

THE GEOGRAPHY OF OLD AGE, GUILT AND SECLUSION IN HENNING MANKELL'S *ITALIAN SHOES*

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Abstract

We set out to analyze the interferences of the setting of the story and geography with the main character's feelings at the dusk of his life, as he is haunted in his old age by a sense of futility and depression. By geography we mean, on the one hand, the actual relief, atmospheric phenomena and surrounding natural environment and elements, as well as, on the other hand, the inhabited space, familiar objects and even beings (as in his pets, a cat and dog), which tend to mirror his inner life, thoughts and feelings in perfect conjunction. The main character-narrator uses these to convey messages related to how he is and his situation. When he is lost for words, he still seems to have a way of expressing himself with landscape imagery (in the broad sense of the concept of a "landscape", as pointed out above), and in this specific manner of expression he is never lost for either words or metaphors – on the contrary, he masters transmission particularly well.

Keywords: old age, geography, trauma, mental and physical landscapes

JEL Classification: Z10

1. Introduction

Fredrik Welin is an old-age, retired surgeon who lives by himself on a small Swedish island. One day, he sees through his binoculars his youth sweetheart, Harriet (whom he abandoned) appearing on the ice, helping herself with a metal frame, obviously making for his house. She convinces him to take her to a place in the forest, a pond that he promised her that they would visit (but never got to fulfil the promise). As they go there, he realizes that what the old lady really wants is to introduce him to their daughter, Louise, who lives in a trailer in the woods. After spending a few days with them, Fredrik leaves and then gets the urge to visit a patient of his, whom he maimed for life by amputating her healthy arm in an operation. Her name is Agnes Klarström, and her home is a shelter for troubled adolescents. Fredrik spends some time with her too, apologizing for his deed and relieving a guilt that has in fact haunted him for a very long time, also realizing, surprisingly for him, that she does not hate him. Upon returning to the island, he receives an unannounced visit from Sima, one of the teenagers from Agnes' shelter, who commits suicide under his very roof, dying

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despite the doctor's efforts to save her. Later, Harriet, who is terminally ill, comes with Louise to spend her final days with Welin, having as a last request the organization of a party the day of the summer solstice. After her death, Welin, who in the meantime finds out he has a heart condition that gives him the prospect of just a few more years of life, is visited by Agnes, and then by Louise, and contemplates the possibility of leaving the house to his daughter, but also accommodating there Agnes' shelter (as the latter has run out of funds to keep it up at her place).

The paper investigates the way the landscape and surroundings, understood as both the natural environment and elements and inhabited space and objects, reflect the protagonist's thoughts, feelings and attitude to life. These mark his estrangement, self-imposed, embraced strandedness, guilt for his medical mistake and sadness. The study dedicates its sections to obvious, great symbols that are part of the geography of the space, such as the ice and island, or the forest and pond, as well as to the interior space of the house and workplace, and then some relevant symbolical objects that constitute spatial metaphors, like the anthill, Rembrandt's 1642 painting *The Night Watch*, or Caravaggio's paintings and person, shoes, the boat or the sea. We try to explain their meanings and connotations in the context of the story and of Welin's life narrative, showing that they help us understand the protagonist better, carrying and putting forth information on him in an indirect way.

2. The natural landscape and ice

First of all, the main character, a reputed, retired surgeon, lives on a *self-imposed exile, on his own on an island* in the Swedish north archipelago, and, what is more, under extremely harsh conditions. The few inhabitants of the region are old as he is, but at least they are not sole inhabitants of one given island, but tend to stick together, even though density of the population is obviously low – seven people in total, with only one of them below sixty. Just as if to make matters more difficult for himself, he has gone quite to the far end of the place, closer to the open sea. If he climbs the hill behind his house, he can see the smaller islands, which are less hospitable, around and in front, whereas behind him there are the bigger and more welcoming ones inland; the land is barren, covered with ice and water, with cliffs appearing above the surface from place to place, and there is no other house in the area. Also, he has limited his interactions with other people to the one with his postman, and has forbidden him to bring him publicity mail, which has made *their* encounters rarer as well. Just to complete the dim picture, the winter described is harder than the regular ones. Isolation is obviously hinted at from the very beginning through the absurd point of his living by himself on the whole island, and the harsh weather conditions. However, isolation is not explainable merely by the trend statistically noticed as naturally accompanying old age, which signals a decrease in social engagement once people advance into their senior years even in healthy individuals with no mobility impairments (Agahi, Lennartsson, Kareholt, Shaw, 2013). It is a conscious choice made out of some kind of masochistic, self-punishment drive, an idea for which we are thrown various hints in the text.

