

Teaching Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* as a Postcolonial Text

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Résumé: Cet article propose une lecture du roman *The Diviners* de Margaret Laurence qui privilégie les éléments qui font de ce récit un exemple idéal pour aborder en classe les questions fondamentales du postcolonialisme: la définition de l'identité canadienne dans un milieu multiculturel, la dénonciation des partis pris de l'histoire traditionnelle, la volonté de réviser l'histoire du Canada et l'exploration des liens entre le féminisme, la conscience des classes sociales et l'idéologie postcolonialiste.

Summary: This paper offers a reading of Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* that highlights its potential as a basis for classroom discussions of issues central to postcolonial theory: the definition of Canadian identity in a multicultural classroom; the biases of traditional Canadian history; the movement towards rethinking and rewriting Canadian history; and the links between feminism, class, and postcolonialism. *The Diviners* illustrates the extent to which Canadian history has been fictionalized but has become regarded as truth. The novel re-imagines Canadian history and uses multiple perspectives--and consequently multiple narratives—to create a space for those who have previously been denied creative/political power, namely the Métis, the working classes, and women.

In his essay "Frye Among (Postcolonial) Schoolchildren: The Educated Imagination" (also in this issue), John Willinsky calls for the highschools of Canada to imagine "a world that has moved well beyond the age of empire" (1); that is, Willinsky believes Canadian schools need to acknowledge the historical impact of imperialism on our curricula, and to accommodate the growing multicultural population of Canada. This paper offers a reading of Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* that highlights its potential as a basis for classroom discussions of issues central to postcolonial theory: the definition of Canadian identity in a multicultural classroom; the biases of traditional Canadian history; the movement towards rethinking and rewriting Canadian history; and the links between feminism, class, and postcolonialism.¹

The Diviners emphasizes the extent to which we use the past as a way of understanding the present, a concept that is suggested in Laurence's famous opening line, "The river flowed both ways" (11). The line suggests both that our contemporary culture has been determined by history—that is, the past flows into the present—and that we are constantly revising history from our contemporary perspective—that is, the present flows into the past. The novel presents a complex perspective of time, then, in which the past and the present are inextricably linked and consequently determine each other; this is the conclusion that Morag herself draws at the close of the novel, when she looks again at the river flowing both ways: "Look ahead into the past, and back into the future, until the silence" (477).

On the one hand, this perspective illuminates the extent to which history can

be used as a tool for political oppression; a colonizing country, for example, can produce an historical narrative that asserts that colonization is a “natural” progression of civilization. Much of the standard history of Canada provides just such a narrative. The river metaphor, however, also exposes the constructedness of colonial history and opens the door for telling alternative histories. Laurence embraces that opportunity; she re-imagines Canadian history, to create, through multiple perspectives—and consequently multiple narratives—a space for those who have previously been denied creative/political power, namely the Métis, women, and the working classes. For Laurence, history can be understood only by listening to many stories, not just one.²

The bias of Canadian history and the impact of that bias on contemporary Canadian culture is poignantly illustrated in one of the classroom scenes when Morag is a young girl. The dominance of Anglo/Celtic culture in Manawaka is evident in Morag’s recognition of “The Maple Leaf Forever” as an affirmation of her identity:

Morag loves this song and sings with all her guts. She also knows what the emblems mean. 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). Shamrock is Irish like the Connors and Reillys and them. Rose is English, like Prin, once of a good family. (80)

Suddenly, however, Morag looks over at Jules Tonnerre, a Métis boy in her class, to see if he is singing and with a shock understands why he isn’t: “He has the best voice in the class, and he knows lots of cowboy songs, and dirty songs, and he sometimes sings them after school, walking down the street. He is not singing now. He comes from nowhere. He isn’t anybody” (80).³ Later, Morag learns that in fact Jules’ Métis family has an earlier stake in the land than her own family does, but in terms of the Anglo/Celtic (that is, dominant) version of the past and present, Morag is right: Jules isn’t anybody. None of the emblems represents him; the Métis have been eliminated from the version of Canadian history that gives Morag such a strong sense of identity. Morag’s classroom is a microcosm of the imperialist legacy: the dominant culture is Anglo/Celtic; they sing their identity while the Métis are silent.

