



Affective Stylistics and Children's Literature: Spirituality and Transcendence in Robert Munsch's

Love You Forever

—Robert Hurley

When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while.

Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes, A Memoir*.

Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*.

Introduction

The unhappy family and the unhappy childhood would seem to hold far greater narrative promise than do their cheerful counterparts. Even when an author manages to produce a tale in which happiness and human fulfillment hold centre stage, response to it may often divide along emotional fault lines. Such is the case with *Love You Forever*, a picture book by Robert Munsch, which presents the story

of a mother, who achieves happiness through self-forgetful care, and of her son, who moves beyond the self-centredness of his youth to emulate his mother, first by recognizing and returning her love and then by sharing his agapic legacy with his baby girl.¹

The origins of the book may provide some insight into its eventual interpretation. In the account that follows, I have supplemented information found in the biography on Munsch's website with details included in a sermon by Brian Kiely. In 1979 and 1980, the author and his wife experienced the pain of two stillbirths. In the wake of their tragedy, the couple consulted a therapist as they sought for ways to deal with their grief. The therapist suggested that they try writing through the painful experience by imagining a whole lifetime of parenting. The result was a song that grew into a story before being published as a picture book in 1986.² Over the nearly twenty years since its publication, readers have consistently

reported finding comfort in this story during moments of bereavement and loss.³

But despite its overwhelming commercial success, *Love You Forever* has met with considerable critical reserve and, at times, with blatant hostility. While negative reaction varies from critic to critic, a charge of excessive sentimentality has often been levelled at the work. In an early review, for example, André Gagnon writes: "*Love You Forever* is sentimentality at its worst. This is not a children's story, but one that will appeal to adults who have experienced a feeling of loss as their children grow older. Munsch should go back to what he does best" (78). Reviewing the book for the *New York Times* in 1994, M.P. Dunleavy echoes Gagnon's negative appraisal and quotes a librarian who remarked that this book was the most loved and the most hated she'd ever seen: "More loved than not . . . People will read this book and burst into tears" (Br48). Another librarian quoted by Dunleavy introduced a second frequently repeated assessment of *Love You Forever*. In declaring it to be the most "Oedipal book" she'd read since *Oedipus*, Barbara Jenko mirrored the thoughts of a man who wrote to impeach Munsch directly: "Dear Mr. Munsch, How dare you parade for the general public your unresolved Oedipal feelings for your mother!" (Dunleavy Br48). Dunleavy himself discusses the book in the context of "abnormalities in parent-child relationships."

The controversial opusculé has continued to attract critical attention over the years, but scholarly criticism has not wandered far from the ground staked out early on in the history of its reception. Raymond Jones dismisses the work as "cloying sentimentality" (57) and Marjorie Gann categorizes it as "sentimental fiction" (64). Perry Nodelman combines charges of sentimentality and Freudian weirdness with a negative evaluation of Sheila McGraw's illustration:

As I've suggested, this story shares . . . the absurdity of other weird-parent stories like *50 below zero*; a mother with a fetish for holding grown men on her lap and rocking them is exactly as strange as a frozen sleepwalking father How can you possibly show a mother sneaking into her teenage son's bedroom to cuddle him as he sleeps without eliciting laughter—or even worse, evoking horrific images of a monstrously exaggerated devouring mother out of the worst nightmares of Freud. (14)

Earlier in the same article, Nodelman used *Love You Forever* as an example of a Munsch book that caused problems for illustrators:

Interestingly, a number of the other books not illustrated by Martchenko also attempt to depict what cannot be actually or easily seen; and, in my opinion, at least, they fail to do it successfully.

Indeed, it's this failure that most clearly distinguishes the illustrations of *The dark*, *The mud puddle*, *Love you forever*, *Good families don't*, *Get me another one!* and *Purple, green and yellow* from Martchenko's. (14)

Clare Bradford, in an article with the suggestive title "Schmalz is as Schmalz Does: Sentimentality and Picture Books," uses *Love You Forever*—which she characterizes as "highly sentimental"—to illustrate how authors exploit emotion to control their readers. Defining sentimentality as "an excess of or lack of control over emotion," Bradford understands this literary strategy to be "embodied in the interactions between implied author or narrator and implied reader or narratee, and particularly in narrative strategies which seek to manipulate subjectivity" (17). Despite her allusions to these text-bound interpretive categories, the real excess of sentiment identified by Bradford has nothing to do with an analysis of the story's style, content, or illustrations, but is rather extrapolated from the effects which a dramatic reading of it produced on an audience of teachers and librarians:

I do not recall how this reading was introduced or what reasons were given for its presentation, but I have vivid memories of its effects on its audience as the sounds of weeping filled the lecture-theatre.

It seemed to me at the time that the emotions evoked (grief, sadness, guilt, sympathy) related experientially to the lives of the participants (most of whom were middle-aged women who might be expected to have aging parents), the consequence of the reading was to focus upon the figure of [storyteller] Yetta Goodman as the catalyst for these emotions and to endow her with a kind of wisdom, goodness and authority. This, I think, offers the premise that sentimentality in picture book texts might have a similar effect: the deflection of emotion onto the figure of a narrator or implied author, rather than on the capacity of the text to create for its reader a subject position which enables her to draw upon her own emotional experience so as to derive significance out of textual representations of emotion. (18)

Leaving aside the merits of Bradford's general argument, it seems to me that no evidence of emotional manipulation can be read into the way in which *Love You Forever* related experientially to the lives of the audience she describes. In the context of her article, Bradford seems to indicate that the effect produced on the audience (sounds of weeping) was due to the successful yet regrettable manipulation of their collective or individual subjectivities by the implied author or narrator. Curiously, she herself seems to have been immune to these effects. Indeed,

not only she but many other readers respond quite negatively to the same story, and for a variety of reasons.

