Negotiating Loss and Otherness in Margaret Laurence’s “The Loons”

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1 “The Loons” belongs to Margaret Laurence’s story-sequence *A Bird in the House* which is built around the character Vanessa MacLeod and her growing-up years in the fictional town of Manawaka, Manitoba. Following on from the collection’s title story which has the death of Vanessa’s father as its central event, “The Loons” is set in a time prior to the father’s death and is the first of three stories which deal with Vanessa’s progressive opening up to the world around her and her increasing awareness of the suffering, poverty and forms of oppression outside of her family circle (Stovel 92). More specifically, “The Loons” gives us Vanessa’s perception of a young girl called Piquette Tonnerre who is of Métis descent and who accumulates the social disadvantages of poverty, illness, ethnic discrimination and being female.

2 The story has been taken to task for the questionable values attached to its use of Piquette as the stereotype of the doomed minority figure, most notably by Tracy Ware who asks: “To what extent [does this short story] confirm a debased master narrative that regards Natives as victims of a triumphant white civilization?” (71). At the same time, Ware recognizes the “enduring sense of [the] aesthetic merit” (71) of this story which so clearly has its place within the canon of Canadian literature. Evaluating the text against its depiction of the Métis can only lead to the negative conclusions that Ware arrives at, namely, that Laurence’s “The Loons” falls ideologically short of the expectations of today’s politically-conscious reader.

3 What this reading of “The Loons” does not take into account is that the “aesthetic merit” of the story is situated elsewhere—not in the portrait or role of Piquette as such, but in the story’s treatment of loss and in the central role of the father in the symbolics of this particular knot of meaning. In the context of the full story-sequence, loss and the father would seem more naturally associated in “A Bird in the House,” where the death of the father is the central event. In “The Loons,” the death of the father is recalled and reactivated as an informing event related to other moments in Vanessa’s life and to her relationship to others, Piquette bearing the weight of this role as ‘other’.
On one level—that of Vanessa’s childhood perception of Piquette—the story is about incomprehension, misconstruction, defensiveness and the impossibility of communication between the two girls. But the entire history of this failed relationship is revisited through the narrating voice of the adult Vanessa; in the telling of the story, she reshapes past events through the experience of loss provoked by her father’s death and invests them with symbolic value. Like the dreamer and the dream, Vanessa’s story is more about Vanessa than about those around her; it is her attempt to fit her own sense of loss into a world which is, more than she knows, beyond her.

The father’s role in giving Vanessa access to symbolic values is central to the story; indeed, the first ‘event’ in the story is the father’s announcement of his concern (as a doctor) for the health of the young Piquette, who is in his care. After having prepared the ground briefly, he asks his wife: “Beth, I was thinking—what about taking her up to Diamond Lake with us this summer? A couple of months rest would give that bone a much better chance” (110). This act of social generosity, which is to involve his whole family, introduces the reader to the father’s values; it also inaugurates the continuing association in the text between the father and Piquette. The father is a reference point for Piquette; she invokes him to justify her refusal to accompany Vanessa on a short walk: “Your dad said I ain’t supposed to do no more walking than I got to” (113), and in later years, Piquette tells Vanessa, “Your dad was the only person in Manawaka that ever done anything good to me” (116). This positive assessment of the father is the only shared ground between the girls. In response to the comment above, Vanessa “nodded speechlessly [...] certain that [Piquette] was speaking the truth” (116).

In the name of her love for her father, Vanessa will make several attempts at approaching Piquette: these attempts are regularly met with rejection, leading to a moment of hurt for Vanessa:

‘Want to come and play?’
Piquette looked at me with a sudden flash of scorn.
‘I ain’t a kid,’ she said.
Wounded, I stamped angrily away [...]. (112)

This pattern recurs twice on the following page, with Piquette’s “scorn” taking on other forms—“Her voice was distant” (113); “her large dark unsmiling eyes” (113)—and her refusals becoming more verbally aggressive: “You nuts or somethin’?” (113); “Who gives a good goddamn?” (114).

The impossibility of sharing between the girls is seen both from the perspective of the child Vanessa, who is mystified, “wondering what I could have said wrong” (113), and from the more experienced perspective offered by the narrated construction of events. This double vision allows the reader to see the misperceptions and involuntary insensitivity on which Vanessa’s attempts at communication are based. Where Vanessa fantasizes Piquette into “a real Indian” (112) and projects onto her the knowledge of the ‘secrets’ of nature, Piquette lives her identity as a Métis through the social rejection which characterizes Manawaka’s view of her family:

‘I bet you know a lot about the woods and all that, eh?’ I began respectfully.