It is the island where his grandfather was born. This means that the character's homecoming in the senior, final years of his life resembles a kind of return to the roots as a desperate attempt to find there and retrieve some of the meaning that may have

guided him in his childhood and adult life, previous to the traumatic event that changed his perspective on living. In this sense, his move is like a foraging for a lost trove of a treasure – except that it means foraging into ice and wilderness, in a lonely place, in which sense it also points to the futility of his existence and attempt, pushing him and us farther from positive outlooks. As a movement backwards, it also constitutes *a kind of regression in the psychological and philosophical sense*, of going back to the origins, to innocence and to a point where one can be soothed and start over.

When we say that he refers to what he is and experiences through landscape, we really mean it *at the level of the five senses*. There is imagery connected with the tactile – the sensation of cold on the outside which pairs the cold within, the two colds making him feel as if he is being under siege from two sides, and managing to resist nonetheless (Mankell, 2013: 11). Then, there is the idea of a human being spying on what he does, described, visually, as a black silhouette against the white environment (*ibidem*). It is interesting that the presence of life is depicted with the black color, whereas white is attributed to the absence of it, which could be an early, extremely subtle sign of the way in which humans, i.e. the social, i.e. company, i.e. a soothing element would nevertheless be perceived by Welin as negative – since black as a color has this connotation. In other words, the character is aware that human presence is, on principle, desirable and healthy, but he nonetheless refuses it for himself, which explains the ambiguity of assigning it the black color (a shade usually bearing negative overtones). What this means is that he is perhaps punishing himself for something and is in reality burdened by some kind of guilt. Which, as we shall soon find out, he is. The singing of the ice, along with the strange noises in his house – which are initially put down to mice scurrying, making their way under the wood planks or in the walls, as well as to the house timbers squeaking and creaking as a general state of affairs because of the weather conditions – only fill in the auditory bits of the picture. This singing of the ice is also a reminder of his childhood and of a manner of describing the movement of the ice layer on water resorted to by his grandfather – so a painful memory of loss after all, which unconsciously adds to his depression.

There is the very strong image of his habit of plunging in the freezing water naked every day which, besides providing another powerful element related to the sense of touch, shows once more that he may be prone to chastising himself for an error yet unknown to us. Every morning, he goes out on the ice, without any clothes on, cuts a hole in it and plunges into the deep freeze, so that, when he gets out, the frozen air outside seems scalding. At the age of 66, this ritual seems rather unusual, not to mention risky and painful. There is a reunion of hints that send us to a desire to atone for some mistake, which makes this tradition of his acquire the spiritual overtones of both self-chastisement and self-disciplining of the body and senses. It is also a survival technique, as the character confesses himself: he jumps into the black hole as a reconfirmation that he is still alive, as well as to shake out loneliness (*ibidem*: 14). Shock fights the numbness of depression, getting the adrenaline pumping and changing the hormone chemical balance. It is a self-induced shock and pain, as in shock therapy, a leap into darkness trying to jolt the mind out of its dark place of its own. The tactic is both healthy – in a rather radical way – and sad, a manifestation of both trauma and the desire to be cured from it. Taking into account the risk, which is obviously present, given that he is no longer young by far – the gesture is, besides all

the above, a death wish as well. Hence, the harshness of the environment is starting to make sense by being in harmony with the harshness of the character's state of mind and strategies of both exposure and survival.