Yet another reservation surfaced in a conversation I had with France Bilodeau, the librarian for children's literature at Université Laval. Having received the French version of the book as a gift, she read it to her son. Put off by the quality of the illustration, she was particularly disturbed by the outdated image of selfless motherhood that the book seemed to promote. Western women have fought hard to liberate themselves from a life defined solely as self-sacrifice. She was caught, however, since, after the first reading, her son was hooked and insisted on hearing the tale over and over again.

Affective and feminist reserve, learned appeals to Freud, charges of emotional manipulation—none of these do anything to explain to me the massive appeal of this literary phenomenon; I am not prepared to believe that the more than 20 million people who have purchased a copy of the book across linguistic and cultural boundaries did so for sappy or “perverted”

reasons, or that they were, as has been suggested, simply the victims of emotional manipulation. *Love You Forever* remains, in fact, the best-selling picture book ever; its closest competitor being *Goodnight Moon*, which has sold about 10 million copies. Can



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the appeal of this book be attributed to more than an error in taste or a desire to wallow in self-indulgent emotion?

I believe that the success of Munsch's tale may be in large part attributed to the way in which it taps into a desire for unconditional love, a desire not only to be loved, but also to love unconditionally in return. For most readers,

this narrative moves beyond interests of the sort that are outgrown with childhood, as it awakens and nourishes something spiritual within them. The consistently negative critical reaction to *Love You Forever*, so different from the response of the general reading public, may in part, I suspect, be explained by the interpretive assumptions in force in the community to which these critics belong. As I intend to demonstrate, positive critical responses to this book are also possible; responses based on other

sets of assumptions in force in other interpretive communities. In the analysis offered below, I will attempt a reading based on a number of hermeneutical principles that have emerged in the recent history of the critical reading of the Bible.

Critical literary and theological readings of the Bible do not proceed from the premise that a truth of correspondence exists between the narrative world and the reader's world. While historical biblical critics remain interested in the social, cultural, political, and economic circumstances out of which such narratives emerge, they rarely try to verify the historical details found in a particular biblical narrative. Fundamentalist readings of scripture aside, discriminating readers, rather than passing judgment on the historical veracity of the text or on its realism, prefer to ask where the truth might be found in such stories, or how it might emerge from the reading event. Such readers readily acknowledge that the "truth" of religious narratives is invariably communicated to their audiences in such a way as to preclude absolute pronouncements about the meaning of these stories. For members of this interpretive community, parables and sapiential or wisdom literature elicit different sorts of responses than do works claiming historical or scientific validity.

Readers used to interpreting highly symbolic, religious literature, I would contend, are quite likely to respond differently to a book such as *Love You*

Forever than do the literary critics cited above. Emily Carton, a contributor to a web discussion dealing with this book, responds to comments made by another contributor, the widely-read children's writer Jane Yolen, in a way that seems to me like interpretive assumptions in force among literary critics of the Bible:

Jane, I do not understand why you read this book so literally and refuse to entertain the idea that the book is talking about the mother's internal life. The book is not about what she expresses directly to her son but what she feels about him. As a mother, she certainly expresses both the unconditional love she has for him and the insanity he creates in her life. . . . I see the crawling of the mother as metaphor, as a wish. This is about love—not the reality of growing up.

Are there literary devices and conventions of writing that foster the emergence of effects spiritual and transcendent in illustrated story books for children? I insist on the word "foster," since ultimately the emergence of the spiritual during the reading event, like the emergence of irony, will always remain dependent upon the beliefs and experiences of the reader. I believe that such conventions and devices do exist and, in what follows, I will attempt to describe those I have been able to identify in

Munsch's classic tale. Similar to and likely derived from literary forms found in the Bible, these devices and conventions involve the symbolic transformation of time and space.⁴ Since time and space are relative categories, one might more properly say that what gets transformed in such narratives is the "human perception" of time and space. Literal readings of the gospels—reductive readings which insist on the historical realism of the writing—run into the same type of interpretive blockages as do literalist interpretations of highly symbolic children's literature such as Munsch's *Love You Forever*, Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*, and Margery Williams's *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Religious fundamentalists are not the only readers who insist on reading highly symbolic forms of writing as if they bore a truth of correspondence with the extra-textual world.

Given that spiritual realities and experiences elude direct description, talented authors sidestep the problem by using what Hayden White calls emplotment (397) or what the French more elegantly refer to as *la mise en intrigue*; they spin narrative webs in which they symbolically, indirectly, and most often unconsciously, set the reader on a path to the transcendent. The writers of the Bible understood well that direct communication of the divine and the transcendent is impossible.

My goal here is simple. Using affective stylistics, a method of literary criticism developed by Stanley Fish,

I describe my experience of reading Robert Munsch's *Love You Forever*, paying particular attention to textual devices related to spirituality and to transcendence. I begin with a definition of the transcendent spiritual, followed by a brief description of affective stylistics before turning directly to a consideration of some of the themes and techniques used to produce the spiritual effects of *Love You Forever*. Particular attention will be paid to the role the senses play as a means of entry into a spiritual world, to the ways in which spirituality and transcendence are symbolized, to the effects produced by the use of repetition in the text, to the use of nocturnal and diurnal symbolism, to the juxtaposition of the themes of constancy and change, to the links between the predictable rhythms of the storyline and certain needs arising from human development, and, finally, to the play between fantasy and realism in the narrative world.

A Definition of the Spiritual

No analysis of the spiritual, be it in children's books or elsewhere, will be possible without at least a working definition or some kind of understanding as to what spirituality is:

Spirituality refers, then, to those attitudes, beliefs and practices which animate people's lives and help them to discern super-sensible realities *through a creative and imaginative process which*

is marked by transcendence.

The first part of this definition is Gordon Wakefield's and is drawn directly from the *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (361). To Wakefield's very useful definition I add (my addition is in italics) the notions of transcendence, creativity, and imagination. Several assumptions underlie this definition—the first being that spiritual life should not be reduced to an aspect of psycho-cognitive development. The second assumption is that the spiritual is not directly accessible in the material world, such that one must engage in a process of discernment before it can come into view. Spiritual discernment implies more than simply describing an already existing reality—its poietic (from the Greek for “doing” or “making”) thrust—implies that the observer is actively involved in the construction of the new perspective that emerges. It invents new perspectives on life and realizes new possibilities that begin in the imagination, but end up by concretely transforming us and the world in which we live.

