

SUNSHINE SKETCHES OF A LITTLE TOWN – SILENCE SPEAKS THE LOUDEST IN STEPHEN LEACOCK’S REPRESENTATION OF IDENTITY IN THE TRADITIONAL CANADIAN TOWN.

Acknowledging the lack of cultural identity in Leacock’s ‘supposed’ triumph, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* and how this reflects the reality of life within Canadian literature.

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Abstract

The focus of this article centres around the novel by Stephen Leacock, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*. Despite receiving global recognition for being a Canadian literary classic, analysis of Leacock’s text uncovers the limitations of cultural appropriation and representation within the novel, masked by the silence of the narrator and ignorance of its characters. This perceived triumph of literature excludes individual and Indigenous voices, suppressing and masking the flaws that lurk beneath Mariposa’s perfection. The article analyses three main concepts: cultural representation, the motif of silence and the lack of Indigenous voice within the novel, addressing Leacock’s failure to represent all aspects and individuals that collectively define Canada and its complex identity. Ignorance held against Indigenous heritage, when analysed, uncovers a rather harrowing disregard for native Canadian identity, Indigenous history, and individual voice. Therefore, this article argues against praising Leacock’s novel and suggests that he be criticised for neglecting Indigenous and native influence on traditional Canadian culture.

Written in 1912, Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* is often considered to be a renowned classic in Canadian literature. Praised for its humorous tone and insightful representation of small-town life, the novel explores the quaint beauty and satirical comedy used by Leacock as a device to write his own experiences of life into the fictional setting of Mariposa and its residents. However, admiration and respect given to, what some might call, a canonical Canadian text, cannot overshadow the glaringly obvious exclusion of Indigenous culture and representation. Leacock's series of stories in chapter-form illustrates the quaint, everyday life of townsfolk and their endeavours. But in a novel so central to Canadian literary history, one must question the reasoning behind the lack of Indigenous cultural representation.

Canadian culture is recognised globally for being one of the most diverse. In its extensive form, culture is largely dominated by a combination of British, French, and American. However, it must be understood that those currently dominant within society do not represent the traditional culture present before the country's European colonisation in the sixteenth-century. It would be unfair to suggest that Leacock does not depict culture within the novel, when it is clearly a focus of

his work. However, a lack of acknowledgement for traditional cultures in particular, emphasises an ignorance towards Canadian heritage. Critic Margret MacMillan highlights that Mariposa's 'people are of British stock' and that this contributes to 'the book's charm for readers outside Canada.' This may have indeed been what Leacock was trying to achieve - association between international readership and the small-town inclusive lifestyle represented through Mariposa and its people.¹ Alternatively, it could be argued that MacMillan presents a deep-rooted issue with the narrowminded disregard for alternative culture in the twentieth century. Similarly, Davi Gonçalves argues against the light-hearted praise of *Sunshine Sketches*. He suggests that the Canadian identity portrayed in the novel is flawed, ultimately it 'does not stand for a fixed entity' and instead leads to 'problematizing the idea of a concrete national identity.'² Although it is said that 'in Mariposa practically everybody belongs to the Knights of Pythias just as they do to everything else',³ Gonçalves reveals that this is not the case. In fact, Mariposa can be interpreted as a suffocating and intrusive place where 'Everybody is in everything' (p.33) and unruly judgement of others is held right at the heart of the small town.⁴ The pride of its residents

¹ Margret MacMillan, 'A Nation in a Town', Maclean's; Toronto, 122.10/11, (March 2009), 40-41 (p.40).

² Davi Gonçalves, 'Time, Literature, and Translation: a shared cosmopolitanism', *Ci & Tróp. Recife*, 42.2, (2018), 13-28 (p.19).

³ Stephen Leacock, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, (Middlesex: The Echo Library, 2006), p.33. (Further references in parenthesis).

⁴ Gonçalves, 'Time, Literature, and Translation', (p.19).

stems mainly from a collective inability to accept and embrace change. An example of this being Smith's Parisian café, which was opened solely for financial gain and stability. It was supported by the town through the gossip behind its opening, only to then be dismissed as soon as it had served its purpose. Although this seems like an insignificant factor in the novel, Leacock's reference to the French language, which was 'encouraged' (p.18) if it assisted individual profit, highlights the ignorance towards embracing migrant identity on a cultural level. As soon as the café closed, the 'use of the French language, as such, fell off tremendously' (p.21), implying the fragility of alternative culture in Mariposa and, without native knowledge, its community's unwillingness to learn, accept and support cultural change. 'Through Leacock's particular usage of irony', incorporated with themes of heritage and identity, Gonçalves explains that 'he has not only reflected the disconcerting history of Canadian colonialization and neo-colonisation, but also originally shaped it in a way of his own.'⁵

Furthermore, the lack of cultural acknowledgement brings into question how *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town's* interpretation of silence concerns readers in Leacock's text. It is the unspoken that must be addressed when understanding MacMillan's

suggestion that 'there is a darker side to life and more below the surface in Mariposa than first appears'.⁶ Throughout the stories in the novel, Leacock addresses readers directly; this humorous technique allows the reader to feel a certain inclusion in the quirky and exaggerated narrative that encompasses Mariposa. However, critic Jason Blake points out that it is 'sometimes reasonable to speak of 'appropriation through absence',⁷ as the presence of the unspoken builds to a point of discomfort for readers who understand that Leacock is blatantly choosing to ignore the more ominous reality of life in twentieth-century Canada. Furthermore, MacMillan divulges that there is 'no poverty and no crime. Disagreements over politics never result in permanent rifts' which suggests that the reliability of our narrator should be questioned. It is doubtful that within a town as small as Mariposa there would not be societal tension or discomfort, however this is not accurately represented through Leacock's narrative.⁸ Instead, concealment within the town prevents a truthful narrative, as 'secret benefactions, the kind of giving done by stealth of which not a soul in town knew anything' (p.15) is flippantly mentioned but quickly disregarded, much like other cryptic references throughout the novel. The fact that Leacock alludes to such a mysterious concept but refuses to explain, enforces curiosity within readers surrounding the omniscience of

⁵ Gonçalves, 'Time, Literature, and Translation', (p.16).

