

Journeys from Europe to Canada.

Margaret Laurence's Ukrainian Immigrants

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Abstract

Canadian author Margaret Laurence was born in the small prairie town of Neepawa, Manitoba. The author's ancestors were of Irish and Scottish descent and finding one's origins not only preoccupied her personally, but also fictionally and non-fictionally. The Manawaka cycle, the imaginary place she created, spans over three generations, from the first wave of immigrants, who were not only of British origin, but who also had Ukrainian, Greek, German, or Jewish roots, to those characters who were born in Canada. This paper aims to demonstrate that Laurence successfully connects Europe and Canada, the Old World and the New World, in order to find a better future for her Ukrainian immigrants, because as the author states "we need links with our ancestors" [10, 16], "[o]ur task is not to reject the past but to assimilate it", in order to find "our place of belonging on this planet" [10, 19].

Keywords

Canada, Europe, immigration, adaptation, Old World vs. New World

Many attributes have been associated to Canadian writer Margaret Laurence's name, such as "the First Lady of Manawaka" (Canadian National Film Board), or "a founding mother of Canadian literature" [6, viii].

At personal level, on the one hand, I was impressed by the Manawaka world and I initially noticed its female protagonists, her white heroines expressing the girlfriend/ wife, mother or daughter's worries and experiences as if they were every woman's dilemmas, if we ignore the temporal and spatial framework. Due to their prominence these powerful heroines have already given rise to numerous analyses, from various perspectives and with varied conclusions.

On the other hand, I read afterwards Laurence's African fiction, and then her non-fiction, discovering the wider context of the author's concerns. Therefore, I chose a different path for my research, not only the white female protagonists present in Manawaka, but also the racial, ethnic and class representations included in all her writings. I discovered a new Margaret Laurence! I fell in love with her "humanism" (a concept used by Fulton), with her genuine concern for people, with her courage to be outspoken and finally with her characters that create an impressive world.

Margaret Laurence's Manawaka cycle, consisting of four novels and a short-story collection – *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), *A Bird in the House* (1970) and *The Diviners* (1974) – is considered to set an example of what “Canadian-based and gender-inclusive material” should mean [17, ix]. Laurence's imaginary Manawaka is not only set in the Canadian prairie, or populated by strong female characters, above all, it is represented by Metis, Scots, Irish, Ukrainians, Germans, Greeks, Asians, and Jews, all these protagonists being commonly considered “the most neglected and forgotten among us” [6, viii].

For this article, the literary corpus is limited to one ethnic group, i.e. the characters of Ukrainian origin. Following in detail the Manawaka cycle, we can compose an almost complete portrait of the Kazliks, the Ukrainian family: Nick and his parents are cast in *A Jest of God*, with references to his dead twin brother, while his younger sister Julie appears in *The Diviners*. This time it cannot be argued anymore, at least in Nick case, that he is a secondary character, since he represents the main counter-part of the heroine Rachel Cameron. In addition, the Ukrainians are as numerous as the Scots, “[h]alf the town is Scots descent and the other half is Ukrainian” [13, 71], but as the author remarks the relationship between these two communities was like mixing oil and water.

The first thing we can remark is that the small prairie town is a strictly hierarchically organised society and in terms of class, Manawaka is spatially delimited on several layers. “At your end of town”, says Nick Kazlik to Rachel Cameron in *A Jest of God*, is the area inhabited by white, rich people, of British origin. This part of the town is characterized by “cement sidewalks”, “quiet dark brick houses”, “timber houses”, “new bungalows”, “known as a good part of town” [13, 17] as River Street houses the religious establishments, the school, the respectable shops, the Queen Victoria Hotel, the BA Garage or the Flamingo Dance Hall.

In contrast, there is “The Other Side of the Tracks” or Hill Street where “those who had not and never would make good” [14, 24] lived. This is “where the shacks are and where the weeds are let grow knee-high and not dutifully mown, and where a few bootleggers drive new Chevrolets on the strength of home-made red biddy” [13, 17]. That is the realm of *the other*: “remittance men... Drunks. People perpetually on relief. Occasional labourers... flops, washouts and general no-goods” [14, 24].

The third layer is the river valley, where the Metis family resides, the Tonnerre's "collection of shacks" [14, 111], their accumulation of useless staff around the place, reminding of "nuisance grounds", the waste dump of the town.

Last but not least, there are the farms and the "homestead[s] in the valley outside town" [11, 39], safely placed at a distance, where the Kazliks live, "about three miles out of town" [13, 107].

By means of the re-encounter between Rachel Cameron and Nick Kazlik, both young adults now, the author brings two of these communities together. Rachel, the narrator of *A Jest of God*, is firstly struck by Nick's different physical features, already catalogued as belonging to far away places. "He is about the same height as myself. Not thickly built, really, but with the solidity of heavy bones. Straight hair, black. Eyes rather Slavic, slightly slanted" [13, 68]. The meeting brings back memories which initiate a journey to the past and the European continent.