The word “spirituality” may be traced to the Latin “*spiritualis*” and from there to the biblical terms “*ruah*” and “*pneuma/pneumatikos*,” all three of which refer to the divine breath that animates life (McGinn 4). That divine breath is the breath of creativity, which animates the artisans of life, sparking in them an ability to see the exalted and the

beautiful even in what at first appears to be lowly, weak, or humble. (And, as scholars of children's literature know, despite the variety of opinions about the value and nature of childhood that have existed in the history of the West, Greco-Roman culture and its Christian successor—despite the teachings of Jesus—understood children to be basically weak, imperfect versions of adult, male humanity (cf. Judith M. Gundry-Volf 31–32).) As I read *Love You Forever*, I pay particular attention to the way in which certain textual elements encourage readers to construct and inhabit an alternate world, one in which they are freed from their day-to-day cares.

Given that beliefs, attitudes, and imagination all belong to the realm of the inner life, notions of interior transformation and development prove to be perennial themes in literature which emphasizes the spiritual. Analogous to learning, spiritual awakening cannot be directly measured. At best, only indirect evidence of its presence can be offered.

The notion of transcendence also figures prominently in this definition. Transcendence comes from two Latin roots: “*scandere*,” which means “to climb” and “*trans*,” a prefix meaning “across” or “beyond.” Transcendence, then, involves moving across thresholds, of climbing upwards, of symbolically achieving new heights. I use the term as a hermeneutic key which encompasses several notions. In the sense of self-transcendence, it points

to attitudes and actions by which people set aside their own interests in order to attend to the needs and interests of another. In one of the great paradoxes of spiritual transcendence, the price for crossing the threshold to personal integration and joy is paid in the ephemeral currency of self-forgetfulness and disinterested service to others.

Transcendence also embraces the notions of moving beyond known ranges and capacities, of surpassing or excelling. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, transcendence is associated with experiences marked by the divine, in the sense that these experiences allow one to escape, however fleetingly, the limits of the material universe. These are the moments when poets speak of time standing still and of the weight of the world being lifted from one's shoulders. I will attempt to point out the ways in which stylistic elements of *Love You Forever* have been arranged in order to allow effects of the transcendent spiritual to emerge.

Affective Stylistics:

A Version of Reader Response Criticism

Affective Stylistics—the name of the method itself might seem to be an oxymoron, combining as it does seemingly objective evidence gleaned through a close reading of the text with the subjective responses of the reader. My own interpretive practices take for granted, on the one hand, that so-called objective

results obtained through the application of formalist and structuralist principles prove finally to be rife with subjective elements and, on the other, that the so-called subjective readings based on the responses of the reader are, in fact, controlled in many significant ways by the interpretive community of which the reader is a part and within which she practises her art.⁵

As was suggested above, critics or professional readers typically belong to a variety of interpretive communities: a reader like myself for instance reads as a middle-aged, middle-class male who is a son, a brother, a husband, a father, a reader formed in the Christian tradition as a Roman Catholic, a professor of New Testament exegesis and of religious education, a person who lives and works in a language and culture that differ greatly from the Irish heritage into which he was born. My approach to children's literature has been affected, for example, by the exegetical options I have pursued in my research of the New Testament, a corpus in which metaphor and symbol play a critical role. My experience of growing up in a large family in which my mother gave birth to her ninth child three weeks after the death of her husband—I was 18 months old at the time—probably made the absence of a father figure in the mother-son relationship of *Love You Forever* seem altogether natural to me. I did not consider the absence of great significance until another reader

drew my attention to it. These elements, and many more of which I remain unaware, shape my responses to life in general and to texts in particular.

Meaning as I see it, then, is always personal and always established by dint of argument and persuasion. Critics produce the most convincing interpretations for audiences when they enjoy sufficient mastery of the conventions observed by the author to be able to assume the mantle of midwives in a new interpretive context. Sufficient mastery of the conventions evidenced in a text—literary, socio-political, or religious conventions, for example—would seem to be one of the characteristics of competent interpretation. Critics are likely to construe the text in an even more convincing manner, however, when they share not only the conventions of the (implied) author, but also the hermeneutical assumptions of their intended audience. In as much as the critic shares the interpretive assumptions in force in a particular community, he or she acts as an agent of that community. Thus, certain interpretive possibilities in a text emerge for readers in one community which go unnoticed by readers from another.

The meaning of a story like *Love You Forever* does not lie so much in the experience of the loss of stillborn babies in the Munsch family, but emerges rather from the personal lives of those who read or hear it and who not only know the conventions of the text, but also supply the interpretive context in

which the story becomes meaningful. Readers bring grammatical structures as well as linguistic and literary conventions to texts, but they bring much more than these; among other things, they bring their emotional experiences, their personality type, their educational makeup, their ethnic background, and their religious or spiritual convictions. These and countless other idiosyncrasies collectively determine the ways in which readers pay attention to texts. Without the context of interpretation supplied by readers, it is difficult to understand how a text can be said to have meaning. Meaning evolves then, in a dynamic movement in which the expectations, projections, conclusions, judgments, and suppositions of the reader are not merely instrumental or mechanical but essential (*cf.* Fish 2–3). Meaning is not an attribute of the past but a reality emerging in an ongoing reading event.

Affective stylistics does not work from the assumption that one or more correct interpretations of a text can be made on the basis of supposedly objective criteria. This form of criticism sets out to describe the reading experience, identifying within the gamut of the author's stylistic peculiarities those elements that account for the effects produced by the text in the minds and hearts of a given audience. To convince an audience to accept a particular reading of a text is to persuade that audience that one has paid attention to those features in the text which

account for or enrich their reading experience. The role of the interpreter can be a vital one since, as Terence Cave observes, “there is an important sense in which the things we see in literature are not there until we see them” (10).