[...]
‘I don’t know what in hell you’re talkin’ about,’ she replied. [...] If you mean where my old man, and me, and all them live, you better shut up, by Jesus, you hear?’ (113)

While the child cannot understand the defensiveness of Piquette, as readers, our knowledge of Piquette’s social conditions, outlined in the opening paragraphs of the story, leads us to a position of empathy with the offended girl. Similar effects are
produced by Vanessa’s enthusiasm about her summer cottage, —“I love it,’ I said. ‘We come here every summer,’” (113)—expressed in the face of Piquette’s poverty, which habitually excludes her from the world of lakeside summer homes. Just as much as Piquette’s social disadvantages, Vanessa’s self-absorbed immersion in the comforts of middle-class Manawaka is the source of the girls’ mutual wariness.

As the narrator of the story, the older version of Vanessa puts forward expressions of regret at the failure of the relationship between herself as a child, and Piquette. This regret, however, is not distinct from childhood, but a part of it, recounted in the past tense: “Piquette and I remained ill at ease with one another. I felt I had somehow failed my father, but I did not know what was the matter, nor why she would not or could not respond” (115). The linguistic markers “somehow” and “did not know” suggest that the emotional experience of failure remained confusing for the child, but the ability to formulate this metadiscourse indicates that things have become clearer to the adult Vanessa. This acquired comprehension allows the narrator to develop the expression of failure once again, two pages further on, including, this time, more details about the possible expectations of the father:

Yet I felt no real warmth towards her—I only felt that I ought to, because of that distant summer and because my father had hoped she would be company for me, or perhaps that I would be for her, but it had not happened that way. (117)

Through the voice of the more experienced Vanessa, the regret of the past is understood to have been intimately related to a sense of having failed not herself, nor Piquette, but her father. The focus is on the father’s symbolic role in attributing potential value to the possibility of their friendship.

Along with the father’s generosity towards Piquette, a series of other values related to the father are offered in the short story. The father’s name, MacLeod, is also the name which designates the family cottage (111), which itself is associated with nature and authenticity: it is the father who comes and sits by the lake with Vanessa to listen to the loons (114); the lake, the nighttime, the loons, all come to signify intuitive communication (“we waited, without speaking”), mystery and transcendence (“They rose like phantom birds”), a reproach to human civilization (“Plaintive, and yet with a quality of chilling mockery, those voices belonged to a world separated by aeons from our neat world of summer cottages and the lighted lamps of home”) (114).

The idea that the loons belong to a separate world is reinforced by the father’s comment that the loons had been there “before any person ever set foot here” (114). The loons are both a form of access to the continuum of natural time as opposed to civilized time, and a reminder that man cannot bridge that gap; there is therefore a form of retrospective loss attached to the image of the loons: the imagined loss of what came before and is now inaccessible. However, the birds also prefigure future loss—the enduring presence of the loons is endangered, as Vanessa tells Piquette:

My dad says we should listen and try to remember how they sound, because in a few years when more cottages are built at Diamond Lake and more people come in, the loons will go away. (114)

We can also see the metonymic association between this loss and the approaching end of the permanence of Vanessa’s world; her father, associated with the loons in Vanessa’s childhood, is soon to disappear: “Neither of us suspected that this would be the last time we would ever sit here together on the shore, listening” (115). The symbolic charge of the loss of the loons is therefore great for Vanessa, but meaningless to young Piquette, who, on learning of the precarious situation of the birds, says: “Who
gives a good goddamn?” (114). For Piquette, they are literally, “a bunch of squawkin’ birds” (115).

Meaning is to do with symbolic construction and “The Loons”, for all of its focus on Piquette, is about Vanessa’s construction of personal meaning. Coral Ann Howells notes that Vanessa’s choosing to write about Piquette is a way of “silently displacing her own feelings into [Piquette’s] story” (41). This process is clearest in the paragraph which announces the father’s death:

That winter my father died of pneumonia, after less than a week’s illness. For some time I saw nothing around me, being completely immersed in my own pain and my mother’s. When I looked outward once more, I scarcely noticed that Piquette Tonnerre was no longer at school. (115)

The words which tell of the loss of the father are almost immediately followed by words which tell of the disappearance of Piquette. This is given in the form of a negation: “I scarcely noticed...,” but what the young Vanessa had “scarcely noticed,” the narrating Vanessa gives weight to by placing it in verbal proximity to the death of the father, obliquely associating the two events. Through indirection, therefore, Vanessa speaks of her own loss. But the process is not entirely parasitic; in the telling, she also constructs Piquette.

Piquette is, in some ways, a difficult character for today’s reader to take on board: like Pique, the daughter of Morag Gunn in the final Manawaka story, “The Diviners”, she “suffers from the weight of too much thematic relevance” (Howells 51) since, as I noted earlier, she accumulates an extraordinary number of handicaps, all of which are seen to be indirectly related to her Métis origins. In spite of the older Vanessa’s gentle mocking of her earlier self in her desire to ‘naturalize’ Piquette into a folkloric Indian, the story does imply that part of Piquette’s tragedy is that, like the loons, she belongs to a more ‘authentic’ heritage which has been/is being destroyed.

