically, after

⁴ Kathleen Woodward offers an insight on the relationship between wisdom and anger in her article „Against Wisdom” published in the *Journal of Aging Studies* 17 (2003), p. 55–67

Maggie buys the land of the former colony, she transforms it into a trailer park, thus bringing this place, which was so many years under the spell of a fake prophet, back to the simple, material and trivial dimension of the world. She did not offer “[m]agic solutions to household problems” (Hodgins 263) as Keneally did, but created a home out of a former place of damnation.

Maggie “is the spirit of generosity and community that the Irish leader never was”, notes Annika Hannan (66). She hosts all the misfits of the island, proves spiritual aspirations, and is looking for enlightenment and for a better self. The circle is also a symbol for renewal, and renewal is Maggie’s goal and she pursues this goal from the very moment when, once moved to the former Revelations House, she sets most of the old things on fire, as to purify the place and get rid of the past.

As far as she was concerned the past had been rubbed out when she went through the whole place top to bottom with a bucket of lye and a scrubbing brush, Keneally and his crazy colony were erased when she set a match to the furniture; the flames reminded her of a slash fire, burning off the nuisance debris to make room for newer growth. (Hodgins 43)

A similar scene of apparent destruction, takes place towards the end of the novel, after Maggie’s wedding with Wade, when the entire congregation engages in a battle of mythical proportions. Beyond the inherent material disaster that usually occurs in such cases, the symbolism of the event is worth mentioning. Maggie, the new woman, and Wade, the new man, start their life together in a new world, and watch without regret how the old one is being destroyed. There is no place for the ghosts of the past in Maggie’s new history, not even for Keneally’s ghost, dragging after him his three wives chained together.

[T]his one little bushy man, hiding under the bar-table, was the only person to see the ghost of Donal Keneally move palely through the crowd, dragging his three chained wives behind him, and then dance, to the terrible music, with each of them in turn, while the other two, forced to follow, watched all that happened out of sad uncomprehending eyes. (Hodgins 349)

By empowering Maggie Kyle and allowing her to reinvent herself, Jack Hodgins has succeeded in creating a splendid character, of a unique human quality. She is also one of the motherly figures in the novel, although this characteristic gains different levels in her case. Dreading the perspective of failure, Maggie often laments that she failed as a mother for her own children. As in an attempt to undo this wrong, she fosters on her property an entire group of weird characters. Although she is not a traditional homemaker, Maggie Kyle succeeds in offering and creating a real home to a bunch of people, Kyle’s Crazies as they were called by the others.

Against the burden of the midlife failure, Maggie Kyle comes to life as a real hero in a less shining armour, but bringing enormous reserves of strength and goodness. Her “Crazies” are her own community, formed of people that just happened to meet at the same place. Her destiny as the unofficial leader of this small community is one of generosity and care. Unconventional and always

looking for something more, she always wanted to be “different”. In one of her first encounters with Wade she said:

“I can hardly wait,” [...] “to be different”.

“Different from what?”

“Different”, she said. “Different from *them*. Different from me. Different.” (Hodgins 146)

Indeed, she became different. She possessed “an extra instinct [that] was a quiet torture”, sometimes she was trying “to evade the responsibilities of the beautiful woman” (Hodgins 291), but she was always in a quest that would bring her closer to the center of her own being. This instinct is the driving force that makes her go around the island, adding travelling to her personality. Later on she embarks on a journey all the way to Ireland to fulfill Lily’s last wish, that of returning Keneally’s ashes to the place of his birth. Lily’s legacy bestowed upon Maggie is a material attempt to undo a spiritual wrong, since the image of the leader of the Revelations Colony of Truth could be this way easier removed from the memory of those who were affected by his deeds.

Pray for the donor, it said on the fence, but that only made her think of poor Lily Hayworth, who was paying for this silly excursion from her grave. Who’d never seen this place, or wanted to. She’d seen enough of the world, thank you, she said, it was somebody else’s turn. Maggie had a sudden memory of the old woman down the well, laid out in her nightgown like a pale dropped moth on the clay ledge. And later, in the hospital, smelling of plaster. *Pray for the donor*. [...] Poor Lily, poor Lily, poor Lily. [...] You could only hope she’s found whatever it was she was after. She had already, it turned out after her death, settled all of this sort of business in her will, even planned this trip for them. (Hodgins 288)

Maggie’s journey is meant to close more than just one circle. First and foremost she brings to completion Keneally’s story, by removing it from Vancouver Island and returning it to Ireland, to the almost exact place of his birth. Besides this, Maggie closes the circle of her own story and of her quest for being different, for doing something important. She is thus given the opportunity to act as an essential role player in a story that she inherited from Lily. Her fear of failure is still present, thou, and worries Wade:

Maggie Kyle, with her determination to buck the pattern, had taken a risk, there was a chance of failure.

She would not, no matter what she threatened, go back to what she had been, if she failed. He was sure of it. She’d never survive. [...] Her self pity was the worst. The last thing you’d expect from Maggie Kyle. (300 - 302)

The little group travelling to Ireland is a small community by itself, and Maggie is the leader. The “sense of community” (Zacharasiewicz 103) that animates her pushes her further in her journey, until when she finally admits that such a thing “was too immense to be experienced alone” (Hodgins 313). As Alexandra Ganser notes, „[j]ourney and chance encounter [...] offer the potential to imagine a community based on communication and negotiation rather than on a bonding of homogeneous identities on common ground and soil, on uniformity and

shared essences or roots.” (38). At the end of this journey, Maggie completes her coming of age. This has nothing to do with wisdom, as Maggie does not become wiser; she is rather reconnected with her true self, allowing her emotions to run free. According to K. Woodward “wisdom has almost always been predicated on a lack of certain kinds of feelings—the passions in particular, including anger”. Hence, Maggie’s coming of age is rather a polyphony of emotions⁵, spread on various levels and ranging from self loathing to fear, anger, as well as tremendous amounts of hope. “What was good shall be good, with, for evil, so much good more: On the earth the broken arcs; in heaven, a perfect round.”(Hodgins 351). A circle has been closed; a story has been concluded, allowing a new world to emerge. Together with it, the new Maggie is finally ready to accept her role and start “working, loving” (Hannan 72) and enjoying the “self-knowledge unavailable to the former owner of the house, who strove for control, rather than empathy” (Hannan 72). As Waldemar Zacharasiewicz notes, “Maggie realizes [...] that in her eagerness to rise from her lowly beginnings she has overlooked what was nearest to her, the proximity of Wade Powers, her dedicated though often perplexed friend and cousin”(103). Love is also a very important part of her coming of age, and the new couple formed by Maggie and Wade comes to erase from the memory of the community the old couple of Lily and Keneally, coming with a fresh breath of love and care. By dropping masks and insecurities, “the new man and the new woman” (Hodgins 353) step out of Keneally’s Eden swindle, by creating their own paradise, based on true feelings and strong grounds. Or, as Wade said it, “[w]hen you begin to disbelieve in Keneally you can begin to believe in yourself” (Hodgins 314).

As David Jeffrey said, Jack Hodgins “is one of those rare beings who can claim for his primary motivation a deliberate desire that art should be an instrument of healing and be convincing about it” (44). This healing does not come without a price and usually the new beginning starts after a destruction of apocalyptic sizes, that is seen not as an evil force, but rather as a purifying action, overthrowing the man made games and bringing back the order of things to its original state. Jack Hodgins’s novel concludes with the message that “one cannot shake off the past” (Hannan 74), but can learn from it how to acquire a better self.

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⁵ The term was first introduced by the Romanian composer Sabina Ulubeanu in her PhD disertation

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