Given that the interpretation of *Love You Forever* proposed here pays particular attention to the possible links which may be established between stylistic elements and the notions of spirituality and transcendence, a single question has guided the enquiry: are there textual elements that create effects of interiority; of transformation and growth; of self-forgetfulness; of climbing beyond known limits and crossing thresholds; of creativity and imagination; of being liberated from the constraints of the material world; of seeing, hearing and touching super-sensible realities that normally fall beyond the scope of the human senses?

While the analysis I propose remains provisional and relative, while it represents a perspective informed by particular religious and spiritual sensibilities, it nevertheless seeks to persuade you, another reader, of the soundness of its observations. My goal is to describe the spiritual effects repeatedly described by readers as they encounter the devices and conventions employed in *Love You Forever*.

An Analysis of *Love You Forever*

Love You Forever opens with these words:⁶

A mother held her new baby and very slowly rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And while she held him she sang:

*I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living
my baby you'll be.*

The scene, if somewhat idyllic, is fraught with realistic detail. The addition of the detail that the mother is rocking her baby “very slowly” combines with the lulling effect produced by a repetition of the phrase “back and forth,” to produce a sleepy sense of calm. The words of the song itself confirm and extend this impression. The love of the mother participates already in the realm of the eternal: it is promised “forever,” will last for “always.”

Except for the sex of the child and the description of the care he is receiving, we learn almost nothing about him for the moment. Is he awake? The reader doesn't know. The illustration seems to show a sleeping child but this cannot be affirmed with any certainty. Does the child have a name? Again, we are not informed. In fact, while most of Munsch's story characters bear the names of children he knows, the characters of *Love You Forever* remain nameless throughout. Stylistically significant, this omission elevates the narrative to the status of parable by allowing, even encouraging, readers to identify closely with one or

another of the story's characters. Just how and with whom readers identify depends largely on factors arising not from the text, but from their lives. Is the reader male or female, parent or child, adolescent or adult? All of these factors radically affect their reception of the narrative and their identification with its characters. In the end, whether a person enjoys now or only remembers the love of a mother like this one, or whether he has only dreamt of such affection, the desire for such tenderness becomes heightened as the narrative progresses. The tale continues:

The baby grew. He grew and he grew and he grew. He grew until he was two years old, and he ran all around the house. He pulled all the books off the shelves. He pulled all the food out of the refrigerator and he took his mother's watch and flushed it down the toilet. Sometimes his mother would say, "This kid is driving me CRAZY!"

Many readers will undoubtedly recognize that phase in childhood development popularly referred to as the "terrible twos," when children, owing to a newfound mobility, achieve their first mastery of the world around them by touching and manipulating all and any objects in their purview. The growth and activity of the baby erupt onto this second page of the narrative, destroying the calm and serenity of the opening landscape. The mother now assumes a

passive role while the baby takes centre stage, sorely testing her patience.

The normal order and place of important things like books and food is being disturbed. Books represent one of the great achievements of civilization, and food one of the necessities of life. The watch, another article of both monetary and symbolic value, is destroyed. Can it be no more than a coincidence that the child flushes a device used to reduce time to a quantity? Understood as duration, time constitutes one of the two major constraints which the material world imposes upon human life, the other being space. One aspect of transcendence, understood as an experience marked by the divine, is the suppression of the constraints imposed by the material world. Perhaps this effect will be confirmed and heightened as the story progresses?

The word "grew," repeated no fewer than five times in this sequence, creates an unmistakable shift in tone. The notion of growth itself, in the sense of healthy development, is clearly linked at an elemental level to the concept of transcendence, that is, to moving upwards, to crossing the many thresholds which are part of human development. Here, however, growth also introduces a chaotic element that risks pushing the mother into madness. When she exclaims that the kid is driving her crazy, it is easy and even natural to make light of the choice of words used; but, in fact, the demands of parenting a young child

may indeed destroy a person's sanity. Tragically, we know that parents do not always have the patience and equilibrium that toddlers require. Good parenting skills are not innate and myriad forces risk disrupting family life, robbing it of its truly human and humanizing qualities—the lack of an appropriate model for parenting, post-partum depression, financial worries, the death of a spouse, marriage breakdown, and illness figure among the most serious threats. The illustration of a child in diapers, beaming with joy, further underscores the internal conflicts associated with parenting. How is it possible that such innocence can evoke anything other than loving embrace? The question as to whether the mother's love and affection will survive the day-to-day demands of parenting has been introduced.

Let's return to the story:

But at night time, when that two-year-old was quiet, she opened the door to his room, crawled across the floor, looked up over the side of his bed; and if he was really asleep she picked him up and rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And while she rocked him she sang:

I'll love you forever,

I'll like you for always
As long as I'm living
my baby you'll be.



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The frenetic pace of the two-year-old's day has faded into the drowsy calm of night, as the mother once again becomes the active character. Night, as it is presented here, holds none of the terrors known to the psalmist: "You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day" (Ps. 91:10).

Many of the words and phrases used to open the story are repeated here, re-establishing that sense of loving warmth which had earlier enveloped the newborn child. The lyrics of the song are repeated. In fact from the moment the mother picks up the two-year-old, only one word distinguishes this text from the opening scene on which it was modelled.

Both sequences take place at night. The only clue that the initial scene depicting the mother and her newborn is a nocturnal one, however, comes from the illustrator: the curtains are drawn shut and a lamp is lit. When the mother is with her two-year-old, the reader is explicitly told that the events are taking place at night in the son's bedroom. A possible association has thus already been established between the calm

of the night, the bedroom location and the mother's particular expression of love.

If we take the episode to be a realistic one, a couple of details give us pause. A parent reading this might well wonder why the mother waits until the toddler is asleep to sing her song. Anyone who has ever had trouble putting a two-year-old to bed realizes that it is more realistic to sing a child to sleep than it is to risk disturbing him after he has finally succumbed to the sandman's beckoning. All the same, the scene retains an air of believability about it and the promise of a love that will last forever has survived its first test.