The *ice is a powerful symbol at more levels*. The first cue for it is that it gives the title of the first of the four parts of the novel. We have seen it as a means to test and achieve survival. Also, from what we have said so far, before that, we may infer that it is a mirror of the loneliness and cold inside. Moreover, there are also the significations that can be derived from the character's regression to it, which makes it, on the one hand, a safe place of his most innocent years of life in his childhood, so a kind of magic realm of potentialities where the lost meaning of life can still be found and retrieved. On the other hand, ice and its whiteness may suggest a sort of *tabula rasa* or uncharted land from where he can write a new story that may perhaps lead him to a different ending than the disaster he has lived. In this ice land, he is looking to make a different imprint that would hopefully lead him to a better place, detouring from the same life path, choosing another course, in the hope of avoiding tragedy. An argument in favor of this perhaps unconscious drive of his, and interpretation of ours, is the way in which he remembers not only scenes from his early life, but also, specifically, the moment when he chose his future job and career – that of a surgeon, which also put him on the track of his fatal mistake, i.e. the wrongly amputated hand. Taken by his father to a restaurant for the first time on his 15th anniversary, and seeing the glimmer of hopelessness in his eyes while he was trying to find out what his son liked to do and what could be a potential future livelihood for him, young Fredrik decides then and there that he will be a surgeon, with absolutely no prior thoughts or preferences for this. This memory is haunting him now because he realizes that it was the exact moment when he made the choice that has led him to where he is now and to his fatal error. Of course, it did not actually predict the error, but the character's trauma makes him assess all possibilities and look for pushed connections and forced causalities.

We need to notice that the ice has the power to create signals at the level of all senses. It creates an obvious visual element, as it is the main material forming the physical environment. Unavoidably, it represents an ambivalently welcoming and adverse home. It is what everyone sees, together with water – its liquid form, for miles on end. Then, it is responsible for the sensation of freezing cold – both on the outside, literally, but on the inside as well, symbolically. As the character plunges into the hole dug in it every day, it even creates an oxymoron-like sensation, of both extreme cold and extreme heat – so it is able to activate the senses with opposite but radically intense thrills. Ice can “sing”, making noises that wake Fredrik up at night, loud enough to determine him to leave his bed and check what he has heard, walking, all the more, for almost a mile to ascertain the phenomenon. It is not a pleasant sound, but described as a sinister choir of strange voices (*ibidem*). The ice “singing” is part of the childhood lore around the region, as the character's grandfather was the one that first mentioned to him about this. Last but not least, ice provides the feeling of movement, as it literally creates a dynamic by floating on the more or less calm or restless sea. An explanation is supplied in this area, as where it is thicker than thirty centimeters the movement, and, hence, the “singing”/creaking should not be felt or, respectively, heard. To mention one additional suggestive detail, the ice moves up and down, suggesting the ups and downs of life itself.

Linguistically, from the start, the text tends to isolate one sentence every now and then, a fragment that pinpoints a relevant idea or image. The first one in the novel is at the very beginning and refers to the metaphorical cold inside being intensified by the one outside, and greater when the actual physical cold is stronger. The second comes a few paragraphs later, still in Chapter I, and is about the ice being there to stay. So, ice is a constant in the landscape of the “today” of the narrative, which is comparable to old age itself, as well as to the protagonist’s depression, but it is also an ambiguous symbol, carrying all the significations that we have mentioned above.

3. Houses – the inhabited spaces

Fredrik Welin’s current abode is *described in terms of what it was supposed to be initially, and what it has come to be*. Fredrik imagined it, at the beginning, as his summer retreat or cottage, a holiday house. However, what it has actually ended up being is his “final redoubt” and arranged as a “fortress” that is impenetrable (*ibidem*: 15).

We have seen above that all sorts of sounds accompany Fredrik’s existence in the house, especially squeaky and creaky ones, made by materials reacting to the extreme weather. The *house seems to become an old organism itself*, the contracting of its wood due to differences in temperature making us liken it to the bone cracking and non-functioning joints of an old person – especially since the protagonist mentions his grandparents reaching a time in their old days when they could no longer move and just sat all day, awaiting their deaths.

The pets that function as accessories of his current home and as sole companions to him are also old, just like him. The cat is old and can no longer move that gracefully, being a bit stiff. His dog is completely deaf in his right ear as well as half deaf in his left one – which is why he cannot hear the sounds of the house and the singing of the ice.