Laurence provides another subtle but unmistakable signifier of colonial dominion in this classroom: the copy of “The Death of General Wolfe” hanging on the classroom wall. It would be useful, I think, to show a class studying *The Diviners* a copy of the famous painting by Benjamin West because it provides an apt illustration of the bias of our historical record. The painting is a monument to the success of British dominion over Canada, not only over the French, but also over the Natives, symbolized by the kneeling Native in the painting, who was not, apparently, present at Wolfe’s death.⁴ In fact, the painting has been described by C.P. Stacey as “grotesquely unhistorical” (in Ricou 173), most obviously because of the number of people present at Wolfe’s death in the painting. Most of the figures in the painting are men who, while not present at Wolfe’s actual death, were nonetheless political figures of the time. They are

placed in the scene because of their political importance, but their presence in the painting obviously renders it a less than accurate depiction of the historical occasion of Wolfe's death. Veracity, however, was not the purpose of paintings of this genre. The point of this particular painting is to celebrate a British victory over the French, and the changes that have been made to the historical event are designed to enhance the glory of Britain.

The Native man in the painting plays a purely symbolic artistic and cultural role. Bareskinned and tattooed, he stands in contrast to the richly-robed white men around him. His "savage" appearance provides an "exotic" touch that would appeal to the English viewers of this painting (it was painted for English, not Canadian, consumption). The classic pose of this Native figure signifies the nobility of the "savage." His demeanour, however, is tranquil and even submissive; the way in which the Native man is depicted suggests that any "savagery" has been replaced by unthreatening exoticism.

The significance of this image in the classroom is that it indicates the insidious pervasiveness of colonialism within Canadian culture, and that the narrative of Canadian history that the dominant culture believes to be true is told in a number of ways. Laurence illustrates the extent to which Canadian history is fictionalized but becomes regarded as truth. A study of this painting in conjunction with the novel provides an excellent opportunity to illustrate to students the way historical narratives are produced, and the way in which a painting, like a written document, can be read and analysed as a kind of text. It might also inspire a discussion about signs of colonialism in today's classrooms, or, on the other hand, ways in which today's classrooms have become decolonized.

It is, in part, its challenge to the standard, colonial understanding of Canadian history that makes *The Diviners* a postcolonial text. It openly challenges received histories of the Métis, of Riel, and of Scottish and English settlement. But rather than simply rewriting those histories—in order to make them more accurate—Laurence makes the crucial point that there is no such thing as an accurate historical narrative, because biases are inevitable. Yet, ironically, at the same time as Morag acknowledges the inevitable blurring between fact and fiction, she believes passionately in each individual's need to tell his or her own history. Indeed, the novel is driven by Morag's need to know her own personal history, and she believes it to be linked to the more public history of the Celtic settlement of Canada. The point of *The Diviners* is not to undermine that need to know; indeed, it celebrates the telling of stories and histories. But the novel urges all of us to let go of our assumption that historical narratives are true; it also urges the dominant culture to acknowledge that its own narratives, while providing a sense of individual and cultural identity, also oppress others, and that there are other narratives about Canada besides the ones in the history books.

The point I am making is aptly illustrated by the parallel set of tales told by Christie and Jules about the events leading up to and including the 1885 Rebellion. Christie's tales of Piper Gunn play a crucial role in providing Morag with a sense

of identity, yet her changing responses to those tales illustrate a growing postcolonial sensibility on Morag's part. She learns to negotiate the discrepancies between Christie's version of the suppression of Riel and Jules' version. Eventually she recognizes that even the "real" history she learns in school, like the painting that hangs in her classroom, blurs the boundary between truth and fiction.

Christie tells Morag the stories of Piper Gunn in order to provide her with a sense of identity. Although initially she loves these tales, she begins to question their veracity at a fairly early age. She questions not only the exaggerated details of the stories—"(They walked? A *thousand* miles? They couldn't, Christie.)" (96)—but also the treatment of the Métis:

(Did they fight the halfbreeds and Indians, Christie?)
(Did they ever. Slew them in their dozens, girl. In their scores.)
("Were they bad, the breeds and them?)
What?
*

The story is over. Christie's blue watery eyes look at her, or try to.
"Bad?" He repeats the word as though he is trying to think what it means.
"No," he says at last. "They weren't bad. They were—just there." (97)

Morag's question complicates Christie's simple heroic tales. These grand figures, the underdogs who fought against all odds to re-establish their identity in a new land, and whose blood runs in Morag's veins, killed Métis and Natives because "they were—just there." This event marks the beginning of Morag's growing awareness of the need for multiple perspectives to come to any understanding of the past.