Again, the detail that the mother "crawls" across the floor stands out as odd. Why does she crawl? It seems unlikely that she is simply trying to avoid disturbing the child since she later picks him up, rocks him, and sings to him. The fact that the woman physically assumes a lower position with respect to her son may bear symbolic significance. Her physical stance, a possible clue to her inner disposition, seems to convey a contemplative admiration, of the type one might be struck by when beholding an object of intense beauty. The German philosopher and theologian, Rudolf Otto, used the phrase "*mysterium tremendum et facinans*" to refer to the experience of the overwhelming presence of God. The experience of the divine, always indirect and wholly other (*mysterium*), inspires both terror (*tremendum*) and fascination (*facinans*)(5–31).

Moses covers his face before the burning bush (Ex. 2:6) and Paul of Tarsus falls to the ground when he sees a light from the heavens and hears the voice of the risen Jesus (Acts 9: 1–7). Interpreted literally today, behaviour of the sort described in these texts might well be enough to have someone committed to a psychiatric ward.

Other indications are given that the experience taking place may be marked by a sense of the transcendent. Significant directional clues are provided here as the mother is said to "look up over the side of the bed," and to "pick up the child." We noted earlier that the action of climbing or of moving upwards is intrinsic to the concept of transcendence. One looks heavenward, one looks up for signs of God. What the woman discerns as she peeks up over the side of the bed may well be a scene that places her in communion with the divine. As she picks her son up physically, she symbolically elevates him, contemplating him in a loving gaze that looks beyond the trouble he gives her to see the baby she loves.

We continue reading:

The little boy grew. He grew and he grew and he grew. He grew until he was nine years old. And he never wanted to come in for dinner, he never wanted to take a bath, and when grandma visited he always said bad words. Sometimes his mother wanted to sell him to the zoo!

The description in this scene copies the pattern, *mutatis mutandis*, established by the description of the toddler's activity. New challenges are presented to the mother's patience and to the constancy of her love. Once again in this instalment, the caring presence of the mother from the preceding episodes contrasts vividly with the son's normal but self-centred behaviour. The boy now enjoys considerable independence as the text and illustration clearly indicate. On the page facing the text, he carelessly saunters into the kitchen, leaving the door ajar as he tracks dirt across the floor. As he walks, he blows bubbles with his gum, while simultaneously spilling drink from a bottle tucked under one arm and juggling a baseball in the hand opposite.

Psychologists tell us that a family environment in which the daily routines are stable and dependable promotes healthy psychological and physical development in children: regularity in mealtimes, in personal hygiene, and in bedtimes provides the structure and predictability that children crave and that help them to develop into adult human persons (*cf.* Colomb 261). In this episode, the child is resisting the very elements that are designed to help him grow as a person.

The reference to the zoo introduces another symbol of the obstacle and challenges to the successful realization of the boy's humanity. This image of animality, humorously but plainly, reminds the reader

of the less humanizing paths that may be taken by *homo sapiens sapiens*.

Now that the boy could and likely should be more responsible, will the mother react once again to his trying ways with unconditional acceptance? If any doubt remains, the following page quickly clears it up:

But at night time, when he was asleep, the mother quietly opened the door to his room, crawled across the floor and looked up over the side of the bed. If he was really asleep, she picked up that nine-year-old boy and rocked him back and forth . . . , back and forth, back and forth. And while she rocked him, she sang:

I'll love you forever. . . .

The calm of night, the mother's particular expression of love, and the bedroom setting are once again brought together in this sequence. The repetition of words rich in imagery and symbolism permits certain effects to be enhanced in the narrative: effects of inner calm, of freedom from worry, of contemplation, of elevation, of self-forgetfulness, and of unconditional acceptance.

Most, if not all of Munsch's books, make frequent use of repetition—a technique of all storytellers but especially of those raconteurs who entertain children. The procedure creates predictability and encourages

children to participate actively in the telling of the tale. After one or two refrains, the kids chime right in. Repetition has the added benefit of allowing even young children to easily keep track of the story line. In this setting, however, the repetitive play produces other effects as well.

For a third time, the child, by now a big nine-year-old, is held and rocked back and forth while the song is sung. This reiteration fosters an expectation that the mother likely will be dependable no matter what the situation. By now it has become clear that the unconditional love and acceptance will likely always be the answer the mother gives to the many clashes and fears arising from the growth of the child.

The literary devices used to create these effects come, however, at a price. Questions have been lingering in the air ever since the mother crawled across the floor and then risked waking her two-year-old up by rocking him and singing to him. As she now takes the nine-year-old into her arms, the credibility gap, which opened with the mother's unusual "crawling," now begins to widen as the realistic quality of the narrative appears to have been entirely abandoned. Do mothers really take healthy nine-year-olds into their arms after they have fallen asleep in order to rock them and to sing to them? Why does she wait until the child is asleep to show these signs of affection? Will this drift towards fantasy continue as the story progresses?

The boy grew. He grew and he grew and he grew. He grew until he was a teenager. He had strange friends and he wore strange clothes and he listened to strange music. Sometimes the mother felt like she was in a zoo!

Great emphasis is placed on the teenager's strangeness. His friends, clothes, and music appear to the mother (or at least to the narrator) as extraneous to the mother's adult world. The recurrence of the theme of animality, in the form of a reference to the zoo, combines with the theme of strangeness to convey the impression that the son's mode of being threatens the norms of the world of grown-ups. Despite even this serious challenge, the pattern of acceptance continues.

But at night time, when that teenager was asleep, the mother opened the door to his room, crawled across the floor and looked up over the side of the bed. If he was really asleep she picked up that great big boy and rocked him back and forth. . . .

This sequence introduces a new threat to the continuity of the relationship between the mother and son. The son's size—he is described as a "great big boy"—might normally have constituted an obstacle to her habitual way of communicating her love, which was to lift him up and sing to him.

The teenager grew. He grew and he grew and he grew. He grew until he was a grown-up man. He left home and got a house across town.