The romanticism which the narrating voice mocks is nonetheless supported by the story’s symbolism, as is the attempt to fix Piquette into a sterile, stereotyped role of ‘representativity,’ something that Piquette’s direct discourse has violently rejected.

Yet, we do have access to a more tenacious Piquette; in her silences, rejections, and refusals, she is a character who is fighting for her own survival in a world clearly divided along class lines and this tenacity is seen principally in her rejection of Vanessa’s self-satisfaction. Vanessa’s sense of superiority over Piquette is implicit in the narrator’s comments about the Métis girl’s invisibility to her younger self; at that time, Piquette was but “a vaguely embarrassing presence” who “moved somewhere within my scope of vision” (109). Moreover, Piquette can drop out of sight for years without notice: “I do not remember seeing her at all until four years later” (115). It would seem to be the total separateness of their social worlds that creates and sustains what might be experienced as a ‘lack of affinity’. Whereas these social differences remain unformulated to the child Vanessa, they are close to the surface for Piquette whose discourse refuses to endorse the smugness of the well-off Vanessa:

‘Do you like this place,’ I asked [...]
Piquette shrugged. ‘It’s okay. Good as anywhere.’
‘I love it,’ I said, ‘We come here every summer.’
‘So what?’ (113)

Other details suggest a Piquette who has dreams of her own, but who cannot allow herself to expose them to others: “When she saw me approaching, her hand squashed flat the sand castle she had been building, and she looked at me sullenly, without
speaking” (113). For Piquette, the child Vanessa is a potential enemy, someone to guard oneself against. Dreams cannot be shared, and cannot even be envisaged within the society of which Vanessa is a part.

Indeed, even in her later teenage years, Piquette holds no hope of improvement for herself within the confines of small-town Manawaka: “Boy, you couldn’t catch me stayin’ here. I don’ give a shit about this place. It stinks” (116). Piquette knows that Manawaka holds nothing for her in the sense that no one there believes in her chances for a better future. When she becomes engaged to be married, she remarks that, “All the bitches an’ biddies in this town will sure be surprised” (117). The implication that the town gossips have nothing good to say about Piquette is underscored by Vanessa’s own reactions. On seeing Piquette several years after the summer at the cottage, Vanessa is “repelled” and “embarrassed” by her, and although she is “ashamed” at her own attitude, she gives way to an emphatic outpouring of animosity towards the teenage girl:

I could not help despising the self-pity in her voice. I wished she would go away. I did not want to see her. I did not know what to say to her. It seemed that we had nothing to say to one another. (117)

The force of this expression suggests a negative identification with Piquette on Vanessa’s part. It is as if Piquette represents the photo negative of Vanessa’s life; the result of poverty, illness, and lack of education made flesh and standing there as a threat to the integrity of Vanessa’s identity as a middle-class, reasonably well-educated girl with a future. There is no indication in the story that Vanessa ever overcomes this violent rejection of Piquette during the Métis girl’s lifetime.

This moment of intense emotional confrontation is followed by what may be seen as the story’s signature moment:

For the merest instant, then, I saw her. I really did see her, for the first and only time in all the years we had both lived in the same town. Her defiant face, momentarily, became unguarded and unmasked, and in her eyes there was a terrifying hope. (117)

These last two words encapsulate the relative positions of the two girls. Where Piquette ‘reveals’ her most guarded treasure—hope, arguably the most positive emotion which exists, Vanessa reproduces the condemning judgement of the town; with the word “terrifying,” she declares this hope to be without any ground. It is therefore coherent with Vanessa’s view of Piquette’s life that the Métis woman should be left as a single mother, follow in the drunken path of her father, and finally die in a house fire along with her two children. Vanessa’s reaction to this news is, “I did not say anything. As so often with Piquette, there did not seem to be anything to say” (119). It is not that there is ‘nothing to say’ about Piquette, but rather, that what there is to say would involve a questioning of community values which would also have to be a form of self-questioning.

