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Lament for the Marginalized: The "Other" Behind Animal Imagery in *A Bird in the House*

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Abstract

Canadian writer Margaret Laurence's short story collection *A Bird in the House* is rich in animal imagery. These images carry profound cultural connotations and are highly intertextualized with various marginalized individuals—or the "Other" in different social contexts within the fictional prairie town of Manawaka: the endangered loons symbolize Piquette, who is marginalized in terms of both ethnicity and gender; the horses of the night represent the economically marginalized Chris; and the half-husky stands for Harvey, who is marginalized in both economic status and family environment. The tragic fates of the animals and the marginalized characters are closely intertwined and reflect each other, refracting the writer's sympathy for the vulnerable and her deep humanistic concern.
Keywords: A Bird in the House, animal imagery, the marginalized, the "other"

Margaret Laurence (1926-1987) was a literary giant of Canada's "Renaissance" period in the 1960s, ranked alongside Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro as one of the "Three Major Figures of Canadian Literature." With a prolific literary career, she gained national and international acclaim primarily through her distinctively Canadian prairie-themed "Manawaka Series" of five novels. These five works are interconnected, exhibiting strong intertextuality, and meticulously depict the broad social landscape of Canada during the 1950s and 1960s alongside the destinies of diverse individual characters. Generally speaking, Laurence's works not only focus on Canadian women's position and circumstances in society (Wen, 2012) and their search for individual identity (Guan, 2016) but also pay special

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attention to other themes such as national identity (Guan, 2017) and the marginalized figures. Published in 1970, A Bird in the House is the only short story collection in this series, comprising eight stories. With elegant language and poignant plots, it portrays the social fabric and individual fates of the fictional town of Manawaka through the growing-up experiences of a white upper-class girl, Vanessa.

While carrying forward her familiar themes, A Bird in the House places greater emphasis on the fate and living conditions of disadvantaged groups. The most famous story among this collection is The Loons, and existing research has mainly focused on the female protagonist Piquette's construction of female identity (Wang, 2019), spatial politics (Liu, 2011), symbolic imagery (Sheng, 2010), etc. These studies recognize the tragic fate of Piquette as a marginalized outsider as well as the "Other" ostracized by mainstream society. However, most of them fail to notice the inter-relationship between Piquette and the loons, both nearly extinct for being unneeded by society. Therefore, it could be argued that the loons are metaphorical for Piquette. In addition to The Loons, similar metaphors abound throughout the collection. Piquette represents only ethnic minorities and women; other marginalized individuals in society, such as impoverished men or abandoned children, remain under-researched. Therefore, exploring the other stories in this collection can lead to a broader and deeper understanding of a vast social landscape in this fictional cosmos.

Besides, animal writing in Canadian English literature has a long history, numerous authors, renowned works, and distinctive characteristics combined to form an essential and captivating literary genre (Tu, 2023). Although Laurence does not feature animals as primary subjects in her works, their presence consistently holds a significant place. Laurence was good at employing animal imagery to create dual narrative threads. The stories, featuring many parallel images, reflect Laurence's sympathy for Manawaka's marginalized individuals and her profound humanistic concern. This paper intends to explore, from the perspective of

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the "Other", the parallelism between human characters as well as their destinies and three corresponding animal images in the stories, revealing the cultural connotations and the author's deep concern for the marginalized.

1. The Concept of the "Other" and Its Application in Literary Studies

The intellectual lineage of the "Other" could trace back to G.W.F. Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic, where the "Other" is posited as a necessary condition for the formation of self-consciousness — selfhood is defined only through the recognition (or denial) of an opposing, unequal other. Jean-Paul Sartre framed the Other as a threat to subjective freedom: the "gaze" of the Other reduces the self to a fixed object, initiating an unresolvable struggle for dominance in interpersonal relations.