Another barrier, distance, threatens to separate the two as the son moves away from home. Have the tender moments which take place at night in the child's bedroom come to an end? Is this the mother's reward for having loved and accepted her boy so unconditionally these many years and in the face of so many challenges?

But sometimes on dark nights the mother got into her car and drove across town.

The illustration shows the mother's car en route to her son's house, a ladder strapped to its roof.⁷

If all the lights in her son's house were out, she opened his bedroom window, crawled across the floor, and looked up over the side of his bed. If that great big man was really asleep she picked him up and rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And while she rocked him she sang:

I'll love you forever. . . .

Even if a reader's credulity stretched far enough to admit that some mothers might rock some nine-year-

olds in their arms after they had gone to sleep, the subsequent scenes from the boy's bedroom move beyond all possibility of realistic story telling. The slide from realism to fantasy is slow but complete. When the mother takes first "that great big teenage boy" and then "that great big man" in her arms, readers are confronted with a choice. Either they simply reject the story, which on its face seems absurd or even perverse, or they accept the implicit invitation to move to another level of reading. The mother's ability to overcome the natural limits of her strength, allowing her to lift first her teenage and then her grown-up son, functions as a code for her inner strength in overcoming obstacles and limits to her ability to love.

Adopting a narrative strategy in some ways similar to the one used by Shel Silverstein in *The Giving Tree*, Munsch juxtaposes two contrasting types of attitudes. In *Love You Forever*, the selfless love of the mother is set forth in one episode, while, in the subsequent episode, the egocentric demands of her developing son test that love. In *The Giving Tree*, it is clear that the boy's demands are truly egotistical and selfish and that they remain so, even as he grows into adulthood and old age. In *Love You Forever*, the boy's egocentrism is related more to the phases of maturation than to any permanent flaw in his character. However culpable these youngsters may have been with respect to their self-centredness,

Silverstein's tree and Munsch's mother both respond with unwavering generosity and unflinching kindness to the successive demands on their time and patience. None of the obstacles life throws at this mother seem to be strong enough to put even a dent in the love she has for her son.

In this scene, symbols of the transcendent abound. The mother finds the means to cross the barriers separating her from her son. As she drives across town, she transcends the distance that threatens to put an end to her demonstrations of love. Sheila McGraw's illustrations provide even more clues to the presence of the transcendent. The ladder strapped to the roof of the car and visible at the window of the man's bedroom symbolically relates to a notion of spiritual climbing and of moving up and across barriers. Indeed, if you accept the premise that the bedroom constitutes a sacred space in this narrative, you may also be willing to see in the ladder a subtle allusion to the ladder of Jacob's dream (Gen. 28:10–22), which, in the biblical text, functions as a symbolic link between heaven and earth that angels use to pass between the two realms. The window, like the boy's bedroom door before it, now symbolizes a threshold that must be crossed if the mother is to enter the sacred time and space in which she can communicate her love to her son. Neither the distance across town, nor the inaccessibility of the son's bedroom, nor the potentially threatening "bigness" of the teenager

and grown man deter this mother from showing the same affection she first showed to her newborn baby. Once again, the association between the mother's activity, the bedroom setting, and the calm of the night is reaffirmed. The son continues his activities in the diurnal realm. But the story is not finished:

Well, that mother, she got older. She got older and older and older. One day she called up her son and said, "You'd better come and see me because I'm very old and sick."

So her son came to see her. When he came in the door she tried to sing the song. She sang:

*I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always. . . .*

But she couldn't finish because she was too old and sick.

The son went to his mother. He picked her up and rocked her back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And he sang this song:

*I'll love you forever
I'll like you for always
As long as I'm living
my Mommy you'll be.*

A shift in the dynamics of the narrative is clearly indicated by a reversal of the nocturnal and diurnal associations established thus far in the text. Up to this point, the mother has always been active only

at night, while the daytime has been the province of the son. On this occasion, the mother calls her son during the day. She is now active during the day. The illustration depicts him as passively receiving the call while preparing a meal in his kitchen. By the time the son moves into action, the illustration clearly shows that night has fallen. He reaches his mother's house and goes to that symbolic space of the bedroom, where their love can be shared through the song. It is the son who now becomes active in the calm of night, while the mother for the first time is on the receiving end of the exchange.

The mother, once a rock of constancy and steadfastness, no longer has the strength to express her love as she would like. The very predictability set up through the use of stereotyped episodes which juxtapose scenes of generosity and self-centredness makes this shift in the narrative all the more effective. How will the son react? Will he be no better than the selfish boy/man of *The Giving Tree* or will he rise to the occasion and return the love he has received?

The son does not hesitate. He goes to his mother to support her in her hour of need. But how can he possibly know the words to this song? According to the narrative, he could not have heard his mother sing it. Most readers understand, however, that, although the son has never heard the mother's song in his conscious life, he nevertheless knows not only the lyrics but their true significance. As he responds

with love to the person who has taught him what love means, he is bringing the song to life.

It is at this point that the theme of death surfaces allusively in the narrative. The text never explicitly says that the mother has died, but the end appears not only imminent but inevitable. Seen from its climax, if death can be said to be a climax, the story appears to confer organization and form on the temporal structure of the mother's life. From this vantage point, the story now appears to have been written with this final chapter of her life in view. As it draws to a close, her existence can be appreciated as a seamless act of love for her son, the manifestations of which can be mentally reviewed by any reader who accepts the implicit invitation to do so. It is not surprising, then, that many people have used this book as a valuable support for coping with death and dying.⁸ Dunleavy in his review refers to the "Pieta-style drawing of the white haired mother cradling her grown-up son" (Br48). The Pieta, of course, is a sculpture of Mary holding the dead Jesus in her arms. If one allows for a symbolic role reversal, another Pieta-like drawing is found a few pages later in the text when the son holds his ailing (perhaps dying) mother in his arms.