The *description of the space of his childhood home and how his family inhabited it shows the emotional separation of its members and the division existing between them*. His mother, who used to cry all day because of their poverty and inability to make ends meet out of his father’s waiter’s wages, locked herself in the bedroom, keeping her husband away from her both physically and emotionally. Her strong imprint on the space of the bedroom could be sensed in the way in which it acquired a special smell, of tears mixed with lavender which was her signature, like a core of her personality that ended up defining her. Fredrik’s father used to explain to him that he could not have a brother or sister because his mother refused to let her husband get close to her, being upset about their financial situation. Hence, the man slept on the kitchen floor, while the child slept on a couch in the same room. This *setup of frontiers* that could not be breached secluded the two males in the kitchen, which was also normally the father’s workplace space, so the punishment was filled with ironical meaning: the man’s inability to produce more money in the culinary domain was made a constant reminder by locking him to those particular familiar surroundings. Nevertheless, there existed a space of escape for him, represented by his collection of tin soldiers and the reenactment, with the help of the figurines, of the contexts of some famous historical military clashes. These fantasy spaces showed an attempt to regain some of the lost innocence of playfulness as well as exercise the control that the man lacked in his daily existence. The father used to lose some jobs in the gastronomical

domain because of an attempt to set up another kind of boundaries and delimitations, this time metaphorical, healthy ones, of taking only day shifts and refusing the nighttime ones in order to have a family life and to preserve his dignity. However, on various occasions, this type of borders finally caught up with him and backfired.

Also, his gift to his son on the adolescent's fifteenth birthday introduces the two of them as clients in *the space of a restaurant*. Throughout this scene, the father places them on the other side of the relationship customer-employee or served-serving person, breaching the limit and crossing or upgrading to the higher power position. He goes towards an empowered state, even though only temporarily, taking his son along with him, as a reward, treat and compensation for a grim reality.

The *boat shed in his old age retirement home is improvised into a doctor's surgery* or office, as it is filled with specific medical instruments, such as a stethoscope and a blood pressure meter; even the bench on the pontoon functions as an examination bed for Jansson. This makeshift space is a reminder of Fredrik's previous life, but also professional guilt, being a thread to both his existence before the exile and his mistake. Also, the very idea of a surrogate space symbolically points to a surrogate life, to not truly living, but rather accepting life as a burden, which Fredrik does because of his guilt.

4. Spatial metaphors

There are images functioning as spatial metaphors for the way in which the character feels about his life – the dark area that enwraps him and that is not caused by either old age or his status – since he is careful to tell us that he enjoys good health and a good financial standing after retirement – but by a certain event that was negative enough to have determined him to think of suicide, and bring about feelings of anger and despair. One of these images is that of *every human being's life being as if (s)he were hanging from a tree branch*, bearing the certainty of the only possible outcome – that eventually they are going to fall – but nevertheless hanging on for as long as they can (*ibidem*: 12). This image is linguistically supported by various phrases that refer to someone metaphorically clinging on to life, such as not losing one's grip (the one in the English translation of the text), but also others: holding on, holding up, not letting go, hanging on, hanging in or hanging in there etc. (Ammer, 2013).

Another image, symbolical of a self-made man, resorts to spatial elements as well. The protagonist likens the way he managed to raise from poverty to *clambering or crawling out of a pit* (Mankell, 2013: 13).

Fredrik has the habit of noticing and writing down specific data, mentioning *exact figures* related to various aspects of his life. For instance, he tells us that he is sixty-six, his blood pressure is 15/9, his pulse is "64 beats per minute" (*ibidem*: 13). Also, the ice is thirty centimeters in the golf area (*ibidem*: 12), the thermometer outside indicates minus nineteen degrees Celsius (*ibidem*: 14). The postman's father is ninety-seven years old, the father and son have had a fight in 1970 and have not talked to each other ever since (*ibidem*: 23), Jansson's mother's father died in 1920. The protagonist has been keeping a diary for twelve years, with daily entries of just a few lines about mundane things like the type of birds that can be seen one particular day through the window, and his health; even though he knows it is futile to do that, that nobody will ever be interested in reading it and that it is the diary of a life that has lost its meaning, he does it nevertheless (*ibidem*: 24). This accuracy in his expression is proof of an

attempt to map and chart his life, to make sense of, and order his existence. The unnecessary exactness in data shows a need to compensate for the lack of control and meaning that he actually feels he has become prey of. A suitable metaphor for his situation may be that his life is as if floating without knowing the destination, and bringing figures into the picture is like using a compass, finding the coordinates for his position and destination.

Apparently, Fredrik works on a puzzle of Rembrandt's 1642 *The Night Watch*, to which he manages to add only one or a few pieces a day, as it is complex and a bit dark. A work of art, the respective canvass, is a space in itself, and the puzzle of it is a representation of a representation of the world, a fragmented space that requires (re)composition, in a manner as true-to-life as possible. This puzzle is another metaphor for the effort of recomposing the meaning of his shattered existence. When we look into details related to the painting as such, we realize that there are other aspects that make it symbolical with respect to the protagonist's life.