Poststructuralism deepened the concept by shifting focus from individual consciousness to systemic power and discourse. Jacques Derrida demonstrated how Western metaphysics relies on hierarchical binary oppositions (e.g., West/East, male/female), where the latter is marginalized as a subordinate Other to legitimate the former's authority. Michel Foucault extended this to institutional contexts, arguing that modern disciplines (prisons, schools, clinics) construct "abnormal" Others (criminals, madmen) through knowledge-production, enforcing social control via categorization. The concept's most transformative application emerged in postcolonial and feminist theory. Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* (1979) exposed how Western scholarship and literature constructed the "Orient" as a primitive, irrational Other to justify colonial domination—a process of "othering" that erased the agency of non-Western peoples. Gayatri Spivak's essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak?"* (1988) further interrogated the silencing of marginalized Others, arguing that even well-meaning

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attempts to "give voice" to the oppressed risk replicating colonial power dynamics. Homi Bhabha expanded this by emphasizing hybridity: in postcolonial literature, the "Other" is not a passive victim but a site of resistance, where cultural mixing disrupts colonial binaries. For feminism, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) established women as the quintessential Other, defined by their opposition to men rather than their own subjectivity.

In literary studies, "the Other" serves as a powerful lens to unpack power, identity, and marginalization. For example, postcolonial critics use Said's framework to analyze how texts like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* replicate Orientalist tropes; feminist scholars deploy Beauvoir's theories to examine gendered othering in texts ranging from *Jane Eyre* to contemporary women's writing, revealing how female characters negotiate their positioning as the "Other" of patriarchal discourse.

In recent years, a growing number of studies use this lens to focus on a variety of marginalized groups (e.g., indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities, the elderly), and the connotation of "the Other" proves equally applicable to unpacking the thematic depth of three pivotal stories in *A Bird in the House*: it illuminates the ethnic and gendered othering experienced by Piquette, whose tragic fate is mirrored by the endangered loons; it exposes the economic disenfranchisement that renders Chris an invisible social outcast, paralleled by the symbolic horses of the night; and it reveals how the dual burdens of economic marginalization and familial abandonment cast Harvey as a displaced "Other", whose plight resonates with the abused half-husky. Therefore, this perspective provides a deeper and broader insight to *A Bird in the House* as well as Margaret Laurence's creative purpose.

2. The Interplay of the "Other" and Animal Imagery in *A Bird in the House*

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2.1 Piquette—The Loons

The Loons is known for its beautiful language and rich symbolic imagery, recounting the tragic and short life of a Métis girl, Piquette Tonnerre. The town of Manawaka at that time was multi-ethnic, comprising not only the dominant white immigrants from different European countries but also Asians and local Indigenous Indians, serving as a microcosm of Canada's multicultural society. In the mid-to-late 19th century, with the development of Western Canada, intermarriage between white settlers and Indigenous people increased. Due to their darker skin, French-Canadian mixed-blood people derisively called themselves "burnt wood," while whites referred to them as "Métis" or, derogatorily, as "half-breed." They were the poorest, lowest in status, and most discriminated-against group in Manawaka, their ethnic identity relegating them to the margins. The Métis were ridiculed as "neither flesh, fowl, nor good salt herring" (Laurence, 1989, p.108-109) to the whites. Hence, they are undoubtedly the "Other" in this cosmos.

Piquette was the representative of the Métis, whose living conditions were extremely harsh, dwelling in self-built shacks on the town's outskirts, surrounded by scavenged garbage. From the perspective of spacial politics, the marginalization of their living environment aptly symbolizes their marginalized existence (Liu, 2011). Plagued by these abysmal living environment, the twelve- or thirteen-year-old Piquette contracted severe bone tuberculosis—a condition that was rendered all but invisible and dismissed as unsightly: "she existed for me only as a vaguely embarrassing presence, with her hoarse voice and her clumsy limping walk and her grimy cotton dresses that were always miles too long" (Laurence, 1989, p.109). As a female, with her mother having left, she had to manage all household chores and care for her

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younger siblings despite her illness, so gender is the shackle her family imposed on her. One incident clearly shows what a Métis is like in the white people's eyes.The kind Dr. MacLeod, suggesting she accompanies them to Diamond Lake for a rest from heavy housework, faced immediate opposition from his wife and mother, the latter declaring, "if that half-breed youngster comes along to Diamond Lake, I'm not going" (Laurence, 1989, p.110). It is obvious that the white deems being with the Métis is a disgrace.