At this juncture, it should also be clear that the senses of hearing, sight, and touch have developed a new compass which allows them to discern internal realities and to act in a spiritual world. Readers in

the interpretive community I am describing and representing awaken only gradually to this fact as the storyline moves forward. It may be useful to take a closer look at the transformation of the individual senses and the role each plays in producing certain effects in the story. Let's start with the sense of hearing.

It would appear that the opening page has served as a template for the thematic architecture of the entire narrative. Beyond the physical arrangement of the words on the page, and beyond the lexical and grammatical similarities between succeeding passages in the text, the theme of unchanging love continually refers back to the initial image of the mother with her newborn. It may be significant that the opening scene is the only time when the child is not specifically said to be sleeping while the mother sings the song. Even if the child were awake, one supposes that a pre-linguistic newborn wouldn't remember as an adult words and phrases he had heard during his first days of life. Since the child was quite specifically said to be asleep every other time the mother sings the song, we are left wondering how the man knows, not only how to complete the original verse, but also how to make the necessary changes that signal a shift in the roles he and his mother are now playing in their relationship. This is a song heard not by physical ears but by spiritually sensitive ears. The boy hears and stores up its lyrics,

like a treasure he can count upon when the time comes for him to act. Despite appearances of self-centredness, we now understand that he has been undergoing a rich inner development and that he is capable of using his stored (and storied) spiritual and moral potential for the good of another person. He transcends his ego for the sake of one he loves.

We have already seen how the sense of sight is also metaphorically transformed in *Love You Forever*. The mother, when she looks at her two-year-old, her nine-year-old, her teenager and her adult son, sees them not through the lens of their needs and demands but with the rose-coloured glasses she wore when she first saw him. Except for the initial episode, the newborn baby becomes truly present in each of the subsequent scenes thanks to the imaginative and creative inner resources of the mother. Despite the passage of time, her discerning gaze allows her to keep the loving response she first had to her son alive and vibrant. Specifically, it is the repetition of the word "baby" in the song sung at the various stages in the boy's life that produces this impression. No judgment here. No conditions. Simply unconditional acceptance.

The effects of touch are taken to a new level as well. To use a distinction made by Seymour Chatman (19 and *passim*), we might say that, at the level of story (the "what" of the narrative, the events that are recounted), an obvious question one might ask runs

something like this: “How could a mother find the physical strength to lift the body of a nine-year-old, then of a teenager and finally of an adult man?” At the level of discourse (the “how” of the story, its *mise en intrigue* or emplotment), however, the author seems to be proposing an answer to an entirely different question: “Where do men and women find the strength to continue to respond generously to their children, despite the many trials, both the great and the small, with which life confronts them?” The answer is a simple one: love alone provides the strength needed.

By evoking the senses transformed, Munsch manages to produce what might be called effects of the eternal. When the song is sung, the story plunges us into that dark, sacred night where time’s quantity is swallowed up by its quality, where *chronos* gives way to *kairos*. In the biblical context, *chronos* refers to “passing time” or “waiting time” time as duration—while *kairos* designates time as a season, a point in time filled with significance.

When the mother crosses the threshold to enter the sleepy world of her child, the constraints of time are no longer upon her. The trials of the day disappear; the effects of the passing years evaporate as she once again finds herself alone with that child she loves just as tenderly as she once loved her newborn babe. She enters a mythic time, the time of the storyteller in which a quixotic imagination reigns supreme.

But the story is not yet at an end:⁹

When the son came home that night, he stood for a long time at the top of the stairs.

Then he went into the room where his very new baby daughter was sleeping. He picked her up in his arms and very slowly rocked her back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And while he rocked her he sang:

I’ll love you forever. . . .

Only nineteen words appear on the pages that describe and illustrate the son standing, pensive, atop the stairs near an open door. Time seems to slow down and to weigh heaviest at this point in the story. The narrator shares no insights with the reader concerning the son’s internal dialogue. The pause created here leaves a gap in the story that each reader fills in his or her own way.

Conclusion

The juxtaposition of opposing themes is vital to the thematic progression of the story. The division into nocturnal and diurnal realms of activity allows the dominant theme of the story to be expressed unambiguously. The day is the province of the son where physical sight and physical activity dominate. Until the last two scenes, the night is the province of the mother where interiority and spiritual (in)sight

hold sway.

Time and space assume a metaphorical dimension in this narrative. The bedrooms, as sacred space, are not really places at all but rather a series of privileged moments (*kairoi*) in which the limits that weigh upon the characters in their natural world no longer exercise any dominion, a place where the heart is free to speak and where it may be heard. They are hallowed ground upon which one kneels. It is worth noting that all the elements of fantasy are limited to the episodes that take place at night in the sacred space of the various bedrooms. Events taking place in the daytime retain an air of playfully menacing realism about them.

The son, like the mother before him, sees and hears what lies beneath the surface of life. He has heard the song of love sung by his mother and now sings it back to her. As he crosses the threshold to the daughter's bedroom, love once again fills the sacred space as he sings the song a second time. On this occasion, however, he is called upon to love someone, who for the moment at any rate, seems to have nothing to offer in return (*cf.* Luke 14:14 and Matt. 25: 31–46). He is called upon to transcend his own needs and desires in order to respond in love to a helpless child who, if she is to be elevated and helped to achieve

her full human potential, will require seemingly endless care. The torch has been passed to a new generation.

Although the story leaves the question of the mother's death hanging in the air, readers of all ages realize that, when people are "very old and sick," the end can't be far off. As the son cradles his own little girl, the circle is now complete. Significantly, the detail that the child is being rocked "very slowly" functions as an *inclusio* at the end of the story. This detail is present in only two sequences: when the mother first rocks her baby son and when the son first picks up and cradles his baby daughter. The love that began

at birth proves not only stronger than the trials and tribulations of life, but stronger than death itself.