Of Scottish origin, hence a representative of the white British-descendants, Rachel remembers that her mother did not care about the origins of other kids, making terrible geographical mistakes. The Ukrainians were neglectable, "related to the verb 'to marginalize'" [1, 135], therefore, ignored, rejected, misunderstood. Rachel reiterates her mother's words:

Mother used to say, "Don't play with those Galician youngsters." How odd that seems now. They weren't Galicians – they were Ukrainian, but that didn't trouble my mother. She said Galician or Bohunk. So did I, I suppose. She needn't have worried. They were rawboned kids whose scorn was almost tangible. They would never have wanted to play with us. [13, 69]

Whether they are from Spain or Portugal (i.e. Galician) or an unknown country from Eastern Europe (i.e. Bohunk) is irrelevant to the dominant Scottish Presbyterian tradition, characterised by "repressive notions of respectability, its concern for appearances, its fear of anything that is not 'nice' or tidy or normal" [4, 187]. Gunilla Florby or Kenneth James Hughes discuss the characteristics of "a system dominated by class power and bourgeois rationality", which keeps "in a subordinate position" "the passionate barbarian hordes" [9, 116], in this case the Ukrainians. Particularly, the first generation of immigrants is still very much rooted in their homeland traditions, especially if they are the inheritors of the British imperial values. Laurence depicts the Scots and Irish people, displaying a settler attitude towards the other ethnic groups. As Rachel puts it, Scots "knew how to be almightier than anyone but God" [13, 71], acting accordingly to the detriment of the other communities.

Compared to their ancestors, the second generation of Canadians, Rachel's and indirectly, Laurence's, does not associate itself with any other home, than the Canadian territory. As Laurence herself confessed, "where I belonged, [was] namely the land where I was born" [12, 158]. Interestingly, this is not only valid for those with British roots, but it is the stage of settlement of all the immigrants' children who were born in Canada. The New World has accommodated its citizens, Nick being a High School teacher in the city, while Rachel only teaches Grade Two, "the milkman's son" vs. "the undertaker's daughter" [13, 73], one of the author's most fascinating ironies.

According to Dennis Cooley, Margaret Laurence "opposes what is foreign and what is native, what is imposed and what is discovered, what is artificial and what is natural" [Cooley qtd. in 4, 173]. This can be translated in a certain dialogue between Rachel and Nick about the perceptions of one ethnic group of the other. Rachel confesses that as a kid, she had projected her own image of *the other* and "envied Ukrainians" [13, 93] for what she thought they were like: "always seemed more resistant ... and more free" [13, 93], "[n]ot so boxed-in... [m]ore outspoken. More able to speak out." [13, 94].

Consequently, the Scots' life style is perceived as "imposed", "artificial", imported to the New World, and taken for granted without any kind of adaptation to the life conditions here. While this could be valid to a certain extent for all the old generations, for the young ones to set themselves free, they have to go beyond the stage of stereotyping the unknown, projecting "standardized images of the other" [2, 429], "pictures in our heads" [Lippmann qtd. in 2, 429], and to finally accept them as they are. As if to create confusion, Nick himself encourages some of the common biases, mentioning "Laying girls and doing Slavic dances" [13, 94], or owning a samovar brought here all the way from the old continent, or the passion for vodka, which Nick's grandparents might have resorted to "to make the trip endurable" [13, 111-12] on the immigrant ship. As we will see below, Nick is not a representative of Ukrainian values, therefore, not a genuine voice, but a master of ironic meanings, according to David Heinimann. One of the challenges of my approach is that the critics do not analyse these characters as part of the ethnic or racial group they belong to. Nick Kazlik is just a young man, not a Ukrainian.

Nick needs to come to terms with himself and the New World he lives in. Kenneth James Hughes is the only one who confirms my arguments, connecting ethnicity to identity, or rather search for an identity. Troubled by the fact that he has given up his past and that he wants to start life anew, away from the Ukrainian

tradition and from the stifling small town, the young man is at a loss. His first reaction is to reject “as an embarrassment the Ukrainian family and culture into which he was born” [9, 118].

But, while Rachel imagined Ukrainians had a careless life, what Nick used to experience as a child, was an unconscious search for roots, for a “neutral place” [13, 92], “that it wasn’t the town...and it wasn’t the farm” [13, 93], somewhere to make him feel he belonged to, a “neutral territory ... Some place that was neither one side nor the other” [13, 93], hence, the need to construct “a workable definition of home” [15, 224]. Although he does not know “what’s natural and what’s unnatural” [13, 92], Nick still experiences the settlers’ struggle for a “need to establish the authenticity of their daily experience and cultural milieu” [Rowland Smith qtd. in 15, 224]. Of course, there are other explanations for Nick’s search for identity that I am not going to discuss here, but it should be briefly mentioned that Nick had lost a twin brother, a fact whose psychological consequences I have thoroughly interpreted in previous papers.