Rembrandt has portrayed the guardsmen of the city of Amsterdam, a militia force of musketeers led by Captain Banning Cocq, who were supposed to be highly esteemed and reputable characters, but who are nonetheless depicted in a less noble, dignified manner, given their postures, the surrounding hurly-burly, and the woman carrying a dead chicken at her waist – a pun on the Captain's name and at the same time an image that could be interpreted as a mix of banter and a hidden threat. To highlight this subversiveness of the painting and the potential revolt that it may have triggered from the part of the authorities, Güner refers to the imagined reaction upon it being shown to the public and the officials, as presented in Alexander Korda's 1936 film *Rembrandt*, where the viewers ask, in "pompous indignation", whether that was "serious art" and how come that gentlemen "of rank and position" are painted in such an unserious manner (Güner, 2019). The commotion that happens in the very presence of the civil officers – another absurdity and an ironical tinge – is made apparent in the bigger, original painting, which was cut on all sides in 1715, "2ft from the top, 2ft from the left, and inches from the right and bottom": "Here a frisky dog barks; a drummer beats his big drum, readying to keep time with the marching guards; a boy is seen at the furthest edge to the left, looking back as he runs off carrying a gunpowder horn; a guard tinkers with the muzzle of his musket; behind the richly attired captain, another guard accidentally fires his musket, its smoke mixing with the white plume on the lieutenant's tall hat (a comical near miss, and an actionable offence). Further to the right, a guard examines the barrel of his musket." (*ibidem*) Another element of irony is the girl's chicken, a *figura* for the emblem of the division's coat of arms; as Güner points out, "why a chicken and not an eagle", the choice of fowl already constituting an offence; moreover, the chicken is dead (*ibidem*). A relatively recent study, using the technique called a "calcium map" of the painting, discovered Rembrandt's initial sketch, visible underneath the current version, in which there were more spears, a sword between the Captain and his aid, and feathers to one of the militiamen's helmet (Boffey, 2021). These elements, being specific to battlefield, could have made the image and the characters more imposing, adding to their gravity and seriousness. Their removal could point to the same alleged intention of providing a satirical rather than accurate impression of them, making the soldiers more cumbersome and clumsy. All these elements that represent irony and subversiveness may mirror the character

Fredrik's mute revolt and subversive attitude towards life itself, the way in which it can turn into a masquerade, something less serious and dignified.

The fact that the painting has been cut, probably to fit on a wall on display, which was a rather common practice in those times, but nowadays may look as appalling hooliganism, given that it is art, may be a metaphor for the act of cutting involved by the character's occupation of a surgeon, on the one hand, but also, on the other, for the concept of maiming. Maiming, or absurd destruction, just as the one undergone by Rembrandt's masterpiece, is what has happened to the patient that had had the wrong arm amputated, having as outcome the additional figurative maiming of the surgeon's life. Also, the quality of the painting being affected by time and layers upon layers of dust that have darkened and smudged it can be equated, symbolically, with Fredrik's life having become, because of his tragedy and trauma, both darker, i.e. sadder, and unclear, i.e. losing its meaning.

The way the space of a painting is revelatory for how a character feels in real life becomes a leitmotif, as, later on in the novel, Louise, Fredrik's long-lost daughter, will confess to him how she feels about the painter *Caravaggio and his works*. The genius' topics are almost always filled with a striking dramatism, and he has a special relationship with movement, being able to render it very vividly, along with the characters' turmoil. Also, according to Fredrik, his dark colors and strokes show, in his masterpieces, the painter's fury and fear, the way he was a misfit. Hence, the artist's life struggles are transposed on the canvas. Moreover, Louise feels her own unrest and sense of being different represented in the paintings' subjects, thus she resonates with their atmosphere. That is why she says that she feels there is always room for her to get immersed in one scene or the other, as if she belonged in them and could feel in synchronicity with what happens in them.