Self-transcendent spirituality, although distinct from Christian faith, should not be understood as foreign to it. That said, *Love You Forever* makes no explicit mention of God or religion. Its message, while in every way compatible with the Christian gospel, remains open to readers of all persuasions to the extent that they share the assumption that receiving and giving unconditional love is the *raison d'être* of human life.¹⁰

The transformation of the senses, the discernment



The reader of *Love You Forever* is invited to look imaginatively and creatively at the world and especially at the people with whom they share life.

and even creation of a reality, the crossing of thresholds, and the liberation from the constraints of time and space are all common themes in literature with a spiritual perspective. By means of devices of the sort we have seen in Munsch's work, children are encouraged to pay attention to the depth dimension in life. The reader of *Love You Forever* is invited to look imaginatively and creatively at the world and especially at the people with whom they share life.

Books like this one encourage children to believe in things they cannot see and that cannot be measured by the instruments of the physical sciences. They open them up to paying attention to their own lives in a different way. If this literature is used well, it may help children to look beyond the physical and the material all the way into the spiritual and even into the eternal.

From its inception, *Love You Forever* had a connection with death, one that has often been evoked in the history of its reception. In the five minutes it takes to read the text, adult readers are invited to view life from the perspective of its end point. It is a book that is offered at the birth of children and one that is used by middle-aged readers to help them cope with the loss of their parents. On such occasions, deep, human, heart-felt sentiment seems altogether appropriate. This picture-book parable paints scenes that are so generic that readers are able to insert their own experiences into those depicted in

the storyline.

The history of the reception of *Love You Forever* makes it clear that many readers do not and cannot read this story in the way that I have suggested. Feminist and Freudian objections, fears of emotional manipulation, an aversion to an excess of sentimentality, a desire to avoid dealing with the question of death—all have been given as reasons for rejecting the book. Gagnon and Bradford offered still other motives for embracing or rejecting the tale which arise from the particular emotional landscapes and personal biographies of various classes of readers. While these arguments may have merit, in varying degrees, I believe that the main hermeneutical impasse lies elsewhere. In fact, I am persuaded that the various kinds of criticism levelled at *Love You Forever* are a function of the assumptions in force in the interpretive community or communities to which most professional critics belong. Readers experienced in the interpretation of symbolic, religious, or spiritual texts seem to respond differently to *Love You Forever*, in part because they do not routinely assume, as so many of these critics appear to, that the narrative world depicted should be read as a true-to-life account.

Trained in scientific habits of thought, many modern readers are wont to ask whether or not a story is true as they try to classify it and thus propose an appropriate response to the text. When a story seems,

even in part, to offer a mimetic representation of the “real” world, then, more often than not, a literalist interpretation of its elements follows. As with the interpretation of a parable or allegory, it may often prove more profitable to ask whether and how truth is communicated through the story, rather than to ask whether or not the story is true. To take an example from the field of New Testament interpretation, trying to prove that Jesus walked on water (a claim which, if true, would invalidate his humanity) or that he calmed a storm (who would have been listening to his

command?) does little to enhance one’s experience of the text. It may be of considerably more interest to discover what the use of such literary devices and conventions are meant to convey to the audience. Fundamentalist readings of scripture and of picture books eventually self-destruct. While one might not like *Love You Forever*, barring the most philistine and literalist approach to this text, it would be difficult on the basis of what is written and illustrated to make a case for this book as a source of hatred and unhappiness in its readers. Or would it?

Notes

¹ Often contrasted with Eros, earthly or sexual love, “agape” refers to the disinterested love at the heart of Christian communal life.

² See the autobiography of Munsch on his website, <<http://www.robertmunsch.com/bio.cfm?Bionum=3>>.

³ See for example the many reviews which recount experiences of using the book in the context of bereavement at <<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0920668364/104-8014971-2450335?v=glance>>.

⁴ “Bending” time and space is a common phenomenon in the narratives of all major world religions.

⁵ In the field of biblical criticism, for example, feminist critics

like Mieke Bal have analyzed the sexist character of the biblical criticism which male exegetes have (historically) projected on to the Bible. Other deconstructive meta-readings have also pointed out that the supposedly neutral reading proffered by “scientific” exegetes looks curiously like the preoccupations of white, middle-class male interpreters.

⁶ Excerpts from *Love You Forever* ©Robert Munsch / Bob Munsch Enterprises Ltd. reprinted by permission of Firefly Books Ltd.

⁷ I was surprised by what follows in the story. When the mother climbs through the window the grown son is sleeping in a single bed. Looking back, I realize that most readers legitimately wonder where the man’s wife was, as they may also have wondered where the boy’s father was in earlier scenes. Readers with training in psychoanalysis have remarked the absence of the father-mother-child triangulation.

⁸ For example, Rex Blankinship writes: "I received this book when my mother was 83 and dying, and I was 48. It was perfect for me at that time, I loved it, and it helped me to get something positive out of one of the most difficult experiences I've ever been through. It states the cycle of love that flows from generation to generation in a very concise way. I'd guess that many adults that hate this book also hate thinking about death. Death is part of life, and accepting it can help make life more meaningful, and help us understand what things are most important. The unconditional love between parent and child, generation after generation, is one of the few lasting things that matter. See Dr. Rex Blankinship, *Rev. of Love You Forever*, <http://www.amazon.com/gp/cdp/member-reviews/AWMFNEJET9MY8/ref=cm_aya_rev_more/104-8014971-2450335?%5Fencoding=UTF8>.

⁹ In the scene which follows, the son simply walks into his baby's

bedroom; a clear contrast to the mother's "crawling" into his. When I broached the question with Munsch, he merely replied that he hadn't noticed the distinction. Neither had I, before a reviewer pointed it out. Whether or not one is justified in reading a sexist distinction into this difference, the symbolism of the physical posture assumed by the mother in earlier scenes tends to be re-read in a critical manner when compared with the stance assumed by the new father in the final scene of the story. It should be noted, however, that the mother is not said to be crawling when she climbs the ladder to her son's bedroom across town, but that the critical directional clue of moving upwards is still present. The son too, has just ascended the staircase before entering the child's room.

¹⁰ Munsch trained for seven years in preparation for ordination as a Jesuit, but, of course, left the Jesuits, got married, moved to Canada, and started publishing children's stories.

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