At Diamond Lake, they encounter the near-extinct loons. The birds' nests are on the opposite shore from the cottages, and their calls could be heard at night. The birds' distance from human habitation parallels the Métis's isolated shacks, metaphors for their marginalized existence. Before humans arrive, the loons are masters of Diamond Lake, but as cottages are built, their living space shrinks. "My father says we should listen and try to remember how they sound, because in a few years when more cottages are built at Diamond Lake and more people come in, the loons will go away" (Laurence, 1989, p.114). The fate of the Métis mirrors that of the loons. As descendants of the Indigenous people, the Métis were the land's original owners. With the arrival of colonizers, indigenous lands were seized, their living space compressed, gradually forcing them to become the "Other" in their own land and sink into the bottom of society. In the novel *The Diviners*, Laurence, through the protagonist Morag, voices injustice for the Métis uprising leader: "The Métis were losing the land—it was taken from them. All he wanted was for them to have their rights. The government hanged him for that" (Laurence, 1984, p.132). As white colonists encroached on the Métis' lands and urban development intruded upon the loons' natural habitat, the fates of the Métis and the loons ran parallel to each other.

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In Vanessa's words, the crying of the loons is "ululating...Plaintive, and yet with a quality of chilling mockery" (Laurence, 1989, p.114), but seldom there are people willing to listen. Similarly, due to limited education, the Métis spoke a language called "patois" among themselves, difficult for mainstream society to understand, placing them in a state of "speechlessness". Speechlessness means being deprived of the right to speak, becoming inaudible in society, just as the loons presented only black silhouettes in the night, their true forms unknown.

Stuart Hall argued in Cultural Identity and Diaspora (1990, p.222), "We should probably not think of identity as a finished fact, but rather as an ongoing production—one that is forever incomplete, in constant flux, and continuously constructed and represented from within rather than imposed from without." This indicates that identity is characterized by fluidity, existing in a dynamic process of constant shaping and construction. Individuals can transform and seek new identities through their own efforts. Has Piquette strived to change her identity? The answer is yes. When she grows up, Piquette hopes to change her social status and identity by assimilating into mainstream society through marriage to a white man, but a marriage based on inequality is doomed. Years later, she returns to Manawaka with two children, eventually dying in a fire in her shack due to alcoholism. Coincidentally, the adult Vanessa, revisiting the "prosperous tourist resort" Diamond Lake, finds the loons extinct, their habitat encroached upon, vanishing without a trace just like Piquette.

2.2 Chris— Horses of the Night

Chris, the protagonist of Horses of the Night, is Vanessa's distant cousin from a remote farm at Shallow Creek, a margin far from Manawaka. With his father deceased and

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the family impoverished, he relies on Vanessa's grandfather's support to continue high school, a veritable poor relation "living off" the family. As a young man aspiring to be a civil engineer, his abject poverty is an inescapable mire. The lack of economic resources, coupled with the economic recession in Canada, condemns him to a permanent state of economic marginalization.

In sociological research, the concept of role is typically broken down into three distinct dimensions, namely ideal role, perceived role and performed role respectively. Ideal role refers to a complete behavioral model prescribed by law or society, which is often idealized in nature. Perceived role is what an individual subjectively believes they ought to play, which may be shaped by personal values. While the performed role refers to what an individual actually enacts in specific situations based on their capabilities and available opportunities. If there is a discrepancy between social expectations (i.e., the ideal role) and an individual's actual conduct (i.e., the performed role), role distance comes into existence (Merton, 1968). In Horses of the Night, there is obvious role distance between Chris' ideal role, perceived role and performed role, which is mainly rooted in the economic reason and reflected in the different images of horses.

At the beginning of the story, Chris's attire upon arrival hints at his economically "Other" status. Though his clothes appear somewhat formal, Vanessa's mother's whisper to her grandmother reveals the truth: "Heavens, look at the shirt and trousers—must've been his father's, the poor kid" (Laurence, 1989, p.123). Chris is good at craftsmanship and full of ambitions. In his descriptions of home, "horses" are the core images. Upon first meeting, Chris tells Vanessa about two fine riding horses on the farm: Duchess and Firefly, sleek

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potential racehorses. At this point, Chris dreams of university and becoming a civil engineer, building real bridges, which is his ideal role. But the economic situation extinguishes his university dream. After high school, unable to afford university and unwilling to compromise by returning to farm labor, he becomes a traveling salesman, dreaming of making a fortune (perceived role). As a nation bordering the emerging United States, Canadians were somewhat influenced by the "American Dream," believing hard work could lead anyone to success. But during the economic recession in the 1950s-1960s, even middle-class families like the doctor's can not afford his wares, which dooms Chris's dream. In the end, Chris has to return home to make a living (the performed role).