The *anthill* in one of Fredrik's rooms is an exotic and unusual element to be hosted in a home, let alone one in an arctic-cold environment. Tall as the table placed in the center of the room, it has engulfed a part of the tablecloth in it. There are various ways in which we could interpret its presence. Given its dimensions, it is obviously something that cannot be ignored, much according to the phrase referring to the "elephant in a room", i.e. something that is big and strange enough to be impossible to overlook or disregard – perhaps a representation of the life-changing event in the character's case. The anthill keeps growing as well – in other words, it is an accumulation, a build-up, paralleling that of both tension and other feelings, such as guilt, the impossibility to overcome trauma or make sense of reality, or find purpose. The anthill, in this respect, is the blockage that Fredrik is suffering from, but with which he has learnt to live. In this perspective, his attitude to it, and to the environment he leads his life in, and with which he has made peace and found a harmonious coexistence reflects being in synchronicity with nature, not feeling the need to dominate it, but rather achieving balance with its elements, an attitude named *outer-directedness* in intercultural theory (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997: 141). Given the color of the anthill, and the fact that it is ultimately earth, it is also a symbolical tomb, figuratively pointing to all the characters' proximity to death, to the moment when they will be engulfed and embraced by earth. In support of this interpretation, there is Fredrik's dream about Harriet being covered up by earth, as well as the protagonist's obsessive, recurrent thought about the envelopment of a person,

especially an old woman (who possesses, in his opinion, an uncanny beauty), by the earth as in an embrace – an idea that occurs to him for the first time as he finds an elderly lady, Sara Larson, dead in her cottage, where he and Harriet are led by the lady's lost spaniel. At the end of the novel, he moves the anthill outside, which is the relief of the symbolical burden of all his blockages at the emotional level, which he has managed to resolve, mostly. The gesture means that he can finally separate and detach himself from these.

Fredrik's *compulsive need to pry in other people's private spaces* or belongings is a tell of his need to gain leverage by getting access to secrets, which is psychologically, ultimately, a need for control. He searches Harriet's bag (both in their youth and now, as she visits him), read his dying mother's letters to an intimate friend instead of burning them as required, reads his girlfriends' diaries and intrudes into his doctor colleagues' offices, even checking their wallets. This disregard for boundaries is indeed exposing their vulnerabilities and weaknesses, making him feel more powerful, but also, perhaps, less lonely in his own vulnerability.

Shoes seem to be quite a relevant complex symbol. Shoes are spaces in themselves, where one's feet need to enter, and where shapes need to fit together. They are mentioned a few times, in different contexts of his life, until Harriet is the one pinpointing the idea, when her long-lost friend remembers something she told him some time before – that shoes are like life itself, they sometimes do not fit exactly, so one needs to either break them in or adjust to them (Mankell, 2013: 92). Fredrik Welin's father said that a waiter needed a good pair of shoes in order to be able to do his job properly. Remembering this, he checks the hotel waitress' shoes by force of habit, as a result of the emphasis put on them by his father.

Harriet used to work in a shop mending shoes as a regular occupation in her youth. While apprenticing in Rome, later on in her life, for an elderly artistic manufacturer, she likens his effort to match the character of the wearer to the care with which Stradivarius made his violins (*ibidem*: 76). Also, her manager believed that feet have their own personality, reflecting that of the user, and shoes in their turn suggest it according to the way in which they have been worn, which is an indication of the character traits of their owner. As examples, a ballerina had "arrogant" feet that did not take their shoes seriously, and a Hungarian businessman had feet that treated the shoes "tenderly" (*ibidem*). The fact that Harriet knew her shoes and how to make, handle and repair them, transforms her, symbolically, into a potential life-forging force or agent, which she could have been for Fredrik, shaping his life, or their life together, if only he had let her and not run away. His leaving her suggests missing out on a – better? – life variant or course.

In the novel, objects are used to stand for various realities as symbols. For instance, there is a *boat* in Fredrik's shed, which needs fixing, but which he has left there unattended for years, covered with a tarpaulin. After he makes the acquaintance of his daughter, then his patient, Agnes, and subsequent to Sima's visit, he will finally start repairing the boat. He compares the object with his own person, saying that, just like him, it is unused and never mended, and the reason why he does not know what to do with it is that he does not know what to do with himself (*ibidem*: 237). Finally, the boat becomes a funeral pyre, as Harriet's remains are incinerated in it. This very end is symbolical itself. The now-mended boat, which can be understood to stand for Fredrik

metonymically – i.e. is a “concept” metonymy, in which there is “a shift from Concept A to Concept B” (Feng, 2017: 443) – is sacrificed and finds its own end next to Harriet, just as Fredrik as a human being has finally managed to heal emotionally, at least in part as a result of his contact with his youth sweetheart, and at the same time a part of him dies and vanishes together with her.