Christie does not stop telling these tales, although he is evidently shaken by Morag's question. Some years later he tells her about the Riel rebellion. This time, rather than being characterized as innocent victims, the Métis are portrayed as "bad guys" opposing the heroic Sutherlands who are simply fighting to regain what is rightfully theirs. Morag as listener is older now and challenges the historical accuracy of Christie's tale, of his claim that it was the Sutherlands, not the army, who routed Riel and his rebels out of the Fort. And she argues that the Métis were only fighting for their own land. Again Christie backs down, suggesting that "maybe the story didn't go quite like I said" (146).

We hear no more tales from Christie. Yet as a grown woman Morag passes these stories on to her daughter. Because we do not hear Morag's version, we cannot know how much she changes them to accommodate the political issues she saw in them as a child. Presumably, since she tells them alongside stories inherited from Jules's family, she comes to believe in them as versions of history which, when told in conjunction with other versions, play an important role in the process of narrative history, of telling what happened. In other words, history as it is represented in this novel consists of a number of narratives, not a single one. We can never say decisively what happened; our obligation as historians is to listen to as many stories of the past as we can and to be sensitive to the different political perspectives of these stories.

At the same time, then, that Laurence mythologizes the Celtic heritage, this “Canadian history,” she revises it, offering an equally compelling set of narratives of Métis history. Like Christie, Jules tells Morag three tales, and he narrates the same historical events as Christie, except, of course, from a very different perspective. Jules’ language is as hyperbolic as Christie’s:

“Okay, so this Rider, eh, he is so goddamn good on a horse he can outride any man on the prairies. They have races, see, and he always wins, him and King of the Lake [his horse]. And Rider’s rifle, now, it’s called *La Petite*, and he’s so good that he can be going full gallop on that stallion, and he never misses a buffalo at one thousand yards or like that. He’s about seven-feet-tall, and wears a big black beard.” (160)

In Jules’s version of Métis history, the roles of good guy and bad guy are reversed. The Métis are the innocent victims, displaced from their land. The Scots are hired guns. Morag challenges the truth of these tales too, claiming, for example, that Riel was not nearly as tall as Jules depicts him.

The similarity of the tales told by Christie and Jules—three heroic narratives in which the heroic action is attributed exclusively to the nationality of the teller—suggests that we all construct our histories according to our own needs. Laurence is challenging not only the accepted “History” of Canada, but also the possibility of determining history at all. Rather than latching on to one story, rather than rewriting *Canadian History*, Laurence provides us with multiple perspectives, all of which are true and not true, just as Morag’s own “memories” of her childhood are true and not true. As Morag writes to her friend Ella about the “inaccuracy” of Jules’ tales, “I like the thought of history and fiction interweaving” (444). The point is that history and fiction are inextricable, and *The Diviners* cautions the dominant culture to loosen its hold on the narratives it has grown up believing to be true, and at the same time urges us all to embrace a plurality of narratives that, in spite of their fictionality, play a crucial role in our sense of ourselves: in the end, Morag embraces both sets of tales and passes them on to her daughter.

In the previous analysis I have pointed out that postcolonial theory foregrounds the extent to which one culture can dominate others by presenting its reality as *the* reality—the result of this domination is that anyone outside that culture—such as the First Nations or non-white Canadians—is disempowered, marginalized. Clearly, these issues relate in a very practical way to a multicultural classroom. One can further point out to students, however, that even members of the dominant culture can be disempowered, and, again, *The Diviners* provides an excellent forum for this kind of discussion. The novel is heavily populated, for example, with women struggling to find their way in a culture that has very clear ideas about what it means to be a woman. There is Eva Winkler, abused by her father, and married to the only man who will take a girl who has broken the moral codes of Manawaka. There is hard-edged Maggie Tefler, Morag’s first landlady, a widow making ends meet by operating a run-down boarding house. There is Julie Kazlick, an old friend from Manawaka whom Morag runs into in Vancouver; she has been in a violent marriage and is entering a loveless one. There

is also Fan, a tragic/comic figure whose moment of triumph is attaining an African python as an addition to her nightclub dancing act, and whose career dies when—still in her early thirties—she grows too old for it. There is Bridie McRaith who is trapped and silent in her domestic role (signified by her name) in a small town. Finally there is Prin, whose full name, Princess, mocks her tenuous social standing in Manawaka. Prin's spiritual and mental disintegration is echoed by her expanding flesh which renders her identity, both physical and spiritual, less and less distinct.

