

DIVINING EURO-CANDADIAN HISTORY AND ITS BIASES

An article discussing how Margaret Laurence uses her novel *The Diviners* to show the downfalls of teaching the Euro-Canadian perspective of history.

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Abstract

Canada is known as a multicultural country that is viewed as a place of opportunity for anyone, regardless of origin. However, the country has its own dark past that has only recently been addressed. This article will explore the ways in which Margaret Laurence uses her novel, *The Diviners*, to show how the teaching of the Euro-Canadian settler perspective of history leads to ingrained biases and a lack of remorse for Indigenous people, leaving an opening for further suffering and attempted genocide.

Canada prides itself on its inclusivity of different communities. However, in its recent history, there is seemingly a lack of remorse and an indifference to their Indigenous cultures. By analysing the novel, *The Diviners* by Margaret Laurence, published in 1974, as a postcolonial text, this article will discuss how Laurence shows that a teaching of Canada's history from the settler perspective has had a damaging effect on the views of Indigenous people, and how it creates a culture of apathy to their history of suffering, as victims of

colonialism. This article will also use Laurence's novel to illustrate the importance of always questioning what you are being taught, as well as looking at things from a different perspective.

In her novel, *The Diviners*, Margaret Laurence uses the voice of her main character, Morag Gunn, as a vehicle to portray the ways in which the teaching of a colonial perspective on history causes not only internalised racial opinions, but also an erasure of the history and

suffering of the Indigenous people of Canada. Namely, in this novel, the Métis. Laurence, throughout the first few chapters of the book, lays out to the reader just how easy it is for children to be taught half-truths, and how it can lead to misguided opinions. Prin's dad was described as a remittance man; that he was sent away to Canada with the expectation that he wouldn't come back. Prin describes him as being 'a gentleman, a real one' and that his family was 'pretty mean and all'.¹ A remittance man was a man, usually from an upper- or middle-class family, who had emigrated and was funded by his family on the premise that he would stay away and cease being an embarrassment to the family.² As readers, we are expected to know what a remittance man is, but six-year-old Morag would not. Laurence is able to show how easily adults use their position as points of authority to give only one side of a story, as a way to sway the opinions of someone younger and more intellectually malleable. In this case, it is likely that her father wasn't as much of a gentleman as Prin says.

Laurence further solidifies this idea through Morag's commentary of the neighbour's boy, Vernon: 'He is a drip [...] his nose drips drips drips all the time [...] but he's just a little kid

and it isn't his fault he's a drip. What is Vernon's dad going to *do*?' (Laurence, p. 51). A contrast between the first two sentences and the last two shows how Morag conceptualises what she hears, such as the likelihood that it was her foster parents calling Vernon a drip, and how Morag understands what she is hearing. Plainly Morag only thinking that he is a drip because of his runny nose. The second two sentences, which are obviously not the typical wording of a seven-year-old, are simply a repetition of what she has likely heard being said about Vernon. Laurence shows how Morag chooses to engage in the same genre of thinking that her foster parents employ when it comes to the people around her, even if she doesn't fully comprehend what they are saying.

This plays a larger part in the novel when Jules Tonnerres is introduced. A descendant of the Métis people of Canada, his family is looked down upon by the town because of his heritage. Laurence uses his character in order to further display the notion that children see the world through the lens the adults in their lives give them. When Morag ponders on Jules' family, she thinks how 'people talk about them but they don't talk *to* them. [...]

¹ Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners*, (Toronto: New Canadian Library, 2007), p. 38, subsequent references in parenthesis.

² John Robert Colombo, 'Remittance Man', *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/remittance-man>> [accessed 10 November 2021].

They are dirty and unmentionable’ (Laurence, p.79). The idea that a person or a family who are, not only mixed race, but also Indigenous and are therefore looked down on, is a vision of the colonial mindset and implies that being any of these things is bad and, as Morag says, dirty. Laurence puts this notion in the mind of her readers before she introduces the next scene, in which the class sings the first chorus of the song *The Maple Leaf Forever*, written by Alexander Muir in 1867. The verse which the children sing refers to the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, a conquest of Quebec led by General James Wolfe. The song itself is well known as a song of patriotism, second only to the Canadian national anthem.³ In the novel, Laurence writes that ‘Morag loves this song, she sings it with all her guts’ (Laurence, p.80). Morag, a young, orphaned girl of twelve, is a character who doesn’t feel she fits in with the other children and is often bullied due to her social and class status. However, in the song she is elevated by her ancestry to being on a level with the rest of the children in her class: ‘Thistle is Scots, like her and Christie (others, of course, too, including some stuck-up kids but *her* definitely, and they better not forget it)’ (Laurence, p.80). This feeling of acceptance is a stark contrast to the

next scene, where Morag discovers her classmate, Jules Tonnerre, isn’t singing along to the song, ‘He is not singing now. He comes from nowhere. He isn’t anybody’ (Laurence, p.80). The use of the song exemplifies how a colonial perspective of history is taught in Canadian schools. The Canadian Encyclopaedia claims ‘the song essentially celebrates British military victories in Canada and the manner in which they ostensibly united the country’ (Kallmann, para. 3 of 9), with the conquest of Quebec being a pivotal point in the making of Canada. It’s clear to see that Laurence is showing how prominent the settler perspective is in Canada. Earlier in the novel, Laurence hints at the prevalence of this famous battle and its prominence in Canadian culture by mentioning a copy of the painting by Benjamin West titled *The Death of General Wolfe*, which is hung in Morag’s classroom. After his death in the battle, Irén Annus states that ‘Wolfe [...] instantly became the embodiment of a [...] imperial Britain: its emerging values of nationalism and patriotism, [...] as well as its perceived unlimited potential for the future’.⁴ It is interesting to note how often Wolfe is mentioned, as well as the fact that the scene takes place in an educational setting. Gillian Siddall wrote that

³ Helmut Kallmann, “‘The Maple Leaf Forever’”, *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/the-maple-leaf-for-ever>> [accessed 10 November 2021], (para. 1 of 9), Subsequent references in parenthesis.