Some time after his dog dies, he *digs up the animal's grave*, wondering if this means that he is ready to open up a metaphorical grave from inside him (Mankell, 2013: 275). *The Baltic Sea* is a symbol as well, for Fredrik himself, for the situation he is living, and ultimately for death itself, as it is an endangered space that is getting annulled progressively, day by day, by being filled up with material waste. As Fredrik puts it, it is getting choked towards its extinction by algae and mud, which is what he gets in the fishnet, along with dead fish, instead of something alive. Sima dies while trying to get closer to Russia by crossing the sea, and Harriet comes here to die listening to the sea rather than to cars honking in the city (*ibidem*: 278).

5. The forest and the pond

The forest pond is the destination of Fredrik and Harriet's journey, made in order to fulfil an old promise that he had made to her before running away, and which she asks him to keep as a last wish before dying. It is also the place where his father took him when he was only a 10-year-old child, as a father-son bonding activity. For the first time, he then saw his father's manly body completely naked, swimming in the cold water, which both brought them closer and was intimidating, raising a barrier between the boy who watched from the bank the grown man enjoying the swim, something that made him understand right then and there how different they were by the way in which they related to and perceived this activity. Young Fredrik felt debilitated and somehow threatened by the father's manliness and carefree attitude. Going back there, then, is about coming to terms with the trauma of inferiority and inadequacy that he felt in relationship with his father, as well as that of an unfulfilled promise and abandonment performed on his girlfriend from later. Moreover, the gesture of making up for a mistake is given high importance and significance by Harriet as well. She tells him that if he could never give her a ring, he could at least take her to see the pond, as if the two gestures somehow had an equal standing (*ibidem*: 93). The roundness of the two objects also makes them similar, as well as sends to the idea that they resemble closed spaces or alternative worlds. Which they do, as both the ring and the pond provide an exit into another reality – of marriage and, respectively, freedom and coming-of-age through which a boy is similar to a man, equally naked and free, annulling thus the boundaries between age and status (where the father has the upper hand). For Harriet now, the pond is also an escape from the cruel reality of old age and terminal illness, a return to a state of youth, hopefulness, companionship and happiness.

The *special or magical quality of the place* is suggested from the very beginning by some details provided in the text. First, through the words of a homely forester, who wonders why they would go to such lengths to see such an insignificant lake, as there are many others just like it, and it would not save a dying person from death anyway, our attention is driven towards, on the one hand, the absurdity of the elderly couple's endeavor, and, on the other, whether it may actually be special enough to make a

change in anything. Additionally, as the characters literally advance towards it after having actually found it, it is likened to a holy place – Fredrik compares it to a church altar. Moreover, as they finally reach the place, some events, which appear to be bizarre coincidences, or filled with hidden connotations as to how the universe may work meaningfully, take place right away, in rapid succession, in an uncanny manner.

Fredrik walks on the frozen water and, noticing a darker space, gets closer, realizing only too late that it is a spot where the ice layer is thinner, which makes him fall through the cracked surface. With the whole weight of his wet clothes on, he almost drowns, but is miraculously saved by Harriet, who extends her metal walking frame and manages, against all odds, to pull him out. Then, they stay naked under a blanket on the back seat of the car, as Fredrik remembered young people used to do in his youth, a lot of illegitimate babies resulting hence. Ironically, with respect to secretly born babies, the reason why he was slyly dragged by Harriet in the woods was not primarily to visit the pond, but to introduce him to their daughter, Louise, who lives in a trailer in the heart of the woods, where they spend a few days as a surrogate family, bickering and acting as if they had known one another all their lives.