The narrative does not take the direction of a critique of human and social relationships; it deals with the vague sense of guilt expressed by the narrator—“I wished I could put from my memory the look that I had seen once in Piquette’s eyes” (119)—by sublimating Piquette into the symbol (along with the loons) of something lost. The ground is prepared through the falling action of the story which lists the avalanche of losses which Vanessa experiences after having heard about Piquette’s death: “The MacLeod cottage had been sold after my father’s death”; “The small pier which my father had built was gone”; “Diamond Lake had been re-named Lake Wapakata”; and
finally, “I realized that the loons were no longer there” (119). These different elements reinstall the triad of the father, the loons and nature as the paradigm of loss and the narrator then brings Piquette into this sphere of symbolism:

I remember how Piquette had scorned to come along when my father and I sat there and listened to the lake birds. It seemed to me now that in some unconscious and totally unrecognised way, Piquette might have been the only one, after all, who had heard the crying of the loons. (120)

“Piquette,” “father,” “lake,” “birds,” “loons”: all of these words are given a place in the final paragraph. The narrator too, is present amongst these elements, and her place as the one who reconstructs meaning is affirmed: “I remember how [...]”. But it is affirmed, finally, as a process of questioning: in the phrase, “It seemed to me now that in some unconscious and totally unrecognised way,” (where it is uncertain as to whether it is the narrator’s unconscious or Piquette’s which is being invoked), the narrator seems to romanticize Piquette’s Métis status into the ‘natural’ world and confer on her the positive charge of nostalgia related to loss. In this statement of restricted awareness, it would seem that the narrator is trying to resolve the problem of her own position in relation to Piquette; the irreconcilable distinction between how she felt towards Piquette and how she felt she should have felt, if only for her father’s sake.

18 The solution to this is to transform Piquette from the living girl—judged by society, including Vanessa and her mother—as “sullen and gauche and badly dressed,” “a real slattern,” “a mess” (118), into a symbol: a young girl, representative of an oppressed minority, with a tragic destiny, doomed to die. In this form, the loss of Piquette can be associated with both the death of the father and the disappearance of the loons; the desire to bring Piquette into this association suggests an unresolved sense of guilt—towards the girl character, on the level of the diegesis, but also towards the Métis people, whose “long silence” (108) is echoed in the “quiet all around me” experienced by Vanessa (119) as she becomes aware of the disappearance of the loons. Silenced by death, Piquette’s ‘otherness’ can be neutralized and romanticized into nostalgia.

19 The contradictions which structure “The Loons” give the story its force. In spite of the control of the adult narrator in the choice and ordering of memory, there is no attempt to beautify the emotions of her childhood self. The limited, often egocentric aspects of her childhood perspective are rendered, so that the reader’s sympathy goes out towards the other girl, Piquette. This construction of perspective may be seen as a form of generosity, whereby, in spite of Vanessa’s statement that “there was nothing to say,” the narrator’s rendering of the past has allowed the reader to achieve an awareness of Piquette’s specificity as a character: she has moved from the general sense of absence which characterizes her in Vanessa’s memory, to a form of visibility in which the reader may see her as the victim of multiple vectors of oppression; in this context, her ‘defiance’ and ‘sullenness’ become the marks of a fighting spirit, and her ‘hope,’ the sign of her humanity. Through these effects constructed by the narrating voice, the earlier generosity of the father is ultimately echoed and loss takes on its complex human dimension.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. I am grateful to my colleagues in Besançon who participated in a discussion on “The Loons.”
2. See Vauthier (96-99) for a detailed analysis of Vanessa’s function as narrator (based on the short story “To Set Our House in Order,” but equally valid here).
3. Indeed, Tracy Ware argues that the association of Piquette with nature, on the basis of her Métis origins, “den[ies] Piquette her full humanity, [and it also] makes a tragic outcome inevitable. We will never be able to imagine a future for people whom we regard as separate[d] from us ‘by aeons’” (80).
4. Margery Fee’s comment, quoted in Ware, that “Native people [...] are so rarely depicted as individuals, because they must bear the burden of the Other—of representing all that the modern person has lost” (Ware 82), seems relevant to the construction of Piquette as a character who comes to bear the symbolic weight of the very idea of loss.
5. Ware declares that this symbol is “a misrecognition because it ignores the historical struggles of both Natives and Métis” (79).

ABSTRACTS

Je me propose ici d’étudier l’impact symbolique de la disparition du père dans “The Loons”, une nouvelle de Margaret Laurence. Au niveau de l’intrigue, l’histoire est celle d’une amitié impossible entre la narratrice, Vanessa, fille de médecin, et une jeune métisse, Piquette, soignée par le père de Vanessa. Les différences de niveau social, d’éducation et d’origine ethnique créent une incompréhension fondamentale entre les deux filles et vont à l’échec les tentatives de Vanessa de sympathiser avec Piquette. Cet insuccès attriste Vanessa ; elle pense avoir déçu son père qui espérait que le sort de sa jeune patiente serait adouci par le contact avec sa famille. Devant son incapacité à transformer la réalité et le remords qu’elle en éprouve, la narratrice transforme son souvenir de Piquette, l’exclue, en symbole. Ce symbole se développe autour d’un
noyau d’éléments sémantiques associés à l’authenticité, la nature, et la nostalgie du passé ; des concepts valorisés par le père, et qui, pour la narratrice sont liés au sentiment de perte occasionné par sa mort

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