Morag's own life-story chronicles her struggle to escape the kind of life a woman is destined to have in Manawaka. Initially she treads the path of respectability, marrying Brooke Skelton, leaving university and keeping house for him. Suffocated by this lifestyle, Morag falls through the floorboards of respectability when she leaves Brooke to raise another man's daughter and to make her own way in the world as a writer. Through her characterization of Morag and the other women characters, Laurence foregrounds the inescapability of cultural expectations for women. It would be useful to ask students reading this novel to think about the expectations their own culture has for them—how they negotiate cultural constructions of gender roles.⁵

The novel also addresses the divisions of class within the dominant culture, most poignantly through the character of Christie. Characterized by Laurence as the town prophet in his capacity as garbage collector, he divines the dark secrets of the "respectable" households and exposes the inefficacy of class divisions as a way of judging an individual's value. It is years before Morag herself can acknowledge her own discrimination against Christie. Eventually she says to Pique, "He used to wear the same old overalls, always, and that embarrassed me and I used to think he stank of garbage, but now I'm not sure he did and I wonder why I thought it mattered, anyway" (390). Morag goes on to tell Christie's tales to Pique, thereby paying him the greatest tribute she could pay him. Christie's role as one of the diviners in the novel, is to illustrate the artificiality as well as the destructiveness of class divisions.

No one in the novel is seen to be more victimized by contemporary cultural structures, however, than the Métis. Throughout the novel, Laurence foregrounds the continuing racism against the Métis. Jules' anger at the loss of so many of his family members focuses our attention on this racism: Piquette's despair and death after being abandoned by her white husband; Paul's suspicious—but uninvestigated—death on a canoe trip; Val's death after living as a prostitute on the streets of Vancouver; Lazarus' struggle with alcoholism and racism, and the town's refusal for his body to be buried at either of the cemeteries. Jules' own determination to fight the racism that devastated his family is evident in his comment to his daughter, Pique, as she recoils from the tragic lives of her relatives: "'Too many have died,' he says. 'Too many, before it was time. I don't aim to be one of them. And I don't aim for you to be, neither'" (456). But Jules also gives voice to his resistance in his songs. The songs provide an important discourse in the novel, partly because of their content, and partly because of the placement of the "Album" of songs at the end of the novel. The final line of the

novel, “Morag returned to the house, to write the remaining private and fictional words, and to set down her title,” may suggest closure, that all the problems raised by the novel have been resolved, as signified by Morag’s ability to close her own novel. However, this final line comes immediately after Morag’s contemplating the impossibility of determining reality and her recognizing “the necessary doing” of writing, rather than any truth the writing may uncover, as being important. Furthermore, the novel does not end with the end of that chapter. Instead, it closes with the collection of songs by Jules and Pique. This ending is significant not only because it gives the Métis figures the final voice, but because it shifts away from a strictly literary text into a different creative genre and again offers alternative versions of historical “texts”: this Album does not, for example, include “The Maple Leaf Forever.” Furthermore, because we are given actual scores from music written by characters in the novel, this ending blurs once again the boundary between fiction and reality.

Because the content of these lyrics addresses the oppression of the Métis, the novel ends with a poignant reminder that the social and political issues raised by the novel are not easily resolved. What this text does emphasize, however, is the importance of an interplay of narratives that challenges the dominant narrative. Morag’s roles as writer and mother, and Jules’ roles as songwriter and father, are to pass the stories on, both publicly and privately: to keep telling, to keep up the cross-current. As teachers, this is our role too.