After her father's death, Vanessa visits Shallow Creek for relaxation to relieve her sadness and sees the real horses. "The horses were both plough horses, thick in the legs, and badly matched a team" (Laurence, 1989, p.136). The shabby horses hint at the harsh reality: a farm struggling to sustain itself can only produce scrawny horses, just as the impoverished farm cannot support Chris's dreams. One night on the farm, Chris talks about horses in the war, "...horses in the mud, actually going under, you know? And the way their eyes looked when they realized they weren't going to get out. Ever seen horses' eyes when they're afraid, I mean really berserk with fear, like in a bush-fire?" (Laurence, 1989, p.141) At this point, Chris is like those horses stuck in the mire: former hope turned to despair, sinking in life helplessly, leaving only endless disappointment and fear. When the war began, he joins the army and six months later, he suffers a mental breakdown and is sent to a psychiatric hospital, his despairing soul finally finding a place to rest. At the end of the story, Laurence pours her sympathy for the economically marginalized Chris into the lines of verse: "Slowly, slowly,

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horses of the night" (Laurence, 1989, p.144).

From the foregoing analysis, economic destitution and the distance between ideal role and the performed role stand as the root causes of Chris's tragedy. Had his family been able to support his education, and had he truly fulfilled his idealized role as a civil engineer, his life might have taken an entirely different trajectory—rather than ending his days confined to a hospital bed.

Moreover, the metamorphic imagery of horses—evolving from sleek racehorses to humble plough horses and ultimately to horses perishing in the war—mirrors the gradual decline of Chris's fate as an economically marginalized young man. By drawing a parallel between Chris and these equine symbols, Margaret Laurence infuses the tragic narrative with a poignant aesthetic, rendering it far more memorable and resonant.

2.3 Harvey — The Half-Husky

The Half-Husky features a mixed-breed dog named Nanuk, after whose breed the story is titled. The term "half-breed" itself carries derogatory connotations, implying impure blood lineage or, more broadly, societal scorn and disdain. The dog, given to Vanessa because its original owner can not care for it as it has too many siblings, is initially opposed by her grandfather because "They make a mess, they're destructive" (Laurence, 1989, p.147). It is allowed to stay only after Vanessa's persistent pleas, but it has to be hidden in the basement and follow carefully scheduled timetable to avoid meeting grandfather, the representative of authority both at home and in Manawaka. Thus, the half-Husky named Nanuk is a marginalized "Other" in the Brick House.

The protagonist of this story, Harvey Shinwell, to some extent, parallels the dog in his life trajectory. In his childhood, his parents die and he is raised by his aunt. No man would

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marry his aunt for this reason and thus he is resented by his aunt. So both Harvey and Nanuk are unwanted beings in their respective family. The author did not tell what happened to Harvey, but from the scene that the only way he tries to escape from interrogation about stolen telescope is naively pretending to sleep, and he offers no resistance after being threatened and beaten by his aunt who is much smaller in frame, readers can speculate violence is normal to him. When the story happens, he is a large-framed newspaper boy about sixteen years old with "colourless eyebrows and a pallid mottled face. He was somebody who had always been around and whom I had never actually seen" (Laurence, 1989, p.149). Therefore, he was invisible to the white in the Brick House, the upper class in Manawaka. Wang Shouren (2002, p.42), when discussing the image of black people in white society, argued: "Owing to the unique structure of their inner vision, people mainly turn a blind eye to the living, distinctive and authentic selves beneath the Black skin." But actually, in the Western main-stream society, not only the black are invisible, the poor white are also unseen. Laurence chose this "invisible" boy as a protagonist to demonstrate the complicated interplay of traumas society imposed on the marginalized as well as animals in an indirect way.

The relationship between humans and animals is a crucial aspect of the human-nature relationship. As friends of humanity, dogs are among the most beloved and petted animals and numerous works described the genuine bond between these two species. However, in *The Half-Husky*, the dog turns out to be a target of abuse and torture. The writer spends considerable detail describing how Harvey torments and bullies Nanuk: poking it with a sharp stick, sprinkling pepper in its eyes, secretly shooting it with a slingshot, and even lighting its hair with a whole handful of lit matches. How could a boy be so cruel to a dog?