⁴ Irén Annus, ‘THE DEATHS OF GENERAL WOLFE’, *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 13.1/2 (2007), 105–19, (p. 106).

‘the significance of this image in the classroom is that it indicates the insidious pervasiveness of colonialism within Canadian culture’.⁵ The use of the song and the painting, added with Jules’ reaction and refusal to sing the song, shows Laurence’s dedication within her text to highlight how a pushing of the colonial perspective of history – in this case only focussing on the battle between two settler camps (the English and the French) – leads to and solidifies a negative view on people who are of Indigenous descent by disregarding them from history taught and presented in the classroom. This lack of representation in the classroom has a negative effect on both Indigenous and non-Indigenous descendants. By not teaching, or even recognising the Indigenous history, Indigenous children experience the erasure of their own culture in an educational setting, potentially causing a fracturing of identity. Similarly, this lack of education of the Indigenous people’s history leaves non-Indigenous children without the knowledge of the different kinds of discrimination, segregation, and abuse the Canadian government inflicted on the Indigenous people.

In keeping with her aim to highlight how prevalent the teaching of only one historical

point of view is, Laurence shows the benefits of questioning the stories we are told. When Christie, Morag’s foster dad, tells the tale of Piper Gunn, he talks about how they sailed from Scotland and settled in Canada. Morag asks whether the settlers killed any of the Indians, to which he replies, with a seeming lack of remorse, ‘did they ever. Slew them in their dozens, girl. In their scores.’ (Laurence, p.98). Christie, a man raised on the colonial perspective, pays no mind whatsoever to the slaughter of the Indigenous people, and appears to see it as not only a normal aspect of the story, but almost as something of a bragging right. It isn’t until Morag asks him if the Indians were bad that he seems to put thought into it, eventually replying ‘They weren’t bad. They were – just there’ (Laurence, p.99). This is the reality of a one-sided education; when the colonial mindset is prioritised, the victims of colonialism will be pushed aside and forgotten. This lack of awareness of the suffering that the Indigenous people went through leads only to more prejudice and racism. Laurence shows us in her novel how easy it is to simply not question what you are taught, both in an educational setting as well as in the stories that are told from generation to generation. Gillian Siddall believes that history is a tool for political oppression, and that a colonising country can

⁵ Gillian Siddall, ‘Teaching Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners* as a Postcolonial Text’, *Canadian*

Children’s Literature, 79 (1995), 39-46, (p. 41), Subsequent references in parenthesis.

produce a historical viewpoint to assert their own narrative (Siddall, p. 39-40). Christie had seen the Scottish settlers of his story as heroes; people who had left their homeland in search of new pastures and had built a successful new life for themselves. Because this view of their ancestors is so glorified, the thought of looking at it from a negative standpoint is not even considered. The mindset that the Indigenous people were 'just there' poses the idea that the white settler lives were more important than the Indigenous. The story Christie is telling is one that has been passed down from generation to generation, showing a carried view that Indigenous lives mean little, creating a culture of apathy. This lack of knowledge on the experiences of Indigenous people breeds indifference to their suffering and genocide, whether it is intentional or not.

This level of apathy can also be seen through the residential schools; government sponsored schools that operated between 1831 and 1996, which took young Indigenous children (usually starting at the age of five) out of their homes and into religious schools in order to assimilate them into Euro-Canadian culture.⁶

⁶ Fred Glover, 'Residential Schools in Canada (Plain-Language Summary)', *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <<https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/residential-schools-in-canada-plain-language-summary>> [accessed 18 November 2021].

They were known to be places of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse. Kevin Hutchings believes that they 'disrupted the lives of thousands of families often becoming sources of multi-generational trauma and suffering. Denying Aboriginal people's moral right to their own forms of cultural knowledge and identity – indeed, not even considering the possibility that such a right could exist'.⁷ It was not until 2008 that the Canadian federal government formally apologised to the residential school survivors, only doing so after the survivors spoke up about the abuse in the 1990's. Laurence shows her readers how easy it is to sway the minds of young people, and how those ingrained biases are often kept well into adulthood, due to a lack of questioning. These biases act as a butterfly effect in a hegemonic view of society. In this case, it is the view of an entire population of people and the idea that, because of a Euro-Canadian view of Indigenous people, they are lesser and should be treated as such.

The Diviners shows the influence of opinions and one-sided history from the very beginning. Laurence uses her characters to champion the

⁷ Kevin Hutchings, 'Cultural Genocide and the First Nations of Upper Canada: Some Romantic-Era Roots of Canada's Residential School System', *European Romantic Review*, 27.3 (2016), 301–8, (p.306).

idea that authority figures should be questioned and that, in a postcolonial world, more attention should be given to the victims of colonialism. Laurence successfully highlights, through her novel, the importance of showing the different perspectives of

history; so as to throw light onto personal biases and ingrained colonial mindsets. Canada is a nation proud of its label as a multicultural country – and it is multicultural – however their past as a colonial country still needs to be addressed.

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