What we may say about the forest with its pond is that this space is an almost magical one, as it provides, in a condensed manner, a means to live compensatory experiences that tend to seemingly karmically restore a kind of balance for the characters involved. The way the protagonist almost dies seems an atonement for his sins; the time spent naked under the blanket with his young-age sweetheart is the belated fulfilment of an old fantasy, but also an omen for the newly-found daughter, as in this way a lot of babies were conceived; the hours spent together with the two women constitute an unexpected, perhaps undeserved gift, a second chance, but also give him a taste of what he has been missing out on. The three of them sleep in the same small bed, moreover, with Louise initially wanting to stay naked under the covers, which symbolically points to a kind of forced, sudden and advanced intimacy, into which the protagonist is forced – a both humorous and tormenting situation given his issues with intimacy and desire for distance and isolation. His daughter takes after him and is just as eccentric as he is: she wears expensive shoes in the snow in the middle of nowhere on a regular basis, while living in a tin box, has peculiar friends, who organize boxing matches for fun, writes letters urging country leaders and prominent figures to take responsibility for the poverty and other misfortunes of their citizens, and has a lot of money although she apparently has no other occupation. Also, she knows Giaconelli Mateotti, a genius shoemaker who has worked for important personalities, who makes just a couple of pairs per year and lives a simple life away from the hassle of the city. Louise's gift to her father is a pair of shoes from Mateotti, and, on their visit to him, the elderly gentleman spends a few hours measuring Fredrik's feet in all sorts of strange manners – standing, sitting in an armchair, drawing his outline with the pencil kept at a certain angle, telling him once he has finished that the pair will be ready in a year, as he has to complete two or three other orders beforehand. Louise's ideas on shoes resemble Harriet's, as well as Fredrik's father's – she mentions how an opera singer can perform better in an adequate pair. According to Giaconelli, good shoes are supposed to make people forget that they have feet. This metaphorically suggests, if we remember the parallel between shoes and life, made earlier in the story, that when one is well-adjusted or placed, i.e. integrated, in one's

life, life does not feel like a burden, it is similar to the space of the shoes, i.e. one fits perfectly in it and does not feel encroached, uncomfortable or tightened in.

The trip to the magical place of the forest pond unblocks something in Fredrik, as he is, for the first time, up to searching for the woman whose wrong arm he amputated. It is as if Harriet's visit and his availability for taking her to the forest has triggered the ability to move, to become dynamic, to cross limits, not only physically but also mentally and emotionally, setting some things right and moving on – again literally and figuratively. In this respect, the spaces of the forest and pond function as transformational and compensatory ones. Just as he moves from a frozen world to a greener, populated one, his psychology and emotions get thawed and malleable again, suffering alterations.

6. Conclusions

The environment mainly mirrors, besides the aspects that we have mentioned related to his state of mind, Fredrik Welin's inability to manifest himself emotionally, to experience attachment and warmth towards another human being. When the summer progressively sets in – along with the notion that it is, strangely and abnormally, one of the hottest in years – the character experiences a metaphorical de-thawing of his barriers and crosses some invisible, self-imposed lines, being able to relate, connect to, and empathize with the others, overcoming his fear of intimacy and being able to put himself at risk emotionally. He manages to take action and do some gestures that used to be unconceivable to him: he stays with his family in the tight space of a trailer for a few days, confronts his guilt and worse fear by visiting the person whose life he believes he has ruined or at least altered for the worst forever, allows Jansson in his house and other people to get closer to him by having the party, receives a long line of women under his roof (Harriet, Louise, Sima, Agnes), has the courage and foolishness to burn Harriet's remains in the boat, giving her an unconventional, Viking-like funeral, despite the obviously illegal nature of the deed, only for the sake of a romanticism, sentimentality and poetry that characterizes it.

This method of using elements from the environment to render other realities regarding the character is effective because it is more lyrical, and because it displays in material, concrete and more numerous tangible objects – and thus more clearly and visibly – something invisible and difficult to explain.

We also notice that the progression of feeling and the evolution of the character on the personal plane are mirrored by a dynamic of the environmental elements as well. The stasis of the surroundings at the beginning is replaced by them becoming active, and not only as the logical outcome of the moving of, for instance, seasons. It is not just that they change, but the changes are rapid, dramatical and unexpected, illustrating those taking place internally, in the protagonist. Additionally, there is a passage from cold, hard-fact illustration between the protagonist and what is around him, to a sort of exchange between the two, a relationship of some kind, in which he influences and is influenced by the environment, in which he genuinely interacts with it, operating modifications on it and being modified by it. In the final words of the book, Fredrik acknowledges his progress and describes it as having come very far, even though not farther than a certain point (*ibidem*: 377).

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