⁶ MacMillan, 'A Nation in a Town', (p.40).

⁷ Jason Blake, 'Appropriation, Absence and the Canadian Studies Classroom', *American Review of Canadian Studies*, 49.2, (2019), 348-359 (p.354).

⁸ MacMillan, 'A Nation in a Town', (p.41).

the narrator. The choice to withhold this knowledge creates a sinister undertone to the novel, leaving interpretation of the potential corruption and unlawful acts that occur within the town, solely up to the reader's imagination. By Leacock permitting the narrator to address the reader's apparent inside knowledge of Mariposa, the portrayed morality of its residents can be questioned, as 'there's a certain- well, you know how sensitive opinion is in a place like Mariposa.' (p.21) This lends itself to the concept of silence and the inability to address the underlying troubles rooted within the town throughout the text. Blake does suggest that 'not being talked about is not harmless, even if absence often stems from an author's benign intention to "write what you know."' However, Leacock's storyteller chooses to withhold the truth from readers and therefore further contributes to the motif of disregard for a balanced narrative, ultimately corrupting the apparent wonderfulness of Mariposa and its people.⁹

The silence that engulfs Leacock's narrative further enforces neglect of the Indigenous voice throughout *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*. The illusion of idyllic twentieth-century Canadian existence in Mariposa fails to acknowledge the presence of the Indigenous community. This oversight on Leacock's part questions social morality in the novel and the flaws of its widely celebrated success for

being an insightful literary representation of twentieth-century Canadian people. Blake questions how a 'quintessential work of Canadian literature' can be praised as such,¹⁰ when it dismisses the narrative of Indigenous heritage. Like the Indian's Island in 'The Marine Excursions of the Knights of Pythias'(p.32), which is not visible in the 'morning mist'(p.32) on the lake, Blake acknowledges the existence of Indigenous people as 'somewhere on the periphery, but only as an absence, as a non-existent collective entity of yore, at best a hazy abstraction.'¹¹ Something which is rarely referred to in the novel. As a result, Indigenous people and tradition become isolated and mimicked. 'Ho, for Indian's Island!'(p.36) alludes to cultural insensitivity and disrespect towards original settlers of the Canadian landscape, seen purely as a source of entertainment for a community that are, rather ironically, supposedly celebrating their country's wealth of culture and identity. The insensitive and patronising description of Indigenous land further reveals Leacock's shocking inability to represent all aspects of Canadian individualism effectively and dutifully. His characters delight over how 'wonderful [it was] the French had found their way through such a pathless wilderness' (p.38), as the island 'covered with trees and tangled vines'(p.39) is inferred to be a treacherously wild and hostile environment. The suggestion of uninhabitability subtly

⁹ Blake, 'Appropriation, Absence and the Canadian Studies', (p.355).

¹⁰ Blake, 'Appropriation, Absence and the Canadian Studies', (p.354).

¹¹ Blake, 'Appropriation, Absence and the Canadian Studies', (p.355).

implies that native Indigenous people must be seen as having animalistic and inhuman qualities in order to live in such a place. Similarly, this parallel of worlds bridged by the sinking Mariposa Belle, constructs a metaphor that presents how broken the town's community truly is. The 'cracks between the timbers...fill[ed] up with cotton waste... [that] must be properly corked'(p.41) symbolises the strain felt as a consequence of Mariposa's barbaric preconceptions and outdated beliefs that burden the harmony of the Canadian landscape. Ignorance ultimately hinders social innovation and cultural growth in the town. The irony of the boat 'suddenly and saucily'(p.41) rising from the 'mud bottom and float[ing]'(p.41), is that with the removal of social discrimination, true Canadian heritage can resurface and assert defiance against cultural silencing. Inhumane suppression of identity is further strengthened by 'side-references and throwaway lines' that reflect Leacock's 'mindset or [...] the limitations of an age[s]' acceptance of linear growth of two cultural identities. Blake suggests that biased presumptions towards the cultural extinction of Indigenous representation from the author is the cause of the silenced native voice.¹² Shockingly, the passing reference to an 'Indian skull they had dug out of the railway embankment'(p.45), disregards the monstrous act of desecrating sacred burial grounds and, as Blake suggests, symbolises the mortality of Indigenous

representation throughout the novel. The limited reference to Indigenous life stems mainly from artifact, bone and the past, therefore enforcing the motif of cultural voicelessness throughout the novel.

To conclude, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* is an insightful portrayal of authorial focus and satire, centred around Canadian life. Despite the praise and respect the novel has received for its classical portrayal of small-town Canadian life, the light-hearted and playful tone of the text is tainted by the untold narrative of underrepresented culture, clear ignorance towards reality, and the shocking disrespect for Indigenous heritage. Although Leacock manages to capture the collectiveness of Canadian culture through the individualism of each character, his exclusion of diversity creates an irony in itself, caused predominantly by the lack of inclusion towards the definition of true Canadian identity in the novel.

¹² Blake, 'Appropriation, Absence and the Canadian Studies', (p.356).

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