In contrast to Nick, a citizen of the New World, with no roots and no strings attached (at least in his relation to Rachel), Margaret Laurence depicts his parents, as people with roots in another world. They not only represent the past, but they also stand for a life style that Nick simply disagrees with.

Old age makes his father confuse his sons, although Nick believes this is done on purpose, and being constantly remembered of his dead brother becomes a painful experience. On the other hand, there is a fragile relationship between father and son, fuelled also by the implications of the journey to the New World. The fact that his children did not want to learn Ukrainian was a great disappointment to Nestor, but he would not let it show, because, in Nick’s words he had “this gargantuan faith in himself, and I don’t know even yet if it’s real or just some kind of barricade” [13, 95]. Probably not even realising, he was protecting himself from failure, at the same time, putting himself “at a great disadvantage” [13, 95] to the children’s ability to learn foreign languages, believing that “not even the Queen speaks better English than he does” [13, 95]. Nestor cannot accept that he lost a country, a language, and a son, who died of poliomyelitis, but also lost Nick who chose the city to the detriment of the farm life.

Rachel’s memories of the past bring a different Nestor Kazlik to the fore as “a big man, a great bear of a man, with a moustache thick as an untrimmed hedge” [13, 75], with a “great bellowing voice”, getting “emotional” [13, 94] with the horses of his wagon or sleigh, “difficult, eccentric, even a giant buffoon”, “Nestor the Jester” [13, 195]. Of course, the pictures get slightly different connotations

when his own son mentions how he is ashamed of his father's stubbornness to accept change, to resort to technology or to have a different behaviour. Nestor had barely given up the wagon for a truck, and refuses to buy another car. He has got one single employee and expects Nick to decide to remain and help with the farm work. But Nick feels betrayed and manipulated by his father's "fantastic way he has, of creating the world in his own image" [13, 148]. He is isolated from the world, same as his son, which is characteristic to the whole Ukrainian community. As Hughes concludes, they represent "all the ethnic minorities in Canada in the first half or more of the twentieth century" [9, 119].

Nick is the only one who speaks about his mother, as Rachel had not met her. The fact that "she believes in omens" [13, 151] makes her belong to a timeless past, but in her son's eyes, because "she is not eccentric like my old man" [13, 151] makes up for her interpretations, for her belief in "something magical... given by heaven to mothers like her, the devout" [13, 151]. Although Nick takes her side, she is just a housewife, who does not probably dare to ask Betty Friedan's question "Is this all?" [5, 11] at the end of the day, but who as proud as any other woman of her generation "wouldn't give you fifty cents for these women who park their kids and go to work" [13, 151].

Laurence's characters represent in a microcosm, the bigger picture of the whole world. Hughes associates Rachel's liberation movement from "the middle-class emphasis on mind" (Hughes 116), from racism, from alienation and submission, to Canada's "seeking to free itself from an authoritarian colonial past" in order "to make its own future" (119). To a certain extent, this can be extrapolated to Nick's case, as all the former young inhabitants of Manawaka are trying to build a future, away from the prairie town, irrespective of their ethnic belonging. Julie Kazlik, the youngest of the family, appears in *The Diviners*, as a friend of the protagonist Morag Gunn. Both Julie and Nick attempt to gain their independence from the family and to find their home, which becomes the city.

In conclusion, trying to summarise the entire picture of the society the author frames, we can notice that the traditional society still tries to imprint "the process of social reproduction" (Hughes 116) on its inheritors, i.e. the Camerons on their daughters, in particular. At least at the level of the first immigrants, the pattern is reproduced over and over again.

In my opinion, this is Laurence's way to connect Canada and Europe, present and past in order to find a better future. Her life and writing (both fictional and non-fictional) remind to the ones who have forgotten that "[w]e stand in need of our gods, and we need links with our ancestors" [10, 16], that "[o]ur task is not

to reject the past but to assimilate it”, to find “our place of belonging on this planet” [10, 19]. And this place is Canada, an ethnic mosaic, which accommodates people irrespective of nationality, religion, class, ethnicity, race or gender, her fictional people and places having the power to forge an identity.

Paraphrasing Kristjana Gunnars, Laurence is neither lecturing at us, nor sentimental in her depictions of people and places, but subtly noticing the world around her and demonstrating her literary credo, i.e. to portray “individual characters as faithfully as I am able to do” [10, 15].

I would not like either to be judgemental in my analyses, my intention being to shed a new light on Laurence’s writing. I consider that Laurence’s work in general and in this case, the Manawaka cycle can be considered “multivoiced” [8, 7] in including the perspective of the marginalised: the woman, the lower class, the Metis, the ethnic minority, at the same time presenting a complex image of the Canadian society of the 1960s and ‘70s, without overlooking the wilderness landscape (in her case the prairie), the patriarchal and traditional rural or the frightening and potentially dangerous urban.

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