NOTES

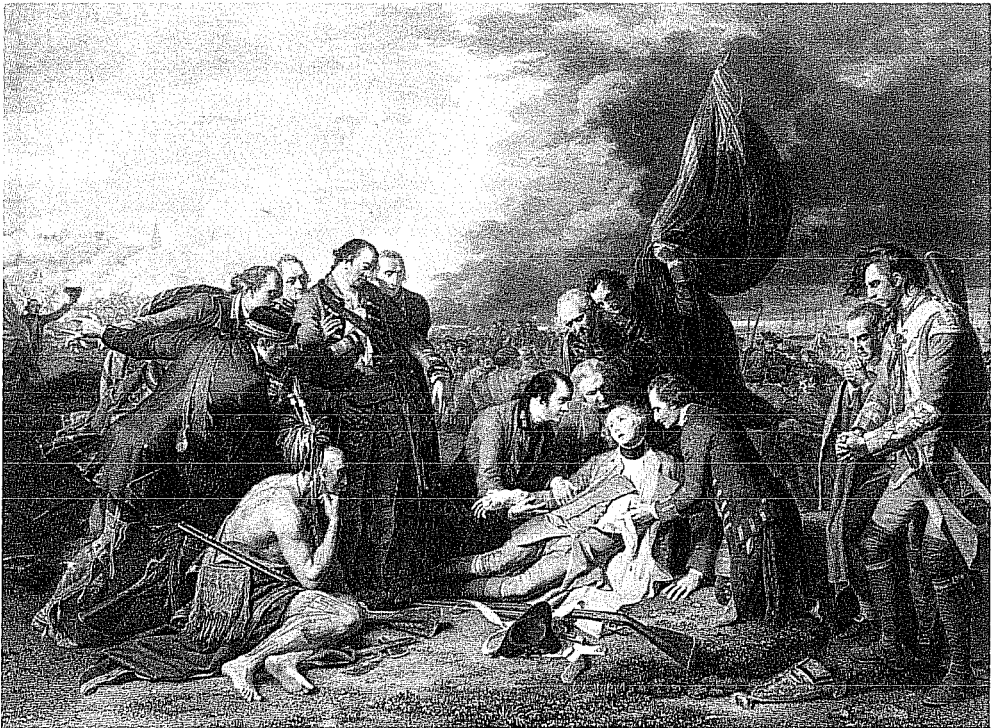
- 1 *The Diviners* has enjoyed considerable infamy as a high school text, although more so during the first ten years after its publication than in the subsequent ten years. While the controversy about the novel may have subsided, it is nonetheless not widely used in Ontario highschools. Obviously, however, I would like to urge teachers to adopt this novel in their classrooms. For an excellent summary of the censorship history of *The Diviners*, see Hugh Bennett’s “The Top Shelf: The Censorship of Canadian Children’s and Young Adult Literature in the Schools. *Canadian Children’s Literature*. 68: (1992) 17-26. The entire issue, in fact, addresses the difficult issue of the censorship of children’s books.
- 2 This idea of history’s consisting of intersecting narratives is central to Edward Said’s influential text, *Culture and Imperialism*.
- 3 This might be a good point at which to raise with a class the issue of appropriation of voice. It is problematic that Laurence has made Jules know dirty songs? Does it perpetuate a stereotype? Is his knowledge of cowboy songs—given that he is Métis—meant to be ironic? The class can discuss how it is possible for a white writer who intends to correct stereotypes to perpetuate them without realizing it. For a good analysis of the problems of white writers writing about non-white characters, see Terry Goldie’s *Fear and Temptation*. He deals specifically with *The Diviners* and Morag’s relationship with Jules. For some First Nation’s perspectives on the issue of appropriation, see the pieces by Lee Maracle and Lenore Keeshig Tobias in *Language in Her Eye*. It would also be useful, if possible, to have students study some Native novels in conjunction with *The Diviners*.
- 4 My information about West’s painting comes from *The Valiant Hero: Benjamin West and Grand-Style History Painting*. Laurie Ricou’s article, “Never Cry Wolfe” also provides a good analysis of the postcolonial implications of the painting.
- 5 Students may initially resist the idea that gender is socially constructed. I have found, however, that if I get them thinking about examples of gendering in popular culture, they very quickly

television or in magazines are gendered. I have found that a lively discussion soon follows a recognition of gendering in our contemporary culture.

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"The Death of General Wolfe," by William Woollett (1735-1785), after Benjamin West, R.A. From *The Ontario Collection*, by Fern Bayer, 1984: 143. Published by Fitzhenry & Whiteside in conjunction with the Ontario Heritage Foundation.