"To understand a work of art, an artist, or a group of artists, one must correctly grasp the spirit and ethos of the era to which they belong. This constitutes the ultimate

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interpretation of the artwork and the fundamental determinant of all its attributes" (Taine, 1998, p.46). Harvey resides in the impoverished "North End of Manawaka, a district rife with shacks and shanties" (Laurence, 1989, p.156)—a neighborhood reminiscent of Piquette's dilapidated home—where every corner exudes a palpable sense of desolation and disarray. This blighted geographical environment is not merely a backdrop; it is a tangible reflection of the residents' marginalized social status and destitute living conditions, rendering it virtually impossible for a boy growing up in such deprivation to access quality education or opportunities for upward mobility. Compounding this adversity is his aunt's perception of him as a burdensome liability, coupled with her propensity for inflicting physical violence upon him.

According to social learning theory, children raised in hostile domestic environments are predisposed to mimic the abusive behaviors of their caregivers. Through the dual processes of observational learning and reinforcement, such children may internalize aggression as a normalized mode of interaction, directing it toward both humans and animals (Hensley et al., 2017). Yet after years of enduring habitual intimidation, Harvey has been thoroughly "tamed," stripped of the courage to resist or retaliate against his oppressor. Deprived of a legitimate channel to vent his pent-up frustration and resentment, he redirects his repressed aggression toward Nanuk—a vulnerable target who "is considered weaker and less likely to retaliate" (Wright & Hensley, 2003). Abusing Nanuk is actually a reflection of Harvey's powerlessness and existential despair: by asserting dominance over a defenseless being, he momentarily compensates for the powerlessness he endures in his daily life. This act of displaced aggression also embodies the cyclical nature of violence perpetuated by systemic deprivation, as individuals trapped in marginalized circumstances often replicate the

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oppressive behaviors they have endured, perpetuating a vicious cycle of harm.

Although later Harvey's physical abuse of Nanuk stops after grandfather's intervention, its psychological trauma is permanent. Nanuk remains hostile to anyone outside the family, is eventually chloroformed. In parallel, Harvey soon drops out of school, works in a café, and is arrested a year later for robbery and sentenced to six years, and later disappears without a trace. Maybe go back to prison again.

In this story, Laurence first sketches the repellent image of Nanuk as an abuser, only to unveil his identity as a victim with a few deft strokes in the closing passages—an artistic choice that articulates her profound sympathy for this marginalized child-as-Other. Yet Laurence's narrative ambition extends far beyond mere sentimental compassion; by weaving the parallel fates of Harvey and Nanuk into the fabric of Manawaka's stratified society, she constructs a searing critique of systemic marginalization that transcends the boundaries between human and animal.

Laurence's deliberate narrative inversion compels readers to confront an uncomfortable truth: marginalization operates as a cyclical mechanism of violence, where the oppressed are at risk of becoming oppressors in turn. Harvey's redirection of his accumulated rage toward Nanuk, a fellow "Other" deemed powerless by the dominant social order, mirrors the way in which systemic deprivation distorts the humanity of those trapped within its grip. Similarly, Nanuk's status as a half-breed dog, rejected and mistreated in a society that values purity of lineage, echoes the plight of Harvey—a poor white youth rendered "invisible" by the middle- and upper-class white residents. Laurence's nuanced portrayal of Harvey and Nanuk challenges readers to reject simplistic moral judgments and instead recognize the

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interconnectedness of all marginalized lives.

3. Conclusion

In A Bird in the House, Margaret Laurence artfully mirrors the marginalized groups and the animals that are also framed as the "Other" with delicate brushstrokes. While conveying deep concern for the underprivileged in Manawaka, she also demonstrates the exquisite ingenuity of her literary craftsmanship. Interpreting the symbiotic relationship between humans and animals from the perspective of the "Other" not only yields fresh insights into the work, but also enables readers to grasp the author's profound humanistic sentiments.

Constrained by the limitations of her times, Laurence did not propose concrete solutions to address the existential predicaments of the marginalized. Nevertheless, her works compel readers to confront these pressing social realities, laying a foundation for subsequent social reforms and targeted interventions. In this sense, her literary creations possess remarkable artistic merit and ideological depth, and thus deserve the sustained attention of global readers.

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